Storm on the Horizon

by Footloose

Summary

The world is in chaos. Civilization is menaced by a looming threat. Violence holds entire cities hostage, hapless citizens hiding in their homes. When the magic released by the NWO's bomb settles, it's only a matter of time before the war begins.

In Camelot, it's easy to forget what's coming, even if it's only for a little while. Among family and friends, broken bodies can heal, shattered hearts can mend, and betrayals stop hurting, becoming a dull ache that allows others to trust again.

The team has been kept in a heightened state of readiness while they wait for the Brass to reactivate them. They train until they're exhausted, they recruit new members, and they make sure that their new home and their loved ones are safe and protected.

It's idyllic until it isn't, not anymore.

Notes

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

This is part fourteen 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? There is a healthy mix of both mundane and supernatural violence. There may be triggers in this part associated to this warning.

ALERT: 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.

See the end of the work for more notes.
There wasn't much of a view from the large window in their bedroom.

The shrubs and short trees were dying. It seemed as if it were only yesterday that they'd teased Bohrs for tending to the garden when things got slow, and not the months since the day they closed up the house before leaving for the prototype testing ground in Paris. The plants had been blooming, then, but leaves and petals were withering, now.

Just like London.

Havoc raged through the city. It seemed that there was a war on the other side of the fence that Perceval had repaired, and that fence, however flimsy, served as fortress walls, keeping them safe from the violence and looting.

It wasn't much of a war, not when the enemy was hidden, even invisible, but it had been going on for days and nights without surcease. Looters, vandals, gangs -- they were out in full force. When there wasn't anything left to steal from the stores, they turned to private neighbourhoods, attacking at random. Families believing themselves safe behind the heavy doors of their own homes quickly had that security ripped from them by thugs who didn't care for anyone's well-being but their own. People grouped together and fought back for their own protection and survival, but it wasn't enough.

The police were doing what they could. Emergency services filled the streets with flashing lights and sirens that did little to douse the fires burning through London. The army had been brought in, but they couldn't be everywhere.

It was endless madness.

Days and nights filled with flames and gunfire.

Days and nights more until black smoke thinned out in the sky long enough to see the clouds churning overhead, but the rain of respite and relief never fell.

Merlin leaned a hand on the window frame and stared at the orange-red glow in the distance. It was bright enough to be the sun, except they hadn't seen the sun in days. The clouds and the smoke rising in a long line in the distance had made that impossible.

He didn't need to look at a map or use his magic to know that the burning was along the Thames.

Merlin chewed the inside of his lower lip.

If he could stretch out his magic to protect the city, he would have. And he had tried, but Arthur had put a stop to it when he realized that Merlin was slowly bleeding himself dry by simultaneously fighting the wild magic and maintaining barriers across the city.

You can't save everyone, Arthur had whispered.

Merlin didn't have to like it, but Arthur was right. It was a lesson Merlin had learned many times over during the war.

Save what you can, love, Arthur had pleaded.

Merlin had reluctantly released his magic and left the city to fend for itself before heading to the
centre of the house, closing his eyes and covering his ears and *willing* for an end to the chaos. Bran would join him there, curling up against him. Kathy would, too, resting her head on Merlin's shoulder.

It was quietest in the middle of the house, away from the magic battering against the protections Merlin had cast around the building. He could still hear it -- they all could, the three of them. The freed magic raged like the winds of a hurricane, thunderous like a drum. And it *was* a storm, invisible to most, deadly to those who could sense it and who were caught in the swirling masses around the centre of the eye.

There wasn't only one storm. There was a conglomeration of them over London, over England, Europe, America.

It was worldwide.

If this was what the released magic could do against Merlin's shields, Merlin worried. He worried what it was doing to innocent civilians who hadn't known what the NWO had been planning, and who had been unable to prepare. He'd worried for Gaius and Morgana -- Morgana, most of all, though for reasons that he couldn't explain -- until Leon had assured them that Mordred had done something to shield them from the worst of it.

Mordred.

*Mordred.*

In the aftermath of the artefacts -- the *bombs* -- going off, Merlin hadn't given Mordred much thought. None of them had, least of all Arthur, and now, they didn't know what to think about a man who had been the enemy, who could still be the enemy, as the one who would step forth as the guardian of all those who had taken refuge at the cottage.

Arthur and Merlin couldn't do anything about it. They couldn't keep an eye on Mordred. They were too far away. They could only hope that the rest of the team had everything well in hand. There was some measure of reassurance in the knowledge that the cottage was too remote from the comforts of civilization to suffer more than the lightest assault from the storms.

They were safe.

But, Mordred...

There was another reason why Merlin hadn't spared any thought for Mordred. Thinking of Mordred made him think of Cennydd.

Merlin bowed his head and ran his hand through his hair.

In Paris, at the end, there had been five guards in the room with them. They'd rushed in at once when the house was breached by Arthur and the team. One of the guards -- a large bald man with ceremonial scars on his face -- had erected a shield.

It hadn't been like any shield that Merlin had ever seen, with strands and tendrils that were woven like a basket and stretched across the wall, barricading the door. At every impact, the shield had *heaved*, absorbing the energy to become thicker, wider, stronger.

Merlin hadn't had much time for *looking*, to study the shield and to learn from it, because one of the guards had grabbed him and shoved him against the far wall.
Cennydd hadn't moved from the table. In the tumult, he didn't bother for subtlety: he tapped at the keyboard hurriedly. He disconnected the cables connecting all of the systems, but he didn't touch Merlin's laptop or the hard drive. He flicked a few switches, shut down the desktop, and passed his hand over it, leaving behind a crackle of electricity.

The sorcerer was at the door, taking a step back after casting the basket-weave of the shield. The three guards with him fanned out to either side, and one of them went to the window, peering through the curtains as if looking to see if the way was clear. The last guard pushed a Sig Sauer nine millimetre in Merlin's face, but it wasn't the first time that someone had done that, and Merlin didn't look down the barrel.

He stared at the man's eyes, instead, searching for some indication of his next move. The man was shorter than Merlin, but heavier, wider, and solid, with blond hair that was almost white and eyes that were almost grey. His mouth twitched in silent communication, as if he were running through his options in his head.

His arm was across Merlin's throat. His weight was on it, but he didn't have the leverage. Merlin glanced down briefly, took in how the man was standing. His feet were a shoulder's width apart, one leg behind him, just slightly off-balance.

Merlin didn't have the energy to be cowed the way he was supposed to be. He was done with this. So fucking done. Arthur was outside that door. His friends. They'd found him; they'd come for him.

Four guards and a sorcerer weren't going to stop Merlin from getting to Arthur.

Well.

Four guards, a sorcerer, and Cennydd weren't going to stop Merlin from getting to Arthur.

He didn't know what to make of Cennydd, just as he didn't know what to make of Mordred.

Cennydd was... Cennydd was doing something. He wasn't making eye contact with Merlin. He was standing next to the others, a step or two behind them, his gun in his hand.

Outside those doors, gunfire waged. There were -- there were several degrees of gunfire, layered, wildly staggered and overlapping. Over their heads. Down the corridor. Distant, muted.

An explosion rocked the door. Plaster crumbled from the ceiling. The walls cracked in one corner, pushed inward. The shield held.

Long minutes passed.

The gunfire ebbed, only to start up again some distance away, retreating.

And, then, silence.

Suddenly, the building shook, a blistering roar rattling floor and ceiling and walls. It felt close, but the sound was muffled by the magic surrounding the room.

And, painfully, the sounds of fighting stopped.

Cennydd looked at Merlin, then, his mouth in a thin line, his brow furrowed. It struck Merlin that
maybe, just maybe, Cennydd hadn't expected this turn of events, that the team would retreat, that they would be driven back.

But that was what was happening, and it left Merlin gut-wrenched. His team wasn't leaving him behind. They couldn't. They wouldn't. Arthur wouldn't come this far only to fail. He never failed. He always had plans -- ridiculous plans --

No. No. No. They weren't leaving without him.

Merlin no longer cared about his cover. The Directory's agenda had never been his, never Excalibur's. If they had never gotten involved with the Directory, the team would have finished their regular tours, retired from the armed forces, gone into the private industry like each of them had wanted. Fuck. Right about now, Merlin should be taking over a corner of Arthur's flat and reconverting it into a workshop over Arthur's objections while trying to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. Arthur should be in that fucking doorway right now, yelling at Merlin not to put his tools on the antique table because he paid a bloody fortune --

Out of the corner of his eye, Merlin saw Cennydd shake his head in warning. No. Don't do it.

All Merlin could think was, Fuck you. I don't owe you anything.

Something must have showed in his expression, because the guard pinning Merlin to the wall frowned. It was a faint frown, the slightest pinch between his brows, but it was enough to tell Merlin that he wouldn't have time --

So, he didn't wait. He didn't hold back. He knocked the Sig Sauer away from his face, jerking his head away when the gun went off, the bullet burying into the plaster and brick.

The guard pressed forward, trying to choke Merlin, but Merlin didn't give him the chance to. He punched the guard in the throat. The guard took a step back; Merlin pushed him, grabbing him, turning them around.

The other guards raised their guns to shoot. They both got off one shot each. The guard in Merlin's arms slumped, an awkward, dead weight. Merlin couldn't hold him up -- his grip was wrong, the man was too heavy -- but he levitated the gun from the floor and caught it --

Cennydd shouted in an arcane language. The armed guards went crashing hard against the far wall.

The sorcerer whirled, his eyes a sickly orange-red, his arm outstretched --

Merlin squeezed the trigger. One. Two.

Cennydd fired on one of the guards before he could get up, and --

There was a high-pitched beep-beep-beeeep. At first, Merlin thought someone's mobile had gone off. The sound repeated, muffled, muted, persistent, and recognition sank in --

Too late --

He threw up his arms just as --
The curtains flared out like the wings of a dragon unfurling. The blast was a tremendous roar of triumph. The explosion from outside was a burning fury of glass and wood and brick as hot as dragon's breath.

Merlin was slammed against the wall. The gun was knocked out of his hand. Almost too late, his magic rose and shielded him against the worst of the conflagration.

Merlin waved the magic away; it dissipated the debris hanging in the air. The sorcerer was dead, the guards' wouldn't survive much longer, and --

He rushed to Cennydd's side. There was a large gash on his forehead. Blood dripped down the side of his face. He snapped awake almost as soon as Merlin touched him, blinking repeatedly, disoriented and trying to sort himself out as quickly as he could.

He grabbed Merlin's arm. He shoved his gun into Merlin's hand.

"Shoot me," Cennydd said. "Make it look good. Take your things and go. Go."

"Cennydd --"

"Take care of Mordred. He's not as strong as he thinks he is. He's going to need you. Tell him --"

There was a crash on the door. The woven shields were still, inexplicably, framing the door, but the magic holding it together was fading.

"Tell him that I'll find him," Cennydd said, giving Merlin a push. "It won't hold. Shoot me. Take your things. Go. Go now."

A searing-hot touch ran down Merlin's spine and settled near his hip. Heat radiated all along his back. There was a light press against his skin.

Merlin raised his eyes and saw Arthur's reflection in the window. Arthur kissed his shoulder. Merlin tilted his head, resting his forehead against Arthur's temple.

"You're naked," Arthur said.

Merlin snorted. "So are you."

"You're cold," Arthur said, pressing a kiss under Merlin's ear. He moved closer, if that was all possible, and Merlin was blanketed from shoulder to thigh. Arthur's cock was half-hard against Merlin's arse; Merlin's cock twitched in response.

"You're not," Merlin said, turning his head just enough to catch the corner of Arthur's mouth in a too-dry kiss.

Arthur hummed quietly, but didn't speak. Merlin thought it must be killing Arthur not to tell Merlin to come to bed where it was warm, to get away from the window where he might be seen, to remind Merlin that they wouldn't be holed up in the house forever and they had to be ready for anything. Maybe Arthur didn't say any of those things because he knew that he didn't need to.

The power was off in this quarter of the city -- vandals had destroyed a transformer, and the city's work crews wouldn't be dispatched until the violence in that area calmed down, if it ever did. It hadn't taken long for the cold temperatures to seep through the flat, but there was a fireplace in the
main room helping chase away the worst of it. Kathy charmed a few tea lights to give off more heat and last longer than normal, and Merlin had shown Bran a simple warming spell that he'd been practicing ever since, struggling to keep his magic under control whenever the storm surged.

They were better off than most, though they were careful -- no point in attracting attention. The windows were kept dark, no one went out the front door, and they didn't use the lights or the appliances more than they needed to, because they didn't know how long the generator in Arthur's back room was going to last. They'd drained the gas tanks of their cars -- Will and Kay had shamelessly done the same to a few abandoned lorries on the road -- but even that was rationed, feeding the generator only rarely while safekeeping the gasoline for when Arthur gave the order to get out of London.

No one knew when that order would come, least of all Arthur. The unrest in the city -- Hell, the unrest all over the country, never mind the world -- made it difficult to decide. Arthur had already discarded his other plans, downgrading them in importance. They wouldn't be confronting Uther to find out what he had done, what he was doing, why. There was no point anymore, Arthur said, not when they already knew the answer. Arthur wasn't interested in wasting resources trying to find Uther when Uther likely already had a contingency plan for his own evacuation and had disappeared for parts unknown.

Merlin privately believed that Arthur had cut the cord between himself and his father as resolutely as possible. Filial responsibility has ceased; familial loyalty had broken. Arthur no longer referred to Uther as my father or even the Colonel, and his name was always twisted with a faint note of disgust and hatred when he was brought up at all.

But on the surface? Arthur acted as if nothing was wrong at all, as if Uther was some sort of supervillain that they would hunt down, once they had the chance. Uther wasn't the man who raised him, who had been his hero growing up, who had --

Who had fucking broken Arthur in ways that Merlin couldn't imagine, and the mere knowledge of it made Merlin's magic flare up unexpectedly, golden flames licking at his skin.

Arthur brushed his hands down Merlin's arm, the flames curling around his fingers before dissipating. Merlin had a better handle on his magic now, though the storm wasn't making it easy, but Arthur had the trick of it, calming Merlin's magic with a touch. Merlin preferred Arthur's method than his own.

It was nicer. Gentler. Intimate.

"It's not any better out there, then?" Arthur asked, his voice a low murmur.

Merlin glanced out the window. The clouds were moving in slow coriolis swirls, dark and heavy with rain, but not a single drop had fallen, and the wind that should be blustering was hiding from the violent, magical clatter roaring through the city.

"It's not worse," Merlin said, shaking his head. He covered Arthur's hand with his own to make him stop soothing magic that had retreated already, and said, "This... This was me. Sorry. I got stuck in my own head."

Arthur didn't answer for a long time before he said, "Funny. I always thought it was the other way around, that your head got stuck in your own arse --"

Merlin elbowed him hard. Arthur breathed a small, choked-off laugh. Arthur kissed the back of Merlin's neck in apology. Merlin bowed his head to give him access, shivering when Arthur blew his
breath and made the long hairs at the nape of his neck ruffle.

He needed a haircut. They all did.

"How much longer?" Arthur asked. Merlin shook his head and half-shrugged. Bran asked every day. Kathy gave him a haunted gaze in the aftermath of a long sleepless night. Pellinor didn't mind the break, because it gave his arm more time to heal, but Owain was restless, and Will was being an annoying pillock at being trapped indoors, always needling Merlin into making it better so that he could go out and get some fresh air.

This was the first time that Arthur had asked, though, and it was a sign of Arthur's infinite patience finally wearing down.

"I don't know," Merlin said. He'd always told Bran that it would be soon, to hold on a little longer. He would give Kathy a reassuring smile that he didn't feel, because sometimes the truth didn't help anyone. He had had that tenet drilled into him by a former C.O. until he didn't know any different -- it was never bad until it was worse, and there was no point in bringing down morale.

"It's got to end, doesn't it?" Arthur asked.

Merlin nodded. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to ignore the sensation of Arthur's hands running down Merlin's sides. He failed, but that was probably Arthur's point. Arthur was still half-hard, if not harder, his length solid against Merlin's arse.

Merlin leaned back against him.

"I was thinking about that," Merlin said, closing his eyes. "Makes no sense that they'd trigger the bombs without knowing what would happen. Makes even less sense that they would've left themselves vulnerable. They must have shelter. They must have gone to ground."

Excalibur had stockpiled food, necessities, medication, weapons, but they'd been careful about it, scattering their purchases, and everyone who had gone to the cottage had brought along their own supplies. If someone had noticed what they'd done, the odds were high that they would also have noticed similar stockpiles from the NWO over the years.

But Tristan hadn't known. He hadn't been prepared. The NWO had been prepared to sacrifice their own men. Sorcerers were either aware of what was coming, or they didn't know -- hadn't been informed. Merlin imagined that any person who was remotely magically-inclined would be emerging from this storm exhausted, battered, or worse.

Or maybe it was a test. Weeding out the week. Survival of the fittest. It would fit with their manifesto, that only the strongest would rule in the end.

Merlin licked his lips. He shifted his stance, spreading his legs a little more. His hands tightened around the window frame, and he leaned back against a cock that was very definitely not half-hard anymore.

"It will settle. It has to," Merlin said. He was distracted when Arthur's hand slid around Merlin's waist to grasp the base of his cock, stroking gently. It was almost too gentle, a cruel touch on
oversensitive skin, not quite ready for a second round but wanting it, anyway.

Merlin stilled Arthur's hand after one light stroke too many, already trembling. He breathed something that might have been *fuck, Arthur*, if he hadn't muffled it by pressing his mouth against his biceps.

It didn't seem to matter, because Arthur chuckled softly, as if he knew exactly what Merlin had said and was fully intent on making Merlin scream it. Merlin wouldn't, of course. There were too many people in the house. There had been too many people in the house, *before*, but it hadn't mattered as much, then, because the team had had to listen to Arthur and Merlin shouting out *more* than just a sudden conversion of religion.

Merlin didn't want to scar Bran, and after watching Kathy tease Kay and Will, he didn't want to be at her mercy. Ever.

Arthur kissed the base of Merlin's neck. He licked down the dips of Merlin's spine. He shifted until he was so far away from Merlin that their only points of contact were his hands on Merlin's hips and his tongue in the cleft of Merlin's arse, and --

"*Oh, fu*--" Merlin jerked when he felt Arthur's tongue along the rim of his hole, tracing a circle around it. Arthur's fingers tightened insistently -- *stay still* -- and just as quickly, eased from their bruising hold, rubbing gently at those spots in an apology that was quickly drowned out by the sound of Merlin's blood rushing through his body until it all went to his cock.

His dick was probably hard enough to cut glass, now. Merlin pushed away from the window even more, hoping Arthur would take the invitation.

Arthur had never been shy about rimming Merlin, and he did it because he knew it was the surest way to make Merlin come completely undone. But there was something different about it, right here and now, when they both felt helpless and useless to do anything to stop the war that was coming. For Arthur, it was about control, about having something in his hands that he could manipulate, that he could tease and push and prod until he had it the way that he wanted it. And for Merlin, it was about losing that control, about giving it up to someone he could trust, to let himself get out of his own head and to calm the raging storm and the magic clawing under his skin.

It wasn't just sex. It was *want*. And maybe, yeah, maybe they both needed this. They needed something that was just *them*, without any thought given to the impending threat.

Merlin's nails dug into the frame when Arthur's tongue pushed in. Merlin didn't know how he must taste -- the remnants of lube and dried come, he supposed -- but Arthur went at it until Merlin's toes curled and he'd drawn soft whimpers from Merlin's throat.

Arthur let up after only a few minutes. He bit at Merlin's arse, the inside of his thighs, around his knees, everywhere that Merlin was sensitive. With every sharp sense of *pleasurepain*, Arthur soothed them with a heated kiss and a soft breath of cool air.

Merlin's legs trembled. "*Arthur--*"

Arthur put his hands on Merlin's arse and spread his buttocks. There was a light lick at Merlin's hole, a teasing touch. His tongue pushed past Merlin's rim, and Merlin might have… he might have shouted a little before he bit his fingers.

Arthur's pleased hum reverberated through Merlin's body and ran up his spine. His tongue pushed in again, a shallow press. And again.
Merlin didn't know how long it went on for. He'd collapsed against the window, no longer trying to cling to any pretense of being able to hold himself upright. His arms were crossed against the cool glass, his head buried in them, and though he didn't shout again, he was no longer quiet, though he had no idea of what he was saying.

Arthur seemed to know, though.

For a long, torturous moment, there was nothing -- no warm, wet heat pushing into Merlin, no firm hands holding him steady, no gentle bites to remind him that Arthur was still there. Merlin might have made a sound of protest, he wasn't sure, and he had been about to struggle out of his daze to search for him when a slick finger pushed inside.

Then, two, easily.

And three -- stroking in and out a few times, just barely brushing at the perfect angle -- before they were withdrawn, replaced by the blunt head of Arthur's cock.

Arthur didn't tease Merlin any more than he had to, and that was good, because Merlin was out of coherent words to beg. Arthur pushed in without waiting for Merlin to be comfortable. There wasn't any need; he was still wet from earlier, but the added lube that Arthur must have put on himself before thrusting in made the slide all the easier when he bottomed out.

There was a pause, a soft groan from behind Merlin, a slight adjustment of position. Arthur leaned forward, kissing the back of Merlin's neck -- Merlin turned his head and caught Arthur's lips, but it was awkward like this, in this position, and they could only manage a few shallow, desperate kisses.

Arthur put his hand on the window frame, thrusting in small, shallow movements. Merlin grabbed his wrist and braced himself against the glass with his other arm. Arthur fucked into him like this for a little longer -- little, aborted jerks, as if he didn't want to leave Merlin -- before settling. Merlin felt calm for the first time in what seemed like ages, but he always felt calm when Arthur fucked him like this, careful, gentle, full of love, and mindful of exactly what Merlin needed.

And right now, Merlin needed more. He let go of Arthur's arm, he braced himself against the window sill. He managed a soft, "Please --"

It came out as a mewl of syllables, but Arthur knew, he understood, just like he always did.


Just for a second, a handful of fluttering heartbeats.

He did it again. And again. The pauses in-between were shorter and shorter until Arthur pounded into him relentlessly. Sweat coated Merlin's skin, and he really should be cold, but it felt like he was burning up inside. He reached down to stroke himself, his cock heavy between his legs, pre-cum dripping. He could only manage a jerky, haggard pull, not enough to give him what he needed.

He dropped his hand and caught himself before Arthur jackhammered him through the window. He spread his arms to brace against something more solid than a window that was wobbling from the impact, pushing back into Arthur even as Arthur thrust in, the two of them panting for breath and chasing a relief that wouldn't, frustratingly, come.

Merlin's grip on the window's edge slipped. An unexpected laugh faded under a startled moan when Arthur pulled at his hair. He closed his eyes at the bolt of pleasurepain jolting down his body. He tilted his head. He arched his back, and --
Arthur's cock hit his prostate more fully this way, a stroke of length and ridge as erratic as his thrusts, unpredictable in duration and pressure. Merlin grabbed at the frame and missed. He braced against the window instead, and the shock of the cold glass against his forearm was a sensation that poured a melting heat over his skin, peeling him apart layer by layer until his magic vibrated out of its nest and erupted --

His vision went white for a moment. His nerve endings spasmed and he shuddered. His sweaty palms slipped on the glass, and his face pressed against the blessed cold once, twice, and…

Arthur came with an indecipherable grunt that might have been a groan, if Merlin had been in a frame of mind to distinguish between the two sounds. His hips rocked against Merlin, gentling before finally stilling. He didn't pull out right away, soothing Merlin's ruined body with soft kisses and warm hands, and when he did, Merlin barely noticed, too preoccupied with keeping his legs from collapsing under him.

_Fuck it_, Merlin decided.

His knees buckled, and he collapsed. Arthur caught him and eased him down the rest of the way, pulling Merlin in to rest in the Vee of his legs, wrapping his arms around Merlin.

The window was smeared with palm-prints. There was an outline of Merlin's forehead, of his cheek. Come dripped in multiple lines, big globs of it, slowly running down the glass.

And outside, the night had darkened as half the city lights went out. The fires raged still in the distance, and the currents crashing over the earth from the destroyed leylines continued to batter against the shield protecting the house.

Merlin prayed to all the Gods and Goddesses that this storm would break, and that it would break quickly. The world couldn't endure more.

They stayed like that, wrapped in each other, Merlin's hands grasping Arthur's arms. The rest of the house was silent, though no doubt someone had heard them crash against the window. Suddenly, Merlin couldn't be arsed to care.

It felt like it was the end of the world. He damn well was going to enjoy every last second he had with Arthur if that was the case.

"I didn't ruin the curtains," Merlin murmured.

"_This time_," Arthur groused, and there was something so petulant, so resentful in his tone that Merlin couldn't help but laugh. "Remember the look on Bohrs' face when we sent him to the dry cleaner's?"

"I couldn't look him in the eye for days," Merlin said. "Why did you even ask him to do that?"

Merlin felt Arthur's shrug. He felt the deep rumble of a chuckle. "He might've scratched my car."

"Oh, Gods, Arthur," Merlin said, and he laughed again, unable to help it and not wanting to. He had the feeling that the chances of any kind of pleasure or humour would be far and few in the future. "You scarred him for life."

"Worth it," Arthur murmured. He bowed his head, his hair tickling Merlin's cheek, and pressed his lips on Merlin's shoulder.
It was a soft whisper, muffled by the contact, but Merlin heard the words as much as he felt them, deep, deep in his soul.

"Love you."

ooOOoo

If there was one good thing that came out of all this, it was that Arthur could finally watch Merlin as he slept.

Before the Directory, before the NWO, when it was just *them*, the team, Excalibur, there had been plenty of opportunities. Out in the field, on assignment, in transit. Huddled against hard ground and cold rocks, on the roof of a Humvee to catch a few winks of sleep during transit, tucked between Perceval and Bohrs on the chopper.

Arthur had never let himself look too long. But now, he could look. He could look his fill. He could look until he was drunk and delirious. He could look until he saw nothing else in his heart and in his mind.

The power outage that had hit the Northern part of London had spread; it wasn't long until the entire city was blacked out. The buildings were outlined by the fires that still raged in the distance, by candlelight that flickered in the windows of nearby buildings, by the stars and the moonlight that filtered through the clouds, however feeble the glow.

And, for once, that damnable light from the neighbour's house didn't shine blindingly through the bathroom window.

It would have been as black as pitch without artificial illumination, but the shield protecting the house flickered every now and then. Arthur couldn't see what was going on out there -- Kathy had described it as being trapped in a washing machine, with the water swishing and swirling in every direction, only with magic. Bran had only given Arthur a haunted look when Arthur had asked before burying his head between his knees and covering it with his arms. Merlin had said... Merlin said it was just a storm, and he'd shrugged as if it wasn't anything serious.

A storm.

When Merlin's shield was struck by a bullet, the shield rippled like a flat pond that had just been disturbed by a pebble skipping over its surface. The circles would flare out in a crystalized, honeycombed glow, bright and golden, before fading.

When it was semiautomatic fire at full barrage, the shield lit up like a Christmas tree suffocated by tiny little lights. Tiny black circles marked the impact points, and the ripples blew outward, each wave hitting its nearest neighbour and doubling in intensity or cancelling each other out entirely.

During the day, the shield was invisible. It was invisible at night, too. But sometimes, Arthur would catch a glimpse of impact out of the corner of his eye, there and gone before he could properly see how bad it was.

Arthur didn't know if he could see it because the storm was particularly bad right now, or if it was because of the thundercrash of Merlin's magic slipping away from him to curl around Arthur at the moment of climax. He didn't care *how*, or *why*. He could see the ravages of the storm now, and it
terrified him.

It didn't strike the shield the way the bullets did -- it *sheared* across the surface, like claws through skin. Merlin's shield was being torn apart, and Merlin was continually rebuilding it, even in his sleep, his magic filling an unconscious desire to protect them all. There was no light from the impact, only light from the *tears*, and Arthur could only liken it to the time he had been trapped in one sandstorm in particular, years ago, during one of his first missions. His Captain and his fellow soldiers had barely made it to shelter. The sand had scoured the surface of the heavy transport. It had been like steel wool over glass. The clear windows had been buffed until they were opaque, and they'd had to poke their heads out the open windows just to drive the transport back to base once the last of the sand had settled, the wind suddenly stopping.

It was like that, now. Arthur had assumed that there were *no* impacts because he couldn't see the resulting cascading glow. He'd never thought that he had been seeing a faint glow all along, illuminating faintly through cracks that were scratched over again and again, that were rebuilt and repaired as Merlin fought to maintain it.

Arthur had thought that Merlin's exhaustion these last few days had been because he had regressed in his control, that he was fighting his own magic. It was the complete opposite. He was feeding the shield -- always feeding, as if from a bottomless well that wasn't as bottomless as Merlin thought it was -- and it was draining at him. No wonder he was so tired.

But there was light. Faint and shimmery. It was under that light in the darkness of the night that Arthur watched Merlin as Merlin slept.

Black hair tousled in messy strands that curled over his ears and the nape of his neck.

A faint scruff of unshaven cheek stark against pale skin.

Long lashes over dark circles beneath his eyes.

Sharp cheekbones and hollowed cheeks from an imprisonment that should never have happened, not enough time to recover completely, and too much energy being burned instead of conserved.

Lips that were bruised red from kissing, but that were too often held in a pressed line so firm that it was nearly white with suppressed rage.

Merlin wasn't innocent. Not by far. He was no different than any other soldier, than any man in Excalibur. He had taken arms; he had fired upon the enemy; he had his own private nightmares that he never shared but that could only be memories of times when he had been given an order he didn't want to follow, but had followed anyway.

But there was a purity to him, even now. Especially now. With most of his worries cast aside by sleep. In this moment between his dreams. With this slackness to his features, the way the faint glow from the shield cast him in a golden light. With his hand twined through Arthur's and holding it close to his heart.

The storm had to end. It *had* to. Merlin wouldn't admit how much of a toll it took on him to maintain the shield, but it was obvious to anyone with eyes. If there was a way to track the storm that didn't involve magic, Arthur would be using it now, studying the patterns to see if there would be calm skies ahead, but there wasn't. Kathy had tried to use her cards to predict how long it would be, but there had been too much... interference. Bran had left the safety of the house to touch the shield on a weak spot before Merlin could repair it and had *looked* --
He'd hidden in Kay's room and had refused to come out for hours.

It had to end. It needed to end.

In the beginning, Pellinor had had a theory that the magic storm was like the full moon -- it brought out all sorts of loonies. It was the only explanation for the ongoing fighting in the streets, for neighbours attacking neighbours, for the looting of shops that had already been looted ten times over. Kathy had said he wasn't far off, Bran had stared stonily at the video games that Will had unearthed from somewhere, and Merlin hadn't answered.

With the power out, without the safety and comfort of a light source, things were bound to get worse throughout the city.

Arthur rolled onto his back, away from Merlin, and rubbed his forehead. He didn't let himself make plans. He didn't let himself think. He needed rest and recuperation as much as Merlin did, and these few moments, when Merlin was at peace, should be enough.

The house line rang. Arthur dropped his hand and stared at the ceiling in irritated defeat.

It rang again.

Merlin made a soft, grumpy sound.

Arthur put a hand on Merlin's shoulder to quiet him. "It's all right, Merlin. Go back to sleep. I have it."

He reached for the hard line on the bedside table and picked up the handset. With the power down and the mobile reception hazy at best, a hard line was the only way to stay in communication with the team at the cottage. It wasn't ideal -- difficult to secure when the person who could encrypt the line couldn't get to the other side to install the decrypt code -- but given the matters at hand, Arthur doubted anyone would be listening in.

Still, he was cautious. He answered the call with a curt, "Pendragon."

"It's Leon. I don't suppose you have a speaker handy?"

Arthur sat up straighter in the bed. Merlin murmured questioningly; Arthur ran his hand through Merlin's hair. The sleepy noises faded, but there was a growing tension in Merlin's lax body, and Arthur knew he wouldn't be asleep for much longer.

"Power's out," Arthur said. "Everything all right?"

"Could be worse," Leon said, and something in his tone hinted that it either was worse, or it would be worse. Either way, Arthur didn't have the energy to be more than annoyed and resigned. "First town was a bust. Complete chaos. We did what we could, but it's not going to take much to set the tinder burning again."

Arthur leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. He wasn't surprised. "And the second location?"

They were vague, avoiding names and coordinates on the off chance that someone really was listening, and they would have to start using code if they needed specifics.

"Is Merlin around?" Leon asked.
Arthur dropped his hand and glanced to his side. The curly cord was stretched over Merlin's chest, held in place by a finger. Merlin's eyes were half-open, as if ready to drift off, but when he saw Arthur looking at him, he woke all the way, shifting on the bed, sitting up. He knuckled his eyes.

"Yeah," Arthur said quietly. He cursed inwardly. Merlin hadn't had nearly enough sleep.

"Can he set something up to secure the line from your end?" Leon asked. "It's important. There's something you both need to hear."

"Can it wait?" Arthur asked, watching Merlin. Merlin ruffled a hand through his hair, bowing his head with a groan. In the dim light, it looked as if he was even thinner, his shoulder-blades sticking out, but Arthur hoped that was just the shadows. He'd had his hands all over Merlin a mere hour before; they hadn't felt that bad, then.

"Now would be best," Leon said. There was a brief pause. "Sir."

Arthur closed his eyes and swallowed a sigh. If Leon was going to use formalities now, after everything they'd been through, there was a reason. "Hold the line."

Arthur lowered the phone, pressing it against his chest to muffle it, but before he could say anything, Merlin asked, "Leon?"

"Yeah."

"Is he all right? Is the team --"

"He has news for us. But he wants a secure line. Can you do that?" Arthur wobbled the curly cord for emphasis.

Merlin stared at it thoughtfully before nodding. He slipped out of bed, fumbling around until he found a pair of pyjama pants, tugging them on. "He's on his mobile, yeah?"

Arthur raised the mouthpiece. "Are you on your mobile?"

At Leon's relayed "Yes", Merlin left the room, leaving the door ajar. Arthur heard him descend, but after that, it was anyone's guess where he went. He cradled the phone between his ear and his shoulder and asked, "What can you tell me?"

"It's like we figured," Leon said. He paused, and there was a faint shuffling sound; Arthur thought he could hear voices in the background. "Less terrible out in the country, though that's not going to mean much for long if this keeps up. We've been careful, shouldn't be tracked back to the house, but anyone could stumble on us."

"Who's running the perimeter?" Arthur slid out of bed and cast about for anything he could wear that was in reaching distance of the phone.

"Morgana," Leon said flatly, but there was a hint of amusement in his tone that Arthur wouldn't have picked up on if he didn't know Leon so well. "You might want to let Will know we got hold of his father. They're arriving --"

"They?" Arthur interrupted. He dragged a pair of what he hoped were trousers closer, and grunted when it turned out to be Merlin's shirt.

"His boys, ex-army all, and our special guest," Leon said, and there was no need to detail who the special guest was. Arthur was certain that Olaf would be pleased to know that Vivian was close to
London and decided not to tell Olaf just yet. "… here in a few hours. From what I understand, they could've held out where they were."

"Why didn't they?" Arthur asked. He found sweatpants half-tucked under the bed and pulled them on. They were a little loose in the waist; Merlin wasn't the only one who had lost weight.

"Unclear," Leon said, and there was a long pause. "Hunith said that there were fires in the area, but we couldn't confirm with news reports. Between you and me, I suspect she's taking someone's word for gospel, and he's playing her as much as he's playing anyone. He doesn't like taking orders."

They'd agreed not to mention Balinor's name in any shape or form over unsecured communication lines -- and even then, they were cautious. It wasn't fair of Arthur to saddle Leon with two weighty responsibilities. Mordred was cooperating with the team, so far, and Lucan was keeping an eye on him, but Balinor was another matter. Despite Balinor's falling out with Kilgarrah, Arthur wasn't convinced that the two weren't still talking, or that Balinor didn't have another mode of communicating with his team. Leon was doing his best, but Balinor had slipped the noose more times than Arthur was comfortable with.

"No, I don't suppose he does," Arthur said, clenching his jaw. He half-turned when he heard the door push open. "He'll have to get used to it. Have you been able to keep an eye on him?"

"Gaius is helping with that," Leon said. "He picked up on what we were doing, offered to help. I think he feels guilty about... well. About Merlin."

