Breakwater

by Footloose

Summary

Never has the world felt more right than now, with Merlin free and once again with Arthur and Excalibur.

Except it's not over. It's only begun.

There’s more to the war than they'd ever suspected. More players than they'd counted on. And no idea how to fight against it all.

Notes

I don’t own the characters to Merlin(TV) and am not profiting from this work.

This is part thirteen in the Loaded March series.

My thanks go to Baemlalagreen (LJ) for thorough beta and such a quick turn-around time. Any mistakes that remain are entirely my own.

Fair warning: this is a military fic, and there will be military violence. In this part? A lot of... let's say supernatural violence. There may be triggers in this part associated to this warning.
"We need to dump the pack," Arthur said, his hand on Merlin's shoulder. He had to pry Merlin's fingers from the strap, but before he could pull the backpack away, Merlin clutched it close to his body.

An ambulance roared by, lights flashing. It was followed by two others, the sirens cutting through the night air. The shrieking noise muted everything else except for the pounding of Arthur's heart.

Merlin. He had Merlin back.

"Can't," Merlin said, shaking his head. The shadows passed over his face as they walked from streetlight to streetlight, making him appear gaunter than he actually was. Arthur's knuckles cracked as he tightened his fist around the gun he'd stashed inside his coat pocket.

Arthur had braced himself for the worst. Of course he had. But nothing could have prepared him for this. Merlin must have lost a stone, maybe more, and it had been weight he couldn't afford to spare in the first place.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder. Owain was trailing behind them by a good twenty feet, his head down, his shoulders hunched. He caught Arthur looking and gave a quick shake of his head. It was all clear, so far.

"Trackers, Merlin. They might be tracking us now," Arthur said, keeping his voice low.

"I know," Merlin said, wobbling a little. He steadied himself against Arthur, and Arthur resisted the urge to throw Merlin over his shoulder. For one thing, Arthur wouldn't be able to carry Merlin's weight and run if Aredian or the gendarmes caught up to them. For another, he was pretty sure that Merlin wouldn't forgive him if he tried. "I know, believe me. But I've my gear and things we're going to need."

"I could give a shite about --"

Merlin stopped dead, grabbing Arthur's arm to turn him around with surprising strength. He stepped inside Arthur's space, and the intrusion was welcome, so welcome. Arthur tugged Merlin even closer and wrapped his arm behind Merlin's neck.

A police cruiser drove by, lights on, sirens off.

"I'm not throwing it away. I can't. Will. Kay. It has to be worth it, what we did. I'm not coming back from that with nothing," Merlin hissed. His body was shaking from the cold and probably from other things, too -- things that Arthur didn't want to think about right now. Arthur would give Merlin his jacket if it wasn't the only thing hiding his weapons and body armour.

"Oi," Owain said, closing the distance between them. "Let's keep moving."

Arthur released Merlin reluctantly. Merlin didn't move away, his hands clinging to Arthur's waist, greedily sucking in body heat.
"All right," Arthur said. He turned his head, closing his eyes and shuddering when his lips brushed Merlin's cheek. "First chance we get, we take everything out of the bag. Can you check and make sure they're not bugged?"

"It'll take time." Merlin scratched the side of his head and looked over Arthur's shoulder, a quick, furtive glance full of nerves.

"I can call in, ask someone to bring a scanner," Owain suggested. He automatically touched his earpiece, but it was futile. Whatever was jamming their comms was still jamming them, and that meant that someone was near enough to do it.

Arthur took Merlin's hand and pulled him along. Owain was right. They needed to keep moving.

"Well, fuck," Owain said after a moment. "I guess I could use a pay phone."

The laugh that bubbled out of Merlin was this side of hysterical. It rippled through his body in a chattering shiver. Arthur tightened his hold, willing body heat into Merlin.

"Go," Arthur said, jerking his head. "We'll meet you at the bridge. Ten minutes. If we're late, you keep going. Meet up with the rest."

"Like hell I will," Owain said, but he started walking faster, brushing past them. "Watch your arses."

"You too," Arthur said. He continued to walk, but took a detour; the area they were in was deserted, with little traffic. They needed to get someplace where they wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb, but, more importantly, Arthur needed to get Merlin warm.

After a few minutes of walking, Merlin broke the silence with a quiet, "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah," Arthur said, trying not to think about the reports of injuries taken during combat. The team had gotten out alive, and no one had said anything about life-threatening wounds. For him, that was as okay as they got, given their situation.

"Kay?"

"He's fine. We found an apothecary -- that's how we tracked you down, actually. Got some of that stuff for Kay, and he's as good as new." Arthur said. "Or as good as he can be considering I sent him to London with Will."

Merlin was quiet. "Why?"

Arthur rounded the corner at the intersection and crossed the empty road. There was music coming from somewhere ahead of them, occasionally broken by the screech of tires and honking horns. This was Paris; it was the weekend, and there would always be someone throwing a party in one of the nearby bars. They were bound to find one where Arthur could find -- and steal -- a coat for Merlin.

"Gaius is missing," Arthur said, not mincing words. He tightened his fingers around Merlin's hand to keep it from slipping out of his; the sharp intake of breath was all he needed to know that Merlin was ready to turn around and run in the wrong direction to find his uncle himself. "Will's got it under control, and Kay's keeping him under control. They'll find Gaius, Merlin. I promise."

"We need to go back," Merlin said. Arthur didn't know what Merlin meant by back, and he didn't ask. All he could hope for was that Merlin didn't mean back to Aredian.

"We need a whole lot of things, Merlin, starting with getting you a coat. Let's do one thing at a time,"
Arthur said. The promised party was just down the block.

He paused in the shadow of a tree to inspect Merlin. His clothes were a fashion disaster and covered with a thin layer of dust and dirt, but at least there were no visible tears or stains. Arthur unbuttoned Merlin's shirt, gestured for him to roll up his sleeves, and reached to tuck the tails of his shirt into his trousers.

Merlin jerked out of his grasp.

Arthur stood there, frozen, his hands out. His eyes were wide and his heart pounded and all he could think was No. God, please. No.

He had a flashback to the Louvre and the smarmy come-ons that Aredian had made toward Merlin. That Merlin could have been assaulted -- Arthur hadn't wanted to think about it. He'd pushed it to the back of his mind, out of the way, because it was too real a possibility considering how openly they'd played their roles.

The knowledge that Aredian and his men might have -- could have… raped Merlin --

It froze him to the spot. He couldn't breathe. He wasn't sure if his heart was beating.

"Sorry," Merlin said suddenly, closing the distance between them to curl a hand against Arthur's cheek before wrapping his arms around Arthur. He kissed Arthur quickly with cold lips. "Sorry. Reflex. I… I guess they were missing their favourite punching dummy when Will escaped. I'm okay, though. I promise. Mordred gave me healing draughts. It's fine. It's fine. I'm okay."

"Merlin." Arthur's voice was hoarse even to his own ears. He put his hands on Merlin's waist tentatively, not wanting to ask, but needing to, all of a sudden. "They didn't --"

Merlin's brows furrowed before widening an instant later in realization and understanding.

"No. No," Merlin whispered. "I promise. No. They didn't. Counting myself lucky, because they could have. Threatened it enough, too. But that was my line in the sand, Arthur. You know that? I wouldn't have let them do it. Fuck the mission and fuck them finding out about my magic -- I would've killed them all, first."

Arthur took a steadying breath before nodding. He didn't say that he knew Merlin's magic hadn't been working for a good, long while, that Merlin wouldn't have been able to defend himself with it.

Now wasn't the time for what-ifs and could-haves. They'd beaten Merlin; they'd tortured him. They hadn't done worse. Arthur had to be grateful for that, at least.

Still, he would have Lance check Merlin, maybe find a doctor that they could pay to keep quiet. Someone who could make certain that Merlin was all right. He wouldn't ask that of Hunith, no matter how much she might want to check her son out for herself. Major Emrys was good at her job, and Arthur was afraid that she would see more in Merlin's lingering aches and pains than what Merlin was telling them.

"We're talking about this," Arthur said. He both didn't want to know and needed to hear everything that happened. Maybe he was punishing himself, or maybe he just wanted the reassurance of hearing it from Merlin himself rather than letting his imagination take him down a path he wasn't ready for. "Don't think that we're not."

Arthur pulled away and unknotted the red handkerchief around his throat. He held it up for Merlin to see before tying it around Merlin's throat, loose and easy, not wanting to startle a reaction out of him.
Merlin didn't flinch, but Arthur could tell that he was fighting to keep from pulling away.

"Later," Merlin said, but he looked away, not making eye contact. "We should go."

Arthur didn't answer. He took Merlin's hand again and led him toward the busy bar, slowing down whenever he felt that the crowd was too thick and threatened to split them up. They wove through the tables on the pavement outside, entered the bar proper, and kept going until they were in the thick of it, where it was nearly too dark to see.

He spotted a bloke who was roughly Merlin's size, his coat hanging by a thread on the back of his chair. Arthur slipped it off when the man stood up abruptly, laughing, and reached over to smack someone on the other side of table. No one noticed.

Arthur and Merlin kept moving until they were at the kitchen, pushing through the doors. Arthur ignored the squawk of a waitress more upset that they were in her way than them being there at all, and herded Merlin to the rear exit.

They were in the alley when Arthur shoved the coat in Merlin's hands. "Here. Put it on."

Merlin didn't argue.

"Bridge?" Merlin asked, pulling up the collar of the coat. He patted his pockets to check for belongings.

Arthur glanced around, trying to orient himself. Merlin made a sound of triumph and held up a smartphone; he cracked the lock screen in less than ten seconds and accessed the map app, zooming in for the quickest way to meet up with Owain.

"Let's go," Arthur said.

They headed down the alley at double-time, Merlin's feet heavier on the ground than Arthur's. Arthur cast more than one glance at Merlin to see how he was doing, and each time, Merlin would give him a crooked smile.

Each time, that smile became more wan.

"Are you hurt?" Arthur asked, slowing down to let Merlin catch up.

Merlin shook his head. His chest was heaving and he was gasping for air. "Let's just go, yeah?"

"Merlin --"

"I'm fine," Merlin snapped. Almost immediately, his expression softened. "You want to coddle me, coddle me when it's safe. I'll even let you. Let's find O."

Arthur gave Merlin a thin-lipped smile, biting back everything that he wanted to say. He wrapped an arm around Merlin's waist over Merlin's quiet protests, nudging the backpack out of the way, and held on firmly. It was less than a kilometre to the bridge; they could make it at a fast walk.

"You have their number?" Merlin asked, holding up the smartphone. The bright blue circle was blinking their location, and the bridge was just around the bend, across several lanes of high-traffic roads. "I could call."

Arthur stared at the phone before grunting. It was tempting -- too tempting -- to call the others, to give them an update minutes after Owain had alerted the team to their situation. There wasn't
anything more that he could add to whatever Owain would tell them. He could ask for Lance, but he
didn't want to do that until he could confirm Merlin's condition. There was no point in putting more
of his team in danger until the possibility of being tracked was completely eliminated.

Also, Arthur wanted to keep this phone as clean as they could for as long as they could.

"Best not. Save it, though," Arthur said.

Merlin nodded. "Are we still being jammed?"

Arthur paused at the corner, watching the heavy traffic rush by. A relatively quiet one-way street and
a cement barrier stood between them and the four-lane road. At least fifty metres beyond that before
the bridge. The trees were in the way; he couldn't tell if Owain was there.

He tapped his ear. There was nothing but dead silence. "Yeah, jammed."

Merlin dialled a number at random on the smart phone and brought it to his ear. He pulled it away
and hung up a second later. "Phone's fine," he said, frowning.

Arthur gave him a long look. Merlin's brows pinched in the middle, creasing deeply. Arthur didn't
wait for him to come up with an explanation -- the longer they stood here, the lower their chances of
getting away undetected and unnoticed. He led Merlin to the cement barrier between the lanes and
glanced around. They waited for a gap in the traffic before they ran across.

"You're on E, right? You're using our comms?" Merlin asked.

"Yes," Arthur confirmed. He took Merlin's arm and dragged him across the first stretch, pausing
before running the rest of the way.

They hit the kerb just ahead of a lorry. Merlin's breathing was ragged again, almost wheezing. He
doubled over for a moment, trying to catch his breath, before straightening. "Let's go," he panted.

Arthur spared a glance for Merlin's expression, taking in just how ghostly his features had become in
only a few minutes. He didn't say anything. He moved to keep himself between Merlin and the
traffic, casting a wary eye on their surroundings.

"Do you see him?" Merlin asked. Merlin was looking around, too, but he seemed… distracted.

"Yeah," Arthur said. Owain was at the crest of the footbridge, his head down, his shoulders up. He
wasn't the tallest member of Excalibur, not even close, but he was the broadest and easy to pick out
in a crowd. No amount of trying to make himself smaller would hide him.

Arthur paused before walking over the bridge. The traffic was relatively light, moving at a constant
speed. There was a reasonable mixture of vehicle sizes and a measurable pattern between them. In
other words, nothing out of the ordinary.

They caught up to Owain, who looked past them before nodding firmly and moving out of the way.
He dropped to take the rear again without speaking.

It seemed as if they were walking into a completely different borough as they headed over the bridge
-- the social class shifted from posh to middle-class to barely-scraping-by, and all within a few
blocks. The area wasn't decrepit. Nothing about Paris could possibly be so run-down and dreary, not
this close to the central arrondissements. But there was a subtle shift in mood, as if they'd crossed a
barrier of some sort.
The streets were darker. The buildings loomed and the shadows deepened. In the bright of day, the houses would be no different than they were anywhere else in Paris -- grandiose, old, beautiful, a testament to the architecture of an era long past.

In the night, the plastered brick crumbled, the mortar was gouged and pitted, the wrought-iron gates twisted and bent.

Any other similar neighbourhood would be quiet -- *quieter*. The residents were content to leave their homes and to celebrate the end of the day somewhere else, or to stay in and have a late evening dinner with a freshly-opened bottle of wine. But there was a gloominess to their surroundings, and the deeper into the area they went, the more it was tinged with menace.

"Arthur," Merlin said quietly. He jutted his chin toward the alleyway just ahead of them. Arthur followed his gaze to see three men lingering at the kerb, caps and hats down over their heads, coats loose and open, collars flicked up.

"I see them," Arthur said. "Keep walking."

Behind them, Owain pulled back even more. The street toughs must have decided that the three of them weren't worth the trouble, because after an indecisive attempt, they kept back.

Arthur tapped his ear, activating the earwig. Static. At Merlin's questioning glance, Arthur shook his head.

"We can't still be in jamming range," Merlin muttered, staring at the phone. "They're not supposed to even *know* about the frequency."

"But the phone's working, yeah?" Arthur asked, giving Merlin a sidelong look.

"Yeah," Merlin said. He pressed the heel of his hand on his forehead. "Arthur--"


"It's not that," Merlin said, shaking his head. "I'm fine. I'm just... I haven't had much to eat. Mordred gave me some food, but he had to be careful."

"Mordred," Arthur repeated. He dug deep into his pockets with his free hand until he came up with a half-eaten protein bar. He gave it to Merlin, who smiled gratefully and took a large bite as soon as he unwrapped the rest of it. Arthur felt a surge of frustration that he immediately squashed down -- Merlin must be starving, if he was eating the protein bar without argument. "Tell me about Mordred. What's his game?"

"It's a long, convoluted story that gives me a headache just thinking about it," Merlin muttered, glancing over his shoulder at a distant sound. Arthur looked, too, but there wasn't anyone other than Owain, who was slowly catching up to them.

"I know the feeling," Arthur said, remembering his conversation with Kilgarrah.

There must have been something telling in his tone, because Merlin raised a brow.

"I know what you mean. But the phone's working, yeah?"

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They needed to find a place, Arthur knew. Private and easily secured. The sooner they went through Merlin's pack and got rid of the tracking bug, the better. Unfortunately, because whoever was tailing
them was still within jamming range, they couldn't stop for long.

Arthur bit the inside of his cheek in thought before glancing at Merlin. "The mobile works. The tracking bug -- if there's one -- works. Why is it only our channel?"

Merlin gave him a sharp look. The pinch between his brows deepened. "I'm not… I don't know. Different frequencies, all of them. You can't jam a full spectrum, just a range of one. It's being targeted -- specifically."

"How?"

Merlin shook his head and said, "Not possible."

Despite his every attempt to be attentive whenever Merlin mumbled about his work, Arthur had to admit that he didn't understand a whole lot of it. Still, he'd picked up enough from reading basic communications handbooks and cryptography primers to at least muddle his way through Merlin's published journal papers. If Merlin said something wasn't possible, then something wasn't possible.

Except it was, and it was making a frown furrow its way permanently on Merlin's forehead. Arthur didn't doubt that Merlin would figure it out, eventually, but he wasn't in the best of conditions right now.

"Never mind," Arthur said, loosening his grip on Merlin long enough to give him a reassuring squeeze. "More pressing matters, like going through your bag."

"Yeah, all right," Merlin said, though he didn't look as if he were going to let the question drop, not yet.

It took another half hour, but Owain found an empty two-storey building slated for renovations, if not outright demolition. The stucco had cracked into an attractive fresco on the brickwork. Dead ivy hung listlessly from the rafters. The door was nothing more than a slab of wood nailed into place, but it rattled and gave with the slightest bit of force.

They walked inside. A few pigeons fluttered their wings, unimpressed by the intrusion, but they didn't fly the coop, either.

"I feel like I'm working blind," Merlin said, shucking off his backpack and crashing to his knees on the ground.

"Join the club, mate," Owain said, positioning himself at the window. There were horizontal slats over the broken glass with gaps just wide enough to peer through. "You need a torch?"

"Yeah, if you've got a spare," Merlin said.

Owain plucked something out from the inside of his coat and tossed it over. Merlin fumbled, but he caught it.

Owain and Arthur glanced at each other. Merlin, for all that he sometimes lacked grace, rarely missed catching anything. It had taken a while for the team to figure out why, but eventually Merlin had admitted to Arthur that his magic had something to do with it.

Arthur and Merlin had kept that from the rest of the team for a while -- playing footie with Merlin and his magic had been the source of a lot of amusement on base.

But if Merlin was having trouble now, did that mean that his magic wasn't working the way it
Arthur crouched beside Merlin. He watched as Merlin emptied the backpack, sorting the contents out into two piles. The first pile was inconsequential -- items that could safely be disposed of and easily replaced. Random tools, pens, pencils, rubbish. The second pile was Merlin's equipment and tools. Two laptops, one of which was a disposable for distracting the enemy, with false data and crippled programming that would hamper anyone trying to use it. The other was Merlin's go-to laptop, a backup of the backup of the principal laptop that was safely hidden away in one of their equipment cases. The Crack Box was there, too, though it didn't look as if it had been tampered with. There was a hard drive, several thumb drives, and a strange, black box.

Merlin went through all the pockets of the pack, one by one, finally inverting it and giving it a good shake. He passed it on to Arthur with a gesture to double-check, and went through the pile of items that they needed to keep.

Arthur went through the bag carefully, keeping an eye on Merlin in the meantime. Everything that Merlin was doing was so... Merlin that Arthur shouldn't have any doubts that it was indeed Merlin in front of him, that they'd rescued. But the weakness, the heaving breath over a short run -- while they could easily be chalked up to the unfriendly treatment that Merlin had received in his captivity, it was so unlike Merlin that Arthur couldn't help but wonder. The only thing that defrayed his immediate concern was that Merlin didn't complain.

Merlin never complained.

Arthur would never forget the man with the blank face, who could take on everyone's appearance. He'd been bulkier than Merlin. Chubbier. Thicker. Shorter. He couldn't pass for Merlin, not physically, and definitely not after Arthur had held Merlin so close to know that, yes, what he was feeling was real and not an illusion. But that didn't mean that if someone else could hide his real face, that they couldn't take on someone else's identity.

Arthur had also seen Merlin's file -- his real file, the one that contained details of covert training and anti-interrogation. He knew how difficult it could be to get an answer out of Merlin without an evasion that seemed as much a truth as anything else. He didn't think that Merlin would have broken; he didn't think that Merlin would have revealed Excalibur's secrets to the enemy. He definitely didn't think that Merlin would have told Aredian and his people anything about them.

And there had been that moment. That precious fucking moment when Merlin emerged from the plaster and brick dust and froze time long enough to embrace Arthur. It had been Merlin kissing him -- of that, Arthur was certain.

It didn't matter, in the end. He could waver back and forth between his conviction and his questions that this was Merlin all that he liked, but he couldn't risk anyone. How many sorcerers could freeze time? Arthur didn't know.

"Three minutes and we're out of there," Arthur said, still watching Merlin.

"Three minutes," Merlin repeated, nodding. He didn't take his eyes from his work, though. At the moment, he was carefully inspecting the hardware with the flashlight, checking the seams, and sorting through which ones he would take apart first. It was so very Merlin that Arthur hesitated.

But he asked anyway.

"Lift up your shirt," Arthur said softly.
Merlin glanced up, curious, confused. He put down the black box. He stared at Arthur for what was thirty seconds too long, and a strange mixture of emotions passed over his features. It was too dark to see them and know what Merlin was really feeling.

In the end, Arthur didn't need to know. He could hear it in Merlin's voice. It was the faintest warble, a hitch. He was bracing himself, even though he must know that Arthur would never hurt him.

"Right. Okay."

Arthur felt like a heel. He wondered what kind of bad memories his order had triggered.

Merlin handed the torch to Arthur, who shone it on Merlin. Merlin shrugged out of his borrowed coat, leaving it on the dirty floor in a pool of fabric around his hips. He undid the first few buttons of the shirt and tugged it over his head. He dropped it off to the side, immediately shivering in the cold.

He was painfully lean. The light from the torch bleached his skin marble-white, but it was blotchy and grey in spots where Arthur tried not to look at too hard. Merlin's old battle wounds and surgical scars were still prevalent, sticking out in puckers, familiar, each and every one, except for two that were new, too new, raised along the collarbone and the soft of his skin beneath his ribcage.

They weren't large cuts. One of them was ragged, more of a tearing than a clean cut. The second, the one at his collarbone, was about three inches in length and stiletto-thin, a scalpel's edge wielded by a butcher's hand, straight but wide, forming a white smear of patchy skin.

Merlin's tattoo was intact. Right where it should be. Elaborate and simple all at once, the dragon clutching a sword, its eyes dark and judging.

Merlin shivered, goose flesh bumping on his skin.

Arthur reached for Merlin's shirt and inspected it. He ran his fingers over the seams, searching for anything like a wire or a tracking bug. Arthur couldn't take his eyes from the ugly bruise on Merlin's left side, shading the dragon in marbled blotches. It was easily the size of an army boot, with a pale halo radiating outward.

"Merlin," Arthur said, trying to find the words for the apology he needed to give. Merlin shook his head and looked away, but it was too late. Arthur saw the hollow in his eyes, the distance in them, as if he were cutting himself off from this experience.

Like he'd probably cut himself off from so many other experiences in the last few weeks.

"You want my trousers next?"

"Save that for when you're alone," Owain said. His tone was light, trying for teasing but barely managing. "There are some things a man doesn't need to see."

"Put this back on," Arthur said gruffly, putting the shirt in Merlin's lap. He hadn't felt anything out of the ordinary. In any case, the shirt was too cheap and threadbare to risk hiding anything in it without it being detectable. "We'll do everything else later."

"Yeah. Okay," Merlin said, and his hands shook as he pulled the shirt back on, getting his arms tangled in it. Arthur reached out to help him, but Merlin twisted away, as if the mere thought of being touched by anyone, even Arthur, was too painful to bear.

And Arthur had no one to blame but himself.
He forced himself to look down at the equipment that Merlin had put aside. They were running out of time. They had to keep moving to stay ahead of whoever was after them. "What can you absolutely not do without?"

Merlin stared at the pile as he curled up inside the jacket, rubbing his hands over his arms in an effort to stay warm. He leaned forward and ruthlessly culled everything except for a few pieces. The remainder were small enough to carry, but it would be easier if they had a pack to stick them in, to keep their hands free.

"All right," Arthur said. He grabbed a few items from the pile to discard and stashed them around the room hastily, on the off-chance that they might want to recover them someday. "Put the rest in the bag. Let's go."

He got up and went to the exit, glancing through the cracks in the thin piece of plywood. Owain grabbed Arthur's arm and gave him a meaningful look before turning him around.

Merlin shouldered the backpack, but there was a moment when the light hit him just right. Broken, struggling, vulnerable.

Every one of Arthur's nightmares reared their ugly heads. Fabricated images from the darkest recesses of Arthur's mind -- Merlin bound to a chair and gagged, his body listing to the side and struggling to stay conscious; Merlin held in place by two men while a third beat him; Merlin shirtless, bruised and bloodied, cowering in a corner. It didn't help that Kay and Will had hinted that these things had happened -- not just to one, but to all of them.

Arthur grit his teeth. He wouldn't treat Merlin any differently -- he couldn't. Merlin would be pissed if Arthur put on kid gloves. Arthur had to wait and be ready if Merlin needed him.

He'd told himself this before. He'd forced himself to plan for the recovery, for the aftermath -- of not just Merlin, but of all of his men. He thought he was prepared --

But he wasn't prepared. He wasn't.

He forced himself to ignore the rising panic, the freak-out that was threatening to build and blow like a defused bomb. He pushed it all down and tried to focus on what needed to be done.

He couldn't afford to lose himself, not now. Not when they were so close to being safe. Not when they had Merlin with them again. It wasn't about him. It was about Merlin. And he couldn't ever let Merlin think that all this was his fault when Arthur was to blame.

Arthur nodded grimly and shook himself from Owain's grasp. He caught Merlin's arm when Merlin slipped and pulled him flush against him.

Merlin's body was stiff, tense, strained. He held himself as if he were resisting without seeming to, bracing himself against blows or injuries that would never come. Not from Arthur. Never from him.

Then, all at once, as if remembering where he was and who he was with, Merlin melted, his body fitting against Arthur's like something out of a favourite memory. He was bonier, now, with harder edges. His waist was narrower, the trousers slipping down. The coat was heavy, a pillow and a barrier all at once, and Arthur wanted it off, he wanted it gone.

But Merlin was cold. Merlin was all grasping hands and arms, clinging to Arthur as if he thought that Arthur might disappear. Arthur heard a sniffle and felt a hitched breath before Merlin buried his face in the crook of Arthur's neck, hiding his face from sight even though it was too dark to see properly.
"I'll just be outside. Give you a minute and all. Just a minute, mind," Owain muttered, and that was the last that Arthur heard of him until the creak of footsteps by the entrance and the whush-clack of a flimsy plywood board falling shut.

Arthur closed his eyes, swallowing the thickness in his throat with difficulty. He tightened his arms around Merlin -- as tightly as he dared without risking additional injury or worsening that painful bruise on Merlin's side. He bowed his head and pressed his lips on the exposed bit of Merlin's throat.

"I have you, love," Arthur murmured. His voice was strangled, strained, hoarse. "I have you and I won't let you go again."

Merlin's chest stuttered with a suppressed sob.

"I'm sorry. God. I'm so sorry, Merlin. This is my fault, this is --"

"Shut up," Merlin whispered. He was fierce, biting, even as his body was curled against Arthur's, as if wanting to burrow there where he knew he would always be safe. "Shut up. It's not anyone's fault. We talked about this. We agreed --"

"Not to this --"

"There was a chance it might happen --"

"I tried so hard to make sure there was no chance --"

"Shut up. Shut up. I'm just..." Merlin lifted his head, pulling away a little, straining against Arthur's arms but not fighting against them. He wiped a hand on Arthur's cheek, collecting the tears that Arthur hadn't realized had fallen.

There was a faint knock on the plywood. It was hollow and urgent, a rap-rap-rap that made Merlin freeze up and tense, half-turning toward the doorway, as if waiting for something bad to happen.

Owain stuck his head inside. "Boys, we got to go. There's a few funny black cars driving at less than the speed limit, and they don't look friendly."

Arthur nodded sternly, pulling away. He wiped his eyes with the sleeves of his jacket, but when he dropped his hand, Merlin caught it, fingers twining in his.

"I love you," Merlin said. "Now, stop being a pillock. Get us out of here."

ooOoOoo

The nondescript black cars -- three of them, like Owain had said -- stood out like sore thumbs. Every time a car drove past, Merlin, Arthur and Owain hunkered down to hide.

It made any forward progress slow.

As far as Merlin could tell, the three vehicles were driving in overlapping concentric circles, following a search grid pattern. If they were being tracked by virtue of a location bug planted somewhere on Merlin's person or hidden within his equipment, the bug wasn't accurate to more than
They kept moving. Arthur refused to leave Merlin, so it was up to Owain to find a pay phone to call the team and pass on a change in plans. Now, they were to hold back for now instead of meeting up. Arthur didn't want anyone else to fall on the enemy radar.

When Owain returned, he returned bearing gifts. They dumped Merlin's equipment into the fabric shopping bag and stowed the backpack in a rubbish bin behind a building. They stopped long enough for Merlin to eat the stale grocery store sandwich and down the contents of a bottle of orange juice before they were on their way again.

"What time is it?" Merlin asked. The cars had shown up eight minutes apart, like clockwork, but the more time passed, the longer it was taking before the cars made an appearance. Merlin didn't have a watch, but it seemed as if the patrols were long overdue. That was either because they'd left behind the tracking bug and Aredian's men had given up or were scouting the wrong location, or --

Hackles rose on the back of Merlin's neck.

Or it was because they'd been found out, and they were planting a trap ahead.

"Arthur --"

"It's okay," Arthur murmured. There was something strange in his voice, a taunt, strained quality that Merlin had never heard before. Arthur's hand squeezed Merlin's in what might have been reassurance, but it was just a little too much and a little too long. "Keep moving."

Merlin bit back a complaint. He nodded instead, even though he wasn't entirely certain that he could keep moving. He'd been surviving on adrenaline ever since the house, but even that minute supply was fading. Merlin felt both numb and detached from his body. He wondered if he was going into shock.

He'd stopped feeling the cold a long time ago.

"Owain, move up, get as far from us as you can. See if you can get the comms back up," Arthur said.

"We still have the mobile," Merlin said stubbornly. As if even mentioning it had summoned a ghost in the machine, the mobile rang.

They all stopped and stared at it.

It rang a few more times before falling silent. The name that had flashed on the screen was Valjean. Merlin chuckled to himself, not sure if he should feel sorry for the bloke saddled with that name, or if he should feel affronted on the man's behalf that his friends would give him that nickname.

The phone rang again from the same number. Before Merlin knew what he was doing, he'd clicked the answer button and brought the phone to his ear.

Arthur rolled his eyes at him.

What came out of the earpiece was a hostile string of words and phrases in French, and Merlin only managed to pick up one swear in twenty. He handed the mobile to Arthur, who huffed, but took it.

And hung up.
"Block the number," Arthur said, giving the phone back. "You disabled the GPS, right?"

"What do you take me for?" Merlin grumbled. He flicked through the settings screen and set the privacy mode, blocking all calls. He double-checked the GPS -- he honestly couldn't remember turning it off and was relieved to see that it was -- and deleted the *Trouvez mon iPhone* app from the mobile.

"Someone who needs to sleep for a week," Arthur said, putting his arm around Merlin's shoulder, fingers trailing through Merlin's hair.


"Sounds good to me," Owain said, approaching them. He tilted his head to gesture up the road. "I'll scout ahead. Not getting out of range, and don't look so sour, Arthur. You're not the only one who lost our boys, and we're damned if it'll happen again."

Arthur's frown faded. His lips thinned and he nodded. Owain clapped a hand on Arthur's shoulder and headed up the road at a slow jog, keeping clear of the streetlights and sticking to the darkest parts of the street.

Arthur and Merlin followed in silence. If Merlin leaned more on Arthur than he had before, Arthur said nothing. Instead, he shifted a little, letting Merlin fit against him where his vest or his weapons wouldn't dig into Merlin's side.

They'd gone two blocks without any sign of the black cars before Merlin straightened, shaking his head to clear it before he drifted off. He was falling asleep on his feet.

"What's the plan from here?" Merlin asked, his voice rough.

"To get everyone the fuck away from Paris," Arthur said, shrugging a shoulder. "Beyond that, I don't know."

Merlin gave Arthur a measuring look, and Arthur reddened under his gaze. It didn't seem like Arthur, not having a plan. He was rarely without one. Long term or short term -- it didn't matter. He always had a destination in mind, a goal, some sort of agenda that needed to be accomplished before they could move onto the next step. That Arthur didn't know where they were going to go or what they were going to do?

That struck Merlin as odd.

"Are you all right?" Merlin asked.

A muscle popped in Arthur's jaw. His eyes narrowed but he didn't turn to look at Merlin; if anything, he avoided looking at Merlin at all. Finally, he nodded and set soft eyes on Merlin, leaning to press a kiss on Merlin's temple. "What do you think?"

"I think you need to sleep for a month, too," Merlin said. A faint smile pulled at Arthur's mouth, but it never blossomed into the real thing. "Maybe two. And I don't care if it's in Thailand or Timbuktu as long as you're there."

"Thailand would be warmer," Merlin said, pushing Arthur along. He ducked his head down when a cold blast of wind whistled between the buildings, using Arthur as a shield. "Arthur, if you don't have a plan for later --"
"My first priority is getting everyone to safety," Arthur said. He gave Merlin a strange look and added, "There's a lot that you missed."

"I'm starting to get that," Merlin said after a moment. Ahead of them, they saw Owain meandering back at a slow, leisurely pace. That was signal enough that the way ahead was clear. Owain, seeing them, turned around and headed the other way, again pulling out ahead. "Can I get the Cliff's Notes version?"

"After we get you someplace where you can rest," Arthur said.

"If you keep talking, I'll stay awake longer," Merlin said, elbowing Arthur in the ribs. The movement made something pull in his chest, and Merlin suppressed a wince. He'd developed the habit of hiding how badly he was hurt lest Aredian's men take advantage, but considering that they hadn't treated Merlin any differently even when he was half-conscious on the ground and bleeding from several wounds, Merlin wasn't certain how successful he'd been. Mordred's tonic had helped, but he wasn't all the way healed, and actually escaping Aredian, even with a hole in the wall giving him a perfect way out? Not as simple as it looked.

He tried not to think about Cennydd.

Arthur didn't seem to notice that Merlin was favouring his side, though. Instead, he made a face, as if he would rather not talk about it now, and pointedly looked around. There wasn't any trace of the black cars, and they couldn't hear any traffic in this part of the neighbourhood. "All right," he finally said, his tone grudging.

"After the prototype went off. What happened?"

"Aredian's men took you, obviously," Arthur said, a sharp edge to his voice. He inhaled deeply before adding, "The NWO grabbed Morgana and Gwen."

Merlin stuttered to a stop. Arthur halted a few strides ahead, gesturing impatiently for Merlin to catch up. "No. You can't just -- where are they? Are they --"

"We got them back," Arthur said. "They're fine. Rattled, but they're all right. Morgause wanted to use Morgana to get into the database. Aredian wasn't cooperating anymore --"

"Because of Bryn," Merlin guessed, remembering how Will had shot the man dead. He didn't know how he felt to have seen his best friend killing someone in cold blood. He hadn't had time to give it much thought.

"Bryn was part of it, yeah. I think there's something else going on, though," Arthur said. He didn't say anything else, not right away. Owain made another appearance and detoured ahead. Finally, Arthur spoke up. "The testing grounds? That was a…"

Clusterfuck, he didn't say, but Merlin heard it all the same. Merlin nodded in agreement. Arthur didn't have to spell it out for him. On that day, nothing had gone according to plan. So many things had gone wrong that, even with the trap they'd set, Merlin wasn't even sure who had betrayed them -- Bayard or Kilgarrah. Arthur had given the Directory one story; Merlin had given Kilgarrah another, and Merlin wasn't entirely sure what happened after that.

The prototype's effect on him had been… unexpected, and very much unwanted.

"The Directory did show up. So did the CIA, the NWO and Aredian." Arthur pulled Merlin into a nearby doorway at the sound of a car approaching. They waited until the little red BMW roared past before continuing. "Kilgarrah had some men, too."
"He called in the army?" Merlin looked at Arthur sharply.

Arthur shook his head before nodding and finally hedging. "Not the way you'd think."

Merlin stared at him, stumbling over a crack in the sidewalk. Arthur steadied him, and they walked another block before Merlin lost his patience and asked, "Are you going to make me guess? Because --"

"No. It's just --" Merlin stopped, and Arthur did, too. They weren't quite under a streetlight, but there was enough light for Merlin to notice the uncomfortable expression that had crossed Arthur's face. "Let me skip ahead some, yeah? We were in pretty bad shape, Merlin. We didn't know who we could trust anymore. Cut off the Directory, MI6, Kilgarrah. We went back to England to regroup."

"Is everyone all right?"

"Everyone's fine," Arthur said, tilting his head to indicate that they should keep walking. Merlin fell in step beside him just in time to hear Arthur mutter, "Though listening to Gwaine, you wouldn't think so. He got a splinter in his leg, made it out to be that it was an entire bloody tree…"

Merlin snorted a little at the mental image, but there was something in Arthur's tone that made Merlin think that Arthur was downplaying how bad it really had been.

"We went to the only person we knew could help us," Arthur said. He hesitated. "Someone who had a stake in this that I could trust. We went to see your mother."

"My mum?" Merlin blurted out, wide-eyed. He winced at the volume of his own voice and tempered it before Arthur could tell him to keep quiet. "You brought my mum into this?"

"As if I could keep her away with a bloody tank the minute she found out we'd lost you," Arthur grumbled. He shook his head. "And anyway, she was already into this. I don't know who it was. The Directory, MI6, maybe both. It doesn't matter. What matters is that she was under surveillance, and if we hadn't been there, MI6 would have picked her up. They tried to kidnap her, Merlin --"

Merlin deflated, and his knees would have given out if he didn't have forward momentum and Arthur to keep him steady. "Oh, God. Mum. Is she okay?"

"She's tougher than the rest of us put together," Arthur said, nodding reassuringly. Then, cryptically, he added, "You have no idea."

Merlin shot Arthur a questioning look, but Arthur didn't elaborate.

"She patched us up, we regrouped, we came back when Morgana and Gwen triggered the trackers we'd left behind in case somehow, someone would pick them up. Sure as fuck hoped that it would be Aredian's men, who could toss them at you and make you think we were all dead, but turned out to be Morgause. It worked out in the end, though," Arthur said, bringing his free hand to his forehead, brushing his temple with forefinger and thumb. He was trying to sort it out in his head, to make sense of everything, and it was a relief to have Merlin back. Leon was a great sounding board, but even he couldn't keep up with Arthur's manic planning the way Merlin could. "Morgause's still alive and there's every indication that she's back at Interpol pulling some strings, but if the seeds I've planted take fruit, she's bound to lose connections there."

Merlin nodded.

"Hardest part was getting answers. Finding you," Arthur said, nudging Merlin gently. "Merlin --"
"Explanations now, maudlin confessions and declarations of love later," Merlin said firmly. "Go on with the story."

This time, the smile that quirked its way to Arthur's lips stayed there, though it only lingered for a few seconds. "That's one hell of a phone you left your mum," Arthur said.

"The phone?" Merlin frowned.

Arthur made a swirly gesture with his hand, as if that was supposed to make sense. It didn't matter how long he was in Excalibur -- Merlin had only been able to interpret Arthur's hand signals out of pure guesswork and sheer dumb luck. "The phone. The one with Merlinware. For the record, you should build one for me. I bloody love that thing. Anyway, that phone gave me the traction to move forward when I didn't know what the fuck to do next."

It took Merlin a few minutes to realize that Arthur was talking about the monstrosity of an ancient mobile phone that he'd turned into a long-range transmitter and long-life battery as a school project, but never turned in because he'd worried that Tristan or Bryn would have stolen it from him before Merlin had even made it past the yard. It had still been serviceable when he went to university, and he had continued to tweak and upgrade it whenever he'd returned home on school holiday, and later, from active duty.

The Merlinphone was a multi-purpose device mostly built because he could, and mostly because his mum wanted it a certain way. There had been times -- there were still times -- when Merlin wished he'd had it out in the field instead of the cumbersome Box that the army always saddled him with. It was smaller and more lightweight in comparison.

Also, more reliable. Maybe he should market it.

"I'll build you something better," Merlin promised. "Go on, then. What did you find out?"

"Kilgarrah," Arthur said, after a long, stretched silence. Merlin was about to give up waiting on Arthur following up with additional information when Arthur added, "He's not as innocent in this as he'd have us believe."

Merlin tilted his head in consideration. He nodded. "Yeah. Kind of figured after he had me try my hand at cracking a bit of code I've never seen anywhere else."

Arthur started to say something else, when they both saw Owain ahead of them, an arm raised in the all-clear signal. He didn't turn around to keep going. Instead, he stayed where he was and waited for them to catch up.

"Haven't seen hide or hair of them," Owain said, though he glanced around for good measure anyway. "Maybe we've lost them, we're out of their range or something, I don't know. I figure it's safe enough to hole up for a while if that's what you want to do, or..."

He waved an arm in an easterly direction.

"Or we hop on the Metro and get out of their range fast as we can. We must still be in the jammer bubble, because the comms are still down," Owain said.

Merlin took the stolen mobile out of his pocket and opened the map app. It took a moment for the flashing blue ball to reposition itself on the map. The Metro station that Owain was talking about was only a few blocks over, and if memory served, it was one of the last stations on that particular line. He flipped the screen to show Arthur, but Arthur only gave it a cursory look before nodding sharply.
"Let's do that," Arthur said. "Owain, keep ahead of us, eyes and ears open. Don't head in until we catch up. I don't want you pinned down if they're waiting for us there."

Merlin put the phone away, taking care to shut down the application first. There was no point in draining the battery any more than it already was. He pulled at the jacket, wrapping his arms over his chest, and hunkered down, digging as deep as he could to find the energy he needed to keep on going just that little bit more before he could pass out.

Arthur hadn't said anything for half a block. Merlin nudged Arthur's arm with his elbow. "Go on, then. Kilgarrah?"

Arthur pressed his lips together the way he did when he was thinking about something particularly distasteful, but it wasn't until they'd reached the end of the block that he spoke again. "I'm not sure what his game is, but he's not working with Aredian or the NWO."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay," Merlin said. Arthur didn't elaborate. Instead, Arthur took Merlin's arm and pulled him across the road. They lingered there as a few cars drove by -- another red car, a silver BMW, a navy blue sedan dusty enough to pass for one of the black cars following them. Merlin sagged against the wall, letting Arthur hold him up.

He might have drifted off in those few minutes, because the next thing he knew, he was being dragged out of the alley, Arthur's arm under his and around his waist, taking on most of Merlin's weight.

"Who's he working for? Kilgarrah?" Merlin asked, grasping that tendril of conscious thought and hoping it was enough to keep him awake.

"I'm not sure," Arthur admitted. "Himself, most likely. He's not a fan of the Directory, MI-6 doesn't ping on his radar. He acts like the NWO is a fly in his soup and Aredian is a cockroach infestation."

Merlin chuckled. The description was apt -- or he might be so tired that he was at the point where he would find anything funny, too punch-drunk with exhaustion for anything else. He sobered up, but it took too long for him to follow the first question with another. "You said he sent men to the training fields."

Arthur nodded jerkily. "He did."

"And?"

"Not now," Arthur said. A muscle in his jaw popped. "Later, love. When you've had some sleep. Can you hold on a little longer? We're nearly at the station."

Merlin saw Owain standing just outside the gates, waiting for them. He headed inside as soon as they were in line of sight, his head up and his body angled in preparation for action. Merlin and Arthur followed just as cautiously, with Arthur's hand in his coat pocket, the bulge of gun and fist hinting that he was more than ready to shoot, if necessary.

Merlin had a gun -- Cennydd's gun, and it made him feel guilty to have it in the first place -- but he couldn't remember where he'd put it. It wasn't in the shopping bag that Owain had bought them earlier, but there was a weight in the small of his back that he might be confusing with the warmth of Arthur's hand Merlin resisted the urge to reach around to confirm, and that was only because he
wasn't altogether confident in how good of a shot he would be right now.

Special Forces teams were made up of men who endured rigorous endurance trials, including long, sleepless days and nights. They were tested on their ability to keep working with a clear mind and to continue to shoot with a certain degree of accuracy at different time intervals. A lot of those tests were pass or fail -- and Merlin was of the belief that he would fail them all spectacularly right about now.

If Merlin were to pull his gun out now and use it, it would be because Arthur and Owain were so incapacitated that they couldn't continue. Beyond that, Merlin couldn't even make a vague assurance that they wouldn't be shot by friendly fire if Merlin helped their defence.

He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palms, barely noticing when Arthur guided him close to the wall. He didn't even pay attention to where they were going -- the Metro station corridors were either long and straight or long and winding, and one curve in the bend was a twin to the next one along the way. The only difference was in the graffiti painted in stark black spray paint, fuzzing outward in an overdone Photoshop afterglow, and in the posters stuck at haphazard angles, advertising an indie band playing at this club, a fashion show at this institute, an art exhibit from Italy at another museum.

It was funny how he could spot and remember small, inconsequential details like these, but not even take notice of the way Arthur's body tensed when they reached the base of the stairs, stopping short of the train platform, until it was nearly too late. Merlin stumbled against Arthur, grateful that Arthur was there to steady him.

The view wasn't great and there were too many blind spots from their position, but there was enough for Merlin to figure out why Arthur had stopped short. Despite the late hour, the platform wasn't empty. It wasn't a weeknight, and it was unlikely for a Metro station to ever be completely empty short of a complete shutdown or major emergency. Merlin would expect a handful of people on their way into the central arrondissements, at the very least, but the nearly two-dozen people who lingered in groups of fours and fives in a scattered pattern? Merlin looked again. Aside from their unexpected presence, there was nothing out of the ordinary with the crowd. Not exactly. They were all wearing trousers and nice shoes and long coats that stopped past their hips or stretched down to their knees. They stood stiffly, at least one hand in their pockets. There were men and women in the group, but there was a disproportionate number of each.

No one was talking. There was significant eye contact, but no one spoke.

No. That wasn't right.

Owain was at a nearby pay phone, the handpiece against his ear, though Merlin couldn't tell if he was pretending to talk to someone at the other end or if he'd gotten in touch with the rest of the team again. Merlin was too far to hear what Owain was saying, and the acoustics on the platform and the tunnel worked both to drown out ambient sounds and to deafen anyone foolish enough to remain there for too long.

Arthur moved beside him, coming close enough to press his mouth to Merlin's ear. His voice was soft when he asked, "Recognize any of them?"

Merlin looked, careful not to fall out of the shadows and into the opening where he would be easily spotted. After a moment, he shook his head. "No."

That didn't mean much, but it also lessened the chances that these were more of Aredian's men. That left MI-6, the Directory, or the NWO.
Arthur nudged Merlin back until Merlin got the message. They wouldn't be taking the Metro, now. It was too much of a risk. Merlin didn't want to leave Owain behind, but if the way he'd been standing by the pay phone was any indication, he had clued in to the situation as much as Arthur and Merlin. Owain wouldn't draw attention to them -- if anything, he'd do everything to draw it away.

It was a sobering thought. Merlin grasped Arthur's arm tightly.

"Owain --"

"Knows the drill," Arthur said grimly. They walked faster. Ahead of them, at the crossroads of the corridor, shadows shifted -- man-sized shadows, bobbing and weaving and moving quickly. Arthur swore under his breath and abruptly shoved Merlin to the side; they stumbled in a side passageway, hurrying to the other end. Merlin caught a glimpse of one of the men stalking through.

"Fuck," Merlin said, his voice low, hoarse, trembling. "That's... Those are Aredian's men."

Arthur said nothing. After a moment, Arthur dragged Merlin out of their hiding place and pulled him to the Metro's entrance. They exited slowly, watchful for anyone else coming toward them.

There was a black car at the kerb, the engine rumbling, the passenger door ajar as if the occupants had been too much in a hurry to get to the station before they missed their target.

"Get in," Arthur said, letting go of Merlin. He rounded the hood and headed for the driver's side.

"We're leaving Owain behind?"

"He's fine," Arthur said. His tone was flat and detached, as if he didn't quite believe his own words. "He's never dealt with the NWO, Aredian's men have never seen him before. His hair's longer, he hasn't shaved in a week, and he looks bigger in person than he does in his pictures. MI-6 and the Directory won't recognize him."

The maybe was unspoken, but Merlin heard it as clear as a bell.

Arthur climbed behind the wheel without another word. Merlin slid into the passenger seat doubtfully, dropping the fabric grocery bag at his feet.

"With luck, Owain will have rigged the pay phone to blow after he gets on the train," Arthur said. He pulled the car out of park and accelerated down the road. "We'll pick him up at the next stop."

Merlin didn't ask how Arthur was so sure that Owain would be there, and it struck him, then. Arthur wasn't sure. They were separated from the team and their one support person, with no way to safely contact any of them beyond the cell phone that Merlin had picked up, and even then, neither of them wanted to risk it. Arthur was operating on the principle that everything was fine until he heard otherwise, and Merlin had only ever seen him act like that when the odds had been against them out on the battlefield.

Merlin felt a gut-wrenching yearning for the good old days when all anyone had to worry about was a stray bullet or bomb shrapnel while hunkered down in a foxhole somewhere, occasionally returning fire against an enemy taunting them from just outside the range of most of their weapons. He remembered fondly how Gwaine had taken his gun to the overwatch station of the base camp one frustrating night of never-ending bombing. No one had been able to sleep, and Gwaine, who was hungover, had had enough.

Officially, Gwaine had spent the night in the barracks, same as anyone else. Unofficially, it had taken three of them to haul him out of his cubbyhole after he'd taken care of the enemy before the enemy
found him by following his loud snores.

Merlin went through the shopping bag. The laptop, he left alone. His Crack Box stayed in the bag. The Crack Box was too small to accommodate a tracking bug even if they'd known what it was. He was too familiar with his own system for Aredian to risk planting a bug inside -- someone with Merlin's fabricated, but very real reputation would spot the tracking bug in less than a fraction of a second once the casing had been removed. The Pendragon database hard drive was unlikely to be the source of their problems, because he'd taken it apart twice in front of the guards, and there hadn't been anything strange inside.

That left the other black box. Mordred's jammer.

"What's that?" Arthur asked, glancing at it. His eyes immediately went to the rear-view mirror, keeping an eye out for a tail.

"It's Mordred's. Some sort of a jammer. He used it back at the house," Merlin said, running his fingers along the seams. He found the latch and popped the lid. He tilted it, using the illumination from the passing streetlights to get a better look. There wasn't much inside. A couple of circuit boards, a connector, a fan, a transmitter. The fan wasn't running, and the circuit boards had firewire and USB access -- one for control, another for power.

He gave the box a good shake, but nothing rattled.

Arthur was uncharacteristically silent as he made a turn and raced down an empty stretch of road. "Are you telling me that we've been carrying a jammer all along? That the reason we haven't been able to contact the others on the E channel is because --"

"No," Merlin said, shooting a glance at Arthur. He shook his head. "No. There's no power source, for one thing. For another, it's too fucking simple to affect the E band. Look. If you don't believe me --"

He reached in, jiggled a few connectors, and tore out the circuit boards -- the only important parts of the jammer, as far as he was concerned.

He lowered the passenger side window and tossed the box. It bounced once on the pavement before falling apart.

"Try now," Merlin said. Arthur looked dubious, but he tapped his ear. A moment later, he shook his head. Merlin sucked a tooth, grimacing. "Then either we're still in its range, it's got a hell of a transmission source, or it's city wide. We're fucked either way."

"Can you tell which?" Arthur asked. He turned at the roundabout and kept going, barely tapping the brakes.

"Not with what I've got." Merlin checked the circuit boards carefully. They were ingenious -- the soldering was perfect. The detail was exact, almost on the nanoscale. He would have to get it under a microscope to really see how it worked, but at best, the circuits powered a short-range jammer, and it looked to be specific to the WIFI bandwidth. Enough to affect his access, just like Aredian wanted, with fine controls built in. "Parts are clean. That leaves the laptop or the Crack Box."

Arthur came to an abrupt stop. Ahead of them, Owain was running out of the Metro station. His gun was in his hand, but pointed to the ground; he stuttered at the sudden appearance of the car. Arthur lowered his window.

Owain didn't need to be told twice. The car was already moving by the time he'd clambered into the back seat. People were people running out of the Metro after Owain. A thunkthunkthunk of bullets hitting the car's rear fender as they sped away.

"You all right?" Merlin asked.

"Yeah," Owain said, breathless. There was a bruise on his jaw and a cut on his forehead. At first glance he was a little roughed up but otherwise none the worse for wear. "Dogs after bones, though. That's what they are."

"Recognize anyone?"

"No," Owain said, shaking his head. He checked his weapon and holstered it, twisting around to look through the back window. "But considering the pissing fight I left back on the platform? I'm betting they used to date, and it was a bad breakup. I wonder who got the dog."

Arthur raised a brow. His fingers drummed on the steering wheel. They drove in silence for a few minutes before Arthur nodded, as if to himself.

"Merlin, give Owain the mobile. Owain, call the others. Tell them to bug out and scatter to their assigned locations. We'll dump the phone when we switch to a new car."

Merlin fished the phone out of his coat pocket and handed it over his shoulder. Owain took it, but didn't dial right away.

"Are you sure?" Owain glanced at Merlin. "Lance's ready to come out --"

"I'm sure," Arthur said, his voice grim.

ooOoo

Six cars, two close encounters, and a long tourist trip around Paris later, Owain was driving out of the city proper.

Merlin had taken apart his gear, piece by piece, using Owain's toolkit, and found them clean. After an awkward and painful moment that had Merlin reflexively jerking away from Arthur, Arthur had helped him check the rest of his clothes, searching for a bug that wasn't there.

By that point, Merlin was exhausted to the point of nodding off but struggling to stay awake. Owain and Arthur were on a razor's edge -- too wound-up to come down from an adrenaline buzz that continued to flare up every time a shadow moved wrong.

"All that's left is a magic tracker," Merlin had said, rubbing his face with both hands. "Give me a minute and I'll see if I can --"

Arthur had taken Merlin's wrists and lowered his arms. "Why don't you get some rest?"

"Can't, not with --"

"You can, and you will," Arthur had said firmly, tapping Owain on the shoulder. Owain had pulled
the car over, Arthur had shifted to the front passenger seat, and Merlin had stretched out on the back seat.

He had passed out within seconds.

"He'll be all right," Owain said softly, catching Arthur in the act of glancing over his shoulder for the tenth time in as many minutes to check on Merlin.

Arthur didn't answer.

"We'll be all right, too," Owain continued, keeping his voice low to not wake up Merlin. There was a conviction in his tone that Arthur didn't feel, and that was only because he was still reeling from how Merlin had pulled away from Arthur's touch when Arthur had put a hand on Merlin's knee.

Arthur rubbed his face. He dropped his hand and looked out the side window, bowing his head to check out the side mirror.

"So, what's the plan, then?" Owain asked.

Arthur shook his head and made a half-hearted shrug, because he didn't know.

"Go on," Owain pressed, his tone earnest, almost desperate. "Talk it out. We need a plan."

Arthur gave Owain a long look. Owain didn't take his eyes from the road; if anything, his hands tightened around the steering wheel, his knuckles white in the dashboard glow. He was stressed. They all were.

Arthur straightened from his slump and glanced in the rear view mirror at Merlin before exhaling slowly. He should be elated that they had Merlin -- and he was. But he was afraid that the damage, whatever its form, was irreparable. Would Merlin ever be able to trust him again? Would Merlin stop flinching whenever Arthur reached out to touch him? Would he be all right?

Arthur forced himself to turn away from questions that had no answers. Owain was right. They needed a plan.

They'd learned at the Directory training that a magical tag had as many limitations as an electronic bug. They needed a power source -- always the caster, since the caster couldn't be certain that the target had any magic of their own. They could broadcast a location, but only within a fixed range, and it depended on the caster's strength. A good magical tag could work over sections of a city; a better one could find anything in the entirety of the country.

Merlin had sworn up and down that no one had cast any magic on him, as far as he knew, but it had been Owain who had suggested maybe the spell was on his clothes.

They didn't have much by way of spares, and Merlin had said that Mordred and one of his men had given him the change of clothing in the first place. It didn't make much sense to Arthur for Mordred to have given Merlin objects that were already ensorcelled, and Merlin had admitted that he probably would have sensed the magic, anyway.

Probably.

Merlin had been distracted, and hadn't been thinking along those lines at the time.

It didn't make sense to Arthur, anyway.
Besides, why cast a spell that required an enormous amount of maintenance when they could simply scry their location? Scrying, Arthur remembered, was just as draining, and it had the unfortunate addition of being unreliable and difficult to interpret.

He rubbed his forefinger and thumb over his eyes.

"All right. If there was a tracking bug, we've ditched it. If there's a tracking spell, it won't last much longer. Merlin's in no state to check, never mind counter it, so we keep moving until we're out of range or they run out of power to keep it going."

"How long do you figure?" Owain asked.

"The Directory sorcerers burnt out fast on the big spells," Arthur said. "Tracking is more passive. Let's say twelve hours."

"Twelve." Owain nodded. "Twelve minus three. Nine more hours."

"Full twelve to be safe," Arthur said, grimacing as soon as he said it. Owain didn't look any happier. "Look, I don't fancy being on the move that long. We might not have to. We have twelve hours to get out of the range of the spell, if there's one."

"Orright," Owain said, glancing at the dashboard of the car. "Can go for a while longer, but we'll need to change cars, or at least refuel."

"How long?" Arthur asked.

"Two hours, give or take," Owain said, glancing in the rear view mirror. Arthur looked in the side mirror and saw two headlights coming up fast behind them, growing bigger and brighter with every passing second. It wasn't long before they both relaxed, making out the form of a small cherry-red sports car, driving low and pedal to the metal. There were obnoxious horns honking at them before they were passed, the car disappearing ahead of them.

"Two hours, and when we stop, we'll check with Merlin. If he says we're clear, then we're clear, and we'll go for the next safe house. If we're not, we'll get him somewhere that he can deal with it, then we skip the area before we try for the next location."

"Sounds good," Owain said. "One question, though. What safe house?"

Arthur sighed softly, digging into his vest until he could wriggle loose the sheet of paper with the list of coded numbers. Each of the numbers were coordinates to places that he had no known association with, but where he knew he could find help and shelter if he needed it. Morgana had a similar list, with a few locations in common between the two. She was the only other one who knew the code, although Arthur was willing to bet that it would take no time at all for Merlin to crack it.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder. Merlin was curled up uncomfortably on the back seat, too tall for its length, his knees rucked up, his feet jammed against the door. He was using the stolen coat as a pillow and Arthur's coat as a blanket. His eyes were shut and his breathing slow and even, but sometimes, when Arthur looked for too long, he could pick out unconscious twitches and frowns.