"Good," Arthur said curtly. He wasn't feeling charitable toward Gaius. He nodded at Merlin when he entered and was damn glad he'd grabbed something to wear, because Kay was right behind him. Kay looked as if he'd rolled out of bed and right into an action movie -- shirt and sweatpants, bare feet, and a gun in his hand, ready for anything. Merlin must have woken him up.

Merlin put his laptop on the nightstand and waited for it to boot. He clicked through a series of menus and entered a few commands at the prompts, including one blindingly long password hidden behind a series of stars. The screen blanked out and Merlin connected a chunky block to the laptop with a single wire; the block hung listlessly over the edge. He pulled at the telephone cord from behind the bedside table and sat back on his heels. "Tell Leon to call back with the protocol. Twenty seconds."

"Did you get that?" Arthur asked.

"Twenty seconds," Leon confirmed, and hung up.

Arthur placed the handset in the cradle and sat down on the bed, watching with some amusement as Merlin tangled himself up in the too-long cord before muttering to himself with aggravation, putting it all down, and disconnecting the cord from the phone itself instead. He plugged it into the block.

When the phone rang a second later, the screen flashed once and text burst across the screen and scrolled all the way down too quickly to be read, looping through several pages of code. By the second ring, the screen was blank again, and a cursor prompt appeared in the upper left corner.

A series of numbers resolved themselves -- Arthur recognized Leon's mobile.

Merlin hit the return key.

ACCEPT Y/N

He hit the letter Y.
"Hullo, Leon," Merlin said, nodding at Arthur to confirm that they were on the line, and, somehow, using the laptop as a phone. "Give me a second to hook up the handset, let you have a private chat --"

"If you're on a speaker, leave it," Leon said. "You should hear this, too."

"Kay's here," Arthur said, glancing at Kay. Kay's eyebrows rose and he tilted his head in question toward the door, asking if he should leave.

Arthur shook his head no at the same time that Leon said, "Don't send him out. If the others are up, they should hear it, too."

"Should I get --" Kay asked.

Arthur nodded. Kay walked out, and Arthur said, "Won't take him a minute."

"All right. Should I start without them, since I'm short on time and promised that we'd be back at base by dawn?"

"Before dawn," Geraint cut in, his voice a little distant, but he came through the line loud and clear.

"Wriggle room," Leon said, and Arthur could almost hear his shrug.

Owain came in then; he peeked around the corner with a cringe on his face, as if expecting to see the worst, but when he saw that Arthur and Merlin were both dressed, he walked in. He glanced out the window -- Arthur met Merlin's eyes and Merlin's cheeks reddened when Owain came a little too close to the stained glass -- before making himself comfortable in the armchair tucked in the far corner of the room.

He propped his head up with his fist, his eyes already half-lidding and staying like that when Gareth and Lamorak came up next. Less than ten seconds later, Kay came in, too, shrugging.

"Will's out like a light, and Pellinor's going to stay with Bran," he said. Arthur didn't need to ask why; Bran hadn't been sleeping any better than Merlin had been.

"Go ahead, Leon," Arthur said.

"I'll start with the most important bit," Leon said.

If he was going for dramatic flair, he failed miserably, because in the next instant, Gwaine took the phone and said, "The second location's full of druids."

"Gwaine," Leon chastised. There was a wrangle for the phone, but Arthur exchanged alarmed glances with Merlin, Kay, Owain. When Leon came back on the line, he was out of breath and frustrated. "He's not wrong, but there's no cause for alarm. The village is warded. They've secured their stores and their assets. Their people are protected in shelters. There has been absolutely no violence in this sector."

"So much for Pellinor's theory, then," Owain said.

"What about their magic users? Are they... are they all right?" Merlin asked.
"They're fine. Wandering about, sneaking up on us -- could teach us a thing or two about stealth, if you ask me --"

"You mean they're not affected by the storm?" Merlin asked, his brows furrowed.

Leon paused, as if he wasn't entirely certain what Merlin was talking about, but they heard him ask the question anyway. "Here, let me put you on speaker. We're in a private office, it's secure. Gwaine is with me, and I'm with the former mayor, Brian McGraw, and the Chief of police, Matthew Lane."

There was a click and a clatter as the phone was put down somewhere.

"Hello, can you --" Someone cleared their throat. "I'm Brian. To answer your question, no, we're not affected. When the… Um. The nursery rhyme? Can I call it the nursery rhyme? It was a warning to the NWO to get ready. When I heard that, I told the others to set up the wards."

"Painted all over town if you know where to look, with the biggest ones on the outskirts," Gwaine said. "Makes a funny sort of fog."

"Yes, that's… yes. The fog acts as a conduit to disperse the magic, to help the magic settle down. It also diverts the worst of it, but it helps that we're not near one of the larger leylines," McGraw said. He paused, and his voice was suddenly louder when he said, "Wait. How did you know about the --"

"That doesn't matter," Arthur said, his tone cutting. "What matters is how you know about the NWO and how you know what to do."

"That's, um. Yes. I was recruited," McGraw said.

Arthur's bedroom was suddenly dead silent. Arthur leaned forward, an elbow on his knee, and he covered his mouth to keep from swearing out loud. He stared down at the floor, shaking his head, and he could just imagine it now -- Leon and the others were captured, they were being held by these people who were likely allies of the NWO, if not outright members -- and any minute now, they would hear a ransom demand.

When none came, Arthur lowered his hand and asked, "Leon?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I believe you know the question I'm about to ask," Arthur said.

"I do, sir," Leon said, and Arthur could almost see the smug grin on Leon's face. Arthur wondered if this was payback for all those times that Arthur nearly gave Leon a heart attack during a mission. Leon spoke up again before Arthur's patience ran out, and he said, "I don't trust them, but they're not violent --"

"Speak for yourself," an unknown man said. Arthur guessed that was the police Chief.

"-- and there's a lot of kids here, sir," Leon said. True or not, that was the key phrase that Arthur had been waiting for. It was inconceivable to any member of the team to harm a child, even if it happened in the line of duty, and that had become their standard go-to phrase to confirm that they were safe and that the people with them were friendlies. Code phrases like those had saved their lives on more than one occasion, and hearing this particular one allowed Arthur to relax. Marginally.
"All right. What is it that you wanted me to hear?" Arthur asked.

"Go on, Mr. McGraw. Tell him what you told me," Leon said. "Preferably the condensed version. My mobile's battery won't last otherwise."

There was a dry chuckle on the other end of the line. Someone -- McGraw, most likely -- cleared their throat.

"I was at Oxford when they approached me the first time," McGraw said. "It was back in the nineteen-sixties. I was nearly done with my studies, already working part time in the Chancellor's office -- stuffing envelopes, sending out letters, sorting through petitions. They said that they represented a very powerful group with a vested interest in broadening the horizons of certain... talented individuals. I don't suppose I need to tell you what that means, but I didn't understand, not back then.

"I thought they were offering me a job. I said I was interested, they told me they'd be in touch. I never heard from them, so I thought it was a put-on, that they'd found an easier punker to roll. I didn't think about it again. I graduated, got a job, and it wasn't until later that I realized I wasn't moving up in the political arena as quickly as I did because of my connections. It was because of theirs.

"They told me about their manifesto a few years later. I..." McGraw paused. "Needless to say, I was horrified. They were talking about destroying the infrastructure of civilization, of --"

Leon -- or Gwaine, most likely Gwaine -- muttered, get to the point just within earshot. McGraw coughed before continuing.

"Right, yes. You already know this. Of course. At that point in my career, I sat at the House. They pressed me into voting a certain way for some bills, to make amendments, that sort of thing. I thought I should be alarmed, but I wasn't, not at first, but, eventually..." McGraw trailed off. "I only saw my part in it. I have no idea how many others were involved. There must have been quite a few. On their own, the laws that were passed, the amendments? They weren't a cause for concern. But put together? It took me a great deal of time to piece together what they were doing, but... They were changing the way the government operates, the way it could operate.

"I tried to stop some bills. They threatened my family. I didn't... For a long time, I didn't have any choice, and..." McGraw sighed. "I never thought I'd be grateful for a history of heart disease. I had... Well. No one was surprised when I announced an early retirement from politics when I was released from the hospital."

There was a pause. A creak. It was the sound of someone shifting in a chair, of settling a weight more comfortably on their shoulders. Arthur knew that sound well, if only in his imagination, because it was what he thought he sounded like when no one was looking and he let himself sit down, to slump down, letting his body show the burdens he'd been carrying all these years.

Everyone carried something. Merlin. Owain. Even Leon hid something from Arthur despite the two of them knowing each other so well that there shouldn't be any secrets left between them. Kay did, too -- though he didn't so much heft his past on his shoulder and trudge forward as use that weight as armour, as a shield. Arthur could only imagine the strain on this McGraw. He was a man, a civilian, someone who must have had the idealized ambition every youth had, once, except he had to watch it come crumbling down around him because he had become someone's pawn.

"She came to visit me then," McGraw said, his voice a little muffled. Arthur imagined that he was rubbing his face with his hands as if trying to wipe away the memory even as he was recounting it. "My contact. I didn't see her very often. Usually, she sent a lackey. But when it was important -- to
them, obviously -- she would show up at my door with a fine brandy in hand.

"She wanted me to do one more thing. One last thing. And she would be out of my life forever. She promised," McGraw said. His voice was weak toward the end, full of the pain that came with broken words and wistful dreams.

"What did she want?" Leon prompted.

"Access to the archives, she said" McGraw said without pause. "It didn't make sense to me at the time. The National Archives were open to the public -- they still are. But she insisted. She had me obtain the approval -- some fellow fairly high up on the food chain, I don't remember his name now, it probably doesn't matter. But I remember the Office, I'd never heard of it before. I thought she was pulling my leg. It was called the Directory of Alternate Affairs."

Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin's expression was grim. Neither of them corrected McGraw, but it seemed that his mystery woman was talking about the Directory’s archives, where they stored manuscripts and artefacts.

"I never heard from her again. I moved to the country, took it easy, recuperated. Eventually, I reconnected with other people like me, other Druids. We started talking, and it wasn't long before we figured out that most of us had been contacted at one point or another, or that we knew someone who had been recruited. That's when we decided that it was real. We... We prepared for this," McGraw said. His voice broke.

"If we thought anyone else would believe us, we would've alerted the authorities," Lane said, speaking up. His tone was harsh, defensive, protecting the other man from... Arthur wasn't certain what. "And if the government already knew about it, how were we to know that they weren't in on it? You can't blame us for this. We have to protect ourselves --"

"We're not accusing you of anything," Leon said tiredly, almost in monotone. It sounded as if it was an argument that Lane had made several times already, and that Leon had calmly tried to defuse, but the damn thing kept lighting up like a party candle.

Arthur absorbed all the information that he'd been given, and as he digested it, he glanced around the room. Kay was frowning, which meant he was either thinking, or he was confused. Gareth leaned against the dresser, his arms crossed, his head down; he'd listened, and he wasn't sure how to process it. Lamorak, who was crowded against Gareth and trying to be subtle about it, tapped his fingers thoughtfully. He'd made a connection, but he wasn't the sort to speak up until it was time.

Ovain looked as if he were asleep.

Merlin chewed his lower lip, his eyes narrowed. Arthur knew that Merlin had been paying attention, but he also knew that Merlin was thinking about an entire village protected by wards and how he could duplicate that to protect the flat, maybe even extend it to certain parts of the city.

Arthur leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Lane was still arguing with Leon, who hadn't said much more beyond his initial, deflecting protest. Arthur interrupted him with, "I have three questions, if you don't mind."

"Only three?" Gwaine asked.

"For now," Arthur clarified, because he was certain that he would have more questions, later, and best not to hobble himself. "Mr. McGraw, who was the woman who contacted you? Do you remember her name?"
"I do," McGraw said. "It was such an unusual name. It was Nimueh Morrigu."

The name didn't ring any bells for Arthur, but Merlin's head shot up, his eyes went round, and his mouth dropped open as if he were about to say something. Arthur forestalled him by holding up a hand and shaking his head.

"Of the druids working with you, Mr. McGraw, or that you are aware of, do you know of any who are actively working against the NWO? Druids who have, perhaps, 

infilttrated

the NWO with the intent of bringing them down?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw Kay nod, as if that had been his question -- it probably had been. There was a long silence over the phone line. He couldn't even hear a pin drop. Merlin glanced at the laptop and half-frowned, half-shrugged to indicate that they were still connected and that he didn't know what happened.

"Not… personally, no," McGraw said carefully.

"But you are aware of some --"

Arthur's press was interrupted by the slam of a door and Leon's pointed, "Gwaine, go after him."

Gwaine didn't answer, but the door opened and shut again; Arthur expected that Gwaine had done exactly that.

"Arthur, Lane just left," Leon said. The tone of his voice changed. "Mr. McGraw, I've made it very clear to you that if we're to stop the NWO, you can't hold anything back. If you know something --"

"It's his nephew," McGraw blurted out. "His sister -- his sister was recruited by them, but they killed her. We're not sure how or why. A few years later, her son -- Cennydd was just a boy -- he disappeared. Matthew tried to find him, but he'd dropped off the face of the planet. It wasn't until we met, when Matthew found out about the NWO and spoke to the other druids that he realized --"

McGraw made a frustrated sound. It was the audible equivalent to a man's shoulders slumping in defeat.

"He'd never known his sister was a druid," McGraw whispered. It was almost inaudible.

Merlin closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Arthur saw him flinch, clench his jaw, close his hands in tight fists. He wanted to go to Merlin, to tell him that Lane's nephew wasn't the same Cennydd who had stayed behind to give Merlin a chance to get away, but he lost his chance when Merlin abruptly rose to his feet and walked to the other side of the room.

"One more question, Mr. McGraw," Arthur said, his throat suddenly dry and scratchy. Gwaine had been right to mock him, because he had more than the 

one

question. Still, he gave himself license to ask only the one he thought was most important, the one that would give them all some idea of when the war would begin. "How long before the storm is over?"


ooOoo

Two more days, the Druid had said.
Talked to Mordred about it when we got back, like you asked, Merlin. He said he's using a combination of a ward and a shield over the main house, and Gaius is adding some bits and bobs to it from some herbs that he has. Come to think of it, I remember Mordred saying that he didn't remember how to do it right, and that was why he was doubling up, Leon had said, several hours later, when the team had returned to the cottage.

Looks almost like the ones we saw at the village's corners, except it's missing a squiggly line on the top and a tiny circle on the bottom. Took a picture of both and marked which one was which and sent them both along to you. Should I show Mordred? Get him to fix the one he's got? Morgana would sure appreciate it -- Fuck, we all would. Keeps waking up in the middle of the night, screaming like bats out of Hell, and my nerves are a bit frayed, Gwaine had said, later that same day.

I wonder if he might've drawn it up wrong on purpose, Will had asked, and just like that, any trust that Mordred might have earned -- not that it was much, mind -- evaporated.

That was two days ago.

Since then, Merlin had hooked up his laptop to a dial-up modem and downloaded the file with the photograph of the wards that Gwaine had taken along with instructions provided by their new "friends" among the Druids. Kathy was a keener hand at foundations than Merlin, and Bran didn't have any skill at it yet, but between the three of them, they carved those wards in the woodwork of the flat at the key cardinal points and nearly immediately relaxed when the constant underlying hum and never-ending roar of the storm went from maximum volume to complete silence.

It did mean that the flat was shrouded in something of a misty fog, and that would look strange to anyone who was paying attention to that sort of thing, but Merlin didn't care much because it meant that he didn't have to maintain the shield any longer and that he could get a full night's worth of deep sleep for a change.

He pretended he didn't see how elated Arthur was after that first night, how bloody pleased he was that Merlin had slept in. He also ignored how Arthur added extra protein powder to those disgusting shakes he made Merlin drink, because if Arthur was happy...

That was all that mattered.

They did little else but sit and rest and prepare. The background information they'd received from McGraw would have served them better at another time, ideally when it was actually happening, for instance, but that had also been well before their time. If nothing else, in addition to the wards, they had learned two things.

The first was that even if they no longer trusted the Directory and its motivations, the Directory's archives had been compromised. Whatever they might have had -- an artefact or two, perhaps more - - was likely no longer there, and the NWO had more artefacts in their possession than any of them were comfortable with.

The second -- they had a name.

"Out with it, Merlin," Arthur said, long after they'd hung up and disconnected the laptop. "I saw how you flinched. Don't tell me. You know her?"

Kay poked Owain in the vain hopes that Owain might wake up.

"Not... not exactly," Merlin said. He pulled his laptop closer and started tabbing through the different programs, closing them all. He opened up the partial database that he'd cloned from the
Pendragon database. "It's just. The name. Morrigu. It's not that common, is it?"

"It's not like we expect the bad guys to go around using their real names, though that'd make things a sight easier," Lamorak said. Merlin glanced in his direction with a distracted nod, noting how Lamorak's fingers lingered on Gareth's shoulder and filing that away for closer examination later.

"It's not like the bad guys would go around with a distinctive real name, either," Kay pointed out.

"Hold on. Let me --" Merlin fell silent, his brow furrowed in concentration. He entered a few search strings, skimming through them before turning the laptop to Arthur. "It's just, I've seen it before, didn't I? Not just one entry, either. It didn't click until the bloke gave us the name."

There were many first names on the client list for the custom database that began with the letter N, but the surnames...

"Morrig, Mohrig, Mogrioghain, Morgan, Morrigu --" Arthur read off the surnames, one by one, his brow pinching. There were probably more permutations in the database in the database, but all those that Merlin had pulled up had two things in common. They had first names starting with the letter N. And...

"It's the Morrigan," Merlin said. "Those are all variations of the Goddess Morrigan, Arthur. Doesn't the Directory and MI-6 have profiles on someone who goes by that name?"

They didn't have a copy here, at the flat. They had always been careful never to leave anything lying about, and when the team moved to the cottage, they had made certain to bring along the files they'd originally obtained from Bayard and Olaf. There was no way for them to check, not now --

Arthur didn't hesitate. He picked up the handset and brought it to his ear. Merlin hastily found the other end of the telephone cord and squeezed behind the nightstand to plug it in. Arthur punched a string of numbers and waited for the dial tone.

It had taken Bedivere less than twenty minutes to find the files on the Morrigan. There was no photograph, no description, no indication of movement, and the only notations were references made by members of the NWO. As far as MI-6 had been able to put together, someone who went only by Morrigan had been an active member in the 1960s and the early 70s, but had never been identified nor found. The NWO continued to mention Morrigan, though less and less as the generations increased, and although neither agency marked Morrigan as alive or dead, the person wasn't marked as active, either.

The Pendragon database showed that they had been receiving orders for customized material from every variation of N. Morrig... as late as the mid-2000's, with new requisitions and invoices dating to the last year.

McGraw had been in his early twenties when they'd first met, and he'd described her as an attractive brunette in her early-to-mid thirties with a slim, curvy figure and a quick smile that never reached her eyes. "I remember her lips the most," McGraw had said, and there had been a tone to his voice that had made Merlin embarrassed to hear it. There had been an admission in McGraw's voice, as if he'd wanked to the memory of the woman's mouth on more than one occasion. "Ruby lips. She always wore this bright red lipstick. It shouldn't have looked good on her, she was so pale, but..."

Whoever this woman was, she had to be pushing eighty or ninety by now, and the description was no longer valid. That was if she was even alive, and that the paper trail in the Pendragon database hadn't been generated by a lackey using the name as a throwaway pseudonym.
Even if the power was back up, there was no way of tracing any of Nimueh's incarnations using the address or payment information on the invoices. The addresses were always different. The payment was always done in cash -- unusual, given the amount owed, but not completely out of the ordinary.

The Directory's files were even more sparse than MI-6 -- the standard identity page sans photograph, description or name, with a short list of references noted by Directory agents during the course of their assignments or missions.

"Then there's six form pages, completely blank, and on the last page, the one with the header, Field Notes, I thought it was blank at first, except flipping back and forth, I thought I saw -- anyway, doesn't matter, it's white text on a white background and this is what it says when I highlight it: The Three will rise -- the Crone, the Mother, the Maiden. The Guardian, the Priestess, the Warrior. It was our time, once. It will be our time again. Does that make sense to you?" Bedivere didn't wait for an answer. "Hold on, I'll have to call you back. Morgana just started -- fuck. Leon! Where's Leon! Geraint, go get him now."

The phone disconnected, but not before they heard Morgana's scream over the speakers.

Morgana had had a waking vision. Before that, she had only ever Seen things in her dreams. She refused to talk about what she had seen, and sometime in-between Morgana's stronger visions and the lack of information on Nimueh, Arthur had decided on a plan that Merlin was in full agreement with.

As soon as the storm was over, they were leaving for the cottage.

The SUVs were packed. The gas tanks were full.

While Pellinor and Lamorak kept an eye on the SUVs, the rest of them remained inside, watching the storm.

Two days, the Druid had said.

The magic swirled as violently as it had before, shearing through the air, whistling and roaring and raging. But without a shield to batter against, the wild magic no longer thundered and boomed. The house no longer vibrated or shook. And as long as Bran and Kathy remained behind the wards, the wild magic didn't try to drown them.

As long as Merlin remained behind the wards, the wild magic didn't try to rip him apart.

Arthur was leaning against the window in the main room, his arms crossed, his shoulder against the frame. The curtains had been pushed aside, giving him an unimpeded view of the street.

The lights flickered once, twice, three times. And finally, the power was restored.

All the appliances that had been on before the power went out were ringing, dinging, whirring, beeping and whining. Gareth and Kay went through the house, turning everything off.

Merlin took the opportunity to recharge his laptop one last time.

Will plopped down on the couch next to Merlin, one arm stretched across his chest because he refused to wear a sling anymore, the other draped on the pillows behind Merlin's back. "Figures. Soon as we decide to move for greener pastures, everything starts bloody blooming here."

Merlin flashed Will a wry smile before returning his attention to the laptop. "Sod's law and all."
Will didn't answer. His leg started jiggling.

Merlin glanced at the window again, watching Arthur. He was dressed in worn jeans, a long sleeved shirt, a soft dark-grey and green button-down on top. His hair was ruffled, a little wavy now that it had some length, and even though he'd shaved a few days ago, the scruff had returned to his cheek, and he looked a bit… ragged.

Hell, they were all rough in one way or another. Only Gareth was brave enough to shower every day despite the lack of hot water, but he didn't have to worry about shaving, not when it took him a full week to work up to a respectable five o'clock shadow. Kay fled the room every time Kathy suggested giving him a haircut, and Bran, learning by example, made himself scarce, too.

Will, on the other hand, had begged for Kathy to run her hands through his hair, and that had been enough to turn her off on the idea altogether.

It was strange. In the last two days, things had… settled. Arthur wasn't fretting over Merlin; Merlin wasn't fretting over the storm. Kay and Will had gone out to check the neighbourhood and acquire supplies where there were supplies to be had. Pellinor would have cut the cast on his arm if Arthur hadn't stopped him. Gareth and Lamorak --

Well. They'd disappear. Sometimes, it was out on patrol. Other times, it was to return from their shared bedroom looking a little flushed.

On the surface, it was almost normal.

But it wasn't.

Will was… detached, distant. Merlin knew better than to ask what was on his mind -- it was best not to know, because Will's head was a dark and dismal place full of jumbled mazes and confusion, and he'd come out of it, eventually, but not until he was ready.

Kathy was torn between wanting to run out to help her friends and being desperate to stay where it was safe. Bran alternated moods -- some days, he needed to be cajoled into learning his magic lessons with Kathy or Merlin, other days, he was pestering them to learn something new.

Kay was his usual reserved self, though Merlin had caught him glancing at Will thoughtfully a few times, and Merlin wasn't sure if Kay was sizing him up for something, or if he was worried about Will. Pellinor messed about in the kitchen to see what meals he could make without using power, and no one had the heart to tell him that they would rather eat MREs. Gareth and Lamorak were always in each other's orbits, though that was nothing new, but sometimes, inexplicably, they would split up to different corners of the room as if embarrassed.

And Arthur…

Arthur was quieter than usual, regressing inward, dwelling grimly on… on everything they had learned, everything they had done. He wasn't planning anything -- the team would know if he was, because he always had a funny look on his face, pinched and concentrating all at once, the way it was in the movies when someone was trying to move something with their mind. No, the weight on Arthur's shoulders could be attributed to the Directory, MI-6, the NWO, Aredian, his father, the artefacts, Nimueh -- it was a messy swirl, and messier still when family was involved.


There were moments when Merlin almost wished that they hadn't learned about the wards, that they
were forced to rely on the shield. The drain on his power, the constant wariness, the ever-sharpening edge… All those had been welcome distractions from his own thoughts. He didn't have any distractions, not any longer. If he wasn't sleeping, he was working. If he wasn't working, he was…

Thinking. Always thinking.

His father wasn't dead.

His mother had perpetuated the lie by omission.

His uncle had kept silent on a binding that had been set on Merlin by his parents.

Merlin should be pleased that his father was still alive, that he'd returned. He should forgive his mother for her deception because she must have had a good reason. His uncle wasn't to blame for something he hadn't done, and no one could have predicted the effects that it had had.

He should accept. He should forgive. He should move on.

He couldn't.

All he felt was rage.

It was less intense, now, dwindled down to a simmering anger, always grumbling away in the back of his mind. If he paid it any attention, it would flare up, his magic would lash out at anything and everything in retaliation, and --

Best if he didn't think about it. Best if he waited --

And waited and waited. He didn't want to deal with it. He didn't want to go to the cottage where he would have no choice but to see his mother, Gaius…

Him.

Bran tumbled onto the couch and wedged himself between Merlin and Will. He was wearing one of Merlin's shirts under one of Arthur's jumpers, the sleeves too long and hanging off his arms. He kicked up his feet onto the coffee table. Merlin protected his laptop reflexively.

"I'm bored," Bran announced. He reached for the telly.

"Go outside and play," Will said.

When Bran rolled his eyes, he did it with his entire body. "Har har de har har. You know that bird who told you were funny?"

"Yeah?"

"She lied," Bran said. He flicked through the channels.

Merlin chuckled.

"You're too young to appreciate the fine art of feminine flirtation," Will said, shoving Bran.

"I bet I have more pull than you." Bran shoved back. Will snatched at the remote. Bran held it out of reach.

Kay walked by, reached down, and split them apart. He let them go, took the remote out of Bran's
hands, and flipped from channel to channel, skipping the newscasts. He sat down heavily on Merlin's other side and left the telly on a rerun of an old *Die Hard*.

Merlin hoped that wasn't prophetic.

Bran was quiet for all of three minutes before he spoke up again. "This spy business is dull. I thought there would be more action."

"You watched a building come down," Kay said.

"There's riots in the streets," Will said.

"Pretty sure there was a train wreck somewhere in there," Kay said.

"Wasn't there an assassination attempt, too?" Will asked.

"And then there were the suits from MI-6," Kay said, tapping the remote on the sofa arm.

"Magic storm," Will said, flapping a hand in the air.

"Half the city on fire," Kay said.

Bran groaned and slumped deeper in the pillows, banging his head back before sinking against Merlin. "Do they ever shut up?"

Merlin didn't look up from his laptop. He pointed at Will. "That one? Not really."

Bran gestured at Kay. "What about that one?"

"Not when Will's in the room," Pellinor said, walking past to drop into the plush armchair.

"Noticed that, did you?" Merlin asked, glancing up.

Pellinor shrugged a shoulder. "It's entertaining, at least."

"You don't have the room next to theirs," Owain said.

"You snore, I wasn't bunking with you when there's a perfectly comfortable sofa right here," Pellinor said.

There was a loud crack behind them. Merlin turned to see Kathy slamming her mobile onto the kitchen counter several times before pausing in mid-strike, suddenly acutely aware of the attention. "The power's back, there's finally a few bars, and the bloody lines are busy."

As one, they all turned to look at Kay.

"Cabin fever, or should we worry?" Owain asked.

Kay shrugged. "If I had to learn how to tell the difference by hard, painful experience, you have to learn how to tell the difference by hard, painful experience."

"So helpful," Owain said.

"Look at the bright side," Will said. "You can run out of the house. She can't."

Will abruptly pitched forward, yelping in pain. Scattered bits and pieces of broken plastic from a shattered cell phone scattered onto the sofa and the coffee table.
Kay didn't look up from the telly, but he leaned into Merlin and said, "By the by, she has really good aim."

"Good to know," Will snarled, rubbing the back of his head.

Merlin smiled faintly. He closed the application he was working on, checked to see that all the emails had downloaded for Arthur to look at, later, and shut down the laptop.

Just like that, he felt a heavy weight ease, a lightening of a pressure he'd become so accustomed to, he hadn't known it was there until it was gone. He sat up straight, alarmed; besides him, Bran did the same thing. They both turned to look at Kathy, who was looking back at them.

Merlin got up, climbed over Kay, and went to the front entrance, only distantly aware of Arthur following him and calling his name. Merlin fumbled through all the locks, wrenched the door open, and walked outside.

Arthur's hand slapped on his shoulder, holding him back, but Merlin slipped away easily, taking his first real breath of fresh air since…

Since Freya.

The chaos of the city hit him like a ton of bricks -- the smoke, the burning rubber, acrid and sour. It left a tar-taste in the back of his throat, coating his tongue. It scraped on his skin like dried blood slowly flaking away. It tensed like the body waiting for another blow.

But beneath it all, there was the sharp tang of ozone, the wet wash that followed the rain, the smell of cut grass and cinnamon apple pie.

The tree branches rustled, the wind light and gentle. The wild magic in the air had settled and was drifting down toward the ground like sparkles thrown up in the air, dust motes flashing and blinking in the dull sunlight that was only just piercing the sky.

Merlin waited a moment. Two. Three. On the fourth breath he reached out with his magic, stretching as far as he could, ready to withdraw and return to the house at the slightest hint that this wasn't the end of the storm, but merely a brief pause as the wild magic inhaled deeply and prepared for another round.

But there was nothing. It was fading, binding, easing.

The air was still rich with magic, but so was the earth. The buildings around them, the birds that fluttered in the trees, the dog that chased after a yowling cat down the street.

Quiet. Calm.

The counterpoint in a song.

Merlin turned around.

Arthur was standing in the doorway, one hand on the frame, the other reaching out for Merlin, but slowly dropping down as realization seeped into his eyes. "Is it --"

Merlin nodded. "It's over."

Arthur closed the distance between them, pulled Merlin into a hug, and kissed him soundly, hurriedly, desperately.
A crash down the street forced them to pull apart. Merlin could see a gang congregating at the end of the road, emerging from one of the two-flat houses. They hadn't been spotted, not yet, but if the pattern that Kay and Will had observed on their scouts was correct, the gang would be heading their way, soon.

"Wait or go?" Merlin asked, looking back at the gang.

"Let's go," Arthur said, pulling Merlin into the house. The others were at the top of the stairs, waiting for them. "Pellinor, keep an eye out for those plonkers. The rest of you, grab the last and lock everything down. Merlin --"

"Mask the house, I know. Don't worry, no one's going to raid your movie collection," Merlin said, already running his hands along the brickwork. Before, the shield had made the house difficult to see from the outside-in. Without the shield, the wild magic had stripped the rest of the illusions and protective spells that Merlin had originally laid on the foundation. It was only a matter of minutes to raise those spells again. Merlin's magic curled through the brickwork and nestled in the cracks, weaving together into something impenetrable should someone make it past the illusion of a burnt-down husk.

"Will --"

"Aw, do I have to?" Will asked, struggling into his jacket one-armed. Merlin helped him, then walked past to take a box of supplies out of Kathy's arms just as she was about to drop the bags hanging from her arm.

"Tell them we're picking it up now," Arthur said. Arthur disappeared into the house and missed the way Will rolled his eyes.

"Just do it, Will," Merlin said.

"Yeah, yeah," Will muttered, fishing through the pockets until he found the burner phone. He thumbed through the contacts and brought it to his ear, hanging up and trying again after a muttered, "Network services are jammed."

"Did you dial the bypass emergency code before the number?" Merlin asked.

"Course I did," Will scoffed.

Merlin shook his head when Will half-turned away from him, hung up, and thumb-dialled again. It couldn't have rung more than twice before Will said, "Hullo, Batman. I don't suppose you're ready for us? We're not late, we're --"

Merlin moved out of the way when Lamorak closed the boot of the Range Rover; Bran clambered into the rear seat, wedging himself against the cases that spilled over from the back. Owain climbed in the driver's seat and gave Merlin a small, two-fingered salute. Kay clapped a hand on Merlin's shoulder as he headed for the SUV, taking shotgun. Pellinor got in the back with Kathy.

They waited until Arthur emerged from the house carrying one last bag before pulling out of the driveway and driving off with a salute.

Merlin had made certain that the spell would maintain itself before following Arthur to the second SUV. Gareth and Lamorak were behind the wheel and in the passenger seat; Merlin got out of the way and waited for Will to squeeze into the third row before sliding in next to Arthur. Gareth pulled out as soon as the doors shut.
"I don't give a shite if we're overdue. We couldn't get to you in the first fucking place. What? What -- Do you blokes ever look out the window? It's the bloody apocalypse is what it is --" Will put the phone against his chest. "He said we were supposed to be there five days ago, lost our chance, we've got some cocksucking to do --"

Arthur grunted and held out his hand. "Give me the phone."

"You poor sod, you're in for it now," Will said into the mobile. He handed it over the seat before settling back with an annoyed groan. He threw up a hand in the air. "I don't know why people just don't do what I tell them to do. This? Fucking rude is what it is. Don't they know not to annoy me? I can shoot them from three klicks away --"

"Shut it," Arthur said, though it was light and half-hearted. He put the phone to his ear. "This is Captain Arthur Pendragon of Excalibur. Am I speaking to Daly or Baker?"

A grin tugged at Merlin's mouth. Arthur was using his bored, don't fuck with me voice, and this was... This was his Arthur, pure and natural, without the strain put upon him by his undercover role. It was his Arthur -- their Arthur, their Captain, large and in charge, and things would be done his way from this point forward, because the way the rest of the world had been running things? It wasn't working.

Lamorak glanced over his shoulder, and from the way that the line of tension in his shoulders suddenly eased, Merlin could tell that he'd heard that tone, too.

"Listen very carefully, because I'm not in the habit of giving orders twice, and it'll be on you if you don't carry through. In thirty-eight minutes, a silver SUV will arrive at the American Embassy. It takes twenty-two minutes to get from your so-called secret headquarters to the Embassy. You have sixteen minutes to find Daly or Baker to have the package ready for pickup. If no one's there when we arrive, you have the privilege of passing on the following message: you're on your own in this."

Arthur hung up and tossed the phone over his shoulder at Will, who squawked in surprise.

"I want to climb you like a tree," Merlin blurted out.

Arthur glanced at Merlin, an imperious eyebrow raised, but Merlin saw the corners of his mouth tug. Arthur was fighting a smirk.

"I see my stop," Will said. "Let me out. Right here. Here is good. Oh my God, let me out. They're about to snog --"

Merlin reached over the rear seat and smacked Will on the head. "Shut it, you. Spoilt the moment, you did."

"Terrible, terrible shame," Will said, not at all repentant. At Merlin's glare, Will's smile broadened, and it was only the tight squeeze of Arthur's hand that kept Merlin from lunging over the back seat to strangle Will.

Will had been the penultimate cockblock while they were all sequestered in the house. He came up with admittedly ingenious ways to get between Merlin and Arthur -- cutting between them even though there was plenty of room to go around, appearing out of nowhere with food or drinks in hand as if he were a bloody waiter at a pretentious restaurant, even sending a poor, unsuspecting Bran to the garage where Arthur had been helping Merlin with some additions to the mechadragon and they had gotten understandably sidetracked.

Bran had forged in, not the least bit bothered by the sight of two men kissing or the hands down each
other's pants, and primly announced that "their presence is requested, and I'm only here because Will's an arse."

The only line Will hadn't crossed was the master bedroom, and that was probably only because he knew that Merlin would have turned him inside-out if he'd even tried.

Merlin wanted to remind Will of all the times that he'd paraded one bird after another through their shared flat back in uni, of all the times he'd had to deal with the half-naked morning-after walks-of-shame, because Will couldn't be arsed to wake up and do much more than slap them on the butt as they left. Merlin had felt particularly badly for one girl, and had invited her to stay for breakfast. She'd been nice; Merlin hadn't been able to understand what women saw in Will, anyway.

Of late, Merlin wondered more why Will hadn't gotten over himself, already.

Merlin squeezed Arthur's hand in return, and he let it go. Will was his dearest friend. Will was a fucking pillock. And one day, Will would realize that the only reason Merlin hadn't knocked him on his arse was because the very man Will antagonized was the same person who was defending Will to Merlin. Arthur was a better man than anyone outside the team and their families ever knew, and Will...

"You need to grow up," Merlin said, and if his tone was harsh, he didn't feel the least bit apologetic.

There was a long, awkward silence from the third row.

Gareth wove through debris and rubbish littering the street. He pushed the SUV onto the kerb to get around a lorry angled on the diagonal across the road. He didn't slow down when several adults ran out into the road to block their way, waving their arms and shouting. One of them held up a sign that said HELP US.

They didn't stop.

They couldn't stop. For every request they received for help, for every body lying flat on the road to stop them, it was just as likely to be a trap as it was to be a very real need. Every person in the SUV was more than capable of defending themselves, of protecting their supplies, of getting away, but every stop they made was a delay they couldn't afford.

Recon missions and the satellite images that Merlin had painstakingly downloaded through the dial-up modem at an arse-dragging 28.8K bandwidth when the power was up had warned them of roadblocks, streets that had been inexplicably dug up, and blockades made out of any object that had been on hand. The time frame that Arthur had given the CIA blokes was an overestimation of how long it really would take to get to their destination, but given the conditions, Merlin had a feeling that they would make it with seconds to spare.

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat from the back seat. Merlin ignored Will.

He was surprised when Will offered an olive branch when he quietly asked, "So, Captain. How about you run us through your plan again?"

ooOOoo

Less than ten minutes later, Will's Adam West called back to change their destination. It was on their
way, but Arthur made a fuss about it until West was practically tripping over himself apologizing for the inconvenience. Arthur could only wonder what it was that Daly had told West to change his attitude.

He found he didn't much care, not when they were nearly there. Two more blocks, and --

Less than ninety seconds later, they swerved through a series of cars strategically placed to slow down any oncoming vehicles, and they found themselves at the wrong end of a barricade made up of an overturned lorry, the transport container completely twisted onto its side.

"Our one o'clock," Will said softly. "More like half one. Closer to two."

"That's... really precise directions," Lamorak said, his tone mocking. "How are you a sniper again?"

"Sod off," Will said.

Gareth's mouth twitched into the near-miss of a smile, because he'd spotted what Will had seen from the rearmost seat.

Arthur shifted in his seat just enough to see the large splotch of dried blood, the crumpled front end of a double-door sedan, and the impact dents that were roughly the shape and size of a human body. A few metres away, there was more blood, this time smearing on the front hood of a white car.

"Pull back," Arthur said. He didn't hide it when he drew his gun and thumbed off the safety, just in case. A heartbeat later, the rest of the team -- and Will -- did the same.

Gareth shifted the gear into reverse, twisted his body around, one hand not on the passenger seat beside him, but on Lamorak's shoulder. Arthur noticed -- hell, everyone in the car noticed, it wasn't subtle anymore -- and he wondered if he was going to have to have some sort of conversation with them. If at all possible, he'd rather avoid it, but if he had to, he was going to make sure that the sum total of his dressing down amounted to keep your heads straight. It was a lecture he wasn't qualified to give, not considering that he'd made himself unfit for duty on more than one occasion, worrying about Merlin, but it was a lecture he needed to make, anyway.

Particularly considering... the looming question about their relationship. Arthur didn't know what to make of it, and he wasn't certain that the two of them even knew what they were doing, either.

"Problem," Will said, because he was the one with the best view through the rear window. Arthur leaned away from Gareth's line of sight and looked for himself.

"I see it," Gareth asked. "Anyone spot a side road?"

"Not on this stretch," Merlin said, his tone strained, but calm. "Buildings all the way to the end of the block."

"Well, that won't help us," Gareth said. Arthur made eye contact with Gareth and nodded. Gareth grimaced, but asked, "Goddamn it, I hate to scratch the paint. Which car's the lightest? The right one or the left one?"

"The left one," Will said.

"The right one," Merlin said. They glanced at each other, and Merlin asked, "Which left?"

"Facing that way," Will said, thumbing over his shoulder to the rear window.
"Right one facing forward --" Merlin trailed off. Arthur followed his gaze to the front of the car and saw a small crowd gathering and coming their way. "The left one."

The sound of a bullet being chambered was audible in the car. Lamorak's voice was a low, warning tone. "Gareth, you might want to develop a lead foot. Right about now would be nice."

"Understood," Gareth said. He shifted in his seat.

The engine roared, the SUV accelerated, and they sidewinded back the way they had come around the remaining obstacles at the best speed they could manage without tottering and tipping over. They were moving too fast to tell if the two cars blocking the way were empty, but no one needed any warning to brace.

Except, it seemed, Merlin, who was looking at Arthur -- no, at something behind Arthur --

"Get down!" he shouted, throwing up his hand.

Arthur saw a flash of gold in Merlin's eyes the same instant he heard a thunderous tat-tat-tat hitting the side of the SUV, and in the next, they impacted with one of the cars.

Arthur didn't see what it was. Maybe a grenade. A missile launcher. All he saw was the tail end of a firecracker flash, the flare of a miniature jet --

And they were turned around with a violent wrench. The SUV twirled like a half-hearted top, Gareth just barely keeping all four wheels on the ground. They must have just been missed, barely clipped by the explosive. The lightest of contacts and their rearward momentum --

Arthur glanced at Merlin.

-- and probably also whatever it was that Merlin had done -- had saved the engine, or they would be dead in the street right now. They'd lost both speed and momentum, but Gareth had gotten their nose pointed in the right direction. He accelerated, slammed on the brakes, yanked the wheel, and got them facing forward back the way they came.

"Incoming," Lamorak said.

"I would've never seen aught if you hadn't said anything," Will mocked from the rear seat, leaning forward to see through the front. There were a few people standing in the middle of the road. They stood at arm's width, and they spread their hands as if making a human barricade.

"Shut it, Will," Merlin snapped.

At the same time, Gareth said, "If they think I'm not prepared to run them down --"

Arthur saw something dark in the road ahead of them, small at first but growing larger by the second. Whatever it was, it stretched out and reached out for them. "Back up. Back up, now."

Gareth veered a hard left. The SUV stuttered to a sideways stop. "What's the --"

He didn't finish the sentence. Something very large and very heavy fell right where they had been mere moments ago. The impact shook the earth and jarred the SUV. Dust clouds rose and drifted down, barely thick enough to veil the twisted wreck of metal in front of them.

There were traces of red paint in the gnarl. Splinters stuck out where a windshield must have been, once. The dashboard extruded through a partial opening, the engine making up the other side. There
was a bright blue bumper sticking out the other side of the mess, too big and too different to be from anything other than another vehicle.

A wheel fell from above. It bounced once or twice more before rolling down the street toward the human barricade on the other end.

"Well, shit. Looks like we've got us a welcoming committee," Will said.

"Now who's being observant?" Lamorak asked.

Will didn't answer right away. "I miss Kay. His comebacks were better."

Lamorak snorted.

"I think your comebacks are just fine, dear," Gareth said, his tone teasing, even fond.

Yeah, Arthur needed to have a talk with those two sometime soon. He wondered if he could get Leon to do it for him instead.

On one side, a double-handful of street toughs dressed in everything from jeans to army camos and carrying weapons -- handguns, semiautomatic rifles, grenade launchers and at least one ground-to-air missile launcher that made no sense given the context -- came out of the woodworks. On the other, the line of men and women approached them at a slow, sedate pace, and if it wasn't for the debris planted in the middle of the road as if it were a giant pile of dog shite, Arthur would half-expect them to be singing some sort of campfire song.

"What's our situation?" Arthur asked.

"We're good. Point me in a direction," Gareth said.

The team had gotten into plenty of situations where they walked right into the middle of two different factions warring for the same ground. It was never their fight, but every time they tried to retreat, they were pulled in, forced to defend themselves against one or the other and doing their dirty work.

This was exactly the same situation. On the one hand, there were twenty -- now close to thirty -- people gathering around the barricades. They stayed close to a defensible perimeter, half-hidden behind upturned vehicles. On the other, there were three women and five men marching down the street as if they were part of a parade, not a single weapon in hand, and not a single ounce of God-given fear, either.

"Merlin, are they --"

"Yeah, they are," Merlin said.

It wasn't hard to figure out why the road had been set up the way it had. If he didn't know any better, Arthur would think that the people who lived in this area of town were using this street as an ambush site to obtain supplies or to attack the unsuspecting for their own means.

Except at the far end of the street, just a block and a half more, was the address Robert Daly, senior assistant director with the CIA, had given him.

"They're soldiers. Agents. They're trained," Arthur said, watching their movements. They weren't advancing, but they weren't retreating either. The car blockade was the first line of their defences.

A cell phone rang.
"Shite, that's mine," Will said, fumbling through his jacket. He brought the mobile to his ear. "Hullo, can't talk now, kind of busy. If this is the girl I met the other day, definitely call me back -- what --"

Will handed the mobile over the seat and gave it to Arthur.

"Pendragon," Arthur said curtly, keeping an eye out. The eight sorcerers had stopped fifty metres away -- not quite out of bullet range, but they would have plenty of time to pull up a shield if they were fired upon.

Daly's voice was like the clatter-clack of railroad wheels on a crooked rail, nearly obscured by background noises and excited conversations. "If you value your life, you'll drive to us --"

"Can you stop them?" Arthur asked, glancing at Merlin. "Do you even know how?"

The silence from Daly was long enough that it was answer enough on its own. Arthur hissed through his teeth.

"Then you let us handle it," Arthur said. "If you value your life, your men won't shoot us."

Arthur disconnected the line without waiting for an answer and returned the mobile to Will.


Lamorak was out first, Merlin right behind him. They split to either side of the SUV -- Lamorak at the front, Merlin at the rear, guns at ready. Arthur slid across the bench seat and exited out the passenger side, pausing long enough to flip the seat to give Will access. Gareth secured the vehicle and clambered out about as gracefully he'd ever managed. Arthur joined Merlin at the rear, Gareth was next to Lamorak in an instant.

There was a long pause.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder.

Will came out several seconds later, crouching down with the case in his hands. He thumbed the combination codes and pulled out a L115A3 sniper rifle, putting it together with practiced hands. He only looked up when he was done, giving Arthur a half-hearted shrug.

"I figure, whatever you're going to do, it doesn't involve me, so I'll hang back and do what I do best," he said.

Arthur felt Merlin shift beside him and turned. The flicker of surprise in Merlin's expression disappeared behind a focused mask. That was his game face, and Arthur knew that something important must have happened if Merlin had slipped out of it, even for only a brief moment.

Arthur gave Will a curt nod. Then, as an afterthought, Arthur pointed toward himself, Merlin, Lamorak and Gareth. "We're the friendlies, by the way. Don't shoot us."

Will's face split into a guileless smile full of amusement. "Man's got jokes. You know, if you'd led with that when we first met, maybe we would've got on."

It was Arthur's turn to gape at Will.

"Stop flirting with my boyfriend," Merlin groused.

"All right," Arthur said, shaking it off, because now was not the time. If Will wanted to be friends, he could damn well do it on his own time. "Lamorak, Gareth, we'll lay down covering fire. Get to the
wreck. We'll join you on the next jump. Will --"

"Don't shoot the friendlies," Will said, looking down the sight line of his gun before standing up to prop himself against the hood of the truck.

"Right. Don't shoot the friendlies. On my mark. One, two --"

Arthur took the high; Merlin laid down the low fire. They both squeezed out a few conservative rounds while Will did most of the work -- all the bullets hit an invisible surface and clanked onto the ground. There weren't any light shows like what happened with Merlin's shield, and that was a concern, because they wouldn't be able to tell what the extent and limits of the enemy shield were.

Gareth and Lamorak half-crouched, half-ran toward the mangled tangle of multiple vehicles in the middle of the road and secured themselves.

"I don't have clean line of sight," Will said. "I'm gonna move when you do."

"Stay put," Arthur said.

"It's not like they're shooting back," Will retorted.

"We'll move, and then you," Arthur repeated.

"Are you thick? I'm not any use from here. I'll move, then you," Will said. "It's common sense. On my go --"

"Whose common sense? On what planet?"

"Now that sounds more like the Will I know. I thought for a second he'd been replaced by aliens," Merlin muttered. Then, louder, he snapped, "Will, just shut your fat gob and do what he says."

Arthur shook his head and signalled the others. He counted down again; on his go, Merlin took the lead and ran to the wreck. Gareth and Lamorak covered them; only God knew what the fuck Will was doing.

"Is he always like that?" Arthur asked, his shoulder brushing against Merlin's. A piece of sharp metal poked him uncomfortably in the ribs.

"Worse, actually," Merlin said distractedly. He looked over Arthur's shoulder at the sorcerers.

Arthur glanced at Gareth, who was nearby.

"What are they doing?"

"Not much of anything," Gareth admitted. "Stood there looking pretty, but that's about it. Second to last bloke on the left is more lively than the rest, he's had himself a good laugh while we were shooting at nothing."

"Good. Keep shooting. If they think we don't know what they are, all the better," Arthur said.

"Second to last bloke's the one supporting the shield," Merlin said. "Stretches across the street to the kerb, maybe as tall as... say, twelve meters."

"That's it?" Lamorak scoffed. "First years at Hogwarts could do better."

"Harry Potter, really?" Gareth asked.

Lamorak shrugged. "Got into it at the Directory's training camp. Made sense at the time."
weren't mine, though. Got them off Lucan."

"Focus," Arthur said. He knew they were rattled -- this was nerves brought on from too long in isolation and uncertainty about the NWO, but Lamorak had a good point. Even before the leylines were opened up, the NWO sorcerers could manage shields taller, broader, and more interesting than the one these eight sorcerers were managing on their own. Either the wild magic hadn't completely settled down yet and was just a touch too erratic for use, or these sorcerers hadn't been much to look at before the artefact-bombs went off. Either way, Merlin didn't seem concerned. "What about the others, Merlin?"

"They're drunk. Mostly on magic, but they're pissed out of their heads," Merlin said sourly, glancing over the twisted metal they were using as cover before settling down with his hands between his knees, his gun loose in his fingers. He made a faint, dismissive gesture. "I can pull down the shield. The others might react long enough to cast something, but I doubt it, because, see A). They're drunk."

Gareth snorted.

"They're not who we have to worry about, though," Merlin said. He thumbed over his shoulder.

Arthur glanced over the wreck to get a quick look. Seven of the eight sorcerers were rocking on their heels, as if dancing to some unknown tune, their eyes half-closed, their mouths set in self-satisfied lines. The eighth sorcerer -- second from the left -- was pinch-browed in concentration, a bit disgruntled besides.

If Merlin didn't think they were a threat, Arthur could discount them just as easily, but he didn't know about the girl he'd spotted standing even further back. It had only been a quick glance, but he had only made out dark trousers, knee-high boots, and a jacket that looked as if it might be several sizes too large for her, the sleeves hanging past her fingertips.

"The girl?"

"The girl," Merlin confirmed. "She's sucking up magic like a vacuum cleaner, and she's not getting drunk on it. Odds are, she's the powerhouse, and the rest of them are cannon fodder."

"Is she a problem for you?" Arthur asked.

Merlin started to answer. After a few moments, he shook his head, but there was something in his manner that made Arthur sit back and take him in.

Merlin's eyes were their familiar dark, jewel blue, but they were sparkling with starbursts of magic aching to creep out into the open. He was restrained, reserve, controlled.

Arthur knew why almost at once. His mouth pressed in a thin line and he made a decision. He did not want the CIA to know about Merlin -- not yet. They needed to gain access to their information sources, to obtain the package Arthur had asked for, and if the CIA found out about Merlin and his magic, they wouldn't be keen to hand it over easily.

They might try to capture Merlin.

Emphasis on try.

"No flashy stuff, then. Take down the shield, but don't let anyone see you do it. Same goes for the girl. We'll take the others down," Arthur said. He searched for Will and found him perched awkwardly in an elevated, recessed doorway to one of the buildings. It didn't give him much cover,
but as long as their opponents were sorcerers, cover was a dubious, fleeting thing. Arthur signalled for Will to target the sorcerer maintaining the shield. He wasn't sure if Will had understood, but the signals he'd given were standard.

"Ready?" Arthur glanced around for confirmation. He nodded at Merlin. "Do it."

There was barely a pause before Merlin said, "It's down."

"Scatter," Arthur ordered. He had a moment to appreciate the smug-turned-confused expression on the enemy sorcerer's face before following after Merlin.

They'd practiced this maneuver before, many, many times. Only, this time it had something of a twist in it. Instead of heading to either flank, they fanned out until they were spread apart at an equal distance from the other, advancing steadily.

"Hands on your head, knees on the ground," Arthur ordered.

"Go to hell," the sorcerer, second from the left, spat.

The gunshot was audible only after the sorcerer whipped back from the hit, crumpling to the ground. The two men who were on either side of him snapped out of their stupor long enough to realize what had just happened.

"Hands on your head, knees on the ground," Arthur repeated, keeping his voice steady. The two sorcerers exchanged long looks before slowly sinking onto their knees. The rest were still in their daze, though coming out of it too slowly to do anything about their advance.

Lamorak and Gareth repeated Arthur's order. Those who didn't comply were yanked to the ground roughly. None of them had any zip ties on their persons, but that wouldn't matter in a few minutes. Arthur expected that once he signaled the all-clear, the CIA would be all over this bunch.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Merlin continue to advance.

"Put your hands on your head and get on the ground," Merlin said firmly.

He was halfway to the girl when something round and solid flew through the air at Merlin. Arthur had seen Merlin avoid projectiles that moved faster than this, but Merlin didn't block whatever it was with his magic nor did he try to get out of its flight path until the last second. He dropped and rolled forward on his shoulder, stopping on one knee. His weapon was raised and aimed, but he didn't fire. Slowly, he raised his weapon, rose to his feet, and continued his approach.

Arthur secured one more sorcerer and left them to Lamorak and Gareth. He went after Merlin, moving on the diagonal and staying behind him. It didn't take long for Arthur to catch up; Merlin's forward motion was a little above a crawl.

"You do that again, and I'll shoot. I bet I'm a better aim than you are," Merlin said evenly. "I'm only going to say this one more time. Put your hands on your head and get on the ground."

From where he was, Arthur could see that the girl was barely in her twenties. She had straight brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Too much black eyeliner around small eyes. Her mouth was too wide for her face, powdered white with nerves, her cheeks sunken in, something of a hollow around her.

There was no doubt that she'd weathered the storm in a place that had been safe and secure, but she might have underestimated the duration of the storm itself and hadn't filled her hidey hole with
enough supplies. She wasn't tired, but she was hungry, and in that hunger there was a sort of desperation.

This attack was a mistake, Arthur knew. It was too soon. If the NWO knew that the CIA had offices and a command centre in a nearby building, they would have waited until the agents and soldiers were made complacent by a too-long lull of peace and quiet when the world was set to rights. The girl had broken protocol. She wasn't supposed to be here, not now. She had no backup -- those eight so-called sorcerers didn't count, and were in her age group, probably new recruits with only a rudimentary knowledge of the magic they now wielded. She was out of her league.

And she didn't know it.

Her eyes flashed orange-red, and something flew in the air from a different direction. Arthur got out of the way, but Merlin let himself be hit.

But not before he got off a shot.

The girl screamed. She stumbled and fell.

Merlin screamed. She stumbled and fell.

Merlin grunted from the impact with the hubcap, his arms knocked aside. He barely flinched, though. Arthur wondered if Merlin had cheated and had stopped the hubcap with his magic before it connected.

"Merlin?"

"'M all right. I'm pinching her off. She can't feel what I'm doing right now," Merlin said. His eyes weren't even gold. Maybe they sparkled a little.

Arthur didn't doubt what Merlin said for one second -- pain and blood had that effect on people. The girl was alternatingly holding her thigh and looking at the blood in her hands and screaming her damn head off. Arthur kept his gun trained on the girl while Merlin moved her onto her stomach with her hands behind her head, half-listening to his quiet reassurances that it's a flesh wound, you've probably gotten worse shaving your legs.

"Clear," Merlin said.

Arthur didn't have to signal Will to call in -- the American agents and soldiers had obviously been watching and waiting for this moment. They swarmed in like a massive cloud of honeybees, grabbing the seven subdued sorcerers behind them and dragging the body of the eighth away. Several more men came up to Arthur and Merlin, though they barely made eye contact or any acknowledgement whatsoever. Instead, they grabbed the girl and zip-tied her wrists with unnecessary roughness.

Arthur almost stepped in, but thought better of it. This was one of those situations where he needed to pick his battles, and he had a feeling that any conversation with Daly would be a nightmare. He watched quietly as the men gagged the girl to keep her from casting any spells, and tried not to think about the same thing happening to Merlin.

From the solemn, thoughtful expression on Merlin's face and the sour press of his lips, Arthur knew he wasn't alone in worrying that another capture and imprisonment -- this time by the very same people they were working for -- might be in Merlin's future.

The American agents moved away, dragging the girl along with them, but Merlin and Arthur stayed where they were, in no hurry to get to the CIA headquarters and taking every moment they could for a private conversation.
"You know," Merlin said, checking his gun and holstering it, watching with distaste as the girl was dragged away. "This feels like a setup."

"The first part of it was," Arthur said. He glanced over his shoulder. The road behind them was empty, and there weren't any sorcerers coming out of the woodwork as far as he could tell, but a few curtains in the nearby buildings shifted, and he saw more than one shadow cross the windows. "Blocking the road like that? A grenade launcher waiting for us at the other end? The sweep to come at us? Daly had plenty of time to let his boys know we were on our way, and they knew, or they would've fired a shot."

"What was the point, then?"

"They were testing us," Arthur said, and he didn't know what name to give the dirty sensation settling on his skin. Disgust? Annoyance? Insult? All of the three mixed together would do, because this had been a fucking waste of all their time. "The grenade launcher, that was them. The rest? I don't think they planned on the sorcerers."

Merlin made a noncommittal sound of agreement, looking up and down the road himself with narrowed eyes. "The NWO was bound to show up soon as they could to get whatever weapons they could. I'm more concerned that they knew where to get them, if that's where the CIA's storing the artefacts they haven't liberated to America."

Arthur snorted. They walked back to their SUV. Lamorak and Gareth were inspecting the vehicle, making certain it was still fit for the road. There were long scratches along the sides and the front end was somewhat crumpled but the damage appeared to have been limited to the front grill. Arthur expected that they wouldn't know if the engine had been affected until they popped the hood or drove a few hundred kilometres down the road. He made a mental note to send Daly the repair bill.

"They want us to drive up to the front," Gareth said, sliding into the driver's seat and turning the key. The engine came to life without hesitation, the initial roar ebbing to a gentle rumbling. "We're not going in there, are we?"

"Rather not," Will said, ambling over with the rifle held at the ready, as if he fully expected a second attack. "I got a good look in there from my last position. It's a jigsaw to get out on the other end, and both entrances can be blocked fast if they need to. We go in there, we're trapped. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel, and we're the fish."

Arthur considered. Staying outside the blockade was a show of distrust -- one that Daly and company well deserved. It also meant whoever stayed with the SUV and their equipment would be on their own and likely unprotected. He glanced at Merlin, who raised an eyebrow before shrugging, which was helpful. Arthur gestured for the team to get in the car. "We're going in. Gareth, park at the far end, block the exit from being shut on us. You'll stay with the car."

There was more than one smirking face watching them on their slow weave through the jigsaw barricade, confirming their suspicions that it had been an exercise to see how well they handled the situation, but there were also more than a handful of men -- soldiers, if the set of their shoulders was anything to go by -- with concern in their expressions. They couldn't have missed how the gunfire had stopped in mid-air, never hitting their targets, and they were no doubt wondering how it was that Excalibur had made it through. Arthur could come up with an explanation easily enough; the hardest part was making it believable.

They cleared the barricades in a few minutes. The staging area was three buildings wide and had two
command posts on either side of the road. At first count, Arthur spotted nearly two dozen men in the
enclosure, along with several others positioned on rooftops and in windows.

Gareth parked the SUV at a wedged angle on the far end of the enclosure, blocking the exit. A man
came up to the window and knocked, presumably to ask Gareth to clear the area, but everyone
ignored him.

"Here," Merlin said, passing out the communication earwigs. "Odds are the building's wired to block
signals, but don't worry about that, they'll work."

"Merlin, Lamorak, I want you with me inside. Will, stay with Gareth. Be your usual ebullient
arrogant self and give them shite if they try to move the SUV."

"Can do," Will confirmed, and the lack of protest made Arthur wonder. Maybe the trick of it was to
tell Will to do what came naturally -- that was something he would have to test at a later date.

Arthur passed out extra ammunition and exited the car.

A man in his late-forties, his hair slicked back and his expression pinched, came up to them. He wore
wrinkled dress trousers and a button-down shirt that had seen better days, the sleeves rolled up to the
elbows. His hands were shoved into his pockets and his elbows were nestled close to his body,
shoulders up to his ears to brace against the cold.

"Captain Pendragon, Director Daly is waiting for you inside. I'll take you there," he said. He didn't
look at either Merlin or Lamorak, which was telling; Daly had no idea who Arthur had with him.

Arthur didn't bother with introductions and followed the man toward the main building. It was in the
same nondescript brownstone as the rest of the street, the front a mixture of forbidding steel spike
fencing and quaint cobblestone walkway. They walked up the steps to the door, and --

Arthur felt something off. He glanced over his shoulder to see Merlin standing at the foot of the
steps, studying the building warily.

"What is it?"

Merlin didn't answer right away. He turned and stared at the cobblestones before making a show of
glancing around -- but Arthur knew that whatever was bothering Merlin, it wasn't in the open area.
"It could be nothing."

"I trust your instincts," Arthur said. "Tell me."

"The closer I get to the house, the more it feels like I'm suffocating. I don't think I should go in
there," Merlin said. His tone was halfway to angry, but closer to worried, and maybe even a little bit
afraid. Arthur suspected that Merlin didn't want to go into the brownstone because it reminded him of
his imprisonment, but at the same time, he couldn't discount that there was something wrong.

"Better to be safe than sorry, then. Stay here. Make sure Will doesn't cause an international incident,"
Arthur said, glancing over Merlin's shoulder at the SUV, where Will was loitering around the car and
already making a nuisance of himself with some of the soldiers approaching the SUV.

"Right. Give me the hardest job, yeah?" Merlin said, but he looked relieved. His eyes flicked up over
Arthur's shoulder to look at the building, and Arthur didn't miss the suppressed shudder.

"You can handle it." Arthur gave Merlin a curt nod. "If we're not out in twenty minutes, bring the
building down."
Merlin glanced over his shoulder once. Only the once.

On the surface, the brownstone building was unimpressive, bordering on an eyesore, blending in with the rest of the block. It was unassuming, non-threatening, and easily overlooked.

Under the surface, the brownstone building was a skeleton in someone's closet, the bones hanging from clear fishing line and rattling right next to the metal hangers, a secret kept and kept again over the years until the most recent residents had forgotten that it had a story to tell.

There were no wards painted on the walls, nothing cast into the foundation, no magical talisman or charm or artefact hanging from the doorways or the windowsills. It wasn't like the Pentagram.

It was like the NMZ.

Merlin couldn't put it into words. He wasn't even sure if he could. The NMZ defied description, and this building…

This building.

It echoed in Merlin's senses like a pulsing tribal drumbeat. His vision stretched and thinned and sharpened and blurred. He could smell the distinct tang of ozone and the suffocating undercurrent of burning coal that was decades old as surely as he could taste the dried blood and salty earth upon cold, sacrificial stone. He could hear the sound of chairs scraping on linoleum and the clatter of horses' hooves on cobblestone.

The building did not welcome the likes of him. Merlin was certain that he could enter, that he could manage the symptoms the building caused, just like he had managed in the NMZ. He had a feeling that, the closer he approached the core of the building, the more he would be putting himself -- Arthur, his team -- at risk. He wasn't certain how, or why, and he didn't much care, but he believed that as long as he didn't present a threat, Arthur and Lamorak would emerge intact and well.

Merlin didn't like leaving Arthur and Lamorak. Not when magic was ripe and rampant in the world again, not when they didn't know what kind of arsenal the CIA had at their disposal. But Arthur and Lamorak knew how to handle themselves around magic. And if nothing else...

*Bring the building down.*

Merlin could do that. He *would* do that.

He looked around him without being obvious about it. He verified the number of American soldiers and CIA agents. He fixed in his mind the positions of the men who paid him the most attention. He ran a hand through his hair and surreptitiously pressed a hand against his ear, listening to the quiet chatter as Arthur was led through the building. As long as the radio connection remained strong and steady, Merlin wouldn't worry.

Arthur knew what they needed, what they were looking for. He would know how to confirm that the package was real, and not some mock-up that the CIA had on hand to throw them off the trail. The only thing that Arthur couldn't do was verify if the package was functional. That was a task that was supposed to fall to Merlin, but that plan had changed. Merlin would test it when Arthur and Lamorak
emerged from the building with the package in their hands, and he would have to do it quickly and subtly. It would be harder to hide what he'd be doing when out in the open like this, with so many eyes watching.

The more he moved away from the building, the less it affected Merlin. The background buzz ebbed to complete silence; Merlin estimated that the bubble affecting the area was limited in size, that it was nothing like the wide-open NMZ they'd had to cross, where they'd nearly lost Arthur.

That was something Merlin didn't want to happen ever again. Bad enough that he relived that moment over and over in his nightmares -- nightmares he was certain would recur, considering that he'd allowed Arthur to walk in there without him.

Merlin consoled himself with the knowledge that Arthur wasn't alone -- Lamorak was one of the most level-headed people on the team. Arthur wasn't unprotected, either -- he was wearing a new pendant made by Kathy and bolstered with Merlin's magic, something that they worked on and used as a training exercise for Bran while the wards shielded the house. And, more importantly...

Merlin checked his watch. Nineteen minutes.

Up ahead, Gareth was lingering at the rear of the SUV, hands loose at his side, trying to look casual. A little off to the side was Will, chatting with some of the American blokes. Will's body language was relaxed, though he was waving his uninjured arm in the air as if compounding a point, and the man at the head of the triangle formation had his beefy arms crossed over his chest, his expression impassive.

Merlin raised a questioning brow at Gareth. "Problem?"

"Oh, yeah," Gareth said, nodding sharply. "They will, and I quote, shove that fucking thing up your goddamn asses if you don't move it out of the way right the fuck now. Will's just about gone and dared them to, now he's trying to talk them out of it."

Merlin shook his head. "We don't have time for this shite."

"You're the one with the rank to toss about," Gareth said with a shrug.

Merlin grunted. He walked over, but not before gesturing at the building. "Watch the clock. If they're not out in twenty, I'm going in."

Gareth looked as if he wanted to ask why Merlin wasn't already in there with Arthur and Lamorak, but the moment was lost when Merlin approached Will. There were four Americans around him -- three who carried themselves like soldiers, the fourth a spindly-looking man with long limbs and a lean torso who was probably a suit of some sort. They were wearing heavy jackets against the wind, the collars flipped up, and, except for the large man at the forefront, they were all standing loose and ready, just looking for an excuse.

"Will," Merlin said, stopping next to him. Will didn't startle, but he turned his body toward Merlin, waving a hand in his direction.

"... and if you have a problem with that, take it up with my CO," Will said.

Merlin had the feeling that he really should know what it was that Will had just told the Americans to do, but he had other, pressing concerns at the moment, and none of them could afford to be distracted by a schoolyard squabble right now.

The large bloke with the crossed arms turned his steely gaze to Merlin, already dismissing Will now
that he had someone with some authority to badger. He unfolded his arms, but not without shrugging his shoulders the way a dog’s hackles would rise, making himself look bigger and more menacing, and there was stern command in his voice when he said, "You're compromising the site security --"

"How's it feel?" Merlin asked.

The man stopped speaking. "What?"

"I asked, How's it feel? Compromised site security and all. Because I'm thinking to myself your sort doesn't experience a whole lot of that, but anyone else is fair game when you've got a bit of a bore looming. We were coming to a secure site. You knew we were coming. You slammed the gates on us. You bloody well torched us," Merlin said, keeping his tone flat, letting his eyes slide over to the tall, spindly man who was using the soldier as a shield. "So, I'll ask again. Third time's a charm. How's it feel?"

The man didn't answer. A flicker of uncertainty crossed his features, but it didn't stay long. He gestured toward the SUV. "Move it back or move it out. I don't care what you do --"

"That little party trick you pulled on us earlier? The one where you shoved that car in our way when we were about halfway through the blocks?" Merlin asked, taking a step closer. The man might be half again Merlin's breadth, but he wasn't taller, and he was quite done with being shoved around. "I don't suppose you've got the same setup on this side, too."

"What of it?"

Merlin made a rude piss off gesture and said, "How about you perch yourselves on a watch point and give the signal to slam the gates shut if the undesirables make their way through? How do you think that'll do, taking care of site security?"

The man side-eyed the lanky man on his left and received a half-hearted shrug in return.

"You don't give us orders," the soldier said.

"Then go talk to someone who does, because this isn't a dick-measuring contest. You want site security? Well, I want my team's equipment and route secured," Merlin said. He turned away, gesturing for Will to follow him.

There might have been a moment where the soldier would have grabbed Merlin to bark more orders in his face, but it came and went, the burning wick of the bomb fizzling out like a dud. Merlin walked back to Gareth, checking his watch. The exchange hadn't taken more than a few minutes, but Merlin was already feeling antsy.

"That was quick," Gareth said. "What did you do?"

"Told them where to shove it," Merlin said through gritted teeth. That wasn't what he'd done, not exactly, but Gods, had he ever wanted to.

"Gets me right horny when you do that, though I'd hoped you'd smack them about a bit with that foul mouth of yours. You could've gone dirtier than dick-measuring contest," Will said, his tone cheerful.

"Could've," Merlin said, turning around to look when he heard the sound of an engine rumbling and coming in their direction. No one was alarmed or gearing up for battle, so Merlin assumed that whoever it was, they were expected. He nodded at Will. "Could've, but think of it this way. They're trapped here, like as not, and if it comes to war, we'd like them on our side, yeah?"
Will grudgingly made a noise of agreement, but he thumbed over his shoulder at the big bloke who'd
done most of the talking earlier. "Not that one, though. Bit of an arse, you ask me."

"He's following orders, like as not. He's probably a lovely bloke, really," Merlin said, leaning against
the SUV's rear bumper. He watched the new arrival pull up close to the brickwork building. It was a
four-door Lexus that might have been sleek, once, before the apocalypse came knocking on their
door. There were two broken passenger-side windows, the rear windshield was peppered with bullet
holes, and the shiny paint job was tacky and splotchy and peeling off, as if it had been on the wrong
side of a flamethrower.

"You're too nice for your job," Will said, turning to rest his good shoulder against the SUV. He was
less obvious than Merlin, but he was watching the newcomers, too.

"Who do you suppose they are?" Gareth asked. "More suits or spooks?"

Two men emerged. One was of average height and average build, with shaggy light brown hair and
a rugged jaw. The other was short and squat, built like a cannonball, his hair dark.

They were both dressed in canvas trousers with a multitude of pockets for tools and other assorted
items for the hiking trail. The shorter man was wearing a dark green jumper over a black turtleneck;
the taller man had gone for a T-shirt under a button-down under a jumper that had seen better days, if
the tears in the elbows and the blood down the front was any sign. There was a gun in a holster
clipped to the waist of one, but nothing on the other, unless one counted the hip bulge covered by the
oversized hoodie.

Merlin didn't recognize either of them.

"Well, fuck me sideways," Will said, standing up straight. He stuck his fingers into his mouth and
whistled sharply, getting the newcomers' attention, and called out, "Batman, get your arse over here.
We need to have us a chat about playing hard to get."

The tall man glanced at his companion; he said a few short words before gesturing toward the
brownstone. The cannonball half-walked, half-waddled up the stairs before disappearing inside, and
Adam West made certain that his friend had shut the door behind him before approaching Will,
Merlin and Gareth.

West wasn't handsome in the classical sense. There was something just a bit off about him. His teeth
were just a little too rounded and pointed, like a carnivore's, his hair was just the wrong shade to be
called blond. He didn't seem right in his own skin, though he moved with deliberate ease, graceful
and careful and tense like a spring ready to pounce.

"Will Kendrick," West said, acknowledging Will with dismissal, his attention fixed first on Gareth,
than Merlin. Merlin felt Gareth standing up next to him almost protectively. "Who are they?"