He was dreaming, and those dreams were likely unpleasant.
Arthur flattened the piece of paper on his knee and fished out a small penlight. He mentally crossed off those that weren't on their current route and reorganized them in his head until he had a tidy list of locations that they could go to, depending on the situation in two hours.

The rest of the team would have scattered by now, Arthur knew. Some would have headed immediately to Britain to lend support to Kay and Will. Others would stay behind in case Arthur needed them, and they would keep moving Mordred around until Arthur figured out what to do with him. Arthur had given very specific instructions for the care and handling of Morgana and Gwen that he was absolutely positive would be ignored anyway. And, as loathe as he was to keep secrets from Hunith, Hunith and Balinor were to be kept in the dark as much as possible. They were direct links to Kilgarrah, and Arthur didn't want to run the risk that either of them might contact him.

Arthur needed things to go their way, for a change.

Arthur shifted in his seat until he was half-turned, half-using the light from the dashboard to read his own notes, half-keeping an eye on Merlin. He didn't know why he hadn't mentioned Balinor --

No.

He did know why he hadn't said anything about Balinor to Merlin. Merlin believed that his father was dead. He had already gone through Hell with Aredian. He didn't need to be additionally traumatized by finding out that not only was his father not dead, but that his mother had been keeping that important bit of information from him all along.

Fuck.

Arthur knew how he would feel if Uther had told him that his mother had died, when the truth was something else altogether. There were times when he certainly wished that his mother had run away -- from Uther, from the army life. However much it hurt to think that she had left him, it hurt a whole lot less to tell himself that she was alive somewhere and that one day he would see her again, than to know that the only time he would see her would be when he put lilies on her gravestone.

Merlin had grown up in the military as surely as Arthur had. He knew what it meant when a uniform knocked on their door and hesitantly handed over a telegram with their apologies. Body or not, if the military marked someone dead, the odds were very high that they would never be seen again.

Arthur might have had the luxury of telling himself stories about his mother, but he didn't think Merlin had ever allowed himself to have even a vague hope of rounding a street corner and spotting his dad at a café somewhere. He wouldn't have had the chance. Arthur knew the generalities -- it had been in Merlin's file. Arthur had abused his contacts in the military to gain some access to Balinor's file, too, but there was too much black ink redacting the details to do much more than to puzzle-piece everything together. Merlin had told him bits and pieces of a first-hand account, and only those parts that weren't full of heartbreak.

There had been enough heartbreak, both then and now. Merlin had watched his mother come undone; he had been strong for her. And he stayed strong growing up even while his mother snuck away to visit a father he'd never know.

Arthur hadn't been angry with Hunith. Not at first. There had been too much going on, too many balls in the air. But the more that was revealed, the more...

The more he respected her for making the decision that she had, and the more he grew to hate her for what she had done -- and was still doing -- to her son. It was for that reason, and that reason alone, that he would tell Merlin the truth in the gentlest way possible.
Balinor, on the other hand -- Arthur could care less about him.

He’d tried putting himself in Balinor's shoes multiple times. He tried again now. But no matter how many scenarios he played out in his head, Arthur couldn't put himself in a situation where he would abandon his family. He would take Merlin, he would take their children, if they had them. He would abandon everything and they would run and they would be as safe as he could make them --

Which was pretty damn safe, at least in his head.

It was exactly as safe as Arthur needed to make Merlin right now.

"Arthur?" Owain asked.

"Sorry," Arthur said, shaking his head.

"Drifted off, did you?"

"Yeah, a bit," Arthur said, looking at Merlin again. He wanted nothing more but to crawl into the back seat and to hold Merlin until he woke up, but that not only would be uncomfortable for both of them, given the cramped space, but would probably also be unappreciated, particularly now.

The way that Merlin had pulled away from him -- before looking completely stricken by his own actions and surging forward -- still stung.

"So, the safe house?" Owain prompted.

"You're just trying to distract me, aren't you?" Arthur asked, glancing at the sheet of paper in his hand. It was too dark to see the numbers without more light, but a nervous habit made him go through them again, anyway.

"Is it working?" Owain asked.

Arthur ran his hand through his hair. He caught his reflection in the window; his hair stuck up at weird angles. He was overdue for a haircut. A shave. A long shower. A long night's sleep tangled around Merlin.

"No," he finally said.

Owain grunted. He tilted his head and shrugged. "Can't say I didn't try."

"I appreciate it, though," Arthur said. "I know I haven't been... easy to deal with."

Owain didn't say anything for a while. In a way, Arthur was kind of glad for the silence. Neither of them had turned on the radio, and neither of them would, not when they wanted to have all their senses on alert in case something happened. In the silence, Arthur could half-close his eyes, waking only when he caught a reflection of light in the side mirror. He could listen to Merlin's slow breathing and be reassured, even if he needed to turn around and see for himself that, yes, they had rescued Merlin. They had him. Arthur was with Merlin again.

It seemed as if everything should be all right with the world. The disembodied, disoriented sensation would go away, and Arthur would have his head on straight once again. It hadn't happened yet. He felt sick, nauseous, displaced.

"Look, mate," Owain said, breaking the silence and snapping Arthur out of his daze. Owain
hesitated. He chewed the inside of his cheek as if contemplating what to say next before shrugging his shoulder in what looked to be a *giving up the fight against a lost cause* gesture. "I'm not Leon."

"I'd noticed," Arthur said wryly.

"I'm not Gwaine either," Owain said.

"One of him is enough, believe me," Arthur said.

Owain huffed. He reached out and grabbed Arthur's vest, giving him a rough shake. "What I'm getting at is, they're who you need right now. I'm just a thick-headed numpty. I don't see much outside the bomb I'm supposed to disarm, and I don't think much more ahead beyond how many wires I need to cut and in what order to make sure it doesn't go off before I run out of time."

"You do it better than anyone," Arthur said, and that was true. There were few demolition specialists who were as gifted as Owain was, and Arthur had lucked out getting him in Excalibur when other Captains had been clamouring for him -- and if it was because they'd known each other from the footie teams before the army, that was no one's business but their own. Owain never talked about it, but Arthur had figured out that Owain had been about to leave the army to take a copper job like his dad and his granddad before him.

Instead, he'd deferred those plans in favour of serving under Arthur.

"I'm not Leon. I'm not Gwaine. I'm not Lance. I'm not bloody Morgana, and I'm kind of grateful for that, because I just don't have the tits," Owain said, patting his chest one-handed. He shot Arthur an apologetic look. "Sorry, mate. I know she's your sister and all. But the tits, they're *special*."

Arthur snorted.

"If they were here, they'd know what to tell you. They'd know what you need to hear. Even Merlin would know, but he's..." Owain trailed off, and he glanced in the rear view mirror. He swallowed hard, his lips pressed together and his brow furrowing before he spoke again. "I'll give it a go, though --"

"You don't have to say anything," Arthur said.

"Actually, yeah, I do," Owain said, giving Arthur a wide-eyed *are-you-kidding-me* look. "Someone should, and I don't see anyone else stepping up, do I?"

He turned back to watch the road, checking the mirrors by a matter of course. Arthur did the same, but there wasn't anything unusual about the traffic. No suspicious dark vehicles with tinted windows keeping pace with them some distance behind, no helicopters looming menacingly in the distance, and, thus far, no roadblocks ahead. They could probably relax for a little while.

Just as soon as that thought occurred, Arthur realized that if they were indeed being tracked, never mind *how*, it wouldn't take long for someone to realize that they were on a fixed route on a straight *autoroute* with too many exits and entries. The enemy could still be waiting for them ahead.

He resisted the urge to tell Owain to take the first exit ramp and for them to find a more circuitous route to their destination. Owain must have had some inkling of what Arthur had been about to say, because his jaw clenched and he was shaking his head minutely.

Arthur stared straight ahead at a fixed point just in front of the car, looking away only when it began to make him drowsy. He rubbed his forehead. "All right. Why don't you say it?"
Owain took a deep breath, letting it go slowly. His eyes narrowed in concentration, and every now and then there would be a slight tic -- a tilt of his head, a wave of his fingers. He was a man in deep conversation with himself, and disagreeing strenuously.

"This is going to be painful, isn't it?" Arthur asked.

"Very painful," Owain muttered. "Just not sure which of us is going to be walking away from this."

Merlin shifted in the back seat. He pulled at Arthur's coat and brought his knees up. He made a small sound that Arthur never wanted to hear again. He hesitated before reaching over to put a reassuring hand on Merlin's leg.

Merlin swallowed heavily in his sleep, took a heavy, noisy breath, and settled.

Arthur pulled away reluctantly, turning to Owain.

"You need to become an IED," Owain said quietly, raising a hand to forestall anything that Arthur was about to say.

Except Arthur didn't have anything to say. He was sure that at any other time, he would groan in misery at having to suffer yet another one of Owain's complicated metaphors. But now, all he could think about was Merlin and the way he'd protected his body while he was sleeping.

"Look, improvised bombs are just that. Improvised. Desperate people use everything and anything to get the job done. It doesn't matter if the job is blowing people to bits or blowing a bridge or slowing down whoever's after them. It's all the same to them. They might use bits of metal shavings from a plumbing job. Maybe they'll pull out all the nails from one of the walls of their houses and shove them in the dispersion bin. They could use gasoline or they could use fertilizer. It doesn't matter. Hell, I've even seen a bomb made out of household cleaner and antifreeze. Don't ask me how it worked, I still don't know, mate, and I'm pretty sure the Yard sends some lackey to the deepest, darkest gaol to see the bloke to ask him about some mix or another.

"The point being, up until lately, you've been a cookie-cutter bomb. Machine-worked casing, off-the-shelf wiring, one-pound-store countdown timer that runs a bit fast or slow, depending on the battery. Complicated as fuck, with contingencies on contingencies. It's not a matter of figuring out how to defuse it. It's a matter of seeing whether you can beat the built-in safeties before the timer runs out."

Arthur closed his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Anyone else would have gotten to the point by now, but Owain liked to be contrary. He might be one of the best bomb men on the planet, capable of seeing through all sorts of rubbish to get to the bare bones of a device that no one had ever seen before, but he was a contradiction in that he was just as complicated as the bombs he worked on.

"There's no easy way to say it," Owain said. "They beat the clock. They stopped you good."

Arthur shot Owain a dark look. Owain's attention was fixed on the road ahead of them, his hands tight on the steering wheel. He didn't appear to have noticed Arthur's grunt.

"We were talking about it. Bedivere and me. Everything you've ever done is a matter of record. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that you've already got everything planned down to the millisecond before we ever go on a mission. It might take a genius to figure out how to go about fucking up your plans, though," Owain said. "Or just a whole lot of bad luck."

He glanced in the rear view mirror to emphasize a point that he didn't need to make. Arthur knew all too well about bad luck, though he preferred to think of it as bad planning instead. Very little could
convince him that this wasn't his fault, somehow.


Arthur couldn't help it. He choked back a laugh.

"What do you keep telling us, Captain?" Owain asked. "When everything dips its nose in the bloody sewer, someone's given the toilet a good flush, and there's no way to avoid the wave surge?"

Arthur raised a brow. "That's descriptive."

"Shut it and give over. The shite's hit the fan and we're out of plans. What do we do?"

"Come up with a new plan," Arthur said. "Obviously."

"So come up with something," Owain said, shooting him a sidelong look. "Come up with something good. Do something they're not going to expect you do to. Be the IED."

"You've got to stop breathing fumes, it's affecting your head," Arthur said, but there was no real heat to his words. Owain might not have gotten to the point quickly, but Arthur had heard what he'd said, loud and clear. And he was right. They hadn't wiped Captain Pendragon from the army databases. It would be easy enough for an experienced hacker to pull his assignment report files and debriefs. Even someone with the right clearance level at Interpol might be able to get their hands on them. That meant that the NWO and MI-6 and Aredian knew damn well who and what they were dealing with when it came to Arthur -- even if his record had been altered to fix his undercover role, the military data hadn't changed. They would know what Arthur would do when he was thrown in a difficult situation. They would also know how he would react when he had his back to the wall.

And his back was at the wall.

Losing his entire livelihood when he'd been forced to deliver the Pendragon Consulting database to the enemy. Outwitting them and getting it back. Attempting to stop anyone from getting a prototype that wasn't supposed to exist and didn't work according to the specs and failing.

In the context of the role that the Directory had put him in, his reactions to whatever the NWO and Aredian had thrown at him had been predictable.

But with what the Directory and MI-6 already knew about him, even his contingency plans would work against him. There would always be someone waiting for him.

In many ways, it felt as if he had been thrown into a battlefield over who could control him. If he had come up for air after the incident at the testing ground, Arthur had a feeling that he would have found a ransom demand waiting for him. It was a ransom demand that he would have willingly paid, no matter what the cost, if it would have gotten Merlin and Kay back.

He wasn't certain where things had gone wrong. If he had continued to play the part he'd been given, would things have ended differently? Morgause had taken Morgana and Gwen. Would she have contacted Arthur at all? Would she have taunted Morgana into cooperating if the team hadn't left behind indications that they were dead? Would they have ever found them?

And if they had resurfaced, alive and well, after the attack, if they had continued to pretend that they didn't suspect a traitor somewhere up the line? What, then?
Neither side had any reason to believe that Arthur would have gone off-script. Aredian and the NWO had believed Arthur's cover. Had believed Merlin's. There had been no reason to think that Arthur and his men were anything more than the wayward son with a bit of a dark streak.

Bayard and Kilgarrah couldn't have known that the team believed one of them to be a traitor. They would have expected Arthur to continue in his role no matter what, to play it out, to…

To keep an eye on the goal.

And MI-6?

Maybe Olaf knew Arthur better than anyone else, because Vivian had been watching Hunith with every intention of taking her away if necessary. Gaius had disappeared, but why would he disappear if there hadn't been a tip-off? And Uther had done nothing but to issue a short, boring press release to explain the incident at the company testing grounds as a faulty prototype, with no injuries, downplaying any mention of Arthur and Morgana.

Arthur still didn't know if Uther knew that they were alive, how he had reacted to the news of the accident, or how he was covering up their absences. That was for later.

What worried Arthur more was the knowledge that Olaf had changed Will's orders.

*He had changed Will's orders.*

After the attack, Arthur and his men had gone to ground, cutting off every one of their usual communication routes. As far as anyone was concerned, they had dropped off the face of the planet - - they were *dead.* Any intention of negotiation over hostages had been circumvented when there was no one left to hold Merlin over Arthur, and with Morgana and Gwen saved by some *mysterious* benefactors…

Everyone else had been as much at loose ends as Arthur had been when he went against what had been expected of his team.

Everyone, except, it seemed -- Olaf.

Arthur closed his eyes.

They *had* had support all along. They'd had Will. Will hadn't been trained to go as deep undercover as the members of Excalibur had been. Will had been suited for the NWO, but that was only because he'd known Bryn and Tristan. He was out of his depth with Aredian and his mercenaries, but he'd held his own and kept both Kay and Merlin alive. Will had been their inside man all along.

Arthur grimaced inwardly. Olaf must have figured out what had happened to Vivian. Either her disappearance set him in a rage against the NWO or whomever had gone after Hunith, or it had given Olaf confirmation that Excalibur was still alive and kicking. If it was the former, kidnapping Vivian and holding her somewhere had been to their benefit. If it was the latter, sending Will had been Olaf's way of thanking them for getting Vivian out of the business. She was a good agent, but Arthur *knew* Vivian. He knew she could be foolhardy. He knew she could be blind to what was around her. And, more than anything, he knew that she would put herself at risk and get herself killed -- and Olaf knew that, too.

Arthur started making more connections in his mind, and it made him shudder.

The police forces had arrived at the house too quickly. The team *knew* the gendarmerie's response time. They'd tracked it. They'd planned for it. Even with all the action going on in Aredian's house, it
had been a matter of mere minutes to sweep all the levels, find Mordred, retreat, blow a wall, and escape with Merlin.

The police had either been nearby, or someone had tipped them off early. But who?

The Directory hadn't been at the house when Arthur and his men attacked. There was no way that they could have known that Aredian was holding Merlin. Hell, as far as anyone had known, Aredian wasn't even in Paris, and there was no reason for any intelligence agency to have been watching for him in the first place.

It might have been the NWO. They would have shown up because Morgause must still have some sort of access to the Interpol databases despite what Arthur had done to quietly discredit her with them. Although they didn't always act on the data they received, Interpol maintained information on the whereabouts of any number of wanted fugitives. The police presence at Aredian's house could have been Morgause's doing if she had found out that Aredian was in Paris and had mobilized an official incursion to approach the premises. It might not have had anything to do with Arthur. It might have been an attempt to grab Merlin through official channels, since the NWO were well aware that Aredian had captured him, and to secure the Pendragon database when the hard drive that was entered into evidence mysteriously disappeared.

Or it could have been MI-6. It might have been Olaf's way of sending Arthur some reinforcements. The gendarmerie were unlikely to be a real threat to battle-hardened mercenaries, and it wouldn't be the first time that Olaf had done the equivalent of tossing civilians in the way of a bomb blast, either. It was more likely that the police had been there as a distraction.

Regardless of the reason why the police had shown up earlier than expected, the clusterfuck at the subway station confirmed that the three groups were very much active in Paris.

With luck, everyone except MI-6 continued to believe that Arthur and his men were dead and that there was a fourth party in the mix. It would send them chasing ghosts and leave Excalibur with some much-needed room to breathe and figure out a plan.

A fourth party.

Arthur opened his eyes, straightening in his seat. He glanced over his shoulder in contemplation, watching Merlin. He was sleeping a bit more restfully now, his breathing deep and even.

He settled in his seat and found Owain glancing at him out of the corner of his eye, trying to act completely casual.

A fourth party.

There was precedent. Of course there was. Hunith had given Arthur all the information that he needed to piece together this entire, ungodly mess and Balinor had confirmed his leaps of logic. There were international teams who had been searching for the artefacts all along. Uther Pendragon was one of those teams, though he worked for no one but himself.

Balinor hadn't trusted -- probably still didn't -- Arthur because he believed that Arthur was working for his father.

Maybe there didn't need to be a plan. Maybe there was a plan all along, and he'd subconsciously planted the seeds in case he'd needed to use it.

If he couldn't come up with anything else. The only other viable plan was hiding forever, and...
Arthur glanced at Merlin again.

Disappearing and never coming up for air? It was a tantalizing prospect.

"You look like you have something," Owain said, sounding hopeful.

"Not yet," Arthur admitted. He reached over and clamped a hand on Owain's shoulder. "But you were wrong. Leon or Gwaine? I know what they'd say, and believe me, I think I needed to hear it from a thick-headed numpty who doesn't see anything beyond the bomb he's defusing."

"That's the way you say thank you?" Owain asked. A small smirk tugged on his lips, obviously pleased.

"Take it or leave it," Arthur said.

"Oh, I'll take it," Owain said. "That and a hot brew."

ooOOoo

Merlin had had better showers while standing under a trickling waterfall from a drying riverbed, tucked deep in arid desert environments while on missions, but the paltry pressure from the cracked showerhead was heaven.

Aredian and his mercenaries were long left behind. The NWO was nowhere on the horizon. The Directory was probably off sucking some goat's tit somewhere -- Merlin didn't care much. What mattered was that Merlin was free and that Arthur was just outside the bathroom door. It was a door conveniently left open so that Merlin could watch him through the flimsy shower screen and be reassured that, yes, he was done with Aredian, he was done with finding out what they were hiding, he was done.

Just done.

Merlin ducked his head under the water, but he didn't close his eyes, half-afraid that despite the logic and reality of the question it would all vanish as if it had been a cruel dream. The water sluiced through his hair and down his face before dripping onto the cracked tile to mix with the rusty stains around the drain ring. He stared at the swirl of water at his feet until his vision blurred from all the water running into his eyes.

He stood up straight and reached for the tiny bar of hotel soap, scrubbing it through his hair.

Merlin had woken up in the cramped back seat of a car he didn't recognize, all the tension in his body seeping away when he had recognized Arthur's voice as he had sketched out their next few steps to Owain.

If not for that, Merlin was fairly certain that he would have done something drastic and potentially explosive to the car out of sheer panic and desperate I've had enough attempts to escape.

Merlin ducked his head under the too-short showerhead and ran a hand through his hair to get the soap out. When he was done, he moved on to wash the rest of him. Essentials, first -- armpits and
crotch and feet. Then, once he remembered that he had all the time in the world, or at least as much
time as their current situation allowed, Merlin passed the soap over his chest and arms, careful of the
new cuts and bruises. The bootprint on his ribcage was ugly and he couldn't take a deep breath
without feeling a stitch in his side, as if he'd gone running too fast for too long on a full belly.

As if realizing that it had been acknowledged, even peripherally, Merlin's stomach rumbled. Merlin
ignored it in favour of gently palpating his side, but he couldn't tell if his ribs were cracked or broken
or merely badly bruised. Sometimes an X-ray was the only way to tell and be certain.

Sometimes magic could tell, too.

Merlin closed his eyes and allowed the familiar trickle of magic to pass over his skin. The sensation
wasn't quite like being tickled, and it wasn't quite like being stroked. It fell somewhere in between,
leaving him with a staticky tingle no worse than if he'd dragged his feet over the ancient shag
carpeting in the rented room of the one-and-a-half-stars hotel. It was a new, different, almost like a
long-lost family member returning home.

His magic recoiled at the bruising, but it didn't feel as if his ribs were broken. That was a small mercy
considering that they were on the run, and there was no easy access to the magic potion that Mordred
had given him to heal.

While he was at it, he double-checked to make sure that they really weren't being magically tracked.
He had already checked, once, at the first gas station that they'd stopped at on their way here --
something about Arthur owing Owain a coffee. He'd sensed a faint crackle, at least at first,
something that might have been, once, an hour or so prior, the last vestiges of the magic lingering
and leaving breadcrumbs behind, but it had nearly run out by the second gas station -- one with far
better coffee, Owain said -- and it was completely gone, now.

There was that small relief, at least.

It hadn't been a tracker, not exactly. Merlin didn't know for sure, but if he had to guess, he thought
that they had been scried, and for one reason or another, whoever had been watching them had lost
them completely.

Merlin was less certain about the communication units. Arthur and Owain didn't have a Box with
them, and the earwigs alone should have had enough range to contact the team while they had been
in Paris and within range of another team member for the message to piggyback on another
transmitter signal. Now that Merlin had a clearer head, he could think of a few ways that their comms
could have been jammed. Most of them were unlikely, requiring mathematics that didn't exist yet and
technology that wasn't on the market --

He made a mental note to look into that once everything was over, because while Arthur might have
an enviable net worth, Merlin had no intention of being a trophy husband.

-- but, more importantly, there needed to be people smart enough to think outside the box to even
begin to work out Excalibur's private communication network.

Merlin crossed off jamming from the list of possible reasons for the communication failure and took a
mental step back to look at the problem from a new angle. The answer came to him in a sharp flash
of recollection, and he nearly beamed himself on the showerhead in the process. Someone was using
Merlin's own technology against him.

The only other possibility was that the team's signal had been swamped by a stronger signal emitted
at a similar frequency using a larger power source. It meant that whoever was carrying equipment
that could generate those signals could also, conceivably, eavesdrop into the E channel comms. All
they would have to do is tweak their receivers just so.

"Fuck," Merlin muttered, the soap slipping out of his hand. He crouched down with a wince, picked
it up, and glanced through the curtains. Arthur was on the landline, talking quietly to Leon. The
feeble spray from the shower muffled most of the conversation, but Merlin could make out a few

Mordred had hinted that he had scoured the planet in search of someone who could complement his
abilities, that he had found Merlin, and that there hadn't been anyone else. Merlin had just enough of
an ego to believe that, because he had opened up a new field of study with his research in university.
But the modifications that he had built into the team's Box to communicate on a secure line that was
inaccessible to even the army brass?

That hadn't been part of his research. It was unpublished. No one had ever seen it.

The soap slipped out of his hand, but this time it was because he'd been squeezing the soap too
tightly.

Someone had seen it.

His thesis advisor.

The same thesis advisor who was a consultant for Pendragon Consulting.

"Shite. Shite. Shite," Merlin said, louder and more frantic with each repetition. He dropped the soap a
third time but didn't bother to pick it up. Instead, he scrubbed himself to try to rinse the soap off
faster. The pipes clunked when he shut off the water, distracting him just as he pulled the shower
curtain aside.

Arthur was right there, his eyes wide and a little wild. Merlin yelped in surprise and slipped on the
tiles, Arthur catching him before he knocked himself out on the wall and broke his neck on the way
down.


Merlin pushed him out of the way and stepped over the ledge, grabbing a scratchy white towel from
the top rack over the toilet. "I know how they jammed the E channel. They didn't. They were using a
frequency on a band powerful enough to overwhelm ours. It wasn't a jammer. No one even knew
that you were there."

a moment of hesitation, he returned to the bedroom, taking the telephone receiver from the bed where
he'd left it and brought it to his ear. "Gwaine, I'll call you back. No, everything's fine."

Arthur hung up deliberately, placing the handset in the cradle, and dragged the phone, line and all, to
the bedside table. Merlin dried off hurriedly, watching Arthur from the doorway of the bathroom,
and frowned when Arthur didn't move.

"Arthur?"

"No one knew that we were there?" Arthur asked. His fingers lingered on the telephone and his head
was bowed; Merlin didn't need to see Arthur to know that there was a deep furrow in his brow.

"I don't think it was deliberate," Merlin said, wrapping the towel around his waist. Arthur turned
around, his gaze scanning Merlin's body. It was the same sort of inspection that he had made when Merlin stripped for the shower earlier. Merlin had seen the way Arthur's expression had shuttered to see the fading cuts and the ugly black bruise, but it wasn't until he had seen himself in the bathroom mirror under the flickering fluorescent light that he understood why Arthur had reacted the way he had.

Merlin was thin -- he'd easily lost a stone, if not more. Never particularly substantial in the first place, his muscle mass had decreased and his bones were showing the way they hadn't in a long time, not since he was a skinny, gangly thing studying for his A-levels. It wasn't anything that a few good meals and a return to Arthur's physical training regime wouldn't cure, and, for once, Merlin looked forward to it, if only because it would make the hollows in Arthur's eyes disappear.

He was all right, damn it. He wouldn't be all right later, he knew, when it all sank in, but right now, he couldn't afford to let himself dwell on what he'd gone through.

"Look," Merlin began, glancing around the room. He spotted a thin pad of paper by the phone and a pen, both with the hotel's faded logo. He drew a sine wave across the page. "Say that this is the E channel frequency. The transmission power is limited by the Box battery pack."

Arthur nodded.

Merlin drew a second sine wave across the page, slightly offset from the first, the peaks and crests of the wave deeper and broader. "Let's say someone else was using a frequency in about the same range as the E channel, but not exactly. It's just a bit off. Close to a few decimal places. Let's say they're running with a bigger transmission power pack -- big enough to cover not just Paris, but probably all of France."

"It overlaps," Arthur murmured. The frown across his brow took another tone -- this time one of intense contemplation.

"Not just overlaps. It completely wipes out E. At best, someone monitoring their frequency would get this --" Merlin drew a third sine wave on another page, copying the theoretical frequency. Every now and then, when the overlap between the first and the second waves weren't perfect, he would sketch a small spike. At a glance, it looked like background noise.

"They intercepted our frequencies?" Arthur asked.

Merlin started to shake his head no but had to admit, "Yeah, it's possible. But it's unlikely they even noticed. It would show up as static unless they had equipment to tune down the foreground and increase the background. At most, they'd get a few words. Maybe. Less than a few seconds of conversation all put together."

That seemed to reassure Arthur somewhat. The frown lessened but the weight of concentration remained, and he crossed his arms over his chest, bringing one hand to his mouth. After a moment, he nodded gravely. "All right. Nothing to worry about right now, but still a concern. Can you overcome this?"

"Give me my damn Box back and I'll adjust the frequency. Might even find out their frequency, see if we can listen in," Merlin said. He grinned when he saw Arthur's eyes sparkle.

"Good. Yeah, I'll get it to you soon as we can," Arthur said. Merlin guessed that the team was even more scattered than Arthur had let on. "Though, the sooner we know who was behind that --"

"Oh, that, I have a pretty good idea," Merlin said. He took a deep breath and held it, suddenly
rethinking his words. He wasn't so sure that he wanted to tell Arthur that his father was even deeper into this mess than he already was.

Arthur's brows rose when Merlin didn't continue. He rocked on his heels before steadying himself; he nodded, as if he wasn't surprised by his own conclusion. "Uther?"

"Yeah," Merlin said, grimacing. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Arthur. It's just, Monmouth was my advisor, he'd seen my dissertation, he's gone over the math. He's the one who told me to remove that chapter, and I guess… I guess I know why, now."

Arthur closed the distance between them cautiously, reaching out with his hands up and palms out in the universal gesture for *I mean no harm*. Merlin rolled his eyes.

"I'm not going to bloody break, you prat," Merlin said. "Or run. Or freak out, though I'm sure that's coming."

"I know," Arthur said, his touch gentle on Merlin's arms. "But I'm not keen on having you pull away from me."

"Jesus, Arthur," Merlin said, deflating. "You know it's not you? That I'll be all right once I have it in my head that I'm out of there?"

"I know," Arthur repeated. He lowered his eyes, but didn't drop them down to the bruise like Merlin expected. His attention was focused somewhere on Merlin's right collarbone. "I just wanted you to know that. And also, that I'm sorry."

Merlin shrugged off Arthur's hands, but only so that he could wriggle closer. He wrapped his arms around Arthur's neck and held him. Arthur's arms rose up around Merlin without hesitation, though he didn't tighten them as much as Merlin would have liked.

"Went in there knowing what could happen, didn't I? Went in anyway. If we'd known the prototype could short-circuit my magic, you wouldn't have let me anywhere near it," Merlin said. "And I wouldn't have gone, either."

Arthur shook his head. The stubble on his chin scratched Merlin's cheek. "You know I wouldn't have."

There was a dour heaviness to his tone, unhappy in ways that Merlin couldn't fathom, and he sensed that there was more to Arthur's words, a thought process behind it that Merlin hadn't stumbled over just yet. "What is it?"

Arthur started to say something. His chest expanded against Merlin's as he breathed in. But he was silent, his shoulders falling, and he shook his head. He pulled away to look at Merlin. "There's a lot that I haven't told you yet."

"A lot I haven't told you, either," Merlin said. Arthur let him go. He went to the dresser with the glued-shut drawers, taking the clothes out that Owain had grabbed out of a shop when they'd stopped to upgrade their vehicle yet once again. He handed them over.

"Get dressed. There's something I need to tell you before Owain gets back with the food."

"This sounds ominous," Merlin said, feeling something tighten in his chest. "It's not anyone on the team, is it? Everyone's all right?"

"Everyone's checked in. Minor injuries, only," Arthur said.
Merlin shook out the worker's trousers, the material new and coarse, the fit loose and comfortable. He pulled them on. "It's not Will, is it? Did he call in? Has he found Gaius yet?"

"It's not Will, either, though he's gone off the deep end. He's foul, Kay says. Pissed that we found you without him," Arthur said, and for a change, he actually sounded amused.

"Sounds like Will. After what they did..." Merlin flinched and shook his head. He grit his teeth and distracted himself by pulling his shirt over his head. "I suppose we all want our own back? And Kay? Kay's all right? You said --"

"Kay's fine," Arthur said. His expression was grim. He glanced at the two beds with their ugly, mismatched slipcovers, at the open bathroom door, at the curtained window. "Let me finish telling you what I started in the car, back in Paris."

"Okay," Merlin said, uncertain. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. He crossed and uncrossed his arms before letting them fall to his sides.

Arthur gestured for Merlin to sit down. Merlin plopped on the too-hard bed, bruising his tailbone. He shuffled around until he was as comfortable as the bed allowed. Arthur plonked a chair in front of Merlin before he sat down, too.

He rubbed his face and stared at... Merlin wasn't sure where he was looking, but it was somewhere in the vicinity of the dizzying kaleidoscope pattern on the bed. He didn't speak for nearly a minute. The stretch of time wasn't making Merlin any less worried, but now, he was absolutely alarmed and bracing for the worst.

"When we went to see your Mum, she was being watched, so we couldn't stay there. She sent us to Allan's place, and we holed up in the barn. Gave us supplies, too. A new med kit for Lance, because God knows we needed it at the time. Coolers full of food, changes of clothing -- whatever she had of yours, whatever Allan had of Will's, anything that fit us, really. Maps and brownies for Gwaine, and wasn't he a made-up duck, fussing over who got the last piece. A satchel..."

Arthur paused.

"A satchel for me. Said it would answer most of my questions, but I think I ended up with more questions than I'd started with."

Merlin reached up and brushed the fringe out of Arthur's eyes. His hair was soft, and if Merlin's fingers lingered, well, neither of them seemed to mind. Arthur caught his hand before he could pull it away, and didn't let go.

"I don't know how your mother got her hands on half of the information in that pouch. Most of it should've been classified and blacked out. It's obvious someone gave it to her, but the rest? She got it on her own." Arthur met Merlin's eyes and said, "Your mother's frightening, by the way."

"Good old Mum," Merlin said wryly. "Strong-arming my friends to submission with food and torturing my partner with a black-ops conspiracy plot."

Arthur let out a breathy chuckle. His head dropped and he shook his head. "Seems like more than that, Merlin. God. I wish I had it here, I could show you. It might even make this easier."

"Just tell me, Arthur. You're freaking me out."

"It was about your dad's last assignment," Arthur blurted out.
Merlin jerked back. Arthur's hand tightened around his, very much not letting him go, providing a grounding that Merlin needed right now. Merlin rubbed his chest absentmindedly, trying to soothe an old ache. He didn't talk about his father very much for a reason. "What about it?"

"Aredian's looking for something on the Pendragon's database," Arthur said instead of answering. "Mordred had you download a chunk of Aredian's personal files. Gwen saw schematics of artefacts on Morgause's desk. MI-6 and the Directory are a little too interested in certain parties. Even the CIA is in on it."

"Tell me that you'll be getting to the point soon," Merlin said.

Arthur exhaled a strained breath. His fingers were tight around Merlin's hand. "Thirty years ago, give or take a few years, there was an unit assembled from different divisions and from different governments. Bayard was in it. Olaf. Kilgarrah and Mandrake. Those CIA blokes -- you remember them? -- they were there, too. My father, too."

He paused.

"So was yours."

Merlin's brow furrowed. He knew his father had been part of a special unit -- the early members of the first SAS teams -- and that his skills and those of his team were in high demand. He'd never asked about his father's assignments, though, not after that first time when Hunith had shaken him desperately and begged him never to ask again. He'd been fifteen and dying of hero-worship, but he'd kept his promise and never brought it up again.

"Their job was to hunt down and recover magical artefacts. To move them somewhere secure, where the enemy wouldn't get to them. Different governments allied under this project set themselves up as caretakers for the artefacts, but because Uther was responsible for reviewing the inventory and categorizing them, I suspect that the most significant artefacts remained with the Crown. Some of those artefacts may even have been wiped from the inventory entirely by persons unknown and removed to a secret location, and that's what the NWO and Aredian were after."

Merlin closed his eyes, letting the words sink in even as he trembled. He had always craved to know more about Balinor, to know where he had been and what he had been doing when he was declared first MIA, then KIA. But he'd been too afraid to find out for certain, too obedient of his Mum's wishes to satisfy his curiosity. Now that he was hearing the story, he wasn't sure that he should have been so quick to stop asking questions.

"The NWO's after something that will help them rule the world. Aredian's a facilitator. Makes sense that he'd want the same thing. All right. We know what they want now --" Merlin slowly parsed through this new information, categorizing them with what he already knew. Merlin's eyes snapped open as he made a leap of logic. "Does that mean Uther's been using the artefacts to create new prototypes?"

It was Arthur's turn to jerk back in surprise, as if it had been something he hadn't already considered. Merlin wasn't fooled.

"I mean, it makes sense, yeah? That prototype -- that wasn't just an EMP blast. It disrupted magic. Which, okay, that really doesn't make sense, because if Uther were replicating the artefacts, the prototype would've enhanced my magic instead, unless he's working on countermeasures --"

"Oh, shite," Arthur said, blinking repeatedly as if struck by a realization.
Merlin trailed off into silence. He went over what he just said and repeated, "Oh, shite. You didn't think of that."

He should be chuffed that he'd come to a conclusion -- a probable, correct conclusion -- faster than Arthur, but he felt sick instead.

Arthur rubbed his face in his hands, dropping his head. Neither of them spoke.

While everyone else was working toward magical supremacy or trying to prevent it, it seemed as if Uther Pendragon was trying to eradicate it.

It was a bit of a leap going off a flimsy diving board that was exactly one destroyed prototype wide. It was also a leap based on a prototype that probably hadn't worked the way it had been designed to work in the first place. Merlin hadn't seen the inner workings of the device himself -- he'd only seen the blueprints and had Gwen to help him figure it out, mostly, though they'd both been wrong. Whatever had been done to disrupt his magic could equally be shifted around to enhance it.

Merlin didn't know Uther very well, but the few times they had met, Merlin had always felt as if he needed to be on his guard. The feeling hadn't been triggered by anything specific, and Merlin had written it off as a side effect of Uther's unconscious posturing and weighty presence. The military taught the very tactics that Colonel Uther Pendragon had developed on the battlefield. The stories of his successes, outright wins, and conquests were meant to shock and awe new recruits, motivating them through basic training and beyond into a new generation of soldiers. And who didn't know of the very weapons that Uther built and distributed? He was the major supplier for the British army. Except for a few very minor cock-ups, Pendragon weapons had yet to fail a soldier.

Magic, though.

Magic was something that Uther couldn't fight against. Even the Directory's manoeuvres were third-rate approaches that would get a full platoon killed. If Uther had been part of the teams searching for magical artefacts, he obviously was aware of magic in the first place. He might even have encountered it firsthand. And --

Shite.

Uther was in this as much as the NWO, the Directory, and MI-6, except he had his own agenda.

Merlin ran his hand through Arthur's hair.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean --"

"I know," Arthur said. He caught Merlin's wrist. "It's nothing that we haven't already thought about, isn't it? All that sneaking about he's been doing. Leaving his bodyguards behind. A meeting schedule that Morgana didn't know about. All the files that were missing from his private drive. I think he's been playing us all along. Us, and Bayard, and whomever else."

He stared at Merlin's hand, flattening out his fingers. He pressed a kiss in Merlin's palm and sat up straight, a prickly steeliness bracing his resolve.

"That was the piece I was missing. I didn't know what was in it for him. I thought, for certain, that he'd use the artefacts for new weapons, but it didn't make sense. None of Pendragon's weapons have anything to do with magic. The prototype... It's meant to shut it down, like it did with you. Uther's not in it for the artefacts. He's in it to destroy magic."

Arthur's voice was flat and emotionless, his jaw set and clenched tight.
"Arthur?"

"Never mind Uther for now. We'll deal with him later. I need to tell you something, Merlin. It's important."

Merlin said nothing. He put his free hand on top of Arthur's and tilted his head until he caught Arthur's eyes. He saw worry in them. Concern. Sadness. Those emotions were so strong that Merlin thought that he could feel whispers of them through the bond.

"It can't be that bad," Merlin tried.

"Merlin," Arthur began. He shook his head and sighed. "Actually, yeah, it can. Do you remember that we thought someone was betraying us? Setting it up so that we didn't have an advantage? Bayard or Kilgarrah --"

"Yeah. I remember," Merlin said, his lips pressed together. "Did you figure it out? Because, ah. I was out for the count when it happened, wasn't I."

"Yeah," Arthur nodded gravely. "Yeah, I figured it out. It's both of them. I'm almost certain that Bayard was using his influence to keep us on slippery ground, but it's Kilgarrah who really mucked things up for us. For you."

Merlin's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"There's someone else working against the NWO. Against the Directory. Against all of them. Their only resource is Kilgarrah. He's their inside man, except --" Arthur made a face, sitting up straight. "Except Kilgarrah's got his own plan."

"Okay," Merlin said, nodding slowly.

Arthur made a small sound of frustration. "I'm not telling it right."

"You're doing fine," Merlin said. "Admittedly, I'm right confused. Does this have anything to do with Mordred's Druids?"

Arthur shook his head. He frowned. He tilted his head as if he were about to nod, but shook his head again. "I'm not sure. Probably. I don't think they're even in contact with each other, but --"

He stopped himself, running a hand over his face.

"Forgive me, Merlin," Arthur said, dropping his hand. "I'm just going to say it."

Merlin nodded. "Please do. Rip the plaster off. It'll be less painful."

Arthur hesitated for all of a heartbeat. "It's your father, Merlin. He's alive."

Merlin didn't blink. He didn't breathe. All the air had gone out of the room, the bed had disappeared, the floor had vanished under his feet, and there was a thudding roar in his head that was the sound of his blood pulsing too fast and a heart scrambling to keep up.

"No," Merlin said weakly. "No. He's dead."

Arthur didn't answer. He didn't need to. All that Merlin needed was to see the regretful sympathy in his eyes to know that Arthur wasn't lying to him. Arthur would never lie to him. Merlin knew that. He knew that as surely as he knew that Arthur would do anything for him.
"Are you sure?"

Arthur's nod was tiny and apologetic.

"How?" Merlin asked. He shook his head. He forced himself to blink. "But why?"

Arthur brought Merlin's hands to his mouth and kissed his knuckles, but Merlin barely felt it. "He went missing. Him and his team. But they didn't die, love. They went underground. They worked behind the scenes to keep one very important artefact hidden from everyone. They couldn't let anyone have it."

His vision was getting blurry. Merlin blinked repeatedly before he realized that it was because his eyes were full of tears.

"He --" Merlin's voice croaked. "He left me? He left Mum? For what? For some stupid stone vase with zigzags on it from a few hundred years ago --"

Arthur looked down, but not before Merlin caught a flicker of a grimace in his expression. There was something else that Merlin wouldn't be happy to hear.

"Mum? Mum knew?" Merlin didn't recognize his own voice as his. "She knew and she didn't tell me?"

Arthur shook his head slowly. "No. I mean, she knew, but she didn't always know. Merlin --"

His mother had known. It was a stab of pain like being gutted with a jagged piece of metal, but about ten times more painful. She had known. She had continued the pretence. She had kept Merlin in the dark.

She had kept him from his father.

And for what?

He didn't understand. What could possibly be so important that she wouldn't have told him? What kind of lies had his father told her to convince her in the first place? How could his Mum let Balinor get away with it? Was it something that they'd done? Had Merlin done or said something to drive his dad away? If Balinor had been in trouble, they would've helped him. They would have found a way. And if they couldn't have...

Why hadn't Balinor taken them with him?

Arthur's thumbs stroked over Merlin's hands, neither to reassure nor to calm, but merely to confirm that, yes, he was there. He was listening. It was the tears that Merlin saw reflected in Arthur's eyes that made him realize he'd said all that out loud.

"You've..." Merlin hiccupped. "You've seen him?"

"I didn't give him a choice," Arthur said quietly. "We needed his help."

Merlin wiped the tears on his face with a brush on his shoulder, shaking his head. "I don't get it. I don't -- why would he come out of hiding for you? And not for me? Not for Mum? What did you say to him?"

"Merlin." Arthur reached out and touched Merlin's cheek, tracing the trail of tears before his fingers slid behind Merlin's head and down to his shoulder. "I told him the truth. I told him everything.
Everything. He was out of touch. Kilgarrah hadn't been keeping him informed. He didn't even know that you'd been pulled out of the army and were working for the Directory.

"I told him that his entire reason for being in hiding was gone."

There was a faint jingle outside the hotel room door, the noisy rattle of someone working the bent keys into the lock. Owain came in, shutting the door behind him quickly, putting down the bags of take-away onto the nearby table.

Neither Arthur nor Merlin looked at him.

"I told him that the enemy had the artefact."

Arthur took both of Merlin's hands in his again and squeezed, but Merlin couldn't feel his fingers at all.

"I told him that they had you."

ooOOoo

"Your Kathy, she's --"

"Don't finish that sentence," Kay warned. He elbowed his way through the crowd, grunting when they missed the train. They'd have to wait for the next one.

"Pretty," Will finished, unhindered. Kay raised an eyebrow, and that brow furrowed when Will went on to say, "Is she seeing anyone? No, never mind, that doesn't matter. Did you give me her number? I'm pretty sure I saved it --"

Will thumbed through his mobile, trying to make sense of his own shorthand code for the names and numbers in the contact list. He'd be pulling the chip and the battery before dumping the burner phone, later, but for now, he relied on his phone to keep him in touch with everyone.

He'd just scrolled down to the section that could, conceivably, be where he'd saved Kathy's number, except under "C", to cleverly foil villains, when he remembered that he'd tucked it under "W" for "witch". And she was a witch, all done up to the nines, except without the pointy hat, the stoop-shoulder and the broom. Kathy was Witches of Eastwick gorgeous, with long wavy brown hair and green eyes the colour of pickled olive, listless pale and vibrant all at the same time.

Will hadn't expected the vivacious, blustering woman to open the door before Kay could even knock on it. She'd worn jeans and a V-neck short-sleeve shirt instead of the drab black Goth gear that Will half-thought she would be wearing. There were hints that she'd been one, once, because her black eyeliner was heavy-handed, and the light flush of her skin had been enhanced by just the right amount of blush.

He pressed the Call button. It rang through once, twice -- "Hello, Kathy, it's me, Will --"

The mobile was wrenched out of his hand.

"Ignore him," Kay said into the phone. He rolled his eyes. "No, everything's fine. He's just being a
"Oi!" Will made a grab for the phone, but Kay dodged him with the graceful ease of someone who was accustomed to keeping things out of the reach of children. Having met the members of Excalibur, Will thought it was an apt description.

"No, absolutely not. I'm not letting you talk to him. He -- no. No, Kathy. Absolutely -- fine. He wants to ask you out."

Will grinned. He loved a woman who could put a man in their place with a few well-chosen words, as long as he wasn't the man in question. Being on the receiving end of a chastisement wasn't his scene. Well, not unless he had a few drinks first and had negotiated a kink agreement.

Kay turned to Will. "She says no."

He glanced off to the side, listening to Kathy.

"Sorry. She said, fuck, no."

Immediately, he winced, pulling the phone away from his ear.

"I'm not telling him that. I'm not -- I'm -- Jesus, you had to bring that up. Fine, Fine," Kay said, turning to Will again. "She says, it's really sweet of you to ask, but she has a feeling that it wouldn't work out."

"Aw. Why not? No, wait, tell her it's all right, I'm not looking for long-term --"

"Absolutely not," Kay snarled. Kathy must have said something, because he turned to the phone and repeated, "Absolutely not. You are not. This one time, Kathy, God. Just trust me on this one. Look, we have to go, the train's here. Yeah, we'll be all right. Be careful. Make sure your wards are up and all."

Kay said his good-byes and hung up. He pocketed Will's phone and pushed past the people exiting the train to squeeze his way inside.

Will shook his head and sat down next to him. "You're such a moron."

"What?"

Will shook his head and didn't answer. Either Kay was genuinely thick, or he really was clueless. It was a shame, really. Obvious to a blind man. Kathy bloody well adored Kay. They might be adoptive siblings, but if it were Will, he would have asked her out a long time ago.

Actually, no. He wasn't that much of a wanker. He would've waited until he'd moved out of the house, and then asked her out.

Kay's brow was furrowed, certain that he was missing something. Will barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. Instead of pointing out what was going on right under his nose, Will scratched absently at his chest, his finger rubbing over the pendant that Kathy had made for him. Kay had gotten some sort of Celtic knot -- Will hadn't really been paying attention, not when Kathy's cleavage had been in his face as she'd bent down to study him as if he were a piece of shit. Kathy had studied Will with narrowed eyes, reminding him altogether too much of Gaius, and came back from the back room with a pewter pendant crafted into the shape of a shield, a Crusader's red cross bright against the polished metal.
The shield pendant had a noticeable heft, and the leather cord around his neck was pulled taut.

"How do these work again?"

Kay gave him a strange, sidelong look.

"What?"

"Really?" Kay shifted in his seat. "You want me to explain how it works, here, where anyone could overhear us?"

"It's not like we don't already look odd," Will said. They hadn't changed out of their scummy clothes and were still dragging their duffel bags around. They weren't armed, either, not beyond the basics, and Will felt naked. "Couple of bums in dire need of a bath, looking like we've been tossed off a ship for being a pair of stowaways. Nobody's going to give us any mind."

"Is that what they taught you?"

"Oi, I'll have you know I'm self-taught." Will paused. "Well, except for the regular curriculum, and don't give me that stink eye. I took the same course as you, passed with flying colours, I'll have you know. Also, my dad taught me a fair bit."

Kay considered that and nodded. "Your dad's a fair man."

"That he is," Will agreed. All the shite that Will had put his father through growing up? His dad was a bloody saint.

"Doesn't mean you are, the shite you've done. I mean -- doing Bryn in? Jumping ships and serving yourself up to..." Kay trailed off, but didn't finish his sentence. He shifted in his seat, glancing around the car, checking for anyone who might be a threat. He wasn't obvious about it, but it seemed to be more of an ingrained instinct than a trained reflex. Will wondered what had happened to Kay to make him turn out this way.

"What would you do if you were in my shoes? You'd panic a little, yeah? You'd do whatever it took. What if it were your Kathy?"

The way Kay's body tensed was answer enough.

"Well, there you have it. And I didn't toss the mobile however much I wanted to when Arthur called," Will pointed out. "Give me some credit."

"Didn't toss it because I caught you before you did," Kay retorted.

Neither of them spoke for several long minutes. The train came to a stop. Passengers got off, more came on. Kay shifted over a seat to make room for a couple, but Will stretched his legs out, turning into a tripping hazard that caught at least two men in suits and a student running for the doors. Will didn't sit up, not even when the blue-haired woman sitting across the way from them gave Will a look that put his grandmother's to shame.

Although he was naturally obnoxious, for once, Will was being deliberate. There wasn't anything in the duffel bag that he couldn't replace, and there wasn't anything that would be traceable to himself and anyone else. All the clothing was off-the-shelf, from a mixture of both London and Paris. The toiletries were generic, and he'd been careful to wipe down every surface in case someone was smart enough to try to fingerprint the contents of the bag.
He had keys in his pockets, memorized instructions, and a mobile he sincerely wished would explode if someone entered the wrong lock code. It might not seem like it to Kay, but Will's natural charm -- or lack thereof -- was what would get them through London.

"He's all right, though?" Kay asked. "Merlin, I mean."

"Don't know," Will said absentmindedly. He was trying to think of their next steps. He'd spoken to Alice -- the woman had, in fact, remembered him, and he wasn't so sure that he hadn't been cursed during the course of the conversation for having ruined her garden back when he was no higher than her knee. He thought it was unfair that she still held a grudge. Who could hold a grudge against a cheeky eight year old? And besides, half the fault had been Merlin's. Merlin had dared him. "Haven't got but Arthur's word for it, don't I? Heard the shower running in the background, but that could've been anyone. One of the other blokes. Or maybe he picked himself a boy toy on the way --"

Kay's elbow was sharp and his aim impeccable. Whatever else that Will had been about to say -- and there had been some choice words about Arthur, too -- vanished in a gasp of breath.

"Jesus fuck," Will snarled. "A little harder next time? I don't think you managed to break my rib."

"You don't like Arthur. I get it. I don't bloody have to listen to it. He's my Captain. He's my mate. He stuck his head out for me more times than I can count, he's been there for the others when they needed him, and, for fuck's sake, he'll give you his shirt off his back if you were bare-arsed and streaking through London proper, even knowing how you feel about him. You know why he'll do it?"

"To make himself look good, why else? Anything to get into Merlin's pants --"

"He'll do it because he's a good man, that's why, and that's more than I can say for you, going around with your head up your arse spouting bollocks about him, and you haven't bothered to sit down and get to know him, have you? Decided you didn't like the look of him that first time we met at the bar, decided to be an arse to him from there on out, didn't you? God. Merlin said you were a wanker, but that you were a decent bloke. I've yet to see it."

"Didn't stop you from kissing me," Will pointed out cheekily, though if he were honest, he would rather forget that had ever happened.

Kay hissed in exasperation and stood up abruptly, dragging his duffel bag out from under the seat. He kicked at Will's bag, shoving it out of the way.

Will scrambled to catch up when Kay got off the train, hauling his bag over his shoulder and nearly knocking an elderly gentleman off his feet as he walked past.

"I don't have to like the bloke to follow his orders, and that's what we're doing, innit?" Will said.

"You don't have to like him. That's what we're doing," Kay agreed. "But until you take a good long look around and realize that there's a bloody good reason the rest of us are following him and it's not got anything to do with him being our Captain, keep your fucking opinion to yourself. I'm sick of it."

Will didn't say anything until they emerged from the Underground, blinking against the foggy London sunshine. "Look."

"I'm done listening to you," Kay said. He had already oriented himself and was heading towards their destination, his stride long and hurried. He didn't stand out from the crowd, though, because everyone was moving quickly.
Will caught up again, grabbing Kay's arm. He wrenched Kay to a stop. "For fuck's sake, just listen. If it were Kathy he'd sent into this --"

Kay grabbed his jacket lapels and shoved Will off the pavement and into the alley, slamming him against the brick wall. Kay might seem slighter and shorter than Will, but he was surprisingly strong, and it was something that Will really needed to stop forgetting.

"If it were Kathy," Kay said, pausing. "If it were Kathy and not Merlin, and she were fucking trained for this? If she knew damn well what the repercussions were? Damn right, I wouldn't like it. Not one bit. But Arthur wouldn't have made it an order. Not to Merlin, not to Kathy, not to anyone."

Kay let Will go. He took a step back, adjusting the shoulder strap of his duffel bag.

"If it had gone the way it should have, neither one of us would've gotten grabbed. Something went wrong. You weren't there. You don't know. And you can't fucking well judge. They got us out of there. They got Merlin free. That's all that matters, yeah? "

"Won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes," Will said, his fists clenched so tight, his bones creaked and cracked. "Not until I hear it from Merlin that he wasn't pushed into this."

Kay scoffed. "And even then? Would you believe it?"

"Too right, I wouldn't," Will said. "Would you? Your Kathy tits over arse over the bloke? Keen to get his attention and keep it? Willing to do anything to make him happy?"

"Arthur's not like --" Kay stopped. His brow furrowed. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, as if trying to make out the details on a puzzle piece and figure out where it went.

Will went very, very still.

"What did he do to Merlin?" Kay asked gently.

"Who? Arthur? The fuck would I know --"

"The bloke who broke his heart, that's who," Kay said. "What did he do?"

Will grunted and turned away. He kept walking, hiding his grimace with an elaborate show of looking at his watch.

"Will?"

"Hasn't got anything to do with this," Will grit out, jerking his head to indicate the way. "The sooner we get to Gaius, the sooner we can get to the drop box to pick up all the bollocks His Highness demanded from my boss, and the sooner we can go to the pub to meet my mate. If we get there first, he'll pick up the tab."

Will was tired. And if he was tired, that meant that Kay was even more so. They hadn't slept since leaving France -- the catnaps that they had while waiting for Kathy to do her thing with the pendants didn't count -- and it felt half as if they were running on fumes. Kay seemed to be more alert and aware than Will, for all that he was oblivious about Kathy, but neither of them were shipshape, and they were running the risk of making mistakes.

They couldn't afford to make mistakes at this point.

"And the sooner we can get back to the others, yeah? Because that's where we need to be right now,
and I don't care --"

Will didn't care how well-trained someone was. When faced against a sniper, everyone stuck out like a sore thumb, even the two blokes dressed in business casual, standing too close to the kerb in half-hearted attempts to draw a cab. Whenever a cab looked as if it were about to slow down, the two men took a step away from the edge of the road and moved to another location. It was completely natural, except for where it wasn't. These two were obviously some of MI-6's most experienced agents.

He cursed.

He didn't know how, and he didn't know when, but somehow, MI-6 had gotten the hint of an op going on in the hereabouts. Kay and Will hadn't been spotted yet, though.

Will slowed down, veering away from the edge of the pavement to hug the building. He came to a stop, leaning against the brick, shoulders pressed back, duffel bag at his feet.

Kay kept moving, but surely and deliberately, putting his hand on the wall next to Will's head, using his arm as a shield. He came in close, really close, the sort of close where body heat was being shared and one of them had better have just nearly drowned in icy cold waters, and Will blurted out, "Don't you dare kiss me again."

Kay huffed a laugh, lowering his head. He glanced over his shoulder before turning back to look at Will, but he was so close that they were both cross-eyed. Kay put his other hand on Will's hip, his touch firm, and Will growled.

"Should've known you'd be the sort to cop a feel when we're compromised," Will snapped.

"Look," Kay said, his voice low. "Merlin's my mate, too. It's not just Arthur. I'd slam their heads together if that's what it took for them to stop being stupid -- damn near did it, too. We were all frustrated from the eye-fucking they were doing. Believe me when I say that the last thing Arthur wants to do is to hurt Merlin. He'd sooner carve out his own heart if it came to that."

"He should use a rusty spoon," Will grunted.

"Give him a chance, yeah?" Kay smirked and let go of Will's hip to run a hand through his hair, first futzing with it, then straightening it out. Will blustered and swatted his hands away. "But right now, here's the plan. Those blokes won't be looking for me. I'll get Gaius, you go to the drop box, and we'll meet you at the pub."

"Orright, but the first thing out of your mouth when you see Gaius, you tell him Merlin's all right, yeah?"

"Second thing," Kay said, shrugging a little at Will's raised brow. "Just in case the first thing I need to say is run."

"Right," Will said, shaking his head. He startled, slamming back into the wall, when Kay surged in close, his cheek brushing against Will's.

"Set your watch. One hour. If you're not at the pub, I'm coming after you." Kay pulled away without another word, though he gave Will a big bright smile and a backward wave as he walked away.

Will knew the image that Kay had just given the entire world. That the two of them were lovers parting for whatever reason, and damn if it didn't put Will on the wrong foot. He was so used to working on his own that partnering up had thrown a wrench in his normal operating mode, but the
last thing he'd expected was for Kay to take *that* approach.

He half-wondered what Kay really was up to, or if it was all for his own amusement. He muttered something about Excalibur having some fucked up tactics under his breath before shrugging it all off and heading in the opposite direction.

Gaius had expressly refused to stay with Alice, but he'd agreed to book a hotel room in the glitziest part of town. He was registered under the assumed identity of one of their mutual acquaintances who regularly returned to London from Eastern Europe and stayed in the very same hotel that Kay was heading for now. Gaius wasn't rich, and he wasn't known for spoiling himself, particularly not on the run; surely that was as safe a place for him to stay when he was being hunted down as any other.

It had taken some convincing, but Alice had finally given Will the phone number of the cheap mobile Gaius had picked up while he'd gone under. Will had pretended he hadn't heard how relieved Gaius was to hear his voice, and Gaius had pretended that he hadn't needed any help at all and why were they bothering with him anyway? Will still didn't know how Gaius had been tipped off to go dark -- he suspected Hunith, or maybe even Will's dad had passed on the word -- but considering the number of people mobilizing to try to get to him, the sooner Will and Kay got Gaius out of the area and somewhere safe, the better.

Will had noticed that there hadn't been any sign of the NWO yet, but they were bound to turn up at some point. So far, all the shady sorts were MI-6, and he didn't know if that was a good or bad sign.

The drop box that Olaf had set up was at the reception desk at a posh hotel -- the sort that knew how to be discreet if one paid enough money. Will acknowledged the eyebrow-raises and subtle glares from the clientele in the lobby as he walked by, well aware that he stood out in his dirty jeans and oversized coat and ratty duffel bag and not giving a shite. The *strut-it-like-you-own-it* principle applied even here as those judging looks became less hostile and more considering, as if maybe, just maybe, the miscreant soiling their precious Persian carpet and ruining the atmosphere might be a nouveau-riche billionaire on his way back from a philanthropic expedition somewhere nice and sweaty and fulfilling the current charitable trend.

He rapped on the front desk. To the credit of the hotel's staff, the concierge didn't so much as bat an eye at Will's appearance.

"Any messages for room 1313?" he asked.

The concierge blinked owlishly. He opened his mouth -- probably to say that there was no such floor, never mind such a *room* -- when an older woman elbowed him aside, and primly said, "One moment, please."

She rifflled through the drawers beneath the desk. While she searched -- Will might have glanced down to make certain that she wasn't reaching for a gun -- Will took a long look around the hotel lobby. It was large and opulent, as hotels of this class were wont to be, with a sitting area that was a waste of space and an overpriced restaurant off to the side. There were no familiar faces, but Will thought that one of the page boys might be a new secret agent, flustered as he tried to look busy while not getting roped into doing any actual work at all.

"Here you are, sir," the woman said, a tight little smile hinting that he should go away now. She handed him a thin envelope that couldn't possibly contain all the information that Olaf had promised him.

"Much appreciated, ma'am," Will said, affecting a Western drawl for no other reason than he *could*, and he took a few steps away. He tore the envelope open, pulled out the sheet of paper, and rolled
his eyes at the extravagant calligraphic scrawl.

*Lunch?*

Will rolled his eyes and sighed a long-suffering sigh.

*Fucking secret agents.*

He crumpled up the paper, tossed it in the nearest rubbish bin, and headed for the restaurant.

The maître d' wasn't as disciplined as the staff at the reception desk, because the sniff of distaste was loud enough to be heard in the next borough. "Coat and tie are required, sir."

"I'll just be a minute," Will said, clapping the maître d' on the arm as he breezed past. "It's a matter of life and death."

The restaurant was nearly empty, but that only made spotting Olaf easier. He was wearing his usual extravagant, shiny suit and helping himself to a glass of wine. There was a bowl of soup in front of him -- it smelled sweet and spicy -- and Will's stomach growled in betrayal.

He had his heart set on the chips at the pub, though, so he waved away the waiter who came by just as he sat down across from Olaf.

Olaf, though. He picked up his spoon, pinky finger sticking out, and went through an elaborate, slow-as-fuck ritual of sweeping the utensil through the soup, tapping it on the rim, blowing on it, and finishing it off with a snotty slurp.

"You're trying my patience, mate," Will groaned. "Can we move this along?"

"We can," Olaf said amiably, and the friendly tone of his voice was full of warning bells. "As soon as you're debriefed."

Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw a couple of the patrons take notice. They put down their forks and knives and turned to look at the booth with the sort of mechanical precision only ever seen in horror movies or body-snatcher sci-fi flicks, and it freaked Will the fuck out.

"I'd be glad to oblige," Will said, just as pleasantly, though he was fairly sure that his tone didn't match Olaf's in terms of *arrogant bastard.* He was more of the sledgehammer type, anyway. "But not right now. I've things to do, people to see, phone calls to make -- notably the one where I pass on the message to keep Vivian alive for one more day."

Olaf's spine snapped ramrod straight, his expression shuttered as if he'd been clubbed in the head, and his face flushed magma-red, as if he were about to blow.

"So how's about you hand over the thumb drive with all the files that I asked for, and I'll be on my merry way?" Will suggested.

"If you think that I'll let you go after that --"

"I'm thinking you'll smile and give me the damn thing *right the fuck now* because you're shitting bricks in your breeches. Really, you don't deserve any better than this. What were you thinking, in any case? Following Hunith? Threatening her? Trying to kidnap her? You didn't think that there would be measures put in place to make sure that didn't happen? Bet you haven't heard from Viv in a while, but you haven't been worrying *too much* because it's standard procedure to go radio dark when you're not operating on the Queen's say-so anymore."
Will picked a bread roll from the basket, tore it in half, and took a big bite. Will didn't know what he was saying and was talking out of his arse, but it was hitting home with Olaf, almost as if Will were rubbing salt in an open wound.

Olaf reached for something on his lap.

"Oi. Slow-like and all," Will said, frowning meaningfully.

Olaf picked up his napkin, wiped his mouth, and left the cloth on the table, neatly folded. He reached into his coat --

"Super slow," Will warned.

-- and pulled out a small thumb drive no larger than Will's pinky finger. He put it on the table and pushed it toward Will.

Will held it up to the light. "I'll be checking this first chance I get. Looking for bugs and all. It had better have the information I'm asking after, or I'll be making a call."

Will started to stand up. He glanced at his watch. He figured he had just enough time to give Olaf something, just in case he thought that his newest agent had gone off the deep end.

"Look," Will said, leaning in. "I've not gone rogue. I promise you that. Aredian had Merlin and he was in a bad state. I had to make a choice. Bryn's nothing, everything's running through Tristan, but you knew that already, didn't you? And besides, if there's something going on between the alphabet soup and a bunch of mercenaries running about ten dozen different types of smuggling rings worldwide? I'm betting you want an in on the latter, and I'm it."

Will spread his hands.

"I were it, actually," he said, grinning. "I got a better offer, but changing camps didn't go over too well, and now I've got both Aredian and the NWO out for my neck. I'd sure appreciate it if you didn't have a go, too. I've my hands full as it is."

"And that?" Olaf asked, glancing meaningfully toward the thumb drive that Will was shoving into his trouser pocket.

"Special request, new boss and all, and don't front, we both know you know who I'm working for," Will said. He raised both brows. Olaf raised one. "And don't worry, Viv's fine. We're just keeping her out of the way for now. Don't want her waving guns and having the wrong person in her cross-hairs. Bit of a wild one, I understand."

Olaf leaned back, his eyes narrowed. "I want to talk to him."

"I'll pass it on, but no promises. I'm sure you've guessed it already. Man's gone and done with this whole bollocks, and he's running his own show. If he's in the mood, he'll call. If he's not, well." Will shrugged.

Olaf put something on the table. It was a second thumb drive, thinner and slimmer than the first, with the shiny sort of coating to protect it against electrical interference and the lack of a logo to show that it was made in-house, with all the security that MI-6 could muster.

"What's that, then?"

"Everything that our mutual friend didn't ask for," Olaf said, and he smiled the way a shark smiled
when it smelled blood in the water. "Give it to him. Tell him I want him to call me. Tell him I want my daughter back."

"What am I, a messenger? Am I wearing those tight bike pants? Do I look like I want to run through London on a twenty-pound piece of metal and rubber and get my neck broken? Fuck that," Will said, standing up. But he came back and took the second thumb drive from the table, pocketing it, too. He leaned down, kissed Olaf on the cheek, and cheerfully said, "Thanks, dad!"

He left the restaurant and the hotel without a backward glance, though he would remember Olaf's startled expression to the end of his days.

Will didn't need to look to know that he was being followed. He took the first taxi he saw, gave the driver a random address that was in the rough cardinal direction of where he needed to go, and spent a few minutes prying open the plastic casings of both thumb drives to check the innards for tracking bugs.

Both were clear, but just in case, he put them in one of the silk embroidered pouches full of pebbles that he'd gotten from Kathy, "Guaranteed to hide your location, you just have to toss one pebble out every time you want someone to lose your trail. It works really well, too, especially when you're trying to duck your ex-boyfriend."

Kay had snorted, but Will had seen the merit in trying to get rid of ex-girlfriends and overbearing secret agents, and it was coming in handy now.

He shoved a pebble between the seats, stuffed a couple of twenties through the gap, and opened the door while the car was still moving. "Sorry, mate, changed my mind."

He nearly tripped on his way out, ducked around a car coming at him from the other direction, and darted into an alley. He used all the tricks that MI-6 had taught him to make certain that he wasn't being followed and threw in a few streetwise twists picked up in Baghdad before trotting down the stairs to the next train station.

The people on the train were bland, expressionless, bored, suffering through the indignity of being packed as tight as sardines with the usual British stoicism. Will stayed as close to the doorways as possible, refusing to be pushed in deeper or shoved around, and three stops later, he darted out and trotted up the stairs with the relative certainty that he hadn't been followed.

He waited outside the station anyway, waiting to see if anyone paused and looked around as if looking for someone. A few people slowed down long enough to orient themselves before shaking out tourist maps, but the vast majority of the late-morning crowd moved like schools of fishes following the current streams in the ocean, drifting off to their next destination without hesitation.

Will was clear, at least for now. He hoped that Kay had made it out all right with Gaius; he'd hate to have to go back to square one and have to figure out where the suits were holding both of them.

He checked his watch -- he had minutes to spare -- and hurried to Grosvenor Square. The American Embassy loomed large in the distance, all glittering stone and polished glass, flags waving in the air, but that wasn't Will's destination, just a side-effect.

Part of Arthur's original assignment for Will had been to get in touch with some of his American friends. More specifically, a trusted American friend who could get in touch with a certain person in the CIA and not ask too many questions. As luck would have it, a squad-mate of one of Will's contacts had been reeled in for babysitting duty at the British Embassy, though Will couldn't imagine him being pleased by that fact.
Babysitting duty was notorious for having a lot of *hurry up and wait* -- more so than an average mission. A soldier on this kind of assignment was often not told where they were going until the last minute, rarely advised of the people accompanying his charge, and never consulted for required safety measures. Most of the time, the protection happened despite their target's interference.

Will should know; he'd been on that type of duty more than a few times during his tours. For all that he enjoyed the much-needed downtime -- depending on where the babysitting was being done -- after a few days he was ready to climb the walls. He assumed that there were perks associated with being posted at the American Embassy -- just as there were perks to being sent to Washington to loom menacingly at people from behind an internationally-known, entirely too squirrely, highly-visible political activist -- and he wasn't wrong when he ducked through the doors of The Lucky Pig and spotted not only his friend, but a few more people in a semi-private section of the pub.

Kay and Gaius were at the bar, nursing their pints and talking quietly over steaming chips. None of them made eye contact, but Will knew that Kay and Gaius had spotted him.

Kay didn't look none the worse for wear, and of course he didn't, the bastard, because he had the luck of a bloody Leprechaun, that one, and it was coupled with the sneakiness of a Fae. He likely waltzed in and swanned out with Gaius on his arm, the two of them carrying on as if they were in some sort of May-December romance. No one would have noticed them or paid them any mind.

Gaius even looked the part -- a Hornburg hat roguishly tilted over his left eye, his white-blond hair tied back at the nape of his neck, a white scarf tucked into his trench coat. Kay wasn't particularly pretty, but Will supposed that they made a *plausible* pair, at least.

That wasn't what he cared the most about. It was the extra worry lines that had appeared on Gaius' face, the weight of unexpected strain, the dark circles under his eyes. He hadn't slept -- or if he had, it hadn't been a fitful rest.

But he was alive, and he was in one piece. That was what counted.

Maybe Will spent too long studying Gaius, and maybe he did a poor job of hiding his relief at seeing the old man, but no one seemed to notice, not when he caused a bit of a scene by twirling around a waitress about to run into him. He took the opportunity to order, though. "A pint and chips, please, I'll be at the back of the pub with those sour-faced block-heads who are probably too cheap to give you a decent tip."

She smiled at him. "And you'll be making up for it?"

"Well, certainly. Someone has to do something for the pride of the Union Jack, and it won't be that lot," Will said easily, leaving her with a wink before heading to the rear of the room.

The Lucky Pig might not be a landmark, but it should be. Will didn't know the history, but the service was impeccable and the décor was as unique as a pub could get. He wasn't a fan of the bartender uniforms -- stark white shirts and barbershop red suspenders -- and kept expecting them to whip out skimmer hats and canes and break into song.

Except for that one glaring oversight in fashion, the rest of the pub was almost homey, in a distressed, decrepit run-down sort of way, decorated with whatever had been dragged out of the grandparent's attic, one of the grungy consignment shops, or a neighbour's yard sale. The back booth claimed by the American contingent reminded Will of a railway box car, nearly windowless, with dull ambient lighting, a dark brown leather couch from the nineteen-fifties, a beat-up chest from well before that era, and several stuffed armchairs that looked comfortable enough to doze off in.
Eddie -- Gunnery Sergeant Edward "Call me Mister" Jackson-Smith -- was a Special Forces grunt with as many tours under his belt as Will, though Eddie had seen a lot more action when his team had been sent to Afghanistan and there had been a desperate need for snipers trained for in-city incursions. He was easily as tall as Perceval, which was a pain when he needed to squeeze himself into small places and stay there for hours on end, but he was about as beanpole skinny as Merlin had been back in his early years, which made folding and unfolding himself a bit easier. Despite all his years in the army, Eddie hadn't bulked up any more than he remembered, and if Will wasn't wrong, there was something of a beer paunch showing over the belt of his civvies that his mates would be giving him Hell for when he returned to active duty.

"Eddie," Will said, giving the table plenty of advance warning before they abruptly halted their conversation. He shoved his duffel bag under the table and shook Eddie's hand, leaning in for a one-armed hug that doubled for the requisite pat-down for weapons and wiretaps that was returned with equal gusto, though Will could've done without the nipple pinch. He pulled away, rubbing his chest. "Jesus, that stung. What did I do to deserve that?"

"Don't play stupid, Kendrick. You damn well know what you did," Eddie said, raising a crooked eyebrow and giving him a meaningful glare.

"What are you, my wife?" Will asked, making himself comfortable in the vacated seat without bothering to wait for an invitation. He looked over the other two men with a critical glare. One of them was his height and thickly muscled; his hair was trimmed short to the skull, but stylishly done. The other was of average and unassuming build, with light brown hair and narrow wire-framed glasses. He almost reminded Will of the new James Bond Q, but he wasn't fooled. Appearances were deceiving when it came to any Special Forces team. "You must be his mate."

There was an exchange of glances, and Q blinked owlishly before breaking into a big grin that was almost wider than his face. "Name's West. Adam West."

"Very Batman of you," Will said, reaching over to shake his hand. "So we're using pseudonyms today?"

"Seems like," West said, tilting his head in something that might be acknowledgement but was probably more an apology. "I'm not here, you never heard my name, and you're never going to see me again."

"You say that now, but you just wait. I'll win you over yet," Will said. He gestured at the broody grunt sitting between Eddie and West. "I'm guessing he's the mouthpiece?"

The man glared.

"Wow. Verbose. I hope I can get a word in edgewise," Will said.

Eddie snorted. "You don't stop, do you?"

"Do you ever start?" Will retorted. "I expected a message passed on, not a same-day call-back. I mean, fair say, I look good on paper, who wouldn't want to hire me? But this isn't the sort of thing where I'd expect a quick-whip of a merry-go-round. If there's a message to pass back, let's have it. Places to be, people to see and all that rot."

There was another exchange of glances. Will didn't know what to make of it.

"There's only one person that could've sent the message," the nameless grunt said, leaning forward. "How do you know him?"
"Who are you again?" Will asked. The waitress came over before the man could answer. She came with treasure that wasn't part of the usual menu: a pint and a plate of chips fresh from the fryer with pickles and a bacon-and-turkey sandwich for good measure. Will gave her a delighted grin. "How'd you know?"

"I know your sort," she said with a slight shrug. "You'll swan off as soon as you can, and stick that lot with the rest. I figure I might as well pad the bill."

"You're a lass after my own heart, you are. You wouldn't be single, by any chance?"

The woman held up her left hand and flickered the flash of a small white-gold band before leaving.

"What a disappointment," Will said, taking a big bite out of the sandwich. "The food, on the other hand, makes up for it. So, go on, mate. What's your corker want?"

"The man who gave you the message. We want to talk to him."

Will made a small -- but decidedly rude -- sound and paused to take a drink of his pint before answering. He shook his head and frowned. "Love to oblige -- actually, strike that. I'm not obliging anything, you get my meaning? You have questions to ask, you ask me. You have a message to pass on, you give it to me. You have some information on the poor plonkers on Big Brother, USA, I'd love to hear it, because I'm losing my squad pool. Is it true that they kicked Meredith off the show? She's my favourite -- gives as good as she gets, snarky as fuck, and I just bet that she'd claw Brandi's eyeballs out if given half the chance. What a shame, the producers don't know what they're missing."

He stuffed some chips into his mouth, eating quickly. He had a feeling that he should get up and go as quickly as he could. There wouldn't be any use signaling Kay or Gaius ahead of time; he could only hope that they would follow and they'd meet up afterward.

Belatedly, he realized that they hadn't set up a meeting point for after, in case things went south. Grudgingly, he decided that maybe Pendragon's propensity for over-planning had some merit.

Nameless pulled out his phone and typed something. Eddie and West exchanged glances and sipped their beer. Will took another big bite of his sandwich and washed it down with a quarter of his pint. He'd polished off half of the sandwich before Nameless looked up and grunted.

"Wow," Will said, giving Eddie a dark look. "That bloke of yours? Illuminating. Now, look, I'm here because my mate tells me you've got something for me, but if it's turning into a colossal waste of my time. Cloak and dagger games? Love watching them on TV, not so much reading them, totally not a fan of being in the middle of one. So how about this. You actually have something that's not a waste of my time or a free lunch, you get..."

Will trailed off, glancing between Eddie and West.

"Which one of you is my contact?"

"That'll be me," West said.

"Then you'll get in touch with me, yeah? Give me a number, I'll give you a call when I'm the mood for a nooner --"

"I have your number," West interrupted.

"You have a burner phone, more's the pity --"
"Yeah, I thought you'd say that," West said, fishing into his coat pocket. He tossed a mobile onto the table. "Take it."

Will stared at it for a second before giving West an appraising look.

He picked up the phone anyway. It was unlocked and there was one number in the contacts list; he jotted it down on a scrap of napkin before tossing the phone back.

"I might be slow, but I'm not thick. Mum always told me never to accept candy from strangers. If that's all...?"

Will stared at West, at Eddie, at Nameless. None of them said anything.

"Right, then. Thanks for lunch, I'll be in touch," Will pointed at Nameless and grinned. "Nice chatting, but maybe involve other people in the conversation? It'll make you look a lot less self-centered."

He grabbed his duffel bag, stood up, finished his pint, and grabbed a few more chips before leaving. He passed the bar, but Kay and Gaius were nowhere in sight. The bartender removed two glasses from the countertop, though, and that might mean that they hadn't been gone long.

There was an itch between Will's shoulder -- the sort of an itch that he'd think a target would feel seconds before he pulled the trigger and shot them -- but he resolutely refused to look over his shoulder as he walked out the door. He turned quickly and headed up the road, glancing around as he walked. He didn't see Kay or Gaius, but he spotted the suits following him in the shop reflections that he passed along the road.

He walked faster.

They weren't wearing suits, not exactly, but Will had learned how to spot an undercover cop before university for reasons best left unmentioned to everyone, in particular his father, and it wasn't much of a leap to pick trained operatives. They had a way of carrying themselves that was difficult to explain, an insouciance associated with the role they had been put in, a certainty in their own invincibility that was present only because they'd been given a gun and the authority to use it. There was a hyper-alertness about them, a precise way in which they looked around, scanning their environment and committing it to memory, pretending not to notice their target even though they were acutely aware of their presence and position right down to the barest millimetre.

Even new agents acquired those particular traits. Will had already possessed those skills when he'd been recruited by MI-6 to keep an eye on Merlin -- for his own reason, not theirs, though they could think whatever they wanted about it. Hell, he'd been making use of the scan-and-commit tactic a long time ago, starting from when Merlin was being pushed around by wankers bigger than them both. It was a skill that he'd tried to teach Merlin for his own self-preservation.

Those lessons might never have stuck for Merlin, but Will was making use of them now. He couldn't pinpoint their affiliation, but from their clothes, he guessed that at least half of them were Americans, while the other half were most likely Americans with good taste in clothes. It was an assumption that he didn't put much faith in, considering that he worked for Olaf Niedermann.

He was certain that Olaf knew the movements of every important member of the CIA anywhere in the world, more so when they were in his home city. Eddie wasn't very high on the totem pole -- if anything, he was closer to the bottom rung of the ladder -- and he wouldn't have blipped on Olaf's radar. But Nameless and Mr. Adam West, the original Batman, they were important. Will was sure of it.
Perhaps Will was a mite remiss in not asking more questions about the message when Arthur had given him this assignment, but he’d been so pissed at the man that Will hadn’t wanted to spend more time in his company than what was strictly necessary.

*Keep walking. Stay in the middle of the pavement. Blend with the crowds. Don’t let them get close.*

It wasn’t a question of darting through traffic, hopping in the nearest cab, and driving away. Not the way that the roads were completely snarled with midday traffic. If he wanted to turn himself into a sitting duck, yeah, twiddling his thumbs in the back seat waiting for the vehicle to advance two centimetres? That was the way to do it.

The train was his next best bet.

He didn’t have an option three, not yet, and he had no idea what he was going to do if Kay and Gaius resurfaced. Kay must have spotted the agents when he’d gone out with Gaius ahead of Will and reacted accordingly, but Will hadn’t trained with Kay and hadn’t worked with him long enough to even be able to anticipate what he would do.

Probably kiss Will again as a distraction.

Fucking Hell, Will was worried if he was thinking about stupid things like that. He glanced over his shoulder, knocking into a woman walking the other way. He steadied her, muttered an apology, but kept going, because the suits in civilian clothing were suddenly a whole lot closer than they had been a minute ago. They weren’t even trying to be subtle about it, either; one of them brought his wrist to his mouth and spoke into it, pressing his finger into his ear to receive a transmission.

"Options. Options. Come on, Will. Options. You’re a smart guy. You look good on paper," he reminded himself. He wasn’t just an amazing shot with a sniper rifle -- or any gun, really. He had his dad and all those hunting trips to thank for that. He knew how to wriggle out of a tight spot, whether it was the bookies collecting on a loan made for a bet that didn’t pan out, or a boyfriend walking in on Will having a shag with the girlfriend, but that last one, he’d learned on his own, and it was best not to mention it to his dad. "You’ve got this. You’ve got options. What are your options?"

It was an impulse, more than anything, that drove him to take a shortcut through a narrow alley barely wide enough for a Mini. The alley was crammed full of rubbish bins, some of which were large enough to stuff a body or two.

Will really wished he had a gun right now. *Why* had he left it behind? He dimly remembered some dumb strategy of having an excuse to go back to Kathy’s place late at night under the pretext of having forgotten it, but it seemed pretty stupid now.

If the military was good for anything, it was making certain that its assets knew how to survive, no matter the situation. Will’s skill as a sniper meant that, once he’d established himself, the enemy would put a price on his head. The army retaliated by either positioning Will as far away from the action as was humanely possible while still making the critical shot -- a bit of a pain, really. But it meant that Will had a whole slew of confirmed long-distance kills that broke a few records on his curriculum vitae -- or dropping him right in the middle of it and making sure he could fight his way out.

Damn right he could fight his way out. He’d learned some valuable skills fighting all those schoolyard bullies who had picked on Merlin. Plus the army had instructors who weren’t half-bad with the good, old jiu-jitsu.

There was a clatter behind him. Will was betting that he’d gained some time to escape when all the
different teams bumped into each other and formed a bottleneck of who would get to him first.

His mobile rang.

Will answered it on the second ring. "Hullo, you've reached *La Casa de Mama* pizzeria. How may I help you?"

There was a dead pause on the line, and finally, someone spoke.

"I told you that we had questions. It would be easier if you cooperated." The man sighed in frustration. "If you stop, they won't hurt you."

Will didn't recognize West's voice right away. He glanced up at a passing shadow and twisted to look over his shoulder. He didn't appreciate stalling tactics, but he definitely didn't like being in someone's crosshairs. "Orright, I see you got wise and got my number from Eddie. Let's see if I can help you get a few more IQ points."

Will emerged on the other side of the alley largely unhindered, but there were several men coming in his direction from around the corner of the building and a few more through the alley.

"Let me tell you something. Behind my ears? *Not wet*. That's a hint that I'm not new at this game. Tell your boys and your shooters to get the fuck off my arse, or any future conversation we have will go the way of this one -- it'll be *over*."

Will was down another block, detouring toward The Little Pig, when he saw the men on the street back off. At least two of the more visible shooters disappeared, too.

"All of them, you plonker. Including shooter number four, tucked up the rooftop, scrambling for a better position. Don't play with me, mate. I know you've looked me up. Don't fucking insult me."

He waited. He waited some more, lingering at a street corner in full view of several lines of sight, presenting himself as a delectable morsel just waiting to be taken down.

Shooter number four retreated.

"It wasn't my idea," West said.

"Sure, it wasn't," Will scoffed. He turned on his heel to watch his own back, but he was also keeping an eye out for Kay and Gaius. He thought he saw silvery hair out of the corner of his eye, but it was a silverback gorilla of a man squeezing his immense bulk into the back of a cab.

"Eddie told me you were hot-tempered, and I had to agree after seeing your profile. I recommended a soft approach, but my associate decided that matters were of some urgency," West said, sleazy-smooth and diplomatic.

"Is that fancy-talk for saying I'm the flighty, high-maintenance sort? Because you're not wrong there. Are we done playing games?"

"We are," West said calmly, like a parent soothing an unruly child.

"You call me at this number again, I'm voiding your warranty," Will said. He didn't need to be told how important it was to keep everything on the down-low, and getting harassed by some covert American operative when he was in the middle of a mission didn't qualify. Hell, *Olaf* knew enough to keep communication to a minimum.
It made Will almost like the man, even if he was an overbearing prick.

"I understand," West said. "I'll wait for you to contact me."

"Good boy," Will said. "Good-bye."

"Wait," West called out.

Will's thumb hovered on the End Call button, and he was half-tempted to push it, too, except he spotted Kay -- but no Gaius -- up the street, lingering at a street corner. It was reminder enough that he wasn't doing this on his own coin, and that Merlin was involved, so he couldn't play the games that he wanted to play. That was all right with him. He'd toyed enough with the NWO, but it wasn't fun anymore.

"What?"

"I do have a message to pass on," West said. There was a creak of leather, the sound of a crowd all around him. Will was about to hang up when there wasn't any response for several long minutes. He spotted West coming out of The Lucky Pig, his open coat blustering in a sudden blast of wind. He smoothed down his tie and looked around, stopping when he saw Will. "Tell your boss that my boss said yes. But it's quid pro quo. Show us yours, we'll show us ours."

"You know how far that's going to fly," Will said. West moved out of the way of the foot traffic, shoving one hand in his pocket. Even at this distance, Will saw West dip his chin down and nod. "Your boss knows my boss. My boss knows your boss. Let's skip all the fucking pussyfooting and get to the meat of it. When does your boss want to meet?"

"Two days from now?" West said. "I'll have something, but I can't guarantee that my boss will be there."

"I don't fly on your timetable, mate. I'll call you when I call you, and you'll sit by the phone pining away waiting on me to call, and I don't want to hear any dumb excuse about being busy washing your hair when I set up a date," Will said without hesitation. "And, everything being equal, I'll have something, too, and I can't guarantee my boss will be there, either."

It grated at Will to even use the word, boss. He didn't have a boss. Arthur was... some wanker with Captain's bars who knew how to shift his weight around, and Will was another wanker who'd been in the army long enough to know when it was in his best interest to obey orders.

"We'll make it work. Don't forget to call, Mr. Kendrick," West said.

"Top of the day to you, Mr. West," Will said, refraining from the Batman joke he so badly wanted to make right now. He hung up, shoved the phone in his pocket, and stayed where he was until he saw Eddie and Nameless emerge from the pub and join West on the street, the three of them walking off in different directions.

He went in yet another.

It wasn't until he'd walked off for a good hour that Kay fell in step beside him. "Went well, then?"

"You know, the thing about Americans, when they're after something, they're a canny fucking lot," Will said. "Always something up their sleeve, always trying to get the high ground, and almost always bluffing their way through a bad poker hand. Got to admire them, though. This whole never back down mentality? It might work out for us in the long run."
"So, it was a bluff?" Kay asked.

Will shrugged half-heartedly. "I don't know. Suppose we'll find out in two days, won't we?"

"Two days," Kay repeated, his brow furrowing. They walked in silence for a while longer before Kay nudged him down a different direction. Will didn't have a better plan, so he went along with it.

"I don't suppose Arthur told you what it was that he thinks the Americans have," Will asked.

"Oh, so now you care?" Kay asked, giving him a sidelong look.

"I'm thinking there's a story in this that I should probably know about, instead of patting my way through a dark room blindfolded," Will groused. He looked around, trying to see past Kay. "Where's Gaius?"

"Erm," Kay said intelligently.

Will stopped dead. "Don't tell me you lost him. How the bloody fuck do you lose a sixty-something bloke who thinks running is something done by other people?"

"The same way you lose a sixty-something bloke who was a former combat corps engineer and probably knows more about evasion and distraction tactics than both of us combined?"

Will stared at Kay, unimpressed.

"I didn't lose him. Goddamn it, Will. Come on," Kay said, forcing Will to move in order to keep up. "Arthur called while you were having a drink. There's a change of plans. He wants us to meet with a mate of ours, and I sent Gaius on ahead. Figured it would be for the best, in case you were grabbed by the suits and needed a hand."

"I can take care of myself, thanks," Will snapped.

There was a long silence before Kay said, "With cleanup."

Will shot him a sidelong look. "What?"

"I never said you couldn't take care of yourself. I meant, if you needed help with the cleanup," Kay said. It was almost an apology, except Will didn't think Kay was physically capable of apologizing for anything. He knew that for a fact. He couldn't apologize either, not without feeling as if someone was pulling out all of his teeth at once using rusty pliers and a half-arsed anaesthetic.

"Fine," Will grumbled, nodding curtly. "So where did you pack him off to? Gaius?"

Kay clamped a hand on Will's shoulder and half-shrugged. "Nowhere you need to worry about, mate. We've crossed our number one to-do from your list and your plate's full with dogging MI-6 and the CIA to untangle the rest. I'm taking care of this one."

"Gaius is my responsibility," Will said.

"And he's safe where he is and we'll head over there -- eventually -- so that you can lay eyes on him yourself, but from here on out, it's my call," Kay said.

"What," Will said flatly.

"My call," Kay said firmly. "Arthur's my Captain, you're the tag-along. You don't know what he's thinking, and I'm the one who sits through all of his planning sessions until I've got every possible
contingency bleeding out of my ears. Did Olaf give you the files?"

"And then some," Will said, though he couldn't help the growl in his voice. One reason why he wasn't any higher in rank was because he didn't kowtow to authority well, and he took orders only so long as someone was pointing him toward the target. He didn't particularly like that Kay was taking over now, but he supposed it was inevitable, and, if he were honest -- and he wouldn't admit it to anyone, least of all himself -- it was a bit of a relief.

Will didn't know what the fuck he was doing. He hadn't known what the fuck he was doing since the beginning. He could play with a half-deck all that he wanted, but it wouldn't get him any closer to the end of the game.

"We've got to get them to Arthur and Merlin soon as we can. We'll get our next orders after we get them to our mate -- he'll send them on," Kay said. "Olaf's not going to wait for them to skim the contents. He's going to push, and Vivian's only going to work as leverage for so long. Two days is stretching his patience. You might want to prod your mate with a sharp stick, I've a feeling we're going to need that package of theirs before then."

"You know what it is?" Will asked, curious.

"No," Kay said. He didn't sound like he cared, either.

Will blew out a breath and followed Kay down the stairs to the train, already feeling world-weary. It felt as if he'd been riding the trains ever since he'd left France, and he was getting tired of them. "Yeah, all right. Whatever it is they say, yeah? In for a pence, in for a pound, or however it's supposed to go."

Kay flashed him a wry smile.

"I expect to be told what Arthur's playing at," Will said, poking Kay rudely in the chest.

"Wouldn't we all?" Kay grabbed Will's shoulder and pulled him onto the train car right before the doors slammed shut between them. "Now, quit jawing. We're not far. I'll introduce you to Gwen's little brother."

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Merlin was the first one out of the car when they arrived in Le Havre. He left the door open behind him and stumbled over the pavement to the railing bordering the harbour, panting for breath.

Owain said nothing. He got out of the rear, calmly shut the passenger side door, and unloaded their bags. Arthur put the rental sedan into park, deliberately twisting the key to shut off the engine. His fingers curled around the wheel, and he closed his eyes.

Merlin was looking better. Over the last few days, his appetite had gradually returned and he'd demolished nearly everything that was put in front of him, never immediately noticing that both Owain and Arthur made sure that he had more than enough to eat, even giving him food from their own takeaway containers. He was still lighter than Arthur liked, though, but there was no helping that.
Arthur had thought it would be best if he let Merlin sleep alone, but that notion was quickly rejected when Merlin clambered into Arthur's bed and fiercely wrapped his arms around Arthur. Neither of them had slept well that first night. They still didn't sleep well, even a week later, but it was getting better. Merlin was no longer jarring himself awake at faint, creaking sounds of a building settling with the changes in temperature, waking Arthur with him. The nightly interruptions had traded up from an understandable paranoia to bad dreams and nightmares, and Arthur spent more time soothing a slumbering, whimpering Merlin than he did sleeping himself.

Merlin was fine during the day. Or at least, as much as he could hide what had happened to him. He acted as he always had -- his shoulders to his ears, his head down, his movements a little jerky and a lot gangly, with a special sort of grace that Arthur knew couldn't be mimicked. But sometimes, when Merlin thought no one was looking and the effort of keeping up the act, he sagged, a heavy hollow appearing under his eyes.

His nights might be disturbed by images from his kidnapping and imprisonment, but his days were haunted by grief and anger.

Arthur might not have had a direct hand in it, but he was responsible for Merlin's pain.

He didn't care if Merlin forgave him. He would never forgive himself.

He forced himself to unbuckle his seat belt. He reached over and took Merlin's abandoned coat before leaving the car. He glanced first at Owain, who was packaging their equipment into even smaller bags, before scanning their surroundings. He walked up behind Merlin, who was leaning over the railing and looking a little green, and put the coat over Merlin's shoulders.

He didn't ask, *What happened now?*

Instead, he ran a hand down Merlin's back until he felt the warning tension to *stop touching* and stood next to Merlin, a bare inch of space between them. His hands balled into tight fists in the pockets of his coat to hear Merlin's stuttering hitch of breath.

It was early in the day even for the harbour, and traffic was at a minimum. They would abandon the car here -- the rental company would pick it up eventually, when someone noticed that it had been there for weeks and the gendarmerie followed up -- and head down to the boats. It was a long walk, but nothing that they weren't used to, though it would mostly be in the open, and none of them fancied making themselves targets right now.

There hadn't been any hint that they'd been seen or observed, no sign that they were followed or even that the enemy had any idea of where they were. The peace and quiet was nice, but Arthur didn't think that any of them -- Merlin included -- would feel comfortable until they knew where the bad guys were.

"Sorry," Merlin said.

Arthur debated saying something. He'd been telling Merlin that it wasn't his fault, that he shouldn't apologize, but that had only made Merlin's hackles rise. Arthur knew that Merlin had always been self-conscious about pulling his own weight -- sometimes, pulling *more* than his own weight -- and that he didn't like feeling as if he was a burden or that he was slowing them down. It seemed that the only safe recourse was to nod, to accept it, and to move on.

This wasn't Merlin's first panic attack since the rescue, but he hadn't had one for almost a full day. Arthur had been vigilant -- Owain doubly so, because he didn't know Merlin half as well as Arthur did -- and had taken pains to avoid anything that might trigger another one. Arthur had no idea what
had happened this time.

"Panic attack?" Arthur asked uselessly, stating the obvious in the hopes that it would get Merlin talking. Merlin hadn't been talking very much, either, and when he did, it was as if he was a shadow of his former self, forced and strained.

"Yeah," Merlin said finally. He shook his head. "No. No, just too much in my own head, I think. I need a distraction."

"What was it?"

Merlin didn't say anything for a long time. He stared at the palms of his hands. The streetlight on the other side of the road wasn't enough to see by, but it didn't stop Arthur from imagining the misery in Merlin's voice reflected in his expression.

"Mum," Merlin said finally.

Arthur didn't say anything. He waited to see if Merlin would elaborate.

"I was just thinking. Sorting out when she knew Balinor was alive," Merlin said, standing up straight. He hadn't used the words father or dad once since Arthur told him the news. "I think it was my birthday party. I'd just turned ten. Chocolate cake and presents, but just me and Mum and Will. Uncle Gaius was there, too, and Will's dad. Alice, maybe some other people. I don't remember, exactly. But I was just about to blow the candles out, and the phone rang. Mum made me wait, and everyone went into another stupid round of Happy Birthday when she took the call in the other room."

Merlin shrugged into his coat violently, nearly ripping out the arms. He pulled the collar up against the wind blowing from the harbour. It was cold, but it would get colder still, once they were on the ocean. They'd gotten some warmer clothes, even some wet skins, but none of them were wearing them now. There would be time for that on the boat.

"Mum didn't come back. I got tired of hearing Happy Birthday. Ten years old, you know. Stupid and selfish and I just wanted my presents. So I blew out the candles anyway. I knew she'd be mad, but she'd forgive me. Felt like I could've committed murder, back then, and Mum would've handwaved it and made it all right, because it was just that sort of time we'd had. It was just me and her. We hadn't seen the uniforms for a while -- no more bad news, and what could they tell us that was worse than letting us know that Balinor was dead, anyway?"

Merlin scratched his jaw. He hadn't shaved. He hadn't brushed his hair. He'd come out of the shower and bypassed the mirror, because he couldn't stand to look in it for some reason. Arthur hadn't asked him why. He thought that he understood -- he hadn't been able to look himself in the mirror, either and see all his failures reflected back at him. He wasn't sure what Merlin saw in his reflection, though.

"It's the first time I remember me and my Mum happy," Merlin said, suddenly breathless. He put a hand on his chest and rubbed, his fingers inching upward and to the left, brushing the exact spot where his battle scars were. "First time I remember my Mum laughing. It'd been ages since she laughed. Then, she was just gone from the room and didn't come back. I didn't think much of it at the time. Uncle Gaius went to look for her, came back, said to go ahead and open the pressies."

He bit back a short, dry laugh that was like the wind over sandpaper, and glanced over his shoulder. Owain was leaning against the fender of the car, his hands in his pockets, his head down. The bags were packed in three neat loads -- one of them smaller than the other two, and obviously meant for
Merlin, because he wasn't up to his full strength yet. Owain was listening and not even bothering to hide it.

Merlin turned around. Maybe to include Owain, maybe because he needed the reassurance of being able to see Arthur and Owain close by -- Arthur wasn't sure. All the same, Arthur took his hand out of his pocket and stretched his arm over the railing. It was an invitation of comfort, there for the taking, if Merlin wanted it.

He'd found that Merlin didn't want comfort, not very often, but when he did, he grasped for it like a drowning man hoping that there was something at the other end of the slippery rope that could keep him afloat.

"Never noticed that anything was wrong. Didn't think anything of Allan leaving the room and not coming back until we were cleaning up after. Everyone left. Uncle Gaius stayed -- he never usually stayed. Allan asked Will if he wanted to stay overnight. I guess that was strange, it was always Will begging to stay over and Allan telling him he was making a nuisance of himself."

Owain snorted with a tone of disbelief. A faint smile flashed across Merlin's face -- there-and-gone, too fast to grasp.

And, as if that was a kick at the wobbly leg on a stool, Merlin broke.

"I don't know what it were," he said, his voice a cracked sob. "Woke me up in the middle of the night. Found mum in her room, sitting on her bed. Didn't look like she'd changed or moved since the party. She looked as if she'd been crying for hours."

Merlin wavered on his feet. His eyes were bright with tears. Arthur couldn't stand it. He took Merlin into his arms, but he didn't try to shush him or soothe him. Merlin's body shuddered at the contact. His fingers twisted into Arthur's coat until they were balled up into fists, torn between hitting out of rage and pulling in a need for comfort.

"I sat with her. Don't think either one of us moved. But. Fuck. He must've... He must've called her that day. He must've... He must've told her not to say anything. "Merlin hiccuped. "How could he do that to her? How could he do that to my Mum? She'd already been through enough. Why didn't he just disappear? Why did he call her? We didn't know. We were fine. We'd moved on. Mum had moved on. She'd even gone out on a bloody date. She never dated anyone after that. How the fuck could he do that to her?"

Merlin was holding onto Arthur so tightly that it hurt, but nothing was worse than the pain of knowing how much Merlin was suffering. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Owain quietly move the smaller bag to the pavement where they could reach it, then shoulder the other two bags himself, heading for the bridge down to the docks, and, eventually, to the marina.

"I can't see him, Arthur. I can't. I'll kill him. I know we need him if we want this to work, but I don't think I can keep it together if he's there. I can't. I won't work with him. I don't want to -- I don't want to ruin this, but there's got to be something else that we can do. Anything but this --"

"Merlin. Merlin." Arthur swallowed hard, hating that he had even asked Merlin to go along with the plan the way he'd sketched it out. He hadn't been able to come up with a better way to trigger certain things from happening without direct interference, but if he had to cut Balinor out of it entirely, he would. He needed Merlin for this. Everything pointed toward Merlin being more than capable of dealing with his imprisonment -- he'd been trained for this sort of thing, more so than the rest of them -- but his father's reappearance was another thing entirely. "I'll find another way. There's always
another way. It'll be all right. We'll figure it out."

Merlin buried his face in Arthur's neck. His arms loosened -- they weren't so tight around Arthur's body anymore, and Arthur thought he could take a deep breath again. He rubbed a hand down Merlin's back. He rocked him. He scratched his fingers through Merlin's unruly hair.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked," Arthur said.

In the distance, the horns blew. They echoes were disembodied by the harbour and torn apart by the wind, sounding like lonely banshees howling for vengeance and sea monsters roaring against the chains holding them captive.

"There's no other way, is there?" Merlin asked, his voice a whisper. "It's got to be him. Otherwise it'll take too long. Or it might put one of us at risk. Or it won't work at all."

"There's always another way," Arthur said, though he didn't believe it himself. He could look at the possible scenarios all that he wanted, but the only way to incite the reaction that he was hoping for was to push Balinor into the open. There were a few non-negotiable aspects of his plan. Dropping the roles that they'd been playing for months was one of them. Keeping Merlin safe was another. Shoving Balinor into the middle of it was a third.

Arthur would have to recalculate his plans, but later. Maybe when they were on the boat and traveling across the channel. He couldn't think of it now, not when his emotions were in turmoil. Not when Merlin was so close to the edge that they had just rescued him from.

Abruptly, Merlin shook his head, as if refusing the reassurances that Arthur was trying to give.

"I can't do this to my Mum," Merlin said. "I mean, she's just got him again. It must've killed her to pretend that he was gone. What is it going to do to her if she loses him for real?"

"We'll have to make sure that doesn't happen," Arthur said. He pulled away from Merlin, holding him still. He brushed his fingers through Merlin's hair and wiped the streak of tear that had trailed down his cheek. "You don't have to worry about that. Balinor has men that he can depend on. We'll make use of them. Put them to work doing something useful for a change, instead of hiding like the rats they are."

"More Druids," Merlin said, shaking his head. His laugh was hollow. He let go of Arthur, wiping his face with the rough of his sleeve. "Jesus. Just when I thought this couldn't get more complicated."

"We've run out of room on the board, haven't we?" Arthur said, and it wasn't far from the truth. There was no way that they would ever be able to identify and track all the people who were involved in this mess, never mind uncover their personal motivations. He'd chosen to let that go. It was a pursuit better left for the agencies that had the resources for it, even if Arthur wasn't sure what their motives were.

What mattered was the one and only objective -- stopping each of those groups from achieving their goals. The NWO wanted a world dominated by magic with magic users at the top of the food chain. The Druids wanted the return of magic, and they weren't fussed by how or who was in charge. The Directory wanted -- Arthur wasn't certain what they wanted, but surely it had to be along the same lines, with themselves in charge, the magic carefully doled out and taxed in such a way that they would reap the most profit.

Aredian was in it for the power. If what Merlin had told him was true, Aredian's purpose was less to broker the sale of magical weapons and to have it in a throttlehold. Arthur believed that MI-6 and the
CIA and other worldwide organizations were after the magic for much the same reason -- for their country to gain the upper hand over another.

Except there was no upper hand where magic was involved.

The Dragons wanted -- Arthur tried not to think too hard about it, but it was difficult when it was weighing down in the back of his mind. The Dragons wanted a prophecy fulfilled, a balance restored. Magic was coming back to the world whether the world was ready, and it was just a matter of how.

That knowledge made Arthur's arms tighten around Merlin and to reinforce his private desire to keep Merlin safe.

He would not let Merlin be used as a tool. Merlin was not an artefact. If the Dragons -- if Kilgarrah -- were to be believed, the balance didn't need Merlin to remain steady on a counterpoint. It only needed to be defended and protected.

Merlin was needed to defend and protect it.

The realization struck Arthur hard. He pulled away slowly, his hands sliding down to rest on Merlin's hips. He took in the dark circles under Merlin's eyes, the hollow of his cheeks, the cracked and dry of his lips.

He suddenly knew what he needed to do.

But instead of telling Merlin, instead of giving it substance by speaking of it, Arthur stroked Merlin's cheek and released a soft breath.

"Merlin --"

"No, I know," Merlin said, closing his eyes, shaking his head. "It needs to be done. I'll be fine. I'll… Just, it'll go south the second he tries to be my father, yeah?"

"I know," Arthur said.

"I'll deal," Merlin said, sniffling, turning way. He spotted the bag that Owain had left behind and reached for it, but Arthur shouldered it first. Merlin pursed his lips in half-protest, but instead of grumbling, he said, "They're probably wondering what happened to us. We should go."

They stared at each other wordlessly, as if there was too much left unsaid. Things that had nothing to do with the mission, with Merlin's imprisonment. It was as if they were suddenly very awkward with one another, suddenly unsure.

"Do your jacket up," Arthur said gruffly. Merlin's mouth quirked, and there was a slump of shoulders that told of great relief at the sudden change of topic, even if it was only Arthur being his usual overbearing self. "Wind's vicious closer to the harbour."

Vicious was putting it mildly, Arthur thought once they crossed the bridge and hit the open ground. The sun hadn't risen yet, and there were plenty of streetlights and pier lamps to light the way, but the wind was blustering so hard that even the lights themselves fluttered in and out, as if they were being blown away. Merlin walked close to Arthur, using him as a shield; Arthur was glad to be able to do that, even if it meant that the wind drove icy daggers into his face and treated his heavy coat as if it were nothing but a flimsy shirt. He might as well be naked for all the good that it did him.

It was better once they were down on the docks themselves, navigating the maze of moored boats
and struggling for balance every time the waves smacked the sides and forced the dock to roil and ripple. They worked their way to the middle, where there was at least some semblance of shelter. The waves had been broken up enough by the other docks and boats in the water that it didn't feel so much as if they were walking on a roller coaster.

"I question the sanity of the man willing to take us out across the channel in this," Merlin shouted.

"I question our sanity," Arthur said, his second thoughts having second thoughts when they saw the boat that Pellinor had chartered for them.

"I know a guy," Pellinor had said. "We can trust him. He'll take us out no matter what, make sure we're covered, get us there when we need to be there."

Pellinor could have mentioned that the guy was also batshite insane, because the boat in question was a small fishing trawler that probably manned six to eight men on a good day. The mast bobbed up and down with the waves, the paint peeled at the edges, and it was at least somewhat reassuring that the deck itself looked sturdy.

Sturdier than the boat, at least.

Owain was already there, stowing away their equipment. Gareth was with him, folding a net -- or trying to get himself out of a tangle, it was hard to tell. They both looked up when Arthur and Merlin came into view, looking bored and unconcerned, fishermen about to head out onto the waters with their done-in-the-head Captain. Recognizing them, Owain and Gareth relaxed and shifted subtly away from their weapons, and finished their tasks.

Merlin's legs were wobbly when he stepped into the boat, but he steadied himself easily enough. Gareth was there in an instant, walking across the unsteady deck with a grace that he rarely showed on land, and he stopped in front of Merlin, holding out his arms.

Gareth was giving Merlin a choice, in case he wasn't ready for the sudden onslaught of fuck I'm glad you're all right that he was sure to get from the entire team once they were all together again. Owain must have warned Gareth that Merlin wasn't quite in his right mind today.

But Merlin was, Arthur was glad to see, because Merlin took an unhesitating step forward. He crashed into Gareth just as an unpredictable wave made the boat lurch. Gareth caught him, keeping them both stable and steady, and if either of them said something, it was lost to the roar of the wind.

Gareth let go of Merlin only when he was sure that Merlin had his sea legs -- or a sea-stumble, because that was what it would amount to in this weather. Merlin took the duffel bag from Arthur and headed into the boat, squeezing through the narrow door. He wasn't going to be much help getting the ship ready, and it had nothing to do with his condition. Merlin trained for the sea same as any other member of the team, with the exception of Pellinor and Gareth, who were specialists, and Owain, who was the underwater demolitions expert by default, and that training amounted to knowing how to move around on board, how to keep a ship going even when it was sinking, how to survive when it did sink, and, most importantly, how to stay out of the way.

Arthur watched Merlin go with misgivings. He clamped a hand down on Gareth's shoulder, the two exchanging a nod before Arthur followed Merlin inside.

He was promptly accosted by Pellinor, who was on his way out; there was a grasp of arms that was less a hand-shake and more of an awkward hug in a narrow space. "Good to see you, Captain. Even better seeing Merlin. We'll cast off in a few. Go on up, Ian is at the controls."
Anything that Arthur was about to say would have been drowned out in the rush of wind when Pellinor stepped outside. He headed down the narrow corridor, skirting past Merlin, who was getting comfortable at a cramped booth in the corner next to the makeshift kitchen. There was a hard case already there, the cover off, the contents strewn across most of the table and what amounted to the kitchen counter, and Merlin was putting it all together.

Arthur left him to it. The data that they’d gotten from Kay and Will -- by way of Elyan, who was pleased that his sister was alive despite reports to the contrary, but pissed that he couldn't tell their parents -- would keep Merlin busy. The distraction would be good, and it would take Merlin's mind off of things, at least for a little while.

Lamorak was on the bridge, going over the ship controls with a man who only came up to his shoulder, which put him at just over five feet and generous change. Ian Johnson had short, spiky blond hair, dark brown eyes, eyebrows that seemed to crawl across his forehead of their own volition, and a salt-and-pepper scruff along his jaw. He was broad-shouldered like a swimmer and trim under a heavy peacoat that was big enough to double as a two-man tent. Arthur never got the full story behind why the former Navy SEAL was a fisherman in British waters, but he had a feeling that it had something to do with him not being so much former as undercover and in-between assignments, bored out of his mind.

Both Lamorak and Ian noticed Arthur at the same time. Lamorak reacted first by putting himself between Ian and Arthur to envelope him in a quick, hasty hug and a mumbled Fucking glad you’re with us again before he shoved Arthur out of the way and headed down the stairs.

Arthur heard him exclaim, "Merlin!" and winced, hoping that Merlin hadn't been surprised. He didn't do well with surprises, not lately.

He turned to the ship's Captain and held out his hand. "Arthur."

"Ian," the Captain said, shaking his hand. Arthur had the feeling that he was being sized up, but he couldn't tell if the former SEAL found him wanting in the end, because Ian turned away to flip a few switches. "I take it you're the last and we're casting off."

"That's correct," Arthur said. "Pellinor and Gareth are taking care of that now."

Ian nodded without expression, reaching across the board to push a button before pushing the throttle. The ship's engine roared, then calmed, and with a deft swirl of the wheel, Ian had the ship pulling away from the dock, already helped along by the waves.

"There's a bit of a blow. We'll be delayed," Ian said.

"A bit of a blow," Arthur repeated, staring out the windows. The sea spray had coated the glass with a nasty splatter, and he knew that the sunrise would be a bare sliver of light along the horizon before the storm clouds thundered down. They would be halfway across the choppy channel before it started to rain. "Pellinor was right. You're off-kilter."

Ian laughed, rich and loud, his face splitting in a shite-eating grin. "Compliment coming from you, Pendragon. Don't tell me that it wasn't your team back in Colombia in '06."

Arthur glanced sidelong at Ian only long enough to make certain that he wasn't pulling a weapon on him before shooting a glare over his shoulder.

"Don't be hard on him. It's not his fault I already knew where he'd gone after he finished his training with us," Ian said. "When the man says he wants a lift at the ass-crack of dawn across God's
backside, and that he's got a few mates who want to come along, it's not much of a reach."

Arthur grunted. After a long silence, he asked, "Does Pellinor know you're CIA?"

It was Ian's turn to glance over his shoulder, his brows pinched in the middle.

Arthur's mouth pulled in an unexpected smile that stopped before it was much more than a smirk, and he felt guilty for this sensation -- the first real amusement he'd had in a long time. "Don't be hard on him. It's not his fault I can spot a suit a mile away. And besides, it's not everyone who's a former SEAL living as an ex-pat in the UK, who just happens to own a fishing boat and is willing to brave a blow for a mate."

Ian grunted.

"We're away!" Lamorak shouted from below. He retreated down the corridor.

Ian put a hand on the throttle, pushing it forward slowly. He turned the wheel, guiding the boat around a sail that was improperly berthed and bobbing like a rubber ducky in a tub with a cranky two-year-old. For Ian, it was almost as if he were cruising on flat waters; he didn't seem to notice the oncoming storm at all.

He didn't speak until they were clear of the docks. "I never explicitly told him. He never gave any indication that he knew. But he's a smart man, Arthur. He knows exactly who I am and what I'm doing here. He's just pretending he doesn't."

Arthur nodded briefly. That did sound like Pellinor. He kept things close to the chest and didn't show his cards until it was too late for anyone to fold their hands.

It was one reason why Gwaine had banned Pellinor from poker nights.

"But I'll tell you something. I might not be the brightest knob in the bag, but give me a bit of spit and polish and I'll put it together," Ian said. He adjusted the speed and rapidly turned the wheel, taking a cresting wave head-on before turning the wheel back to work their way around the bay. "When someone you haven't heard from for three months and who's supposed to be dead suddenly calls you up and asks for a favour, you shut up and you ask when and where, because you owe him your life, and you know damn well that this doesn't go on the record."

Arthur studied Ian's expression for a long time before nodding. "I appreciate that."

Ian flashed a big grin. "And beside, the way I look at it, Pel and I might be square, but you and me? I think I'm going to like having Captain Arthur Pendragon owing me a favour."

"I knew there had to be a catch," Arthur said, but Pellinor had warned him, and he'd half-expected it anyway.

There was a creak down below. Voices approached, paused, grew louder. Arthur heard Merlin's voice in the conversation. Footsteps came closer and Pellinor climbed up the steps, squeezing past Arthur to get onto the bridge.

"We're away. I can't vouch for your shite, Ian, but our equipment's secure," Pellinor said.

"Good. Let me know when we're halfway," Arthur said, clapping Pellinor on the shoulder. He headed down the stairs.

"Arthur," Ian said. Arthur paused and turned around. "You should think about something while
you're getting some rack time. The scuttlebutt is that someone's gotten under a senior agent's skin, enough that they're going to grab him and bring him in for interrogation. You know who that is?"

Arthur kept his expression impassive. "No idea. Can't be one of mine."

He went to join the others. When he was certain that Ian wasn't watching, Arthur pulled out his phone and sent a text to Leon.

*Initiate evacuation.*

When he received a quick response confirming the order, Arthur sent another text, this time to Kay.

*Hve Elyan upload files to Merlin's srvr. Keep Eyes on Will.*

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Merlin grabbed the hard drive before it slipped off the table and dived for the floor in a pathetic attempt to escape the stink of broiled fish that was sticking to the inside of the boat. He'd learned through painful experience that the firewire cord connecting it to his laptop was neither long enough nor stretchy enough to endure the jerk and slide, not without nearly tearing out the socket or taking the laptop with it. As it was, half of his tools took a dive, clattering against the bulkhead and burrowing somewhere under a sofa-bench-storage space that Ian had made sure Merlin knew contained extra life preservers.

He'd never gotten seasick in his life, but it was starting to look likely to happen now.

Merlin took a tentative, stuttering breath, and pressed a hand to his belly for a few seconds. The initial wave of nausea passed, though he knew it wouldn't last. Lamorak, on the other hand — he'd gone to deck, once, only to return soaked through seconds later and smelling of sick. He'd given an outraged Gareth a wry smile and a half-hearted shrug in explanation: "I've always wanted to toss my cookies overboard."

At the moment, Lamorak was stretched out on a swaying hammock a few feet away from Merlin, curled onto his side, a blindfold over his eyes. Gareth had set up the hammock in the galley, shoved Lamorak into the netting, and fed him tart ginger drops until he'd stopped looking so green around the edges.

There had been a moment of petting between them that Merlin was certain he hadn't been meant to see. He wondered exactly what he'd missed while he was stuck in Aredian's company, but decided that he really didn't care. Lamorak was a good bloke, if quiet; he was probably the steadiest member of the team, even more than Arthur. Merlin had yet to see anything ruffle him, but that was before he saw Lamorak nearly take a spill when the boat's rhythmic rocking turned violent and suddenly lurch in the other direction.

Merlin thought that the way that Lamorak had flattened down on the deck, arms and legs akimbo and locked against the nearest surfaces to keep from sliding any more -- well, that had been pretty funny. Gareth had just about died laughing. Arthur had rolled over in his bunk to blink blearily at the scene before looking at Merlin to make sure that Merlin was all right before turning over and going back to sleep. Owain hadn't even looked up from his tea, using concentration that was normally reserved for defusing a bomb to try to time his next sip with the bob and weave of the boat.
"Sod you lot," Lamorak had muttered, getting to his feet with the grace of a one-year old just figuring out how to stand for the first time. He had his balance again easily enough after that, but his stomach had never settled down.