"Now, now, what do you take me for? Some rotten punker who's never played the game before?
You, first, Batman. Take the gloves off, make yourself comfortable. What do we really call you?"
Will asked, cradling the butt of his rifle in the crook of his arm like a gunslinger eager to swing it up,
aim, fire.

West smiled, big and broad, his teeth suddenly points. Gareth took a sharp breath and Merlin
blinking, and in the next moment, the smile was less predatory and as normal as anyone's. Merlin
hadn't sensed any magic, but there was no way that hadn't been some sort of an illusion.

West held out his hand to Gareth, who was closest. When he spoke, it was with a low, guttural
rumble that reverberated with a sound that was nearly as blistering as a bass cymbal crash. It made Merlin's ears ring, and he almost missed the pleasant, normal-volume, "Any friend of Will's."

"And by that I take it to mean I'm on your shite list," Gareth said, but he nodded his head and gave his name. "You must be Adam West. I'm Gareth Mallory."

Adam.

Adam.

That was not the name that Merlin heard.

West turned to Merlin, raising polite eyebrows. His expression was full of *I don't really care, that's not what I'm here for*, and all Merlin saw when Adam held out his hand were long, cutting claws. "And you are?"

Deep in Merlin's soul, he heard all sorts of alarm bells clanging, the lights flashing a blinking red warning, warning, warning. And yet, he didn't feel as if he was the one who should be afraid.

West had the sort of presence of being that Merlin had seen in many men before. It was there in the set of his shoulders, pushed back with an air of overconfidence. It was there in the way he stood with his feet just a little bit wider than shoulder-width, as if compensating for a greater weight. It was there in the way he'd walked over to join them, in that catlike grace and the forward-balance of his stride.

"Tell me again," Merlin said, curling up tightly against Arthur on the bed. It was a cold night, and without power to keep them from freezing, they had two choices -- snuggle closer together under a massive pile of blankets, or join the others in the main room, soaking up the warmth from fireplace and sharing body heat. Merlin wasn't ready to give in and go downstairs like Arthur suggested. He liked this. This sort-of-quiet where the two of them were the only ones left in the world.

Arthur huffed, his breath ruffling the hair on the top of Merlin's head, but warming him all the same. His arm tightened around Merlin's waist, and if there was a way to conceivably get closer without using magic, Merlin would have thought of it by now. Instead, he pulled the blankets up, because as long as he lay on Arthur's chest, Arthur was probably freezing to death.

Not that he complained.

"You're like a four-year old kid whining for a bedtime story, and I've already read this one eighteen times," Arthur said.

"I didn't get to see the bloody dragons, did I?" Merlin scowled.

"Technically, you've seen one," Arthur said. "Kilgarrah, yeah?"

"Can't picture him as a flying reptile," Merlin said.

"Wrinkly face, all those lines?" Arthur asked, pulling his arm from under the blankets to wave in the air.

"You're letting the warm air out," Merlin snapped. He shifted his position until he was firmly against Arthur, and arranged the blankets on top of them properly. The storm was battering against his shield, but as long as Merlin kept himself busy doing something, he could convince himself that he wasn't slowly being driven insane. Then, conciliatorily, he said, "Fine, I'll agree that in the right
light, maybe all those lines could transmute into a lizard face."

"Don't be speciesist," Arthur said, but his reproach was mild. "Call a dragon a dragon."

"Or it'll eat me?" Merlin asked, snorting.

"In Kilgarrah's case, he'll probably suffocate you with cigarette smoke," Arthur said, pressing a kiss on Merlin's forehead. "I don't know about the rest of them, though. I don't even know how many there are or what they're doing or whose side they're really on. Also, I can't feel my toes. If I tell you the story again, do you suppose we could go downstairs?"

Kilgarrah was a confirmed dragon. Arthur suspected Colonel Mandrake, but Merlin didn't know Mandrake well enough to pick out any particular quirk that could be called dragonesque. Merlin thought that Colonel Locher, his old mentor in the cryptography department, might be a dragon, too, because he was just too canny for words, sometimes, but Arthur had never met the man, and Merlin was probably seeing zebras where there were horses, anyway.

But this man...

Merlin took West's hand in a grip he couldn't get out of, not easily. "Mister Knucker, it's nice to meet you. Can I call you Zach? Or do you prefer Zachariah?"

West's eyes widened. He took a step back. He wrenched his hand out of Merlin's grasp, but Merlin wasn't letting go.

"Emrys," West hissed.

And there they were again, those too-round teeth, those sharp edges, the claws.

Behind Merlin, Gareth took a deep breath. Will muttered, Fuck me.

West's eyes blazed gold and Merlin felt his magic lash out and respond in kind, deflecting whatever it was that West had been about to do, tearing them aside --

Time froze.

West wrenched his hand free. He took a step back. His face contorted, extended, extruded; his body stretched, shifted, puls ed --

Merlin wasn't one of those who could see a person's aura, not like Kathy, but he could see magic, sometimes, like he had been able to see the storm tearing London apart, the way he had seen the magic surrounding Freya before Freya had been consumed by it. Right now, he saw a bloody dragon.

It filled West's shadow, all sinuous and mottled brown-yellow-grey scale, wings unfurling like the cascade of curtains rippling in the wind, clawed knuckles and sheer, fibrous membrane that shimmered in a glitter-gold of magic. It was distant, but coming closer, sweeping down like a bird of prey, its talons extended and ready to grab on, to capture --

And West was changing, his limbs longer and thicker, his torso pulled along an intransient impossibility of quantum mechanics, because all the laws of physics were being broken and conservation of mass was a reality only because of a shift of dimensions --

He was filling the staging area, overwhelming it. Cement barriers scraped as West's wings stretched
out. Soldiers trapped in static pose were toppled over. Agents milled about in the square, just barely missed by the sharp edge of a wing membrane, oblivious to the events that were occurring right before their eyes, trapped in a microsecond.

West continued to change in shape, to grow in size. He wasn't going to be as tall as the brownstone building, but he was long and broad, and his wings could easily take up the entire length of the secured block.

There would be no hiding that. There would be no protecting anyone from any harm done if West decided to stomp around as if he were the Second Coming of Godzilla.

"Stop," Merlin roared.

The command was low, guttural, bone-wrenching. To speak the word was to suffer a blow to the chest, and he was nearly knocked back by his own order. There was power in his voice, a power that made his magic retreat in obeisance, a power that made Weset still and stop as if his very life depended on it.

"Change back," Merlin said. His throat was scratchy, as if he'd chewed on nails and swallowed them dry, but it didn't hurt. Not really. It was strange, like a weight had settled on his shoulders --

-- and the Dignity bowed before him, fifty dragons strong, one from every Clan around the world, each and every one accepting his word as Law, for he was their Dragonlord. And, as one, they reared back, their wings unfurled, and let out a great, sonorous cry. It was the call for battle, the thunder of war, and they would wreck and rend asunder as only they could, knowing as no one else could know that it was in the aftermath of destruction that they would find peace, that they would attain balance. From this point forward, they would be called a Rage --

West's breath was heated, heavy with a taint of sulphur. His wings fluttered, but he didn't move. Slowly, ever so slowly, his mouth pulled back, showing two rows of teeth, one behind the other, sharper than the first. His eyes narrowed, the yellow glint of his gaze twinkling out, and the raised hackles of scale on the back of his head and down his neck stood up all the more.

In challenge.

"Goddamn it, I am not having a conversation with a giant winged gecko," Merlin shouted. "Change back, Zachariah!"

And, just like that, West collapsed. It was a matter of mere heartbeats before he attained his smaller size. The wings disappeared, the scales were absorbed behind soft flesh, the claws retreated. His eyes shone gold before fading, the slit pupil rounding, a second membrane, blinking sideways, disappearing completely. Only those two awkward rows of teeth remained, sharp and triangular, like a shark's, before it was gone. He stood naked and unblemished and unabashedly human before rectifying his current state with a wave of his hand to dress himself in the repaired remnants of his clothes.

Weset was a few metres away, as if he'd never turned into a large beast who had taken up the entire staging area and nearly flattened several human beings and knocked over several barricades, one car, and one wrought-iron fence. His chest heaved as if he'd run a marathon, and he was tense -- so tense, Merlin could hear the springs creaking, just about ready to snap.

He worked his jaw as if chewing something unpleasant, his expression contorting into refusing to swallow it -- like a child refusing to take the castor oil that his mum shoved down their throat. Merlin knew that sensation -- he knew that look very well. West was a man -- a dragon, Merlin reminded
himself, and *what the fuck* -- who had just had his arse handed to him all wrapped up in a bow, and he struggled between accepting it and trying for another go.

If anything, at the core, beneath all that anger, Merlin thought that Weset was surprised that he had obeyed at all.

Merlin wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Whatever had happened, whatever he'd done, he'd figure it out later. For now, he was going to press his advantage.

"So," he said, clearing his throat and taking a deep breath in an effort to still his frantically-beating heart, "The Americans have dragons pulling their strings, too."

West didn't answer. He exhaled heavily; the air between them heated up. It was as if they were sitting in a dry sauna. As long as they stood here, outside of time, the heat had nowhere to go.

"What's your play, though? What do you have planned?" Merlin asked.

West looked around slowly, taking in their surroundings. His expression didn't change when he saw the people who were down on the ground, those who were off their feet, frozen in mid-action. He didn't blink at the shattered barricades or the upturned vehicles. The only sign that he was aware of the situation he was in and the shitestorm that would arise once Merlin dropped the time-freeze was the faintest clench of his jaw.

"I can do this all day, mate," Merlin said, sounding calmer than he felt. "Leave you like this. You'll have no way out."

"You assume that your power is greater than mine," West said flatly, disinterested.

"So, why are you still here?" Merlin asked, sweeping an arm around. As he did, he caught sight of Will -- he was frozen, his body twisted, reaching for a weapon. Merlin made a mental note to stay clear of Will when he dropped the time freeze. "I mean. You can turn into a dragon. Could conceivably squish me dead if you wanted to. But you stopped. Why?"

Wedset turned, his eyes flickering between human-brown and reptilian-yellow. "You -- you're not supposed to be here."

"Yeah," Merlin said, exhaling. He kept his hands at his side, willing the tension to ease in his shoulders, and tried to look non-threatening. West was vibrating with restrained energy, coiled as if about to pounce or attack. Merlin didn't want to give him an excuse. "I noticed that. Mind telling me what that's about?"

In answer, West turned towards the building. It told Merlin absolutely nothing.

"What's going on in there?" Merlin asked, frowning. He ignored the spike of panic. *Arthur's in there. Lamorak* -- "The other bloke with you. Another dragon, yeah? You sent him on ahead. Why? What is he going to do?"

"What are you doing here, *Emrys*?" Adam asked. He twisted his body in a movement that shouldn't be human -- and of course, it wasn't. He took a step closer. His hands were in his pockets, his head was inclined to the side. "What does Pendragon want so badly? What is the *package* he insisted on? Why here? Why now?"

Merlin frowned. "What?"

West lumbered forward, the lightness of his step gone, replaced by a heavy grace that threatened to
crush Merlin if he didn't respond. "What. Is. The. Package?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"His death is assured if you don't," Weset said. His eyes blinked yellow before fading into the dark of brown, and the cold wash of fear running down Merlin's spine had everything to do with the promised threat hanging between them.

"And he's dead if I do," Merlin said softly. West loomed closer, no taller in this shape than Merlin, and Merlin had to force himself not to give the dragon any ground.

West answered with a rumbling sound of agreement. "It doesn't matter to me. If he lives, if he dies. The world does not need him. It only ever needed you."

Merlin bristled, his anger rising. West was threatening to hurt Arthur. It sounded like it was going to happen no matter what Merlin did. He wanted to abandon West, to run into the building that he'd so quickly scurried away from, to find Arthur and Lamorak and to save them. But he also wanted -- he needed -- to know why the dragon was so adamant to know the how and the why even though no answer would ever satisfy him. He warred with himself, biting his lower lip, glancing at the brickwork building with growing anxiety. "I don't -- I don't understand."

This time, Weset's huff of breath came with an acrid cough reminiscent of Kilgarrah's perpetual chain-smoking. Kilgarrah's dragon-breath was tame in comparison to West's, though, and Merlin's eyes watered.

"Are you so stupid that you don't see Pendragon for what he is? For what he will do? You need to leave, Emrys, before he kills you."

Merlin stared.

His heartbeat was loud in his ears.

"He wouldn't," Merlin breathed. "He…"

West's eyes were cold, distant, alien. He might pass as a human in this shape, but he didn't have a human heart, he didn't have human emotions. Whatever he was doing, it was with the complete detachment of a creature who had lived through an age and had lived an eternity without the Balance.

Whatever that was.

Kilgarrah had explained the dragons' agenda to Arthur. Something about a prophecy and history repeating itself, only, they meant to ensure that it didn't muck up like it did the last time. Arthur had tried to make sense of Kilgarrah's vague riddles and had shared the story with Merlin. And Merlin…

West stood in front of him with a tremble that Merlin could only describe as nervous, if he dared assign human emotions to a creature who had probably been alive well before homo erectus ever evolved. Merlin saw a dragon desperate to do whatever it could do to ensure that the current Age of Magic didn't come to a premature end.

"What do you think he's here for?" Merlin asked.

"Perhaps when you know, you will see him for what he really is, Emrys. Perhaps knowing will make you see the truth." West's eyes gleamed. He made a rude sound that Merlin didn't bother interpreting, and said, "They found a stone, decades ago. The Americans spirited it away before
archival; few, if any, know that it exists. They meant to study it, to learn from it, but this stone has made stronger men into lesser men. That they return it now, of all times, it's a sign."

"A little less cryptic and a little more plain English," Merlin said, impatient. He clenched his fists, magic dancing around them.

West glanced down. He rocked back on his heels, apprehensive. "Pendragon convinced them to bring it here."

Merlin blinked. He tried to speak, but he couldn't -- his chest clenched in overwhelming fear even as his heart scolded him for thinking, even for a moment, that Arthur could be involved in anything. "Uther," he said.

"Pendragon," West said again, insistent. The name was a curse on his lips, the cause and the blame Merlin ignored him. "The stone. What does it do?"

"It doesn't do anything. It's a source of power --"

Merlin's blood ran cold. He had a flashback to the prototype testing ground in France. The wide open field with random obstacles positioned to act as deflectors. The electronics used as targets to test the efficiency of the so-called "directional EMP". The schematics he'd gone over with Gwen, over and over. The instructions he'd given to help the team set up a bomb to destroy it. The tingling sensation on his skin when he realized that he'd been made a target, whether intentionally or not, and how it had shut him off as easily as someone would flick a light switch to darken a room.

The power source had burned itself out. It hadn't been able to handle more than a single charge. But that single, temporary charge had nullified Merlin's magic -- or had broken the connection to his magic, Merlin wasn't sure -- for weeks.

He'd wondered the extent of the damage that a modernized artefact could do if it had the right power source. Now, he was terrified to think that the power source even existed.

"You think Arthur is here for this artefact," Merlin said bluntly, flatly, cold, too horrified to do anything but to speak plainly. "He's here for a package. An information packet. You stupid fuck. Arthur isn't out to destroy magic. He's trying to save us all."

"Pendragon," West repeated, his tone full of spite and hatred.

"He's not his father!" Merlin roared.

The world trembled. It shifted out of phase. The earth shivered under Merlin's feet; the air buzzed, the buildings jiggled as if made out of gelatine. West took a step away, his heel catching on a crack in the ground, and he fell on the ground, his arms up to defend himself against --

Against Merlin.

And, just like that, they were out of the time freeze. Will finished his movement and aimed his weapon at where West had been a second ago, but adjusting for the change in target without even startling at how West had moved several metres away in the blink of an eye. Gareth took a step closer, already changing his stance to put his back to Merlin's, ready to defend them from the Americans. And, all around them, life continued as normal -- soldiers paced the length of the staging area, a woman in a wrinkled pencil dress came out of the brownstone building, lighting up a cigarette before she reached the bottom of the steps. Startled people picked themselves up, unsure how they'd fallen, and soldiers stared in consternation at the broken barricades.
Merlin moved, closing the distance between him and West. He grabbed the dragon's shirt, pulling him up like a misbehaving dog — Merlin thought he should not be able to manhandle a creature that was nearly as big as a house so easily, but he didn't think, he couldn't, not if Arthur was in any danger.

"He's not his father," Merlin repeated. "And I swear... Not even the Gods will be able to stop me. If you hurt Arthur, if you kill him, I'm going to..."

He trailed off. A white-hot rage boiled deep in his bones.

"Fuck your precious Balance. Fuck dragons and their fucking games." Merlin shoved West away from him, standing up. He looked at the brownstone building. It was foreboding and unimposing all at once, with quaint window draping and a heavy, scratched front door.

*Bring the building down.*

"If you hurt Arthur, Zachariah," Merlin said. "I'll burn down the world."

ooOOoo

Arthur did not miss Lamorak's very significant look as they crossed the threshold of the building. He'd noticed it, too.

The heavy steel door that had been disguised as a regular, run-of-the-mill front door, easily purchased at the nearest home improv store. The door had been painted and distressed and painted again into something resembling a mixture of cheap plasterboard on top of sturdy wood. The half-moon window at the top had been moulded in "plastic", but was cleverly-disguised carved metal, and the clear panel at the top was three inches of bulletproof glass.

The front landing was a narrow corridor that appeared to have been built around the metal detector, though it was more likely that the metal detector had been built to suit. It pinged and beeped at their entrance, the volume increasing as they were shuttled through.

The inner door was more conventional, though it was unusual in that it was solid wood. It was heavy, and it bore down on the hinges drilled into sturdy blocks that shaped the frame. There was no glass on this door, nothing except for a peephole, and the security extended to several deadbolts that looked to be electronically triggered.

The carved etchings along the doorframe, as if done by a sculpting knife, drawn with a careful hand, the wood smooth around the edges. They weren't new, but they weren't old, either; someone had put the symbols on the doorframe sometime in the last twenty years.

There was a throw carpet beyond the second threshold, wrinkled and lumpy, as if someone had hastily placed it there to cover up more symbols carved onto the floor. Arthur and Lamorak hadn't been meant to see it, but the sigil was there as plain as day -- some sort of curlicue spiral with ribbons that led the eye away from the central knot, where the lines curled and twisted in some sort of fractal pattern that probably meant something. Even if Arthur could see the entire mark -- and it wasn't only *carved* into the dark wood floor, he noted, but *burned* -- he wouldn't be able to tell anyone what it stood for, never mind what it would do.

Arthur wished that Merlin was there with him, but if Merlin said something was wrong with the
They would make do without Merlin.

They had to make do without Merlin, because it wasn't until after Arthur crossed the half-hidden sigil carved on the floor that he understood what Merlin had sensed from outside.

The building was dead.

There were no sounds. No echoes. The air was stale.

Arthur was reminded of the old trunk that he'd found in one of the base buildings, before Uther left the military and founded his business. It was ancient -- he'd only been four years old at the time, and everything had seemed ancient to him -- with old, worn leather buckles and travel stickers from all over the world. It had been bumped and dinged and dented, the corners were reinforced with brass, and there were hints that someone had tried to jimmy the lock, because the lock was scratched up, but not broken.

It hadn't been locked. It had been empty, too, except for scraps of torn paper and bobby pins. Too large to squeeze through the attic door, too large to have been brought in -- it was an incongruity that had stuck with him ever since, and this place made him think of it now.

This brownstone was part of a block of houses that couldn't be more than fifty years old -- maybe sixty, at a push. If Arthur had to guess, it might have been built after the Blitz, replacing whatever had been on this spot before the war. It definitely wasn't old enough to smell like this, to have this vibe of complete, utter wrongness. Of emptiness. Of a void.

There was a shroud cleverly hidden inside the building. It was mourning veil over a mirror and a thick, silk barrier blocking magic, life, everything.

Lamorak coughed. Arthur swallowed hard. He understood, now, what Merlin had meant when he'd said that he felt as if he was being suffocated.

"Oh, that's the building," their guide said, noticing that they'd slowed down to linger in the front entrance. He gave them a look full of sympathy but it didn't quite fit on his face.

"The building?" Lamorak asked.

"Mothballs, maybe," the man said, shrugging.


Bollocks.

The runic marks on the doorframe, the witchcraft sigil on the floor -- any questions that Excalibur might have had about the Americans and their use of magic? They were answered now, and in exquisite detail. The Directory had told them, yes, they have their own sorcerers, but it was different, to see it and know it with their own eyes.

"Yeah, there's a running gag that they used mothballs to insulate the place when it was built. You get
"used to it," the man said. He chuckled humourlessly, and rubbed his arms to warm himself. Goose flesh appeared on his skin, and he shivered. "I should've worn a coat."

"Should wear one anyway. It feels colder in here than out there," Lamorak said, jerking his head to indicate the outdoors. He didn't take his eyes from the man, though, and shifted his stance slightly, as if bracing for something. His tone, though, didn't change, remaining friendly. "What's your name, by the way? I don't think I caught it."

"Graham," the man said, his mouth quirking in a small smile. He gestured toward one of the corridors just past the stairs, walking in that same direction without waiting for them. "Director Daly's in the back."

Arthur considered calling Graham back and to tell him to bring Daly to them, but Graham was already down the corridor, and the building was emptier than he'd thought it would be. He nodded to Lamorak, and led the way.

There were more examples of magic the further they went. Sketches of symbols on pieces of parchment paper stapled or pinned to faded wallpaper dating the building back to the 1940s. Chalk numbers in Roman numeral script on the wall next to a door at the far end of the corridor. Dried hemlock and mistletoe braided together and stretched across the ceiling in a zigzag pattern. The eerie feeling of complete silence was made all the more potent by a low-level thrumming that was more and more audible. It felt like a generator, of some sort, or a ventilation fan -- Arthur wasn't sure which.

Graham led them into a cluttered room. There were books on the shelves, books on the floor, file folders on every available surface, cardboard boxes on top of cardboard boxes doubling as tables and cabinets. The old sofa -- a velvety thing in faded purple with knobby paw-shaped feet -- had been pushed against the curtains, effectively pinning them against the window and keeping anyone from looking inside. There were two people sitting on the floor, wearing jeans and heavy jumpers, their heads bowed over whatever reading material was in their hands, barely paying attention to their arrival. Arthur thought he heard them humming softly.

There was a closed door on the other end of the room. Graham knocked lightly before entering without waiting for an invitation, holding the door open behind him. Like the sitting room, the next room was heavily cluttered, except where there were books and papers in one, there were books, papers, and assorted knick knacks in the other. Most of the shelves, the window, and the free wall space were covered by maps of one sort or another, and each was decorated with coloured stickers or pins, depending on where they were positioned. Strings covered the walls, too, making connections.

Robert Daly was sitting behind a broad desk, tapping hurriedly on a keyboard. Another man -- Arthur recognized him as the analyst, Baker, who had accompanied Daly at the command centre -- sat at the end, hunched over a laptop. They both looked up when Arthur and Lamorak walked in, and suddenly, the room was overcrowded.

"Thank you, Graham," Daly said, and there was a soft click behind them when Graham shut the door as he left.

Before Daly could say anything more, Arthur asked, "I'd think that director of the CIA would be at the Pentagon, not overseas where he can't get a handle on things."

"Assistant Director," David Baker said. Daly gave him a withering look, but Baker only shrugged. "He likes to drop the assistant part when he's overseas. Makes him sounds more important."

"Thank you," Daly said, his tone heavy with frost. He turned to Arthur and said, "They don't need
me at home."

"I didn't realize the situation in the United States was under control," Arthur said. The few news reports that they had been able to obtain despite the blackout had only compounded the worsening situation worldwide. Britain wasn't the only country affected. Most major city centres on every continent were undergoing ever-worsening situations -- lootings and riots that dwindled until there wasn't anything left to loot, with the riots escalating in violence. The uncertain weather was also wreaking havoc regardless of location on the landmass. At least one major earthquake had hit the North American east coast, while a string of hurricanes barreled down the Atlantic side. A tsunami had crashed all through Asia, and except for Japan, Australia and New Zealand, there was no word on how the other, smaller, countries had fared. China had completely closed its borders, and no one wanted to talk about Korea or India.

International travel had stalled, and not only because most ports of call weren't running or because the travel advisories had more to say about the actual act of traveling than the destination. Arthur didn't have to wonder how Daly and Baker were in England. The likelihood that they'd been here all along was high.

"It's not," Daly said, shaking his head. He stood up from his chair; the seat rolled backward until it hit the wall behind him. He bowed his head and sorted through a stack of papers on his desk, pausing to scratch his head when he couldn't find what he was looking for. "I'm more useful here."

Arthur glanced at Lamorak. They hadn't talked about this, and normally, Arthur worked with Leon or Perceval, and, lately, with Merlin. It wasn't easy to jump into a situation where one needed to improvise off the cuff, and it was harder still when they'd never been in this situation before. But Lamorak was a sensible bloke with a cutting sense of humour, and the only question was whether he'd pick up the hint Arthur was trying to give.

He did. Lamorak raised a brow and shrugged, as if to say, why not. Arthur nodded, mostly to himself, and decided to jump into it feet-first, since they were short on time, and he didn't want to leave Merlin and Gareth outside any longer than he had to.

Will could loiter for a while. He didn't seem the sort to mind being left behind as long as he had a way to catch up to them.

Arthur turned to Daly.

"So, you're Bayard's American counterpart," Arthur said, his tone mild.

Daly's head snapped up so fast that Arthur heard the crack of spine. Baker stopped what he was doing on the laptop and stared at Arthur with wide, alarmed eyes.

"Bayard?" Daly asked, his body language changing ever-so-slightly under forced relaxation. His feigned confusion was believable, but Baker had obviously not been trained for subterfuge. Baker's open-mouth fish imitation stole away from Daly's award-winning act when Daly said, "I'm not familiar with the name. Should I know --"

"We call ours the Directory. Reports directly to the Queen. What do you call yours? Do you report directly to the President, or is it like Area 51? If he doesn't know, he can still claim…" Lamorak looked at Arthur. "Plausible deniability. Is that what it's called?"

"That's what it's called," Arthur said, giving Lamorak a confirming nod.

"Plausible deniability. That way, when the shite hits the fan, and boy, has it ever," Lamorak said,
rolling his eyes and making an exaggerated head-tilt toward the shuttered window. "He can make a State of the Union address and say, I don't know what the fuck is going on, and it'll be true?"

Daly sat down slowly, shaking his head. His brow furrowed. His tone was almost thoughtful when he said, "I had no idea that he'd told you this much."

"Does it matter? I'm not here for that. The package," Arthur said, sounding more patient than he was. "I want my package."

"Pendragon --"

"If you're going to give me some bollocks about not having it, or not knowing what I'm talking about, save it. If you're cobbling together completely useless, redacted files, again, don't bother. I gave you a very specific request. Where's my package?" Arthur asked.

"Files?" Daly asked, confused. He exchanged glances with Baker before shaking his head. "I'm not sure if they shipped the files with the package. But it's not ready for transport. We're stabilizing it now."

Arthur's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Baker blurted out, "The Salem Contingency. SC for short."

Arthur looked at Baker. Baker wrung his hands; under the bluish fluorescent lights of the room, his fingers were long and bony, almost skeletal.

"Salem," Arthur said. He wasn't an expert on American history, but he'd at least heard about the Salem witch trials. It seemed odd that this was the name they would go with -- unless the contingency was that whatever had happened in Salem shouldn't happen again. It wouldn't be the first time that the history books told the story from the side of the victors, and when the victors were Hell-bent on ensuring that the end of the world didn't happen, ever again, it wasn't difficult to enact a cover up while they were at it, too. "This sort of thing happened before."

"Not like this," Baker said, shaking his head. "Seriously. Not like this at all --"

"David," Daly said, his tone warning.

"No," Baker said, pointing a finger at the director. He moved his arm to gesture at Arthur. "They know, Bobby. They know. They know the Directory, they know Bayard, they --"

"Just because they know a few names, it doesn't mean they know," Daly said, raising his eyebrows meaningfully. The message he was trying to convey with the wriggle of his eyebrows was obvious -- shut up.

"Oh, you mean about the NWO?" Arthur asked. He shrugged. "We know they're not just a terrorist organization."

"More an evil sorcerer's club," Lamorak said. "The magic tricks are cute, but the blood and the gore gets boring after a while."

Arthur glanced at Lamorak, but decided that, technically, that was true. He turned back to Daly, looking down at him before crossing the open space to the desk. He leaned forward, putting his hands on the file folders and papers, and glared down at the assistant director.

"You set us up out there. You wanted to see how we'd react. Did we pass your test? Because I'm
pretty sure we passed your test, before. Back when you manipulated our superiors into going after the Witchfinder's people. You know what we are and what we do, and I'm going to say this: you wasted our time and yours." Arthur paused. "But I'll grant you that maybe, just maybe, you didn't know about the sorcerers walking arm-in-arm down the road, and that's why you hung back and watched instead of enacting countermeasures. I'll guess that you're a little light on CIA-recruited sorcerers or you were caught with your pants down."

From Daly's expression, it was something of a combination of the two.

Arthur was quiet for a very long time. He'd expected that the NWO would come out of the woodworks as soon as the storm settled down. He'd discounted the sorcerers who had approached the staging area because he'd thought, at first, that maybe they were there to try to find supplies. He was quickly re-evaluating the situation, because the NWO had shown themselves capable of the impossible. He hadn't known that this CIA safehouse would weight heavy with the magic until Merlin had warned him, and there was only one explanation for the sorcerers attacking the safehouse in the first place.

"This is a repository, isn't it? There wouldn't be the protections there are on this place if it wasn't something big."

Neither Daly nor Baker spoke, but they exchanged telling glances.

"How long do you think you'll have before they'll come marching to the door? How long before they'll break it down to get whatever it is you think they're after?" Arthur paused. "And just what are they after, Director Daly? What's in the package? Is there something in those files --"

"We don't have them," Baker said, desperate. "There are no files. Even if we did, they'd be encrypted and we wouldn't have the key. The package is classified above my pay grade --"

"Do you think anyone gives two flaming pink bollocks about pay grades right now?" Lamorak asked. "Bloody end of the world, it is, only, no one will know it's coming until it hits."

Arthur stared at Daly for a long, long time. The strained silence in the room was a welcome respite from the silence that veiled the building. "You don't have any files."

"No," Daly said. The word was filled with such regret that Arthur knew it was an honest answer.

"You don't need any files," Arthur said. He didn't remember seeing Daly in the picture, but that didn't mean that the picture was the sum total of everyone involved in collecting the hidden artefacts. "You don't need to be read in. You were there, in the beginning."

Daly didn't speak, but the lack of confirmation was as good as a resolute yes.

Arthur paused. He looked between Daly and Baker and back again, his eyes flitting to the maps. The large map of England was on the bookshelf, marked in a few places, but it was the street-level of London that was covered in pins and turned into some sort of colourful macramé project. Pieces of thread dangled down and the map listed in one corner where it was ripping through the pin; it hadn't been updated in some time.

"That's one question answered. But you," Arthur said, straightening and pointing a finger in Daly's face over the desk, "Explain you. What's your purpose here? And don't give me some covert mission rubbish. Are you a sorcerer?"

"No," Daly said.
"Me neither," Baker said.

Neither of them added anything more. Arthur resisted the urge to take out the rusty pliers. He glanced at his watch and saw the minutes ticking past. "You have twelve minutes to tell us, or we're walking out of here. I suggest you think very hard before the seconds count down, because I never turn back."

Daly glanced at Lamorak, but whatever it was that he'd hoped to see, he wasn't getting it. He inhaled and exhaled. He stared at the desk without seeing the papers. Baker closed his laptop and put his hands together as if in prayer, pressing his fingertips against his mouth.

"We had an agreement," Daly said finally. He waved his hand in a circular motion. "We all signed it. A free share of artefacts at another's request, particularly in times of crisis. Which..."

He raised his arm as if to gesture outside, but aborted halfway through and scratched his forehead, but Arthur didn't really notice.

There was a sensation of triumph that always accompanied a success, but having the right puzzle piece, finally, and being able to take a step back to take in the entire picture…

That was a different feeling altogether, and it came with the heavy punch of a stone dropping into the pit of his belly, making him sick and disgusted all at once.

"Daly. What's here? What did you bring to my country? What do you have that the NWO wants?"

There was one more question after the ones Arthur had already asked. Only one. But he didn't get a chance to ask it before the door swung on its hinges and crashed against the far wall.

Who asked you to bring it here?

Arthur whirled around, his gun in his hand. The safety was off, the round chambered, and the pause was evaluation, measuring the newcomer as a potential threat.

The man was short and squat, as wide across as the doorframe, his head a little square and put on wrong, tiny round eyes standing out against a face that was full of hard lines and sharp angles. There was a blur of colour for clothes, and picking apart someone's fashion sense was impossible when the target was moving too fast to make out what he was wearing. The man continued to advance, but Arthur noted the absence of a weapon in his hands --

Hands curled into claws.

Claws.

He squeezed the trigger just as the man growled, "Pendragon."

It had been a direct hit at point-blank range: impossible to miss, but the man didn't so much as flinch, and he continued to move forward.

Arthur fired again, and this time there was a double echo -- Lamorak was shooting, too, and someone else from just off to the side.

Daly.

Arthur retreated as the man advanced, emptying his cartridge; he changed it and continued to fire. There was a pause as Lamorak reloaded, then another as Daly did the same. Arthur didn't know how
many rounds had been fired into the man, but there was no way, absolutely none that he was still standing.

The man threw his head back and roared.

The building trembled. The dizzying, disorienting sensation contracted, then expanded. The room grew bigger before it was smaller again, but still larger than it had been only seconds before. The floor was tilted on an axis; the corners were stretched obscenely, the walls curved inward and outward. It was like being in a carnival funhouse, except the distortion was real, and not just an optical illusion.

The man lowered his head the way a bull would before it stomped a hoof into the ground to signal a charge. In doing so, Arthur had a clearer view of his features. They twisted, elongated, reshaped, reformed --

He saw teeth, jagged and edged, like a field of sharpened jagged, three-bladed spears. It filled a mouth that stretched into a large, reptilian head that twisted and struggled as if combating some sort of leash, and Arthur thought he saw what he was fighting against when a glimmer of opal-iridescence shone in the shape of a net.

The creature became a man again, almost painfully so, but not so much that it stopped its advance. Lamorak moved to stand in front of Arthur, but before Arthur could warn him away, the creature knocked him aside.

Lamorak crashed into the chair that Baker had been sitting on, and landed hard in a pillow of file folders and stacked papers before rolling into the wall.

A bookshelf shivered; a few knickknacks fell on top of him.

Arthur emptied the last of his bullets into his attacker. He dodged to the side to get away from the creature, but it reacted with a cobra's strike, quick and lightning-fast. It grabbed Arthur by the throat, claws digging into the unprotected skin, and pushed Arthur against a wall.

The feeling of the blunt-end of thousands of pushpins digging into his back was a distant ache in comparison to the weight crushing his windpipe.

"You won't have it," the man hissed, sibilant and sulphuric. "You won't s-stop this-s."

Arthur grabbed the man's wrist and tried to break the hold, but the man was strong. Arthur let go, grateful only that he was taller and couldn't be dangled from the ground. He brought his clubbed fists down on the man's arms, once, twice -- but to no avail. He kicked at the man, going for the soft spots -- the groin, the belly, even the sensitive insole of his feet, but he shifted aside to avoid the first, and was impervious to the rest.

He leaned forward, putting more pressure on Arthur's throat. Arthur gagged. He felt something hot and fluid dripping down the sides of his throat.

He saw stars. His vision clouded and darkened at the edges.

Suddenly, he could breathe. The weight crushing him was gone. He fell forward, his knees cushioned by the thick carpet. He gasped, blinking rapidly, and saw Lamorak being tossed aside a second time.

The creature came at Arthur again. Arthur scrambled away. He was only peripherally aware of Baker, screeching to get away before he disappeared through the open door, shouting for help. He
knew that Daly was shooting at the creature again, but to no effect, and the firing stopped just as Arthur was caught and pulled away from any possible escape.

The sharp pain in his calf were claws digging through his trousers and into his leg. Arthur twisted and kicked at the creature's face. The impact jarred through his foot all the way to his hip, but the creature let him go.

And was smashed into the far wall by a blurred movement. The creature fought back, and Arthur didn't know who or what had come to his rescue, but he was grateful. He found his footing and looked for a weapon -- he'd lost his gun at some point, and he had no idea where it was under the pile of flying and drifting paperwork -- but there wasn't anything. He rushed to Lamorak and helped him get to his feet while dragging them both toward the exit. He kept an eye on the fighting and pulled Lamorak step by step --

He froze when he felt a hand on his back.

"Stop."

The command was deep, guttural, primal. It triggered at the prey drive of the brain, requiring obedience. It hadn't been directed at Arthur, but he shivered all the same, unable to stop the visceral response at having been so close, too close to the source of the thunderous roar.

The distorted mirror effect faded. The room reshaped, returning to its original dimensions. Blood-splattered file folders were strewed in a landslide cascade all around the room. The books, once neatly lined on the shelves, were now completely out of sorts. A few maps were ripped, and the papers that had gone flying earlier were settling all around them in crumpled heaps.

The two men -- the two creatures -- stopped fighting. They broke apart violently, each at one corner of the room. Their clothes were torn; their chest heaved. Blood and bruises faded before their eyes, and Arthur didn't know if they were healing themselves, or merely hiding their injuries behind the illusion that made them look human again.

They glared at each other. The short, squat man grit his teeth and stared at the new arrival with something akin to outraged betrayal. The other, a taller, thinner man, was shaking his head in reluctant apology, almost with a shell-shocked expression and the disbelief of what he'd just done.

"Why?" the shorter man asked.

In answer, the newcomer slumped against the wall and turned to look at Arthur. No, past him. The man swept an arm and said, "Because he told me to."

Lamorak steadied himself with a hand on the wall. Arthur twisted to see who was behind him.

Merlin.

Merlin.

He was holding the side of his head with a hand, his eyes narrowed with pain. He was pale and sick in a way Arthur had hoped to never see again. It was the building, Arthur knew. The building was doing something to magic, and it was doing something to Merlin.

A second later, several of the soldiers piled up in the corridor behind Merlin, blocking the entrance. They pushed their way in, shoving Merlin away from Arthur, pointing their guns and barking orders that echoed loudly in the room. No one moved -- least of all Arthur -- and the situation was only cleared up when the Director shouted louder than anyone else. "Get the fuck out of my office!"
It took time for the crowd to dissipate. For the adrenaline to come down to a manageable level. Arthur spotted his gun and picked it up, checking and replacing the depleted cartridge.

"Because he told you to," the short man mocked. "When have you ever taken orders from humans-s?"

"It's Emrys," the second man said, bringing his knees up. He looked tired, drained, strained, as if everything in the world had gone wrong. "It's him. And he says…"

"This isn't the Pendragon you're looking for," Merlin said, his voice hoarse and rough.

Gareth came in behind Merlin, out of breath, wide-eyed, disoriented, a weapon in his hand and no target for it. He didn't look as if he were in pain, not like Merlin did, and whatever discombobulation he was suffering vanished in an instant when he saw Lamorak. Gareth went over after a quick check around the room to confirm that the situation was under control, looping his arm under Lamorak's shoulders to support his weight.

"Star Wars, really, Merlin?" Lamorak asked, touching his forehead gingerly. There was a small cut over his eyebrow, nothing deep, but a dark bruise was forming all around his eye.

"Not at my best right now, mate," Merlin snapped.

"Merlin, take Lamorak --" Arthur started, but he changed his eyes at the dark look Merlin shot in his direction. He nodded, then shook his head, because the situation was not ideal. He'd have to work with what he had, and what he had at the moment was precious and little.

He turned around. The short man was looming in his corner, but he hadn't moved. The tall one didn't move though he cradled his head in his hands. Daly had sat down in his chair, but he looked drawn, as if he'd lost a decade of his life in one go.

Arthur knew that feeling. He knew that feeling far too fucking well. He put a hand on Merlin's shoulder and gave him a comforting squeeze before he coughed to clear his strangled voice.

"Daly, I get the feeling that you think I'm here for something I'm not. Start talking."

ooOOoo

The least that the Salem Contingency branch of the CIA could do was give them medical supplies.

Gareth and Lamorak returned to the car. Will joined them a few minutes later, looking nonplussed. Arthur's calf was in a fresh bandage, but other than the bloody tear in his trousers, there was no overt sign of his injury, which meant that Arthur was being a stubborn prat again, refusing to show weakness in front of others.

Merlin's head was still ringing, but the volume was down to background levels. The disorientation didn't go away like Arthur said it should have, in a quiet whisper when their heads were bowed together for a private conversation away from Daly and his people, and the only solace was that the dragons were similarly affected. Merlin had no choice but to get used to it and follow Arthur closely, because where the others were warped and bent away, Arthur was the only real, solid presence.

"Dragons, huh?" Arthur said, when he was introduced to the two men. He didn't shake their hands,
and, like Merlin, refused to call them by their code names, much to Will's disappointment, because Will rather liked Batman, which made the shorter, squat man Robin. "I know him," Arthur said, his eyes narrow and critical when Adam West -- Zachariah Knucker -- walked to the other side of the room to have a quiet, insistent conversation with Alfred Scylles.

"Tell me later," Merlin said, glancing over his shoulder. He fussed over the medical kit for a minute longer, even though it wasn't needed anymore, and watched the Director wave his hand in the air, angrily compounding a point. Daly shifted the telephone handset from one ear to the other, and now that his dominant hand was free, the gestures became more violent. Merlin couldn't hear the conversation, but he didn't need to. Daly's expression was red with outrage; Baker, who had remained in the office, had gone deathly white, his expression green around the edges. "They think you're here for an artefact that Uther --"

"I know," Arthur said tightly. "I was setting them straight when the juggernaut came barging in. Not the sort to ask questions before going into a mad rampage, are they, these dragons?"

Merlin's chuckle was faint. If West hadn't followed Merlin's orders, if Weset and Alfred hadn't stopped when he'd shouted... He didn't know what would have happened. West had lost control of his form outside in the staging area, and there had been signs that Alfred would have done the same, right here in this little building. That would definitely have knocked the roof off; maybe a few walls would have been taken out.

"What did you do?" Arthur asked. He pointed to his own throat, and Merlin pretended not to understand what he meant. "You made them stop. How?"

_I don't know_, Merlin wanted to say, but he didn't get the chance. Daly slammed the handset down hard enough to make his desk creak in protest. Instead, he said, "I'll tell you later."

"Yeah," Arthur said, half in agreement, half in understanding. Merlin wouldn't put it past Arthur to have already figured out that Merlin had no idea what he'd done.

Daly stormed out of the office, stopping right outside the threshold as if struck by an invisible field. His chest heaved in frustrated breath, and he looked around the room, first at the dragons lingering at the doorway before turning to Arthur and Merlin.

His attention darted off to the side to frown at Will, who was seated on the couch pushed against the window, his feet up on a pile of books, and reading a report that was stamped in bright, red, _Confidential_. He opened his mouth to protest, but Will beat him to it.

"Interesting take on a clusterfuck," Will said. He closed the file before tossing it aside, grabbing another at random. He opened it up, skimmed the first page, and said, "Hey, Merlin, did you know they were in the NMZ at about the same time you were?"

Daly's body tensed up as if he meant to spring forward to throttle Will -- an understandable reaction, and one that Merlin was well familiar with.

"Were they now?" Arthur asked, distracting Daly.

"We mopped up," Daly said, his tone defensive.

Arthur didn't answer. Merlin waggled his eyebrows at Will, hoping that Will would get the hint. He didn't. Will went through another report. And another. "Reading material around here is pap. I'd sooner read The Sun."

Daly looked as if he was reconsidering an attack.
"And the stone?" West prompted.

"The stone..." Daly's grimace was telling. Merlin glanced at Arthur; Arthur's expression was flat and unimpressed. "It's missing."

West, who always seemed to be in preternatural motion even when standing still, froze abruptly. His mouth tightened in a thin line. Alfred turned a murderous look toward Arthur; Merlin moved to stand between them. "It wasn't him," he said.

"What happened to it?" Arthur asked, putting a hand on Merlin's shoulder. Will stood up, glancing between Merlin and the dragons, and from the combined twitch of his hand and the downturn of his mouth, he was no doubt upset that he didn't have anything on him with sufficient stopping power to take down a dragon.

Daly exhaled. "It was signed out forty-three minutes ago."

He checked his watch.

"Forty-five minutes ago," he corrected himself. "At least, that's what's on the sign-out log. One of our technicians came in, showed her ID, and asked for the stone. Claimed that I'd sent her to retrieve it. The quartermaster on duty took down her information and made her sign --"

He shook his head, half-rueful, half-angry. Merlin didn't blame him. Sometimes, even the most rigorous security protocol crumbled to pieces when the opposing party had everything they needed to pass muster, and the human factor could fail, too.

"She might still be in the building," Arthur said, but from his tone, Merlin knew he didn't believe it. Anyone who would have broken in to retrieve an artefact wouldn't have stuck around to see if anybody noticed, and forty-five minutes was more than enough time to get lost very quickly.

Merlin and Arthur exchanged glances. Forty-five minutes ago was also well after the storm had passed. Not only had Daly's little "test" caused a distraction, but the arrival of the sorcerers traipsing down the road to cause trouble -- just another attempt to delay any pursuers should they have uncovered the missing artefact before she had put enough distance between them.

"They're looking," Daly said. He didn't sound hopeful.

"When is Uther supposed to pick it up?" Arthur asked.

"He said he would call and to keep it secure until then. Anywhere between the day after we arrived, to two weeks from now," Baker said.

"Do you know where he is now?" Arthur asked.

"No," Baker said.

"Probably with your boys," Daly said, and Merlin felt Arthur freeze beside him. "Last I hear, your Brits are setting up FOBs and central command centres at critical junctures all over the city."

Arthur relaxed, and Merlin released a soft sigh. The further away Uther was from Excalibur, the better. There was no guarantee that the team wouldn't shoot the man on sight, not at this point. Merlin knew Arthur wanted nothing to do with his father, but he wasn't sure how well Arthur would take it if he didn't get a chance to take his father to task for what he'd done. For what he was doing.

"Where are those staging areas? I don't suppose you have the radio codes?" Merlin asked.
"I don't suppose you could find them on your own?" Daly retorted, but Baker retreated into the office and returned with several sheets of paper. Daly took them with a grunt, flipped through them, and handed them over.

There were several satellite terrain photographs with street overlays and coordinates. Merlin recognised some of the areas, but Gwaine would have a field day with the data points. Arthur glanced at them briefly, but left them to Merlin for now.

"Getting back in touch with them?" Daly asked.


Daly shook his head. "Not much of anything. It makes a lovely glow lamp, shines a pretty shade of blue when it's happy, goes dark as pitch when it's not. It likes classical music --"

"Zachariah," Merlin said, half in annoyance. He didn't realize he'd spoken using that voice until he caught West straighten suddenly, as if rearing back in protest. Merlin half-expected wings to come sprouting out and knocking down the walls. Forcing himself to a lighter tone, he continued, "You said it was a power source."

"It is," West said, and he side-eyed Daly for a long time before adding, "But I cannot tell you more than that."

"Can't, or won't?" Will asked.

"Can't," Alfred said, his voice dull and grumbling.

"The artefact was outside our purview for a very long time. Most of us have forgotten how it was created, never mind what it is capable of. When it was found, we attempted to recover and destroy it, but it was always kept outside our reach, its location shielded from…" West hesitated, once again glancing at Daly. "From us."

"And you are… what, exactly?" Daly asked, his eyes narrow.

"On your side," West said gruffly. He turned, leaving the room at a panther's stalk. Merlin watched him leave, the other dragon trailing behind him, his aura dark and blood-red, full of barely-suppressed fury.

"Is he?" Daly asked, turning to Arthur.


"Probably," Arthur said.

Daly rubbed his face in his hands. He muttered under his breath. When he came up for air again, it was with the weight of the entire planet on his shoulders. "I'm going to have to call in the breach."

"Make sure you notify MI-6," Arthur said. "Talk to Niedermann. Make sure he knows it's a power source."

"If it's all the same, I'd rather not talk to him, he's an asshole," Daly said, half-turning away. He paused. "Do you need anything else?"

Arthur considered. "You don't have the data I need. I never wanted the artefact you thought I wanted. There's only one more thing."
"What's that?"

"The woman who broke your defences," Arthur said. "I want her name. I want a photograph."

Daly and Baker exchanged glances. After a moment of consideration, Daly nodded.

"That I can do," Baker said, returning to the office. There was a long pause, compounded by the clatter of a keyboard and the rumbling of a printer. He came back a few minutes later with several more sheets of paper -- from the glance Merlin got over Arthur's shoulder, it looked as if it was her entire file.

A photograph was on the front. It looked like an ID photo. A plain white backdrop, her face in the middle, shoulders at the corners.

It was hard to tell from the image, but she looked to be in her mid-to-late thirties. Her dark auburn hair was shoulder-length, falling on either side of her face in soft waves, pinned out of her eyes at the crown of her head. She had a long face, only slightly angular, with a wide mouth with full lips painted in a shade of red that just didn't suit her, but could, if it were a little darker. Her blue eyes were in a bored, almost vacant expression.

Arthur shook his head minutely to indicate that he didn't know her, but the set of his mouth hinted at something else, equally worrisome. Merlin glanced at where Arthur was tapping a finger on the page.

The woman's name was Nimueh Morgan.

"Are you going after her?" Baker asked.

Arthur shook his head, glancing over the papers once more before folding them neatly in two. "No. I didn't lose the artefact. You did. It's on you. But if I come across her, I'll give you a call."

"Much appreciated," Daly said, through gritted teeth, as if even the sentiment that someone else could come across her before them was distasteful.

The man seemed amenable, and Merlin remembered something that he wanted to know.

"And if you want us to do something about it," Merlin said cheekily, pausing to tear a small piece of paper from the sheets in his hand jotting down an email address with a pen he grabbed from the side table, "You'll send everything you've got on Mordred ap Aneurin to that address."

Daly didn't miss a beat. "Who?"

"Let's not play dumb, shall we? I haven't the patience," Arthur said. "You know told me about him. You know exactly who he is."

Arthur gestured, ending the conversation. Will led the way out and Merlin followed Will's blurry shape up a roller-coaster path, his course corrected only by Arthur's gentle touches on his arm. It wasn't until they exited the building and had gone past the wrought iron fencing that Merlin was able to take a deep breath of fresh air and feel as if he weren't out of sorts anymore.

Will took one look at the two of them, raised a questioning eyebrow, and, getting a curt nod in response, hurried to join the others, leaving Merlin with Arthur for a bit of private conversation.

"Not a place I'd want to work," Merlin remarked, glancing over his shoulder.
"No," Arthur said, shaking his head. Merlin followed his gaze to the other side of the staging area, where the two dragons were standing. They stood next to their vehicle, both of them in close proximity, their heads bowed in conversation, their heads turned away from anyone who might read their lips and understand what they were talking about. "Him, I recognize from your Mum's photo. The one with everyone -- or nearly everyone -- who went after the artefacts."

"Knucker?" Merlin asked.

"Him, yeah. I don't know the other bloke," Arthur said.

"He's younger," Merlin said, without thinking, and Arthur blinked at him. He had to look at the two men again, comparing them side by side, before he realized what had surprised Arthur. Alfred had a peppering of white hair in the scruff of his beard and grey shot throughout his hair; he had the wrinkles around his eyes and frown lines across his brow. Of either of the two, Merlin would say that Alfred was the oldest, but he couldn't say for certain how he knew that West was the elder. By way of explanation, he shrugged and said, "Dragons."

"See one up close and personal, and suddenly you're an expert," Arthur said, a curl of amusement on his lips. From one instant to the next, his amusement faded, replaced by a thoughtful expression. "How did you stop them? Your eyes weren't --"

"I don't think I could've cast anything in there without it coming out as a clown trick," Merlin said, shaking his head. "Maybe the endless handkerchief, or the stuffed bunny out of the hat --"

"Not even a real one?" Arthur asked.

"I'm afraid to think what would happen if it were a real one," Merlin admitted. He shrugged. "I don't know, to be honest. I just… told them to stop. I wanted them to stop. And they did."

Arthur didn't answer, not right away. He slowed down and stopped when they were in the middle of the staging area. "Dragons," he said. He scratched his jaw. "Kilgarrah, Mandrake. Who knows who else. They were all part of the teams sent out to retrieve and recover the artefact."

"Or they were there to stop them," Merlin suggested. "Knucker seems pretty pissed about the stone -- that they found it, that they hid it from him, and that they lost it."

"Might mean there are more artefacts out there than they collected," Arthur said, nodding. "Artefacts that they made absolutely certain wouldn't fall in anyone's hands. Artefacts that --"

"That might help us?" Merlin asked, and Arthur nodded. Merlin breathed a hollow laugh, and nodded toward Knucker and Scylles. "Do you want me to ask them?"

"No," Arthur said, shaking his head. "I don't trust them to tell us the truth. But there is someone we can ask."

"I'm not talking to him," Merlin snapped, suddenly heated. He was not talking to his father if he had any choice in the matter. He turned away from Arthur and stalked towards the SUV; he wasn't halfway there before Arthur caught up, a hand on Merlin's shoulder. Merlin saw Arthur wince, fighting not to limp, and felt like an arse. He'd forgotten about Arthur's injury.

"Not him," Arthur said, as if he knew exactly whom Merlin wanted to avoid, and, of course he did. "Kilgarrah. He's had his hands in it since the beginning, hasn't he?"

"Seems like," Merlin said, resisting the urge to slide his arm under Arthur's shoulders to help him to the SUV. It wasn't much further, and Arthur's wound wasn't deep, but that didn't stop him from
wanting to take away Arthur's pain. At least, they were going to the cottage; Gaius could prepare a healing salve.

Merlin made a quiet, tsking sound, grimacing inwardly, and shook his head, almost in reprimand at his own thoughts. He'd sooner ask Mordred for help than Gaius, at this point.

"Are we staying, or are we going?" Merlin asked. "We're going to be of more use here. They're setting up headquarters, they're preparing for this because they know what's coming --"

"We've done enough of Olaf footwork. It's about time he made himself useful," Arthur muttered. He let go of Merlin's shoulder and reached for the SUV. Gareth was in the driver's seat again, Lamorak in the front passenger seat, holding an ice pack against his head. Will had squeezed himself into the back, and didn't look pleased about it, but Merlin gave him a grateful look. Arthur paused before climbing in. "Merlin."


Arthur didn't say anything for a long time. He shifted, looking past Merlin at the dragons meandering besides their vehicle, still talking between themselves with bowed heads. He glanced at the building they'd just left. He turned back the way they came. "You know."

Merlin sighed quietly. He closed his eyes. He felt his shoulders slump in despair and resignation, because he didn't think he was ready. He didn't think he would ever be ready. Finally, he opened his eyes and nodded. "Yes, I know."

They weren't going to talk about it. Not here. But it was clear that if this was about to come to a head, if war was going to erupt above and beyond the civil unrest that had spread throughout the globe, if magic was going to be the weapon of choice…

*Excalibur* was the British Army's ace in the hand.

Maybe there were other units like theirs. Merlin didn't know. Arthur thought that there might be -- small, task-oriented, without any real combat experience outside training exercises. There was Balinor's squad, scattered though they were at the moment, still more efficient at dispatching other magic users despite their outdated tactics and their aging magic. And if there weren't any functional units outside of the Directory, there might be those who had been, once, long ago, who would take up arms in the fight against the enemy or come to the fore to train those who could.

No matter how gifted the student, training would still take time, and it was time that they couldn't afford.

They had to retreat. They had to hold back until they were ready to be played. Olaf knew Excalibur was in England. No doubt word had gotten out and the Directory knew, too. Their superiors in the army would be aware of a reserve team, even if they didn't know or understand what they could do.

The odds were high that Kilgarrah had returned to the front lines, that he would be directing the war. And if Kilgarrah was at one of the command posts scattered throughout London, Mandrake would be there, too. Between the two of them, Arthur didn't doubt that they would be called in when they needed to be there.

"I know," Merlin repeated. "Doesn't feel right not to go in now, though."

Arthur nodded, but he didn't speak. He stepped up and into the SUV, sliding across the bench seat. Merlin climbed in right behind him, and Gareth barely waited for the door to close before he took them out of park and gunned the engine.
The barricade slid shut behind them. Will provided the sound effects to go with it -- a high-pitched rumble, like a waste compactor macerating rubbish.

Lamorak chuckled, mostly to himself, but he didn't let anyone in on his private joke.

"So tell it to me straight, boss," Will said, draping one arm across the bench seat, leaning forward. "How fucked are we?"

"Pretty fucked," Merlin said.

Will put a hand on Merlin's head and pushed. "Not talking to you, mate."

Arthur glanced over his shoulder, blinking in surprise, raising a brow to cover. "Less fucked than I thought, actually."

"Go on," Will encouraged, rolling the hand in the air. "You've not exactly been forthcoming with the details --"

"That's because everyone else can connect the bloody dots," Merlin said, rubbing the back of his head and smoothing down his hair. "Uther needed the energy source for the artefact --"

"The EMP?"

"No, the… the thing that knocked me out, I don't know what it's called --"

"EMP," Will suggested, even though that was the same thing he'd already said. "Electro-magic pulse. Isn't that what it is?"

Merlin twisted around and stared at Will for a long time before he shook his head and said, "Anyway, if he doesn't have a power source, he can't kill magic and get the advantage."

"A pity, actually," Will said. Then, realizing what he'd said, he quickly added, "Excepting you, of course. If I could shoot the NWO with an EMP to douse them, I bloody well would."

"The other problem is that we don't know what Nimueh wants with the stone," Merlin said, putting a hand on Will's face to push him back into his seat. "If she has her own version of the artefact --"

"And it does the exact opposite of Uther's prototype…" Arthur sighed, tilting his head back. Merlin heard the bones in his neck pop. Arthur rubbed his face, grinding the heels of his hands into his eyes. When he dropped them, he said, "That makes no sense. They've already used the artefacts to bomb the leylines and release the magic. We're flooded with it now. Having a power source for another go makes no sense."

"Unless there's a magic source they haven't released yet?" Gareth asked. His hands were tight on the wheel, and he was keeping to a good speed. If they didn't encounter unexpected roadblocks and weren't ambushed again, they would make it to the road leading out of London in good time.

"Possible," Arthur agreed. The word was quiet, spoken in a low tone and subdued, and Merlin knew that tone. Arthur was thinking. He was trying to sort out what might happen, what could happen, what would happen. He was probably coming up with a long list of elaborate plans that could be put into effect at a moment's notice.

Same as usual.

Merlin hid a smile.
Behind them, Will heaved a sigh. In front of them, Lamorak adjusted the ice pack, flipping it over to get the colder side against his forehead.

And Gareth clenched the wheel until his knuckles were white.

Something was wrong.

Merlin didn't know what it was, but the way that Gareth glanced in the rear-view mirror was telling. Merlin turned in his seat and tried to see past Will's big head, finally giving up in exchange for reaching over to shove Will down.

"Oi! What!"

"We're being followed," Gareth said. "It's our friends, the ones with the pointy teeth and severe scaly skin problems."

Those who weren't already looking over their shoulder abruptly twisted in their seats to see for themselves.

"Why don't we have heavier munitions," Will complained, leaning over the third seat and rummaging through the equipment boxes carefully stacked in the boot.

"Maybe because no one expected needing anti-tank missiles in bloody London?" Gareth suggested.

Will stopped rummaging and looked askance toward the front seat, glancing briefly at Merlin. Gareth was keeping an eye on their pursuers, and, obviously, had spoken without thinking. Will, however, was the sort who would take advantage if he thought someone's guard was down, and asked, "Mate, where have you been?"

"What?" Gareth asked, barely shaken out from his concentration. He hadn't accelerated, but he was keeping a careful eye on both the bumpy and obstacle-filled road ahead while making sure they maintained a certain distance from the car behind them.


"'M not a dragon-whisperer. How would I know?" Merlin asked, holding his hands up.

"Seems like you're the closest we've got to one, though," Will said, checking his gun. Arthur was doing the same thing, replenishing his spent cartridges. Merlin glanced out the back window, but there was no change.

There was a low level of tension in the SUV for the better part of an hour. Gareth had been forced to take a detour -- not the one posted, mind, none of them were that stupid. They were slowed down by a road that had been completely divested of asphalt, as if some sort of power had yanked it away, and the soft earth beneath had been pockmarked by both rainfall and flooding. They'd come to a complete stop, exactly once, when a small mob of children raced across the road. And the entire time, the dragons stayed exactly the same distance behind them. Even Arthur, who was normally physically calm when the situation was overwhelmingly tense, was jiggling with nerves.

It didn't help at all when Will said, "You know, they could ram us off the road easily, even in that shoddy example for a car. I mean. Dragons, yeah? Ram the car, slow us down enough, sit on the hood, squash us --"
"Shut it," Lamorak said, annoyed.

"Pull over," Arthur said.

Gareth drummed his finger on the steering wheel in contemplation before picking section of the road with a broad shoulder -- enough for another car to pull up alongside without blocking the two-lane street, though blocking wasn't going to be a problem since they hadn't seen any other moving vehicles on the road in the last half hour. Gareth kept the SUV on the asphalt, because moving it to the side would put them in a trapped position.

He left the engine running.

"Gareth, stay with the car. Lamorak, Merlin, you're with me," Arthur said, cracking the door open and stepping out.

"What about me?" Will asked.

When Arthur didn't answer, Merlin shrugged and said, "Have yourself a nap. We've got this. Don't trouble yourself any."

"Well, don't mind if I do --" Will's expression twisted, and he gave Merlin the bird. He crawled to the edge and levered the seat forward so that he could crawl off. "Sod off. I'm going to bag me a dragon."

The sedan slowed and came to a stop ten metres away from the SUV. Alfred was behind the wheel, but he turned off the engine and stepped out of the car almost in synch with West. The two men moved smoothly, quickly, easily, meeting Arthur halfway.

"This is bollocks. I'm not bringing a bloody dragon home. What do you want?" Arthur snapped. He didn't raise his gun, but he held it easily in his hand, ready to bring it up if he needed to.

Merlin raised his gun, bracing it two-handedly, and sighted down the barrel. Lamorak stopped besides Merlin and did the same. Out of the corner of his eye, Merlin saw Will taking position next to an overturned car, using it as a shield and as support.

"To talk," West said.

"Not interested in talking to you," Arthur said. "We've had our fill of dragons, haven't we? We're done being puppets, and we're done playing games --"

"We don't want to talk to you," West said. He pointed at Merlin. "We want to talk to him."

"You want to talk to me?" Merlin asked. Somehow, though, it didn't surprise him. His retort came out a little harsher than he'd meant. "Talk."

"Alone," West said, but what Merlin heard was, I don't trust him.

"I don't care if you don't trust him," Merlin said. "I do. You don't matter here. He does. If you've got something to say, say it. Because otherwise, we're going on our way, and you're not coming with us."

"It's important," West said. He can't stop us, he didn't say out loud, but Merlin heard him as clear as day.

"So start talking," Arthur said.
"Maybe he can't, but I can. I will," Merlin promised. Both dragons flinched reflexively, taking a step back. "That's it, isn't it? You know that I can. You don't like that."

"This matter doesn't involve Pendragon. Step aside, Emrys. There's something you need to know. There's something we need to show you," Alfred said, his voice low and alluring, almost in sweet, sweet promise. But Merlin didn't hear that. Merlin heard, We can stop him. We can stop this. But you need to come with us, Emrys, before Pendragon and his ilk destroy us all.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I don't care. I'm not going anywhere with you. I told you. I told you. Arthur has nothing to do with this. It's Uther that you're after. It's the NWO. It's everyone else in this fucked-up world --"

Arthur looked between them, but Merlin didn't dare take his eyes from the dragons in case they took advantage. Abruptly, though, Arthur shifted his position to stand besides Merlin, coming so close that Lamorak had to move aside to make room, to keep the dragons in his line of fire.

The dragons froze.

Arthur's body was pressed in a line against Merlin. He wrapped an arm around Merlin's waist, holding him close.

The dragons' eyes went wide, and they swallowed hard. Merlin could smell the sulphur in the air from where they were breathing, and breathing hard.

Merlin felt cold metal against his temple. He suppressed the instinct to move. This was Arthur. Arthur wouldn't hurt him. Arthur was --

Arthur was pressing his gun against Merlin's head.

"Arthur?" Merlin asked, his voice breaking.

"You fucker," Will shouted.

"Will! Stay back!" Merlin said, forcing himself to remain still. He fought trained instinct to defend himself, to jam an elbow in Arthur's ribs, to twist and turn and to get the gun away from Arthur. He fought his own magic -- magic that was rising like a dogged, maddened thing, until he realized that it was curling around them both in protection.

And when he looked at the dragons, everything was suddenly clear. The dragons were afraid. Not for him. Of him. Because of him.

"This isn't about me, is it?" Arthur asked, his voice calm and even. Merlin hesitated, unsure, but then he felt a reassuring squeeze where Arthur was holding him, and he didn't move. "Maybe it was, at first. At the archives. You thought I would've done away with the stone, but you were wrong. And now, there's Merlin, and you know what he is."

Arthur paused.

"Don't you?"

"He is... Emrys," West said, as if the name had special meaning. He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "He must come with us. There is a way... There is a way to ensure that this war will end before it even begins."
"He's not an artefact," Arthur snarled. The gun moved from Merlin's temple and Arthur stretched out his arm so that it was in parallel with Merlin's, the muzzle pointed at the dragons. "He's not a sacrifice. The fate of the world doesn't rest with him. It's on you. It's on you and the NWO and every other meddling fuck who started this in the first place."

"We didn't --"

"You did," Merlin said. He sounded so sure, but he wasn't. His uncertainty came through when he repeated, "You did."

West tilted his head, and it was such an animalistic gesture that Merlin very nearly saw the dragon ripple through the human face, and from the startled huff of breath on his neck, he knew that Arthur had seen it, too.

"No," Zachariah said. He advanced slowly, his shoulders broad and relaxed, like wings unfurling; his stance spread, as if to accommodate a greater weight. The curl of his lips was... unfriendly, nothing like a smile at all, almost a sneer, like a predator sensing a weakness and mocking its prey for it. But when he spoke again, it was with a gentleness, a softness, a commanding calm. "No. You don't remember what it was like, Emrys. The shift of power. The magic's ebb. The wars that nearly decimated us all, the fires that nearly burned the earth."

Arthur's hand on Merlin's waist drifted down to Merlin's hip, fingers hooking into Merlin's belt as if he were about to grab Merlin and pull him out of the way. Merlin dug his heels in, shifting his weight, because Arthur might be the one who was a self-sacrificing pillock, but it was Merlin who had magic.

Zachariah took another step forward.

"Kilgarrah didn't tell you everything," Zachariah said. There was a shift of movement, a blur, behind him. Merlin thought, at first, that Zachariah was shedding his human form, but it was Scylles, behind him, who was spreading wings. They unfurled in a splash of blue and green, in tatters of filament and fibre. They looked sickly, with the flesh torn and burned, brown and black around the edges.

"He didn't tell you what we nearly lost," Zachariah said, his voice a sinuous purr. "Clan upon Clan of dragonkind. The oldest, the bravest, the youngest. When magic fell, Emrys, the dragons fell, too. They fell from the sky. They fell to the earth. We suffered. Kilgarrah betrayed us -- and he betrays us again."


The skies were smeared with shades of black and grey. It hadn't been night or day for weeks. No sun, no moon, no stars -- only the reddest flame and the darkest smoke of the earth burning, trembling, breaking.

The roars filling the air were more fearsome than thunder. More dangerous than lightning. A sulphuric heat blazed across the firmament above, and a dragon banked, screamed when the flames burned flesh.

Dragon fought dragon the way kin had never fought kin. For every rise of magic, there must be a fall. The Balance was an illusion, a desire, a dream. It didn't exist. There was no such thing. There couldn't be, because a Balance meant that there was no heartbeat.
It meant that the earth had died. Railing against the end when it was not an end but a sweep of the pendulum was a death stroke as sure as the knife plunged through the heart.

They didn't understand. They wouldn't listen.

A dragon swept down, blazing breath blocking the way. Horses reared, screaming. Knights and riders fell from their steeds and tumbled to the ground; others fought to maintain control of mounts frothing white with fear. When the flames died down enough, the Knights -- the King -- continued on.

It was the King who reached the mountain first. It was the King who dismounted and climbed the steep side until he reached the top. It was the King who found him, his blue robes scorched by the heat, his black hair matted down with ashes and sweat and blood. It was the King who took him into his arms, who patted his cheek until he stirred, who begged, "Please. Please. Wake up, my love. We've lost. They aren't listening anymore."

"There's one more thing," the sorcerer murmured, struggling to stand. The King took his weight and held him when he wobbled on his own two feet. "Just one more thing."

The sorcerer raised his chin and roared. The words that came out of his mouth were low and guttural, a deep, sonorous growl that seemed torn from the earth itself.

"I bind you to your oath. I bind you to my blood. I bind you to my cry, to my will, to my soul. You are my kin, I am yours."

A dragon swept down. Flames burned the ground. The sorcerer raised a golden shield; fires burned all around them.

"By the winds that carry you, by the earth that shelters you, by the fires and the seas that gave birth to you, I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm --"

"I bind you from doing harm," Merlin murmured, and the dragons screamed.

Zachariah took a step back -- from one blink to the next, he was a dragon again, springing into the air. His crest was flattened, his head borne low, and he hissed. Alfred had become a long, swirling mass, a sinuous body knotting and unknotting, his filamentous crest rippling with movement and wind, his wings sweeping down hard until they caught the air.

It seemed like only seconds had passed before they disappeared behind the clouds, leaving behind a four-door sedan, the engine still running.

Merlin stared up at the skies, searching for the dragons, but they were gone. He nearly didn't hear Will or Gareth coming up behind them.

"What the fuck were that?" Will asked.

"No idea, mate," Lamorak said.

Merlin lowered his gun. Arthur did, too. Merlin turned his head and felt Arthur's lips brush his ear. He swallowed hard.

"Did you see that?" Merlin asked. He wasn't talking about the dragons, either.

Merlin felt Arthur's faint nod.
"I heard it, too," Arthur said.

ooOOoo

It was late afternoon when Gareth turned onto the gravel road leading to the cottage. Arthur looked out the rear window to see several teenagers creep out of the shrubbery, dragging a hollowed-out tree log and several large, leafy branches along with them, first sweeping the path clear of tire tracks before completely camouflaging the road. He nodded with approval. The kids were taking their jobs seriously, and whoever had taught them must have had them eating out of his hand, if their eagerness was anything to go by.

Arthur sincerely hoped that it hadn't been Gwaine. Absolutely no one should be terrorized by a horde of mini-Gwaines. Arthur didn't even want to imagine what sort of mischief would be coming out of that.

Gareth drove slowly. Someone had been taking care of the road, because there were signs that the potholes from the increased traffic and the muddy bits had been filled in and smoothed down, but the going was still rough and wobbly. After traveling for hours over highways littered with abandoned cars and taking more gravel shoulders or unexpected detours than necessary, Gareth was understandably overly-cautious. Arthur wanted to tell him not to bother -- the paint job on the SUV was done for, and the dents and dings from nudging vehicles out of the way so that they could keep driving through wouldn't be made worse by the slap of low-hanging branches.

Two men came out of the forest some distance ahead -- Geraint and Galahad. They were both in camouflage from head to toe, their faces painted in green and black grease, their hair matted down by skullcaps, short-range semiautomatic rifles in their hands. Geraint raised a hand to signal both a greeting and a stop request. There was no warning or alerts to go with them, and Arthur patted Gareth's shoulder to indicate, yeah, go ahead.

There was no need to stop. Arthur had called ahead. That was why the road had been cleared when they arrived, and why they hadn't needed to do it themselves.

Geraint and Galahad couldn't be more obvious if they were carrying posterboard signs all drawn up with Welcome Back messages scrawled in crayon and marker and covered in glitter.

If Arthur were being honest with himself, it had been too long since he had seen his team, his family, and he was damn glad to see them.

He didn't feel the least bit put out that Geraint and Galahad both went to Merlin's side of the car, first, pulling him out. He was grateful.

The closer they had gotten to the cottage, the quieter Merlin had become. He'd sat, Arthur's injured leg in his lap, hands on Arthur's shin, and grown increasingly distant, staring out the window without seeing anything. It had been easy enough to pick up on Merlin's mood, too easy by far to fall quiet in turn, all of them wanting to intrude into whatever thoughts were swirling through Merlin's head, and none of them knowing how.