Merlin rubbed his eyes. He'd been staring at the laptop for what seemed like an eternity but had only been just over an hour, running dual modules that were straining the fluid memory allocation of even his souped-up system. He had finished unpacking the data burst that Gwen's brother, Elyan, had sent them, but now he had to program a search parameter that would scan it against both the Pendragon Consulting database and the information he'd downloaded from Aredian's drive.

Trying to decrypt both modules at the same time was a memory hog. His laptop was up to the task, but it was slow going. It wouldn't go any faster even if he were only decrypting them one after the other.

At this rate, they'd reach landfall first.

Merlin got up. He used the last of the duct tape to stick the hard drive on the table -- the damn thing kept ripping through -- and gestured at Owain. "I'm going up. Make sure that nothing falls, yeah?"

"Can do," Owain said, pausing long enough to drain the rest of his tea out of the mug. He knew better than to bring liquids near Merlin's equipment, particularly after he nearly dropped a hot kettle full of water on the laptop itself a half hour ago.

"Thanks, mate," Merlin said, squeezing past Owain to get to the stairs leading to the bridge.

Pellinor wasn't with Ian -- he was out on the boat, doing something unfathomable to the cabling, his bright yellow raincoat barely visible through the daylight gloom, the torrents of rain, and the waves splashing across the glass. He didn't look flustered in the least out there. He was rock steady as usual, working with what looked to be good humour, and Merlin imagined that if he opened the triangle window on the side any wider, he might hear Pellinor whistling tunelessly to himself as he worked.

As it was, the little bit of fresh air that was coming through the crack was doing Merlin a lot of good. He was starting to feel claustrophobic down below, and sitting at the table, trying to break encryption? That was too much like what Aredian had forced him to do on more than one occasion, and he couldn't help flinching whenever someone walked past.

Someone walked by a lot, and the only good thing about that was that Merlin had gotten used to it.

"Rig got loose," Ian said helpfully, misinterpreting the frown that Merlin could feel growing across his forehead. Merlin forced himself to nod and to relax. He didn't know the man, and though Pellinor seemed to trust him, Arthur had been closed off after his little chat with the ship's Captain. Whenever Arthur looked like that, he'd gotten a piece of information or had been faced with something that troubled him. Merlin was banking on both, in this case. "Pel went out to secure it before it took out the hull."

"Could that happen?" Merlin asked.

"No," Ian shrugged. "You know what they say. Better to be on the safe side. Plus, kind of a relief in a way. Pel was getting jumpy, and it was making me nervous. Easier to get rid of that one for a while to get some peace and quiet, if you know what I mean."

Merlin glanced out the window where Pellinor was making his way back, giving a thumbs-up gesture as he squeezed around the bridge and along the catwalk to head to the main deck. Merlin kept an eye on him -- slipping and falling into the ocean was a very real possibility, he didn't care
how foot-sure someone was -- and didn't turn back around to Ian until he was sure that Pellinor was safe. "Nervous. Why would either of you be nervous?"

"Weather," Ian said, shrugging again. This time, though, there was a heavy frown on his brow. "I'm not sure. It's not unusual for this time of year. Cold, heavy wind, waves that could sink the Titanic, maybe, if there were a few icebergs thrown in."

Merlin glanced at the ocean. The boat crested and dipped, bobbing up and down mercilessly, but for the most part, they were progressing. Merlin had never spent a whole lot of time on a ship in his military career. At most, he was stationed on a carrier for a few days, helping them unwind a tangle of communication problems and updating their cryptography software, but there had been clear skies the entire time. It had been windy enough for ten-foot waves, but when faced with an aircraft carrier that stood in the water taller than a ten-storey building, Merlin had barely noticed that they were in the ocean in the first place.

"I wouldn't know," he admitted.

Ian didn't speak for a few minutes. He hit his palm on the throttle to bump it a little faster; a few seconds later, he eased up. It was an increase-decrease pattern that repeated over and over as the waves rose and descended; for a while there, Ian was able to counter the worst of the effects of the storm. Then, suddenly, despite his best attempts to keep the ship steady, they were struck broadside by a large wave.

It wasn't enough to cause the ship to roll over, not with the buoyancy built into the trawler's design, but it had been loud and completely unexpected. Merlin steadied himself by grabbing whatever was available -- that single wave hitting the hull felt as if it had blown a hole through the hull.

Instead, though, the force dissipated, no more effective against the boat than a gentle, lapping slap. The wave broke up immediately, water spreading over the railing, and splashed against the glass.

"See that?" Ian said. "Perfectly normal. There's waves, there's wind, there's rain. No big deal, right?"

"Sure," Merlin said, frowning.

"Except every time I compensate, the wind turns and the waves come at us from a different direction. I compensate for that, it comes from the other way."

Merlin scratched his forehead. "Isn't that normal? I mean, it's a storm."

"Maybe," Ian said, his expression calm. He stared off into the distance, already planning their course through the waves. His peacoat was hanging from a hook nearby; as the ship rose and fell, the material fanned out until it was almost vertical, righting itself when they hit the crest and were about to rise again. "Still doesn't feel right, though. I can't keep our heading. We're being blown off course."

"That's to be expected, isn't it? I mean, when the weather's like this?"

The look he got from Ian was withering.

"And what I meant to say was, an experienced sailor like yourself wouldn't get blown off course even in a Class-5 hurricane," Merlin said.

Ian grunted, satisfied, and turned his attention back to steering the ship.

Merlin glanced down at the radio. It was shut off; the handpiece hanging from the hook. There was
no sign that it had been used or that it could even be used, and he itched to turn it on and find out for himself. Ian must have caught him looking.

"That's a last resort," he said. "This is a black ops mission, isn't it? You're going over under the radar. No papers, no course charting, no nothing. Hell, I got the feeling that you probably wouldn't want me to call in a mayday even if we were sinking."

"No, probably not," Merlin said. He heard a sound and glanced down.

Pellinor came up the stairs, dripping a combination of rainwater and saltwater even though he'd left his yellow raincoat somewhere else. His close-cropped hair was a melted mess on his head, his shirt was soaked around the neck and down the back where he hadn't closed his coat properly, and his trousers were piece-meal wet, splattered where the rain dripped down his front.

He gave Merlin a quick nod, lingering on the front step and blocking the way out, though not intentionally; he was giving them both plenty of room to move on a bridge that probably wasn't meant for two broad shouldered men and a third who would give them a run for their money once he packed on the weight he lost. Pellinor didn't look happy.

"Ian. Who's been on your boat?"

Ian turned around so fast that Merlin thought he heard the sound of a whip cracking. Ian kept a hand on the wheel, though, steadying the course, and reacting fast enough to turn the prow into an oncoming wave, rather than letting it slap the side.

"You know damn well no one gets on my boat," Ian said.

"Are you sure about that?" Pellinor asked, his hands grasping the railings on both sides of the wall, his knuckles white. He wasn't accusing Ian, his tone was too soft for that, but there was a hint of an edge to his voice, as if he'd just spotted a bomb that he hated walking away from, but had no other choice. "I know your knots, Ian. You taught me how to tie those knots. You never tie a bowline on your gear. You use a trucker's hitch. And when did you ever use a slip instead of an overhand? Ian. What's going on?"

"I know my goddamn ship," Ian growled. "I secure every goddamn line -- kid, hold onto this --"

He grabbed Merlin by the arm and hauled him over -- for a split second, Merlin froze, getting a flashback of being caught and dragged across a holding cell, before Will had shown up. Ian took Merlin's hand and wrapped Merlin's fingers around the wheel.

"Keep the nose pointed into the wind and the wave. If they start towering over the keel, bump up the speed." Ian turned to Pellinor. "You leave any of those knots the way you found them?"

"Some," Pellinor said.

"Show me," Ian said.

"But I --" Merlin's protest fell on deaf ears. Pellinor and Ian disappeared down the stairs. Merlin stared out the window, watching the waves rise and fall, not really sure which wave he needed to be pointed toward and even less certain about the wind direction, and -- "Fuck. What do I do when the waves and the wind are going in opposite ways?"

"Cross yourself and find the nearest life preserver," Gareth said, coming up the stairs two at a time. "Here, I'll take over."
"Thank the Gods," Merlin said, but he didn't let go until Gareth's hands were on the wheel, elbowing him out of the way to get to the throttle. Gareth adjusted speeds and turned the boat to face into one of the biggest waves that Merlin had seen thus far in his bare few minutes up on the bridge, and a fantastic crash of water smashed onto the ship, drowning out everything. The windshield wipers were shit, because the water kept pouring from above and the sides, dribbling through the small corner window and cascading a small river onto the bridge.

"Get the window," Gareth said, calm and collected, because this was just one more thing gone wrong in a long string of things going wrong, Merlin had learned a long time ago that Gareth didn't really notice them anymore. The team had its fair share of level-headed people in times of crises, but Merlin was willing to bet that after having to endure all the weird turns of events that the universe had to offer, Gareth would be the one to hold his shit together during the fucking apocalypse.

Merlin scrambled over and shut it with a slam; the latch didn't hold the first or second time, but Merlin used a burst of magic to weld the bloody thing closed.

There was a flash of yellow in front of them, joined by a second blotchy yellow blur. One was bigger than the other, which meant telling Ian and Pellinor apart a lot easier. Pellinor was pointing out a few things; Ian came over to take a look, both of them bowing over whatever it was. Their heads were together, and Merlin imagined that they were shouting to be heard, even at those close quarters.

"What's going on?" Gareth asked.

"They didn't tell you?"

"Rushed down, said something about knots, grabbed raincoats, and went out. Oh, and said that I might want to get up here, if I didn't want the ship to get capsized," Gareth said.

"Well, their faith in my ability to keep the boat pointed in the right direction is gratifying," Merlin said, running both hands through his hair and his palms on his scruffy jaw. Gods. He needed a shave. He needed a long bath. He wanted his pillow next to Arthur's. He wanted their bed. He wanted to close his eyes and not wake up until all this bollocks resolved itself without their intervention.

He dropped his hands to see that Arthur had woken up in the commotion and had joined them on the bridge, mirroring the exact same pose that Pellinor had only moments before.

"Something about knots?" Gareth prompted.

"Knots," Merlin repeated. "Pellinor asked if Ian's let anyone else on board. Said there were knots that Ian doesn't normally use. Ian looked fit to shite a brick, though."

Neither Gareth nor Arthur said anything. Gareth broke the silence with a calm, "Well, that's not promising at all. Sailors are particular about their knots, aren't they?"

"They are," Arthur confirmed. "Stay here --"

"Someone's got to drive the boat," Gareth muttered.

"-- Merlin, keep an eye on them."

Arthur headed down the stairs. His orders were drowned out by the waves slapping on the sides of the boat.
Two waves hit them from opposing directions -- from the forward port and the rear starboard -- and the boat abruptly tilted, changing directions. There was a crash down below, quickly followed by Owain's "Fuckshite!", and outside, Ian lost his footing, Pellinor right after him.

Another wave swept up high, coming down to flood the boat with so much water that it looked as if they'd gone under like a submarine. Gareth was thin-lipped, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel and the throttle, more concerned with keeping the boat afloat and stable than keeping their previous heading.

The windshield wipers kept working through blast after blast of waves, though they weren't doing much good. Gareth hit the lights in the cabin and leaned forward, trying to wash through the smear of water. Just when it cleared enough to see, Merlin spotted the two yellow blobs being swept out --

"No!" Merlin shouted, throwing out a hand. Magic flared to life, abruptly, suddenly, making him drunk and heady with the sheer strength and power of it, and Pellinor and Ian were jerked onto the boat's prow where they had very nearly slipped off.

"Shite," Gareth said, eyes wide. "Good catch."

Merlin didn't answer him. He went closer to the windshield, leaning against the dash, careful not to flip a switch that shouldn't be flipped. Now that his magic had been released, now that he was aware of the sense of it, Merlin could sense something out there. It wasn't the electrical crackle in the air. It wasn't the storm battering down. It wasn't shrieking wind or pounding rain.


"That it was," Gareth agreed. There was a brief pause, and he asked, "Wait. What?"

"Out there," Merlin said, jutting his chin forward. "There's a sorcerer out there."

"Are you taking the piss?" Gareth asked, glancing at Merlin sharply. "Are you telling me that this weather, it's a sorcerer's doing?"

"No, no," Merlin said, shaking his head. He furrowed his brow, trying to sort through all the sensations flooding at him through his magic. It was like learning to feel, again, as if he'd grown a completely new set of skin. "Storm's real enough. The waves -- Ian said that it wasn't right."

Gareth was silent, too preoccupied with turning the boat back into the waves to answer. The engine ran at a high pitch before he throttled it down; it was a little too soon, and the boat jerked roughly.

They watched as two new yellow blobs joined the ones already on the bow. Merlin didn't think that the slighter of the two shapes was Lamorak, and that left Owain and Arthur.

Merlin's hands closed in tight fists as he watched the four of them grab hold of a permanent fixture on the boat, bowing their heads down in shouting conversation. They split up a few minutes later, working in teams of two to batten down whatever was flying loose. It wasn't just stray cargo or equipment, either. It was the mast, the sail, even the fishing crane, items that were large enough to bring the ship down.

The waves were getting worse. They were being hit on all sides. The crests were almost taller than the boat, and they were growing taller still, coming at them from all directions.

"It's not just one sorcerer," Merlin said. He could sense three or four, at least; one of them was the centre-point, the focus, the ground. That one was the closest. The others were either fuelling the first sorcerer or using them as a guidepost to brace their magic against. "I can't -- I've got to go out there."
He was halfway down the stairs, barely acknowledging Gareth's frustrated, "Merlin," when the boat suddenly heaved and listed, the whole world tilting to a forty-five degree angle. Kitchen cookware, the empty kettle, an overhead compartment full of sharp odds and ends -- everything tumbled out and cluttered the passageway.

Lamorak was on his feet, just barely keeping steady, too alarmed to be sick to his stomach. He was eyeing the overhead compartments warily, as if waiting for one of them to fall open and dump its contents on his head, but he was also standing close to the table with Merlin's equipment, making sure the duct tape holding it down didn't break.

Merlin squeezed past him, sparing a glance for the screens. "Turn everything off, pack it up."

"They're not done --"

"Just do it," Merlin said. He missed his step and the wall shifted to hit him. He knocked his head, his foot slipped; he grabbed a shelf and steadied himself.

"Are we sinking?" Lamorak asked. He sounded calm, but there was a faint tremor in his voice.

"No," Merlin said, refusing to tack on not yet. He made it to the other end of the boat, climbing the stairs. He opened the hatch and slipped into the rear of the boat, the wind howling.

It took him two tries to get the door shut behind him. He was soaked to the bone in no time.

The waters were a roiling grey-black-blue, the froth almost green. The waves were so high that they weren't threatening to wash anything overboard anymore -- they meant to collapse on top of the boat, driving it down to the bottom of the sea.

A glimmer of sunlight peeked through the clouds in the distance and was swamped almost at once by the angry clouds. Lightning crashed, arcing toward the waters in a frayed branch. Merlin didn't hear any thunder, but it was impossible to hear anything at all. The wind was blowing so hard, even his soaked clothing made a whistling keen as the material ripped and tore.

He turned around wildly, moving his way to the rear of the boat. The equipment that had been battened down was still in place, but the ropes and straps were wet and slick, and the boat was shifting, becoming increasingly difficult to handle the more the weight was thrown from side to side. Something was going to break. He hoped it wasn't going to be the boat.

Now that he was outside, Merlin could feel the wild, elemental magic. The air crackled with it. It wasn't so much that there was a sorcerer or a group of sorcerers behind it as it was the complete release of power. There was a source of magic nearby -- maybe the English Channel itself was a hotbed of supernatural activity, he'd have to ask Gaius about that later, if they survived long enough to make it home -- and the sorcerers were using it to fan the waves of the storm.

The lightning without thunder. The waves without the wind. The wind screeching angrily.

Merlin hung on to the railing as the ship listed, righted itself, and suddenly swept up, riding a roller-coaster wave that grew from beneath them. The ship tilted, diving down.

The trawler's engines roared, gaining speed, wanting to crest the dive and climb the next wave before it formed fully, tall enough and heavy enough to come crashing down like a wrecking ball.

There was a scramble on the side of the boat less exposed to the waves. Two yellow raincoats slipped and slid their way along the narrow catwalk between the bridge and the edge, tumbling onto the deck. Arthur righted himself before he let go to skate across the wet deck, coming close enough
to be heard.

"Merlin!"

At that instant, a wave lapped them broadside. The boat shuddered violently, shaking like an earthquake as Gareth fought to keep the ship steady. There was a flash of colour against the gloomy canvas, and it streaked into the water only to vanish somewhere behind them.

Pellinor. Ian.

Merlin shouted their names, but the wind ripped the syllables apart. He felt a pressure at his back, strong, solid; Arthur was behind him, grasping the railing on one side, grabbing Merlin's belt with the other in case Merlin was blown overboard.

A shadow darkened the already cloudy sky. Merlin glanced up --

A wave crashed down on top of them.

The water was icy. All the breath was knocked out of his chest. He kept his mouth shut to keep from breathing in out of reflex as the full weight and force of the wave bore down on top of them.

He lost his footing. He went sideways. His grasp on the railing slipped a few centimetres. There was a pull at his waist, but it didn't wrench him away, instead keeping him steady against the boat, locking him in place.

Just as suddenly, they were on the surface again. The water rushed away in a flooding rush. The boat wobbled wildly before steadying. They were still afloat, but barely.

Some of the equipment was loose, but the ropes held.

There was no sign of Owain.


Merlin saw, rather than heard, *Fuckshite* on Arthur's lips at the same time that the hatch flew open and Lamorak ran out. He skated across the slick deck before finding purchase, launching himself from the mast to the side of the boat. That was when the flash of yellow caught Merlin's attention, but Arthur was faster than he was. Arthur launched himself to the railing, and they heaved Owain back on board.

Merlin twisted around, scanning the waters for a flash of yellow -- *any* yellow. He thought he saw something right before it was engulfed by a wave, but it bobbed to the surface again. There was no judging proper distance, not with the ocean so violent, they might as well be in a fishbowl being angrily swished around.

He reached. Merlin stretched out his arm to help focus the magic running wild through his bones, to fight through the elemental magic that had been released by the enemy sorcerers -- whoever those sorcerers were. He reached until he thought he felt something familiar bump against his magic; it was a bare moment of recognition of Kathy's magic, faintly ensconced in the pendants that most of the team still wore. Instinct, more than anything, guided him and Merlin latched on --

And pulled.

He reeled his magic in, dragging a heavy weight made all the heavier by the water pulling them down. His body trembled, but his magic stayed strong.
There was a brief warmth at his back, a hand between his shoulder blades, before he felt cold, so cold again, the rain and the sea and the wind doing its job of robbing him of his strength. Merlin didn't pay attention to it. He couldn't. He fought the waves and slid his catch over the surface until --

Arthur and Owain shouted something that was lost to the wind, a garbled chorus of sound. Suddenly, Lamorak was there with them, all three half-leaning over the edge to pull in Merlin's catch.

Ian first, because he was smaller, but also because someone was shoving him up, giving him an extra boost. Pellinor hung from the railing, his head and shoulders visible, his arm draped along the length, and for a split-second, it was almost casual. It was as if they were at Arthur's cabin again, laying about the lake, Bohrs and Bedivere having some sort of canoe-versus-rowboat oar battle, Pellinor half in the water, supporting himself with an easy hand on the dock.

The image snapped, broken by a juddering of engine and an ominous creak that was audible even over the storm. Merlin looked up, but a wave crashed down. He stumbled and slipped and slid across the deck, stopped by the very real and painful metal barrier. The water swept past him and down the drain.

Pellinor had been dragged on-board at this point. He was flat on his back, his head turned aside against the rain, panting heavily for air. Next to him, Ian twisted around and crawled onto his knees, his shoulders hunched up, his head down. He coughed once, twice, and vomited what looked to be a litre of saltwater onto the deck.

Owain danced away from the spew, but Arthur knelt down next to Ian, grabbing his shoulder and dragging him to his feet. Lamorak came over to help and Owain got over his disgust long enough to take Ian's other arm, helping him down below to shelter.

Merlin used the inch of water sloshing around the deck like a water slide, joining Arthur to rest next to Pellinor. Pellinor had caught his breath, though his chest still heaved as if he'd run a marathon -- or worse, fought ten to fifteen feet walls of waves to stay on the surface.

"All right?" Arthur shouted.

"Yeah!" Pellinor said, taking Arthur's arm. He started to get to his feet when he froze.

A shadow passed over them, large and looming. It was another wave, a ship-killer, thick and solid, black and edged as sharp as obsidian. There was no green-white froth. There was only destruction.

A sucking whoosh made Merlin's ears pop. He didn't think. He reacted, falling onto his back, his arms stretched up, and he poured his magic into a shield that encompassed the entire ship.

The wave slammed down, down, down, forcing them deep into the trough, below the surface of the water, into the roiling and twisting mix of currents and shearing forces that twisted the ship all the way around and back again. It was a half-circle clockwise, a half-circle counter-clockwise, grinding and groaning like a cheap clothes washer about to break apart from the overload.

The light was gone -- there was no more sunlight struggling to burst through the stormclouds, no side-illumination from reflected rays of light. It was black, black, black, until it wasn't anymore, the lights of the ship reflecting against Merlin's shield.

Down, down, down, deeper and deeper, bouncing and twisting until they were sick with it, Merlin's arms trembling from the strain of holding the shield in place. His vision greyed at the edges, his teeth ground and cracked from where he clenched his jaw against the pressure crushing him down, and his
magic…

His magic shone, bright as a beacon, strong as the sun, holding fast against the turmoil of the ocean even as Merlin threatened to crumble, to falter, to fall.

Abruptly, they stopped sinking. The ship twisted and surged at a parallel with the ocean floor, barely brushing the sediment, and the buoyancy of the air-filled and shielded ship driving it to the surface.

The water dripped down the sides of the shield. The rain pattered against the surface, making bright gold dots blink in and out. The pressure that had nearly caused Merlin to pass out was gone, and he was left panting for breath. He blinked his eyes and stared up at the ship's mast, at the rigging flying wild, at the storm clouds overhead, and was grateful for the ship's deck, firm and solid beneath him.

He dropped his arms. They crashed on the deck on either side of him. An instant later, the shield fizzled and dissipated, and cold, icy rain splattered on his face.

If not for the still-raging seas and the dark of the sky, the rain was almost refreshing.

"Goddamn it, Merlin," Arthur said, wriggling his arm under Merlin's shoulders. Pellinor was on his other side, and before Merlin knew it, he was on his feet, half-carried toward the hatch below.

"'M fine," Merlin muttered, but he let his head roll onto Arthur's shoulder when Arthur pulled him close, and he soaked in the warmth of Arthur's body. It was a sign of how cold he was that he could feel body heat through the yellow raincoat.

His teeth chattered. He shivered.

Arthur kicked the door shut behind them, walking Merlin backward and guiding him down the steps. "Careful," he murmured, and Merlin had enough presence of mind not to trip over all the equipment that had tumbled out of the overhead compartments.

He felt a hand on his shoulder -- a light squeeze and it was gone. A one-armed hug that was awkward until it was extended to include Arthur.

"Thank fuck for you," Owain said, dropping a towel around Merlin.

Merlin couldn't help but think that if it hadn't been for him, the man he loved and his team wouldn't be in this mess at all.

He didn't realize that he'd spoken out loud until Arthur pressed warm lips against his cold skin, the contact burning and searing. "Don't you dare think that," Arthur whispered viciously. "Don't you dare."

"We wouldn't trade you for anything," Lamorak said. There was a long pause. "Well, maybe I'd cave for some dry land, especially right now, but I promise it would be a hard sell."

Merlin's disbelieving huff of breath turned into a laugh, deep-bellied and bordering on the hysterical. He leaned against Arthur, who smiled. But that smile was short-lived, and Merlin followed Arthur's flinty gaze to see Ian pointing a gun at them.

"What the fuck was that?"
There was a wild-eyed look to Ian, his eyes round and white. He hadn't removed his raincoat and water continued to drip, falling onto the deck and the fallen debris strewn about. Ian glanced off to the side, quick and deliberate, to indicate that he was talking about the storm, and not any strange thing that he might have observed when Merlin had saved their lives.

Arthur wasn't fooled.

Ian was a trained SEAL. Like Pellinor or Gareth, Ian had the greatest chance for survival in the turbulent, icy waters of the English Channel -- more so during a storm like this, regardless of its origin or provenance. Arthur wouldn't have left the men behind and would have ordered Gareth to turn the ship around to find Pellinor and Ian once they had the ship under control, but Merlin had --

Merlin had dragged them over the waves, bringing them to the relative safety of the boat. There was no way that Ian couldn't have noticed the sensation of Merlin's magic all around him, or of being pulled in the opposite direction of the current, the wind, the waves.

Arthur tried not to think about how Merlin's eyes had blazed a gold so white and bright that it had been blinding and burning to look at him. Will had said something about this, how Merlin's magic had seemed stronger, somehow, when they'd all escaped, that first time. Even Merlin had murmured that he wasn't sure about his magic anymore, but he had refused to talk about it when Arthur had asked what he'd meant.

This.

This was what he'd meant. Merlin's magic was stronger. So much stronger. The shield had encompassed the entire ship -- it had enveloped the boat in a bubble that had rendered them so buoyant that it had driven them to the surface despite the force of the wind and the waves trying to smash them down.

Arthur didn't know if it was an after-effect of the prototype or if it was something else, but he couldn't think about that now. Not when a Navy SEAL was holding a Sig Sauer nine-millimetre in a steady hand, the safety off.

Arthur stepped in front of Merlin.

Lamorak shifted, his shoulder brushing against Arthur, and the two of them formed a human shield in the narrow passageway, protecting Merlin.

Arthur felt a faint pull at the small of his back, a rustle of clothing, and Merlin's fingers grasped his belt. He was trembling -- from the cold, from the exertion. He wasn't fully recovered from his ordeal, the healing potion that Mordred had given Merlin notwithstanding; a great deal of his injuries were psychological. Exposure to the elements, manipulating his magic, holding fast against the storm -- it had done him in. Even if Merlin's magic could continue to stand against the storm for hours, Merlin couldn't.

"Put the gun down, mate," Owain said, his tone soft but firm. He inched forward, stopping dead when the muzzle of the gun turned onto him.

Pellinor broke the standoff with a strangled laugh. "Really? Really, Ian? It's like you've never been in a bloody storm before. Put the goddamn gun down."
"Isn't just a storm," Arthur heard Merlin whisper. As if to compound his words, a wave hit the boat all along the broadside, and the ship tilted dangerously, careening in a bobble before settling down. Arthur braced Lamorak to keep them both from going tumbling down. Owain slipped from one side of the boat to the other. Pellinor lodged himself in place with a hand against an overhead compartment, and Merlin stumbled away from Arthur.

There was a soft thunk behind Arthur, and Arthur reached for Merlin, finding his hand. His cold, trembling hand.

"It's all right, love," he murmured.

"You know damn well that I'm not talking about the fucking storm," Ian snapped. He stood with his legs spread, feet bracing along the cabinet and the bulkhead wall, one hand grabbing an overhead railing. "I'm talking about --"

"It's a storm," Pellinor insisted, taking a step closer. He stepped back when Ian waved the gun in his face.

"Yeah, and it's natural for storms to sweep sailors a full klick away from their boat one second, then shove them back the next," Ian said, his tone dripping. "I'll grant you that. But we just sank a goddamn league under the water, and --"

Another wave smacked the side of the boat, this time sending Owain, who still hadn't steadied himself against the tossing and tumbling, to the other side of the narrow corridor. He crashed into a cabinet, crushing the door inward. First aid supplies, extra lifejackets, fishing equipment, random tools, even what looked to be a carefully-folded mainsail fell down on top of him.

"If anyone's alive down there, I could use a hand," Gareth shouted. "It's getting worse!"

"How much worse could it get?" Lamorak muttered, but he didn't move from his position. Pellinor started for the bridge, but Ian was in the way. Ian raised the gun again.

"Don't move."

"You want us to drown?" Merlin asked. Arthur felt a push at his side and glanced over his shoulder to see Merlin trying to wedge past them. Arthur's grip on Merlin's hand tightened, but Merlin elbowed him. "Let go. It's okay."

Arthur shifted only a little, keeping a hand on Merlin's hip in case he needed to pull him aside and out of the way. He didn't think that he would be faster than a bullet, but he couldn't count on Merlin's magic forming a protective shield in time, either. He didn't want to run the risk of the bullet ricocheting off that shield and punching a dangerous hole through the hull, or, God forbid, into someone. He'd rather take the bullet.

Merlin must have sensed his intention, because he received a light, annoyed shove.

"Look. Ian," Merlin said, trying for placating. "You told me that the storm's not natural. Do you remember that? You're right. It isn't. Someone's out there stirring up the waters and the wind, and it's getting worse by the minute because we're approaching --"

"What do you --"

Something struck the side of the ship with a reverberating clang, nearly completely upending them. Everyone, even Pellinor and Ian, slipped to the port side and were flattened there, gravity holding
them in place for a few seconds before the boat, somehow, jerked back upright.

There was a crash up on the bridge, a shout of pain, and an angry "Fuck this shite" from Gareth.

Arthur scrambled to his feet, unwinding himself from the tangle of arms and legs. Lamorak had a fresh cut on the side of his head where he’d hit against a coat hanger, and Merlin was holding his arm close to his body, as if he’d struck and hurt his elbow, but there was no time to check on them. He climbed over the junkyard of fallen equipment and headed toward the front of the ship where Owain and Pellinor were struggling with Ian for the gun.

It was a heart-stopping struggle with a frightening moment when the Sig Sauer disappeared between Owain and Pellinor, and the press of bodies and wild grappling was a disaster waiting to happen. One of them must have hit the safety on the gun, though, because there was a click-click and the blessed silence of a gun decidedly not going off.

Owain had the gun. Pellinor was keeping Ian down. Arthur made it over Owain's legs and grabbed Ian by the coat lapels, so angry that there was red bleeding into the edges of his vision. He hauled Ian all the way up the corridor, helped by a wave surge that tilted the boat forward, and slammed him on the stairs.


Ian's hands grasped at Arthur's wrists, trying to get free. He got his legs under him and shoved Arthur off, turning to run up the stairs toward the bridge. Arthur caught his footing and followed.

Ian slammed the door shut.

It was locked.

Arthur crashed his shoulder against it once, twice -- he retreated far enough to get some momentum, but the ship suddenly lurched --

He tumbled back, landing in the corridor, his fall cushioned by the contents of the now-empty cabinets and overhead storage spaces. It did him no favours, though, because the ship was climbing, and he was sliding all the way to the rear of the boat.

It was a frantic grab for purchase -- Owain had wedged himself beneath the table and just missed grasping Arthur's hand. Pellinor had grabbed a door handle, but the door had swung open and he nearly lost his grip. Arthur caught the edge of a lockbox and held on for dear life.

The loose items swept past him, but the expected crash against the far wall never came. Arthur looked down and saw those very same items fly through the open hatch and out -- no, down, bouncing off the equipment still securely tied to the deck and falling into the ocean below.

There was no sign of Merlin or Lamorak.

"Mer --" Arthur started to shout, catching himself when the open door swung. He caught a sight that frightened him all the more -- Merlin, grasping the edge of the hatch with a white-knuckled grip, Lamorak holding onto Merlin's free hand. But that wasn't the sight that robbed Arthur of his words. It was Merlin -- Merlin's eyes, once again a bright, blazing golden white, the air around him crackling with jagged lightning bolts of magic gone completely, utterly wild. There was no direction, nowhere for it to go, Merlin too exhausted to decide if that power should go in saving Lamorak or to sort out the problem with the boat --

The boat was nearly completely vertical now, struggling to stay on the crest of a wave that was still
rising and about to crash down. They would either sweep over the top and the edge and somehow, miraculously, stay alive, or the wave would topple them over and they would tumble to the pit below.

Arthur climbed down quickly, letting himself slide part of the way, ignoring the sharp pain in his leg when he struck the side to stop his descent. He wedged himself on one side of the open doorway, reaching to grab Merlin, but he didn't have the leverage.

Pellinor dropped next to him, a rope unwinding and swinging wildly. Pellinor was tying it to a railing when he shouted, "Lamorak! Grab the rope!"

He twined it around his arm and braced himself on the other side of the open door. Lamorak didn't let go of Merlin's arm, not until he had the rope between his legs. He grabbed it, swinging wildly, but it was too slick to climb.

Pellinor grit his teeth, straining against Lamorak's weight. The rope dug into Pellinor's arm, and the only thing that saved him from the thin rope cutting clean through was the thick material of the raincoat.

"Merlin!" Arthur shouted. "Merlin -- come on --"

Abruptly, the ship heaved.

Arthur lost his grip and nearly fell. He caught himself on the upper edge of the hatch. Pellinor had slipped and was now wedged precariously and unsteadily under the top of the hatch, jammed against the roof. Owain cried out from somewhere behind them; there was a crash and a tumble of equipment that bounced its way down the corridor. It hit Arthur's shoulder, nearly dislodging his grip. It struck the swinging hatch hard enough to make it slam on the outer side. It struck Merlin in the thigh.

Merlin's grip slipped.

The boat started to flip. They were very nearly upside down.

The rope holding Lamorak was taut, but he was out of sight, lost just past the upper edge of the hatch. The thin rope scraped along a sharp edge and frayed. Pellinor was white with pain as he struggled to hold onto Lamorak without tumbling out of the opening himself.

"Merlin!" Arthur shouted. "Give me your hand!"

Merlin looked up at him, but it seemed as if he couldn't see Arthur. For a moment, a tiny sliver of a second, Merlin seemed to recognize him, to have heard Arthur's pleading, but then...

He turned away.

One hand dropped from the door.

"Merlin! No!" Arthur braced his hand on the other side of the hatch, determined to reach down to catch Merlin before he did something stupid --

There was a loud, crashing pop. The railing on the other end of the rope suddenly gave way. The rope spooled outward; Pellinor slid across the smooth wall, toward the open hatch.

"Arthur!" Pellinor shouted.
Arthur threw himself across the hatch, blocking the opening, catching Pellinor before he reached the opening. His feet braced against the ledge, and he strained, trying to hold onto both Pellinor and Lamorak.

His legs and shoulders burned from the effort.

There was a nearby crash. Small, harmless pieces of debris rained down on him. And suddenly, most of the pressure eased, the weight shifting. Arthur saw a shadow. A flickering light in the background confirmed the shadow as Owain, taking on some of the slack on the rope.

"Fuck," Pellinor breathed, his chest heaving. His face was white; it had been a close one, but it wasn't over yet.

Arthur glanced down.

Merlin was still hanging one-handed from the hatch, his fingers digging into a groove that gave him a good handle to hold onto. He was looking at the dark ocean below them, an arm outstretched, his fingers spread.

Those fingers closed in a fist.

"For--"

The wind roared, tearing Merlin's shout apart.

Merlin's hand opened and closed again, but this time, his voice rang out clear as a bell, reverberating despite the muffling rush of wind and rain and storm.

"Forbræsan!"

The ship shuddered. The wind screeched, as if howling a protest. The sea far, far below them seemed to shift and quail. The waters bubbled and roiled, a white froth lipping outward from a center point --

Arthur suddenly felt light. It felt like he was in free-fall.

And they were.

Falling.

There was slack on the rope and Lamorak came into view; Arthur grabbed the rope and started to reel him in. Lamorak was nearly even with Merlin, the rope whipping him around, when Arthur's attention was caught by movement down below --

A pillar of water rose out of the ocean, rushing upward at dizzying, disorienting speeds. Arthur couldn't tell if they were falling so fast that the water seemed to be moving, or if the water was indeed moving up toward them. Either way, it was coming --

"Hold on!" Arthur shouted.

The impact was tremendous. The wave juddered against the rear of the ship, splattering and splintering, breaking apart even as it seemed to cushion the blow. Water sprayed outward, on either side of the ship, and --

It rained down from the wave above, too, which seemed intent on battering them down. But the wave below, the tower, the pillar, it bolstered them, supporting them, steadied and -- finally, it won
out, stabilizing and levelling the ship. Lamorak thumped onto the deck and scrambled forward. He started to help Merlin, but the magic flaring out gave Lamorak second thoughts. Instead, he grabbed for the bar affixed near the hatch, holding on in case things went tits over arse again.

Blood streamed down his wrist and mixed with the water sweeping and dribbling on the deck, but Lamorak didn't seem to notice.

Pellinor had unwound himself from the rope, but he was favouring his arm. Owain was coiling up the rope to get it out of the way and in case they needed it again. Arthur fought between instinct and common sense, and it was a war between surging out of the hatch to drag Merlin back inside and trusting that Merlin would be able to handle… whatever it was that he was doing.

There was a jarring jerk. They were level -- for some definition of level, if it included being bobbed about and being victimized by a runaway rollercoaster. The saltwater flood from above eased and ebbed until all that was left was rainwater. The ocean around them was calm -- or calmer, with the waves returned to their usual height, with none of the ship-killers like the one they'd just been sat on.

The world was nearly right again. It was as if they hadn't nearly been dropped to their deaths.

Merlin sagged. His arm dropped, his shoulders slumped, and he exhaled in a soft, drained sigh.

Arthur scrambled out without hesitation, catching Merlin where he had fallen to his knees and helping him to his feet, taking Merlin's arm and draping it across his shoulders. Lamorak started to help, only to pause and point off in the distance.

"Arthur. You see that?"

Merlin's body was a distracting ice block, a near dead-weight. Arthur hefted Merlin against him until he was steady while squinting against the biting wind. It took some doing, particularly with the waves rising and falling, but eventually, there was enough synchronicity in the movement that he caught sight of what had alerted Lamorak.

A ship.

Merlin must have seen it, too, because he said, "It's them. All this. It's coming from them. It's the focus for the storm."

Arthur's jaw clenched. "Pellinor."

"Yeah?" Pellinor stuck his head out, using his good arm to steady himself against the opening.

"Does your mate have any missiles on board?"

"Wouldn't put it past him," Pellinor said. He shifted subtly, as if trying to hide how badly hurt he was, but Arthur glanced at his arm anyway. There were spiral cuts on his sleeve and blood dripping from his fingertips. At worst, he'd severed important ligaments, or nicked a vein -- if not more. At best, he'd broken his arm. Either way, Pellinor wasn't acting as if it were life-threatening, and Arthur was willing to let an examination go long enough to get their situation under control. "Getting him out of the bridge, though. That's going to be a problem. Knowing him, it's bulletproof and barricaded."

"He's with Gareth," Lamorak said grimly.

"Thought that your Ian was steady," Owain remarked. "That was why you got in touch with him."
"I thought he was, too," Pellinor said, shrugging. "Give him some credit. He didn't go completely bonkers and start shooting, did he? Most would've, you know."

"He's a spook, and there's no telling what he really knows or what he's doing in there," Arthur said. "Let's get to the bridge."

Pellinor nodded and took a step back to let the others through. Owain helped Merlin get inside, and Arthur made sure Lamorak was through before following and securing the hatch behind them.

"Bulletproof and barricaded," Merlin said, his voice quiet and a little wan. His eyes were bright, rimmed with gold as he elbowed out of Owain's grasp and pushed past Pellinor. "But not magic-proof, is it?"

"Merlin," Arthur said, squeezing past the others and reaching to stop him. His fingers hooked Merlin's elbow, but just barely. The expression on Merlin's face was fey, and Arthur thought Merlin would fight him.

But, almost as if the contact had reset something in his head, or gave him something to hold onto, Merlin relaxed and closed his eyes. His eyes dimmed, and he sagged, no longer driven forward like a puppet by his magic.

"Lamorak," Arthur said, jerking his head. Lamorak nodded at the unspoken command, determination keeping the green from his face as the ship wobbled on the sea, but he worked his way toward the bridge, kicking the debris out of his way. "Owain, go with him. Pellinor--"

"Put pressure on it, I know. Might need a hand," Pellinor said, sinking down heavily on a lockbox. Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin nodded, wiping the water from his face. "I'm all right."

Arthur raised a brow when Merlin's teeth chattered, but said nothing. The corner of Merlin's mouth quirked in an uneasy smile, probably because he knew damn well that they would be talking about Merlin's magic when the current situation was dealt with, and he went to get a towel, already pulling his shirt over his head. His ribs stuck out. His shoulder blades were in sharp relief. The knobs of his spine could double for a xylophone.

Whatever Merlin had done to save them, it had sapped more than just his strength. Arthur grit his teeth but nodded, accepting Merlin's reassurance, and moved to help Pellinor.

Arthur glanced at Pellinor and saw a thoughtful frown crease his brow. Pellinor saw him looking and tilted his head. His voice was pitched low as Arthur cut through the raincoat's sleeve, doing the same to the blood-soaked shirt he'd been wearing. "That shouldn't have been possible."

Arthur raised both brows in agreement. He wrapped a compress around Pellinor's arm to soak up the blood and see how bad it was. At first glance, the cuts were ragged, more burn marks than anything, and not nearly as deep as Arthur had feared. The blood was seeping, not pulsing or spraying, so nothing critical had been hit, but that didn't mean there wasn't more trauma under the skin that needed looking after.

He held up the peroxide to give Pellinor some warning, and poured the contents on the downward-circular slashes. They were worse in the meatiest part of his arm, and Pellinor hissed when Arthur made certain to get those areas too.

"Did he talk to you about it?" Pellinor asked.
Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin was towelling himself off as best he could, oblivious to their conversation. Arthur met Pellinor's eyes and shook his head. "He hasn't told me anything more than what we already know."

And that wasn't much. Will had described something off about Merlin's magic. The prototype had done something to keep Merlin from using it, and when he had recovered enough to use it, his magic was distant, fickle, cold. That changed when they escaped -- suddenly, Merlin was able to do things that he hadn't been able to do before, but his control seemed to be shot, almost as if he was bleeding off too much magic for simple things.

"I couldn't tell you, mate," Will said. "It just didn't feel like Merlin was completely with it, yeah? I chalked it up to him being wonky, but looking back... I think that prototype of yours did more of a number on him than he let on."

Merlin had given him more, but nothing that made sense. On the one hand, it confirmed Will's observations; on the other, Merlin couldn't answer Arthur's questions. Arthur didn't think that Merlin even knew himself.

Physical wounds could heal. Psychological trauma needed time and acceptance. What did one do to treat a magical wound?

"We need to get him to Gaius," Arthur said quietly, using butterfly tape to hold the wounds closed, coating the rest in a thin layer of super glue. He wrapped it all up carefully, doubling up on the layers just in case the bones were broken, giving it a bit more support.

Pellinor's gaze flicked up to look out one of the portholes. The water was black and frothy and rising up and down even over the ship's waterline. "If we get there."

"We'll get there," Arthur said wryly. Thankfully -- for now, at least -- there were no crises to deal with. The sea was comparatively calm compared to the giant surge that had nearly killed them, but if Merlin was right, if that boat out there was the focus point of the storm, it wouldn't be long before they tried again. As long as they were in range, they were in danger.

"This boat have radar?" Arthur asked. He had seen the equipment on the bridge earlier, but he hadn't given it much thought. Still, he vaguely remembered something that might be radar -- not the sonar used for fishing, but the radar that would ping other boats in the vicinity.

Now that his wound had been tended to, Pellinor shrugged out of his raincoat and tore off the shredded sleeve. Arthur helped him to his feet and Merlin, noticing that they were done, tossed a couple of slightly-damp towels in their direction. Pellinor thumbed to the stairs. "There's radar. Military grade. Nothing but the best for that wanker. We can make do. What are you thinking?"

A loud creak coming from the fore interrupted Arthur before he could answer. There was a series of loud thumps as Ian's body bounced down the steps and came in for a landing. Owain walked down as if this were a cruise ship and stepped over Ian. He grabbed Ian's collar and dragged him over to a cot.

Arthur headed over. He started to squeeze past Merlin when he noticed that Merlin was looking unusually pale, his eyes glazed over. He guided Merlin down to the kitchen cubby and patted his cheek. "Merlin? Are you with me?"
Merlin wavered. He shook his head, but then nodded. "Really fucking tired of this shite."

"Yeah, you and me both, love," Arthur said, but he knew that it was more than that, at least for Merlin. "Sit and rest for a bit."

"But there's --" Merlin started to stand up, his eyes going a little wild. Arthur put his hands on Merlin's shoulders and pushed him back down.

"Saved our lives twice already, and they're bearing for a third go, aren't they? Let us take care of it this time," Arthur said. The look that Merlin gave him was mutinous, but he nodded.

Arthur went over to Owain. Ian was sprawled over a paltry makeshift bed that was more lockbox and blankets than an actual cot. Water dripped from his still-soaked raincoat, his hair was smeared on his forehead, and he looked like a drowned fish, complete with a bruising cut across his cheek and a blackening half-moon around his eye.

Pellinor joined them, his arm held close to his chest. He peered around Arthur's shoulder, studying Ian's condition, before giving Owain a dark look. "Didn't have to knock him out."

"Don't look at me," Owain said, holding up his hands. "That's all our Gareth's work. Saw the gun, dropped the wheel, got the weapon away from him. Then the ship up-ended and Ian bunged his head on the wall. Took a bit for Gareth to open the door. He's fighting the waves. Said he could use a hand -- preferably a hand that's not Lamorak. Bickering like -- well, like you and Merlin." Owain pointed at Arthur and nodded at Merlin before continuing. "Something about Lamorak's driving skills and this not being a four-wheeler. I have sisters. Married sisters. I know when to duck for cover."

"I'll go," Pellinor said, clasping his good hand on Arthur's back. "Check out that radar, too. We're looking for the other boats, yeah?"

"Yeah. If they're using that one out there as a focus point, they can't be far. Go on," Arthur said, thumbing at Ian. "We'll wake him up, see where he's keeping his defence system."

"Defence system," Pellinor repeated with a chuckle, laughing at a private joke that not even Arthur got.

Pellinor shook his head and disappeared up the stairs.

Arthur gestured at Owain. "Tie him up."

Arthur got out of the way while Owain took care of Ian, sorting the man out in a slightly more comfortable position that included hands zip-tied in front of him, palms facing. There was an easy way out of those zip-ties, but not when a second zip-tie was pulled through in-between to keep it secure, and definitely not as long as Ian's hands were where they could see them.

It took a couple of sound slaps before Ian came to in a sputtering protest. Arthur held up a hand to stop him from talking.

"I'm only going to say this once. You're going to listen, and you're going to listen carefully. The only reason you're alive right now is because of us. I'm not going to say how, because you don't need to know. You're not going to insult me by pretending that you haven't at least heard about me and my men while you've been hanging around the CIA water cooler."

Arthur studied Ian's expression, evaluating the man, before making a decision.

"You're smart. Smart enough not to say anything to your bosses about training with a bloke who's on my team. Smart enough not to say anything when Pellinor calls you out of the blue and says he
needs a ride across the channel. Smart enough to keep your gear onboard and your eyes peeled and your mouth shut, because you want to know what's going on -- because you want to go back to the office and tell your bosses and maybe, just maybe, you'd get a promotion from being a glorified on-call lackey who's permanently on stakeout."

Ian didn't do a good job of hiding his snarl, and Arthur knew he'd hit a sore spot.

"You want that promotion?" Arthur asked. He gave Ian a few seconds to let his question sink in, but the sparkle of interest in Ian's eyes was almost instantaneous.

"What do I have to do?" His tone was reserved, almost hesitant, as if afraid to hear the answer. "And are you going to kill me if I say no?"

"No," Arthur said. He glanced at Owain briefly before looking back at Ian, raising his eyebrows meaningfully. "But we'll make life real difficult for you."

"Starting with making all of the cash in your bank accounts disappear," Merlin said, his voice chattering a little. "Then moving on to substituting your files with the records of a serial killer and letting the authorities know that there's something funny going on near where you live. I've got this nice little virus I've been wanting to try for ages --"

Arthur struggled to keep from smirking. He focused on the tremble in Merlin's fingers and resisted the urge to find another blanket.

Ian didn't say anything for a long time. When he finally spoke, it was with a grudging tone. He didn't look as if he wanted to ask, but he did. "What do you want?"

"Not much," Arthur said. "Just your help blowing up a ship."

ooOooo
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

ooOOoo

Ian and Arthur were on the bridge. Lamorak and Owain were on the aft deck, getting the equipment ready for unloading. Pellinor and Gareth were somewhere on the ship -- but where, exactly, Merlin didn't know for sure.

It wasn't until Gareth came down from the bridge to run out of the rear hatch and Pellinor's foot appeared, balanced on the narrow six inches outside the porthole window, that Merlin relaxed. The calm lasted all of ten seconds before he started shivering violently again.

He pulled the coarse blanket up to his chin, but it was a fruitless attempt to get warm -- to stay warm. A cool stream of air snuck up from the gap between his feet and the short blanket. He kicked it back down and tried to make himself as small as possible to fit under the wool.

After Gareth manoeuvred the boat close enough and Owain fired the shoulder missile launcher, destroying the other ship, the rest of the journey to Portsmouth had been uneventful. The storm still raged, but with one corner of the sorcerous triangle broken, it calmed down to more normal levels -- less of hurricane-flirting-with-a-monsoon type of weather, and more typical of the usual battering against the British shores.

Merlin felt kind of useless.

He... couldn't quite remember saving the ship. Twice, Lamorak had reminded him, after devoutly muttering that he would never be setting foot on a boat ever again, followed with, Sorry, Gareth. Gareth had shrugged, unconcerned, a small, wry smile on his lips, as if he was already concocting a plan to make Lamorak change his mind. The two of them couldn't seem to look at each other, not without blushing, anyway, and Merlin definitely felt as if he'd missed something while he had been away.

He felt as if he was missing a lot of things.

Merlin's stomach growled. His head throbbed. He couldn't stop trembling. A permanent static charge had settled on his skin.

Outside, and loud enough to carry to bloody Greece, Lamorak sneezed.

"Bless you," Owain said. "But next time, aim somewhere else, yeah? That was disgusting."

"Sorry," Lamorak said.

A small smirk pulled at Merlin's lips, but instead of staying there, it faded and became a frown that weighed him down.

He turned onto his side, bringing his knees up. The blanket was as narrow as it was short, but if
Merlin didn't move too much, he was mostly covered up. The boat was rocking from side to side and up and down, and even though Merlin had never gotten sea-sick before, he was starting to feel a little bit like Lamorak, now.

He eyed the abandoned hammock, but he didn't want to move right now.

Arthur had shoved protein bars and water at Merlin the first chance he got and forced Merlin to change out of his wet clothes. When Merlin had pointed out that Pellinor and Ian were worse off than he was, Arthur had growled something under his breath that Merlin hadn't caught and continued to manhandle Merlin until he was stripped of soaked jeans and pants and given a change of clothes.

Merlin had been too tired to protest, but he'd noticed the way that the others had pointedly not looked in his direction.

Merlin shut his eyes.

He knew what he looked like. He couldn't not. The bed and breakfasts along the way, the cheap hotel rooms, even the abandoned house that Owain had broken into -- there were mirrors and other reflective surfaces everywhere. No avoiding them. Merlin could keep his head down and avert his gaze all that he wanted, but when he scrubbed up in the shower, he couldn't really ignore how his own ribs felt under his skin.

Something was wrong.

Something had been wrong ever since the prototype had gone off and had cut him off from his magic. When it returned to him, it had been... almost like a living entity, reluctant and shy. But when Merlin had desperately needed it to break out of the house, to get Kay and Will to safety, it had...

*Broken.*

It had broken something.


When he was a kid, playing with Will and showing Will all the tricks that he could do with his magic in the relative privacy of his own home and under Gaius' and Mum's watchful eyes, Will had asked him what it had felt like, to have magic.

"I dunno," Merlin said, knocking over the Legos and starting from fresh. *They weren't all Lego pieces -- the pile was made up of mismatched logs from a half-dozen different kits, and was missing a lot more parts. There was no way of reproducing the image on the box, not now, but he had as much fun taking his attempts apart as he did putting them together.*

*Will always lost interest quickly. He was reading one of Merlin's comic books.*

*Merlin craned his neck to see which one Will was reading now. When he saw it was one of Captain Britain's -- he wasn't supposed to have it, but what Mum didn't know wouldn't hurt him -- he dropped the Legos and crawled over, snatching it out of Will's hands. "Are you mad? Not in the open," he hissed.*

*"Your Mum's not going to see," Will protested, trying to get it back. Merlin held him out of arm's reach easily; all it took was a buffer of magic.*

*He imagined that it was a little bit like having an imaginary friend, given semi-corporal form. He*
laughed when Will windmilled his arms against an invisible force, and told Will as much.

Will stopped fighting. He huffed and straightened his shirt. "Well, not as good a friend as me, that's for sure."

"Course not," Merlin agreed. And, when his defences were down, Will tackled him.

They got in trouble over the comic book anyway.

Merlin grunted and forced himself to sit up. He shivered at the cold air and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. He rubbed his face and dropped his hands, turning to look blearily at the open hatch.

If his magic had felt like it was an imaginary friend all those years ago, it was something else entirely now. Merlin tried not to think about it. As long as he didn't think about it, his magic hummed along merrily under the surface, quiet and calm. It was just when he tried to access it that it went a bit… Bonkers.

Merlin had to fight to keep it under control any time he needed to use it. It was exhausting.

He needed to talk to Gaius. Gaius would understand. Gaius could tell him what was wrong and help him figure it out. Merlin wasn't useful to his team, to Arthur like this, and it had as much to do with the mind-fuck of having been Aredian's prisoner as it did with his magic being…

He reached for a word to describe it, but couldn't.

Merlin's magic was stronger now. More powerful. Unpredictable, fickle, feral, the way Merlin supposed a person would be, too, if it had been locked in a cage for decades.

Locked in a cage --

The thought gave Merlin pause.

Instead of following that thread down the rabbit hole, Merlin pushed himself off the cot. He went over to the disaster area that was his equipment and slowly packed them away. They would be making shore soon, and he knew that Arthur wanted them to get moving as soon as they were on land. They'd already been briefed -- and by briefed, Merlin meant brief, summed up by a quick, "We're not stopping when we get there." Arthur hadn't wanted to give them more details while they were still onboard this ship, but it was clear to everyone that Arthur's plans had changed.

Merlin almost dreaded arriving in England.

The laptop had weathered the storm fairly well; the duct tape holding it in place had, surprisingly, held firm. The same couldn't be said for the Crack Box or the hard drive -- the hard drive had wrenched free, the connection between the computer broken. The firewire had been torn out entirely from the hard drive. Merlin was going to have to rebuild it if he had any hopes of accessing the Pendragon database.

The Aredian database on the hard drive wasn't in much better shape. When the processes were cancelled, a fatal error had popped up on the screen. The message box had Apocalyptic disaster in cheesy Word Art font and Merlin was going to regret programming his own warning messages into the operating system, because it wasn't funny and far too prophetic for comfort.
He put everything away. Every piece fit in one case; he wedged the Crack Box between foam wedges.

When he was done, he sat down heavily, trembling from exertion. He wanted to lie down again, but the very idea of it made him ill, and besides, he spotted land through the porthole. Ten, twenty minutes, and they'd be docked.

Sixty minutes and they'd be on their way.

Merlin wasn't sure what kind of agreement Arthur had made with Ian, but he knew that there had been no explanations for having survived two killer waves. His magic was still a secret, but it wouldn't be for much longer.

He closed his eyes. There was a dull ache behind them, a scratchiness that he couldn't get to. The waves lapped against the hull, the wind bustled and whipped outside, and there were snatches of conversation, torn to pieces before they ever reached Merlin.

He must have dozed off, because Arthur was next to him when he opened his eyes with a start. Arthur's hand hovered close to Merlin's shoulder, but didn't touch, the hesitation visible in Arthur's expression. Merlin felt awful -- it wasn't his fault that he had reacted badly the first time Arthur caught him by surprise like this, but it had ruined any kind of easy comfort between them.

As quickly as it had appeared, the stricken look faded from Arthur's eyes, and his fingers dropped lightly onto Merlin's shoulder to squeeze comfortingly, thumb and forefinger stroking along the line of Merlin's neck. "All right, love?"

Merlin started to answer. He wanted to say that he was fine, that Arthur didn't need to worry, that they had a bigger problem than Merlin's wayward magic and his general condition. He wanted to reassure Arthur, to have him know that he could depend on Merlin, but it would be a lie.

He didn't want to lie to Arthur any more than he wanted Arthur to worry, but this was serious. This was a mission that could cost the team their lives. Arthur needed to know.

Instead, Merlin shook his head. "For now. I can go on, but --"

"We'll get you to Lance and Gaius. Your Mum, too. Soon as we can, yeah?" Arthur's eyes were a deeper blue than usual, as if affected by the same emotion that made his voice thick.

"Not my Mum," Merlin said, breaking eye contact. His heart constricted, but there was no anger left in him, not after fighting the bloody ocean. He was just too tired to muster up the energy to be mad at his Mum for… for everything. He changed the subject abruptly. "Are we there?"

The sound of the engine changed subtly as soon as Merlin asked the question, the ship settling back into the ocean, slowing down.

"Yeah. Ian's sorting out a slot for us. But you stay here, yeah? We'll grab a trolley, find out where the trucks were left for us, and --"

"Not a fainting damsel," Merlin said firmly. The engine slowed down even more; for a brief instant, it felt as if they were floating on air, only to be shoved forward roughly by the ship's own wake. "I'll let you lot do all the hard work, but I'm not sitting here waiting to be collected. The faster we're off from here, the better."

"If you're sure," Arthur said.
"Coddle me, and we'll see how you like it," Merlin growled. Arthur's smile was quick and relieved, hidden by his usual Captain's scowl, and he dipped down for a chaste kiss before heading up the stairs to the bridge.

If Merlin were being honest, he had no real recollection of disembarking. He had a vague memory of Arthur staying behind to talk to Ian, of Lamorak and Pellinor checking the location of the vehicles that the rest of the team had left behind for them, of Owain and Gareth doing the majority of the grunt work to load the trolleys and transfer their equipment to the Land Rovers.

There was a bustle of activity around the port. People running, shouting, shifting. There were screams and cries that Merlin couldn't make out -- not that he tried, anyway.

"Shite's hit the fan," Owain said, walking close to Merlin as they worked their way to the first SUV. Owain was looking around, but Merlin wasn't paying attention. There were flashing lights in the distance -- the police, maybe, or the port authority.

"We weren't the only ones hit," Pellinor said, catching up to them. "Overheard someone say half the boats were forced to turn back, and a whole lot more never made their port of call. The storm hit all the way up the coast. Someone really didn't want ships coming through."

"We weren't targeted?" Owain asked.

"Doesn't look like it. Leastways, not as far as I can tell. Saw Arthur talking to a few officials -- he'll probably know more." Pellinor paused. "Wait, there he is."

The coolness of Pellinor's departure was replaced by Arthur's searing body heat. Merlin leaned against Arthur gratefully and let himself be guided through a dizzying maze of equipment and crowds. None of them spoke until the way cleared up and they were nearly at the cars.

"I don't know what their game is," Arthur said, his lips pressed in a thin line. "Spoke to a few old salts who made it through. They saw those other ships, just the one we spotted, sitting there in the water and not moving. They mapped them out, let me take a look. The ships were in a triangle formation. Two ships feeding a focus point, isn't that what you said, Merlin?"

At Merlin's nod, Arthur gestured toward the Land Rover. He opened the door and gestured for Merlin to get in, away from the wind.

"I don't think they were after us," Arthur said, confirming what Pellinor had guessed. "Just lucky that we left as early as we did. Any later --"

He grimaced.

"Any later, I would've still gotten us out of it," Merlin said, giving Arthur a crooked smile.

"I don't doubt it," Arthur said, giving his hand a squeeze. He gestured. "Pellinor, you're with us. Owain, --"

"With the others, I know," Owain said, giving Arthur a lazy salute. "We'll meet up with you at the next point."

Arthur took the wheel, but the other Land Rover took the lead. It was slow going until they crawled out of town.

No one spoke. The radio was on low volume, and the tension eased, but it didn't quite completely fade away.
Merlin was comfortably sitting in the front passenger seat, the heaters blowing blessedly hot air toward him, his bum heated up by the seat warmers, and half-dozing with his head against the window when an announcement on the radio caught his attention.

"... devastating collapse of the tunnel shortly after eight o'clock this morning..."

Merlin shifted, glancing from the radio to Arthur, who was frowning. He didn't take his eyes from the road or move his hands. Pellinor, sitting behind Merlin, put down his mobile. Merlin increased the volume.

"... unable to access the central part of the train tunnel from Folkestone to Calais. Authorities cannot confirm that early morning commuters are trapped following an unknown event that caused a landslide at both ends..."

"Everyone made it, didn't they?" Merlin asked, glancing over his shoulder at Pellinor. He knew, logically, that the rest of the team had gone on ahead of them, that they were setting up the foundations for the next part of their plans. He also knew that Arthur had ruled out traveling through the Chunnel, not wanting to have civilians caught in the crossfire in case of, not if they could help it.

Two people on the team were trained pilots. Two more were experienced in naval operations. The team had gone over in quick, untraceable spurts ahead of them. Merlin's mind reeled. He fretted over Will and Kay, knowing that they had gone on to London via Chunnel, but unable to parse the very important detail that they had gone on ahead more than a week ago and were all right.

Before Arthur or Pellinor could answer, another piece of information dropped.

"... new information. Specialists at the British Geological Survey have reported that their sensors have detected indicators of an earthquake --"

"Bollocks," Pellinor said. "Bollocks. There's a reason why they dug where they did. There weren't any active faults. It was the safest and most stable location for the train. That wasn't a --"

"Shut up," Merlin said, leaning forward. He pulled Arthur's mobile from his inner coat pocket, already thumbing past the lock screen. With his free hand, he increased the radio volume.

There were few additional details -- more than two hours had passed since the incident, and the first reactions had already been broadcasted. Now, it seemed that the radio station was moving onto newer and fresher news-bites, including the scientists and so-called experts that had been called in to weigh in on the situation.

The newscaster repeated the same mantra after every brief commercial, always introducing a new person on their interview panel: "Good morning, if you're just joining us, at 8:34 AM today, the Chunnel was closed following an unexplained event, possibly an earthquake or a structural collapse. The entrances at both ends of the tunnel are blocked off by a sluice of debris, and rescue efforts have begun. Construction crews are digging in an attempt to get into the tunnel itself. There has been no successful communication with the crew on board the train, and the situation, as it stands, remains uncertain. Please welcome Doctor --"

"Zero-eight-three-four," Merlin repeated under his breath. He could barely focus on the screen on the mobile. The quick search he'd done about the tunnel had returned a large number of results, but he was too shaky to select any of them. He shut his eyes tightly. "Zero-eight-three-four."


The timing correlated with the giant wave that had nearly clubbed the ship down to the bottom of the
Merlin's eyes burned. He saw white stars and forced himself to open his eyes, but it was no good. His vision was black, lined with white streaks, and he could make out objects in the periphery only very, very slowly.

"Did I do this? Did I --"

"You didn't. It wasn't you. It couldn't be you," Arthur said. His tone was quiet and calm, reassuring and steady. There was a brief pause. "We were nowhere near the tunnel. Not even close. We came from the South, remember? And those other ships. I saw the radar. They weren't --"

"The radar doesn't even stretch out that far," Pellinor said. "There's no way it was you. Absolutely, one hundred percent not you, Merlin."

"And those sorcerers on those ships?" Arthur said. The SUV slowed down and pulled over. Arthur didn't continue until they were stopped and he'd put the vehicle into park. "If they're anything like the ones over at the Directory? They're not very strong. Limited power, like you said, and they were feeding into a fourth. And even if they had access to more power, they wouldn't be able to handle it."

Arthur paused, and Merlin thought that he saw Arthur give him a strange, appraising look. Before he could really think about it, Arthur took the mobile out of his shaking hands.

"Not you, Merlin," Arthur said softly. "You protected us. You saved us. And we know you, Merlin. There's no way that you would've done anything to hurt anyone else just for that, even accidentally. It's impossible."

Merlin didn't want to say that he didn't know what he was capable of anymore, but the words came out anyway. Arms came around the seat from the back, and Pellinor hugged him tightly, if awkwardly.


Merlin shook his head. He didn't believe it. He also didn't know. He'd been half out of his mind, dangling from his fingertips and looking down into a black, roiling abyss, and his magic -- His magic had flared out. It had felt as if it would burst clean out of his skin. Merlin had been left scrambling, frantic, struggling to keep from falling, fighting to keep his magic from lashing out at anything and everything within reach. Arthur had been just inside the boat's cabin. Lamorak had been hanging for dear life, his grasp slipping on the thin rope. Pellinor hadn't made a sound, but Merlin swore that he'd heard the faint crack of bone even over the roar of the wind, and Owain had been a loud, clumsy, stampeding elephant falling through a spider's web, crashing his way to where he would be most helpful.

Merlin was shaken -- lightly, comfortingly, and Pellinor drew his arms away. Arthur was on him in the next instant, freed from his seat belt. He took Merlin's face in his hands and gently raised Merlin's chin. "It wasn't you," he whispered.

Merlin wanted to believe that.

He had to believe that.

Yeah, okay, he wanted to say, even if the words were hollow and he didn't have much faith in his own innocence. The words wouldn't come. Instead, Merlin made a strangled sound just shy of a sob, and he nodded, bowing his head.

A scientist was droning on with his predicted theory of a partial tunnel collapse and estimation of the
tensile strength of the train itself, claiming that if there were people trapped in the tunnel, they were most likely still alive --

The announcer interrupted him. "I'm very sorry, doctor, please hold that thought. I have breaking news from our anchorperson at the site. Let's switch to Leslie right now. Leslie, what can you tell us?"

A man's voice came on the air. "The construction crews have cleared several tonnes of dirt and heavy rock from the tunnel entrance. It appeared as if they were making good progress, and the shift supervisor believed that they could break through in another half hour. Unfortunately, they are pulling back from the scene. Let me describe it to you. The extruded debris has been cleared away, and the crews were starting to work on scraping out muddy dirt at the top of the tunnel entrance. There was some water in the beginning, trickling through, but now it's pouring down, turning the entire area into slush. Engineers have been called in to determine if it's safe to proceed, and they've requested large-bore pumps to assist with clearing the water from the area. The levels are already quite high -- about shin-high -- and it looks like, yes, it looks like we are being evacuated right now--"

The radio crackled.

The dead air resounded like thunder in the SUV. Merlin pulled Arthur's hands from his face to look at the radio. Arthur followed his gaze. The SUV shifted and wobbled as Pellinor moved onto the middle seat and leaned in, sticking his head between them.

The radio crackled in a burst of static, and a child's voice came on the air, singing a song. The voice was soft, airy, almost an ethereal soprano.

"Build it up with wood and clay, 
Wood and clay will wash away, 
Bricks and mortar will rot away, 
Iron and steel will rust someday.

"Gild in gold, plate with silver, 
Hide the crack, mask the patch, 
Hear the creak, feel the snap, 
The Bridge will fall, the Bridge will fall.

"Once upon a time, we were cast away, 
Our stories buried in stone and clay. 
We wake and we will rise this day, 
Because tomorrow, tomorrow is today.

"Power will rule, magic will reign, 
Chains will shatter, bone will splinter, 
The earth will rise, the fires will burn, 
The Bridge has fallen, the Bridge has fallen.

"London Bridge is broken down, 
Broken down, broken down. 
London Bridge is broken down, 
All Hail the New World!"

The child laughed, sweet, like tinkling bells. It sent a shiver down Merlin's spine. From the tension in
Arthur's body, Merlin knew that he felt the same.

There was a dead silence on the air, a burst of static, and:

"Prepare."

It was ominous, spine-chilling and cold.

"Fuck," Arthur said. "It's starting."

Merlin didn't know what to say. Pellinor had completely frozen up behind them. Arthur sank back in his seat, covering his face before dropping his arms.

They had a plan for this. Merlin knew they did. As soon as they'd figured out the NWO manifesto, Arthur had put together all the worst case scenarios. While Arthur and Merlin played out their roles, only calling in the rest of the team when necessary, those who weren't immediately involved in the mission laid out the most pressing foundations to allow them to protect their families, to give them a fall-back position, and to give them a staging ground.

Merlin had teased Arthur for using all the post-apocalyptic movies as a basis for the outcome for the NWO's plans -- if they succeeded. But for all his mocking, Merlin knew that if the worst happened, they would be all grateful for Arthur's forethought.

"How long do we have?" Merlin asked.

Arthur shook his head. He put his hands on the steering wheel, the knuckles turning white, a muscle popping in his jaw. His lips pressed together, and he gave another small, little headshake. "No. No, this isn't right. This is too soon. They don't have what they wanted. They don't have the database and whatever they were looking for. They don't have the arte--"

He stopped himself.

"Me. They don't have me," Merlin said quietly. He took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "They don't have me."

Arthur met his eyes. He nodded sharply. He relaxed, and he started drumming on the steering wheel. "They said they were on a strict timeline."

"And say what? What do I say? I don't know what's happening. What was that? Can anyone explain to me -- no, all right, okay." There was a brief pause, and the anchor hesitantly said, "It appears that our radio broadcast was temporarily hijacked to distribute a message of unknown origin. The message was replicated over all radio and network television channels --"

There was a brief pause. Arthur put the engine into drive, his foot on the brake, but they didn't advance.
"That same message was distributed worldwide, although the message was altered to refer to specific disaster events in different parts of the world --"

They listened as the announcer made reference to tragic accidents across the globe that had initially appeared to be a natural occurrence. Those accidents all happened in the last twenty-four hours, but the hijacked broadcast had all been at the same time. When the radio started talking about terrorists, Arthur reached over and turned off the radio.

They were on the road again, traveling at twenty klicks over the speed limit, before Arthur broke the silence.

"That was their call to arms. They did just enough to make people wonder, but not enough to make them completely afraid. Anyone who's with them in any capacity -- they're going to know to get ready, if they aren't ready yet. I'm betting there's a few days of grace, but it's going to go downhill from this point on."

"Yeah," Pellinor said. He shifted in the back, no longer buckled in. He was looking at his mobile. "Leon's asking if this changes things."

"Without question," Arthur said. "We change the focus. Get the team's families and loved ones out of town, everyone who's on the list. Get them to the cottage. It's going to be crowded, but it's isolated and they'll be safe there. All the equipment we set aside, the supplies -- grab a lorry, load it up, get it there. Our first priority is making sure everyone's safe."

"Right," Pellinor said. He dialled a number and slid back, waiting for it to ring through.

Arthur flexed his fingers on the steering wheel; Merlin could hear the knuckles cracking. He didn't have to ask what Arthur was thinking. It was the same thing that they already knew -- that there was no real way that any of them could have stopped the NWO. They might have identified some of the members. They might have gotten deeper into the organization than any of the other, trained undercover agents. They might have prevented the NWO from attaining weapons that could have furthered their cause.

But the NWO was a lot bigger than they'd been led to believe. The Directory, MI-6, the CIA -- they'd only scratched the surface. For a concerted worldwide attack, the NWO had to have cells situated everywhere.

Even if they'd taken one down, there were still more who would have taken their place.

Merlin wondered if they'd even had a chance of stopping them, but he remembered what Arthur had told him. Kilgarrah had talked about a pivot point, of preventing it from tilting too far the other way, of restoring a balance.

Maybe a balance was the only thing they could do now.

"I'm sorry, Merlin," Arthur said, his voice soft, his tone so deeply apologetic that Merlin thought he'd broken. "I'm going to need you to hold on a bit longer."

ooOooo
They didn't make it very far.

London was barely two hours away from Portsmouth, and despite their hasty departure, they had only made it an hour away before the roads turned into a parking lot, with many more cars lining up behind them.

Arthur snarled. He had hoped that they would have made it to London before the roads shut down. It was difficult to predict how people would react to a creepy sing-song broadcast on hijacked airwaves, but if he were honest, the odds that the roads would be clear all the way to London had been pretty much even.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel before making a snap decision. He turned the wheel and went off the asphalt.

The Land Rover took the loose gravel hill with ease, and he slowed down only marginally when the hill flattened out and dipped into a swamp. Behind them, three cars followed, the drivers probably thinking that Arthur had a shortcut out of the gridlock of the main roads. Two cars gave up at the bottom of the hill when the rear ends of their cars sank too deep in the gravel, and the third got stuck in the swamp, its tyres spinning and splattering mud.

The off-road wasn't flat, and there was no way to travel across the terrain quickly. Even at relatively slow speeds, the SUV bounced and shook like a carnival ride. The suspension took the edge off, and the ride was tolerable, even if it made Arthur nervous to have their forward progress reduced to nearly nothing.

Beside him, Merlin stirred. He turned his head away from the window and sank deeper in his seat. His chin was tucked into his chest, his arms were crossed, and he was swaddled under Arthur and Pellinor's jackets. Arthur thought he saw Merlin's eyes flutter open, but the next time he looked, Merlin was sound asleep, his chest rising and falling slowly.

They made it across the clearing and crossed onto a hard-packed gravel road. The GPS reset itself and recalculated their route, but it only directed them to return to the packed highways.

Arthur wrenched the GPS from the holder and passed it over his shoulder to Pellinor. "Fix it," he said.

"No problem," Pellinor said cheerfully, tossing the GPS onto the seat beside him. He pointed straight ahead. "Keep going for another three klicks, take the first right on the roundabout. There'll be a bed and breakfast on the left side of the road."

Arthur glanced at Pellinor in the rear view mirror before he remembered that Pellinor was from around these parts. Pellinor misinterpreted his look and said, almost defensively, "What? Look, I'm not Merlin or Leon, and I'm definitely not Gwaine, but I can read your mind sometimes, and I know you can't decide if we're going to take every gravel road until we get to London, or if you'd rather Merlin were someplace where he could rest."

Arthur grit his teeth. Pellinor was right. It was a difficult choice, but it was one where, if pressed, he knew exactly how he would answer. He'd chose Merlin, every time.

"I'm making an executive decision. We'll get Merlin settled. We'll get you settled. Can't direct the evacuation from the car, can you? Merlin can't reset the decryption in here, either. And I can't bloody well walk into Casualty to get a look at my arm if I'm being jostled about the road all the way to London."
Arthur grimaced. If Pellinor even mentioned his arm, it meant that he was in a lot of pain. "How is it?"

"Throbbing," Pellinor said, and Arthur translated that to mean, *It really fucking hurts, but thanks for asking.*

A kilometre passed. Two. "Right. Call Owain and the others. Let them know we have a change of plans."

"All right," Pellinor said, sinking back in the seat and fishing out his phone. Before he dialled, he reminded Arthur, "First right on the roundabout. It's a funny little thing, so take a sharp right. The B and B is about half a klick in. You'll see rotten fencing and thick shrubs before you'll see the sign, and if I remember right, the Tomlinsons weren't ever arsed to fix the dip in the road, so you'll be wanting to slow down for that."

Arthur grunted in acknowledgement.

He listened with half an ear as Pellinor called the others, sketching out the plan. He glanced at Merlin again, but Merlin was out like a light, breathing steadily.

The back roads were empty, and they'd left the gravel road behind ages ago. Arthur spotted the roundabout and slowed down; he took the first right as gently as he could, because the turn-off was just as sharp as Pellinor had described it.

"They were ahead of the snarl," Pellinor said, sliding forward between the seats, his phone still in his hand. "They're going to keep on to London, get everyone organized. Lamorak's got the sniffles, though, so they're going to get Lance to double the medical supplies on top of everything else. Maybe triple them, if they can. Knowing Lance, though, he's already taken the base list and multiplied it by a hundred, and I don't doubt the Major's had a fair bit of say in it, too."

"Good," Arthur said, following the run-down fence. It looked like it might have held back cattle, once, but now it was nearly completely engulfed by the shrubs.

He slowed down all the way when he spotted the sign, and he did his best to avoid the massive pothole in the gravel driveway. Pellinor grinned, half in glee, and said, "I knew they wouldn't ever fix the damn thing."

Arthur guided the Land Rover to a spot that wasn't visible from the main road and pulled to a stop. Merlin startled awake when the engine was shut off, his expression full of the unconscious alertness of a soldier who had been at war too long before becoming bleary and sleepy again. He fumbled for the door latch, waking more and more as he breathed in the cold, crisp air, catching himself before he tripped over the jackets he'd been using as a blanket.

"I'll get us checked in," Pellinor said. He glanced at Merlin. "Should I take him to Casualty with me?"

Arthur walked around the Land Rover and caught up to Merlin. He took Merlin's hand away where he was rubbing his eye, and asked, "Are you all right, love? Do you need to see a doctor?"

Merlin's brow pinched. "No. I'm not sure what they could do for me anyway."

"You'll call Gaius, though?"

"I'll call Gaius," Merlin said. "Where are we?"
Arthur waved Pellinor off and opened the trunk. He cherry picked the kits that they would need right away; the rest could wait until the equipment had been set up. "An hour or so from London. Had to take a detour. I suppose the broadcast made people skittish, because the roads were packed."

"So much for keeping calm and carrying on," Merlin said dully, rubbing a hand over his head. His hair stuck up along the side, and it made Arthur's heart both ache and melt at the sight, because Merlin looked soft right now. Arthur wanted to wrap Merlin up in a protective blanket, but he doubted that Merlin would let him do that -- at least not until they were in a more secure location.

It was all about security for Merlin, and Arthur thought that he understood that. Arthur had been in far too many dangerous missions -- Hell, he'd led too many dangerous missions -- to not have been affected in some way himself. No one had ever called him out on his habit of doublechecking patrol lines even if he trusted the men on patrol. No one mentioned anything when Arthur refused to leave the barracks without completing his usual preparation rituals. And, especially, if something was out of place, everyone stood aside and let Arthur have his own private meltdown while he inspected the perimeter, making certain that the area hadn't been breached, and returned to rearrange the items to the way they were meant to be.

If Merlin didn't want to let his guard down until he was absolutely convinced that he was safe, then Merlin didn't need to let his guard down. Arthur could live with that, even if it meant curtailing their usual, highly distracting public displays of affection.

Arthur knew he would miss those the most. He only hoped that whatever had happened to Merlin -- he still didn't know the details, and he didn't want to press -- that Merlin wasn't so far gone that he had lost everything.

Merlin tugged at the case in Arthur's hands, distracting him. Arthur let Merlin take it, and quietly unloaded the essentials. The trunk was shut and they were heading toward the front door when Pellinor emerged, keys in hand.

"Over that way," Pellinor pointed. "Got us the family suite. Two rooms, a door in between, and the master bedroom has an additional exit off the balcony. That'll be yours. I'll move the car over that way when I get back."

"Going somewhere?" Merlin asked, confused.

Pellinor gave Merlin a strange look before forcing a smile. "Food, some supplies that we might need that we won't be able to get in London, I don't think anyway, and I'll nip a visit to medical and make sure my arm's not about to fall off --"

"Are you --" Merlin shook off his drowse, suddenly more alert.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me," Pellinor said, glancing at Arthur. "But you -- you need anything? You're crotchety on your feet, and it's been worse since… since the boat."

Pellinor was right, Arthur realized. Merlin had been tired even before the crossing, but he'd been more alert and had seemed stronger. He had been better since leaving Paris, and Arthur had been willing to be convinced that Merlin was getting healthier. Since the storm, Merlin had been in a daze, as if he couldn't quite sort out what was going around him. It was a depressing, backward slide.

"'M fine," Merlin said, shrugging a shoulder. Arthur saw the pinched line in the middle of his brow, his mouth pursing as if trying to come up with something to say that would reassure them. "Just a headache, I suppose. If we haven't any paracetamol in the kit, could you --"
"Whatever you need," Pellinor said.

They entered the house from the side and followed Pellinor down the corridor. He unlocked two doors, giving Arthur the key to the second, and went through the first. They met in the middle, opening the privacy doors.

The "family suite" consisted of two bedrooms. The larger room had a Queen-sized bed, the second bedroom had a pair of smaller beds that weren't half as long as they needed to be for a man Pellinor's height. There were two bathrooms with narrow showers and barely enough room to sit down on the loo. The small sitting areas were tucked into the corners with a square table decorated with flowery, lacy tchotchkes that threatened to give Arthur hives when he moved them to the floor to make room for their equipment. And, as promised, the master room had sliding doors behind heavy blackout curtains, and beyond that was an open balcony with a few steps down to the ground floor.

Merlin saw all that and relaxed.

"Right, I'm off," Pellinor said. "Shouldn't be long unless there's a line to see the doctor, though I doubt it'll be terrible, not around these parts anyway."

He paused, raising both brows at Arthur, and glanced at Merlin.

Arthur got the message loud and clear: Take care of that one, I'm not far, call if you need me.

The door shut with a click.

Arthur left Merlin to sort out his computers, and headed into the second bedroom. He dragged the twin beds together to form one long bed, pushing them against the wall. Pellinor likely would have done it himself, but Arthur didn't want him to strain his arm worse than it already had been.

When Arthur was done, he tossed the blankets back onto the bed and returned to the master bedroom. He found the equipment partially unpacked and Merlin was sitting on a chair, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked, fighting off his panic.

The silence that followed was sheer torture, but Arthur made himself wait it out. He didn't want to overwhelm Merlin. He didn't want to trigger a reaction. He wanted to know what was happening, desperately, but he couldn't push. He didn't dare push.

"I'm not all right," Merlin whispered. His hands reached up to scratch his head, his fingers pulling at his hair. Arthur knelt in front of Merlin, crawling as close as he could, and he took Merlin's hands, gently prying them off. Merlin shook his head. "I'm not all right."

Arthur kissed Merlin's fingers.

"You're fine, Merlin. You're safe --"

"I know," Merlin said, looking up. His eyes were bloodshot and rimmed red from tears or frustration or exhaustion or all those things together at once. "I know. It's not... This isn't... I'm not freaking out, Arthur. I'm not. It's... It's me. It's my magic. It's --"

Merlin shook his head.

"It's wrong."
Merlin was stricken, suddenly pale.

"I'm not good to you like this. I don't... I didn't have any control, back at the boat. I didn't even know what I was doing --"

"You saved us," Arthur said, letting go of Merlin's hands. Merlin immediately started wringing them together, fingers picking at his nails, nails digging into his skin. Arthur only managed to stop him by putting his own hand on top of them. He fumbled with his phone. "You saved us, Merlin. You wouldn't have done that if you didn't have control --"

"That's just it," Merlin said, his tone frantic. "I don't know who's controlling what. It feels like my magic's controlling me, that I'm just barely keeping it in check. It's a fight. Everything's a fight. Anytime I let it out, even a little bit, I have to fight to make it stop, to hide it. I'm... I'm so tired, Arthur. I'm fucking terrified. I don't know what's happening --"

"I'm calling Gaius," Arthur said. He thumbed the number, one-handed, and brought the mobile to his ear. He reached for Merlin, stroking his cheek. The number rang through once, twice --

"Yeah?" Leon asked.

"Is Gaius with you?" Arthur asked.

"Out the back, helping Hunith with the supplies. You want me to --"

"Get him, please," Arthur said. Merlin bowed his head, his hands opening and clenching into tight fists, grasping at his knees, pulling at the fabric. Arthur cradled the phone against his shoulder and took Merlin's hands in his again, afraid that Merlin might hurt himself.

"Just a moment," Leon said, and Arthur was never more grateful for Leon than he was now. Leon understood. Arthur would never know how Leon knew when times weren't right for questions, but he did.

Arthur barely paid attention as Leon shouted for Gwaine, or as doors opened and closed. He rubbed Merlin's hands, stroked his arms, and tried to cajole him into looking up. He wasn't sure how long it was before someone came on the line again.

"Arthur?" Gaius asked. "Is everything all right? Leon said --"

"Are you alone?" Arthur asked.

Merlin squeezed Arthur's hands, and the look he gave Arthur was nothing short of grateful.

"One moment," Gaius said, his tone perfectly calm and neutral, not even hinting at any other emotion. Arthur heard him say excuse me, before a door shut less than a minute later. "I am now."

"All right," Arthur said. "I'm putting you on speaker."

Arthur put his mobile aside, leaving it balanced on another chair.

"I have Merlin with me. We're alone and in a semi-secure location. My phone is scrambled, yours should be too, but to be on the safe side, let's talk in general terms."

"I understand," Gaius said.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked, but Merlin only shook his head. Arthur rubbed a calming hand on Merlin's arms and continued, "I'll be blunt. Merlin's not well."
Gaius' sharp intake of breath was tinny over the speaker, but Arthur heard it all the same. "Can you describe his symptoms?"

"He's exhausted," Arthur said. He glanced at Merlin, but Merlin only lowered his eyes and nodded dully. "He was only just getting back to normal. That changed when we crossed over. Has someone told you what happened?"

"I have been informed," Gaius said neutrally.

"Then you know that he did something to save us, and that it was fairly substantial," Arthur said, wrapping his fingers tightly around Merlin's wrists before loosening them. Merlin's breathing was slow, but it was erratic, alternating between long inhalations and short, sudden exhalations, as if holding his breath and letting it out in short bursts. "Since then, he hasn't been able to get enough rest. He can barely stay awake. Gaius. Has someone told you what happened in Paris, when Will and Kay escaped?"

"Yes," Gaius said.

Arthur paused, not sure how to describe what he was seeing and equally unwilling to explain what he was thinking. He didn't understand enough of Merlin's magic to even formulate a theory of what was going on. Before he could open his mouth to say something, Merlin coughed.

"Gaius," Merlin said, his voice small, half-panicked. "Something broke."

"Broke?" Gaius repeated. Arthur could almost see his raised eyebrows. "When you say broke, do you mean --"

"Inside. Inside me, Gaius. It feels like… It feels like I'm… I'm unravelling, Gaius. Except I'm not hurt. And I have to… I have to concentrate just to hold myself together," Merlin said. He bowed his head and shivered so violently that Arthur felt it in his bones. "There's… There's just so much of it. I don't know how to… I don't know how to hold it back."

"Oh, my Lords," Gaius whispered. It was possible that he hadn't meant for his epithet to be audible, but it came through the speaker all the same.

Merlin's tone became desperate. "You can't tell anyone. You can't. Not Mum, because she'll worry. And definitely not him."

The hatred dripping from that last word was enough for Arthur to know he meant Balinor, but he wasn't sure that Gaius picked up on it.

"Help me," Merlin whispered. "Please help me. What's happening to me, Gaius?"

There was a long silence. Arthur had to strain to hear, but he thought that he could make out the sound of footsteps, walking four short strides one way, four more the other way.

"You know what this is, don't you, Gaius?"

Merlin made a sound, faint and miserable. It was a gutted noise, as if he'd been stabbed in the belly with a sharp knife that was pulled out just as quickly, a combination of a grunt and a sick sluice of blood dripping to the ground. It was the sound of betrayal mixed in with disbelief, and Merlin's fingers tightened around Arthur's hands.

"Yes," Gaius finally said.
Merlin hiccupped. He started to get up and walk away, but Arthur held him in place. He met Merlin's watery eyes, feeling his own burn with tears fuelled by impotent rage. He didn't understand why so many people would hide things from Merlin, that they would hurt him like this -- his father, his mother, Gaius. The pillock, Walsh, who set Merlin up to take the fall. What had Merlin ever done to deserve that?

Arthur wanted to lash out at them, to shame each and every person who had dared betray Merlin, but that would have to wait. There was something more important that he had to do, and that was to make sure that Merlin would be all right. That didn't mean that he had to hold back on his anger, and his words were curt and clipped and cold when he said, "Start talking, Gaius."

Gaius sighed, guilty, contrite, regretful -- Arthur didn't care, not as long as he had a cure for whatever was wrong with Merlin. "It is -- it was a...."

Gaius hesitated, as if testing the waters. He finally went ahead and finished his sentence.

"A spell. It was a spell."

"Did you put it on me?" Merlin asked.

"No," Gaius said firmly. "And I am not certain who did. It was not Balinor's work, that much I knew."

"But you think he was behind it," Arthur said. It wasn't a question. It didn't need to be.

"No. I know he was behind it," Gaius said, and the pause that followed was brittle, as if Gaius was surprised by his own vehemence. "I went away on a mission. Merlin was fine. He had problems with his control, but that was to be expected. He was only a boy. Perhaps three or four years old. I knew that Hunith and Balinor were concerned that someone would see something that they shouldn't, but Merlin was trying so hard to be careful. He… There are men and women who do not understand as adults what Merlin understood as a child, of how important it was that he hid what he was.

"But it was difficult, because neither Hunith nor Balinor were home very much to reinforce his lessons. And I had my assignments. There weren't many people who could be trusted to keep an eye on Merlin. I only know of a few, and most wouldn't have been able to suppress or curtail whatever was happening around Merlin."

Something creaked on the other end of the line. Gaius must have sat down. He was weary when he went on.

"I returned six months later, and there was Merlin, playing in the back yard with Will. Balinor had gone on a standard mission, Hunith had been assigned to the hospital on base on a temporary basis, and… I did not notice right away. It came to me much later. Years later. Merlin… Balinor's status had been changed to MIA. Hunith was beside herself with grief, and Merlin was not much better."

There was a pause.

"Merlin should not have had the control that he did in his emotional state. I eventually asked Hunith about it, and she said…" Gaius took a deep breath, as if steeling himself, "She said that she'd rowed with Balinor when she found out, but it was too late. It was already done. It could not be undone."

A tear ran down Merlin's cheek.

"What was it supposed to do?" Arthur asked.
"It was meant to protect him," Gaius said, and from his tone, it seemed as if it had done more than that. "I studied its effect when I could, and I realized that if I had not already known that Merlin possessed… his particular talent, that I would not have known otherwise. He had been rendered virtually invisible to anyone with magic who could detect it. No one would have sensed it in him."

Merlin's brows pinched and his mouth had an unhappy little downturn. He made a soft, hiccupping sound, as if he were struggling to hold back his emotions. Arthur reached up to wipe the tears from Merlin's cheek, and Merlin leaned into his touch.

"A side effect seemed to be that, the more Merlin used at any given time, the more he exhausted himself. Eventually, that effect balanced out, though I admit I was never certain if it was because Merlin had unconsciously learned to work within his limits, never pushing at his fetters more than he needed to, or if the fetter had been forced to adapt to Merlin's growing strength. I suspect the latter."

A silence fell.

Gaius must have needed to fill it, somehow, because he said, "Merlin, my boy, I'm so so--"

"Do I still have it, then?" Merlin asked, interrupting. There was an edge to his tone, and he was shaking his head, not wanting to hear apologies or excuses.

Gaius didn't answer right away. "I'm afraid I won't know for certain until I see you."

"But what do you think?" Merlin pressed. His hands were tight around Arthur's, nearly cutting off Arthur's blood circulation.

"I think…" Gaius stopped. Arthur heard a faint knock, and a muffled conversation. Gaius came back on the line an instant later. "My apologies, that was young Perceval."


There was a drumming sound -- fingers on an armrest, perhaps. The creak of a comfortable chair. Footfalls across the room, a door clicking shut.

"From your description," Gaius said slowly, stretching out his words the way people did, sometimes, when they were pushed for answers but wanted desperately to be wrong, and were evaluating the facts in the hopes that there was an error, somewhere. "From your description, I suspect that the fetter is gone."

Merlin's expression was unreadable. The tears were drying on his cheeks. His mouth was pressed in a thin line, and his breath came in small, hiccupping stutters. "You knew all along and you didn't tell me."

Gaius didn't answer. Arthur hoped that Gaius wouldn't make excuses, because he deserved every drop of guilt that he should be feeling right now.

"What else didn't you tell me? What else should I know? Because this is me. This affects me. It affects Arthur. It affects my team. Gaius --" Merlin stopped, forcing himself to take a deep breath. He turned away. His voice was very small when he asked, "How could you do this to me?"

Arthur pulled at Merlin's hands until Merlin slipped off the chair and fell into Arthur's lap. Merlin threw his arms around Arthur's shoulders and turned his head into Arthur's neck. His body shook with quiet sobs, and it was all that Arthur could do to hold him.

Neither of them said a word. Arthur didn't move until he felt Merlin's body calm and quiet, too strung
"Gaius, are you still there?" Arthur asked.

"I am," Gaius said, his voice wrecked.

"Does this put Merlin in danger? If it's gone, can other people find him? Can they sense him?" Arthur asked. "If they're looking for -- if they're looking for the object, is it possible that --"

Merlin's body went slack, but his arms remained around Arthur's shoulders. Merlin turned his head, resting it on his arm, and his breath tickled Arthur's throat.

"I'm... Again, I cannot answer that until I've seen Merlin --" Gaius was confused, and Arthur remembered belatedly that no one had told Gaius about the so-called artefact that everyone seemed to be looking for, or that the artefact was Merlin.

"How does it work?" Arthur interrupted. "How does someone know?"

"They'd have to be looking," Merlin said, his voice rough and low. "It's not... It's not obvious."

"All right. Good. We have that in our favour," Arthur said, worrying only slightly less. He rubbed the small of Merlin's back and turned to the phone. "Gaius, if it was meant to protect him, why is it affecting him like this now?"

"I don't --" Gaius cut himself off.

Arthur wished that they weren't still so far from London, so far from the cottage, so that he could see for himself the expression on Gaius' face, and be able to divine what he was thinking. He waited patiently, ignoring how Merlin's hands were digging into his shirt, how his breathing was starting to pick up again, as if he were on the edge of panicking. Instead, he continued to run his hands in circles and pressed kisses on Merlin's brow, trying to distract him.

"The fetter is gone," Gaius said.


It took a moment before Gaius continued, and it was with regret in his tone. "If we assume that Merlin unconsciously relied on the fetter for control, it is possible that he is doing it to himself. He may be fighting to hold it in, but without the fetter to subdue his strength and to impose a barrier..."

He trailed off.

Merlin went suddenly rigid in Arthur's arms. He made a small, desperate noise, but he held himself back from asking or saying whatever it was that was on his mind.

Arthur heard Gaius take another breath, but whatever he had been about to say was interrupted by another knock on the door. Whoever it was didn't wait for Gaius to let them in. "Gaius, there you are. I heard someone say that you were talking to Merlin?"

"Hunith --"

"Give me the mobile. I need to talk to my son," Hunith said, sounding desperate. "Please."

Arthur didn't know what happened next. If there was some sort of sibling tussle for the phone between Gaius and Hunith. Arthur half-expected there to be, because even though they were adults now, he and Morgana still fought over stupid things like that. He would never know, because
suddenly, his mobile exploded.

The pseudo-metallic shell turned into deadly projectiles and embedded in the wall, marring the flowery wallpaper. The cracked touchscreen became a razor-sharp knife that cut the curtains in two, leaving them hanging by a thread. The button bounced off the laptop, and the circuit board completely disintegrated.

Arthur stared at the spot where his mobile had been, conscious of Merlin breathing fast. He turned to look at Merlin and saw that he was wide-eyed and afraid, his hands opening and closing into knuckle-white fists.

Arthur chewed the inside of his lip. He made a little head-shake and shrugged. "I didn't need the phone, anyway."

Merlin huffed. The sound became a choked-off laugh. He buried his head in Arthur's shoulder, and this time, when his body shook, it was with suppressed laughter.

Arthur smiled, but it didn't stop him from feeling sad. He knew, logically, that Merlin was going to have to face both his mother and his father someday, to confront them over the lies they'd told, just like Arthur was going to have to face his father to find out the truth of what he'd been hiding all these years. But he knew that Merlin would shut down and withdraw even more if Arthur pushed it on him.

So, he didn't. Instead, he said softly, "What do you think?"

"I'm not," Merlin said bluntly. "Thinking, that is."

Arthur felt Merlin pulling away and held on all the tighter. He'd gotten the hint, but that didn't mean he needed to let go of Merlin entirely. He understood that Merlin didn't want to talk about it. Knowing that someone had put a spell on him at Balinor's request, muting and shackling his power, and simultaneously hampering Merlin's magic -- that was too raw a nerve to touch upon. Arthur knew that he needed to wait, to give Merlin the time to sort it through in his head. Eventually, he'd get to the point where he would be able to get a handle on his magic.

Except.

They didn't have that sort of time.

Arthur didn't give a damn about Hunith or Balinor or Gaius. He didn't know how he could look at any of them and not hate them for what they'd done to their son, and if he never saw them again, it wouldn't make a difference to him.

But what mattered, what absolutely, completely mattered --


"Don't want to talk," Merlin mumbled into Arthur's shoulder.

"Then don't. Just listen." Arthur turned his head a little, bumping his cheek against Merlin's. He lowered his voice. "Is it possible? No, don't answer. Just think about it. Is it possible that Gaius is right? That you're doing this to yourself? That you're making yourself sick holding it all in, trying to keep the rest of us safe?"

He ran his hand through Merlin's hair.
"Don't say anything. Just consider it. And, maybe... Trust yourself?" Arthur kissed Merlin's cheek. "Trust yourself like I trust you."

ooOOoo

The backlight from the laptop illuminated the dark room.

Merlin woke up when it broke out of screensaver mode with a small message box with a simple message that he couldn't read from across the room. There were no warning *pings*, no exclamation marks, no blocky texts with error code, and Merlin assumed that, between the Crack Box and the laptop, that the decryption on both the Pendragon database and Aredian's files was complete.

He didn't stir. He stared at the screen until it went black.

Beside him, Arthur slept. He hadn't shifted once through the night, not since curling around Merlin like a cat, his arm draped over Merlin's stomach protectively. His expression was slack, relaxed -- but there was a faint crease on his brow, hinting at dreams weighed down by worry and the strain of operating for so long on the bare minimum.

In the dim light, Merlin could make out the hollow under Arthur's eyes and the sunken-in look of his cheeks. His jaw was set, the muscle clenching as if in reaction to something in a dream.

His hair was longer. Scruffier. It had a tendency to stick up when he ran frustrated hands through it. He hadn't shaven, either, at least not regularly. The scruff along his jaw was more than a week old.

It wasn't the first time that Merlin had seen Arthur with something of a beard -- sometimes, it was hard to find the time to shave properly when running missions. Merlin had always thought that it was sexy, in an unkempt, rolled-out-of-bed sort of way, especially when Arthur looked as if he were somewhere between hobo-chic and businessman-playboy, his clothes rumpled, his tie undone.

Before he knew what he was doing, Merlin was brushing away strands of hair from Arthur's forehead, smoothing down the frown between his brow, tracing the thin line of his lips until they relaxed, warm and soft under the pads of his fingers. Arthur exhaled slowly, the warmth of his breath tickling Merlin's skin.

Merlin had asked the others how Arthur had been holding up. Owain had shrugged and said, "Not well", which wasn't very helpful. Gareth, who was always a little bit stiff when it came to interpersonal relationships, had shrugged and went somewhere else. Pellinor had said, "He missed you. We all did", which both answered Merlin's question and didn't, but it had been Lamorak who had told Merlin the truth.

"He was a fucking wreck."

Merlin shut his eyes tightly. He held his breath and it came out in a stutter that made his chest ache.

Every moment that he had been alone during his imprisonment, Merlin had second-guessed himself. He had wondered what he had been doing, staying there, letting Aredian and his men torture him and Kay and Will. He had wondered why he had drawn a line in the sand as far back as he had, why he hadn't decided that it was *too much*, why he hadn't found a way out of there for the three of them
much, much sooner.

Logically, Merlin knew that he had done everything that he could have. They all had. Will had had the most freedom from among the three of them, but even then, he'd been watched like a hawk and beaten if he stepped out of line. Kay hadn't been able to do much -- he had been Aredian's ace in the hand when it came to forcing Merlin to behave, kept alive only because Aredian thought that Kay's magic could be of some use to him someday -- magic that Kay didn't have. And Merlin? Merlin had spent too much time in a cell or a room without anything remotely electronic within reach, cut off from his magic because a prototype had managed to...

To break him.

Emotionally, Merlin was convinced that he hadn't done enough. He should have looked harder for a way out. He should have done more to protect Will and Kay. Instead of resting from the latest round of beatings, Merlin should have been reaching for his magic, to rebuild what had been disrupted. He should have gotten them out of there sooner. He should have --

Arthur's arm tightened around Merlin's waist, a sleep-unconscious gesture. His expression tensed, and he looked as if he were about to do something unpleasant.

Just as quickly as it happened, Arthur relaxed again, and his head tilted down, his cheek rubbing against Merlin's shoulder.

Fuck.

Merlin rubbed his face. Whether or not he had done enough to escape and to protect the others, Merlin knew that he couldn't stay idle now. The storm that had been roused by enemy magic, fuelled by the magic of the Earth itself -- that had shown Merlin he couldn't not fight.

He studied Arthur's profile in the dim glow from the laptop, at the regal cut of his features. The sharp edge of his jaw, the curve of his cheek, the curl of his eyelashes.

Merlin knew he would fight for Arthur and for his team with his last breath. There was no question about it. It was just a matter of how.

And if Gaius was right, if Merlin was doing this to himself... How was he supposed to undo years of subconscious conditioning in only a few days?

Hours.

Hours, because they didn't have days. They didn't have weeks. Arthur needed him now.

Merlin tried to meditate -- maybe that would help. Gaius had taught him how, years ago. Merlin had barely been a teenager at the time. Gaius' eyebrow had been a bushy blond-brown-white back then, less terrifying than it was these days, but he'd simply nodded when Merlin said that he wanted to know so that he could control his magic better. He'd never told Gaius that it had been for Freya, that he wanted to show her that there was a way to live, and even thrive, with the magic that transformed her into another creature.

He forced himself to count back from a hundred. He struggled to clear his mind of all thoughts, worries, and fears. He worked to relax his body, muscle after muscle, and felt a satisfying sort of sensation when he was slack and soft under Arthur's weight. It wasn't quite right. There was still something held back, a tension deep inside that he held onto tightly even in the light half-doze that he could barely manage these days.
It was the iron grip on his magic.

Merlin imagined himself letting to, millimetre after millimeter.

Gaius had always told Merlin that there was no reason to hold his magic tightly in check, that he should allow it to merely be. That Merlin and his magic thrived in a symbiotic relationship -- that one couldn't be there without the other.

Merlin wondered how many of Gaius' lessons had been his way of telling Merlin about the fetter, of teaching Merlin how to handle his magic if the spell was ever removed.

The thought made Merlin tense up again, full of mistrust and anger. He wanted to leave the bed, to pace, to rage --

He also didn't want to wake up Arthur. He wanted to be stronger for Arthur.

He concentrated. Toes. Calves. Thighs. Hands. Shoulders. He let them go one by one until he was in that place again, soft and boneless, holding onto his magic with a white-knuckled fist and terrified to let it go.

Merlin tried. He unclenched the tight hold that he had on his magic. He ignored the warnings that had been drilled into him since he was old enough to understand -- keep it hidden, don't let anyone see, keep it under control, you might hurt someone, someone might hurt you -- and let it go.

Just a little bit.

The magic flared, wild and alive, and Merlin clenched it back down, snuffing it like a candle's flame.

He waited until his pounding heart stopped racing, and he tried again.

And again.

Again.

He couldn't do it. If he released so much as a tendril without any intention of using it, the magic flared to life, large and vibrant, nearly suffocating in its desire to fill everything. The tickling sensation of it on his skin triggered sheer panic, and Merlin could only hold it off for mere seconds before he clamped down again, absolutely, completely terrified that someone would walk in and see and know.

He closed his eyes. He panted for breath, feeling as if he'd run a marathon, or had gone through one of Arthur's PT routines.

He couldn't fail. He couldn't let himself fail. There were too many people relying on him, and Arthur --

Merlin turned, only to find Arthur watching him.

Neither of them spoke. Arthur shifted slightly and pulled Merlin close. Merlin felt the brush of lips on his shoulder.

"I can't do it," Merlin whispered. "I can't let it go. What if I do something I don't mean to? What if I hurt you? What if someone senses it? What if it brings them here?"

"If it does, let them come," Arthur murmured. "You can't tell me you're afraid of them."
"I'm not," Merlin said, keeping his voice low. That was true, at least. The NWO had nothing on him. Bryn and Tristan were bullies who played at magic, hefting it about as if it were just another tool to frighten other people into submission. The Directory sorcerers were competent enough, but they didn't match Merlin in sheer control or power. Aredian's men were ruthless, and some of them possessed strange, twisted magic that made Merlin's skin crawl, but when it came down to it, Merlin didn't think that they were any different from any other sorcerer he'd ever encountered. He wasn't afraid of their magic. He wasn't afraid of them. "It's not that."

"Is it your magic, then?" Arthur asked gently, shifting until he had propped himself up on an elbow, the lumpy pillows shoved aside. "Are you afraid of that?"

Merlin chewed the inside of his lip. "Not… not really, no."

He glanced at the door between the suites and gestured gently, closing it without a sound. He didn't want to wake Pellinor. Pellinor had come back with food, additional supplies, a cast on his arm, and a large bag of pharmaceuticals -- some for him, some for Merlin. The paracetamol hadn't done much to help Merlin's throbbing headache, and Pellinor refused to take anything for his pain, wanting to be alert and functional if something happened, so they had a surplus of supplies that they wouldn't use.

The magic responded to his command easily enough, even under the choke-hold, but it still rippled and fizzled on his skin like it had never done before the fetters had shattered.

"What, then?" Arthur asked. There was no demand in his voice, only curiosity.

Merlin started to shake his head, to admit that he didn't know the answer, but he did know, and he was embarrassed to say it. "I don't want to lose control. I don't want to hurt --"

"You said that already," Arthur said, moving his hand from across Merlin's chest to cover Merlin's mouth with a gentle finger. "If you don't want to hurt anyone, then you won't. I trust you, Merlin."

And he did, Merlin knew. He knew that Arthur trusted him, not because he said the words, but because he had never pulled away from Merlin when anyone else would have. He had taken Merlin into the team and trusted Merlin to watch his back, not because they were soldiers, but because they were something more. He had thrown caution into the wind and followed Merlin to places unknown and let himself be cajoled by powers that he couldn't see, only feel, and had married Merlin. He hadn't hesitated to wrap Merlin up in blankets and scold him for exhausting himself after Merlin demonstrated a power -- a power that frightened even Merlin -- strong enough to curtail the forces of Nature, if not defeat them entirely.

He hadn't even blinked when his mobile exploded.

I didn't need the phone, anyway.

Merlin's lips curled into a small smile despite himself. He felt his eyes water and his chest ache, because who -- who, indeed -- would trust him this much?

He didn't think there would ever be anyone else.

"And if I don't trust myself?" Merlin asked. He turned onto his side, facing Arthur.

Arthur bowed his head, but didn't lower his eyes. "Do you trust me, Merlin?"

"You know I do," Merlin said.

"Do you trust me?" Arthur repeated, his tone earnest. "Do you trust that I'd never hurt you? That I'd
never do you wrong? Do you trust that I'd never turn my back on you, that I'll always come for you, that I'll never leave you?"

"I do," Merlin said, his voice thick with emotion. "I trust you."

They stared at each other, the dim light from the laptop making every shadow stand out in stark relief.

Arthur leaned in, his lips brushing against Merlin's, sending shivers down his spine. "Then trust yourself, Merlin. Because that's how much I trust you. With everything."

Merlin swallowed. "Arthur --"

He trailed off. He didn't have the words to express how he felt. He didn't know how to explain how afraid he was. He could protest until the end of time, but he would never be able to tell Arthur how much it awed and frightened him that Arthur loved him this much. Without reservation, without hesitation.

Instead, he leaned in, answering the light touch of Arthur's lips with a soft kiss of his own. It was a chaste kiss, but it made him gasp.

It had been so long.

They had touched each other since the rescue -- in comfort, in reassurance. To help, to soothe. To calm, to warm. There had been faint, fleeting expressions of affection -- a lingering hand, fingers hooking into belt loops, a forehead resting on a shoulder. Merlin had never known intimacy to be both frightening and distant until Arthur had looked at him with fondness and concern, when Arthur would lean in and whisper soft words into his ear, or as Arthur took Merlin's untouched coffee and replaced it with his own, drinking it cold and leaving his behind to help thaw Merlin's hands.

Merlin kissed him again. And again. The kisses that followed were gentle, full of restrained passion, and when they pulled apart for air, they both panted, hungry for more.

"I trust you," Merlin said in between kisses, squirming closer, digging his fingers into the shirt Arthur had worn to bed. "I trust you not to be wrong about me."

"I'm not wrong," Arthur whispered, his arm tight around Merlin's waist and back, pushing him onto the mattress to lay on top of Merlin, weighing him down. It was a welcome, grounding weight, and Merlin had missed it. He kept Arthur in place when Arthur started to slide away, hooking his foot at Arthur's calf to keep from moving.

Arthur huffed, but he didn't complain. If anything, he leaned down, a hand on Merlin's cheek, and kissed him as if he were worth the world.

Merlin felt the same about him.

The kisses were slow and languid; the roving hands soft and exploring. Every now and again one of them would move, and the friction against Merlin's already hard cock would make him see stars.

Arthur pulled his shirt off before taking his teasing time in removing Merlin's, kissing every millimetre of skin that was exposed. Their pants were removed in a frustrating, awkward fumble of too many blankets and tangled legs before being kicked aside.

"I can't," Merlin muttered. "You're driving me nutters."

Arthur's laugh was warm on Merlin's skin, but he didn't stop kissing or touching Merlin, moving down to Merlin's chest, nibbling on his collarbone. The scruff on Arthur's cheek brushed down Merlin's chest, soft and teasing, and Merlin wondered if he could convince Arthur to keep it for a while longer. "I could stop."

"Don't you dare. I've… nn-ghh," Merlin said intelligently, losing his train of thought when Arthur's tongue traced along one of his ribs before moving on to the next.

"Trust me," Arthur said. "Let go."

Merlin groaned, resisting. Still, he couldn't help but to obey, because Arthur knew him far too well -- where to touch, where to lick, how to tease. He closed his eyes, relaxing despite himself, holding onto that very last bit of control with desperation, even when Arthur’s tongue licked up along his length.


"I can't," Merlin said.

"Then let me do it," Arthur said. "Let me take you apart."

Merlin frowned at him, not understanding. "Let me take you apart."

Merlin shook his head, grabbing at Arthur's arms. He tried to pull Arthur up, but Arthur was immovable -- or just stubborn, Merlin couldn't tell which it was right now. "You can't. It's too dangerous."

Arthur stared at him. Then, very slowly, he inched his way up until he was holding himself over Merlin. "I trust you," he said, his voice gentle, soft, low. "Let me, Merlin. I promise I'll put you back together again."

"You're a prat," Merlin said, and, for some reason, Arthur took what Merlin said as permission to continue. Merlin bit his lower lip to keep from moaning when Arthur nudged his head aside and kissed along his jaw. "How long have you been thinking about this? What are you even --"

This time, Merlin couldn't bite back his moan. Arthur's hand ghosted along his side and teased down his thigh, touching everywhere but at Merlin's straining cock.

"Fuck," Merlin breathed. "I missed you. I missed you so fucking much. I kept thinking about you. I kept holding on for you. It's the only reason I didn't gi -- fuuck --"

Arthur sucked on a spot on Merlin's chest where smooth flesh met scars -- a spot that he hadn't known was connected to the pleasure centres of his brain until that moment, and damn it, why couldn't Arthur have found it before? Merlin gasped, his body arching, wanting friction, wanting contact, but Arthur denied him, drifting down.

Ever downward.

"Let go," Arthur murmured. He mouthed along the length of Merlin's cock. "Focus on me. Don't think about anything. Let me take care of everything."

There was a jarring moment when cold air hit Merlin's body, suddenly bereft of Arthur's warmth. The bed dipped when he returned, making himself comfortable between Merlin's legs. Something fell on the mattress next to Merlin's hip, and Merlin picked it up.
"Lube? Really?"

"I didn't ask for it," Arthur said. His tone fell somewhere between bemused and annoyed. "It'll interest you to know that Pellinor made a show of the earplugs he picked up right before he gave me the bottle."

"Cheeky bugger," Merlin said, without any real heat in his voice. He leaned up to reach for Arthur even as Arthur pushed him down with firm kisses.

"I have been thinking about it," Arthur admitted. "Ever since Will told us how he got out with Kay. I saw the satellite footage where Aredian's men stopped you. You've never done anything like that before."

Merlin turned his head away, feeling shamefaced; the sheer amount of destruction that he was capable of doing was frightening.

"I've thought about it some more since the boat," Arthur said, turning Merlin's head toward him with gentle fingers. "I've thought about it since we spoke to Gaius. I've thought about it since I woke up and watched you try to relax, to let it go."

"Arthur --"

"Your magic isn't wild and out of control. It's a part of you. It might be getting stronger, but it's always been strong." Arthur kissed a line of kisses along Merlin's jaw again. Merlin tilted his head, letting Arthur do whatever he wanted. "I watch you and I can't help thinking that I'm watching a jockey whipping at a horse to go while keeping a firm hand on the reins, and they're going nowhere fast."

"Oh, so I'm a pony, now?"

The grin Arthur flashed at him was… wondrous. The gleam in his eyes was full of mischief, though it was overshadowed by want. Merlin swallowed with difficulty, and when Arthur whispered, "Not tonight, but I plan on riding you sometime soon, and I'll ride you hard," Merlin closed his eyes, bit his lower lip, and shivered.

Arthur batted his hand away when he tried to ease some of the ache in his cock.

"But that's not the point," Arthur said, sounding faintly irritated as he licked his way down Merlin's chest, his hands sliding along his sides before his fingers grasped Merlin's hips.

"I admit I'm losing the conversation thread," Merlin said, unable to help himself. He bucked his hips, trying to get some friction against Arthur's abs, but Arthur held him firmly. Merlin grumbled in protest.

"Good," Arthur said, and if he said anything else before he took Merlin into his mouth, Merlin didn't hear it over the blood rushing in his ears.

Merlin couldn't concentrate. With every slow suck, he lost himself a little bit more. With every caress of Arthur's tongue, Merlin forgot where he was. With every torturous bob of Arthur's head, taking him in a little bit more every time, Merlin…

_Magic sparked and seeped out of Merlin's grasp, tingling and tickling along his skin_

… lost control.
It was agony. A tearing between wanting Arthur so desperately and needing to keep Arthur safe. Merlin clawed his way out of the deep pit of pleasure and pushed at Arthur, trying to get him to stop. "Please, Arthur. Please, you have to --"

A slick finger teased at his hole.

"Shi--"

The finger pushed past the rim and rubbed slow, lazy circles.

"Fuu--"

The magic was pins and needles on Merlin's skin, at once painful and invigorating, almost, but not quite, a sleeping limb reawakening.

"Arthur, you've got to --"

The finger stroked into him, exactly right, and Merlin saw stars. He saw stars so bright that it eclipsed the golden glow of his magic at the periphery of his vision. He felt a building need so intense that he forgot about the magic crawling over his skin. Merlin bucked up into Arthur's mouth with a different kind of desperation, and he felt frustratingly bereft a few seconds later when Arthur shifted to press an arm across Merlin's waist, keeping him down.

Any protests that he could make about his magic escaping his control were forgotten the more Arthur's finger thrust into him. One finger was joined by a second, then a third. Arthur worked Merlin open so slowly that it was a different kind of torture altogether, and Merlin's body shivered with a combination of desire, of cooling sweat, and of faint, distant, tickling.

Merlin wasn't sure why he hadn't come yet. Arthur certainly did his best to bring Merlin close to orgasm once, twice, too many times to count -- only to drag Merlin away from the chasm and start all over again.

Merlin sobbed when Arthur pulled his fingers out. He tried to stroke himself, to use Arthur's spit on his cock to bring himself off when Arthur let him go.

He lost every attempt at any sort of coordination when Arthur pushed his slicked cock in.

It was too slow. It was too slow by far. Merlin wanted the ache of penetration, the dull-bluntness that would quickly transform into pleasure. But it never came, and all he felt was a frantic, trembling shudder when Arthur finally bottomed out and stayed there.

"Love you," Arthur whispered. His hips rolled before drawing back obscenely and fucking in. "Love you so much."

Merlin reached for him, but Arthur took his hands and gently guided them away, holding them down for a moment before letting go.

"Let me take care of you," Arthur said, his breath hot against Merlin's cheek. He bit at Merlin's jaw before soothing it with a kiss.

It was sensuous and stirring, quenching and suffocating, a thorough fucking, a complete tear-down, just like Arthur promised. Merlin clung to his magic with the barest fingertips, letting go to chase after a bone-battering climax.

Arthur thrust a few more times before shuddering in his own release. He sank down and settled on
top of Merlin, and they traded lazy, dizzying kisses before they gave up entirely. They curled up around each other, sweaty and sticky, until they caught their breath again.

"Love you," Merlin whispered. His eyes drifted shut, and he smiled when Arthur pressed a kiss on his shoulder and held him tight.

Merlin didn't drift off to sleep. Not exactly. He was hyper aware of Arthur's warmth, of the blankets that were rearranged on top of them despite the mess they were going to be in the morning. He could almost feel Arthur's heartbeat and the faint thrum of blood pulsing through his veins.

He could feel electricity humming through his laptop. He could almost taste the glowing backlight from the laptop, ozone and metallic. There was a rustle and a faint clang from the wall heater, the sound of someone turning over in their bed, the leaves fluttering on the trees, the wind blowing in errant whirls and whorls.

And, beneath it all, Merlin could feel his magic.

It flowed with the rush of a torrential waterfall but rumbled with the barest murmur. It surged like a monsoon but barely kissed the skin. It made the earth slide and shift, but the ground was steady beneath him.