Even Will had been at a loss, tapping Arthur's shoulder and tilting his head toward Merlin questioningly, silently asking, What do we do?

If someone who had known Merlin his entire life didn't know, Arthur wasn't sure there was anything
that they could do, except be there for him when he shook himself out of the darkness that had fallen over him like a heavy cloak.

It seemed that the solution was to literally drag Merlin out of his own mind, to wrap him in arms and bodies and gleeful laughs and welcome back, we missed you, Arthur's been insufferable, save us from the brooding and in hair-ruffles and enthusiastic back-thumping. Geraint had smeared camouflage green and black across Merlin's cheek and Galahad threw caution -- and any future promotions -- into the wind when he grabbed Merlin's face and pulled him in for an awkward kiss.

Arthur winced when he heard teeth clacking.

"Ow," Merlin said, bringing his hand to his mouth. Arthur was glad to see that when Merlin pulled his hand away, it was smeared in camouflage green, and not blood. "How you get the birds you do if that's how you kiss, I have no idea."

"Oi, don't mind him, he's an excited puppy," Geraint said, taking a step back. He crossed his arms over his chest, and rested them on the butt of his slung rifle. He grinned, and the image he made -- smeared camo grease, rumpled clothing, mud down his legs where he'd no doubt been crawling, leaves and grass in his hair -- was off-putting, almost psychotic. "And there's more where that one came from. We've got a whole box full of lost puppies, just looking for their mum and dad."

"Fair description, that," Lamorak said, clapping Geraint on the shoulder before shoving him toward Arthur.

"Who's the mum?" Merlin asked.

"Arthur, obviously," Lamorak said, without hesitation. He drew a laugh out of Merlin. "He's a right mother hen, isn't he?"

Geraint, good-natured as always, started off by offering a serious handshake and aborting it to pull Arthur into a hug. Arthur returned it, squeezing tight and patting him on the back for good measure, and he had hardly the time to breathe before Galahad took his place.

Galahad, however, had turned into either an octopus, or a kitten with claws, or some strange sort of chimera of the two since they'd seen him last, because he clung to Arthur for longer than usual, and no amount of shaking him off would get rid of him.

"Pellinor's been telling everyone who'll listen about your boat trip over," Geraint was saying. "Won't say a bloody thing. He goes white like he's about to French kiss the loo. We're not sure what to believe. Was it really that bad?"

"No," Gareth said, shrugging an insouciant shoulder.

"Yes," Lamorak said, heated and heartfelt, complete with an involuntary shudder of I never want to do it again.

Galahad finally let Arthur go, and Geraint grabbed him by the collar. "Right, I'll let you get on. They're waiting for you. Everything's sorted, nothing for you to worry about, we'll give you some R&R. Bohrs and Bedivere cleared out to bunk somewhere else, so you've got your old room to yourselves unless you want to take the attic -- quieter up there, I recommend it. Anyone wants to get to you, they'll have to come through the rest of us."

Geraint was looking at Merlin when he said that, and there was no mistaking his meaning. Leon had dropped careful hints over the phone in more than one conversation -- no one, absolutely no one was letting Merlin deal with his family until he was ready.
"Oh, and Morgana wants to talk to you. I'd not let her catch me alone, if I were you," Geraint said, moving back into the forest. "We'll be on patrol for a few more hours, but we'll see you at supper, yeah?"

"Watch the skies while you're at it," Lamorak said.

"Dragons again?" Geraint shook his head, making a noise of disgust. "Like bloody cockroaches, they are. Knew I should've signed out some ground-to-airs when I traded for the earlier shift."

"Make sure everyone knows to keep their eyes open," Arthur said, heading back to the SUV.

"Will do," Galahad said, saluting, his mouth wide with a happy grin. "Good to have you back."

"Good to be back, believe me," Merlin said. There was a small smile on his lips and some of the tension had eased from his shoulders.

When he slid into the back seat next to Arthur, he reached for Arthur's hand and squeezed. It was a light, little squeeze, reassuring as much as it sought reassurance, and neither of them pulled away.

They were underway a few minutes later, and it wasn't until they were jarred by an unexpected pothole that Merlin glanced over his shoulder at Will. Will had stayed in the SUV when they were stopped, and he was unusually quiet, now. Arthur turned his head away in a feeble gesture of giving them some privacy.

Whatever silent conversation the two had with just a glance, it felt like Arthur had missed a long, strung-out argument when they finally spoke.

"You'll be fine," Merlin said.

"You don't know what it were like, before," Will said. He shifted in his seat, leaning forward, his arm draping over the edge. "I might've put a fuss up about it when your pillock sent me to London when you were… You know. But can't say I weren't grateful to put some space between me and your mum."

Arthur let himself have two seconds to revel in the backhanded he was right to send me to London, it was getting unbearable before he was forced to reel in his anger that Will even mentioned Hunith. But he remembered how Merlin and Will had grown up together, how Hunith might as well have been Will's mum, too. It had affected Will in more ways than one when Merlin was missing -- Will had lost his brother, and he'd had to face Hunith and admit that he hadn't been able to free her son.

Maybe Arthur hadn't grown up looking to his best friend's mother as his own mum. He didn't even see Hunith as his own mother, never mind mother-in-law. But he knew how gutted he would feel if he had to go to Leon's mum and tell her that he'd left Leon behind.

Merlin gritted his teeth at the mention of his mother, but he didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Will kept talking.

"She can be a little overbearing," he said.

"A little?" Merlin snorted.

"Hmm," Will said, talking into his arm, the mumbled yes both shy and terrified, and that was a laugh, coming from someone as cocksure and brash as Will.

Arthur didn't laugh. To be honest, when Hunith had opened the door of her house the night the team
had arrived after the mess at the testing grounds, Arthur had thought that she was downright terrifying, and that he'd better start running.

It was too late now, though.

Neither of them said anything else. The SUV crested the rise and descended the hill; it wasn't much more after that before they broke past the edge of the forest and the cottage was in sight.

"Holy shite," Merlin said.

The cottage hadn't changed, though the windows were shut tight, and there was a long sheet draped along the far, windowless side of the building, with poles sticking along the edges to give the building an extended appearance.

Several hardtop tents had been raised near the rise before the slope to the lake, blocking the wind that swept in during cold days, and several large reception tents with tables and chairs nearby. Each of the large temporary buildings was fuming smoke through a pipe in the center; the constructions were heated. The tents were, too, and Arthur saw several familiar faces emerge from what he guessed was the mess hall. The last person out was careful to close the flaps, making sure none of the heat escaped.

But beyond that --

Arthur blinked at the sight. He wasn't surprised. He'd pictured something like this, though more on the scale of the messy campgrounds they'd ended up with after graduating from their A-levels and before they went to uni. Between Arthur's friends and Morgana's band of harpies, the entire open field had been crammed full of rickety tents -- most of which hadn't been pitched properly -- and drunk teenagers.

By contrast, the open area around the cottage was a structured mixture of temporary outbuildings and sturdy tents on raised platforms providing a buffer against the cold ground. The more vulnerable residences were crowded toward the middle, so close together that from a distance, it looked as if it were a single building. The tent city was shielded against the worst of the elements by larger tents ringing the middle, and on the outside were solid constructions and motor homes. Generators had been situated in every block to provide power, a complicated system had been set up for the toilets. There were eight different buildings with Showers scrawled over the door in big letters, half of them with No Boys Allowed, and the other half with Girls Have Cooties Anyway.

Arthur spotted the kitchens by the heavier smoke emerging from the pipes on top of the more sturdy enclosures, guessed that a couple of the larger, unused rooms had been converted into schools for the younger kids during the day and bunk rooms at night, and thought he'd picked out a section that looked as if it were still being constructed. It wasn't until he took a second glance that he realized that it wasn't being built, but expanded.

There were more people than Arthur had originally accounted for.

Intellectually, Arthur knew that it was inevitable that the area around the cottage wouldn't be restricted to close family and friends. He'd left enough of a margin of error to account for extra people who would have accompanied them, even stragglers that they would have picked up along the way but couldn't leave behind, like Bran. Leon had mentioned something along those lines, but also said that it was manageable.

It looked like it was more than that. Army engineers -- both former and current -- obviously had a hand in setting up a proper layout while ensuring that each section could accommodate more people.
There was room for spread, as well, either in building out, up, or down, and it was clean, orderly, and logical. Everyone was working on one task or another, pitching in and keeping busy however they could.

"People have started to call this place Camelot," Leon said, a tone of humour in his voice. "I can't even remember how it started. Seemed as if, for every new group to arrive, they'd see everyone else and say, Wow, a lot of people came here" and it just became Came-a-lot, somehow. Anyway, you'll see. And don't worry. We're rationing the supplies for now, and Allan's got a lead on a warehouse full of food sitting there and going rotten, so we'll have a surplus, soon. You should hear some of the old-timers, though. They're acting like they're in for the long haul, and they're talking about planting in the spring."

Arthur hoped that the current situation wouldn't last that long, but he had a sinking feeling that it would be worse.

As he watched, though, he realized that everyone was busier than they should be. Someone had erected an arch and decorated it with wreaths of ivy and poinsettias. There was a table nearby, covered in white cloth that whipped in the wind but somehow, miraculously, didn't fly away. A young woman was carrying a heavy platter from the house and was hurrying toward the large mess tent, her long coat flapping around her legs. A few seconds later, she was followed by several other people carrying bowls and vases and decorations.

"Something's going on," Will remarked.

"Nothing gets by you," Lamorak said. "I understand how you made it as a sniper."

"Still a better shot than you," Will said sullenly. Arthur only understood the weak rejoinder when he glanced over and saw that Will had twisted around and was watching a pretty blonde heading into the mess tent, a large basket in her arms.

Arthur made a note to introduce Will to Vivian later, if for no other reason than to antagonize Olaf.

Curious eyes watched them as they drove past. A few split from the miniature village and raced towards the house. Arthur picked out every member of the team -- other than Geraint and Galahad -- arriving at the cottage or emerging from the front and side doors, and they were on the car before Gareth had brought it to a full stop, yanking the doors open and pulling the passengers out.

Merlin was the first person out, laughing when Bohrs half-carried him out. The laugh became a muffled squeal when Gwaine appeared out of nowhere, no doubt having taken dibs on the first hug, and enveloped Merlin in a bone-crunching hold.

"Don't ever, ever do that again," Arthur heard Gwaine say. He didn't know if Merlin replied, because he was being pulled out, too. He caught a glimpse of Perceval picking up both Gwaine and Merlin and hugging them both before he was damn near knocked out by Morgana -- he ducked, but just barely. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely.

His air supply was cut off, but he didn't protest.

"It's about time you came back," Morgana said, finally letting him go. She wiped tears from her cheeks and hugged him a second time before making room for Gwen, and they both let him go when the rest of the team crowded around them, waiting for their turn.

The entire time that he exchanged greetings and gave reassurances, Arthur kept an eye on Merlin. He saw what the team was doing -- keeping themselves between Hunith, who was looking on anxiously
from the steps of the cottage, and Merlin.

Not ten feet away were Gaius and Balinor. There was a stiff civility between them, almost frosty, the sort of cold shoulder to end all cold shoulders. Arthur could understand Gaius' enmity toward his brother-in-law, but he didn't understand Balinor's toward Gaius, and wondered if there was something that he'd missed.

Balinor's arms were crossed over his chest and his expression was guarded, but there was a wistful twist to his mouth and a downcast pull of his eyes, as if he were trying not to be caught watching the son he hadn't seen in nearly three decades. Gaius’ clasped his hands together, and he looked wrung-out, his face lined with more wrinkles than had been there before, and his blond hair was a shade whiter than Arthur remembered. He looked gaunt, sick with worry, and Arthur wavered between thinking that Gaius deserved it for having lied to Merlin and wondering why Balinor didn't seem bothered by what he'd done.

At all.

Arthur turned away before the rage he'd buried down deep rose up like a leviathan. He spotted Mordred up on the rise near the cottage, watching them wistfully. His hands were shoved deep in a rough overcoat, the collar turned up to brace against the wind, looking smaller than Arthur had expected. He hadn't had a chance to talk to Mordred, but he trusted that Leon had interrogated him and had been satisfied with his answers, or else Mordred wouldn't have been allowed to walk around freely or even permitted to cast protections against the storm on the cottage.

Arthur turned and saw Allan in the crowd. Will elbowed his way through and greeted his father with a one-armed flail that turned into a half-hug and an attempt to jump into his dad's arms as if he were still a kid. Allan, casting an inscrutable look toward Hunith, threw a protective arm over Will's shoulders and pulled Will along somewhere else, away from the group. Arthur didn't see where they went.

Morgana followed Arthur as Arthur moved through the crowd, greeting everyone and exchanging handshakes or hugs. Pellinor's mother lingered for only moments before saying something about the roast needs basting and disappearing in the kitchen. Gwen's father clapped Arthur roughly on the back until Gwen chased him away, nagging him to stay out of the cold. Bohrs' baby sister squealed a high-pitched hullo when she hugged Arthur, kissing his cheek and whispering a fierce thank you in his ear.

Arthur laughed when Bohrs picked up his shorter and slighter sibling and threw her over his shoulder. The tightly-packed space dispersed when she kicked her legs out and slapped Bohrs' arse. "Let me down, you twat. I'm saying hello --"

"And I've told you, it's about time you stop mooning over him," Bohrs said. "The man's taken."

"Oh my God," Bohrs' sister wailed. "Shut up."

"Also, he's gay. Haven't I told you he's gay? I don't know why you never believed me --"

"Why are you still talking!" she yelled. Bohrs barely managed to keep from getting a knee in the face, but for all of Aimée's violent struggles, Bohrs never came close to letting her go. "Why do you have to ruin everything for me?"

Bohrs patted Aimée's hip as he carried her away, but Arthur grinned when he heard him say, "Why can't you fall tits over arse over a nice, young boy your age? Or, really, any nice boy? Anyone who's not on my team? Because let me tell you, they're all wankers, and if they so much as look at you
Elyan appeared in front of Arthur, and it had been ages since Arthur had seen Gwen's little brother. He was taller, his shoulders broader, and he looked as if he'd taken the time between partying in university and completing his graduate degree to fill out properly. It was strange to see him now, to pick out the intensity in his eyes and the maturity that he wore like a protective cloak. He might be younger than Gwen, but Arthur had always thought Elyan to be so much older, and that was evident now in the way he carried himself.


Elyan's smile was big and bright, and for a fraction of a moment, Arthur saw the same worrisome mischief he always saw in Gwen, and wondered how much trouble he was going to be in. "Of course, I did. What was I going to do, hang out in London, twiddling my thumbs? I would've come with the others, but you know how it is. Couldn't leave my mates behind, not until I made sure they were safe."

Arthur nodded firmly, proud. There had been a time when Elyan was the black sheep of the family, always getting into some sort of trouble or another, but he'd grown up in the last few years. They exchanged a quick hug before Elyan slipped away, muttering something confusing about a sound mix.

Morgana was right behind Arthur again when he turned around, looking for Merlin. There was an intensity in her expression hinting that she was up to something that she barely held in check, and Arthur remembered Geraint's warning not to let Morgana get him alone. Morgana was his sister, and he loved her dearly, but whatever it was that she wanted, it could wait until he made certain that Merlin was all right. He was hyperaware of Balinor's presence, overly conscious of Hunith watching, just outside the crowd, and if Merlin didn't want to deal with them, Arthur would make sure that he didn't have to.

"Arthur, I've got to tell you something," Morgana said. There was an urgency in her tone, but it was the way her nails dug into his palm that made Arthur stop, really stop, and look at her.

"Whatever it is, I want to hear it," Arthur said. He glanced around, relieved when he spotted Merlin with Bedivere, Gwaine standing next to him with his arm around Merlin's shoulders in a possessive gesture that Arthur should be jealous of, but wasn't.

That was when he realized that he didn't know where Hunith had gone. She was no longer up the rise to the cottage, and --

The team parted as if they knew they could only keep someone's mum away for so long, and Arthur grimaced against the flood of alarm when he saw Hunith heading towards Merlin.

"Morgana, can it wait? Ten minutes?"

He didn't wait to hear her answer, though the exasperation hit him in the shape of an expensive leather glove tossed at his head. It landed on his shoulder, and he pocketed it without really thinking, trying to hurry.

Hunith reached Merlin first.

They looked at each other for what seemed like minutes -- Hunith, with an expression of mixed joy and concern, Merlin, with barely suppressed anger that was only momentarily swamped at the relief of seeing his mother.
It only lasted a moment, though. Arthur saw the way that Merlin stiffened. Gwaine's hand tightened on Merlin's shoulder. Bedivere shifted his weight from one foot to another, nearly stepping between the two, and murmured something in Merlin's ear.

After a moment, Merlin shook his head, and Bedivere moved aside, though reluctantly. Gwaine didn't look as if he wanted to leave Merlin to Hunith, but when Merlin shrugged his shoulders to brush Gwaine's arm away and nodded faintly, Gwaine moved aside.

Gwaine caught Arthur's eyes and gestured with both arms -- he wasn't subtle, not at all. *What are you going to do about this?* He asked, mouthing the words.

Arthur didn't know. He could only take his cue from Merlin.

Merlin stood where he was, his legs braced, his arms at his side and his hands in white-knuckled fists. If Hunith noticed how Merlin held himself, she didn't let it show, because from one instant to the next, her expression softened and she said, "Oh, Merlin."

And before anyone could stop her, she closed the distance between them. Her arms went around Merlin's waist, her head at his shoulders, and she held him gently, carefully, as if he were fragile and the slightest thing could break him.

She didn't understand that Merlin was already broken. That *she* was the one who had broken him.

Merlin didn't return the embrace. He didn't move. Arthur saw the way Merlin's jaw worked, as if he were struggling to keep from speaking his mind. At the same time, though, there was *something* in Merlin's expression, in the way his eyes fluttered half-closed with yearning. This was his mother, the woman who had borne him and birthed him, who had raised him and taught him, who had nurtured him and loved him, and like most men who had been through terrible trauma, Merlin needed his Mum.

And that, at heart, was the problem.

If the circumstances were different, Arthur could easily imagine Merlin curling into his mother's arms, desperate for that comfort. He'd been imprisoned, beaten, tortured, interrogated -- anyone would want to feel safe, to feel cared for, to be in a place where he would be secure, with people who wouldn't judge him.

Arthur could understand that need. He might not have a mother to turn to, but he had his sister. When everything else went to shit, it was Morgana who was there for him.

Except.

*Except.*

The circumstances were as they were, and Hunith was no longer safe, not for Merlin. She had lied to him, and, no matter the reason why, for good or for bad, Merlin couldn't trust her anymore.

Arthur wasn't certain how long Hunith and Merlin stood there, only in a half-embrace. It seemed that the small clearing held its collective breath, watching without really watching, aware and alert for anything that might go wrong.

And Merlin… Merlin *tolerated* the comfort that she was giving him. For a moment. He raised his chin and shook his head as if telling himself, *I can't do this.*

Merlin took Hunith's arms. He pried them off. He took a step away.
He wasn't looking at Hunith, or he would have seen the absolute devastation across her face. Arthur could sympathize with her pain, but he couldn't feel pity.

"Merlin," she said, her voice a strangled sob. "Merlin, no. Merlin, I didn't --"

Merlin dropped her arms.

He walked away.

"Merlin, let me explain," Hunith begged, following after him. No one tried to stop her, but Merlin outdistanced her easily. When Hunith stopped abruptly, as if hitting a wall, Arthur saw all of her strength seep away. Her shoulders sank, her body bowed, and she shook, broken by guilt and grief.

Balinor uncrossed his arms, his expression thunderous. He started after Merlin, but Lamorak and Gareth blocked his way.

"You told him," Hunith accused, her voice cracking. "You told him. What right did you have to --"

A mere slap wasn't enough for her -- she punched Arthur. He turned his head in time to avoid the worst of it. It wasn't even that much of a blow. She walked on stumbling legs and trembled from the weight of her own emotions. Arthur was certain that if the Major was at her best, Arthur would have been picking himself up from the ground. As it was, he caught her wrists before she could strike him again. This wasn't his fault. He didn't deserve to be the target of her anger -- she needed a mirror for that.

"Merlin deserves one person in his life who won't ever lie to him. It should have been you," Arthur said. He knew it wasn't kind. He knew that it wasn't Hunith's fault. He understood that she had chosen to do whatever she could to protect her son. Arthur couldn't even say that he wouldn't have done the same.

But it was Merlin, and he couldn't stand to see him suffer. He couldn't stand to see Merlin like this -- betrayed, hurt, broken.

Part of him couldn't deal with it because he knew he hadn't dealt with his own feelings of betrayal. If there was one thing he knew, it was that Uther could never give Arthur a good reason for having done everything that he had done. It didn't matter if it made sense in Uther's head. Or even in Hunith's. There was no reason they could give either Arthur or Merlin to excuse why they had chosen to do as they had done.

Arthur dropped Hunith's hands.

He saw Mordred going after Merlin, and something in him fretted that he shouldn't let Mordred talk to Merlin, not when Merlin was like this.

There was a touch on his arm; the touch became a pull. He followed Morgana away from the crowd, and she led the way, following Mordred.

"What are you standing around for, you numpty," Morgana said, her voice trembling with rage, but it was an anger that was directed elsewhere, and he didn't mind her fingernails digging through his coat. "Go after him."

When Morgana didn't let go of his arm, but kept walking with him, Arthur waited until they were out of everyone's earshot and stopped, looking pointedly at her hand. "I'm not sure Merlin wants to be around people right now."
"You're not people," Morgana said, snorting. She pushed him along more.

Arthur stopped again. He looked her over, frowning. Her hair was done up, pinned in curls and there were little, sparkling diamonds in her ears. She was wearing an overcoat that was too large to be hers -- Leon's, probably. Those sweatpants were pushed up on her calves where they weren't tucked into the clunky boots that were always in the cottage hallway, because they were so ugly no one wanted to lay claim to them, least of all Morgana.

It made for a surreal image. Beautifully done up, her makeup pristine, the diamonds --

"Morgana," Arthur said, half in revelation, half in glee. He paused, biting on his own tongue to keep the broad smile from spreading across his face. He huffed and tried to put on a stern air. "What did you want to tell me?"

"It can wait," Morgana said, her brows pinching. "Merlin needs you."

Arthur quirked a brow. He tilted a head and gave her a quick once-over that she couldn't miss. "I have a feeling you're on a schedule."

Morgana's cheeks flushed, but she waved a hand dismissively in the air. "It's only because you called Leon when you were on the road. I thought now was as good a time as any. I mean, we filed the paperwork at the village, the Druids opened up the shops for us, Gwaine even took down two deer, and they've been waiting to cook them --"

"For what, Morgana? It's as good a time as any… for what?" Arthur asked. He already knew, he did -- there was no missing the ring on her finger, not after it had caught the light when she tried to distract him. Merlin… Merlin could wait a few minutes. Mordred couldn't do that much damage in such a short period of time. At least, Arthur didn't think so. But if Morgana didn't get to the point quickly, Arthur was going to ruin her surprise.

Morgana breathed in deeply. She let it out in a slow exhale, as if steeling herself. "For a wedding, Arthur. I'm getting married today."

Arthur didn't hide his smile. He didn't even try. He'd been waiting for this moment for a very long time -- probably even well before Leon gathered up the courage to ask her out in the first place. He'd seen every aspect of their relationship from both sides.

All the agonized waffling on Leon's side in the beginning -- *why would she even go out with me in the first place?*

All the navel-gazing angst from Morgana -- *I've got a shite track record with men, why would Leon ask me out, anyway? Does he think I'm easy?*

All the ups and down in the beginning. In the middle. In the end -- which, fortunately, didn't look like it would ever come. Arthur didn't know what he would have ended up doing if Leon hadn't gathered his courage to propose -- possibly tie them up together with the bloody ring in plain sight in the hopes that one of them would get asked.

After everything that they'd been through, after the unexpected extension to their military careers, the imposed separation, the stress, the strain, the subterfuge that had nothing to do with their personal relationship but everything to do with keeping the mission going…

Morgana and Leon deserved to be happy, and everyone else deserved to share that moment.

Arthur took her hands and squeezed them. "Good. It's about time."
"It's Leon's fault," Morgana laughed, and she was so happy she couldn't contain her joy. There were tears in her eyes, and she shook her hands free of Arthur's grasp to cover her mouth.

"No, no, don't do that," Arthur said, taking her wrists gently, pulling them away. "And don't you dare cry. You'll ruin your makeup."

"Sod my makeup," Morgana said. She scowled furiously, but the grudging look she gave him was ruined when she kept sniffling and couldn't keep from grinning like a little girl who had just gotten the biggest piece of candy.

Arthur smiled at her, and they both laughed a second later.

"There's one more thing, though," Morgana said, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with the flat of her fingers, wiping away the tears that had escaped despite everything. "You're not going to like it."

Arthur winced, because it had already been a long day, and he could do without. "You're pregnant?"

Morgana hit him in the arm. "Don't even start with me. I've heard enough from Gwaine, and bloody Lucan found a pregnancy kit somewhere, and stuck the empty box in the rubbish bin in our room. Leon almost had a heart attack when he saw it --"

The laugh escaped Arthur unexpectedly, and Morgana hit him again.

"No, you idiot. You can't be Leon's best man," Morgana said.

"I can't?" Arthur asked, suddenly sober, confused, and hurt. Leon was his best mate. They'd known each other forever. Arthur had always assumed that he would be Leon's best man, and he would be gracious about it, too, because he'd let Gwaine plan the bachelor party. It wasn't that Arthur didn't already have a plan if he were to throw the party himself; it was that Gwaine always went over the top, and Leon deserved something like that.

"You can't be in two places at once," Morgana said, her voice soft. "You're walking me down the aisle."

Arthur blinked. He blinked again, because this time, his eyes had filled with tears.

He must have stood there for too long without answering, because Morgana asked a quiet, hopeful, "Aren't you?"

Arthur shook his head and took a step forward, wrapping her in his arms. He closed his eyes tight, and his voice was a little rough with emotion when he answered, "Of course I am."

ooOoOo

Merlin stopped walking because he'd run out of land. It took him a minute to figure out where he was.

The cottage rooftop was visible in the distance, just over the skeletal treetops and heavy pine branches. Smoke curled from the fireplace, blowing up and out, fading into the clouds. The tents couldn't be seen from here. It might be winter, but the forest around the Pendragon cottage was thick, providing cover and shelter against the wind.
Merlin was at the furthest edge of the forest, at the point where the lake curved around a stony bend. If he wanted to hike further, he'd have to follow the water until he reached the ramshackle bridge at the narrowest point, cross over, and continue on. Eventually, he'd reach Crown land, but not for a while; the property was wide and broad, something he knew well from the number of times Arthur had run them through PT on the back trails.

Bits of ice cracked under his weight. He stepped back onto more solid ground, the grass crinkling.

The lake was flat and calm. In the distance, in a little, sheltered cove, condensing steam lingered on the surface of the water. The murky sky reflected on the dark waters, swirling and churning as if imitating the storm of emotions that Merlin couldn't sort out.

He'd walked away from his Mum.

He swallowed hard, but the stone of regret and anger in his throat didn't move, and he couldn't breathe.

Merlin had been... apprehensive when he'd first seen his Mum coming toward him. He'd seen the worry written all over her face, the love, the care. And when she hugged him, he'd wanted to lean into it so desperately, despite everything. He didn't know what it was, but no matter how bad things had ever gotten in his life, his Mum could make everything better just by being there. When she wrapped her arms around him, it was as if she'd taken all the weight from his shoulders and carried it for him, at least for a little while.

He'd wanted to see her. He'd... convinced himself that he understood why she had lied to him all this time, why she'd kept this secret from him. He wanted to hear what she had to say about it. He wanted to forgive her. Gods, he'd be an arse not to forgive his own mother for doing everything in her power to protect him.

Except.

Except Merlin had glanced up, his attention drawn by movement up on the rise. And he'd seen him. Him.

In dark trousers and scuffed army boots. In layers of shirts under a rough-hewn coat from the army surplus store, faded and torn from use. With crossed arms over a broad chest, with a forbidding expression and stony eyes, with long black hair tied back and loose strands flying in the wind, with a mouth set in a firm, disapproving line.

Merlin's father.

Balinor.

It all came crashing down in that moment. The stunned silence when he'd peeked around his mother's legs to see the uniformed officers standing at their door, offering their condolences. The hoarse rawness of his throat from screaming until he'd cried himself to sleep. The disbelief that had followed him for days, only to be replaced by anguish whenever he caught his mother sobbing at the kitchen table.

He hated this man for the pain he had given his mother. He hated this man for asking his mother to keep his survival secret from those who were after him. He hated this man for convincing his mother to keep the truth from Merlin.

He hated his mother for keeping it from him.
He'd pushed her away, overwhelmed and numb.

Merlin rubbed his face. He lowered his hands and blew warm air into them. He stiffened when he heard footsteps approaching behind him, the ice in once-puddled crevices splintering in their passage.

"It's only me," Mordred said.

Merlin exhaled, letting go of the magic that he hadn't known had risen to the fore. He thought he heard a sigh of relief behind him, but he didn't turn around.

"The others stopped them from coming after you," Mordred said. "Your parents, I mean. Arthur should be on his way, but I saw Morgana waylay him."

Merlin nodded and turned away. He pulled at the collar of his jacket and zipped it up all the way, narrowing his eyes as a bluster of wind cut through the small clearing. "Why are you here?"

Among the people that Merlin wanted to talk to right now -- and, admittedly, the list was very short -- Mordred wasn't one of them. For all that Mordred had helped Merlin, protecting him from Aredian however he could, even leaving behind a trail for Arthur and the team to follow, Merlin didn't know if he could trust Mordred. He didn't even know if Mordred should have the freedom to walk around, even if Leon had said that they'd been keeping an eye on him, and that Mordred had been nothing but helpful.

"I'm not sure," Mordred admitted.

Merlin turned to look at him.

Mordred was in a thick pea coat that came down to mid-thigh, the collar up, his shoulders nearly to his ears. His eyes were narrowed against the sharp wind, his cheeks were ruddy-red, and his expression was a miserable grimace. It was cold, but it wasn't that cold. Merlin raised a brow.

"I'm not accustomed to the winters here," Mordred admitted. He shoved his bare hands into his pockets.

"You really haven't been home in a long time," Merlin said.

"Not at this time of year, no," Mordred said. He sounded a little lost. "And never to stay. I am not certain if this is the land's way of welcoming me --"

"Rather chilly reception, if you ask me," Merlin said.

Mordred huffed a laugh. "Or if it's trying to get me to leave."

Merlin snorted. "Don't take it personally, mate. We're all suffering here, not just you."


Merlin turned away, not wanting to think too much about Mordred's tone of voice and how it was familiar. He'd been lonely, too, once upon a time. Detached from everything and everyone. Never included, always on the outside looking in and hoping, one day, that people would accept him for who and what he was.

Merlin had been lucky. He'd had Will. He'd been assigned to Arthur and his team. They were people who had stood by him despite everything. They'd gotten over their fear or had never been afraid at all.
We're all suffering here, not just you. Merlin was such a fucking hypocrite. Mordred was suffering most of all. Whatever he'd done, he'd done it to try to stop the darkness before it fell, and because of that, because of an association that he couldn't have helped...

Mordred was their prisoner. Despite that, the team would have treated him with respect. He hadn't come to harm. They'd fed him, they'd given him shelter, warm clothes, bedding. But they also used him when it was convenient -- when they needed to protect Morgana and Gaius and the other even remotely magically-sensitive people among their family and friends. Beyond that, Mordred wasn't one of them.

He wasn't one of anyone.

Nothing was keeping Mordred among them. He was a magic user stronger than even the Directory sorcerers, than any of Aredian's men. If he really wanted to leave, if there was somewhere for him to go, he would have gone, and there would have been no stopping him.

Instead, he stayed here, where everyone was suspicious of him, where he was kept under watch, where he was part of the small community, but ostracized.

Merlin didn't understand why Mordred hadn't joined the Druids in the village. He had had the opportunity, Merlin knew. Leon said that the former mayor of the village had offered Mordred a place to stay, but Mordred had demurred politely.

"Whose side are you really on, Mordred?"

"I don't know," Mordred said.

Merlin turned to look at him. The tree branches clinked together in the wind, and the shadows across Mordred's face were fractured, like broken glass.

"I don't know what side I'm supposed to be on, not anymore," Mordred said. His voice was very small. He started to say something else, but he stopped, turning to look behind him.

Merlin heard it, too. The steady crunch of footsteps on the deer trail, shattering icy grass and miniature frozen puddles at a steady rhythm. Someone was running their way.

Arthur breached the rise and slowed down, his expression shifting from worried urgency to relieved concern. He glanced at Mordred, his mouth tightening, but continued to move forward, past Mordred, until he'd reached Merlin.

Mordred bowed his head and nodded, as if to himself. He hunched his shoulders even more, hiding himself in his pea coat, his arms tight at his sides. He turned and walked away.

Arthur's hand on Merlin's arm was warm, sinking through the layers of clothing. Merlin stepped into Arthur out of reflex, out of need, and made a decision.

"Mordred," Merlin said.

Mordred stopped and turned, but reluctantly, his body angled as if he wanted to run, as if he knew that he didn't belong.

Fuck.

Merlin exhaled slowly. "Cennydd was alive when I left him. He did everything he could to protect me. We staged it to make it look like I'd shot him to escape. He said..."
Merlin tried to remember the exact words.

"He said that he would come find you as soon as he could."

Mordred's expression, so hopeful for an instant, fell. He nodded and started to turn away. His brow pinched, and he struggled with himself for a few seconds before he asked, "When he said that... Was it in English?"

Merlin paused, wondering why that mattered. But then he remembered how Mordred had reprogrammed the GPS in the car to speak in Welsh, and how he only ever spoke with Cennydd in Welsh when they were alone, when they weren't at a risk of being overheard. Merlin, apparently, didn't count, because he wasn't the enemy.

_He wasn't the enemy._

That rattled Merlin in ways that he didn't understand until he turned it around. Cennydd and Mordred had never treated him like they'd treated the enemy. _They were never his enemy._

Letting Merlin _in_, allowing to see Cennydd and Mordred as they really were -- Merlin understood.

"No. It was in Welsh," Merlin said, because the Welsh was a _promise_. "Dwi'n dod amdano fe. Gwed di 'na wrtho fe. Cyn gynted byddai 'di sorto pethe mas a gorffen beth daethon ni yma i wneud. Bydd hi ddim yn hir nawr. That's what he said."

_I'm coming for him. You tell him that. As soon as I sort things out and finish what we came here to do. It won't be much longer._

He didn't miss the curl of a smile touching Mordred's lips, or the way he ducked his head as if overwhelmingly pleased and too shy to show it. But that wasn't it at all, Merlin knew. Mordred had spent years hiding who and what he really was, of tucking away his feelings, of surviving undercover with no training and fighting with everything that he had to keep from being subverted to the enemy's cause. This was Mordred showing himself as he really was.

He was still a young boy. He was a boy turned soldier, a man without a childhood, someone who had never been meant for this, never fully prepared for the scars that a life undercover would leave behind. Merlin and Arthur and the rest of them had only been undercover for less than a year; Mordred had been doing this since he was a teenager.

"Thank you," Mordred said, and he walked away this time, his shoulders down, his chin up, the wind swirling after him, chasing at dry leaves and tree branches.

Merlin watched him go. And when he was gone, he turned into Arthur and threw his arms around him. Arthur's arms were solid, his body was warm, and Merlin rested his chin on Arthur's shoulder, shutting his eyes tightly.

He let out a shuddery breath that he hadn't known he'd been holding. Mordred's presence had eased some -- if not all -- of Merlin's anger, but there was more than that left behind. He didn't know... He didn't know how to...

He'd forgiven his mother, he reminded himself. It was...

It was Balinor.

Merlin didn't know how he was supposed to have a father again.
Arthur's hand ran down his back. It was as gentle, reassuring sensation, a wordless promise that everything would be all right, and Merlin didn't know how.

"I'm sorry," Merlin said, and he wasn't sure what he was apologizing for. He'd had plenty of time to adjust to the idea of his father being alive, to sort out how he felt about it, to get over the heart-deep hurt at having been lied to all this time, but it didn't seem like it would ever be enough, and --

"No," Arthur murmured. "No, love. Nothing to be sorry for."