His magic tickled his skin. It nestled, like a fledging bird rooting through its' mother's feathers, looking for warmth. It settled onto Merlin as if it were a blanket.

Merlin froze.

His breath came in short, panicky gulps. He grasped the blankets. He shut his eyes tightly, and inwardly struggled to pull all his magic in.


"No, I --"

"Open your eyes," Arthur whispered, and Merlin did just that, turning his head away. He caught Arthur's smile but didn't dare look at Arthur at all, in case something happened. "Your eyes turn gold when you use your magic. Did you know that?"

"Yeah, I know," Merlin whispered. He stared at a hideous porcelain piglet on the nearby bookshelf -- the bed and breakfast's idea of decoration, he supposed -- and wondered why his magic hadn't made it explode.

Yet.

"They're gold now," Arthur said. There was something like awe in his voice, even delight. "Fuck. You look gorgeous like this. More than usual."

"Shut up," Merlin said, rolling his eyes. He forced himself to concentrate. "I'm trying to --"

"Don't," Arthur said. "Leave it for a bit longer. Nothing's happening, is it?"

"Something will," Merlin pointed out.

"Only if you want it to," Arthur said. "It's always only when you want it to."

Merlin shook his head. Arthur caught his jaw and squirmed until he was half on top of Merlin and there was no way to look away. "What does it feel like?"
"Like a walking time bomb," Merlin muttered, shuttering his eyes. He freed an arm to push Arthur off, but Arthur barely moved. "I can't leave it like this. Everyone will be able to tell. Just look at me - -"

"If you wear your pants over your trousers and walk around wearing a sign that says, I've got magic, then, yes, I suppose everyone will be able to tell," Arthur said, his tone magnanimous.

"Don't be a prat."

Arthur's broad grin returned.

"Can I --"

"One minute," Arthur said.

Merlin held his breath.

Arthur leaned in and kissed Merlin; Merlin swatted him away ineffectually and breathed again.

"They're not as bright anymore, now. Your eyes, I mean. Are you --"

"I'm not doing anything," Merlin said. He leaned his head back on the pillow, tilting until he stared at the ceiling. His fingers curled around Arthur's arms, and he knew that he was holding on for dear life, like a drowning man grasping at a floating safety ring.

"And nothing's happening, is it?" Arthur said. He sounded smug, but he sounded happy too. When Merlin pinched Arthur, he didn't pinch as hard as he wanted. "Gaius was right."

Merlin grit his teeth. He shook his head a little.

"Another minute," Arthur said.

"This isn't a bloody PT round," Merlin snapped.

"Yes, it is," Arthur said, his tone hard. "It is, Merlin. You didn't have a choice with this. You fell in a lifetime of bad habits because of something someone else did to you without your knowledge or permission. You have to undo it, Merlin, and I'm going to help you. It's not going to be easy, and it's going to take time --"

"You don't know what you're doing," Merlin said. "You don't know what it feels like."

Arthur didn't say anything. Not right away. He bowed his head, looking down; Merlin felt the brush of Arthur's fingers along his side, tracing the dragon tattoo. Arthur raised his chin to catch Merlin's eyes, and there was something indescribable in them, barely visible in the faint illumination in the room. When Arthur spoke, Merlin had to strain to hear him. "Yes, I do."

Merlin looked away, his eyes watering for no reason. He closed his eyes when Arthur stroked his cheek, running his hand down to rest it against Merlin's throat. Merlin focused on that weight and warmth and did his best to ignore the faint buzzing under his skin.

If he ignored the absolute, complete terror of not having his magic close at hand, of feeling it spread
and dissipate, to crest and ebb like the waves of an ocean, he had to admit that he didn't feel... badly. Somewhat concerned, absolutely. Completely worried, yes. On the very edge of panic, definitely.

And yet, there was something strange, nearly comforting, about not being in control, of not needing to unconsciously claw back at his magic lest he suffer some sort of repercussion that he couldn't ever remember having to endure. He wasn't going to admit that to Arthur.

However much that Merlin hated Gaius right now for not telling Merlin what had been done to him, Gaius' guess about what was happening to Merlin was -- probably -- correct. And Arthur had been thinking about it while Merlin had been too busy trying to... trying to keep himself from flying apart.

Merlin's instinct was to pull everything together. It was a struggle not to try that now. One more minute, Arthur had asked, and Merlin was trying.

It was easier when there was a distraction.

"This... this particular PT... Is it going to involve a lot of sex?" Merlin asked casually.

Arthur huffed a laugh in the crook of Merlin's neck.

"I just think... if a good training program needs a good foundation, maybe frequent sex in as many positions as possible might be a requirement to get back in fighting shape --"

"Merlin," Arthur said, rolling his eyes. He propped himself up, looming over Merlin, and kissed him.

ooOoOoo

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not out of ideas yet," Will warned.

Bryn's old house was a bust. Tristan's duplex was abandoned -- the blue-haired woman living there didn't know "anyone named Tristan, and anyway, he sounds like a plonker". There was no forwarding address, telephone numbers had either been changed or disconnected, and every NWO haunt that they had gone to? Empty, deserted, or sorely lacking in its regular clientele.

Kay shut his mouth with an audible click. He had been about to tell Will, What, exactly, do you expect? You turned on them, of course they'll disappear. Plus, all the bollocks going on, haven't you seen the news? 'Course they've scattered. They're getting ready. The expression on Will's face, however, told him that poking the angry beast was a bad idea.

Will had been that way ever since Arthur called him to warn him -- something he heard on his way across the water to get back to England. MI-6 was hunting for him; it didn't help matters any that Will had to duck the CIA, too. And when it came on top of having to tell the CIA there wouldn't be a meeting with his "boss" and negotiating a hand-delivery of the so-called package that Arthur wanted?

Will stomped through the days ready to bite through steel. If there was anything that Kay had learned about Will, it was that, for all that he hated authority, Will certainly expected people to snap-to when he told them to do something. He wasn't a leader, far from it, but Kay couldn't help wondering if it was a sniper thing. Gwaine got like this, too.
And, just like Gwaine, Will was getting reckless. Arthur had asked them to track down all the NWO members they knew about, because whatever they were planning, they were going to do it soon. The more they looked and failed to find hide and hair, the more bloodthirsty Will got. He'd threatened at least two people in the last three hours with cutting their heads off if they didn't get with the program.

He'd made a waitress burst into tears. He'd offended an older woman who had been offering to help. He'd terrified a cab driver who had taken the wrong turn.

Kay liked his head where it was, so he stayed quiet. Kathy had already had a go at him when he told her it was time to evacuate. While Will snickered in the background, Kay and Kathy bickered until she had agreed, but she wouldn't be budging until she'd settled a few things, made certain her friends would be all right, and packed essentials.

And by the way she had said essentials, Kay suspected that there would be a blag in his future, except he would be robbing not a bank vault, but the storeroom contents of a witchcraft store. Probably the one Kathy owned.

It might end up being too much, but considering the situation, Kay was fairly confident that no one on the team would turn away a bit of magical influence when everything went to shite.

They left Kathy back at the apartment with her express promise that she would be careful and that she wouldn't go anywhere without telling them first. If it had been up to Kay, Kay would have taken Kathy along with them on their hunt for the NWO.

Except.

It was too dangerous. They didn't know what the NWO would do next. Depending on their next move, people would start to panic, and...

It would be pandemonium. Kay didn't want Kathy anywhere near the thick of it if the herd mentality kicked in when the shite hit the fan.

If the team could find and slow down the NWO, they would do it. And they were trying. Kay and Will had been all over the city twice -- close to three times, now, and this time it was with a fine tooth comb. There was no trace of any of the people Will had met in his brief time with them. They'd vanished.

"Under no circumstances do you let him go to the Pentagram," Arthur said over the phone. "Wait for us."

"You think they're there?" Kay asked. He was already out of earshot, but he moved away some more for good measure. There was something in Arthur's tone, and Kay couldn't help but feel a nervous flutter at the base of his neck, his hackles rising but without any real sense of where the danger was.

"Merlin said it was pretty heavily reinforced. Remember all those sigils he saw outside the building?"

"I do," Kay said, though he hadn't seen them himself. Merlin's reaction when he'd recounted the story had been memorable though.

"Why would he sink that much magic in a building if he didn't plan to use it at some point?" Arthur asked quietly, almost reluctantly. Kay understood; if he were in Arthur's shoes, he wouldn't want to even hint where the bad guys were. At any other time, Kay would be offended, except he knew that
they didn't have any real defence against magic, and the Pentagram apparently stank of it.

"You think he's there?"

Arthur didn't answer right away. There was a long silence. In the background, Kay could hear the rolling tires over the pavement, the soft breath of someone sleeping nearby. "If none of Will's contacts pan out, this is the only lead we've got left."

Kay had managed to distract Will from the Pentagram as much as possible, but if Will was running out of ideas --

"There's a place," Will said finally. "We can try there. If it's empty, we'll have to hit the clubs, see if anyone knows where they've gone."

"Fine," Kay said, willing to do anything to keep Will from charging into the Pentagram and getting them killed. "Train?"

"Train," Will said, keeping his usual rejoinder of good luck flagging a cab in this to himself. Will's mood was sour and turning desperate. Kay wasn't much better, but he was using Will as a distraction. If he didn't keep Will in line, who would? The last thing they needed was to get picked up by the police, or, worse, by MI-6, and being held for interrogation. The most frightening scenario was still walking into a trap set by the CIA or the NWO and going through round two of a kidnapping and torturing session, and Kay was quite done with that rubbish.

They didn't speak on the train. It was lightly crowded -- for some definition of "lightly crowded", where every seat was taken and all that was left was standing room, but navigable and not sardine-packed -- and gloomily, ominously silent. This was the British stiff upper lip at play, Kay knew. Stoically making their way through the day while pretending that nothing was wrong despite the bombs about to go off around their heads.

The news wasn't good. Daytime telly and regular radio broadcasts had been pre-empted by increasingly alarming information from around the world. The Panama Canal collapse. The ferries in New Zealand inexplicably sinking to the bottom of the ocean. The Sydney Harbour Bridge shearing off in the middle, as if it had been diagonally cut in two. The Akashi-Kaikyo Bridge had completely collapsed. Island ferries in Greece crashed, sank, or burned, depending on the time of day.

It didn't stop there.

Surface railway train lines had been destroyed; several derailments had been recorded worldwide before any government got their act together and sent out notices to halt all further movement. Two large airliners went down somewhere over Turkey, one was lost at sea, and several more crashed across the continental United States. Except for short, unscheduled emergency hops, all flights were delayed.

The world was at a standstill. Hell, Kay was surprised that the London lines were still running.

As soon as he thought that, he had a bad feeling.

It was a really bad feeling.

The first incidents had to do with cutting off the most inaccessible transport routes between continents -- those that were underground. Bridges and ferries were next. The railroads were next.

And now --
Kay turned to Will. "I think we should get off the train."
Will half-shrugged, shaking his head. "We're almost there."

Kay grimaced. He looked around.

The passengers all around them were in a sort of dull state of alertness, lulled to a sense of complacency by the regular clack-clack-clack along the rails and the electronic announcements. There was a grim set to their expressions, as if they were trying not to think too much about the pervasive terrorist threat by distracting themselves with more mundane day-to-day issues -- had they shut off the stove that morning? Was the kettle still boiling? The kids needed to be picked up for a dentist appointment --

It was all very casual, very normal, very… there was something off, but Kay couldn't put his finger on it. He was willing to say that it was an electric current in the air, a lingering static charge, or even the taste of ozone, faint and lingering, but too familiar for someone who rode the train regularly, because it wasn't any different than the grind of metal wheels against a metal rail.

Kay shook his head. "No, mate. We need to get off now."

Will turned to look at him with raised brows. The train lurched to a stop, but Will didn't move. He scanned the faces of the passengers who hadn't made any move to get up and studied those who came onboard. Kay already knew what Will would see -- lingering anxiety, a detachment associated with an invaded personal space, indifference.

He grabbed Will and shoved him toward the doors, but it was too late. The doors slid shut and the train rumbled to life, accelerating through the tunnels.

"The fuck's the matter with you?" Will snarled. He wrenched his arm out of Kay's grasp and turned around. "It's just one more stop --"

"No, it's not one more stop," Kay snapped. "It's --"

The train lurched, as if hitting a new gear, accelerating. The tunnel lights flickered past through the windows in a blink-blink-blink pattern that was both blinding and dizzying, but served to wake up their fellow passengers, who were now sitting straight up and looking around, puzzled. Some of them made questioning noises, and Will --

Finally, Will realized that there was something wrong.

The next station blurred past. The train kept going.

The uneasiness in the train car reached deafening volumes, drowning out the drawn-out claaaaaa-aaack.

"Fuck," Will said, succinctly.

"Back of the train," Kay said, already moving in that direction. He knew what was happening. There was only one reason why they would be accelerating -- if it was a bomb, they would continue on at their normal speed until it went off. They were on a collision course. Louder, he said, "Everybody! Get to the back of the train!"

Some passengers gave him a bored glance, if they gave him one at all. Other people grabbed at him, asking questions. Why? What's happening? Where are we --
Kay pulled past them. He didn't have time for questions that he didn't have the answers to. He heard Will start to answer a couple of frightened girls, but Will gave it up as a lost cause when the girls started sobbing and screaming over whatever it was that Will had to say. Kay reached the rear of the car, scanning for the lock release. There used to be a trick to this, something he'd learned in his ill-gotten teenage years, but the trains had been updated at some point, and --

"Fuck, I really could use Owain right now," Kay said. A small charge would be enough to open the doors. In desperation, Kay tried to force the door to slide --

A hand slammed down on his shoulder. It wasn't Will -- it was a kid with two hoodies and a beat-up army jacket, his trousers filthy, his shoes held together with tar-stained duct tape. "Here," the kid said, and he did something elaborate with a flathead screwdriver that he pulled out from his jacket.

The door opened just as the train started to jerk and stutter. A shower of sparks flew on either side of the train, bright in the dark tunnel. The conductor must have clued in that the train was no longer under his control and was trying to stop it, or at least slow it down, but it didn't seem to work. If anything, hot metal shorn off from the wheels or the rails was flying in the air, burning skin.

Kay held up his arms to protect himself and stepped across, taking the kid's screwdriver to jam the next car open.

The kid followed after Kay; two other boys made it across after Will, their eyes wide and white with fear, but somehow, inexplicably, trusting Kay and Will to keep them safe. Many anxious people looked up at them as they entered the new car, and Kay raised his voice to be heard over the din. "Get to the back of the train! Now!"

No one moved until they had already gone past; a middle-aged business woman with more common sense than the rest of them had gotten up and was already directing people to move aside and to let them through. Kay jerry-rigged that door open, went across and opened the next, and helped the woman to the other side, because he sure could use someone to clear the way.

The kids and Will were right behind him, and more passengers had joined the queue. The uncertainty and growing panic was suffocating, but no one was stampeding just yet.

They kept moving.

By the fourth car, Kay realized that someone else must have had the same thought to herd everyone to the back of the train, because it was deserted and the back door was open. They moved across and reached the fifth and last car, crowding in with a half-dozen of very frightened university students.

"Now what?" the kid who had helped open the first door asked.

Kay pressed his lips together. He didn't know. He looked over everyone's heads, but now there was a sea of pervasive confusion, as people wedged in wherever they could.

The lights flickered on and off.

The loud clack-clack-claaa-aaack ebbed until it was an insistent clicking.

And everything was silent.

Kay met Will's eyes.

"Brace! Everyone, brace yourselves!"
Kay barely had time to cocoon himself in a corner, dragging the nearest kid that he could grab along with him. He threw his arm around the boy's shoulders and grabbed a pole.

A high-pitched, screeching sound tore through the train. The lights crackled, flared, went out.

The roar of sound was overwhelming. It was a crash, a crumple, a *tearing* of metal. Glass shattered, tinkling. Plastic disintegrated with a strange creak-tear-crack. The floor rippled, the ceiling warbled.

For a moment, a brief moment, there was *weightlessness*. It was followed by a sudden drag of gravity that went nowhere, and no real sense of which way was up.

And, suddenly, the train *twisted* and tore and compacted. Every loose item, every passenger were thrown *forward*. Kay hit something -- he must have blacked out, because he wasn't upright anymore, not anywhere close to it, and there was a heavy weight pressing down on him. Someone screamed in his ear.

The forward press lasted all of a few seconds -- maybe more. Kay couldn't tell. Almost as soon as he was thrown forward, he went sliding backward. The weight crushing him scrambled off, kicking at his ribs; there was a brush of air where someone's foot came down too close to his head.

Someone dragged him to his feet just as they came to a sudden, jarring stop. Kay hit the back of his head against a wall that had no business being there. He felt something pinch hard into his leg. He suddenly realized that he was holding onto the same pole that he'd grabbed before the crash, only….

It wasn't even bolted down. Somehow, he'd torn it clean off.

The roof creaked. It grunted. It caved in.

Suddenly, the pole was wedged in place and Kay's flailing scramble for cover was jarred to a stop. The warm weight that he was holding against him sobbed and shuddered and wouldn't let go. There was a thump and the car jarred once, twice, bouncing violently against the tunnel walls. Bright white and orange sparks from outside where the metal body of the train scraped along the rails provided the only illumination.

They were being *pushed*.

In the brief flashes, all Kay could see were panicked faces contorted with terror.

"Will! WILL!"

He was wasting his breath. He couldn't even hear his own voice over all the noise. He glanced around, panicked, trying to find a way out. He had a sinking feeling that this wasn't going to be over until the entire train was crumpled like a soda can, and he didn't much fancy being on the inside when it happened. He spotted the rear emergency exit --

There were bodies on the ground. He had to step over them.

The kid was still latched onto Kay, though he wasn't crying anymore. He'd settled into some sort of hundred-yard stare mixed with denial so strong, the kid was just shy of pinching himself to wake himself up from this bad dream.

Fuck if Kay didn't want to pinch everyone on the train to wake them all up from this bad dream.

They made it to the emergency exit after a wobbling walk that felt half as if he were walking on eggshells and rubber balls while the entire car jiggled around, half as if he was being dragged
through molasses. The emergency switch didn't budge, and Kay didn't know why he was even surprised that it didn't move. The frame was bent; the latch was probably wedged between two pieces of steel and going nowhere fast.

The car crumpled some more. The wail of metal wasn't loud enough to muffle the screams of terror this time.

Kay took the kid's arms from around his waist. It was a struggle, because the kid had turned into an octopus and didn't want to let Kay go. "Hey. Hey, you gotta let me go. I need to get the door open -- look, just stay with me, stay close," Kay said, putting the kid against the wall on the side of the doorway, within easy reach. The kid blinked at him, eyes white and bright in the dark, and Kay could hear his quiet whine of terror.

It gave him chills.

He ignored them -- and the memories of a brutal childhood the sound evoked. He took a step back and slammed a shoulder into the emergency door. He did it again and again until he could feel it give. He gave the door handle another try, but it was still stuck. Kicking at it didn't do much good.

The train car shifted and jerked. It crumpled some more.

"Like the fucking trash compactor on the Death Star," Will said, stumbling over... something -- Kay didn't want to see what. It was bad enough that he had to step over several dead or unconscious people to get to this point. It felt like he'd been doing that too much of late.

Instead, he let relief wash over him that Will was all right. Or rather, that he was alive. He was bleeding from a deep gash in his head, there was a nasty bruise along his face and jaw, and he held his arm close to his body, almost as if he'd broken it, or something had broken him. Kay couldn't tell.

He'd check later. The continuing sound of crackling metal reminded him of more pressing issues.

"Door's jammed," Kay said. Will pulled him out of the way and took out his gun, but when he tried to raise it, he winced. That was when Kay noticed how Will was standing, and that he was in pain. "Give me that --"

"Oi, not completely helpless here," Will snapped, the weapon changing hands. He fired it with his left hand, shooting the reinforced Plexiglas window.

It didn't shatter as expected. The bullets went clean through like hot knives through butter, leaving holes but barely indenting the surface.

"For fuck's sake," Will snarled, dropping his arm. He holstered his gun clumsily. "Can't we catch a break?"

Kay didn't answer him. He shouldered the door again.

And again.

The car shifted. It creaked. Kay's battering ram attempts at the door coincided with the deforming train.

The door gave.

Kay flew out the open door, barely catching himself in time. He crashed on the ground hard, but rolled to absorb most of the blow, and got to his feet with a groan. His left leg collapsed under him
when he tried to put his weight on it. When he checked for injuries, his hands came away, slick with blood.

He ignored that, too, and hobbled to the train. The sides were full of sharp and rounded edges and the length of it was less than half of what it had been. He couldn't make out the rest of the train; it was hidden under cover of darkness made all the heavier by the rubble and dust floating in the damp tunnel air.

The kid he'd helped was the first one out after him. Will was next.

And after that, there was nothing.

The train *crunched*. It thrashed toward the left like a dying animal and was still. Kay went to the opening.

"Come on! Get out of there! We've got a way out!"

There were too many stunned faces. Too many blank faces. Too many terrified faces.

Too many blank faces with empty eyes.

No one reacted.


This time, the train thrashed toward the left. The metal compacted. The opening suddenly collapsed.

Kay heard a young woman sobbed. She crawled toward the opening, a bundle in her arms. Kay started to tell her to leave the backpack behind, to just leave it and to keep crawling, godsdamn it --

The top of the train crushed down. The woman screamed as debris fell on her body, pining her in place. Kay half-crawled into the suddenly narrow opening, feeling a hand on his belt, pulling him back.

"Not worth your life, mate!" Will shouted.

Kay resisted. The train collapsed another metre. Any more than that, and he wouldn't be able to get out. He tried to reach the woman, but there was too much in the way. Half of a plastic seat. The lower half of someone's torso. Railings and bars.

*Just a bit more*, he told himself. He stretched out, his fingers catching fabric. It was coarse, like tweed. He tried to get closer.

He was just too far.

Whatever magical force was acting on the train, it seemed that it had kept all of its power for this last punch, because the Plexiglas windows blew out, the roof collapsed with an ear-splitting *skreee-eeee - - -*

And Kay was wrenched out, falling several metres away. The train flattened, the magic stubbing it out as if it were a discarded cigarette.

He was only vaguely aware of Will dragging him further and further away, of the kid helping Will carry Kay’s weight. They didn't stop moving until they were some safe distance away.

The dim lights in the tunnel -- the lights that hadn't been completely smashed when the train went off
the rails and crashed -- painted the sight in every shade of dismal and horror. The air was thick with the smell of burnt ozone and metal. Dust hung immobile, as if frozen, not daring to settle. The malevolent magic seemed to have ebbed away, because the train settled with the creak of a building made out of old bones, and something dripped.

*Drip-drip.*

Kay told himself that it was engine oil and coolant fluid. He didn't want it to be blood.

"Fuck," he whispered, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. He ran his hands through his hair and didn't dare close his eyes. That last sight -- the woman reaching out for him, her mouth moving in unheard pleas for help -- it had burned itself into his mind. "Fuck."

"Can't save them all," Will said.

Kay dropped his hands and twisted around, giving Will a dark glare. "So fucking reassuring, you are."

Kay wanted to say more, but he bit his tongue. It wouldn't help either of them if he lost his temper now. He knew, logically, that he couldn't save those who didn't want to be saved. He couldn't force them to follow him. He had tried -- they'd gotten some people out to the rear of the train. Some of them had survived the initial crash none the worse for wear. That woman *had* wanted to escape, but when half of the train had fallen on top of her, it wouldn't have mattered if he'd managed to pull her out. She would have died anyway. Her injuries from the crush damage would have killed her before the emergency medical services could make it down to the tunnel in time.

He had one consolation, but only one. One of the kids had gotten out.

Kay turned around and looked at the boy. It was the same one who had handed him the screwdriver early on in this whole cock-up. He was in shambles, but it was hard to tell if his jacket was freshly ripped or if it had always been that way. There was blood on his face, but it didn't look like it belonged to him, and Kay touched his own head only to come away with his palm tacky and reddish-brown.

The kid looked younger now than he'd first seemed to be. Maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. Maybe less. It was hard to tell under the layers of clothes and the dirt on his face or the wild, brown shag of his hair. There was a hollow to his cheeks where there should be baby fat, but life on the streets had a way of taking everything soft away.

Kay was a prime example of that.

"Hey, kid," Kay said, glancing down when he felt a tug. Will was tying a torn piece of fabric around Kay’s leg, staunching the bleeding. He'd shrugged out of his coat, and his shirtsleeve was missing. The sight gave him pause -- Will was the biggest wanker in the fucking universe, even worse than Gwaine, sometimes, but there were times, like this one, when he understood why Merlin was friends with this guy. He gave Will a brief nod of thanks before waving at the kid, trying to get his attention. "Kid, get over here."

"It's not *kid*. It's Bran," the kid said stubbornly. He walked over on unsteady legs, collapsing in a heap when Kay dragged him down to check him for injuries. Bran was quick to smack his hands away and scramble out of reach. "Whoa, hands off, pervo!"

Will snorted.
"Checking you to make sure you're all right," Kay said. He made another come here motion, but Bran stayed resolutely out of reach.

"Use your words then, mate. A warning's nice. Give a bloke a chance to say no," Bran said. 
"'Course, you could always ask, and I could tell you I'm all right. Leastways, I can walk, but can't say the same about you."

"I can walk," Kay said, taking Will's offered hand up with a grunt. He tested his weight on his bad leg; it didn't give out and there was no unexpected weakness. The wound must not have been deep, or Will would have said so.

"Probably shouldn't, though," Bran said, eyeing Kay critically.

"Let me rephrase. We need to get moving. Get up," Kay said.

"You're not the boss of me," Bran said.

"I like him," Will said.

"You would," Kay said.

"Reminds me of you," Will said.

Kay half-turned and gave Will a long look. "Is that your arse-backward way of saying that you like me, then?"

"I didn't say that," Will scowled, pulling his jacket on.

"Oi, keep the lover's spat for later, more pressing issues at hand," Bran said, getting up. He brushed his bum and walked over. "Shouldn't we wait for Rescue?"

"You can wait if you want," Will said, patting himself up and down one-handed. He touched the gash on his head; it had mostly stopped bleeding, but head wounds were the worst, bleeding like a fountain for a flesh wound. Will's injury was marginally worse than that, and Kay wondered if he should check Will for a concussion, but as long as Will was walking and talking semi-coherently, he was probably as healthy as he would get. Kay wasn't sure what happened to Will's arm, but if Will wasn't saying anything, Kay wouldn't ask right now.

Will walked down the other way, away from the wreckage. Kay followed after him, limping.

After a few minutes, Bran caught up to them. "What about the people on the train?"

"If they're not dead, they'll be dead soon," Will said, his tone flat.

Kay glanced at Will, but didn't chide him. If Kay had answered, he might have been less blunt -- or worse. Either way, the kid didn't need coddling, and the way things were going, they would get much, much worse. It was better for Bran to understand that reality now, rather than later.

Although, given the way he was dressed, Bran probably knew more about reality than Will, and maybe nearly as much as Kay. Bran proved it when he didn't respond, but asked instead, "Why do you have a gun?"

"Because I'm a secret agent," Will said.

Kay laughed. So did Bran. But maybe there was something in Will's expression, because Bran's mocking laugh became uncertain and finally trickled to silence. Kay doubled over, heaving for
breath. When he sorted himself out, wiping the tears out of his eyes, he said, "So much for secret, if you announce it like that."

"Cover's blown, isn't it?" Will retorted, rubbing his nose. He stopped walking and came back to where Kay was standing, his weight heavy on his good leg. He put an arm under Kay's shoulders and started them back up the tracks.

"What's the rush?" Kay groused. He might complain, but he was glad to be moving. It kept his mind off the pain. And as long as they were going somewhere, he wasn't tempted to sit down and close his eyes.

"You know damn well what's the rush," Will said. "The bloody train crashed. You're bleeding like a butcher's taken a knife to you. Rescue's going to come swarming down any minute now -- well, when they've sorted out what's happened, anyway, if they haven't yet. We can't afford to be held up."

"I'm still bleeding?" Kay asked, glancing down. It was too dark to tell.

"That's what you got out of it? Bloody heck, you're thick --"

"Wait," Bran said, obviously deciding that they were the lesser of two evils, and caught up to them again. "You said "if". What did you mean by that? You don't think they know about the crash?"

"Might do," Will said, shrugging a shoulder and jarring Kay in the process. "Might not. Not many switches on this line. Where are the other trains? Think they got a cancel order just in time? Doubt it."

"Oh, shite," Kay said.

"Yes, that's right. Oh, shite. Move your fat arse a little faster, we might make it to the last station before we get flattened into pancakes," Will said.

Kay tried to hurry, but it wasn't much good. He was hobbling so much at this point that he was resting most of his weight on Will's shoulder, and Will was starting to show the strain of holding Kay upright. Kay still couldn't tell what was wrong with Will's other arm, and the set of his jaw was sign enough that he wasn't in the mood to talk about it yet.

"Just wedge me against the wall and go," Kay said.

"Not leaving you to Rescue. You know what they're like. A million questions, all those bloody IV lines, sticklers for protocols and rules. They'll hold you up, won't they? Won't let you go. And there's the police. You want to stick around to answer their questions?" Will said. "We'll make it."

"Or maybe not," Bran said, coming to Kay's other side. He took Kay's arm and draped it over his shoulders. They weren't of a height, and the kid was young; Kay didn't put any of his weight down. "Do you hear that? We got to move."

"Hear what?" Will asked.

There was a faint rumble. It was almost indistinguishable -- a slight vibration in the air, a tremor of tunnel walls and dust. If Kay put his ear on the rails, he would probably hear it, echoing through the metal like a tuning fork.

They made an awkward, uncoordinated tripod shuffle toward the faint yellow glow of a station stop in the distance. The rumbling was louder, but there was no sign of a train, and on a straight shot like this one, there definitely should have been. A pinpoint of headlight. At least.

It wasn't a double track. Not this one. The rails were split between tunnels and they'd been given the grace of avoiding another train entirely -- Kay wasn't certain what they had crashed into, but he'd seen Merlin's magic shield on more than one occasion and knew that it had enough stopping force to make bullets freeze in thin air. He didn't have to wonder what would happen if several sorcerers banded together to focus their powers for a single spell. He had a pretty good idea after seeing smashed bullets fall to the ground.


"Is it behind us?" Bran asked. In the dim light they just passed, Bran's expression was a combination of terrified and confused.

"No," Kay said.

Will started cursing louder.

"Save your bloody breath," Kay growled. "Let's just keep moving. It might miss us --"

"Fat chance of that," Bran said, and he suddenly let go of Kay's arm, dropping his weight. Kay lurched to the side, dragging Will along with him. "Yes. Here! Come over here! It's an access door --"

They had taken no more than three steps there when they heard the rattle of the doorknob and realized it was locked.

"Fuck," Bran said.

"Language," Will said.

"You swear," Bran accused.

"I've earned the privilege," Will said. Kay rolled his eyes, but he leaned against the wall when Will shifted to the side, trying to get a better look at the knob. He patted his jacket again with his free hand and made a soft, disappointed sound. "Left the lock picks in my other coat."

"You're wearing your other coat," Kay said wearily. He gauged the distance to the station and how close the train currently was by sound alone. There was no way that they'd make it, with or without him. The ledge that they were standing on was probably wide enough that they could stay where they were and not get flattened, but the downdraft of a high-speed train might suck them in, anyway.

And, what was worse, they weren't that far from the wreck. The train was moving fast. There would be no braking in time to avoid it, and there were worse things than downdraft. A flaming blowback was one of them.

"Why the fuck aren't there lights from the train," Kay mumbled, squinting against the darkness. Beside him, Will had taken a step back and was kicking at the doorknob. He fell, stumbling down the ledge, and made a low, strangled sound of pain. "You all right?"

"Do I look all right to you?" Will snapped. Bran helped him back up on the ledge and Will leaned against the wall next to Kay, heaving for breath. None of them spoke until Will huffed a breath and raised his voice to be heard over the clack-clack-clack of an oncoming train. "Go on, then. Say it."
"Say what?"

"You wanted to get off at the last station," Will said.

"So?"

"I didn't," Will said. When Kay didn't answer, Will huffed. Whatever he was about to say was drowned out by the engine roar and rush of wind as the dark train rumbled by.

Kay grabbed the kid and held on to the wall. The suction wasn't quite enough to drag any of them off the ramp, but it gave them a disorienting vertigo. Kay felt Will stumble, waver, and catch himself.

Then, just as suddenly as it came, the train was gone. Kay took a moment to clear his head and reminded them, "It's going to crash. We can't be here."

"It's gonna crash," Bran repeated, panic finally settling in and grabbing hold. He started to run toward the station but stopped and turned around.

Kay tried his best to run, but his leg was hurting and he felt lightheaded, as if he'd lost too much blood or had been hit with an adrenaline jolt that he hadn't needed. Will staggered, holding his arm close to his chest and looking around as if he saw something and was trying to track it, and he wasn't moving in a straight line.

Signs of concussion. Kay swore silently; they couldn't afford to be less than their best right now.

"Go," Kay shouted at Bran, grabbing Will's arm and giving him a shove in the right direction. He half-hobbled, half-hopped in a jerky run, but he wasn't moving anywhere fast. Bran hesitated, but eventually went, and had already reached the platform when Will and Kay were only halfway there.

Behind them, there was a loud, reverberating sound. Kay couldn't even describe it. The closest word he could come up with was an impacting explosion, but if he allowed himself some creative license, he would say it was closer to a disintegration.

A faint whoosh of air was followed by a complete silence, as if they were standing in the eye of a storm. Kay didn't hesitate -- he grabbed Will and threw them both to the ground.

Nothing happened.

Seconds passed and there was still nothing.

Kay felt Will try to shrug off his hand and twist his body to look behind them. The expression of stark terror was all that Kay needed to grab Will and to cover them both with his coat.

The flush of heat was instantaneous. He didn't know where he felt it the most -- in his feet, his legs, his torso. It didn't matter. It was so much heat, not quite battering down but blowing over and past, like water splashed from a fire hose and they were getting hit by the high-pressure spray. And it kept coming.

Will made a sound and looked as if he were about to bolt, but Kay held him down. He had an idle thought that Merlin had been easier to protect the last time they'd gotten hit by a blast of flame, but that went away quickly when he remembered that Merlin had been unconscious at the time and Kay hadn't been entirely certain if Merlin had been alive.

The heat took away his ability to form conscious thought. It hurt. It sank deep into his bones. He refused to think of himself on fire. He convinced himself he was in a sauna with too much dry heat
because the wanker at the other end had emptied the bucket on his head instead of pouring a ladle of water on the stones. He couldn't be on fire. The frightened, animal part of his brain wanted to run, but as long as he believed that he was all right, he would be.

Will scrambled and pulled away.

"Will," Kay shouted -- or tried to. What came out instead was a searing noise too much like a scream, mangled by the roasting oxygen. He coughed, and if there was any solace, it was that Will hadn't run.

It lasted only seconds. Not even a minute. An incredible chill came over him, a temperature drop of dozens of degrees. The air was a little easier to breathe. He still felt as if he were burning.

Kay braved a quick look. The tunnel was dark. It smelled like charcoal smoke -- too much starter fluid -- and metallic ozone.

He rolled off, away from Will, and kept rolling, twisting his body from side to side before sitting up and patting himself down before realizing that he really wasn't on fire. He was steaming; there was smoke smouldering from his coat. His hair was singed, the rubber on his boots was a little soft, and the fabric of his clothes was hot enough that it was probably on the flashpoint of ignition, but he was all right.

Thank fuck.

He went over to Will. Will was a bit worse off, but at least he wasn't burning like a human torch. The hair on top of his head was singed where it had been exposed. His left leg must have been right in the blowback and exposed, because there was a burn on a strip of skin that looked like it was considering studying for its third degree. Will was also a little dazed, more out of it than he had been earlier, but he got to his feet well enough and followed Kay when Kay dragged them both toward the platform.

"Oh, holy shite, you made it," Bran said, wide-eyed and disbelieving and nearly slipping off the platform in his haste to get to them. He pulled Will while Kay gave Will a leg up, and the two of them together helped Kay make the climb.

The platform was a strange mixture of empty and crowded -- the usual slew of passengers waiting for the train had either vanished when they heard the impact of the first crash, or they'd gotten wise to the tunnels being shut down when a second train had gone past with all its lights off. Those who were still on the platform were like deer in the headlights of a lorry barrelling down the roads in the pitch of night, unsure of their next move, while the trickling stream of emergency crews were just arriving.

"Let's go," Will said, grabbing Kay's arm.

They hurried out the exit, both of them bowing their heads when they made it out, pushing their way past the frantic crowd lingering there and blocking access or egress. They were a block and a half over, studiously ignoring the flashing lights and sirens driving past them and heading towards the station, when they realized that Bran was still with them.

"Go home, kid," Will said.

Bran spread his hands in the air. He gave them an incredulous look. "Do I look like I've got a home to go to? At this rate, with all the bollocks going on the telly and the radio, does it look like anyone's going to have a home to go? I don't know about you, but it looks to me like the shite's hitting the fan,
hard, and at this point? I figure I'm better off with you two so-called secret agents."

"He's the secret agent," Kay said, thumbing at Will.

"Whatever," Bran said. "You're just as badass as he is. So, where are we going?"

Will and Kay exchanged a glance. Kay inhaled deeply before sighing. Bran was right. The shite wasn't just going to hit the fan -- it would hit the bloody ozone layer and splatter over the entire planet. Bran wasn't going to be better off on his own, and, in any case, he'd proven himself steady. Kay nodded. "May as well."

"Your responsibility." Will groused. He turned to Bran and poked a finger in his chest. "You do what we say when we say it, no arguments, and you stay the fuck out of our way."

"Whatever you say, boss," Bran said, holding his hands up in surrender. He was grinning.

They kept walking. Kay kept his head down, content to let Will lead the way. Bran kept in step at Kay's elbow, fidgety and nervous and looking over his shoulder every few minutes.

The first and second crashes couldn't have been more than ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago, but Kay felt as if he'd just lived through an eternity of Hell. People were still rushing toward the station, no doubt to see if they could help. Most were likely only there to gawk much in the same way that people gawked at car crashes. The contrast in their movements -- most people were heading towards, rather than away -- was bound to catch someone's attention. They didn't blend in with the crowds right now, not with the blood down Will's face or the way he was holding his arm close to his body. Kay didn't think he looked much better, but at least his trousers were a dark navy blue, and the blood didn't much stand out against them unless someone looked closely.

He just hoped they wouldn't be stopped by the police or a well-meaning citizen who would urge them to go to casualty. They really didn't have the time for that. The NWO was hitting transportation right now. They would hit the rest of the infrastructure soon, if Arthur's predictions were anything to go by.

"Where are we going?" Kay asked, finally.

Will started to shake his head, but thought better of it. "The plan n-- the original plan -- It's a friend's of Freya's. Met her once. Shagged Bryn on a regular basis whenever Freya wasn't around --"

"Some mate," Kay grunted.

"Yeah, well, wasn't as if Frey didn't know already. Said thank fuck whenever Bryn grabbed his coggies and headed out, saying he was going to the pub," Will said.

Once, Kay had wanted to know why women did that -- stayed with the blokes who treated them badly instead of falling for the men who would put them on a pedestal. He had even asked Kathy to share her wisdom, but remained as much in the dark now as he had been then.

He'd learned not to ask again.

"I'm thinking it's a long shot. The slag finds out Bryn's long gone, she would've moved on instead of waiting for him," Will said, raising a pointed eyebrow. "Just like the rest of them. Fucking wasting our time on this, checking all the closets and rattling the shutters."

"Are you talking in code? Because it's pretty obvious code," Bran said. "I mean, I'm just a kid, but even I could do better. Like, oh, the chickens have flown the coop, or something like that."
"You, shut up," Will said, but there was no real heat to his voice. He turned to Kay. "The ferries sinking, the train to Paris? That was the coyote's howl. The chickens have flown the coop."

Bran's laugh was full of glee. Kay wondered if he needed to check Bran to make sure he hadn't gotten a concussion, too.

"We'd be best off going to their most secure location," Will said.

No, Kay thought to himself silently, remembering Arthur's orders. Don't go there, Will.

"The club. We're going to their club," Will said. He turned to Bran. "How old are you, kid?"

"Old enough," Bran said guardedly.

"Not old enough, I warrant," Will said. "You'll stay outside."

Kay closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes, he stared heavenward half in prayer for mercy, but the clouds didn't have any respite for him. If anything, it didn't have any sympathy, period.

It started to rain.

"Fucking hell," Will exclaimed. "Give us a goddamned break!"

"Language," Bran chided.

Kay grunted and pulled the collar of his coat up to keep the rain from trickling down the back of his neck. He glanced sideways, watching the reflection of a windshield of a car parked on the kerb, scanning for anyone who might be following them. His leg ached, his face throbbed, and there were aches and pains everywhere on his body that he didn't remember receiving.

If Arthur and Merlin wanted backup for when they were finally free and ready to hit the Pentagram, they were going to need to come up with alternate arrangements. Short of a healing potion, neither Kay nor Will were in any condition to --

They weren't in any condition, period.

He pulled his mobile and dialled a number. Merlin picked it up on the second ring.

"Hear about the train crash?" Kay asked by way of greeting. Will shot him a sidelong look, but didn't say anything.


"That's London for you," Kay said. He paused. "We were on that train."

There was a rustle, a shift, a quick word to whoever was nearby, and Merlin said, "You're on speaker. Are you all right?"

"In a manner of speaking. We're mobile, moving north from the station. Just missed the EMS. We didn't want to get delayed."

"How badly are you hurt?" Arthur asked.

Kay's smile was there-and-gone, because Arthur's first question would always be for the welfare of his men. Kay already knew what his next question would be, though, so he killed both birds with the same stone. "Will's got a concussion and... he's broken something, but won't say what. Deep cut in
my leg and half a pint of blood missing, but it's stopped --"

He touched his thigh. His trousers were still blood-damp.

"-- more or less."

"Where are you right now?" Arthur asked.

Kay glanced around. He spotted a few familiar landmarks before he saw the street name; he gave Arthur the crossroads and their direction. In the process, he happened to see the reflection in another windshield and on a storefront and recognized someone who had been behind them a couple of blocks ago.

There was a long silence as Arthur plotted them on a map -- at least, he was sure that the sound of paper crinkling in the background was exactly that. "You're going to the Pentagram."

"Appears so," Kay said. He put a hand on Bran's shoulder and squeezed. "I should mention that we have a tail."

As predicted, Bran tried to turn around, but Kay's firm grip kept him in place. Kay met Bran's wide eyes and gave him a small shake of his head before letting go. Bran must have gotten the hint, because he didn't try to spot whoever was after them.

"Fuckshite," Will grumbled.

"We're not far," Arthur said. "Keep walking. We'll find you."

"Stay on the line, while we're at it," Merlin said.

There was a pause filled with revving engines and a clatter -- Kay suspected that whomever was driving had decided to take the shortest route out of the traffic jam -- over the pavement and down the alley, from the sounds of it. They must have reached a clear patch, because Arthur asked, "What happened?"

"It's what we expected," Kay said, glancing at Bran. "Sorry, can't talk freely. We've acquired a stray. He was on the train with us, helped us get to a safe part when it started going all barmy. Good head on his shoulders, though. I can tell you the train accelerated, went off the rails, crashed against... something. When the smoke settled and the birds stopped tweeting around our heads, the..."

He sighed, glanced at Bran, and shrugged.

"Remember last summer when we told 'Vere he couldn't crush all the empty beer cans on his forehead?"

Bran started laughing.

"He was drunk," Kay said defensively. He pointed a finger in Bran's face. "Don't drink, kid. It's the fastest way to get stupid."

"Did he manage it?" Will asked.

"Don't remember," Kay said. He'd passed out because he'd helped the G's drink as much beer as they could when Bedivere's crushed beer can pile grew taller than the intact beer can pile. "Anyway, that's what happened."

"Yeah, that was weird," Bran said.
Kay put his hand on Bran's shoulder and guided him around the corner, forcing Will to detour and follow them. He jaywalked diagonally across the street, doubled back, and looked at his phone as if checking a map before bringing it to his ear.

From his new position, he got a good look at the man following them. He wore a ratty green jacket, black trousers, and a tweed cap. The collar of his coat was flipped up, his hands were in his pockets, and his moustache was a shade redder than his hair. He wasn't alone. There was a woman with him. She was head to toe in black, but stylishly so -- ankle boots, thighs, a black sweater with a stretched collar and a wide leather belt around a thin waist. She wore a little bolero-style leather jacket, the sleeves shoved up to her elbows despite the weather; there were silver bracelets jangling around her wrists.

Kay described them over the phone and gestured for Will to take the lead again. "They sound familiar to you?" He asked Arthur.

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. The Directory's files were incomplete, and what we have of MI-6's data isn't helpful. Are they close?"

"And getting closer." Kay resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder. "Nearly there, though. I need to put the phone down, I'm starting to look obvious."

"Stay on the line," Arthur said.

"Yes, sir," Kay said. He shoved his phone into his pocket.

"So those are the bad guys? They're the ones who blew up the train?" Bran's nose scrunched up, betraying him for the child he was, but his expression hardened in the next instant. "I saw her. Back on the platform."

"Must have seen us crawl out of the loo," Will said.

"What was she doing?" Kay asked.

"Just watching. Kind of had a weird smile on her face -- leastways, she did until I climbed up and you guys showed your manky faces," Bran said, shrugging. He started to turn around to look for himself, but Kay stopped him.

"Bran. Listen to me very, very carefully. Will and me, we're going to be walking past a club. The Pentagram --"

"I know it," Bran said, nodding.

"You're going to make yourself scarce as soon as we get close." Bran started to protest, but Kay kept talking. "Do not go to the Pentagram. Don't go anywhere near it. Will and me, we're not going there, either --"

"Oi. I thought we agreed --"

"Oh, yeah, and go right where they'll have reinforcements? Kathy's good but she's not that good, and we'll get our arses wiped, pendants or not," Kay said, giving Will a raised brow and ignoring Bran's curious, confused look. "We're walking past it. We'll keep going until Merlin and Arthur get to us."

"You're trying to get rid of me," Bran said.

"You're trying to rob me of some good, old-fashioned revenge," Will said.
Kay sighed, exasperated. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his phone, slapping it in Bran's hand. "Do not hang up. That's Merlin and Arthur on the other end. We don't come up for air, then you go right to them, yeah?"

Bran looked dubious and doubtful, but he nodded hesitantly. "Okay."

Kay pointed at Will. "And if I'm robbing you, I'm robbing me, and do you think I'd do such a thing? I want their heads on a platter as much as you do, if not more. Shut it and do what I've said."

Will grunted grudgingly. Kay thought he only managed Will's agreement because Will was hurting and wasn't in any condition for any kind of protracted fight. Kay wasn't sure how much longer he would have before his leg gave out, either, and now that the adrenaline high was fading, everything fucking hurt.

They walked for a while longer. Bran didn't run off right away when Kay told him to go, but he did leave, glancing over his shoulder as if afraid that Will and Kay would vanish and he'd never see them again. That was a distinct possibility, but not one that Kay wanted to dwell on.

Kay kept an eye on the few reflections on the road, and was relieved when their two tails weren't splitting up to follow after Bran.

He fell in step next to Will, who exhaled slowly. "Thought I should mention I recognize them. Took me a minute, but I've seen them around."

"Figures," Kay said, rolling his eyes. He didn't bother to ask why Will hadn't said anything until now. He'd hit his head; Kay thought that was a pretty good excuse. "Please tell me that they're harmless."

"The bloke could be harmless," Will said slowly, and Kay snorted in disbelief. None of the NWO were harmless. "Okay, fine. He'll carve out our bollocks and force-feed them to us, that's how harmless he is."

"And the woman?"

"Yeah, no," Will said. "Definitely not harmless. I'm pretty sure they're after me, not you. Not that many people around these parts who've blown a hole through Bryn's head, I suppose. Makes sense that they'll feel a little… upset about it. You should cut out."

"Are you mad?" Kay asked. "Keep walking, goddamn it. Don't be a bloody martyr."

If something was about to happen, then it was best that they took it away from innocent civilians -- including Bran. The downside of approaching this district was that the crowds had thinned until they were nearly non-existent, and the man and the woman following them might be encouraged to make their move. Kathy's pendants gave them some measure of protection against most spells, but they wouldn't be much good if this turned into a firefight.

Or, Gods forbid, a fistfight. Kay was almost certain that he could take them both, even with his leg, but he needed to get close enough. The Directory had taught him that there was rarely an opportunity to get close enough, not when a sorcerer was at full power, but Will and Kay might have the advantage if the two sorcerers hadn't recharged their batteries after their stunt with the trains.

"They're catching up," Kay said, catching movement out of his peripheral vision. There weren't many cars parked on the road here and few windshields to use to use as mirrors. After a second of indecision, Kay decided, fuck it, and glanced over his shoulder. He made eye contact with the woman and glanced at the man, making sure that they knew that they'd been spotted, and turned
back to Will. "Definitely catching up."

"And I'm the wanker," Will said, sounding resigned. He half-twisted his body to look, his expression blanching. "Run."

Kay didn't hesitate. He ran. Hobbled. Limped. Hopped on one leg. Will wasn't much faster than he was, leading the way into an alley --

Kay wanted to strangle Will. As far as tactics went, this one was just plain dumb, because it set them up to be cornered and trapped. He let Will run down the corridor, dodging the rubbish bins. If Will wanted to play the bunny rabbit for the dogs, Kay was happy to let him.

Kay shouldered the edge of the building, hoping that the sorcerers would round the corner and keep running. He could get one of them from behind -- possibly two. He preferred taking them alive, because Arthur had questions he wanted answered, and that was hard to do if they were dead.

He waited.

The man ran into the alley, taking a wide arc to turn, and was just out of Kay's reach. Kay didn't try for him and let him go after Will.

The woman, however, was shorter, more agile, and right on the man's heels.

Kay clotheslined her.

The impact jarred him as much as it did her, and he felt every square millimetre of his body screaming in protest at having to endure more abuse. He caught her before she could fall onto her back and spun her around hard, slamming her into the brick wall. Her head impacted with a sick crunch that Kay would have felt sorry for if he didn't know that this woman had participated in the destruction of two trains and the death of nearly all of their passengers.

Considering what she might do in the future, Kay thought that she was getting off lightly.

He saw a sliver of orange-red from her eyes and slammed her against the wall multiple times for good measure, not stopping until he felt her body go lax. He let her crumple to the ground and turned around, alert for anything.

The man had stopped midway through the alley, an expression of sheer hatred directed at Kay when he saw what Kay had done to his partner. Will wasn't quite at the other end, having stopped to face the enemy, half-doubled over in pain, his arm clutched close to his torso.

Kay reached for his gun just as he saw the sorcerer's eyes flash. His arm swung out for blind shooting to distract the sorcerer and he hoped that Will would get out of his fucking line of fire. Will didn't move, but he didn't have to; the sorcerer knocked the gun away with a forehand swat, catching Kay and throwing him against the alley wall on the backswing.

"Fucking shoot the bastard," Kay bellowed. He was dangling two metres from the ground, the last of his air squeezed out of his chest by a pressure at his throat. He heard repeated fire -- one, two, three -- but nothing happened. Either Will wasn't that great of a shot with his off-hand, or --

Kay kicked his legs in the air, trying to get free, but he was pinned with no escape and no way to fight. Kathy's pendant burned on his chest, deflecting just enough of the sorcerer's magic to let him gasp for air. He caught sight of Will in the same position as Kay -- over the ground, fighting for purchase.
"No!" Bran shouted, coming into Kay's peripheral vision. Bran skidded to a stop, tears bright in his eyes. He shouted again --

His eyes flashed a pale orange-gold --

The magic choking Kay faltered. He sank half a metre toward the ground before the sorcerer's magic caught him again.

"Leave him alone!"

Again, there was a stutter in the magic. Kay fell half the distance, and managed a gulp of air before the pressure returned at his throat. Kathy's pendant was searing hot, now. He didn't understand why it hadn't completely deflected the sorcerer's magic. He'd seen her pendants protect the team from far worse. The only explanation that he had was that the sorcerer was just that strong.

Whatever Bran had done, he did it again. Kay could feel the ground with his toes, now, but it didn't do much to alleviate the invisible strangulation.

"I'm not your enemy," the sorcerer said, his voice cold and calm, a chilling, psychopathic edge to his words. "I'm doing this for our kind. These men would hurt you and kill you for what you can do. Why do you protect them?"

"Because they saved me!"

Kay was feet-firm on the ground, now, clawing at his throat. His fingers caught at the leather thong of his pendant, nearly tearing it off.

"Do you think they still would, if they knew what you could do?"

Bran sobbed.

"These men would," Merlin said. Kay didn't know where he'd come from, but thank fuck --

Kay didn't see what Merlin did, but he could breathe again. Kay fell to his knees, half-doubled over, gasping. Bran half-crashed into Kay, grabbing and pulling until he'd dragged Kay to his feet and out of the way.

On the other side of the alley, Will was on his hands and knees. He was coughing and gagging, and it looked as if he'd thrown up.

The sorcerer, however, was in a limp heap, his body bent over one of the large rubbish bins. His neck was bent at an awkward angle. Kay sagged in relief, but he froze when he saw the woman move out of the corner of his eye.

If she had been about to wake up -- or whatever she had been about to do -- she was unconscious a few seconds later when Pellinor knocked her out.

Arthur put his hands on Merlin's shoulders, squeezing gently. He murmured something in Merlin's ear before walking around him and approaching Kay.

"All right?" Arthur asked.

"All right," Kay said, nodding. He steadied himself, but Bran wouldn't let him go.

Arthur went over to the sorcerer. He looked the body over carefully but didn't bother checking for a pulse. Instead, Arthur tipped the sorcerer into the bin and closed the lid; it fell with a loud slam.
"Dead," Arthur said.

Merlin winced. "Sorry."

"I'm not," Kay said. He really, really wasn't. His throat felt raw, and his voice was rougher than it normally was. He worried about permanent damage.

"I'm shedding a tear over here," Will said. He rolled onto his arse with a grunt, and tried to stand; he gave up, throwing his hand in the air. He held himself awkwardly. Whatever the sorcerer had done to him, it had made his injuries worse. "You wankers had better stop ogling me and do something useful for a change. Give us a hand up, yeah?"

ooOOoo

Will did have a concussion. He also had several bloody scrapes, bone-deep bruises along his side, and a broken collarbone. In comparison, Kay was the picture of health with a deep gash on his thigh, a cut at his temple, and a bit of road rash here and there on his face where he'd thrown himself -- and Will -- to the ground to dodge the fireball from the second train explosion. Both men had singed hair, but Will had a second-degree burn on the back of his right calf, and Kay had a first-degree burn on the back of his hand.

Considering everything, it was a miracle they got out alive.

Kay was leaning against the rear fender, the blood cleaned up from his face. The gash in his trousers had been too obvious to pass muster under public scrutiny, and he'd changed into a pair of Arthur's trousers after Pellinor wrapped up his wound.

Merlin was talking quietly with Bran, who answered Merlin with short, clipped answers, his back straight and tense to help support the enormous chip on his shoulders. It was a front, Arthur knew -- false confidence around someone he didn't know, and it looked to Arthur as if Bran would feel safer if he stayed close to Kay.

Pellinor was bandaging Will's injuries while simultaneously averting Will's attempts to wriggle out of the SUV. Arthur walked over to give him a hand.

Pellinor nodded at him gratefully.

Arthur eyed Will up and down, evaluating his condition while Pellinor crouched down to the open first aid kit on the ground, riffling through it until he found another roll of gauze.

"Take a bloody picture, it'll last longer," Will groused.

"I don't know," Arthur said with a sigh. "Photographs don't quite capture the sanctimonious arse as well as seeing the real thing."

Will flew him the two-fingered salute. "Who's the sanctimonious arse now?"

Arthur smirked. He gestured at Will before leaning an arm on the open door. "How are you holding up?"
"M fine," Will muttered, swatting Pellinor. "Oi, Nightingale, gentle, yeah?"

"Fucking porcelain, you are," Pellinor said, rolling his eyes.

"Too right," Will said, and pointed at Arthur. "Don't you dare pull me off of this."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Arthur said. He had a feeling that Will would follow them even if Arthur gave the order to stay behind. It was easier to incorporate him into their plans.

Mollified, Will relaxed. Some of the fight went out of him and his shoulders slumped. Will glanced over at Merlin, then back at Arthur, but instead of asking the question Arthur knew he wanted to ask, Will went with, "You get the files all right?"

"Got them," Arthur said with a nod. "Merlin finished decrypting them the other night."

"Anything useful?"

Arthur shook his head. "Won't know until we take a look. And Elyan? He's all right?"

"He's all right. Interesting bloke," Will said, grinning. "Refused to go to the cottage, though. Said he's got too much shite to leave it, was going to hole up at his flat once he got all the supplies he needed."

Arthur suppressed a sigh. He liked Elyan, he really did, but he was bull-headed and rash, and it had bitten him in the arse more often than not. Gwen worried about him, but like it or not, Elyan was a grown man now, and none of them could change his mind if he didn't want it changed. "I thought as much. He knows where it is, though? If he needs to?"

"He knows," Will said.

"All right," Arthur said, nodding grimly. He scratched his scruffy jaw, wishing he'd bothered to shave, and watched in silence while Pellinor finished patching Will up. It wasn't until Pellinor packed the equipment and moved away that Arthur asked, "And the package?"

Will shook his head. "I tried, mate. I did. They want to talk to you up close and personal."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm thinking I owe you for telling me to duck my head when it needed ducking," Will said. Arthur didn't point out that he had warned Kay, not Will, but the end effect was the same. "I'm thinking that you'll be wanting to bypass the blind date. They were right twitchy, that lot. The sort who would slip you a roofie instead of asking you nice and sweet to drop your bloomers for them."

"Oh, charming," Arthur said, half-startled. He was never going to get used to Will's way of phrasing things.

Will must have figured that out, because he smirked. A second later, he leaned back, looking tired, and swung his legs into the SUV. "Look, they're waiting on us to call, won't budge without talking to you first. You want the package? Sounds to me that they'll ask you to give something up in exchange. Seemed to be non-negotiable."

Arthur let Will's words sink in. After a moment, he nodded sharply in thanks and turned away. He wasn't exactly surprised by the CIA's approach, but it didn't help the situation, either. It was something he'd have to think about later, when he had time to deal with it properly.
Arthur glanced at his watch. They were so far off schedule that it wasn't even funny, but he had a vague feeling, based on what little he'd seen of the newscasts thus far, that the next great disaster would happen soon, somewhere in the world. The incidents were occurring at a set interval, and that interval was accelerating to the point where some events were happening nearly simultaneously.