Merlin didn't know how long they stood there like that. He opened his eyes and he thought the sun had gone down a little, because the reflections in the mirrored waters were different, and the shadowed cove was no longer steaming into the cold air.

"I would've been all right if... If he hadn't been there. Looking at us as if he's better than we are. Disapproving of everything we're doing. As if we're not good enough. As if I'm not good enough," Merlin said.

"Fuck him," Arthur said, and there was so much hostile passion in those two words that Merlin couldn't help but laugh.

After a moment, Arthur laughed with him, too.

"Gods," Merlin said, pulling away a little. He didn't go too far. The air was cold and Arthur was warm, and he'd been stupid to walk away the way he had, without thinking about at least grabbing his beanie or his gloves. He slid his hands down and stuffed them in Arthur's coat pockets, because Arthur's pockets were always warmer than his own. "There are other things to worry about, and here I am, having an existential crisis. Magic has returned, there are evil sorcerers, there are dragons, there are evil dragons, and we're pretty sure that there's going to be war at some point, and it's going to involve some sort of doomsday machine. But I'm stuck navel-gazing over being a bad son because I'm mad at my Mum for lying to me and my father's back from the dead and I'm pretty sure I don't measure up."

"Fuck him," Arthur said again, this time with a faint smile darting across his lips. The smile faded, and there was a pinch to Arthur's brow as he went on. "You don't owe him anything. As far as we're concerned, he's just another soldier. You don't have to treat him any differently than you treat anyone else. He's not your father. You're not his son. He's just another bloke until you say different."

Arthur pressed his lips against Merlin's temple.

"And, if nothing else, you need to remember one thing," Arthur said.

"What's that?"

"You outrank him," Arthur said. Merlin huffed a laugh. "And if he gives you trouble, just say the word. I know Bohrs is just itching for a reason to toss him out on his arse."

Merlin leaned against Arthur again, smiling a little. The smile didn't last. He couldn't help but feel sad, even a little angry.

"What has he done to Bohrs?"

"Nothing, I suppose. Everything," Arthur said, loosening his hold around Merlin and taking a step back. The cold air rushed between them, and Merlin shivered involuntarily, keeping his hands in Arthur's coat. "Bohrs' dad left them when Bohrs wasn't any more than three or four. His mum had a hard go of it for a while. He's never spoken to his dad since. Not once. Won't even talk about him,
either. I suppose he looks at Balinor and everything comes flooding back for him."

Merlin bowed his head and nodded. "Shite. I didn't know. I thought his dad --"

Arthur shook his head. He also shook at his coat until Merlin took his hands out of the pockets with a scowl, shoving his hands into his own coat. "His mum remarried. He has his baby sister. And he thinks of his step-father as his father, as good as blood if not better. If anyone understands how you feel, with Balinor showing up out of the blue, it would be him."

Merlin frowned, because he hadn't known that. He was sure that there was a lot that he didn't know about many members of the team, just like they didn't know everything about him, but it was a strange feeling realizing that the man who had taken exception to Merlin in the early days was also the same man who would defend Merlin against his own father.

"Do you want to go back?" Arthur asked.

"Probably should," Merlin said, running a hand through his hair before blowing breath in his cupped hands again. "I'm a right twat, and it's cold."

"You're not, and it is," Arthur said, pulling off his gloves. "Here. Wear these."

Merlin hesitated, but he saw the look on Arthur's face and knew that arguing would be a waste of time. Arthur was the one who ran hot on a good day; he might be cold, but he probably didn't feel it right now. Also, Merlin wasn't going to turn his nose up at a pair of warm gloves.

"Mordred said Morgana caught you," Merlin said, flexing long fingers in gloves that were a size too wide for him, the fingers just that little bit shorter, but stretched out just enough for him. He tucked a hand in Arthur's arm and they walked back, neither of them in a hurry. "Is everything all right?"

Arthur made a soft sound and shrugged a shoulder. "I suppose so. It depends on your definition of all right."

Merlin stilled. He eyed Arthur sidelong, not sure what he was on about and unable to tell from his tone if it was something to worry about or if it was something dire that they needed to steel themselves against. But then again, if it was something catastrophic, surely Leon would have called them when they were on the road to warn them ahead of time so that Arthur could prepare yet another series of action plans supported with a string of contingency plans to take care of the situation.

Why was Morgana the one to tell Arthur --

"What," Merlin said, his eyes narrowing when he saw the quirk of Arthur's lips.

"Well," Arthur said, unable to keep a straight face anymore. His mouth pulled into a small, happy smile, and his eyes twinkled despite the shadows. "How do you feel about wearing a tux for a few hours?"

"Rather good, actually, considering that under no circumstances are tuxedoes considered to be emergency equipment," Merlin said.

"Unless you're 007," Arthur pointed out, tilting his head in invitation and tugging at Merlin's arm until Merlin caved in and followed after.

"Which I'm not, unless I got recruited and no one told me," Merlin groused. "I'm not nearly dashing enough anyway. You, however, fit the bill pretty well. Could stand in for Daniel Craig any day of
the week. I'll even buy the Blu-Ray when it's out. Are you sure our orders didn't get switched?"

Arthur chuckled. "No, Morgana was pretty specific."

"Oh," Merlin said, considering. After a second, he shrugged. "I'm pretty sure I didn't pack one in my kit and even if she was throwing a posh do, I'd rather walk around the camp and set some wards before crashing for the night."

"There's a posh do, and if you'd rather walk around the camp, set wards, and crash for the night, I'm sure Leon would understand. Things happen. Morgana, on the other hand, would be rather put out if you didn't make an appearance for their wedding."

This time, Merlin didn't still. He stopped dead, as if struck by a solid blow. He rocked back on his heels, catching himself before he fell, his fingers twitching tightly around Arthur's biceps even as Arthur squeezed his arm close to his body to catch Merlin's hand before it slipped out completely, steadying him.

"What," Merlin said again, this time with a soft laugh. "They're getting married?"

Arthur's smile was big and bright, the sign of a man who couldn't be more pleased by this turn of events. For Merlin, in that moment, every other thing in the world took a firm second place, because he hadn't seen Arthur like this for a very long time, free and careless, his shoulders back, his chin up, and not an ounce of weight on his shoulders.

"They're getting married," Merlin repeated, matching Arthur's grin, freeing his hand from Arthur's arm to clap his hands with glee. Then, abruptly, he dropped his hands, stricken; Arthur's face fell, suddenly alarmed.

"Don't tell me we missed the stag do."

Arthur gave Merlin a look, one of those full of things he didn't say out loud, and this one said, don't do that to me. "Skipping right to the shackle and chain, I'm afraid. Morgana doesn't want a fuss, but if you see the setup they've got running, she's got a funny idea when it comes to that sort of thing."

Merlin tilted his head, picking out the important bits, and blinked. "What, it's now?"

"It's now," Arthur said, his grin broadening. "Now. Right as soon as we get back, as soon as we sort ourselves out with the tuxedoes she pinched from the village. Don't ask how she got our measurements --"

"I've learned not to ask anything when it comes to Morgana and Gwen, actually. Those two frighten me," Merlin said. He tugged at Arthur's arm. "What are you waiting for? Our mate's getting married to your sister. This isn't the time to drag your heels --"

Arthur pulled him close. Merlin fell into Arthur's arms easily, and the heated kiss was crushing, dizzying, disorienting. Arthur's fingers dug through Merlin's hair; Merlin's hands were tight at Arthur's waist for only a few seconds before Arthur pulled away.

When Merlin opened his eyes, already mourning the loss, it was to see Arthur looking at him with such open fondness and love that it made Merlin's heart stop.

"Marry me," Arthur said. His voice was a hoarse murmur, as if it had taken everything he had to say the words.

Merlin's heart thumped so loud that it was a cymbal crash in the silence of the forest, and he was surprised that the birds still nesting in the trees this late in the year hadn't flown off, startled by the sudden sound. His hands trembled at Arthur's waist, and he managed a small, soft laugh. "We're
Arthur's expression didn't waver. If anything, it took on an intensity that shook Merlin to the core, and he walked closer to Merlin, pushing him back, ever back, until Merlin was pressed against the firm trunk of an unyielding oak tree.

"Marry me," Arthur said again, his smile broadening. "With rings and council paperwork and Gaius and all the spirits blessing the marriage --"

Merlin's eyes watered, and he blinked to clear his vision. "You're such a prat, I don't know if they'll do it again --"


"Mum won't be able to kill Gaius this time," Merlin muttered, and Arthur laughed.

"We'll have our stag-dos before. It'll make up for Leon missing out," Arthur said, kissing the corner of Merlin's mouth. "We'll show up hungover and Gaius will make us drink that horrid cure he gave us the last time we were at the cottage."

"Yes, because when we get to the you may kiss your spouse part of the ceremony, we should have bad breath," Merlin said, laughing. "You're not doing a good job of persuading me."

"Marry me," Arthur said, pressing Merlin into the tree, kissing along Merlin's throat, nudging at the collar and pushing Merlin's scarf away. "There'll be ridiculous garlands on the walls at the reception hall. We'll make everyone play silly games. We'll disappear until it's time to cut the cake and we'll be wearing each other's clothes when we come back."

"Tempting," Merlin said, wrapping his arms around Arthur and holding him close. "Will we worry about our pants?"

"We'll leave the bloody pants wherever we tossed them," Arthur said, his mouth a smile as he kissed along Merlin's jaw. "Pay extra to cover the groundskeeper's damages."

"Yeah, because cleaning up come-stained pants littering the garden is just cruel, especially when it's not your own," Merlin said, tilting his head. Arthur pressed a kiss on the underside of Merlin's jaw and Merlin made a soft sound of encouragement.

"Gwaine can be the master of ceremonies --"

"Oh, Gods, that's a nightmare in the making," Merlin said.

"He can distract everyone while we make a getaway," Arthur said, pulling away. There was a soft smile on his lips, and Merlin could only see half of his expression; the shadow of a nearby branch fell over his face. "We'll have an old junker with cans tied to the bumper."

"Not much of a getaway if they can hear us from halfway across town," Merlin muttered, leaning in to steal a kiss before Arthur pulled away.

"That's why we'll trade cars halfway there, have Pellinor waiting for us with a Jag. We'll go to the Ritz for the night, not sleep a wink, disappear the next morning for parts unknown --"

"So it's to be Bora-Bora, then?"

"I was thinking Tibet," Arthur said.
"You know how to woo a man. I've always wanted to go hunting for the abominable snowman on my honeymoon."

"Yeti," Arthur said. "They're called yeti over there. Let's not offend them before we find them, shall we?"

Merlin grinned. "Let's not. They might pile an avalanche onto the yurt --"

"At the very least, ox-dung --"

"Oh, that's handy. Fuel for the fire. It's bound to be colder in Tibet than it is here," Merlin said, grinning.

Arthur's smile was soft. He leaned in, pressed a gentle kiss to the other corner of Merlin's mouth. "We'll have to decide if it's Emrys-Pendragon or Pendragon-Emrys --"

"My name first, of course --"

"Or if we combine them --"

"Rhysdragon? Pendemrys?" Merlin laughed.

Arthur pulled away and made a face. "Pendemrys sounds like a disease."

"Rhysdragon it is," Merlin said.

Arthur leaned down for a kiss. It was chaste, no more than a mere brush of lips, and Merlin opened his eyes to watch Arthur step back and slide down to one knee, taking Merlin's hands in his. Merlin's chest tightened, and he couldn't breathe.

Arthur frowned deeply, as if trying to remember something, but he shook his head and said, "I had an entire speech prepared, but I don't think it'll do."

"Don't think I haven't noticed how you've gone completely off-script," Merlin said, ignoring how his own voice trembled. "This wasn't in any of your plans."

"The ones you know about, anyway. I did plan to be spontaneous about it, at least," Arthur said.

Merlin couldn't help a shaky laugh. "Only you would schedule a time to be spontaneous."

"Give me some credit," Arthur said, rolling his eyes. "I had some room in my calendar."

"Such a romantic," Merlin said. He looked down when he felt a tug; Arthur removed both gloves from Merlin's hands and dropped them to the ground. He shifted his weight so that his bent knee was pillowed by the leather, his trousers protected from the damp. "Also, very practical."

"Should have thought of it earlier," Arthur mused. "The lot of them will see the stain on one knee and know I've proposed."

"We could always tell them that I said no," Merlin said.

"They won't believe that," Arthur scoffed. "They know I won't accept anything less than yes, which I notice you haven't said yet."

"Does it need to be said?" Merlin asked.
Arthur raised his head, looking up.

The sun chose that moment to brighten in the cloudy sky. It was a diffuse white light, like peeking through a veil. The wind stopped blowing and the forest was silent. The branches didn't clink and clatter. The birds didn't chitter in the distance. Whatever noises could be heard from the small village that had risen up around the cottage had faded to nothingness, as if a shroud had fallen.

The calmness was eerie. Comforting. Easy. The light cast a crown of gold, and Arthur was kingly and noble --

"Must I kneel?"

"I should think so," the sorcerer said, laughing. "All the Ladies fan themselves over stories like this. Knight-Errants winning tournaments with nothing but their Lady's grace to spur them on. A duel to the death over a Lady's love. A long poem sung beneath the window -- Oh, will you read me poetry?"

"I loathe poetry," the King grumbled, following after his sorcerer at a sedate pace. The sorcerer wasn't fooled, though. He knew how quick his King could be, even weighed down by armour. "I can't stand all that silly, flowery speech, all those metaphors and similes that don't make sense. How can hair be flaxen? How can lips be burnished? Poetry is a madman's riddle meant for a Lady's trifle --"

"You do hate it," the sorcerer teased.

"I'd sooner throw myself upon my blade," the King said.

"I didn't know that about you. Though, it does explain why your First Knight gave you such an odd look when he caught us leaving the library --"

The sorcerer darted away from the King's grasp, but he wasn't quick enough this time. The King caught his wrist and half-pulled, half-swung the sorcerer around until he was trapped in his arms. The King paused and collected the long length of the sorcerer's blue cloak, stretching it across the ground. "What are you --"

"You don't expect your King to get his trousers dirty, do you?" he asked, going on bended knee. "The entire bloody Court will know."

"Oh, I think they know full well that their King gets on his knees for his sorcerer," the sorcerer said cheekily, pausing to steady himself else his nerves would make his voice tremble. "And eagerly, too - -"

The King pinched the sorcerer's waist.

"You drive me mad," he said.

"It's not difficult," the sorcerer said.

"I miss you when you're not with me," the King said. "It's as if I've been dismembered. I know something's missing, and I look and I look, but it's nowhere to be found until you walk into the room. And sometimes, I catch myself touching my heart just to make certain it is still beating, but it doesn't truly beat until you are with me. When you're gone, the sun doesn't shine as bright, the air feels thick,
like a fog hanging in the air, and I am sullen and forlorn and intractable until you return. All I need is one soft look, one tiny smile, and you make all my miseries go away."

The sorcerer was breathless. "I thought you weren't one for poetry."

"That wasn't poetry. It's the truth," the King said. He kissed the sorcerer's fingers and looked up, earnest. "Marry me."

The stillness in the air shivered, and Merlin did, too.

"You're my entire world," Arthur said, his words a velvet-like whisper on Merlin's skin. "I've known that all along. I just couldn't admit it until you were gone. I can't bear you never knowing that because I wasn't brave enough to tell you and I mean to tell you that every day so that you can't ever forget. I can't think when you're not with me. The day's not right unless I wake up next to you, and the day's not done until you've taken me to bed. Merlin..."

Merlin's legs were stupidly weak. He sank down to his knees in front of Arthur.

"I love you."

Arthur brought Merlin's hands to his lips and kissed one, then the other. He never took his eyes from Merlin's, and Merlin thought his heart would explode out of his chest.

"Marry me."

Merlin shook his hands, breaking from Arthur's hold. He touched Arthur's cheeks; his hands drifted until one was behind Arthur's neck, the other in his hair. He leaned in as if to kiss, and paused a breath away.

"Yes."

Merlin kissed Arthur, and pretended he didn't feel Arthur tremble, or that he didn't sigh in relief.

"You daft prat," Merlin whispered, breaking for air before dipping in for another kiss, gentle and light, pulling at Arthur's lower lip. "How could you ever think I would say no to you?"

ooOOoo

"The bride is supposed to be late," Morgana said pointedly.

The sun was slipping over the horizon, a thin, golden line against the blackening blue tint of the sky set the forest aflame with light, and the stars twinkled on what was a supernaturally clear night. The wrought-iron lanterns hanging from spikes all along the path flickered brightly, and the tiny gem highlights of Morgana's gown glittered.

Only Morgana would find the most gorgeous dress in existence hidden away in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere during what could probably be defined as an apocalypse, Arthur thought, and he didn't know why that surprised him.

The gown was slim and form-fitting, hugging her curves; the short train drifted behind her, fading into the white gravel that someone had scrounged up for the occasion and raked down along the
path. The back of the dress dipped down in a seductive scoop, the neckline was almost ridiculously demure, and the long sleeves were embroidered lace dipping into an inverse V, covering the backs of her hands. For all that it was a simple cut, the dress was beautiful and it was so Morgana that no one else could ever wear the same and do it justice.

Arthur caught up to her and tugged on a wayward curl from her upswept do before straightening the white fur stole she wore across her shoulders. "I thought I should at least shower."

Morgana raised an arched brow. "Is that all you did?"

Arthur followed her glance to the cottage. Merlin's shadowed figure hurried toward the crowd at the base of the rise; he disappeared in the throng. Arthur barely restrained the smile that threatened to spread across his face -- the same smile he had only just been able to tone down since Merlin had said yes.

Morgana's sharp elbow in his ribs snapped him out of his reverie.

"Yes?" Arthur asked, belatedly remembering Morgana's question. "No?"

Morgana frowned at him, and Arthur matched her frown with a disapproving one of his own, throwing a small shake of his head while he was at it.

"It's that Merlin. He can't knot a bow tie to save his life," Arthur said, finally answering Morgana's question. "I've been trying to teach him, but he's something of a disaster --"

"Oh, shut it," Morgana said. "Just admit it. You shagged."

"Like bunnies," Arthur said, turning to stand next to Morgana. He offered her his arm.

Morgana's laugh was nervous, and she covered it up with a scolding, "I'm not sure I need to hear about your sex life right before I get married."

"You started it. Also, consider it payback for the number of times you regaled me with stories of Leon's prowess and endurance in bed. There are certain things that a man doesn't need to know about his best mate," Arthur said. He elbowed her, waggling his arm in invitation.

Morgana swatted his shoulder before twining her hand through the crook of his elbow. "Or about his sister?"

"Thank fuck for Leon," Arthur said, because there were no words to properly define how much he appreciated Leon. "The man hasn't breathed a word about what you're like in bed, but there isn't enough bleach in the world to wipe the memory of seeing all those scratches down his back after he returned from R&R a few years back. He was still in a sex daze for that mission, damn near cocked it up, too. I blame you for that."

Morgana's stood up straighter, her shoulders back, and her smile was… ridiculously happy.

Arthur nudged her gently. In a soft voice he said, "He's lucky to have you. You're lucky to have him. If you ask me, there's no better match."

"You're such a liar," Morgana said, her tone teasing. "You're smugly thinking to yourself right now, except for me and Merlin."

Arthur inclined his head and hedged, "Be it as it may --"
"Oh, don't be ridiculous. You two are annoyingly adorable --"

"We're not talking about me and Merlin. This is your wedding --"

Morgana hiccupped, her nerves showing. She raised her free hand to smooth down the fur across her neck; she shivered and bit her lower lip.

"Stop that," Arthur said. "No doubts, no recriminations, no take-backs. If you run away now, I swear to you that I'm throwing you over my shoulder, carrying you down the aisle, and planting you right in front of Leon."

"You're my brother, you're supposed to be on my side," Morgana said.

"You're my sister, and I'm going to make sure you're happy whether you like it or not," Arthur said, ignoring the warmth blooming in his chest to hear Morgana call him her brother. There had been a time in her life when she had resolutely denied any kinship with Arthur and Uther -- especially Uther -- and Arthur cherished every time she said those words.

They looked at each other and laughed.

The lights flickered. The wind picked up, teasing the curls of Morgana's hair.

"I forgive you, you know," Morgana said, breaking the silence.

"I'm afraid to ask what for," Arthur said, eyes forward. Perhaps if he didn't make eye contact --

"Merlin," Morgana said.

Arthur resisted. He tried his best, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what Morgana was talking about. He frowned and glanced at her.

"His magic?" Morgana raised a brow. "You could've mentioned."

"Oh," Arthur said, because there wasn't much that he could say. With everything that had happened and everything that was going on, he wasn't surprised that she'd figured it out on her own -- or had found out by accident. "I'm sorry, 'gana. I would've told you if I could. I was going to tell you, because it's going to come out. But it wasn't --"

"It wasn't your secret to tell," Morgana finished for him. She squeezed his arm. "I know."

Arthur bowed his head, contrite, and wondered if it would have made a difference if she had known. Instead of asking if it mattered, he asked, "How did you --"

Morgana shrugged a shoulder, but there was a faint, familiar tic at the corner of her eye that told Arthur everything he needed to know. She'd had a vision.

He wanted to know how bad it had been. What she'd seen. But when she looked at him with a faint smile, he decided that it couldn't have been bad at all.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said.

Morgana smiled faintly and nodded. "I know that, too."

In the distance, there was a faint flash of light at the other end of the path -- a tent flap opening and closing as someone exited.
"Are you ready?" Arthur asked, nodding down the path where Gwen was coming their way. Arthur was going to have to look into the village a bit more, to ensure that the little settlement around the cottage gave as much back to the village as they were getting -- if not more -- because it seemed as if they'd given everything that they had for this wedding.

Gwen was beautiful with her hair curled up and pinned in place. She wore an emerald-green dress with elaborate beaded embroidery at the neckline, her arms, and in the folds of her full skirts. Arthur could just barely make out her baby bump and was glad; he'd been worried that the strain of the kidnapping would have caused the baby harm. There was a pale brown fur stole around her shoulders to match Morgana's, and Gwen carried two matching bouquets, one smaller than the other, with lilies and red roses all around.

"I'm ready," Morgana said, taking the larger bouquet from Gwen. Gwen's smile was wide and unrestrained; Arthur thought she might grab Morgana by the arm and race her down the white gravel aisle.

"Just waiting on the music," Gwen said, touching Morgana's arm before reaching to brush a strand of hair away. "Bohrs' sister Aimée got her hands on a camera. Don't be startled if there's a bright flash. Everyone thinks she overdid it with the equipment the village loaned us."

"Oh, bless," Morgana said, her expression bright. "I didn't think she'd manage."

"Recruited Bran into helping her, so if he shows up with a video camera…"

"I'll try not to trip over him," Morgana promised.

Just then, the music started. Gwen raised an excited brow and turned, walking up the path.

Arthur waited to see if Morgana would take the lead, but she didn't move. "I might need a little push," she admitted.

"I could always throw you over my shoulder --"

"No."

"It would be worth it just to see the look on Leon's face --"

"Don't you dare," Morgana hissed.

Arthur laughed, and gave her a little pull.

He walked her through the flowered arch that had been placed in front of the largest tent in the field, and the flaps had been tied open to let them through.

It seemed as if everyone from the encampment and the village had shown up for the wedding, rising all at once around the open clearing. Gwen was only a little distance ahead of them, and she took her place on the left. Leon stepped in at the end of the path, his expression gaping and thunderstruck.

Morgana squeezed Arthur's arm so hard that she cut off the blood circulation.

They stopped in front of Leon. Leon didn't take his eyes from Morgana. Arthur cleared his throat and asked, "I don't suppose I need to give you the talk?"

"Oh, no, sir," Leon said, glancing at him briefly. "The one you gave me when I asked her out the first time is still valid."
"What talk?" Morgana asked.

"If you hurt her," Leon quoted, doing a passable imitation of Arthur's voice, "She'll kill you. But I'm your mate, so I'll at least make it look like you fought five or six big blokes before you died."

Arthur nodded with pride -- that was word for word what he'd said back then. "Good. We're sorted, then?"

Morgana pulled Arthur down and kissed his cheek. "Go away."

Arthur grinned and went to stand next to Merlin. Merlin glanced at him sidelong before reaching over to wipe the lipstick from his cheek.

Morgana had done away with the traditional split between bridesmaids and groomsmen. Gwen stood with Morgana as her Matron of Honour; Lance stood with Leon as his Best Man. From there, the rest of Excalibur stood as an honour guard around them.

The official was a man named Henry Kingston who was, handily, also one of the village's druids. His grey hair was brushed back neatly; his face was clean-shaven, and he wore pressed trousers and a button-down shirt under a thick white robe. He motioned for the crowd to sit.

Gwen and Lance pushed the seats of honour on a small raised dais; Gwen took Morgana's flowers, and it wasn't but a moment before Morgana's hand caught Leon's.

Kingston waited a moment until everyone had settled in their seats before speaking. He had a deep voice that carried easily, rich and generous and kind.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Pendragon estate for the marriage of Morgana Pendragon and Leon Cross.

"On this day, Morgana and Leon will proclaim their love for one another as they have done in the past and will continue to do in the future. We are here to celebrate their union and to honour their commitment to each other.

"If any person present knows of any lawful impediment to this marriage they should declare it now."

There was a brief pause, and Arthur caught Gwaine shifting his weight. Beside him, Perceval yanked him back, and Gwaine hissed, "What, I weren't --"

"Shut it," Lance whispered.

The pause was brief, and when no one spoke, Kingston turned to Gwen and nodded, gesturing her toward the raised dais. Gwen unfolded a sheet of paper and looked out at the crowd. "This is Morgana's favourite poem. She always wanted it read at her wedding."

Gwen glanced down and read,

"i carry your heart with me (i carry it in
my heart) i am never without it (anywhere
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)
i fear

"no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)"
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

"here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

"i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)"

Arthur caught Leon's smile -- one of the small, private ones he only ever saved for Morgana. Morgana squeezed his hand.

Kingston waited until Gwen returned to her place next to Morgana before he spoke again. "Marriage is a binding of spirits, of hearts, of minds. It is a promise by two people who love each other and a lifetime must pass before it may be fulfilled. Within a marriage, there is trust, there is faith, and there is honesty. Every act, every wish, every pleasure are shared, and in the sharing, the bond can only grow."

Kingston turned to Gwaine and nodded. Gwaine, Arthur was pleased to see, walked without a limp to the dais. He didn't have a sheet of paper with him, and for an instant, Arthur feared the worst.

"Morgana, before I start, you should know that I in no way influenced Leon's choice of reading material."

"I'll believe that when I hear it," Morgana said, shooting a warning brow at Leon.

Gwaine took in a deep breath, put a hand on his chest, and with a rumble, he recited,

"O my Luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve's like the melodie,
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

"As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

"And fare-thee-weel, my only Luve!
And fare-thee-weel, a while!
And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' 'were ten thousand mile!"

Besides Arthur, Merlin stifled a snort. Arthur barely suppressed the urge to cover his eyes with his hand. But Morgana, who now held Gwaine's very life in her hands...

Morgana laughed, happy, delighted, and she bumped into Leon, her expression suddenly almost shy.
The two murmured quietly between them.

There was a story behind that poem that Arthur didn't know, and he was going to have to find out. Gwaine returned to his place among the honour guard, but he caught Arthur's frown and cheered him with a wink and a mounted, *I'll tell you later.*

Kingston invited Morgana and Leon to stand with a faint gesture. When they did, Lance and Perceval moved the chairs out of the way.

"Morgana and Leon, today you will exchange vows of marriage which will unite you as husband and wife, to always love, to care for, and support each other through the joys and the sorrows in your lives. Before you are both joined in marriage, it is my duty to remind you of the solemn and binding character of the vows you are about to make."

There was a brief pause before he continued.

"I am going to ask you each in turn to declare that you know of no legal reason why you may not be joined in marriage." He gestured to Leon.

Leon coughed and cleared his throat before saying, "I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Leon Cross, may not be joined in marriage to Morgana Pendragon."

Morgana didn't wait for Kingston to turn to her before she said, "I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Morgana Pendragon, may not be joined in marriage to Leon Cross."

Kingston smiled at both of them, and said, "Morgana and Leon, your family and friends are here today to support and to celebrate with you at this special time. I ask you now, Leon, do you take Morgana to be your lawfully wedded wife, to be loving, faithful and loyal to her for the rest of your life together?"

"I do," Leon said.

"Morgana, do you take Leon to be your lawfully wedded husband, to be loving, faithful and loyal to him for the rest of your life together?"

"I do," Morgana said.

Kingston made a sweeping gesture for them to face the other.

Leon fidgeted, took a breath, and said, "I call upon those present tonight to witness that I take you, Morgana, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to love and to cherish, from this day forward."

There was a pause, and Morgana said, "I call upon those present tonight to witness that I take you, Leon, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to love and to cherish, from this day forward."

Kingston regarded them both with a kindly smile before looking out at the audience.

"The exchange of rings is a way to seal the promises that you have made to each other. Let it be a symbol of unending and everlasting love."

The pause that followed was heavy enough to hint that someone had missed their cue. A ripple passed through the team as each of them patted their pockets in frantic search for the rings. Arthur glanced at Merlin, who shook his head and shrugged a confused, *no idea.*
It was something else that Arthur suspected they'd missed by not being here for so long and on limited communications, and an event he wouldn't be surprised to hear had actually happened. He strongly suspected that more than one argument had broken out amongst the members of the team, each of them vying to be the ones to hold onto the rings before the ceremony and each of them being shot down. And now, no one knew who had the rings.

"Oh," Leon exclaimed, freeing a hand to dig into his pockets. "I forgot, I have them."

"What," Geraint said flatly.

"You said I would be the one to carry them," Galahad said.

"He told me the same thing," Pellinor said.

"He lied to all of you," Gwaine said, looking soundly put-out. "He'd promised me I'd have that honour."

Leon glanced past Morgana and made eye contact with Arthur. Arthur started laughing, finally understanding what had happened.

"Do you lot really think I trust any of you with my wedding rings?" Leon asked, ignoring the outcry. "I like to think I'm smarter than that."

"Must be," Bedivere said. "You got the girl."

Leon turned to Morgana, and that shy smile appeared again. He ducked his head, laughing shakily, and Arthur thought he saw Leon's hands tremble as he took Morgana's hand and slid the ring on her finger, but he didn't let go. "Morgana, the day I met you was the day that I knew I would marry you. I was there for you when you needed a friend, and I waited for you until you were ready, until you saw me as more than that. All that I am has always been yours. I love you, Morgana. I always have, and I always will."

Morgana wavered. Arthur couldn't see her face, not from where he stood, but he heard her faint, "Damn you," and when she turned to Gwen, he saw the tears in her eyes.

Gwen gave her a handkerchief, keeping one to herself -- from the sound of her loud sniffle, she needed it. Morgana dabbed at her eyes before turning back, and there was a long, slow inhale and exhale of breath, her shoulders rising and falling, before she composed herself and took the second ring from Leon's hand.

"Leon, you were a smug, overconfident, arrogant arse when I met you," Morgana said, her voice sound and sure.

Half of the congregation gasped. The other half froze, with the occasional titter here and there.

All of the team members, Arthur included, broke out laughing. Leon, for his part, grinned broadly, as if Morgana had just laid her heart bare. And maybe he knew her best of all, because Arthur hadn't expected Morgana to do just that when she continued.

"I can't believe I almost missed the man who was right in front of me all along, who made me see that love could be something more than a fairy tale romance. There are no words to describe how much I've grown to love you, and there's nothing that can measure how much more that love grows every day."

Arthur didn't see Morgana slide the ring on Leon's finger, but he figured he would look at the
photographs later. From the way the flash had been going off every few seconds, Arthur expected that they would be able to stitch all the photos together and watch the whole thing in near-live action.

Neither Morgana nor Leon waited for Kingston to give them permission; they leaned into each other and kissed. Everyone broke out in applause and whistles, though the whistles were coming mostly from the team.

It wasn't until Morgana and Leon broke apart and the noise died down before Kingston spread his hands and said, "Today is a new beginning. Morgana and Leon, may you have many happy years together and may all your hopes and dreams be fulfilled. Above all, believe in each other, have faith in the other, and cherish your union. May the warmth of your love enrich not only your lives but the lives of all those around you."

Kingston took a step back and spread his arms, addressing the crowd. "It gives me great pleasure to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Leon Cross and Morgana Pendragon-Cross."

There was a brief pause in-between the announcement and the applause when Arthur distinctly heard Leon tell Morgana, "We'd better get out of here, or the others will split us up," and before anyone could react, Morgana hitched up her skirts, took Leon's hand, and hurried down the aisle, dodging the flower petals being thrown at them along the way.

Arthur laughed at Gwaine's thunderstruck expression, as if he'd been cheated of a prime opportunity, and he laughed harder when he saw the same look on Geraint and Galahad. The three of them exchanged glances before launching after Morgana and Leon, their attempts to catch up foiled before they were even halfway as the crowd rose and left the tent so that it could be prepared for the reception.

There was a whirlwind round of photographs that started with Morgana and Leon and ended with the entire team making it nearly impossible for Aimée, to get a decent picture, though she whipped them all in shape in the end when she threatened to keep them until the open bar ran dry.

"I think I've gone blind," Arthur said, rubbing his eyes with forefinger and thumb.

"From the flash or Gwaine's bare arse?" Merlin asked.

"I'm not sure, actually. Was that Gwaine?" Arthur asked, blinking away the white spots still lingering in his vision.

"Might've been. The only arse on the team I can identify on sight is yours, though," Merlin said.

Arthur raised a brow and shot him a sidelong look. "I'm not sure if that's a good thing, or if I've just been insulted."

The quick kiss on his cheek was not reassuring at all, but when Merlin took his hand, pulled him toward the tent, and said, "Come on. I'll buy you a beer," Arthur let it go.

"It's an open bar," Arthur pointed out, suddenly glad that Pellinor cleaned out all the best whiskey from the Pentagram, because it seemed like they were going to need it tonight.

"I'll get you a beer, then," Merlin said, squeezing his hand.

The villagers, after staying long enough for congratulations and well wishes, elected to return to their homes before the hour got too late, and by the time dinner was served, the reception tent was noticeably less crowded. The team was scattered across the tables, most sitting with their families --
Galahad with Geraint, of course, because that was his family. Kay was with Kathy and Bran at a table with Will and Allan. Gwaine and Perceval sat with Gwaine's family before moving to Perceval's once dessert came around. Pellinor was with his mother at a different table, though he made a point of stopping over at Bohrs' table more than once to flirt with Aimée, and Bohrs' quiet, protective glower could be felt from across the wide tent. Gwen and Lance were at one of the larger tables with both sides of the family, and Arthur was relieved to see Elyan there, talking animatedly with his father; theirs had long been a strained relationship, but it looked as if they'd sorted things out, at least for now.

Merlin sat with Arthur at the head table with Morgana and Leon. Arthur pretended he didn't notice how Merlin had shifted his seat closer or how he avoided eye contact with Balinor when Balinor had come by to greet the new couple.

Defying everyone's expectations, it was Lucan who stepped up to the podium to give the first speech, and Arthur saw Perceval holding an outraged Gwaine firmly in his seat.

Lucan tapped a knife against his glass. The faint clink-clink-clink was barely audible over the low roar of the crowd, but everyone startled and fell silent at the loud shatter when Lucan hit the glass a bit too hard.

Arthur sincerely hoped that Aimée captured Lucan's one-eye-open wince, his shoulders up to his ears, his entire body cringing. He had the butter knife in one hand, the stem of a former wineglass in the other, and his entire shirt sleeve was soaked.

"Right, then," Lucan said, gingerly depositing the remnants of his glass on the edge of the podium, the knife next to it. He shook out his arm, smoothed down his tuxedo, and smiled his best, most dazzling smile. "I know Morgana said no speeches under the pretense that no one wants to hear us drone on and on about what a lovely couple they are -- and they are, if you overlook their occasional mean streak and tendency to cheat at board games -- but what she really meant was, for the love of God, don't let Gwaine talk, so here I am."

"I thought you loved me!" Gwaine shouted.

"We do!" Leon shouted back.

"I spent hours on my speech!"

"We know!" Lamorak yelled. He was somewhere toward the rear of the tent, loitering by the bar where Gareth had taken over bartending duties.