His schedules -- all of them -- were about to go out the window. Arthur would be more upset if he actually cared about any of them. It did put something of a pinch in his plan to propose to Merlin, but that plan hadn't so much as been derailed as delegated to simply finding the right time.

Merlin left Bran slumping against the SUV next to Kay, and if that wasn't hero worship that Arthur saw written all over Bran's expression when he looked at Kay, he needed his eyes examined. Kay wrapped an arm around Bran's shoulder and the two of them exchanged quiet words before exhaling heavily and taking what little relief they could in the brief respite.

"You were right," Merlin said, coming to stand next to Arthur. His voice was pitched low as he continued, "Bran's magic saved Kay from the worst of the tumble in the train. He's strong, but not trained. Knows to do just enough to save his own arse, though, and it bled out to protect Kay."

"And the pendants? Why didn't they work against..." Arthur gestured idly in the direction of the rubbish bin. It would have been wiser to have relocated after finding Kay and Will. Standing next to a body in a large bin was bound to attract the wrong type of attention, but as long as the rescue crews were working on the Underground, they weren't bound to be noticed any time soon. There weren't any CCTV cameras in the area, either, so they would be all right.

"My fault, I think," Merlin said, sounding guilty. He rubbed a hand behind his head and winced. "Kathy's good at what she does. Lays a strong foundation. But she's not to his level --"

Merlin nodded toward the rubbish bin and the body they were all studiously ignoring. He tilted his head toward Bran an instant later.

"-- or his. Enough magic can break through her defences. Our pendants -- well, the old ones, anyway -- I had a look at them in the beginning, didn't I? Tied them together, so that I'd be able to find them if I needed to. Used a bit of my magic to strengthen the original protection. I suppose I never gave it much thought after that."

"And now?" Arthur asked, glancing at the SUV. The woman they'd captured was in the trunk, bound and gagged; they would have to interrogate her when she woke up, and turn her over to...

Arthur grimaced. He hadn't thought that far ahead. He didn't know how they would handle prisoners who had magic. They couldn't hold them in good faith, and they couldn't release them, either.

"They're fine now," Merlin said. "I took care of it."

Arthur nodded. He didn't say anything else, but when he felt Merlin's arm slide around his waist and Merlin's weight resting against him, he looked up, startled, shifting to catch Merlin.

Except Merlin wasn't falling or fainting; he wasn't weak or stumbling. At least, not more than usual. Arthur knew that Merlin was doing a little bit better now that he knew what was happening with his magic, but he also knew that it was better not to push Merlin to the next level until he was absolutely ready. Arthur could tell that Merlin still had his magic -- most of it, anyway -- under lockdown, but at least he wasn't hurting himself in the process anymore. At least, no more than usual.

"What is it?" he asked.

Merlin started to say something. He shook his head.
"Merlin," Arthur said, gentling his tone. "Now is not the time to hold back. Do you want to do this later? Was what you did too much?"

"It's not that," Merlin said. After a moment, he slid his arm away from Arthur, but Arthur held him fast. Merlin half-chuckled and sighed. "Are you sure about this?"

"There's too much data and not enough information. We don't know what they wanted from the database. The sooner we know, the better. If that means working with the NWO..." Arthur sighed and suppressed an inward shudder. "Then it means working with the NWO."

"Assuming we can find any," Merlin said, glancing around. Neither of them thought that they would be able to get anything out of the woman -- Will's intel on her was limited to occasionally seeing her at some of Bryn's parties, causing trouble and being tolerated only because of her magic. Someone like that was unlikely to be put in anyone's confidence. The only person who might know something useful would be Tristan.

"Tristan will be at the Pentagram," Arthur said, sounding more confident than he felt. "You said it yourself. Some of the wards on it are worth weeks of work, if not months."

Merlin tilted his head before nodding. "And if he's there? You think we can trust him?"

"I know I can trust you," Arthur said. "You'll make him fall in line."

Merlin's expression softened. He leaned in, resting his forehead against Arthur's, the two of them shifting and settling until they were comfortable against each other. They still fit, raw edges and all, and Arthur was swept up with the uncanny need of feeding Merlin until he'd gained the weight he'd lost. "Not sure I trust myself," Merlin whispered.

"I trust you," Arthur repeated.

"Didn't mean to kill him," Merlin said, looking distantly at the rubbish bin.

"I know," Arthur said. He bit back what he had been about to say -- that Merlin didn't know his own strength anymore -- but he didn't want Merlin to feel worse than he already did. Still, Merlin was a soldier and this was war. Intent and outcome sometimes had nothing to do with the other, and if the end result was that the team was safe and civilians were protected from more danger, that was all that mattered.


"I'm still here," Arthur said, but then his brain caught up with what Merlin had said. Not I missed you, but I miss you, right here and right now. His arms tightened around Merlin before Merlin could move away, and from the slackening grasp and the way Merlin rocked back, he had been meaning to do exactly that. "I'm still here. I never left. I'll always be here."

He could tell that wasn't what Merlin wanted to hear, so he turned his head and pressed his lips against Merlin's ear, leaving behind a chaste kiss.

"I miss you too," Arthur said, his voice low, his words for Merlin alone. Arthur knew that he was waiting. That he had been waiting -- for Merlin, for any signs that he might pull away, that Merlin couldn't forgive him for not saving him on the testing grounds. Arthur wasn't certain that he could forgive himself, and... maybe he'd been holding himself aside, at arm's length, because he didn't want to pressure Merlin in any way, because he didn't want to ask that forgiveness of him. "I'm sorry, Merlin."
"Don't," Merlin said quickly, pulling away, putting his fingers on Arthur's mouth. "Don't be an idiot."

Arthur smiled faintly. "I'll try."

"Good. Because we're going to the Pentagram, yeah? Best start acting like you should," Merlin said. He moved his fingers, but his lips replaced them a moment later, less of the chaste kiss than the one Arthur had given him before.

"My eyes," Will exclaimed.

Merlin and Arthur didn't quite break apart as to turn around together in time to see Will shielding his face with his good arm and recoiling. Merlin rolled his eyes and shook his head, giving Arthur another kiss before pulling away. "Give over, Will. All the things you got up to in uni, and not sparing me the view? I've seen your bare arse quite enough, thanks for that. You can put up with seeing me kiss Arthur every now and then."

"It's like watching a bloke shag my brother," Will moaned.

"No worse than your shagging the entire female population in your room, and me having no choice but to listen to it," Merlin retorted, throwing an arm around Will's shoulders. He wasn't gentle, either; there was a rough shake that turned Will a shade of white Arthur had only ever associated with pain, and the two of them continued good-natured ribbing all the way to the SUV.

Arthur glanced at Kay, who tilted his head towards Bran with a questioning brow. Arthur hesitated, not certain how to factor Bran into their plans, never mind how they would protect him if they took him along.

"I can take care of myself," Bran said suddenly. "Been doing it for a lot longer than you think."

Arthur studied the boy. As if sensing himself being measured, Bran stood up straighter, pushing his shoulders back, jutting his jaw out in defiance. They would have more than enough food and equipment to accommodate one more person at the cottage, but it was also one more person that he would have to make adjustments for. Still, the boy's magic could be useful, and his time living on the streets hinted at a type of resourcefulness that they were going to need if the NWO wasn't stopped and the infrastructure restored quickly.

"I can follow orders," Bran said, the silence dragging on too long for him.

"Not well," Kay said, scoffing. When Bran gave him a betrayed look, Kay said, "Came running after us, didn't you? After we told you to keep on walking?"

"Good that I did, too, or your mates wouldn't have known where to go, and that bloke would've gotten you and Will --"

"Get in the car," Arthur said, making the decision. Kay had been smarter than all of them when they were still in their teens, and that was because he'd grown up fast living on the streets, even if it was only for a short time. Arthur didn't doubt that the same could hold true for Bran. He caught Bran before he could clamber into the back seat of the SUV and said, "Until we know the extent of what you can do and you learn how to use it properly, we're going to play it safe. You do what we tell you, and you stay close to Merlin."

"I can watch Kay's --"

"Merlin," Arthur said with emphasis. "Merlin can protect you best, and I need someone to look out
for him. He's our only defence against a rat's nest full of people just like the ones who almost killed Will and Kay. You'll tell him if someone's sneaking up on him. You'll tell him if someone's trying to curse any of us. You'll be his extra eyes and ears."

He paused, taking in Bran's expression. The boy's eyes had gone wide and round, as if this was more than he had expected, and he was awed that someone would trust him enough to give him that responsibility. It made Arthur uncomfortable to do this, to put his coin on a boy he didn't know, but he didn't have any other choice. Bran's magic made him more of an asset than he knew, but Arthur wasn't going to tell him that.

"Can you do that?" Arthur asked.

"I can," Bran said, standing up even straighter, nodding solemnly. Arthur let him go and stepped back to let Kay in. Kay clapped him on the back and winked.

That was Kay's way of saying that he'd keep an eye on Bran, and Arthur had been counting on that.

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They were on the road, idling along at the speed limit, when Arthur glanced in the rear view mirror. "How's our guest?"

Will, who was in the last row and taking up most of the space, glanced over the seat. "Still unconscious."

The original plan called for Kay and Will to track down whoever they could find who would lead them to the NWO, but so far, neither of them had had any luck. The situation grew grim, and Arthur knew that the NWO were the only ones who could point them in the right direction, provided that Arthur and his team applied exactly the right amount of pressure.

Arthur wanted to know one thing, and one thing only. The NWO had fought hard for the database, only to have it slip out of their hands -- what, exactly, had they been after? What was so important about it that they'd sacrificed a great deal, even advancing their own timetable? That was a key piece of information that Excalibur didn't have, and a piece of information that they needed now. Arthur had -- everyone had -- assumed that they were after a certain artefact, that they were after Merlin, but…

Gwen had seen the sketches on Morgause's desk at the warehouse before they'd rescued her, and that implied the NWO was interested in a physical artefact. They either did not know about or did not suspect that a human being could be one, too. But what, exactly, that artefact was supposed to do, or even, what they meant to do with it -- Arthur didn't know.

Arthur didn't like not knowing.

"Everyone clear on the situation?" Arthur asked.

"Clear," Pellinor said. His arm was in a hard fibreglass cast, thin enough that it didn't show up under his coat sleeve, and he was alert and ready for a fight.

Will, beside him, raised a listless hand and said, "Anyone have a spare gun I can tuck in my sling?"

"Here," Kay said, digging one out from the weapons locker they'd slid into the back seat.
"Can I have one?" Bran asked. Kay swatted his hands away.

"No." Kay replenished his ammunition and nodded. "Ready."

"I guess I am, too," Bran said.

Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin wore a distant look, his eyes unfocused. His elbow was on the window's edge and he was drumming his finger against his temple thoughtfully. "Merlin?"

Merlin blinked and turned to look at him. His smile was a quick quirk of his lips that faded almost immediately behind a nervous veil. "This is either going to go very, very badly, or very, very…"

He trailed off before wincing.

"What's worse than very, very badly?"

Arthur snorted. "Have some faith, Merlin. You can pull it off."

"You know I'm not really that guy, yeah?" Merlin's eyes were round and earnest.

From the back, Will said, "Yeah. You really are that guy. Don't sell yourself short. And if you're needing motivation. How's this? Saving the bloody world?"

Merlin did that little raised-eyebrow head-shake that he always did when he was trying to steel himself for a particular task. Arthur could almost hear the pep talk that was running through Merlin's head, even seeing when it reached a crescendo from the way Merlin gave himself a little nod, his lips pressed together in a tight, determined line. Then, for some reason, it all came crashing down with a shaky little laugh.

"No pressure, yeah?" Merlin asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Eh, it's just the entire planet, it's not as if we don't have a spare," Will said, waving a deprecating hand -- his only hand, given that the other was tucked close to his body. Merlin's mouth quirked into something of a smile, and when he turned back, he met Arthur's eyes briefly.

"Will you be all right with this?" Merlin asked.

Arthur didn't answer right away. He slowed down, parking by the kerb, and stopped. He gave Merlin a little smile. "I'll have to be, won't I? And in any case, a bit of role reversal? It might even be fun."

Arthur gestured across the road.

The Pentagram.

It looked different in broad daylight, even if that broad daylight was gloomy and dire, covered by the weight of grey clouds and smeared by the smoke from the train explosion. The scintillating lights were off, the walls a bland black and beige, the symbols that they'd seen in the dark suddenly washed out, looking as if they were nothing more than graffiti.

"Wow," Bran whistled. "Building's thrumming."

"Yeah," Merlin said, leaning down past Arthur to get a better look. If Arthur used the opportunity to run his fingers down Merlin's arm, and Merlin accidentally slipped until he was nearly in Arthur's lap, neither of them was going to say anything. The more Merlin studied the building, though, the more his jaw set, a muscle popping as he ground his teeth. "They're bleeding power."
"What does that mean?" Pellinor asked, sliding forward a bit. He draped an arm over Merlin's chair; Arthur saw the hint of the fibreglass cast peeking from under his sleeve.

"It means that they've pumped so much magic into the wards that the wards can't contain the magic," Merlin said. Bran scrambled forward a bit, as if he wanted to take a better look himself, but he was watching Merlin, interested, a kid soaking up the knowledge that he'd never been privy to, before.

"Is it making them stronger?" Arthur asked.

"No," Merlin said, shaking his head. He gave Arthur a wry smile, and this one was full of mischief. That smile, Arthur liked very, very much, because it meant that Merlin had a plan. "It just means that they should've used stronger wards. Won't be a problem, getting in."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Will said, cracking the passenger door open.

"Will."

Arthur had been about to call Will back, ready to strangle the hothead if he decided to storm into the Pentagram without them and ruining their plans. He looked at Merlin with surprise, because the way Merlin had said Will's name had been full of regret.

"What?" Will said, his good hand on the door handle, his body ready to leap out.

"Freya's in there," Merlin said. "It's her magic they're using."

The silence was long and strained. Will sagged, the door clicking shut. Will's tone was flat and neutral when he asked, "Are you sure?"

Merlin nodded. Arthur would give a great deal of money to know how Merlin knew that, but now wasn't the time to ask. Whatever silent communication was passing between Merlin and Will, he didn't dare interrupt.

It must have been an argument that Merlin won, and won easily, because Will exhaled in frustration and gave Merlin a firm nod.

"It's your show," Will said, his tone terse and angry. He fumbled with the latch this time and stumbled gracelessly out of the car. The rest of the team -- and Bran -- climbed out. Kay went to the trunk and dragged out the semi-conscious sorcerer.

Merlin didn't move, and Arthur stayed with him for a few moments more, letting Merlin get himself sorted. Merlin glanced down at his clothes -- clean jeans and a T-shirt under a button-down, a heavy jacket over top -- and picked at the fabric. "I don't look the part."

"You look like you," Arthur said, pressing a light kiss against Merlin's cheek. "And that's what we need. Are you ready?"

"No," Merlin said, but he got out of the car.

They fell into their usual formation, adjusting for the presence of Bran. Bran stayed close to Merlin while remaining in Kay's arm's reach. Will, who trudged along behind them, half-hiked his pants up with one hand and looked as if he desperately wanted to be somewhere else -- anywhere else. Kay dragged their prisoner along easily enough; she must have woken up some more when he'd dragged her from the boot. She wasn't steady on her feet, but Kay kept her under control despite the muffled shrieks and attempts to get away.
At any other time, in any other area, they would have been bound to attract attention. As it was, no one drove past, they didn't see anyone else on the streets, and any police patrols in the area were diverted to the current crisis several blocks away.

There was no one on the door. The CLOSED sign was turned out and as far as anyone could tell, there wasn't anyone inside. The velvet ropes and the fancy red carpet had been removed. There was no bouncer and no one keeping an eye on the club, and if Arthur half-expected that the outer security door would have a flap that opened and closed at eye-level, he was sorely disappointed.

He tried the lock. It didn't give.

Arthur gestured to Pellinor, who moved up, using a very illegal and borrowed lock pick set to make short work of the lock. The outer security gate rolled up all the way to the ceiling with a faint, noisy rumble --

"Oh, yeah, no hiding that we're here now," Will said.

-- and revealed the inner glass doors, shaded black and... also locked.

Pellinor was about to take care of that lock, too, when Kay said, "Wait."

The enemy sorcerer had gone silent, no longer protesting or fighting; if anything, she was watching the proceedings with an almost gleeful expression, even with the gag. Merlin moved Pellinor aside and inspected the door, his fingers a fraction of a centimetre from touching the frame. He went around it again, his expression furrowed, and tapped once, twice, three times in several different positions before stepping aside for Pellinor.

The woman wore a thunderous look, too surprised to react. When Pellinor pushed the door open, she renewed her attempts to escape.

They were through; Will, as the last one in, didn't bother locking the door behind him. Arthur didn't know if they would need to beat a hasty retreat, and he preferred keeping an exit route unbarred, willing to chance that they might get flanked from behind.

They stopped where they were. The long, dark corridor was ahead of them, full of glittering symbols and runes that glowed despite the absence of blacklight. Arthur remembered the faint, frisking sensation that each time he'd walked through the entrance and knew from Merlin that it was a magical check -- for weapons and for sorcerers. Arthur had always thought that this might be one of the ways that the NWO recruited new members. If the runes sensed the presence of a magical artefact of any kind, if it detected a magic user, however strong, that person was flagged and accosted nearly as soon as they left the corridor and entered the club's floor.

"Still active?" Arthur asked quietly.

"Active, yeah," Merlin said. There was a flash of gold in his eyes, faint enough to tell Arthur that Merlin had closed his eyes, quick enough to know that whatever Merlin had done would have only a temporary deflecting effect. The NWO didn't need to know that they had any kind of advantage whatsoever -- at least, not yet. "Let's go."

Clubs always looked different in the daylight hours. Under the stark light, the tables and benches looked gaudy and cheap. The long curtains were dusty and dirty, greying from exposure to dirt, sweat, and makeup. The floor was tacky and spotted with stains, and every nick, dent, and blemish in the furniture, the walls, and the equipment were painfully visible. Patches of splotchy paint on the wall to cover up a second-rate plaster job over a round, fist-sized hole had dried a long time ago, but
no effort had been made to at least try to match the rest of the wall in the first place.

Despite the money that had been poured into the renovations of Pentagram, it looked much better with the lights off. All of them. Bottles of beer and glasses of unidentified alcohol mixes littered every available surface, as if the waiting staff hadn't been bothered to clean up after the last call. Music played in the background but was set at a low volume, the DJ booth still illuminated.

That quick glance around the main room was all that Arthur had time for before scanning for enemy threats. There weren't any. Except for one.

There was a woman kneeling in the middle of the dance floor, her body hunched over herself. Her arms were spread to either side of her body, held taut even though there were no physical restraints. Her head was down and it was impossible to see her face, but from her long, mousy brown hair and waifish frame, Arthur guessed that it was Freya. From the sharp intake of breath when Merlin saw her and the way Will huffed, Arthur knew that his guess wasn't wrong.

Nearly as soon as they noticed Freya, someone came down the stairs. It was a man in trousers and a turtleneck, his face illuminated by the light of the smartphone in his hand. He laughed at whatever was on his screen, but otherwise seemed oblivious to their presence.

Arthur held his breath. He'd seen this man before. He was always in the background, lurking in Tristan's shadow. The odds were very good, all of a sudden, that Tristan was here after all.

The situation had skewed in their favour, and it was about damn time.

Arthur gestured at Kay. Kay muttered something that sounded like, with pleasure. The sorcerer they'd captured was thrown across the open area. She stumbled over a bump in the floor and crashed into several tables when she couldn't stop herself. Tables struck the ground like mighty elms cut down at the trunk. Glasses and bottles went flying, spraying liquid, before crashing on the ground.

"Lazy fucking wankers," Will said, his voice rising. "Couldn't be arsed to clean up after close. Leaving it all up to the first shift, too. Fucking shameful, is all."

The man stopped a third of the way from the ground floor and stared at them wide-eyed. Will waved his arm in the air.

"Go on and get your boss, yeah? Have him put his best face on. He's got visitors."

"You!" the man shouted.

"Me!" Will retorted, scoffing. "Now that we're all familiar, how about you go and get Tristan?"

The man lowered his phone dumbly, looking towards the woman they'd thrown. He must have noticed the gag and the zip-tie bindings, because he started to back away, inching his way up the stairs.

"Pellinor. Kay. Check the back. Make sure we're alone," Arthur said. They split up without a word. Kay headed to the area behind the bar. Pellinor checked the back rooms and the bathrooms.

The sorcerer rolled onto her knees and managed to sit up; Will walked over and shoved her down gleefully. Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw Bran slink up closer behind Merlin.

The door on the second level opened and closed, the mirrored surface reflecting the harsh yellow fluorescents. Five men and two women came down the stairs -- three in front, three in the back, Tristan in the middle. Their messenger stood in the back, his phone gone, a wary expression on his
Tristan paused halfway down, his expression changing from confused to outraged to murderous.

"Will. You fucking bastard. I can't believe you have the balls to show your face here --"

"I can't believe you have balls, period," Will retorted. He had a foot on the woman's upper back, keeping her face-plant on the ground.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Tristan barked. Once they were all on ground floor, Tristan pushed through his men and pointed angrily at Will. "Kill him!"

"Which is it?" Will asked. "You want to kill me, you want them to kill me? Merls, does that make sense to you?"

"He never did make sense, not even when we were kids," Merlin said, shrugging.

Tristan's people had their guns out, the muzzles at the ready, but no one was shooting yet. Arthur didn't think the peace would last long, and as much as he trusted Merlin to keep them safe if this turned into a firefight, he'd rather disarm the bomb before it went off.

"Don't you want to know why we're here?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah, mate," Will said, his tone full of cheeky bravado that was the core makeup of his being. "Don't you want to know why someone who's killed your right hand --"

He made a jacking-off gesture.

"-- would be stupid enough to walk into your fine establishment without wearing their favourite bulls'-eye shirt over a few layers of Kevlar?"

Tristan wavered.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?" one of the women asked. Arthur didn't recognize her, but her clothes were only in slightly better shape than the rest -- less club wear and more business attire, unlike the other woman in Tristan's group, she was more put-together and calm, and a very possible threat. At least, that's what he thought until she was sloppy and said, "I mean. Didn't Morgause say --"

"No names," Tristan said, waving an arm in the air to cut her off. Tristan's guards flanked him as they approached the group. He walked up onto the elevated dance floor, wobbling a little as he deliberately avoided anything but the carpeted edge. Arthur noted that his bodyguards stayed clear of the dance floor, too.

Tristan came to a stop two metres away from Arthur, out of easy reach but within range for point-blank fire. He'd placed himself and his men in the line of fire of half of his people, putting himself right into the line of fire. Like an idiot.

Arthur wasn't going to complain.

Tristan brushed himself down, making himself more presentable. His shirt was only moderately wrinkled, but his jacket was rumpled and his trousers could use the press of an iron. He wasn't wearing a tie, but the four rings he wore on either hand flashed in the light, gold-plated and ostentatious, as he straightened his collar.
Arthur endured a once-over that left him feeling dirty and in need of a shower. Tristan turned his beady eyes to the rest of them -- Merlin was slump-shouldered, standing beside Arthur, his head averted. Bran was half-hidden by Merlin.

Kay returned from the back of the bar and leaned against it, making a slight gesture with his fingers to mark the *all clear.* That same signal was made when Pellinor came out of the back rooms. Pellinor didn't join them; he stayed on the other end of the dance floor.

Will removed his foot from the sorcerer's back, but when she tried to stand up again, he kicked her over.

Arthur couldn't tell if Will was too in-character or if he was just naturally a pillock. Either way, Will was doing a good job keeping Tristan and his men off-balance.

"Orright. So, the prodigal son returns," Tristan sneered, turning his back to dismiss Will. One of the guards raised his gun and levelled it at Will, though. "What brings you by?"

Arthur let the silence stretch. And stretch. Tristan shuffled from one foot to the other -- it was such a small gesture that Arthur knew that Tristan was trying, and had failed to suppress his nerves. Arthur waited just one more moment, and didn't speak until Tristan opened his mouth to say something.

"A few months ago, Morgause Gorlois requested a copy of Pendragon Consulting's military database. The database was copied onto a hard drive, but it was hijacked by another party before it could be delivered. We encountered this group again shortly afterward during a prototype demonstration, and they took the only man who could crack the database encryption.

"The NWO has a vested interest in those files -- so much so that they kidnapped my sister in an attempt to obtain a new copy. That attempt failed.

"At approximately the same time, the NWO sent an expendable member to this other party to retrieve the database and the person who had encrypted it. What your organization failed to consider was that the other party never had any intention of delivering either the hard drive or the genius behind the encryption. That your man was killed in the process -- that was regrettable, but believe me when I say that his death was the means to an end.

"When your man failed to return and was reported dead at the hand of one of the NWO's own men, an apparent turncoat --"

A choked-off chortle came from Will. He waved a hand in the air, gestured toward his throat, and said, "I prefer the term *counteragent,* personally."

"-- and failed to obtain the database, the NWO accelerated their timeline. By my calculations, the start date was moved up several weeks, at least. The only reason that this would happen is because some other group may be in a position to counter whatever the NWO has planned."

Arthur fell silent, watching his words sink in and searching for any indication that he was anywhere near the mark. He received confirmation when something like fear flashed in Tristan's eyes, and Tristan glanced away, fidgeting with his suit, trying to appear unaffected.

"Who is this other group and how do they plan on stopping the NWO?"

Tristan looked at Arthur sharply, his eyes wide with surprise. His mouth dropped and a hollow sound came out, a huffing *hye-hye-hiie* of strangled laughter. He turned to his men, some of whom shared indulging smiles and mocking eyerolls, the others checking their guns and getting ready to follow whatever order Tristan would give them next.
"And why would I tell you anything, you fuckwit?" Tristan asked. His voice grew louder and more confident with every word as he went on, "You come here, into my home. You act as if you own the place. You're thick enough to show up with someone who killed one of my men, and you ask me questions?"

"You'll tell me," Arthur said quietly, forcing himself to stay calm. "You'll tell me because my boss wants to know."

"Your boss?" Tristan asked, this time laughing a deep belly laugh that was grating and loud. "Who the fuck do you work for? Your daddy? MI-6? The Directory?"

"No," Arthur said. He shifted his body, moving away from Merlin. He gestured at Bran, and Bran joined him uncertainly. They left Merlin to stand alone.

Merlin was stooped over, bowed a little. His elbows were tucked into his ribs and he stood awkwardly, his head bowed, looking simultaneously weak, beaten, and small.

Then, he sighed. He sighed like a man who was deeply, horribly offended at having his fun spoiled.

The transformation was subtle. If Arthur hadn't known that Merlin had been playing a role all along, that the awkward boy-toy always at Arthur's heels was nothing like Merlin, he would have been stunned. And that was exactly the effect that they were going for here, because Tristan's eyes rounded and he sputtered wordlessly.

Merlin straightened. He held his head up. He took a step forward, shifting his stance.

Merlin's shoulders were back, his tension carried by a carefully-cultivated mask of relaxation. His hands were shoved in his trouser pockets, his coat pushed back. There was a faint smirk pulling at his lips as he tilted his head and looked at Tristan.

This was and wasn't Arthur's Merlin. Merlin's unassailable strength shone through, as did his mischief and his hard edge. But the coldness, the emotional detachment, the way he regarded Tristan and his people as if they were beneath him -- it was a chilling change.

"I really don't have that much patience, Tristan," Merlin said, his voice chilled with wet, cold ice. "Why don't you answer my man's question?"

ooOOoo

Merlin loved how Arthur's mind worked.

Sometimes.

When Arthur was in one of his highly-focused moods or when he was planning the bloody heck out of something, he was insufferable. There was an entire wedding folder and a honeymoon folder on Arthur's laptop that proved it, even if those were there for Merlin to find, distracting him from what Arthur really had in mind.

But when Arthur was making the plans up on the fly? Fuck if it didn't make Merlin half-hard to listen
to Arthur detail what he wanted them to do. This time around, though, there wasn't any time to explain the why behind his reasoning; their group had to contend with working on the bare-bones of a plan and would have to play it off the cuff.

Will, for example, should continue in his usual role as arsehole extraordinaire, but because of his injuries he was best left to the back where he could be protected. It suited Will just fine, because it meant he could pick off his targets without his targets immediately knowing where the bullets were coming from.

At least that was what Will had said. Merlin had given Arthur a warning look, but was relieved to see that Arthur wasn't fooled. They both knew Will would wrangle his way to the forefront if he could, if for no other reason than to get a better shot.

Kay and Pellinor were their backup -- the muscle, so to speak. They would make certain that the club was secure before Merlin did anything that would damn them all earlier than they wanted. Pellinor would know how to disable the internal cameras and Kay would make sure none of them would escape.

Bran was the Wild Card. As long as he stayed with Merlin, he would be fine. If Merlin followed Arthur's unspoken reasoning, Bran's mere presence would lend credence to what Merlin was about to do.

They weren't even supposed to be at the Pentagram. Not yet. Originally, they'd been meant to take a detour, first. Arthur had wanted to break into Pendragon Consulting and access the files that weren't part of the database that had been downloaded. Arthur hadn't said so, not explicitly, but Merlin knew that he'd also wanted the chance to corner Uther. But they'd run out of time. The storm, the "natural" disasters, the terrorist attacks, the fear permeating through the population, even Merlin's magic.

The situation was getting worse and worse, and it was getting to the point where Arthur could no longer plan ahead, and could only act and react to one thing at a time.

They might have been able to get the information that they needed from the surviving sorcerer. Maybe. But they couldn't take the risk that she didn't know anything useful and would do everything she could to lead them astray, wasting their time or leading them into a trap.

So, an attempt at Tristan it was.

And the Pentagram...

Something about the club had never sat right with him, and now, feeling the sheer power thrumming through the building, Merlin knew what it was.

At first appearance, the club looked as if it was a shelter against the oncoming storm. The wards on the outside of the building were definitely convincing, but seeing the power from the inside, that was something else altogether. It wasn't a shelter against the coming storm. Merlin didn't know what it was, but it felt wrong.

And Freya…

Freya was in some sort of trance. She wasn't aware of her surroundings, never mind the rising tension on the main floor. Merlin wasn't certain that she even knew what was happening to her, either, and he couldn't look for long, because the sheer amount of magic pulsing through the ground and using her as a focus point was blinding.
Seeing his childhood friend used as little else but an object did something to Merlin. It took all of his nerves and turned it into cold rage.

"I don't have magic, Merlin. That's why they never looked at me as if I amounted to much. The only reason they gave me the time of day was because of who I am, my cover story and the sword fight. But Tristan isn't going to answer to me. He'll answer to people with magic. The more magic, the better. If we let them think that you're Generation Zero -- no, fuck that, let's let them think you're something else altogether, something stronger than them. We're not going to convince them to stop what they're doing. Tristan and his lot don't have that kind of authority. At the least we can get them to tell us what they have planned and why they're so desperate for the database --"

Arthur stopped. He put a hand on Merlin's shoulder.

"Merlin? Are you listening?"

Merlin nodded. He couldn't make eye contact. It was too hard. He hated himself for what he was thinking, but he had to know. "What are we going to do once we know?"

"What do you mean?"

Merlin shifted in his seat. He chewed his bottom lip. He shook his head and set his jaw, but still, he couldn't look up and meet Arthur's eyes. "If you're right, if they're trying to get to the database because they think there's something that can counter what they're doing, what are we going to do?"

Arthur was uncharacteristically silent, but when Merlin risked glancing at him, Arthur wore a heavy, concerned expression with a question that he didn't ask. "We're going to do our best to keep people from dying, Merlin."

"Yeah," Merlin said, nodding, because he'd expected as much. He hesitated, then asked, "The magic, Arthur. What are we going to do about the magic?"

Arthur's hand had slid from Merlin's shoulder. For a brief moment, Merlin thought that Arthur was pulling away from him, that, finally, Arthur had come to his senses about Merlin and his magic and how it wasn't a novelty anymore. Merlin was a weapon. Merlin was magic. Merlin was no different than the sorcerers --

Arthur's fingers tightened around Merlin's hand. "Look at me, Merlin. Look at me."

Merlin stifled a shuddering breath, but he looked up and saw Arthur's bright blue eyes, empty of guile, full of love.

"If there's anything that I want out of all this, it's two things, and two things only," Arthur said, palming Merlin's cheek to keep Merlin from looking away. "It's that I want that world of balance that Kilgarrah told us about. If magic is meant to come back, it'll come back, yeah? It has nothing to do with me, nothing to do with us. We can't stop that."

Merlin swallowed thickly and nodded.

"The other thing that I want," Arthur said, his voice hoarse with emotion, "It's us. Whatever we do from this point on, I'm not calling the shots. I can't. I don't have any magic, Merlin. I don't understand it. I don't know how to control it -- if it even should be. You're my equal in this -- fuck, I'm not saying this right. You've always been my equal. What I'm trying to say is, it's not going to be
easy, but if it comes to that, we will make the decision. All of us, together. You and me."

Merlin released a held breath and closed his eyes. He felt a relief so palpable, it sank into his bones. He nodded. He shook his head. "Yeah. All right. Doesn't mean I'm going to like doing this. Not to you."

Arthur shrugged, giving Merlin a lopsided smile. "I've had my fun. Now, it's your turn."

Merlin looked at the telly. The news anchor looked frazzled as she announced yet another so-called "natural" disaster. He tried to come up with an alternative option and failed. He knew Arthur would have tried, too, but as it was, this was their only other recourse. It was plausible. It could work. He had to learn how to talk the talk and walk the walk if they had any chance in Hell of getting this to work.

He sighed. He nodded. He slowly crawled backward onto the bed, nearly tangling himself into the rough hotel room covers in the process, and leaned back against the pillows. He tossed up his arms and tucked his hands behind his head.

He looked at Arthur. "All right. Let's try this. How about you go and get me a drink?"

Arthur's eyebrow rose and he crossed his arms. "You've got magic. Get it yourself. And don't ask me -- order me."

Merlin groaned. He covered his face with his hands. "Fine. Get me a damn drink."

"Better," Arthur said. There was a pause, and the bed dipped under Arthur's weight as he crawled forward. Merlin didn't lower his hands until he felt Arthur's fingers tug at the waistband of his pants. "Now, what else do you want me to do?"

Merlin let the rage fill him. Every ounce of anger that he'd felt at knowing what Freya was going through, at hearing something else that the NWO had done, at the underhanded attempts by the Directory to do whatever it was that they planned to do -- he let it build up and up in preparation to letting it go.

And when Arthur stepped aside in answer to Tristan's question, Merlin tore open the old, angry wound that had been festering with bitterness and vengeance for decades.

He looked his childhood bully in the eye, and said, "I really don't have much patience, Tristan."

There was a long, long silence, absent of emotion, of conscious thought. Uncertainty crept in Tristan's features, only to waver and be brushed aside by old bravado, and he laughed. "You?"

Tristan looked at Arthur. He glanced at the others. He turned toward Merlin again. He burst out laughing.

"Bollocks. You're a squealing babe on the playground. You're the weak link in the chain. You're the cocksucker dropping to his knees the minute there's dick." Tristan waved a hand in the air, his expression hardening. "Don't waste my fucking time. Boys, cut them down."

Tristan's men were more than happy to comply. The guns raised. The men took aim.

There was no time for panic, no time for protest. Merlin threw out his arm and said, "$Scield.$"

His magic surged, bright and alive, a golden flame licking down his fingers. The shield flared to life.
in a bright, glittering wall that curved around Tristan and his men. It was clear and crisp, and except for a faint golden tint, it wasn't easy to tell that it was there by sight alone.

The barrage of bullets from the armed guards on either side of Tristan changed that. The shield burst to life, every bullet striking it causing a flare of light. The impacted bullets fell to the ground with a musical tinkling. It was almost mesmerizing.

Nearly as suddenly as it started, the gunfire died. Men and women both lowered their weapons and looked between each other with uncertainty before turning to Tristan. Tristan took a step back, and another, and another, until he hit the other side of the shield and fell unceremoniously on his arse.

"Now, here's the thing," Merlin said, and putting ice in his tone wasn't half as difficult as he'd thought it would be. All he had to do was remember being stripped of his trousers and pants and tied to the schoolyard flagpole in the middle of the winter, getting frostbite on his unmentionables and slowly dying from the humiliation before Will showed up to get him down. "I remember my childhood very, very well. I remember everything that you've ever done to me and to my friends. I remember every single thing that I wanted to do to you in revenge, but couldn't because I'd promised my Mum."

Merlin lowered his arm, but the shield held. He approached the shield, walking over slowly and lazily, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets.

"My Mum's not here," Merlin said, taking a slow step forward. The magic fizzled around him as he walked through the shield. Tristan tried to move away but the shield kept him trapped. His bodyguards scattered, afraid, and Merlin let them go, letting the shield drop so that they would get out of his way. Merlin was only peripherally aware of the others subduing and disarming them. "I'm a grown man. So, if I want to play a little game and let people think I'm still the squealing babe on the playground, the weak link in the chain, the cocksucker who drops to his knees when someone fishes their dick out of their trousers and waves it in my face…"

Merlin stopped. He very deliberately looked over at Arthur, watching as he bent over and zip-tied two of the guards together. Merlin wasn't certain if it was the ambient light of the club or good genetics, but Arthur's arse looked really good in those trousers.

He shook himself with difficulty. "Well. That's no business but my own, isn't it?"

Merlin turned to Tristan, advancing slowly. He let go of his magic, letting it free. It still felt strange to do that, to remind himself not to scramble for his magic and keep it under control, and it would no doubt feel strange for a very long time. He needed to remember to let it go and to leave it, because his magic was an extension of his will, of his desires.

And his magic did exactly what Merlin wanted it to do. It dragged Tristan from the raised dance floor and hauled him up until he dangled in the air a good metre from the ground.

Merlin smelled it before he saw it -- the stench of fear and urine. A dark stain spread on the front of Tristan's trousers and a slow trickle dribbled to the ground through his trouser leg.

"See, Merls? I told you. Just stand up to him and he'll back off. Nothing worse than a cowardly bully getting off on pushing everyone else around but having no spine to go with it," Will said. After a pause, he added, "Feels good, doesn't it?"

Merlin didn't answer, and that wasn't because he wasn't sure how he felt. It felt good, but it felt dirty and wrong, too. There was a roiling sickness in his belly that he was using against the waves of smug self-satisfaction at finally getting his own back. The knowledge that this wasn't him, that he'd
been raised better than this, warred against the very dangerous desire to rub his power into Tristan's face.

Instead of answering Will, Merlin let Tristan drop down to the ground, using his magic to keep him upright. He didn't approach Tristan, though. The puddle of piss reeked.

For a brief, brief moment, Merlin felt badly for doing this to someone. Then, he remembered that this was Tristan, who was one-half of the two-boy bully team who had blocked a young Merlin when he was desperate for the loo, and who punched Merlin in the belly until he'd piddled himself.

On more than one occasion, too.

Merlin tried to block the childhood memories, to compartmentalize them the way he'd done all these years, but they just kept coming. He wavered between outrage and irrational fear, vacillating between exacting revenge for every single thing that had been done to him and stopping now, because he'd done enough.

Merlin didn't feel good about frightening Tristan, but it couldn't happen to a better man, as far as he was concerned.

"You said something about wasting time," Merlin said. "The only time you're wasting is mine. I thought it was bad enough that the lot of you were going round, running the show without even a clue of what you were meant to do --"

"Oi," Bran said, and Merlin turned around. Bran raised both brows and pointed. "Someone's running."

"No, they're not," Merlin said. He let his magic pulse. He felt it stretch and bend to his will, twisting the so-called wards on the outside of the building to keep anyone from getting in as much as to keep people from running out.

On the other side of the club, the sorcerer they had apprehended in the alley bounced off the wall before ever reaching the rear corridor.

Merlin gave Will a long look. Will shrugged. "Don't have eyes on the back of my head, do I? Besides, I knew you'd get her."

"Pay attention, Will."

Will tapped his head. "Concussion," he said.

"You need a brain for that," Merlin said, without heat. He waved a dismissive hand in the woman's direction. "Just. Do something with her."

"Yeah, yeah, just give me a bloody second here," Will said. He finished the weapons pat-down on the guard and rescued a few knives and a mobile before wandering over to the sorcerer.

Merlin tilted his head, fixing his attention on Tristan.

"Let me make one thing clear. The order to steal the Pendragon database didn't come from me, but I only allowed it to happen because I wanted to know what the fuck Morgause was playing at. You were never going to get it." Merlin took a step back, letting his gaze rake down Tristan's body, and made a disgusted sound before turning around to look at Arthur. It was only a brief glance, but it bolstered him. Merlin ran his hands through his hair before dropping his arms, and gestured at Tristan. "You're a bottom-of-the-barrel boot-licking slug. You have to do whatever you're told."
Morgause isn't much better than you -- she might have more leeway in how she does things, but she's getting her orders from somewhere, and I want to know who."

Tristan gasped. "Ask her."

"I'm asking you," Merlin said, dropping his voice an octave, sharpening an edge to his tone. "I'm asking you, you useless little fuck, and you're going to answer me."

"You're not a Zero," Tristan said, struggling against the magic keeping him in place. His eyes flashed a faint orange, flickering like embers struggling to come to life. Merlin could sense the magic that Tristan tried to bring to the surface, and he batted it away every time. When Tristan spoke again, it was with an uncertain warble. "You're not a Zero, or you'd know."

Merlin faltered, not sure how to continue. Actually, he had an idea, but after having been on the receiving end of torture, he couldn't follow through. It wasn't in him to do that. He couldn't do it, not even to Tristan.

"I told you that he'd be useless," Arthur said, coming up behind Merlin. He didn't touch Merlin, but they were close enough that Merlin could feel his body heat.

"If he's useless, then we don't need him," Will said, dragging the woman back to the main group. "I'm more than happy to do the deed."

Will bowled the sorcerer at the bound guards. They crumpled, bowling under her weight. Will drew his gun, the safety off, a round already chambered, holding steady.

"You wouldn't," Tristan said, forcing a nervous laugh. "You --"

"Wouldn't I?" Will asked, taking another step forward. He stood next to Merlin, his raised arm brushing Merlin's shoulder. "Wouldn't I? Oh, I don't know, I think I'm inclined, actually. Just like I was inclined to blow Bryn's brains out and stay with Merlin while we figured out what Aredian was up to. And it's no different to how I'm inclined to take my time making sure you're dead and stay dead. Don't need a reason, mind, but if you want one --"

"Will," Merlin said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Shut up."

"Right," Will said. "Shutting up."

Merlin stared at him until Will actually did what he was told, for once. Merlin barely kept himself from chewing the inside of his mouth while he figured out what to do. He wished that he'd had more time to prepare for his suddenly expanded role. He didn't know how to act. He didn't know what he needed to do. He and Arthur had talked about it, but not enough, it seemed, and it felt as if he were the poor, underprepared understudy for a theatre role, about to get laughed off the stage.

Tristan had used the term Zero. He didn't believe that Merlin was Generation Zero of the NWO -- a handpicked member of the core group that had supposedly written the Manifesto that called for the end of the world and the establishment -- or reestablishment -- of those with magic in positions of power.

Somehow, the idea wasn't only worrisome. It was ludicrous. The idea of generations and handpicked selections and manifestos -- it didn't work.

It really didn't. Merlin couldn't remember which member of the team had brought it up -- maybe it was Gareth, maybe it was Lucan. But the question had been raised, once, long ago, and it was coming to the fore now. If no one's seen these so-called Gen Zeros, who's to say they really exist?
Maybe they had, once. Maybe they were dead, now. If there were any survivors, they certainly wouldn't be able to orchestrate all the events of the last few days with such operatic harmony. This wasn't the so-called Illuminati, with a secret inner circle pulling the strings. The name alone told it all -- the propagation of the NWO was based on *generations* of magic users, but the years and corruption and recruitment had changed all that.

Even if they'd passed on their honorary titles to their descendants or to other, worthy sorcerers, the sheer secrecy of the organization worked against them. The Ones might know who the Zeros and the Twos were, but the Twos and Threes and every generation after that would have no idea about the Zeros in the first place. Generation Zero of the NWO was little else but myth, and they had no control on every cluster of a cult that had grown out of control.

Merlin wished he could borrow Arthur's brain, just for a few minutes. He didn't have Arthur's ability to make connections, to follow them to an end-result, to come up with a strategy or a solution. But what he did have…

Merlin almost smiled. It was a twisted, cruel thing, and it didn't fit on his face. It felt strange.

The half-smirk had its intended effect, though. Tristan withered, just a little.

"If I were Generation Zero, I'd know," Merlin repeated. He nodded slowly. "You're right. I should know. Just like I should know that whoever set the wards on this building? *They* were, at the very least, Generation Two. A little sloppy, but the end result will be the same. Do you know what that end result is, Tristan?"

Tristan didn't answer. He couldn't. Merlin was cutting off his air supply. Tristan grasped at the magic holding him immobile and on his feet, his fingers scratching uselessly at his own skin, drawing blood.

"No, I didn't think anyone told you. And why *would* they tell you anything? You're expendable. Just like Bryn. That's why they ordered you to send him. You didn't want to do that. You wanted to send someone else. But they *made* you, didn't they? They made you burn from the inside out until you agreed."

Merlin felt Arthur's tension but didn't turn around. He noticed how the guards glanced at each other, how Tristan had gone pale from something far more than simple suffocation.

Tristan was left suspended a little longer before Merlin dropped him. Tristan's knees buckled, and he landed hard, collapsing onto his side. He gasped for breath.

Merlin tucked up his trouser legs and crouched down. He tilted his head, studying Tristan for a good long while, waiting until Tristan was at least breathing, however raggedly, before he spoke again.

"The NWO was never meant to operate outside certain boundaries," Merlin said pleasantly. "The original edict was never intended to be misinterpreted and twisted into the manifesto that it has become. By the time we realized what was happening, our organization had increased in numbers and was now operating in independent cells. All modes of communication had been cut, except for those between a single cell and their *handlers*."

Tristan tried to sit up, but he only managed to prop himself up on his elbow. He was holding his throat protectively and was staring at Merlin with wide eyes.

"Do you understand now?" Merlin asked. "Whoever is leading the NWO along this path has done so without the explicit approval from the founders and the founders' heirs. We have been cut out as
much as you have --"

Merlin shook his head faintly. He made a small, tsking sound.

"But unlike you, we have the power to correct their faults and to guide them on the proper path -- the path we were all meant to follow." Merlin paused. He spread his hands in entreaty he didn't really feel. "I'm going to ask you questions. You are going to answer them. If you hesitate…"

Merlin smiled, and the ice running through his blood right now felt good.

"I did say that I remembered very clearly everything that you did to me when we were children," Merlin said. He clasped his hands together.

Tristan swallowed hard.

"Let's begin with Arthur's question." Merlin turned his head, never taking his eyes from Tristan. "What was it again?"

"Who is the other group working against the NWO and how do they plan on stopping us?" Arthur asked.

"Ah, yes," Merlin said. He raised a brow at Tristan. "That might be too complicated for you. One question at a time, yeah? Who's the other group working against the NWO?"

Tristan shook his head. "I don't know."

"You don't know." Merlin made a soft sound before looking over his shoulder. Arthur shrugged, unimpressed, but Merlin knew Arthur. It was less unimpressed and more disbelieving. Merlin turned to Tristan. "You don't strike me as the sort who asks how high when someone tells you to jump, even if it's Morgause. You wouldn't have arranged this blindly, not as long as you could get something out of it."

Merlin paused.

"Do you want to try again?"

"I don't know!" Tristan said, coughing halfway through in his desperation to answer. "No one knows! If they do, they're not talking --"

Merlin raised a hand to shut him up. The sad thing was, he believed Tristan. Tristan and Bryn, they'd been two of a pair back when they were children, and they were no different now. Without Bryn to act as his muscle, Tristan had even less of a spine. It wouldn't take much more to break him completely. "What were they after?"

Morgause had wanted the entire database. Arthur assumed that they were after something specific. It was the only thing that made sense -- everything else from there was a bonus.

The NWO, being the NWO, didn't have much use in a prototype or weapons database. They would get much more use out of the finished product. If Morgause had contracted Aredian to arrange acquisition of the database, Aredian would have required payment, and that payment would likely have come in the form of the Pendragon weapons plans and prototypes. By intercepting and capturing Arthur and Perceval, Aredian had cut out the middle-man, and Morgause had never gotten what she had wanted in the first place.

The only question was what.
From the quick sideways glance, Merlin knew Tristan had the answer and was about to lie.

"Don't," Merlin said. After a moment's consideration, he said, "Actually, go ahead. Tell me you don't know, and I'll *squeeze it out of you.*"

"Very Darth Vader of you," Will said.

"I can't quite get the voice right, but collapsing someone's trachea… *so much fun,*" Merlin said. He raised his eyebrows meaningfully at Tristan, who blanched.


Merlin's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I don't know!"

"Bollocks," Will said.

Merlin hummed in agreement. He raised his hand, curving it into a claw. The sound from Tristan's throat was high-pitched and terrified; he sobbed and crawled away.

"Merlin," Arthur said, his tone grim.

Merlin affected a heavy sign of irritation and rolled his eyes. He stood up and turned around. Annoyed, he asked, "What?"

Arthur's expression wavered between forced apology and annoyance -- Merlin could tell that he didn't particularly enjoy his role any more than Merlin enjoyed his. Arthur closed the distance between them and bowed his head, whispering in Merlin's ear. "Custom orders. That's what they'll be after. Not the regular clients. The plans for the custom orders are saved in a different section of the database."

Merlin took a step back and looked at Arthur. His eyebrows pinched, and he wanted to ask -- but decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Instead, he nodded, because maybe, just maybe, he knew what Arthur was thinking.

The regular client list wouldn't have anything that would stand out. Rifle, handguns, shotguns, semi-automatic rifles. The orders wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary.

But custom orders -- it was a small but lucrative division of Pendragon Consulting, operating almost completely on their own. Merlin knew that they handled a separate budget, trained their own people, had their own testing ranges. Publicity and promotions were at a minimum, and the only reason they hadn't broken off completely from the company was because they needed human resources, research funding and controlling interest.

They'd thought that if Uther was working on anything related to the artefacts, he might not have sent those requests down the line to the research and development division, where everything was documented to within an inch of its life. None of them had even considered that Uther would go to a completely separate division that worked on the manufacture of highly-customized weaponry following either a pencil-sketch from a hare-brained idea, from detailed plans stolen from a different company with the serial numbers filed off, or from laser-measured reproductions.

And why would Arthur think of it? The custom division barely came up on the radar. The head of the division didn't attend any meetings. Their budget was a drop in the water compared to the rest of the company, and they were given leeway to retain half of the reward that came with a successful
There was no real communication between the core business and this particular hobbyist office.

Arthur's cheeks were flushed with suppressed anger and his lips were pressed in a thin line -- no doubt furious with himself for not having come to that conclusion sooner. Uther wasn't developing new weapons based on the artefacts -- he was reproducing them. Reverse-engineering them.

Merlin put a hand on Arthur's shoulder and squeezed. Arthur glanced away, but gave Merlin a firm nod. They would deal with this later; all it would take was a review of the adjacent database to see what was being stored in the custom division.

Merlin turned to Tristan. He crouched down again. "One more question."

Tristan took a deep breath, swallowing with difficulty. "What."

"When?" Merlin asked. He gestured around the room with a wave of his hand when Tristan gave him a confused look. "When is it supposed to happen? All this? What are you going to do?"

That was when Tristan found the spine to smile, his teeth nicotine-yellow, his gaze satisfied and narrowed. He leaned on one arm and lounged -- as much as someone could lounge when lying in a puddle of their own piss -- and said, "You tell me, Merlin. You tell me."

Tristan gestured toward the stage.

"Merls?" Will asked, glancing between them. "Is something --"

"Shut up," Arthur said.

Merlin stood up slowly, stepping around Tristan. He walked onto the stage and was immediately assaulted by a wild tickling of magic.

He rocked back, throwing up his arms to defend himself. His magic rose up defensively, forming a breakwater; the sheer force of the magic imbued into the building was overwhelming, but was easily brushed aside, shattering around him as if he was a rock in a stream. It jostled and splashed against the barriers set around the dance floor, like water swirling in a glass, disturbed by violent motion. Merlin stood still, watching as the wave of power ebbed until it was no longer a deafening roar in his ears nor a blinding light.

He looked around.

Lines of power stretched out beneath the floor and reached from the ground to the ceiling. They were piped in a dizzying maze without rhyme or reason, interconnected and overlapping, knotted and snarled together. It almost looked familiar.

Merlin traced them with his eyes, with his magic, until he found the source.

Freya.

The lines of magic twined around her. Ankles, legs. Wrists, arms. They criss-crossed her chest, they noosed around her throat. They drew on her, they fed her.

She wasn't only the source. She was the feed.

Whatever this was, he couldn't undo this, not easily, and not quickly.

He turned away from Freya with difficulty. He took a step back, moving away from the dance floor;
he felt the edge of the raised platform on his heel. He stood in the barrier, in the very edge, and he felt the throb of power.

Pulsing. Pulsing.

Like a heartbeat.

A countdown.

Understanding struck with the startling force of a bucket of icy water. A sick feeling settled in Merlin's stomach.

He turned to look at Arthur -- blank and expressionless, though he struggled to contain his concern -- and shook his head helplessly. When Merlin left the platform, he hesitated, using the excuse of steadying himself now that he wasn't being rocked about by the sheer power coming from Freya.

And when he spoke, he turned to Will.

They always understood each other, him and Will. There were times when Will could even hear what Merlin had to say without Merlin needing to speak out loud.

It was no different now. Will crumbled onto himself, his shoulders sagging, pain weighing him down as he glanced from Merlin to Freya.

"No," Will whispered.

"It's the building," Merlin said, pausing to take a steeling breath. "It's a bomb. And I don't think it's the only one."

Tristan shrugged his shoulders, crossing his legs at the ankles, spreading his hands.

Merlin snapped. He kicked the self-satisfied smug off of Tristan's face.

ooOOoo

Merlin ran his hands through his hair the way he did when he was frustrated by a puzzle he couldn't figure out or a piece of equipment he couldn't fix, and Arthur thought it best to leave him to it. Arthur knew the expression that Merlin was wearing now -- it was the one where he might turn into a snarling tomcat if anyone interrupted him.

Arthur turned and gestured at Kay and Pellinor, pointing them toward Tristan's guards. "Double-bind them, blind them, and gag them. Secure them in the storeroom. I'll call Olaf."

Arthur didn't like any member of the NWO out of his sight right now, but he couldn't spare the men. He needed Kay and Pellinor to take care of other things. His concern must have showed on his face, because Bran stepped into his line of sight, his eyebrows raised, his eyes hopeful.

"I can lock it," Bran said. "I mean, I can set it up so that if they cross the barrier, it'll trigger and I'll know."
Arthur considered, but he didn't have to give it much thought. He clapped a hand on Bran's shoulder and pushed him to follow Kay. "Do it."

Bran gave him a big, beaming smile and trailed after Kay like a puppy.

Arthur glanced around the main floor. He walked in circles, getting further and further away from Merlin, Will and Tristan.

Owain, Lamorak, Gareth. They were still in London, but it would take them time to get here. Owain, for all that he took particular interest in dismantling complicated spells during their training sessions at the Directory, wouldn't be useful here. There were no physical components to disarm -- not unless Arthur counted the building, and he thought that would be as much a trigger for the bomb as the actual trigger.

Arthur stalked over to Merlin. Will, sensing his mood, took several steps away.

"How long do we have?" Arthur asked.

Merlin shook his head before he turned, looking around the club with wide eyes that flashed gold every few seconds. Arthur couldn't tell if it was because of Merlin's magic or because of the way some of the lights were pointed. Either way, the golden glimmer in Merlin's eyes did things to Arthur that he couldn't afford to think about right now, and he forced himself to look away.

"Not long," Merlin said finally. His gaze was a little unfocused, and Arthur felt Merlin's fingers drumming on his arm. A few seconds of that was all that Arthur needed to know that Merlin was tapping out some sort of rhythm that Arthur couldn't see nor hear. "It's gotten faster since we've been here."

"Because of us?"

"No," Merlin said, looking away from whatever had caught his attention, turning to meet Arthur's gaze. "No. I think it's always been counting down, ever since the start. It's been using whatever energy it could get to fuel it, and now --"

He jutted his chin toward the dance floor.

Freya.

"Can you get her out of there?"

Merlin set his jaw. A muscle clenched. His lips pressed tightly together, and he shook his head. "I don't know."

"Will it disable the bomb if you do?" Arthur asked.

Merlin bit his lower lip. "I don't know."

"Try," Arthur said. "Get Owain on the phone. He studied this shite at the Directory, he should be able to talk you through it."

Merlin nodded, his phone already in hand. There was a subtle hesitant pause. He looked more drawn and tired than he'd ever been, and when Arthur touched his arm, Merlin said softly, "It might kill her."

Arthur glanced at Freya. He didn't really know her. There had been a few encounters, but from his
point of view, Freya had always been a silent, obedient drone. He understood that she hadn't always been that way, that she had been troubled as a child, struggling with her dual nature. She didn't have anyone, not the way Merlin had had his family. Arthur knew that Merlin had tried to help her, had gone to Gaius for advice, had worked with her as much as he could without breaking the promise he'd made to his mother as a child, but in the end…

Freya had made her choice. It had been a bad decision, ill-advised and poorly informed, but it had been her choice to make.

Just as it had been her choice to stay with Bryn and Tristan despite everything that they had done to her, despite everything that she had seen them do to others. It had been her choice to dance at the Lockdown and to fuel the magic in that building -- a test run, Arthur recognized that, now. It had been her choice to help Bryn and Tristan when they prevented Merlin from leaving their house.

Arthur knew, intellectually, that Freya might have, and very likely had been brainwashed into doing whatever Bryn and Tristan asked her to do. That, sometimes, she might not have realized that she had the choice to refuse, to defend herself, to walk away.

Despite this, Arthur couldn't forgive her for that. For anything that she had done. To other people. To Merlin.

He was prepared to write her off, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't do it to Merlin. Freya might be yet another person who had betrayed him, but he didn't know what it would do to Merlin if they just left her there.

She had been Merlin's friend, once. Once. A long time ago. She hadn't been his friend for a long time, and as far as Arthur could tell, she hadn't been Will's friend, either then or now. But Arthur couldn't miss how Merlin was twisting himself up, because she had been his friend.

"Disable the bomb," Arthur said. He put a hand on Merlin's shoulder. "That's the first priority. Do you understand that?"

Merlin wavered, but he finally nodded. Arthur could only hope that Merlin knew he couldn't save everyone, but Merlin was also the sort who would do everything he could to try to get Freya out of there alive.

Arthur squeezed Merlin's shoulder and gave him a desperate shake. "Do what you can for Freya, but please, please, Merlin. I can't lose you again."

Merlin tore his gaze away from the dance floor and met Arthur's eyes. Merlin made a soft, hiccupping sound. "Okay, yeah. Yeah, I don't want that either."

Arthur let him go. He watched Merlin turn toward the raised dance floor. Merlin's mobile was loose in his hand as he approached Will; Will watched him warily. Neither of them spoke until Merlin was close enough, and Will went stock-still after a few quiet words. Merlin's head was bowed, his hand motioning between them and to Freya with urgency, but Will only grew colder and more distant. When he didn't respond, Merlin shook his head, his body language screaming *I'm sorry*, and it was only then that Will reacted.

He nodded. He said something, and whatever it was only gutted Merlin more.

Arthur didn't know what either of them had said. He didn't want to know. All he knew was that if it was necessary for him to leave a member of his team behind -- a man who was as close to him as his own brother -- he wouldn't like it, either. He didn't know what had happened between Will and
Going over there to thump Will on the head wasn't high on Arthur's list of priorities right now, but it was on his list.

Arthur turned away and dialled a number from memory on the disposable mobile they'd picked up that morning. He hung up after the first ring. He called again twice more, repeating the first-ring-hang-up protocol, and counted to ten before calling a fourth time.

Olaf answered almost immediately. "You cheeky fucking bugger, where have you been all this --" 

"I need you to shut it and listen," Arthur said, already regretting his decision to involve Olaf. But it wasn't as if he was spoiled for choice right now. His only other option would have to wait until he got the contact information for the CIA from Will.

Over the line, he could hear Olaf bristle, but the man wasn't responsible for his own personal shadow division if he didn't deserve it. With all the cold professionalism that only Olaf could muster, he said, "Go."

Arthur checked his watch. "You're tracing the call. Good. I have something for you to pick up, and I'd appreciate it if you'd get a move on. It's a matter of some urgency."

Olaf snorted.

"You want Vivian. I understand. Believe me when I say she's safer where she is. The natural disasters that aren't disasters, Olaf. The plane crashes, the train wrecks. The NWO's message on every broadcast channel. There's more, and it's happening right now."

Arthur glanced over his shoulder. Merlin was on his knees, inspecting something that Arthur couldn't see. He had his mobile beside him on speakerphone, though Arthur couldn't make out what was being said.

"You need to scuttle whatever plan you had in place and come up with a new one, and you need it now. There's a bomb in London, and it's not the only one."

"I can have the bomb squad --"

"The bomb squad won't find anything. This isn't their kind of bomb. And when I say there's more than one bomb, I don't mean just in London. It's worldwide. You need to flag the other agencies. You need to tell them that they need to get in touch with whatever division deals with --" Arthur whirled around when he heard a yelp.

Merlin was shaking out his hand, but his head was bowed in concentration. Bran had emerged from the back room with Kay and Pellinor. Where Kay and Pellinor were doing a perimeter scan and ensuring that everything was secure, Bran was coming up behind Merlin, curious, cautious, and interested.

"Whatever divisions are dealing with the NWO. You've read their manifesto?" At Olaf's grunt of assent, Arthur continued, "Well, it's happening now."

"Impossible," Olaf said, finally breaking his silence. Arthur had to give him credit; he'd remained silent for a long time, and that was no small achievement for him. "All our intelligence points toward --"
"And where did you get your intelligence from?" Arthur asked. "Your boy's been working with us since the fuck-up at the testing grounds in France, and you haven't been acting on the information he's been giving you all this time because…"

Arthur reached for a reason and grasped the only plausible one.

"Because Will's information isn't matching up with what you're getting from everyone else, and your gut's been telling you he's a sympathizer. I'm here right now telling you that the only thing he's sympathizing with is making sure that the NWO doesn't get the upper hand. Well, too late now. Your intelligence's been compromised, and while you sit on your thumbs in your fancy leather chair, there are fucking bombs in London. There are bombs all over the world. They're set to go off in hours. Hours, Olaf. We don't have time for you to second guess me."

"And why shouldn't I?" Olaf asked. There was a creak of a chair; it was followed by the sound of a door shutting quietly behind him. "You took Vivian. Your men went black."

"We went black for the same reason you're leaving your office right now and waving at your men to evacuate," Arthur said. "We were betrayed in France. I don't know who to trust."

"So you called me," Olaf said jovially. Arthur knew that Olaf was only ever arrogantly pleasant when he was trying to cover up how anxious he was. He let it go this one time.

"Your bloody job," Arthur said. "Contact the other agencies. Spread the word right now. They might get lucky and figure out how to disable the bombs -- assuming they find them."

"Assuming they find them," Olaf said. There was a musing tone to his voice. An elevator chimed; the gears whirred as it moved. "You said this wasn't the bomb squad's kind of bomb. What kind of bomb is it?"

"The kind of bomb neither one of us can hold in our hands," Arthur said carefully. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration, scrambling to come up with a way to describe something he couldn't see. He didn't know what it was; he didn't know what it could do. He took a deep breath and slowly explained, "You've seen it on your intelligence footage. Made out of the same material that can turn a sunny day into a sandstorm and glut up the tracks of a tank and turn it immobile."

"Fuck," Olaf said. At least, Arthur thought that was what Olaf had said. There was an increase in background noise that Arthur couldn't make out over the phone. "I understand."

"I don't know how you do it as long as you leave me and my team out of this. But you need to call the Directory, and get them involved --"

There was a tug on his arm. Bran was wide eyed. He shook his head.

"One second," Arthur said. He covered the mouthpiece with his finger. "What is it?"

"Merlin said we should clear out," Bran said. He bounced on the balls of his feet and wrung his hands.

"Tell him no," Arthur said. He wasn't leaving Merlin by himself.

"He said you'd say that. He also said to tell you Owain doesn't think we've got a chance in Hell," Bran said.

Arthur glanced over Bran's head at Merlin, who was still kneeling in front of the raised platform. His
head was down, his eyes were closed, and his hands were in balled-up fists on the ground in front of him. For an instant -- a panicked instant that grabbed Arthur and squeezed him tight, paralyzing him with fear -- it looked as if Merlin was crying.

The droplets he was seeing was the glimmer of magic cascading down, as if being torn out of thin air. Merlin was almost vibrating from the strain.

Arthur raised a finger to tell Bran to wait and brought the mobile up again. "Olaf?"

"What?" Olaf asked, his tone sharp and impatient. "Are you going to ask for my firstborn too -- wait. You already have Vivian --"

"And I swear I'll get you to her, but she's safer where she is," Arthur said, pinching the bridge of his nose in annoyance. "Look. The Directory's not going to be able to defuse the bombs, either --"

"How big is the payload?" Olaf interrupted.

"The payload?" Arthur grimaced. He didn't know. If the bomb was built using the more traditional components, Arthur would be able to answer Olaf without hesitation. As it was, he couldn't even see the bomb. But he trusted that Merlin could see it, that he could feel it, that he might even be able to disable it, if he had enough time. Arthur didn't want to disturb Merlin to find out.

Except, Merlin wasn't the only one who could see the magic. Arthur looked at Bran. He covered the mouthpiece of the phone again.

"Bran. Do you know what Merlin's doing right now?" Arthur asked.

Bran rolled his eyes. "Course. Cutting the red wire, isn't he?"


He turned Bran around.

"I need you to think. To really, really think. I want you to tell me how much damage this bomb is going to do."

Bran twisted and gave Arthur a wide-eyed stare, as if he couldn't believe that someone would rely on him for anything. Arthur made a swirly motion with his finger to indicate Bran should turn around and get to work.

"Huh," Bran muttered, doing as he was told.

Pellinor walked over, finishing his circuit of the building, and raised an inquiring brow. Arthur pointed at the unconscious Tristan. "Get him away from Merlin. Wake him up."

"With pleasure," Pellinor said. His smile was large and toothy, like a shark's, ready to latch on and rip its next meal apart.

"Is there some reason I'm still on the line with you?" Olaf asked, his tone impatient. He sounded tinny, distant, as if he were going through a tunnel. Arthur didn't know where Olaf had been when he picked up the call, but he was pretty sure that Olaf had been at his office. Not counting the Underground, there weren't many tunnels in that area. He narrowed his eyes.

"I'm your only trusted source of information," Arthur reminded him.
"I didn't --" A crackle of noise blared over the speaker, and Arthur wrenched the mobile from his ear before he went deaf. "-- that. Say --"

Arthur turned to Kay. "Are we being jammed?"

"How should I know?" Kay asked, shrugging his shoulders. It wasn't that he didn't care. It was that he didn't know, and none of them had the equipment needed to be able to tell, anyway.

"Are you --" Olaf said, and whatever else wowwhawowed in and out, every other syllable overwhelmed by the sound of aluminium foil crumpling and flattening over and over again. Arthur had been on both the giving and receiving end of a transmission jammer, and this didn't sound like that at all.

A waving hand in his direction caught his attention. Bran was transfixed by whatever it was that Merlin was doing, but he was reaching behind himself, trying to grab Arthur. Arthur caught his hand, and Bran yelped.

"You got to see this --" Bran caught himself. He gave Arthur a sheepish smile. "Never mind. Anyway, it's really cool, it's like fireworks. No, come to think of it, it's more like a lightning storm. Wasn't there before, but whatever your mate's doing, it doesn't like it."

**Lightning**

Nearly as soon as Bran described it, a silver-white tendril lashed out from the centre of the dance floor. It branched out faster than Arthur could follow. Bottles of liquor behind the bar suddenly shattered or burst apart; the alcohol caught fire. Several tables were overturned. Sparks flared from the overhead lamps, shutting off those that were on, turning on those that had been off.

Merlin was picked up from his crouch and thrown across the room.

Arthur's cry was still building up in his throat when Merlin crashed into Will, and they both fell to the ground in a lifeless heap.

The flash of lightning faded in a cascading glitter before becoming completely invisible.

Arthur darted past Bran and ran towards Merlin and Will. Will coughed for air and shoved Merlin off with a grunt, grimacing in pain from his aggravated injuries. Merlin groaned and rolled onto his back, smoke sizzling from his skin, and he laid on the floor, his eyes closed, his limbs akimbo.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked, reaching out to touch Merlin. He didn't quite make contact, not even daring to, because he didn't know if it was safe. Merlin blinked at him before lazily struggling into a sitting position.

"Brute force? Not the way to go," Merlin said, shaking his head. His mouth was in a grim line, and he was staring at the raised dance floor again, as if working out his next move.

"Did you just --" Arthur stopped himself and tried to put his question in words. He gave up after a second, because there was no delicate way to put it, and asked, "Did you just come close to setting it off?"

"Not… exactly," Merlin said. He held up a hand -- wisps of heat curled up and dissipated in the ambient temperature of the club -- and gestured in a circle. "There's a… maze of… things in the way. I can't get through, not easily, anyway. Freya tossed me. It wasn't the bomb."

The way he said the last few words, slow and deliberate, as if hating himself for speaking them,
never mind coming to whatever conclusion he'd come to, was telling. He had a fairly good idea of what was going on, and didn't want to admit it. Arthur studied Merlin's features, but all he could see was an abject determination to attack the problem from a different direction. "Don't try that again."

"Wasn't going to," Merlin said, taking Arthur's hand. He stood up on coltish legs before steadying himself. Will still hadn't gotten up from the floor, but he looked well enough, if edging down a winding spiral of helplessness and frustration.

"What's it going to do?" Arthur asked. "The blast radius, the damage --"

Merlin stared at the dance floor -- at Freya. A flicker of sadness crossed his features. He ran a hand on the back of his head, and sighed before taking a long, slow look around. "It's built into the infrastructure. When it blows, it'll collapse the supports and implode."

"So, she was never meant to survive," Will said. He shook his head and made a small, unsurprised sound.

"Yeah," Merlin whispered.

Will didn't answer. He rolled onto his side, favouring his arm and broken collarbone, and stood up.

"And the damage?" Arthur asked.

Merlin shook his head. "Just the building."

Arthur scowled. He glanced at the mobile in his hand; the call had been disconnected at some point, and he was only noticing now. "Are you telling me that the NWO has got a grudge against clubs worldwide? Did they get served overpriced beer? Watered-down drinks? Is that it?"

"No. Well, maybe, but mostly no," Merlin said. He glanced over Arthur's shoulder and took Arthur's arm, pulling him away. Arthur saw Bran lingering near enough to eavesdrop, while Pellinor was still working on waking up Tristan. Kay was out of earshot, and Will -- Will was in a different world. Whatever it was that Merlin wanted to say, he didn't want to talk about it in front of the others. When he finished chewing his bottom lip, Merlin said, "It's the prototype."

"Okay," Arthur said. "What about it?"

Merlin turned his body toward the dance floor and gave Arthur a meaningful look. "This is the NWO's prototype."

Arthur's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What? The NWO is trying to shut down magic? Merlin, you're not making sense --"

"No, listen," Merlin said, putting his hands on Arthur's shoulders. His fingers dug into the fabric of Arthur's jacket, pressing hard. "I saw the plans for the Pendragon prototype, didn't I? Before it all went down. Went over the blueprints with Gwen to figure out how to disable it."

Merlin's hands slid from Arthur's shoulders and shaped a small box in the air.

"It were about this big. Mostly made up of electronic components. Some other bits and pieces like charging rods and transformers and fans. Those don't matter. Remember how we thought it had a weird shape? The devil's in the design." Merlin pointed at the dance floor, at things that Arthur couldn't see.

Arthur searched Merlin's face, a question -- no, several questions -- on the tip of his tongue. He bit
them all back and tried to follow what Merlin was telling him.

"Arthur. That thing just threw me across the room, but I'm fine. I'm fine. If anything, I feel a little charged up, but nothing I can't handle. But if it'd been Bran, or anyone else, it would've burned them up. It's too much power --"

Arthur frowned.

"Remember the artefacts?" Merlin prompted. "Uther's custom orders? You think he's trying to reproduce them. What if he's not trying? What if he's reverse-engineered them? What if he's trying to cause a different effect? What if --"

"Oh, fuck," Arthur blurted out. The puzzle pieces had snapped into places. Uther had always liked having an even field where he was the only one with the advantage. Magic robbed him of any possible edge. He wouldn't have liked it, not at all, and he would have done everything in his power to try to come up with a way to counter magic. And he had.

"The prototype wasn't an EMP. It disrupted magic. It broke the connection to my magic. So, the original -- what did it do? What does it do?" Merlin waved at the dance floor. "What does it do that Uther didn't want it to do?"

Arthur's mouth went tight. He had the answer. It was on the tip of his tongue. And yet, he couldn't say them out loud.

"The original artefact. It makes no sense that it would stop magic. So it must enhance it. And that makes sense. It makes a whole lot of sense, Arthur. Because this place? The Pentagram? It's built on a ley line. I didn't know it was there until I burrowed deep down. It's inaccessible right now, but if that bomb goes -- if it's like this all over the world, there's going to be wild magic everywhere. This is the EMP. This is going to bring down the world. This is how they're going to do it."

Merlin's eyes were wide, and there was a tone in his voice that sent a chill down Arthur's spine. They didn't have any defences against magic. And if the NWO suddenly had enhanced magic -- they would be an unstoppable army.

Arthur looked at his mobile. "How do we stop it?"

Merlin didn't answer right away. He was looking at Freya -- beyond her, even, at Will, who stood on the other side. There was a strange tone to his voice as he spoke, slow and stretched, as if each and every word was coming from a bad place, one that he hadn't even known he had. "The prototype was hooked up to a single power source, yeah? Burned itself out when it ran out of juice?"

"It was. It did," Arthur said slowly. He dragged his eyes away from Freya and looked at Merlin. *Regret.*

There was a hollow in his cheeks that hadn't been there before. The overhead lights cast hard shadows onto Merlin's features, erasing the man and leaving behind a shell. *Grief.*

Merlin's lips were dry and chapped, and the edges of his eyes were red and wet. He sniffled, and it was the sound of a person coming to terms with a decision that he would have to carry with him for the rest of his life. *Misery.*
The hard swallow was audible in the quiet club, over even the faint buzzing sensation that Arthur hadn't realized was there until now. Arthur knew the choice that Merlin had made. He'd done it too many times. It was a weight he bore on shoulders that would stoop with age, and the only solace against the black stains on his soul was the knowledge that he had made the only choice he could have.

"Are you absolutely certain that there isn't anything else you can do?" Arthur asked. He had kept his voice low and soft, but it was a thunderclap in the silence, and Merlin winced.

Merlin wiped his cheek with the back of his hand, not even bothering to hide how he was brushing away his tears. He shook his head slowly, closing his eyes, biting his lip, and whatever silent argument Merlin was having with himself, it was over quickly, because he nodded and turned away, shifting his stance until he was leaning against Arthur in an unconscious desire for comfort. Merlin crossed his arms over his chest, squeezing himself tightly, and suddenly, he looked very, very small.

Arthur's attempt to take Merlin into his arms was interrupted when a loud slap reverberated through the club and Tristan moaned.

"You told me to wake him up," Pellinor said, answering Arthur's raised brow. "Didn't say how."

Arthur nodded slowly. He rolled his hand in the air in a faint, encouraging gesture. "Carry on."

Merlin huffed a helpless laugh that was too close to cracking for comfort, and Arthur put himself between Merlin and Tristan. Merlin nodded, sharp and grateful, and clenched at Arthur's jacket.

"It's like a circuit board," Merlin said. He turned his head toward the dance floor but kept his eyes fixed on Arthur. "Interrupt the right flow, break the connections, hope you get lucky and hit the right one, and that should... That should stop it. Except it's magic, and it's been left to fester for too long. I can't... I can't pry it open. Not in the time I have."

"How much time?" Arthur asked. Merlin had already answered him -- *I don't know. Not much* -- but it sounded as if he had a better idea now.

"Two hours," Merlin said, tight-lipped. "Barely that."

Arthur stared. He stared for a moment more. Finally, he gave Merlin a small nod and put a hand on his shoulder. He didn't say anything, letting his thoughts flow over him, allowing a plan to fall in place of its own accord. There wasn't much that they *could* do. The damage was going to be limited to this building and some of the outlying areas.

Arthur had learned something about leylines when they were training at the Directory. He knew that they were sources of magic, conduits that could be tapped with effort to fuel a spell, that sometimes they were close enough to the surface that they were a veritable fountain, feeding magic into the surrounding area.

The sudden liberation of the magic in the leylines would give the NWO all the ammunition they needed to take over the world.

The bombs going off were going to be the first shots fired in a war they would have no hope of winning.

Arthur skipped over the end-effect of a worldwide battle against magic focused on what needed to be done now. His team, his family, his friends. He could protect them.

He made a mental list of everything that needed to be done in the next two hours. The cottage was
far enough from large cities and small towns that it operated on its own grid, using secure generators. They would have to acquire additional fuel and ration it immediately to make it last. There was no knowing how long the power would be out before it could be restored, if it could be restored at all, and they needed to supplement their existing supplies with additional unperishables and MREs. They would need access to clean water, build additional outbuildings for everyone, look for other transportation methods that didn't need unsustainable fuel sources, and establish a perimeter around the cottage to protect them from looters and take in those who didn't have anywhere else to go.

There was nothing anyone could do about the bombs. Not here, not anywhere. Still…

"Here's what you're going to do. You have an hour and fifty minutes to try everything -- absolutely everything -- to find a way to disable the bomb. Use Bran -- he doesn't know the rules of magic, he might see something you could try."

Merlin nodded. He didn't look particularly convinced that they would find something, but stood a little straighter. "All right."

"There's one more thing," Arthur said, hesitating. "It may come down to killing Freya. We may need to take the shot while we have it."

Arthur wasn't oblivious. Not all of the time. But he could tell that Merlin was gutted, and if they didn't at least try to save Freya, they would lose him.

Merlin looked sick, but he nodded. "I'll talk to Will."

ooOoo

Merlin came up for air one hour and thirty-two minutes later.

He was covered in sweat, and beads of it dripped down the tip of his nose. Merlin wiped his jaw on his shoulder and pulled up the short shirtsleeve to wipe at the rest of his face. It didn't do much good. His shirt, his clothes -- they were soaked through.

His magic filled the club where it wasn't already tainted by the foreign artefact design, going as far as to shy away from it unless Merlin wanted to test for weak spots in the constructed bomb. His magic tingled like mad under Merlin's skin, shivering and pulsing, rustling and ruffling until it was almost comfortable, a warm blanket settling around him. Merlin had had to force himself to resist the urge to drag his magic back, to burrow it deep, but once the initial fearpanic ebbed and he became accustomed to the sensation of his magic roaming free, Merlin left it alone.

He sat back on his heels and stared at the monstrosity that was the spell. He wanted to find the person who had invented it, if for no other reason than to strangle them until they were good and dead. If they weren't alive, Merlin had plans for a resurrection so that he could kill them. With his bare hands.

If Merlin weren't already so angry, he would marvel at the intricate spellwork. It was nothing short of genius. The foundation had been bound to the building structure the way a gardener would plant seeds, but instead of water, the spell fed on the energy from people dancing in its epicentre.
And it had grown in the months since its opening. The inside of the club was virtually
unrecognizable for Merlin. He hadn't even noticed the spellwork in the beginning -- that was the
problem. He had always assumed that the spells he'd seen when they had first visited the Pentagram
in the early days of their mission were meant for protection, for discovering magic users, for
suppressing the use of magic and to render any mechanical weapon ineffective.

He hadn't been wrong. Not exactly.

The spell still did that, but as it was fed and watered, what had once been cast as a seed had grown
and become a tangled snarl of creeping ivy and thorny shrubs, pulling together the different wards of
a spell to transform into something more.

A weapon. A bomb.

Merlin couldn't see why or how the men and women of ancient times would have a need for such a
weapon. No one spoke about magic, not unless Merlin counted every mythology he'd ever heard
about growing up. He knew that the victors wrote the history, and guessed that, maybe, they'd left
out that important part of human civilization -- that magic was real, that...

Merlin shook his head. Had there been a war? Had civilization advanced to the point where magic
had become nearly redundant, or where it could be curtailed by more modern weapons? Had the
bomb been created by sorcerers desperate to turn the tide of what must have been a cutthroat
extermination of their kind? Had they been unable to use it? Had they lost the war before they could?

The magic woven through the spell was old. So old that Merlin couldn't fathom giving it an age.
There were parts of the spellwork itself that were gnarled ruins, as if those who had constructed it
hadn't understood -- couldn't understand -- what it was that they were building. In the hands of a
sorcerer strong enough and skilled enough to braid and knot the strands together, this bomb... this
bomb would destroy the very firmament. There wouldn't be anything to hold back the leylines.
Magic would bleed and bleed until it filled every nanometre of the world.

Considering the intricacy of the spellwork, it wasn't hard to think of an alchemist or artificer in a
dark, decrepit backroom somewhere, constructing a small device that would hold the spell until it
could be delivered to a leyline and unleashed. It didn't matter if it was in a tiny jewel box or bound to
a building; the effect was the same. It was ingenious. Brilliant. Genius.

It was lunacy.

The more Merlin struggled to undo the spell, the more he learned about it. He learned how it knit and
wove together, how it seemed to expand and contract, breathing like a living thing. He learned how a
single person could strengthen it, or how it could draw upon anyone who was near.

Here, in the Pentagram, it hadn't been limited to the dance floor, but had stretched out into the club
proper, maybe even outside, where it could draw upon an unsuspecting passerby. If the building had
been larger, the spell might even be able to tent outward and cover more ground. City blocks. Entire
cities.

There was no need for that, though. Set the spell close enough to a leyline, and the end goal would
be the same.

Merlin learned that there was no way to tear the spell apart, to defuse it. If there was a counterspell,
he didn't know it. Owain hadn't recognized Merlin's description, and that meant that even the
Directory sorcerers wouldn't be of much use in stopping it -- if they would be so inclined to do so.
That was part of the problem. Why would a sorcerer work to stop the very thing that would make them more powerful? It didn't matter whose side they were on. Power was a lure, difficult to resist, playing and teasing at a man or a woman until they succumbed.

Merlin was trying very hard not to paint every sorcerer with the same brush. Most might not care about more power -- Merlin certainly did not. He had enough trouble with what he already had. But it only took one sorcerer to bring it all down.

As far as he could tell, even his shields wouldn't be able to stop it. The flare of energy that was building up was too much -- it would tear not only Merlin's shield, but Merlin himself, apart. The only way to stop the magical bomb from flashing outward and overwhelming everything in its path with sheer, blinding power was to remove the power source. Whatever the source was.

Freya.

It might have been a group of partiers the week before. It might have been a sorcerer yesterday. Maybe the NWO had a rotating door policy when it came to keeping the bomb generously well-fed. But like any boiler, even a well-maintained engine could explode from the pressure if it was given too much power.

Merlin had tried to feed the bomb some of his own power -- to poison it, to force it to shut down. It hadn't worked. He had the bruises to prove it.

The artefact, the building, the bomb -- it was at the point where only the slightest disturbance could set it off. Freya wasn't strengthening it, not anymore. There was a feedback loop where the power was returning to Freya, pulsing in and out of her in a steady rhythm. Just when too much magic threatened to send the artefact over the edge, it dribbled down through a safety drain where it was pumped away. Freya had been turned into a pressure valve.

A nuclear plant had cooling rods to keep radioactive material from overheating and threatening the environment, but even a cooling rod could be dangerous after it had been bombarded by enough nuclear particles to contaminate several thousand square kilometres of land if not properly treated and stored.

The situation was no different here. Freya was the cooling rod. Merlin was pretty sure that she had been a deliberate choice to remain behind for the collapse, too, if for no other reason than she could add to the damage caused when she couldn't control herself any longer and turned into a monster.

"Time?" Merlin asked.

"Twelve minutes before your bloke drags you out," Bran said, holding out Merlin's watch.

Merlin took it and gave Bran a raised brow. The teenager was bright and creative -- he'd come up with a few ideas for Merlin to try, though they didn't work any better than what Merlin had already attempted. Bran was also very observant and solidly grounded, the way Kay was, and nothing seemed to bother him. Merlin wanted to know what had happened to the kid to make him so blasé, but Merlin only had twelve minutes before Arthur called for an evacuation as a precaution.

It wasn't so much a precaution, not anymore. The building was triggered to collapse.

And there would be a collapse. It might happen in twelve minutes. It might happen in thirty. Merlin didn't know. All he knew was that the power was reaching its apex, and all that was needed now was for someone to push the trigger.

Except no one knew who was holding the trigger, not even Tristan. That much had been obvious
after a certain type of pressure had been applied not only on Tristan, but also on the others.

Merlin glanced around.

"Where's everyone?" Merlin asked.

Bran thumbed over his shoulders. "Most of them are outside. Handing over the useless gits to a bunch of men in suits."

"Oh," Merlin said, frowning. He'd been out of it for a while, barely aware of his surroundings. The club didn't look that much different, but he was certain that things had changed. "Did I miss anything?"

"Eh," Bran said, shrugging a shoulder so deliberately that he brushed his ear in the process. He half-crouched with his hands on his thighs and peered at the dance floor. "Not much. One of them made a break for it, but your bloke introduced him to the wall, then made sure to acquaint him with the floor. Real polite, that one. I'd hate to go to a formal party with him. He might correct me for using the wrong fork."

Merlin snorted. It didn't sound like Arthur to fly off the handle, but, then again, Arthur was under a lot of pressure. They all were.

"Kay spent a while on the mobile, yelling at some bird," Bran added after a beat. "I don't know what the other guy's doing. Going through supplies? I think he kipped with a few cases of whiskey. Is he some sort of alky?"

Merlin half-chuckled and pushed himself to his feet. "I think Pellinor's just making sure we're covered for every contingency."

"Right," Bran said, dubious.

"And Will?"

"I'm right here," Will said, yawning. "Are we done yet?"

Merlin turned around. Will was sitting on a raised stool at one of the ridiculously small round tables scattered around the dance floor. He was curved over onto himself, as if suffering from a stomach ache, making himself as comfortable as he could get considering that he was concussed, beaten, and broken. There was a single tumbler with a few fingers of darkly-coloured liquid in it on the table, right next to a bottle of Glenfiddich.

The good stuff, too, Merlin saw. If nothing else, he had to give Tristan credit for catering to a high-end clientele.

"Bran, can you tell Arthur that I'm --"

"I can take a hint," Bran said, flashing a faint grin. He glanced between Merlin and Will before leaning in to say, "I'd mind yourself with that one. His bark's just as bad as his bite."

"I usually sort him out with a smack on the nose," Merlin said.

"Oi," Will said, his tone too mild to be offended.

Bran walked away, a loud cackle trailing after him, and it wasn't until he was out of earshot that Merlin approached Will.
"I've been thinking," Will said, leaning back slowly and straightening his spine, wincing piteously in the process. "Came to me about an hour in. Told myself that if it was taking you this long to break the damn thing, it wasn't meant to be broken."

"And you're only telling me that now?" Merlin countered weakly.

Will shrugged a shoulder. "I got distracted. So, am I right? Can't break it?"

"That's not the problem. I can do it," Merlin said. He had been getting the hang of it. There was logic in the chaos. It would have been easier if he knew the spell that was being used, if he could have seen the original pattern that had been drawn to erect the foundations to support it. Pellinor and Kay had searched everywhere, even breaking into Tristan's safe, but there hadn't been any useful information. Despite all the reading he had done on magical bombs, Owain hadn't recognized it, and Gaius didn't know anything about it, either.

When Leon had spoken to Mordred, Mordred had apparently gone pale, distant, and said that there was a way to undo it, but only in the early stages of the spell. It was too late now, according to him. Merlin hadn't want to believe it, but he had a feeling that, despite his own confidence -- if only there was more time --, that Mordred was right.

He blew out his own breath and grudgingly admitted, "But I might be overly optimistic."

"That, you are," Will confirmed. "But the first step is recognizing that you have a problem. I'm proud of you, Merls. Now we can work on fixing that."

Merlin rolled his eyes.

"So, how is it, then?" Will asked, waving a hand toward Freya. "It's going to blow, innit?"

"Yeah," Merlin said. He couldn't bring himself to turn around and look, not anymore. Freya hadn't moved from her kneeling position. She hadn't moved at all, not once in all the time that Merlin tried to do something about the spell. She was locked in some sort of a daze, and so tightly bound up in the magic that any attempt to extricate her resulted in some sort of blowback. Sometimes, Merlin thought that she wasn't even breathing.

"She'll come out of it when she's ready," Tristan said, spitting blood. He was a mess, now -- his trousers stained with dried urine, his shirt wrinkled and torn, his hair rough and uncombed, bruises growing on either side of his face. Kay was an equal-opportunity hitter. "It's how she sleeps."

If Merlin had ever wondered how bloody clueless Tristan was, he'd found out in that moment. The spell simply didn't release anyone. It sucked them dry of energy and of magic, spitting them out as soon as it was done with them.

"Tried everything, didn't you?" Will asked.

Merlin nodded dully. He had tried to lure the bomb away from Freya by offering himself up as a sacrifice, but it hadn't worked. The artefact had gone as far as to brush against Merlin's magic, then gently set it aside.

He had tried to force the bomb to feed from the leyline directly, but every time he re-directed the feed, the spell would simply shrug off the magic from the leyline in much the same way that it had set aside Merlin's.

It was almost as if the spell had been designed to protect the leyline, to instead draw upon an expendable resource with limited magic, so that the spell wouldn't implode on itself from taking on
too much power at once.

That gave far too much credence to the idea that the spell saw *Merlin* as a leyline, too, but Merlin didn't want to think about it. If he did, he would have to talk to Arthur to make some sense out of this entire mess, and he'd have to explain to Arthur why he'd tried to sacrifice himself after he had promised Arthur that he wouldn't.

"Tried everything that I could think of," Merlin admitted. "Even a few of Bran's ideas. I can't defuse it."

"Took you nearly two hours to figure that out?" Will asked, giving Merlin a sidelong look.

"No. It was obvious in the first ten minutes, weren't it?" Merlin said. "Didn't have a chance."

"Ah," Will said. He nodded, more to himself than anything, and asked, "So, you kept trying for... For Freya?"

"Course not," Merlin said, scowling. "I weren't going to give up that easily, were I?"

Will didn't answer.

Merlin glanced at him. He twitched. He closed his eyes. "Yeah, all right. Maybe a little."

Will nodded, but he didn't speak, not right away. He rolled his shoulders and grimaced, rubbing his collar. "Right, then. How long do we have?"

"I don't know."

They stayed where they were in silence for several long minutes before Will asked, "Tell me something, though. Everything she's done -- why are you trying to save her?"

Merlin scratched his jaw with his open palm, rubbing at the faint scruff on his cheek. He dropped his hand and shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "I have it in my head, if I save her, I can stop the bomb. Or, if I stop the bomb, I can save her. I haven't the faintest. It's one and the other, not either-slash-or."

Will nodded, as if that made sense. "Why bother, then? I mean, if it blows, worse it can do is bring down this pit of a club and maybe fry the power in a couple of boroughs."

"Don't forget hotwiring every sorcerer in the city and killing Freya in the process," Merlin said. He moved to lean against the table. It was tall enough that he could fold his arms over the surface and slump a little, and he stared at a scratch in the veneer for what seemed to be an eternity before he said, "Could you do it? If you were me. Could you let her die?"

"She's not my friend. Never was. Don't you remember? She'd look at me with the stink-eye half the time, as if I were some sort of cockroach she'd rather squash under her heel." Will tilted his head and half-shrugged. "The way I look at it, she's no different than one of those fanatics strapping on a bomb vest to set it off in the middle of a busy market square. Doing it willingly, isn't she?"

"I'm not so sure," Merlin said. He couldn't help it. When he looked at Freya now, he could only see Freya when she was barely in her teens, her face smudged and bloody, her hair a bird's nest of snarls and knots, her eyes round and wide as she huddled in the darkest corner of someone's unlocked shed. She had been terrified, then, but he hadn't seen that terror now, not when he saw her on the dance floor at this club, at the Lockdown.
"She's going to die no matter what you do."

Merlin flinched. If the spell didn't kill her, the building collapse would. Also, if Freya managed to transform into her monstrous shape, and survived anyway, she would run and she would attack whoever she could in her rage -- and she would die then, because she would be caught, eventually.

"Well." Will sighed softly and shook his head. "She's in a bit of a bother, yeah? She can't get out, we can't pull her away. It's going to suck her dry like a vampire and she's going to die if the building doesn't turn her flat into a pancake first."

He paused. He scratched his forehead the way he always did when he was trying to find the right words for what he wanted to say.

"You had your chance to save her, Merlin?" Will asked. "You've got to give up. Any second now, Arthur's going to come stomping in to drag you out."

"I don't even know if there was ever anything to save," Merlin said, the words out of his mouth before he could think about it. He braced himself against the flush of regret, of guilt, but it didn't come.

Will didn't answer. He put his hand on Merlin's shoulder and squeezed. He half-turned to look at Merlin, and for a brief moment, Merlin thought he saw something change in Will's expression. It was a bone-deep rawness, an open, festering wound, as if he knew what Merlin was going through.

Maybe he did.

They might be best mates, but there were things that Merlin had never told him, that he never would, and he didn't doubt that the reverse was true, too. Some things in war were best left on the battlefield, and the only thing that they could do from that point on was to try to leave it there. Every soldier carried their ghosts, and sometimes, no matter how hard they tried, the burden they carried home was all the heavier for all the words they couldn't say out loud.

Will looked at Merlin, his eyes cold. "That's what it's about, then? You're still seeing the scared little girl you tried to help. The one who decided that it was too hard to help herself the proper way and went round to Tristan and Bryn instead."

Merlin clenched his jaw.

"I get it," Will said, leaning across the table to put a hand on Merlin's crossed arms. "I do. You don't know how much I wished I had a bit of magic myself so that I'd know what it was be like to be like you. So that you'd have someone to talk to who understood. But the thing is, there she was --"

Will pointed at Freya.

"-- someone like you, just as scared of herself as you were. You tell me, Merls. How come you never told her about your magic? How come you only ever talked to me when things got bad? Why not her?" Will didn't wait for Merlin to answer, but it wasn't as if Merlin had an answer anyway. "It's because deep down, you knew. You knew you couldn't. You saw it back then, even if you didn't know it. She was on a sinking ship and she jumped overboard. She would've dragged you down with her and you would've drowned."

Will shook his head.

"There's nothing left to save. Believe me," Will said. "I'm the one to spend time with her all these months. I know what she's like when she was with Bryn. I know what she's like when she's alone.
It's all the same. Don't make her a problem you can't solve."

"Will --"

"No. Shut it. Never thought I'd say this, but your Arthur's a bleeding heart. Think about this. Would he give anyone else the chance to save her, or would he make the call to cut our losses and contain the situation?"

Merlin's eyes snapped up. He hadn't considered that. He'd been so stuck in his own world, so intent on disarming the bomb and maybe saving Freya, that he hadn't thought that Arthur would have treated Merlin any differently than he would anyone else on the team.

Will searched Merlin's expression -- Merlin couldn't meet his gaze. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Will nod thoughtfully before he went on to say, "Didn't order you to do anything, did he? Not really. He knew that there's nothing we can do. But he also has you figured out. Knew that there wouldn't be any stopping you from trying, so that's why he's out there sorting things out and you're in here being a stubborn arse."

Merlin pressed his lips together and stood up straight. He put his hands on his hips and hung his head. "What do you want me to say?"

"Just listen," Will said. "Look at her. Go on. Look at her. This isn't on you. This is on her. She's the one who gave up. You tried. I tried. Never once did she say that she didn't want to be doing this. She lived and breathed the NWO -- and that might've been Bryn's doing, but we'll never know. She cashed her chips and she's all-in."

If Merlin didn't know better, he would think that Freya had collapsed on the dance floor, or that she was in a quiet, meditative pose. She seemed calm, relaxed, at peace. And, maybe, she was.

Who was he to take that away from her? To say that her decision to join the NWO was wrong? In them, Freya had found a way to be content in her own skin, something she wouldn't otherwise have been.

He exhaled tightly. He closed his eyes.

"Okay," Merlin said quietly.

"Yeah?" Will asked.

"Yeah," Merlin confirmed.

"Good," Will said, standing up. He reached for the tumbler on the table and swallowed the contents. "Good, because I didn't want to have to tell you about the time they'd put me up on a tower to look out for those suicide bombers, or tell you how many I'd had to take out before they bombed our boys --"

"You did. I heard all about it," Merlin said. He remembered finding Will in the mess hall back on base some years -- an eternity -- ago, his gaze fixed to a distant point, his fork drowning in chunky potato mash. He wasn't entirely certain that Will had been all there at the time, but it sounded like he hadn't been. "You could've just led with that."

"Now you tell me," Will said, scowling. He gestured toward Freya. "Anyway, we were thinking something else, too, while we're at it."

"We?" Merlin glanced around. The club was deserted.
"The royal we, meaning me, and that's all that matters," Will said, grinning. There was something wan in his smile, there and not-there. It was a forced smile, weighed down with hesitation. "Is it going to help any if I shoot her?"

Merlin grimaced. Arthur hadn't quite… given the order, but Merlin had known that it would come, either way. When he'd spoken to Will about it, it had hurt to make that call.

"I don't know, Will," Merlin said, shaking his head. "It could go either way. It could trigger the bomb. It could defuse it. I don't know."

Will nodded grimly. He took his Desert Eagle out of the small of his back and thumbed at the safety. "Right, then."

Merlin grabbed his arm. "No. Don't." The pressure in Merlin's chest was suffocating. He couldn't do this to Will. He couldn't make Will live with the knowledge that he'd killed someone that Merlin had thought he could save. "No. You said it yourself. It's on her. I'm not putting that on you."

A flash of relief passed over Will's features before disappearing beneath wounded bravado, but Merlin knew better. Will had as many issues as Gwaine -- maybe not the same ones, but they were both walking wounded all the same -- and Merlin had promised himself that he wouldn't put Will in a situation that would only add to Will's nightmares if he couldn't help it.

But there was such a thing as pride, especially among soldiers, and Merlin pointedly eyed Will's sling. "And besides, it's not like you've got much to work with, anyway."

"Oi, I'll have you know I'm as good a shot with --"

A loud creak at the other end of the club stopped Will from what he had been about to say. Pellinor hurried over, stopping halfway to them, and tilted his head. "We need to clear out now."

Merlin glanced at Freya. Nothing had changed, but he could see that the energies in the spell had increased, and his own magic was retreating of its own accord, nestling under Merlin's skin with a faint buzz.


"Shite. All right. Let's go," Will said, hustling Merlin out.

They weren't even halfway across the club when the building trembled. The ground suddenly lurched under their feet. Will went down first, tripping over a concrete shard tearing through the laminate flooring. Merlin followed with a stumble when Will didn't let him go fast enough.

"Shite fuck our bloody luck!" Will shouted. He clambered to his feet, pinching at Merlin's arm. Merlin was on one knee when the bomb's reserves breached the brim of its reserves and spilled over in a cascade, crashing down with the deafening roar of a waterfall.

It knocked Merlin off his feet. It pounded in his ears. It filled his senses, blinding and disorienting. He wasn't aware of having been swept away by the initial wave until Will caught up to him and rolled him onto his back.
"What the fuck were that?"

"You didn't see --?"

"See what? You getting picked up and thrown like a rag doll --?"

The bomb's magic reared back like the tide going out, wrapping onto itself like the ribbons on a Maypole. It was a gorgeous glimmer of colours shimmering bright, layering one on top of the other until it was as thick across as the dance floor was wide, and in the middle of it all was Freya --

She was standing, now; slim and elegant despite her dishevelled clothes. Her arms were spread wide in welcome, her head was thrown back in adulation, and the magic teased at her hair, making it fly as if it were drifting on the wind or on the waves.

There was a moment -- a pause in time. A breathlessness, a vacuum. They were in the eye of the storm, witnesses to the gather of the masses, waiting for the bomb to fall.

"Go, Merlin," Freya said, her voice disembodied, like an echo in a dream. It was low and deep, sensuous and seductive, teasing at the fearful animal mind. "Go."

"Don't need to be told twice," Will said. He grabbed a handful of Merlin's jacket and pulled; Merlin, unwilling to take his eyes away from Freya, walked backward, stumbling over debris.

The magic of the artefact swirled around Freya, tearing at her clothes and replacing it with a pale blue swath. It raised her from the ground, leaving her suspended like a jewel hanging from a chain, and she dangled and twirled in an arc before the momentum settled and she faced them, her eyes bleached white with so much magic that it was burning her up inside.

"Merlin! Will!"

It was only distantly that Merlin heard Pellinor's voice, their names muted as if spoken underwater. But there was no mistaking the urgency.

They needed to hurry, Merlin knew. They needed to get out of there before the bomb went off. Merlin didn't dare turn his back on the bomb so that he could run like he should. Instead, he reached behind him and pushed Will, breaking Will's hold. "Run."

"What about you?"

"Right behind you. Go," Merlin said. When he looked back at the raised platform, he wasn't so sure that it was a promise he could keep.

The spell had grown into something massive. The blocky column of knotted magical strands pulsed, and the pulses increased in frequency until they blended together to form a single, semisolid strand. The light emanating from the core -- from Freya -- was spreading.

There was nothing that Merlin could do. No way to cut the red wire, to stop the countdown timer before the trigger set off the explosive. And, worse, he recognized that there was very little that he could do to save himself. This close to the source, this close to the leyline -- the magic was going to surge into him and burn him in the same way that it was doing to Freya now.

It would get Bran --

"Shite --"
Merlin turned around and ran. He stumbled over the fallen rubble just as the building shook one more time. The dance lights fixed to the ceiling creaked, bent, and fell, crashing to the ground in bits and pieces. The club went completely pitch black. There was a loud, reverberating crash as what Merlin could only assume to be the overhead ventilation pipes followed much the same route as the lights; he hastily raised a shield to protect himself.

A heavy weight landed on top of him, bearing down. It was a strain to shift the shield and move the weight aside, but he was free.

Then, the ceiling collapsed. It broke off into multiple pieces, starting in the middle where the column had been, only now, the column narrowed and expanded like a living thing, stretching and pushing itself up and out. Sunlight streamed through only to be curtained by the crumbling dust.

"Merlin!" Arthur’s voice jarred Merlin out of his paralysis.

Merlin found his footing and forced his way through the front entrance, ducking and rolling away just as the rolled steel security door shattered down right after he passed through.

Someone grabbed his arm and hauled him away. He scrambled back, back, back, twisting around to watch the Pentagram implode in on itself. Brick and mortar, plastic and concrete, glass and steel -- it was all rendered to nothing but a pile of rubbish as they watched.

Merlin tripped and fell on his arse; the person dragging him away fell, too. Strong arms wrapped around Merlin's waist and chest, holding him tight as if expecting him to surge forward and run, but Merlin leaned back, clutching Arthur as if he was the only real thing left in the world.

*Goodbye, Freya.*

Merlin closed his eyes.

He felt it, first. A break. It was a tear in the firmament, punching through concrete, soil, stone. A faint rumble trembled, jarring the ground.

A high-pitched keen pierced the air; Merlin covered his ears even as he heard Bran cry out in pain. Merlin reached out blindly. "Bran! Come here --"

Merlin didn't know what he could do. They needed to get away, out of the range of the bomb and the first swell of the magic's rise, but there was no way that they could move fast enough.

There was no way.

A body crashed into him, and Arthur -- Arthur caught it. He caught Bran. Bran wrapped his arm around Merlin and sobbed.

Somewhere in the background, Tristan was screaming.

"It hurts. It hurts," Bran whimpered. "Make it stop. Make it stop."

And it did hurt. Merlin felt as if he were on fire. There was heat upon his skin worming its way to the bone; there was a molten core burning its way out. He understood, suddenly, why Kay and Will had had such a hard time trying to find the NWO.

They'd fled. They'd fled because they'd known what was coming. They would come back only when the power had settled and stagnated, ready to be used.
"Merlin! Merlin! What is it, what can we do --"

Merlin shook his head. He shook his head again. In the hazy cloud of a crumbled building, he could see the magic bubbling up and up, bright and vibrant, silvery and iridescent. It was angry, swirling and sweltering, roiling and crashing against the confines of the artefact's structure. The artefact dug down, deep, deep down, cutting through the earth as if it were nothing, reaching for the core.

"Get them away. Get them away!"

The bomb exploded.

It shattered like a tall glass, shards of ephemeral spell bursting outward. The column of leyline magic held together for a confused moment before it came roaring down, thundering toward the earth with a waterfall crash that swept outward with the force of a tsunami wave --

Merlin grabbed Bran with one arm. He clutched at Arthur. His magic rose up, fierce and wild, surging through every fibre of his being --

He drove the sword into the ground with gauntleted hands, bracing it against the rising, raging waters. The torrent soaked them to the bone, but the fires raged against them, still, and nothing seemed to stem the flow.

They clung to each other with all that they had. With slippery hands and grasping fingers. With tangling arms and legs. The stones beneath their boots were slick, the current too fast. When one fell, the other caught them before they could wash away, and they held onto the sword with the last of their strength.

The enemy had the upper hand, and they knew it. A second surge came at them, strong enough to wash them both away, the sword loosening from its sheath in the earth.

"Love. Love, look at me, love." His blue eyes were bright in the darkness. They gleamed like gold in the fading firelight. "It's time. You have to do it now."

"Are you sure?"

Another wave hit, and the sword nearly came all the way loose. They wouldn't last another strike.

It was the rough of leather that caught his frozen hand before it slipped from the hilt of the sword. The press of a warm forehead against his cheek was searing hot against clammy skin. The whisper of eternity was in a voice made out of ardent promise. "I'm with you, love. I'm sure."

Merlin threw his head back. He shouted guttural words that tore at his lungs and made his chest ache. Each syllable was deeper than the last until his throat was a shredded rumble, increasing in volume until it was a terrible roar. He couldn't hear the battering tumult of the leyline's power washing down over the sound of his own voice.

Fires burned all around them wherever the leyline's magic touched. The flames licked high -- nearly as tall as the buildings around them. Nearby automobiles were shoved across the street from the sheer force of the raw magic; others exploded on contact. Glass shattered. The pavement heaved. Men and women screamed -- Merlin didn't know who they were. Men in suits. Olaf's people? Tristan's guards.

They burned. They ran.

Bodies crowded close -- Will and Kay and Pellinor and Bran. Arthur's arms were tight around
Merlin's body, and for his touch alone, Merlin felt *strong*. Invincible.

The astral fragments of the bomb acted like an oil well. The leyline splurted out power in heaving waves. A gusher cascaded down and swept out, roaring toward them.

Merlin let go of Bran and threw out his arm.

Magic -- *so much magic* -- came out of him in concentrated, nearly gleeful attack, meeting the leyline's wild power head-on. It connected in a tremendous crash that Merlin felt into his core, but it wasn't him who grunted in surprise.

Arthur.

It was Arthur.

Always Arthur.

His foundation. His strength.

Merlin *changed* the shield, manipulating its form until it was bridged with a plough, sharp and pointed, forcing the leyline's surge to split, to break, to follow around the curve of the shield that protected them, to finally sluice away harmlessly, splashing down the empty streets and fading into the air.

The power kept coming -- first in violent spurts that washed away SUVs and took out nearby buildings, then slower, in determined pulses splattering down like crushing hail, and finally, in half-hearted hiccups that rained down to lightly kiss the shield. The shield sparkled, though not with bright, golden twinkles; the reflected impact shone bright silver-white and iridescent.

The same colour as a leyline.

Merlin closed his eyes. He let the shield fade. His arm dropped onto Bran's back. He sagged into Arthur. Arthur held him tightly, murmuring reassurances in his ear.

"Is it over?" Pellinor asked, his voice whisper-soft, as if afraid that breaking the silence would start it all over again.

Merlin stared at the ruins of the Pentagram. At the jagged pieces of decorative black glasses jutting up through brick and plaster. At burnt pieces of wood that were still smoking despite the sudden, abrupt disappearance of fire. At automobiles that were laying on their sides or completely flipped over, at buildings with broken glass, at streetlights tilted away from the source of the leyline, as if blown away.

It looked no different than any other scene he'd seen at war. Of buildings in the aftermath of a bomb blast. The silence and empty of a quiet that could only exist after the rest of the world had been muted by a thunderous crack. There was an uncertainty in the strange peace that could be found in the complete lack of movement all around them.

But for all that it was calm, the air was thick with magic, pure and unadulterated, slowly settling to the ground where it would be ripe for the taking.

"It's just begun," Merlin said.
He closed his eyes, heart-sick and soul-sore.

*The fires cast against them were so hot that they could melt stone. The fortresses were falling. They couldn't stand for much longer, but they had to hold fast anyway. It was fight and hope to die free, or fall upon knees and pray for a kind master when weapons were laid down and they were made slaves.*

*Win or lose, people were dying.*

*Crops were lost for want of harvesters. The land dried out for want of rain. Forests thinned season by season as homes struggled to stay warm against the encroaching cold.*

*Soldiers wore their sunken cheeks like armour. Their growling stomachs were a call to arms. Children barely old enough to carry weapons slung them over their shoulders with the ease of long practice and the weariness of knowing nothing else.*

*Bleak and hopeless.*

*Until someone raised a banner.*

*Bright, bloody red and burning gold, the flag unfurled and snapped into the wind --*

Merlin gasped quietly, startling himself. "Arthur --"

"I know, love. I know," Arthur said, his voice low, his lips against Merlin's throat. "We'll fight them."

A faint, whimpering scrape drew Merlin's attention to Will, but it wasn't Will who had made the sound. It was Tristan, who was crawling away, squirming on the cracked asphalt like a worm, inching a distance between them.

Tristan, who had a hand in this no matter what he said. Tristan, who was the embodiment of everything that was wrong in the fucking world. Tristan, who was as good a target as the men and women responsible.

Ice cut through Merlin -- from exhaustion or rage, he didn't know. It didn't matter. Merlin moved Bran from his lap. He tapped at Arthur's arms until Arthur let him go. He stood up on shaky legs; it was Kay who caught and steadied him.

But Merlin stalked over to Tristan on his own. He forced Tristan onto his back with a wave of his hand. He walked over Tristan, grabbed his shirt, and dragged him along until Tristan caught his footing.

He slammed Tristan against an upturned car. The rear wheel still turning; Merlin pulled Tristan close enough for the rubber to lazily brush against Tristan's face.

Tristan was wide-eyed, slack-jawed, pale. He was trembling so thoroughly that the minute shivers on his skin were cancelled out by the full-bodied tremors. Small, crying noises came out of his mouth. The whites of his eyes eclipsed the colour of his irises, and Merlin knew that Tristan was well and truly afraid.

*Good.*

"If I were Generation Zero, I'd know," Merlin said, throwing back Tristan's words at him. Very
slowly, very deliberately, Merlin said, "I am not Generation Zero. I am something far, far worse. Do you understand?"

Tristan nodded. His head bobbed dizzyingly; he couldn't agree fast enough. Slowly, Merlin let Tristan go. He brushed at the bunched-up fabric of his shirt, smoothing it down.

"The men and women responsible for this meant for you to die," Merlin said. "Do you see that? Do you understand that you owe them nothing? That your life was forfeit? That you belong to me, now, because I saved your worthless hide?"

Tristan made a small mewing sound that might have been a "yes". Merlin took it as such.

"I'm letting you go. You're going to crawl to them and you're going to tell them what you've seen me do. You're my proof that I'm real. You have one job and one job only," Merlin said, his words biting into a snarl. "Don't fuck it up. Tell them... Are you listening to me, Tristan? Tell them I'm not fucking happy. They overstepped. And they had better fall in line... Or I will shut them down."

Tristan nodded frantically.

Merlin took a slow, lazy step back and fought to keep from collapsing. He gestured. "Go on."

Tristan sniffled, wiping tears from his face. He hugged the car as he squeezed away from Merlin. He reached the mudguard and didn't wait -- he took off running at a stumbling gait, nearly tripping over his own feet.

Merlin watched him go. Tristan never looked back.

And then it struck Merlin -- that fear. Tristan had been terrified. Not because Merlin had manhandled him and damn near scraped his face off with the rough thread of a half-worn tyre. No. He'd been afraid of Merlin.

In that one look, it all came crashing home. Everything that Merlin had ever dreaded -- of seeing people afraid of him. It gutted him. All the rage burned out, leaving him hollow and hating himself.

There was movement behind him. The shuffle of footfalls. Soft murmurs as the others spoke between themselves. Merlin felt his own shoulders tense, and he braced himself against seeing hate and fear on his teammates faces. On Arthur's face.

He turned around slowly, his boots scraping on the gravelly asphalt. He swayed as his strength ebbed from him.

Will was sitting on the cracked kerb, clutching his arm to his body, trying -- and failing -- to act as if he weren't in pain. Pellinor was crouched next to him, pulling at the arm brace to get a look.

Bran's head was buried in Kay's chest, his arms around Kay's waist. His body juddered with suppressed sobs. Kay looked down at him with the alarmed eyes of a man who didn't know what to do, but he slowly, slowly lowered his arms and wrapped them around Bran.

"It's all right, kid. You're safe. Merlin saved us, same as he always does," Kay murmured, reaching up to stroke Bran's hair.

"Wish he'd done that before the bloody building fell on me," Will groused.

"Oh, quitcher bitching. It weren't but a two-by-four, if that," Pellinor said, scowling.
"What! Did you not see it? A steel support beam, that's what it were --"

"You're nothing but a big baby, aren't you?" Pellinor made soft, cooing sounds as he brushed the dust from Will's clothes. "Does baby want a swaddle? Does baby want kissies? Does baby want a bottle --"

"Shut the fuck up, you pilmlock," Will snapped. He glanced at Merlin. His annoyance faded and was replaced with a wry grin. He winked and gave Merlin a quick thumbs-up gesture before turning to Pellinor. "Shut it and get me a bottle. Don't think I didn't see you shove that case of whiskey in the boot --"

"Well, you help me get the Rover out of that pinch and I'll see what I can do --"

"What, do I look like I'm a bloody tow?" Will asked. He grunted when Pellinor pulled him to his feet. The Land Rover itself wasn't in bad shape -- the leyline had shoved it against the building, but there was a second car pressed against its length. There was no easy way to access either vehicle.

Merlin exhaled with relief that wasn't complete until Arthur stepped into his space and wrapped his arms around Merlin's shoulders. Their mouths crashed together in an ungainly kiss that was quickly broken with a murmur of apology. The second kiss was better -- ten thousand times better -- because it took all of Merlin's worries away.

Merlin shuddered, his eyes pricking, and he held onto Arthur until he had to pull away and gasp for air, though he wanted nothing more but to sink into Arthur and to stay there forever, where he would be safe. And he was safe, he knew that now. He couldn't be anything but safe when he was with Arthur.

He rested his forehead against Arthur's, closing his eyes and ignoring the insistent buzz of magic that was all around him -- under his skin, on his skin, in the air. He focused on the solid heat of Arthur's body against his, the weight of Arthur's arms around him, the shared breath between them.

And then he realized --

"Oh, shite," Merlin said, pulling away. "I let him go --"

"I don't care." Arthur pulled him back in before he could get too far. He crushed Merlin in his arms.

"Bollocks you don't," Merlin said, but he didn't pull away again.

After a few seconds, Arthur murmured, "Honestly? I was trying to figure out how to distract Olaf's people to give Tristan the opportunity to run. We needed him to get the word to the rest of them, didn't we? It just so happens your way worked better than mine."

"Is that right?" Merlin asked, and perhaps he sounded a little too happy at Arthur's compliment, because Arthur stopped hugging him and pulled away.

"This once," Arthur warned, his eyes narrowed.

Merlin grinned.

Arthur's expression softened. He touched Merlin's cheek. "Are you all right?"

"Are you?" Merlin asked, remembering how Arthur had reacted when the full force of the leyline's power hit them the first time.
Arthur answered with a curt nod and tight lips before shaking his head and leaning in for a quick kiss. "It's fine. We'll talk about that later."

"Arthur --" Merlin's brow pinched. He took a step closer but it felt like the ground opened up under his feet as a wave of exhaustion hit. He wavered, but caught himself.

"Come on," Arthur said, taking Merlin's hand and squeezing tight. He waved at the others. "Let's find somewhere to weather the worst of the panic before it hits and figure out what to do next."

Chapter End Notes

The song that was broadcasted over the radio worldwide is a bastardized version of *The London Bridge*. You can find the original version, as well as some history, [here, on Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_London_Bridge).

If you prefer to comment about this fic on livejournal, please do so on [this post](https://www.livejournal.com/user/a/page/1). If you're wondering how long it will be before the next part (and there will be a next part), I regularly update on my writing progress on my LJ.

UPDATE: Before reading part 14, you may want to read the LM Extra, *New Enemies, New Allies*, which occurs in the time frame between 13 and 14.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.tumblr.com/post/123456789012) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!