"Seriously? You'll pass up this rare opportunity to have me give a fawning speech at your once-in-a-lifetime wedding?" Gwaine asked.

"Yes!" Leon and Morgana said in unison.

"Consider this your bloody wedding present, then!" Gwaine sulked.

"We love it! It's the best gift we could have gotten!" Morgana said, laughing.

Gwaine raised his glass, flew two fingers in the air, and said, "Cheers, then!"

Merlin leaned against Arthur and whispered, "You're going to let him have free rein at ours, aren't you?"

Arthur nodded slowly, regretfully. He whispered back, "I think we'll have to, or he'll never let
anyone forget it."

Merlin tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. After a moment, he shrugged. "It won't be so bad. We'll just make sure everyone's properly soused."

"That's the spirit," Arthur said, grinning. He ran his hand down Merlin's back. He didn't have the heart to tell Merlin that the plan had always been to have Gwaine speak at their wedding -- maybe even run the show. It wasn't only that Gwaine would bring it up at every single occasion they got together from this point forward, but because Gwaine would cry if he didn't have the chance. Arthur couldn't do that to him.

"Will's going to want to have a go at us," Merlin pointed out.

"Oh, God," Arthur groaned. "No chance of distracting him with a pretty girl?"

"Well..." Merlin nodded toward a corner of the tent where Will was chatting up a familiar blonde.

It took Arthur a moment to recognize Vivian, and the only reason he wasn't panicking at her obvious freedom to walk about the property was because Leon had assured him that Vivian was too annoyed that Olaf hadn't rescued her to call and notify him of their location. In any case, Olaf probably knew by now, anyway, and Vivian was proving herself useful in helping Morgana and Gwen coordinate resources.

Will looked enraptured by her cleavage, but Arthur wasn't fooled in the least, and neither was Vivian. Will was probably digging for information while simultaneously trying to get her to bed.

"Maybe?" Merlin ventured. He frowned. "Maybe not."

Lucan snapped a paper napkin from the nearest table and wiped at his hand and mopped his sleeve before he returned to the podium. That had obviously been a theatrical maneuver on his part, because as soon as he did, the chatter quieted down.

"Honestly, though. Morgana's right. No one needs to hear anyone prattle on, least of all me, but if anyone wants to share all those embarrassing stories about Morgana and Leon, let's wait until they're out of earshot celebrating their wedding night, yeah? That way, Morgana won't know who told which story, and we all get to keep our bollocks in our pants, where they belong, and not hanging around our necks, where she'll put them."

There was soft, somewhat nervous laughter through the crowd. Lucan pointedly did not look at Morgana, who pursed her lips and pointed a knife in his direction.

"That said, I have five things to announce.

"One. There will be one speech. Best hasten yourselves to the bar before he starts, because I know from experience that Arthur's the sort to be long-winded."

"So much for that recommendation for promotion you've been after," Arthur said.

Lucan waved a hand in the air as if that didn't bother him in the least.

Arthur huffed and elbowed Merlin when Merlin whispered, "You aren't that bad."

"Two. There will be drinking, there will be dancing, and later, there will be cake-cutting. For those of you feeling the itch to get hitched, there will even be a bouquet-throwing, and I'm told that you're best prepared to catch it without warning, because there will be no announcement. If marriage isn't in
your future, I'd suggest running if you smell flowers. Alas, lads, if you've been mooning for our fair lady and you're keen on a garter, you're out of luck. Leon has called dibs on it, but if you want to fight him for it, please feel free."

There was a series of boos and hisses, and Leon grinned in amusement.

"Three. For those of you who are thinking of skipping out early because there's work to be done in the morning, Gaius has prepared a special brew. It won't do much for lack of sleep, but please, share in the festivities and drink as much as you like without fear of a throbbing head --"

"Are you going to warn them about the taste?" Merlin asked.

Lucan scowled at Merlin. Very flatly, he said, "There's nothing wrong with the taste."

"You're just sour because no one warned you before you chugged down a cup of Gaius' miracle cure," Perceval said.

Arthur spotted Gaius in the crowd, sitting with a group of men who were roughly his age. He was once again surprised that Gaius wasn't sitting with Hunith and Balinor, who were on the other side of the tent, but maybe he shouldn't be surprised at all. Gaius was trying to look stern, but he was smiling when he said, "You boys should know better than to need a miracle cure in the first place, and shame on you, Lucan, for trying to spread the misery around."

"Good to know that his brew hasn't gotten any better with time," one of the men at Gaius' table said. "I'd nearly forgotten."

"You lot just spoilt my fun for the evening," Lucan said.

"Sorry we're not sorry?" Merlin said.

Lucan made a rude gesture, and it set off another round of laughter.

"Four. The circumstances being as they are, we couldn't go all out on a wedding gift like we normally would, but we've managed to wrangle a few things together. Morgana, you told a certain someone that you always wanted a horse-drawn carriage to take you and your future spouse away on your wedding night. As part of your wedding present, we've made arrangements for exactly that. There's a pair of black horses in the fanciest cart we could scrounge up waiting for you outside, whenever you're ready to go."

"Traitor," Morgana said, throwing a napkin in the direction of Gwen's table.

"Happily!" Gwen retorted.

"Leon, that night we all got pissed on good Russian vodka after a mission --"

"Which time?" Leon asked.

"The one where you waxed philosophical about all the ways you'd go down on bent knee to beg Morgana to marry you? Practically sobbing, you were, thinking she might say no, because as we all know, she's too good for you," Lucan said.

Morgan laughed, clapping her hands. Leon rolled his eyes. "Oh, that time."

"That's the time you said that all you wanted for your wedding night is to take Morgana to a fancy little place in the middle of nowhere and to pamper your queen the way she deserves."
"Aw," Morgana said, putting her hand around Leon's shoulders and kissing his cheek.

"It's not much, mate, but there's a little cabin waiting for you two, all done up to the nines the way you described it -- and if we got it wrong, well, we were all drunk at the time, so don't blame us. That's where you're going tonight, and possibly tomorrow, and if you're lucky, we won't see you until the week is up."

Leon shook his head and mouthed a quiet thank you.

Lucan reached for the broken stem he left on the podium's edge, hesitated in mid-movement, and leaned over to the nearby table to snatch an unclaimed wineglass. He held it up, waving encouragingly for everyone to do the same.

"Five. On behalf of Morgana and Leon, I'd like to thank everyone who has come out this evening to celebrate their wedding. It's been long in coming, and I hope that's only a sign -- the longer to get to the altar, the longer the marriage will last. Cheers, Morgana. Cheers, Leon. We wish you all the best, and we'll be right there to make sure you get it."

"Cheers," Arthur said. There was an echo across the room as everyone repeated the toast. Arthur clinked glasses with Merlin, reached over and did the same with Leon and Morgana, and took a sip before he rose from his seat. He squeezed Merlin's shoulder and stood next to Lucan.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lucan said, waving a hand to present Arthur, "I'd like to introduce our one and only speech for the evening. Captain Arthur Pendragon, the lucky sod who has us for a team, as friends, and as family."

There was brief applause. Arthur waved Lucan off and said, "Take your shrapnel with you."

Lucan laughed, but he left the broken wineglass where it was.

Arthur paused and said, "I'm not sure what he was on about. I only found out that my sister was getting married to my best mate six --"

"Seven and a quarter," Morgana said, holding Leon's arm up and tapping at his watch.

"Seven hours ago," Arthur corrected smoothly. "In that time, I've spoken with most of you, gotten caught up on how things are at the cottage, made a list of items that we should consider acquiring for the future and learned where best to get them from, made several phone calls, unpacked my equipment, washed up, and dressed in this ridiculous monkey suit. When would I ever have time to come up with a long-winded speech --"

"In between shagging your bloke and that shower," Morgana said.

The crowd chuckled.

"My Mum's here, Morgana," Merlin groaned, covering his face in his hands.

Across the tent, Arthur saw Hunith laugh, her expression startled and fond and a little bit relieved, maybe, that Merlin cared enough to think about her despite the strain between them. Balinor, sitting next to Hunith, was stony and impassive. Arthur was happy to call him emotionally constipated, unsympathetic to whatever turmoil he was going through at seeing his son alive and grown-up for the first time, and doing just fine without him.

Morgana, however, had crossed a line, and Arthur couldn't let that go.
"Oh, and here I was going to let you off easy," Arthur said, raising an eyebrow at Morgana. "But, no, you had to throw the gauntlet. Very well. I'll spend the next hour talking about Morgana's Goth phase and how she went around putting black eyeliner on all the boys she fancied... Did I mention she was six years old at the time, and that it lasted nearly ten years --"

"You wouldn't dare --"

Arthur pointed a warning finger at Morgana. Morgana held up her hands in surrender.

Arthur couldn't help it. His smile was triumphant. He turned back to the crowd and said, "In all honesty, I've been working on this speech for a long, long time. I didn't start the day that I went with Leon when he wanted my opinion on an engagement ring. It wasn't the day they moved in together. It wasn't even when Leon asked Morgana out on a date, finally.

"It was the day Leon came over to ours after a game of footie, covered in sweat and grass stains, his hair tied up in a silly little ponytail, ball tucked under his arm. We were skinny little runts back then, not much to look at, all pimple-faced and snaggle-toothed and absolutely no idea what to do with ourselves half the time. Leon's parents wouldn't be home until late, so I said to have dinner at ours, and not to worry, no one's going to be home, I'll throw a frozen pizza in the oven."

Arthur saw Leon nod his head, a small smile on his lips, obviously remembering that day. Morgana's brows were pinched a little, confused, but she was listening.

"We're in the kitchen. We haven't cleaned ourselves up yet. The oven's pre-heating. We're talking about girls, because that's what Leon likes. We talk about boys, because that's what I like, and Leon's a good mate, he doesn't even squirm."

Leon chuckled.

"We talk about sports, because girls are boring and the blokes in our level are all pillocks and the oven's ready and I turn around to put the pizza in. That's when Morgana swans in. She breezes through the kitchen, her hair all done up, she had the curly do back then, do any of you remember? I thought she looked ridiculous, and she hated it but wouldn't admit it --"

Morgana huffed.

"And she barely acknowledged either one of us, because, you know, boys," Arthur said, rolling his eyes and throwing his hand in the air in an exaggerated swipe to brush imaginary hair over his shoulders. "She walks through, storms up the stairs, and slams her door. You know, the usual teenage girl angst that none of us understand because we weren't there. I'm used to it, so I don't pay her any mind. The pizza is in the oven, the timer is set, and Leon --"

Arthur glanced at Leon, who was slowly shaking his head.

"Leon's standing as if he has no idea where he is. Open-mouthed, jaw on the floor, so completely gobsmacked that he's dropped the ball and it's bouncing away from him. His arm is moving in the air as if he's trying to catch it. If any of you have ever played footie with Leon, you know that he's against a formidable opponent if he's lost the ball."

Morgana turned to look at Leon, a soft, confused smile on her lips.

"Leon snapped out of it eventually. I'd eaten half the pizza by then, and I generously let him have a couple of slices before his Mum came by to take him home. He never mentioned Morgana, but he didn't have to. His face said it all. While I'm doing the dishes and trying to figure out how I felt about my best mate falling in love with my sister without either of them saying a word, Morgana comes
stomping down the stairs. She yells at me for not saving her any pizza --"

Arthur paused. That was when the realization dawned in Morgana's eyes.

"-- and in the same breath, she oh-so-casually asks, *who's your friend?* As if she didn't know perfectly well that Leon and I have been best mates since we skinned our knees at the park, still swaddled in diapers."

Leon looked at Morgana sharply, a spark in his eyes and a grin on his lips at the revelation that Morgana had noticed him even back then.

Arthur let that sink in. He let it sink in some more.

"I started writing this speech *that night*. It's gone through many incarnations since then, depending on the level of unresolved sexual tension, how far up their own arses their heads were, how bloody **blind** they were about the other, and how often they made me listen to them whine about their nonexistent relationship -- and, much later, about their very real relationship. One particularly memorable day, they drove me mad with all the texts asking, *does she really like me and will she say yes if I ask her out and should I wear those shoes and are you sure he really likes me*. I flushed my phone down the toilet. That's how crazy they drove me.

"And not just me, either. Our friends, our family, random strangers on the train. To this day, I swear people still recognize the two of them and say, *no, it's all right, I'll take the next one*. It's because they **know** about the ruddy bastard and the high-strung brunette and their nutty rom-com *will she won't he* relationship."

The crowd laughed.

Arthur waited for the noise to die down before he continued, this time in a more serious tone. "No one was happier than I was when they finally got their acts together. They moon over each other when they're apart, and when they're together, they're inseparable. If Morgana could have come on tours with us, I'm sure the wars would have been over a long time ago if she had -- but she said something about gun oil getting under her nails, once, and --"

Arthur only barely dodged a flying piece of cutlery, and from the fading flash of gold in Merlin's eyes, he had Merlin to thank for that. Arthur winked at him; Merlin grinned.

Arthur turned to Morgana and Leon. "To my sister and my best mate. To Morgana and Leon. Congratulations on your marriage. You two have given me a great gift -- your happiness. That's all that I've ever wanted for you two. Cheers."

He raised his wine glass in a final toast to the new couple and drank. Morgana touched the corner of her eye in an attempt to stop from tearing up. Leon looked as if he'd been run over, his expression touched.

"One last thing," Arthur said, when the applause settled. "I'd like to thank Morgana and Leon for deciding to get married today. I believe that I've won the wedding pool. Pay up, Gwaine."

There was a scandalized sound from the wedding party -- Morgana's outraged "You bet on when we'd get married?" and Leon's "Goddamn it, Gwaine, you said you didn't have a pool for that, ow, Morgana, stop hitting me, I didn't know about this --" -- and a small uproar from all around the reception tent, pinpointing each and every member of *Excalibur*.

"I am absolutely, one hundred percent innocent of all misdeeds," Gwaine said, throwing up his arms. "I in no way manipulated the results to benefit Arthur. Why the fuck would I do that? It's a thousand
pounds in the kitty. Don't you think I'd want it for myself?"

"One thousand pounds?" Morgana screeched. She hit Leon again. "Why didn't you put money in?"

Leon spread his hands. "I didn't know about it!"

Arthur laughed, absurdly pleased by the chaos he caused, and moved away from the podium, heading for his seat. He wasn't going past the long table of honour -- instead, he took the roundabout route in case Morgana decided to lunge over and strangle him -- when Morgana shouted, "Arthur!"

He turned to look, but all he saw was a big white-and-red blob careening at him. He caught it, but only just barely, and it registered as soft and velvety and fragrant.

Morgana's bouquet.

All the noise in the tent evacuated into a vacuum.

Morgana sat back in her seat, smug and content, a villainess who had just received her vengeance. Very sweetly, she said, "Your turn, dear Arthur."

Arthur looked at Merlin, who raised both brows in quiet amusement. Before Arthur could say anything -- not that he knew what to say, since they'd agreed that today was Morgana's and Leon's day and wouldn't be announcing anything until later -- he distinctly heard Lucan complain.

"Didn't I warn people? I warned people. I spelled it out, for God's sake. Why didn't anyone listen to me when I said that Morgana was going to throw her bouquet whenever she bloody well felt like it?"

ooOooo
"So, in conclusion," Gwaine said, filling the silence after Arthur trailed off and never picked up his train of thought again, "We're fucked."

Arthur was petting the petals of one of the flowers in Morgana's bouquet -- a bouquet that was looking a little listless after hours of lying flat on the table. The movement stopped, and his hand curled into a shrugged gesture that everyone recognized as, yes, essentially.

It was nearly dawn, though the first false glow hadn't teased the sun's arrival over the horizon quite yet, and the reception tent was empty except for Excalibur, minus Leon, but including Elyan and Will. The little tea lights had burned out a long time ago, and the hanging lanterns had mostly been turned off to preserve power. The heaters had been moved to areas that needed them, leaving the team to stand watch over a mountain of empty beer and whiskey bottles in dim lighting and a crisp winter chill.

A crisp winter chill that Merlin's magic kept at bay, but no one needed to know that.

Merlin sat slumped in his chair, his knee bumping against Arthur's, his hands shoved in his trouser pockets. He'd long done away with the bloody bow tie and the cummerbund, not quite sure where they'd ended up after Morgana and Leon climbed the horse carriage to retreat to their honeymoon cabin, but he thought that they would turn up.

Somewhere.

The team was in similar dishabille. Perceval was missing his jacket and his shoulders strained the seams of his shirt. Geraint was using his bow tie as a hair band, someone had braided tinsel into Lucan's hair, and there was a round circle on Bedivere's forehead from crushing as many beer cans as he needed to win a bet.

Gwaine was shirtless, though he'd somehow retained his bow tie and cummerbund and suspenders; his jacket was several sizes too big and obviously, that was where Perceval's had ended up. Merlin thought that Lamorak's trousers were unusually tight and that Gareth's were a little loose, as if they'd grabbed the wrong pair when getting dressed for the wedding, but Merlin honestly couldn't remember if they had always been like that or if it was a recent development. Kay had a smear of lipstick on his cheek that matched the one on Will's face -- from Kathy, who had kissed them both before guiding Bran away just as the party was winding down.

Lance was probably the only member of the team who was still somewhat put-together. His jacket was draped over the back of his chair, his bow-tie was loosened, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up halfway up his forearms. He rubbed the stubble on his face with one hand while trying to suppress a yawn. "I wouldn't say fucked, not exactly. More like roughly pegged with the broken end of a broomstick without the benefit of lube and all the splinters."

"More than I ever wanted to know about my sister, thanks." Elyan leaned away from Lance, a screwed-up expression of disgust on his face.

Pellinor chuckled softly before wincing. "Also, ow."

No one spoke for a few minutes. Lamorak leaned elbows on the table and rubbed his eyes. Perceval
grunted and grimaced, rolling a shoulder; Merlin thought he heard bone crack. Geraint scratched his hair -- which tilted the bow on his forehead and made him look a little more manic than usual.

"So a bird steals an artefact from the CIA's X-Files division," Will said, looking thoughtful. "There's good dragons and evil dragons and we can't trust any of them. Pretty good chance that there's a device somewhere on the planet that can eradicate magic and probably send the planet tumbling into the sun while it's at it. And any time now, the bad guys are going to drag us all into the middle ages and collar anyone who doesn't have any magic in them and use them as slaves. At any time now, the evil supervillain will appear at the crest of the hill and start laughing maniacally --"

"More than I ever wanted to know about your sex life, and you were my flatmate in uni," Merlin said. "Thanks for that."

"My pleasure," Will said. He turned to Arthur. "So as far as anyone's concerned, the old cloak and dagger games are done with and we're back to regular duty, except the order is to hold fast until we're needed?"

"That's about the sum of it, yes," Arthur said, sounding weary.

Merlin placed a hand between Arthur's shoulder blades. Arthur leaned into the touch, before sitting up straight. He met Merlin's eyes and sighed.

Since Olaf already knew that the team had survived the attack on the Pendragon testing grounds in France and the American operatives were now aware of their continued existence, they'd decided that there was no more use in hiding. It would put them back on the enemy's radar, but Arthur doubted that it would draw out the NWO since they were likely occupied with going to war. Morgause was probably in the thick of it, somehow, and she'd taken half of her division at Interpol with her. Aredian, on the other hand, was a different matter, but as long as worldwide communications were spotty, it was difficult to get a bead on him and any of his men.

So, they'd reported in.

Every attempt to contact the Directory had been met with a dead line, which surprised no one. They hadn't been in touch with Bayard in months, and no one was keen to join up with someone who had clearly only used the team for his own, inexplicable gains. Arthur had slotted Bayard as either firmly in the NWO's back pocket, if not outright running the show, at least for now; in any case, he was definitely untrustworthy.

Merlin had been shunted through so many levels of red tape before reaching anyone in their command unit that Merlin had considered hacking through the system to get to a live body, but Arthur had wanted to do it by the book. They'd connected to Colonel Mandrake, who had been relieved to hear from them, unsurprised to learn that they were secure, and adamant that they stay where they were until new orders came down.

The communication codes they'd been given by the CIA were confirmed by the ones that Mandrake passed along, and they were told to call back at 0900.

By Merlin's watch, that was still at least three hours away, and none of them were interested in sleeping, not just yet.

"So, just more hurry up and wait bollocks, then," Galahad said, lifting his head up from the table. He turned his head to the side and laid it back down again, moaning. He'd stopped drinking around midnight, but he was a notorious lightweight, and no one was surprised that he was already hungover. The rest of the team were slowly weaning themselves off the alcohol and were waiting for
the Wedding Breakfast so that they could get the other miracle cure that was available -- a heavy, greasy brekkie with sausages and eggs.

Geraint patted Galahad on the head, and in a ridiculous voice, said, "It's okay, baby, go back to sleep. We'll wake you up when it gets interesting."

Galahad swatted at the air, missing Geraint completely. "Fuck off."

"Aw, aren't you sweet?" Will mocked, tossing a few mints across the table. They bounced off Galahad's head. Galahad grunted, but didn't move. Will chuckled, mostly to himself, but he shook his head a moment later. "So what are we sitting around for?"

"Waiting to call," Merlin said, bringing both hands forward so that he could rub at his face. He dropped them and looked around, wondering why no one had thought to keep the coffee brewing after Morgana and Leon left.

Will snorted. "Takes all of you lot to dial the number, then?"

"Orright, like you never stayed up to find out what your next orders were," Owain grunted, scratching the side of his head. He was in nothing but a muscle shirt and trousers -- everything else, including his shoes, had disappeared. Merlin had no idea how, though he dimly remembered members of Owain's family luring him away from the reception at one point.

"No, never did," Will said. "Never worried until the orders came down. Even then, no point in fretting, really, it all sorts itself out in the end."

"I'm too drunk for your optimism. Go away," Gwaine said, but his sullen expression eased when Perceval's hand rubbed across Gwaine's back.

"You're just jealous because I'm a better shot than you," Will said, grinning.

"I still say you cheated," Gwaine said, pointing a finger at Will. "I don't know how, and I don't know why, but no one ever outshoots me."

Perceval patted Gwaine's shoulder reassuringly, but when it looked as if Gwaine was about to launch into a tirade, Perceval put his hand over Gwaine's mouth and gently reeled him in, holding on tight until Gwaine was at least halfway mollified.

"He did cheat," Merlin said, after a minute. Arthur muffled his chuckle.

Gwaine's eyes went wide with outrage. His arms and legs flailed out before he lunged. If not for Perceval, Gwaine would have tossed himself across the table, sending the small city of bottles and glasses flying everywhere, and throttled Will until Will begged mercy -- or agreed to a rematch.

"Traitor," Will said, skittering his chair a few steps back from Gwaine as a precaution. He side-eyed Merlin before asking, "Also, how did you know?"

"Bran asked me what he should get in trade for doing a little magical finagling to help you win a bet," Merlin said, wriggling his fingers.

Will stared at Merlin. He opened and closed his mouth a few times to protest, but nothing came out until he shrugged. Merlin had given Bran a list of things that Will held dear, including his comic collection of Captain Britain, and from the way Bran's eyes had lit up at the mere mention, Merlin knew that Bran would have bargained for that, at least. Will wouldn't have given it up, not for the world, but he might have agreed to lending them, but only if Bran promised to read them while
wearing special gloves.

"Worth it, just to see the look on his face," Will said, grinning. He thumbed toward Gwaine.

Across the table, Gwaine flew him a very emphatic two-fingered salute.

"In any case, it's not about being worried," Lance said, picking up a cloth napkin that had been left behind during a half-hearted late-night clean-up and pulling at the fraying threads. "It's about being prepared. The sooner we know what's expected, the sooner we can be ready."

"Also, the more we can put off the inevitable round of PT and training," Bohrs said. Galahad moaned as if he were dying at the mere thought of PT -- he probably was. Geraint patted Galahad's shoulder, muttering a soothing, there, there, and Bohrs pointed a finger at Arthur. "That one there will have a dozen plans set in place he'll want us to be prepared for before we even know for sure what the Brass will ask of us. He'll have us through a gauntlet of scenarios before the day's out, never mind that none of us have gotten any sleep or are dragging arse right now."

"He's not dragging arse," Geraint said, thumbing toward Galahad. "He's fallen in the loo."

"Shh," Galahad said, his hand waving in the air feebly.

Will snorted. "Aren't you lot already trained?"

"You're not listening, Will," Merlin said, frowning. Will could be quick on the uptake at the best of times, but the rest of it? He was as thick as a brick. Not a lot of it could be blamed on the one and a half bottles of whiskey that he'd finished off, either. "Whatever they'll throw at us, it's not going to be a standard op."

"Lay it out for me, then," Will said, waving a magnanimous hand in the air. There was a certain tone in his voice that made Merlin twitch involuntarily, because he knew Will, and he knew that tone. He was digging for details because he was interested, and he was itching for a fight. There was no way that the team would be able to leave him behind, but there was also no way that Will could join them. The attack at the CIA had proven that -- he was too much of a loose cannon.

Merlin exchanged a glance with Arthur. Arthur didn't seem bothered; if anything, he knew well what Will was on about. If anything, he was unusually calm, almost resigned.

"Let's start with the NWO," Arthur said, leaning forward. He looked past Merlin at Will, who shrugged and nodded in invitation. "Based on what we have from the Directory's files, MI-6's surveillance, and the CIA's compilation, the NWO doesn't have the bodies to stage an all-out war. They might have some people who are combat-trained, but they don't have an army. Even if they did, the big question is where the battlefield is going to be."

Arthur paused. He blew out his breath, cracked open his bottled water, and drank from it before he offered the remnants to Merlin. Merlin took it and finished it off.

"There's no way of knowing where they're going to attack first, but they've been planning for a long time. They've been waiting for a long time. Now that they have power, they don't need an army. They need a target. And the world is giving them one, whether it means to or not. Every country is mobilizing to protect their most vulnerable asset in maintaining civilized stability -- the government."

Arthur trailed off. Merlin saw the way Arthur glanced at Will -- with the same weighing and measuring he made when he wasn't sure how the other party was processing the information.

"When they attack, and they will attack, believe me, it's going to be in one concentrated effort all
around the world. They're going to wait until the majority of the country's defensive forces are in place and prepared for an attack, and that's when they'll have a go," Arthur said.

"It's right in their manifesto," Pellinor said, idly picking at the label of the beer bottle he'd been nursing for the last half hour. "Take down the government. Establish their own."

"London, then? That's where they'll attack?" Will asked.

"Fucking cities," Gwaine muttered. "I hate cities."

"Yeah. Me too. Shite for sight lines," Will said. He nodded at Arthur. "Hasn't your fancy company come up with bullets that will curve around corners?"

"Not yet," Arthur said.

"Pity," Will said. He poured a few more fingers of good whiskey into a cheap red plastic cup, and half the table cringed at the sacrilege.

"We do have a healthy supply of high-powered ammunition with greater penetrative power. Bullet could go clean through two layers of tank armour, don't see why it wouldn't go through a wall or two," Arthur said. "New generations of scopes to go along with it, too, calculates and compensates for material resistances."

"Sold," Will said, grinning wryly. "I'll take two."

"Get in line," Gwaine growled. At the same time, Galahad raised his hand in the air and said, "I have dibs."

"Sure you do," Geraint cooed, patting at Galahad's head with more force than necessary. "And while you're napping, I'll just break it in, why don't I?"

"Can charm the bullets to go through their shields," Merlin mused, his brow furrowed. "I've been thinking about that. Can't say how well it'll work, but maybe fifty percent of the time?"

"Fifty percent is better than zero hits," Gwaine said, a little bitter. "I'm still cross about those bloody shields."

Arthur smiled faintly and reached to take the water bottle out of Merlin's hands. He raised it to his lips before he noticed it was empty, and Merlin answered his scowl with a sheepish smile and a mouthed, sorry. Arthur put the bottle on the table and swirled it around; it wobbled on the uneven surface before bumping and bouncing against the beer bottles scattered all around the middle.

"That brings the other problem to light. Their magic. Odds are, the Brass has pulled in the Directory to bolster defences and provide support -- now that Bayard's gone underground, according to Olaf, we might see them be put to some use," Arthur said. "Directory sorcerers will have gotten the same power boost as the NWO. They're also going to have less time to put up shields and cast hexes and wards and whatever else --"

"They're not half-bad at it, but if you think about it, there's more NWO sorcerers in one bloody pit than there is in the whole of the Directory," Merlin said, remembering how many he'd spotted at the Pentagram on any given night that they'd gone visiting. "There's only so much that they can do before they tire out, and don't forget, you numpty, the NWO's been preparing for decades."

Merlin reached over and flicked Will on the side of his head.
"Ow! Oi! What was that for?" Will asked, rubbing his head.

"You're not daft, you know this. Do the math -- you've got the degree in it --"

"In math?" Kay blurted out, surprised. He moved to look at Will, nearly slipping out of his seat when he ruffled Will's hair. "You mean under all this, there's a brain?"

"In theory," Merlin said sourly. "Why do you think he doesn't write anything down in his shoot book? He does the math in his head."

Arthur made a small, strangled sound. Merlin looked at him in alarm before realizing that Arthur was fighting to hold back his laughter. The entire table fell silent while Arthur gasped for breath, wiping the tears from his eyes. Merlin shot an accusing glance at Will, because this was his fault, somehow, but Will was bewildered, shaking his head as if he didn't know if he should get out of the way as men in white coats dragged Arthur off to the asylum, or if he should start running now, because Arthur was about to snap.

The rest of the team glanced at each other, searching for someone who might have figured out what was going on in Arthur's head. Lance was concerned for a few seconds before he shrugged and grabbed whatever drink was nearest. Bedivere raised both brows and started to say something, thinking better of it. Gwaine scratched the scruff on his jaw and just didn't try.

Merlin looked at them all before turning to stare at Arthur, wondering if somehow, the situation they were in had finally broken him.

Nearly as quickly as the laughing fit had come on, Arthur sobered, his eyes narrowing. Merlin knew that Arthur would never hurt him, but it didn't stop his heart from fluttering a little bit, and he couldn't help moving out of the way, hoping that he wasn't the target of Arthur's sudden, unexpected ire.

"I can't believe I didn't see it before." Arthur pointed accusingly at Will and said, "You're a fucking hypocrite. You don't do anything by halves. You're not an insubordinate little shite. You just don't do anything unless you've got all the variables and calculated all the probabilities. You don't know what my team can do or what we have planned so you can't account for us, and that's why -- that's why you go off on your own."

Merlin's eyes snapped to Will, his mouth a little slack, as stunned as Will was that Arthur had figured it out, but also that Merlin hadn't known that about Will. Or maybe he had known, all along, subconsciously -- he'd never heard it spelled out, and it had never really sunk in.

And it made sense. It fit with Will's personality and explained away quirks that no one had ever looked at closely, writing it off as insubordination or an honest-to-goodness problem with authority. Will would never take orders from anyone, not easily, but if he was told everything that was going on, he was usually the first to volunteer -- and he volunteered not because he liked the odds, but because he'd already calculated them.

"You do that, don't you?" Merlin said, a little dumbstruck.

Will stammered helplessly. "Only when I need to. Christ, don't look at me like that. It's not like I do it all the time --"

"Only when it suits you, you mean," Merlin snapped.

Will grimaced, but he didn't bother defending himself. He couldn't. Merlin had known Will nearly his entire life and had examples to draw from.
"That's why you do stupid shite. That tree that couldn't have held your weight. The bird you know you'll never have a chance with. All those bloody bets in uni. Those times you went on solo missions and never talked about them. Accepting MI-6's offer and going after the fucking NWO all by yourself. That was all you figuring out base probabilities --"

"Look at that, he's a bloody savant now," Gwaine said, chuckling. Abruptly, he stopped and said, "No, wait, could make use of you --"

"Shut up, Gwaine," Merlin said, turning to Will. Will shrank in his seat, practically crawling into Kay's lap beside him to get away from Merlin. "What's my probability rating?"

"You're Merlin," Will said, as if that explained everything. "You're not a probability. You're a certainty."

Merlin's scathing retort died on his lips.

"Damn right he is," Gwaine said.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Lamorak said.

"Why is that even a question?" Bohrs said.

"Get off my lap," Kay said.

Will looked sheepish and slipped onto his own seat. "Sorry, mate," he muttered, but the apology wasn't directed at Kay. "Sorry if I ever made you think --"

"Not me you should be apologising to," Merlin said, poking Will hard in the chest. "It's Arthur. It's my team. You're sitting there on your high seat calculating odds, double-checking the plans as if Arthur hasn't already done that himself. If you want in on this, bloody well say so --"

Arthur's hand on Merlin's shoulder was warm, reassuring and firm. Merlin trailed off and moved out of the way, half-leaning against the back of his chair.

"You want in on this," Arthur said calmly, "You train with us. No complaints, no arguments. You follow the plan. You do not deviate from the plan. You don't countermand my order unless you have no other choice to save yourself and everyone else. You do all this, or you're out. What is it going to be?"

Will hesitated. He side-eyed Merlin. "Does he have to be my Captain?"

Merlin stared.

He was aware that the rest of the table tensed up, that they were keeping themselves from rising to the bait, that they were leaving it to Merlin, at least for now, to defend Arthur. But just as Arthur had come to a realization about Will, Merlin was coming to one, too.

"Don't even front with me," Merlin said. "You like Arthur."

"What are you talking about --"

"You like Arthur. You have this massive boner for him --"

"I don't --"

"It gets you all hot and bothered when you find out that he's got more plans ready to go for every
possible outcome than you've even calculated --"

"Shut up --"

"You never hated him, not even in the beginning --"

"I hate him, goddamn it --"

"You were flaming jealous that he outthinks you --"

"Shut it --" Will grabbed Merlin, hauling him out of his chair. Merlin shoved him off, but Will hung on despite his still-healing collarbone. There was a chaotic scramble, flailing limbs, the universe up-ending itself, and in the end, Merlin found himself in a headlock, a hand over his mouth.

The team stared at them in varying degrees of incredulity, Arthur included.

Will slowly let Merlin go. Merlin started to say something, but Will held up a hand, his fingers curling warningly. Will brushed down Merlin's rumpled shirt and jacket, straightened him up some, and gallantly escorted Merlin to his chair. He took a moment to sort himself out before he picked up his seat from the ground and sat down.

Then, in a measure that Merlin knew was a valiant attempt to regain his dignity, Will drummed his fingers on the table and said in a calm, even tone, "So you think someone in the chain of command is smart enough to hold back the one advantage they have -- a team trained to take out magic users -- but you don't know when or where you'll be called in."

No one said anything, but everyone turned to look at Arthur. Arthur didn't react, not at first. Merlin was certain he wasn't the only one to notice the triumphant smirk spreading across his lips, as if he'd just won a massive battle and was reaping all the rewards, including a much-needed advantage that had been, up until now, an impossibility.

Merlin was grateful that Arthur didn't gloat, but instead turned serious and said, "I don't know where. But I know when. It will be right after the NWO has gone off on the attack and the Army's got them cornered."

Will looked thoughtful. He nodded sharply after a moment. "That's the NWO. What else?"

"Nimueh," Arthur said, and the entire table, Merlin included, tore their attention away from Will to listen. "Uther. They both wanted that artefact for a reason. It's a power source. Easy enough to see that Uther would want it to power a weapon that disrupts magic. What did Nimueh want it for? What about Morgause? You know more about her than I do. And what, exactly, is Uther's role in all this?"

"Morgause's a known quantity. She's all brute force and violence. She'll be masterminding the attacks, and she'll be the general at the frontlines. The rest of them? Unknown variables," Will said, leaning forward in challenge. "That's not an answer and it's not a plan --"

"Doesn't have to be," Arthur said. "I don't doubt that Uther's going to be with the Brass, that he's going to hedge to be recommissioned as soon as the chain of command starts falling apart. He's going to hawk his EMP as the cure-all for the world's problems, and he's going to do it from the front lines."

"You've got it all sorted out, then," Will said mockingly. "And Nimueh?"

"One problem set at a time," Arthur said steadily. "The CIA's tracking her down -- and if they haven't found her yet, they will soon. When they do, we'll figure out what she's doing and how to
"You don't think she's going to influence the fight?" Will asked.

The team looked from Arthur to Will and back. Merlin felt as if he were watching a tennis match; the volleys were moving too fast to follow.

"There's nothing on Nimueh," Arthur said. "No psychological profiles, no modus operandi, and a paper trail that leads nowhere. What we've got on her is limited to two contacts some fifty years apart performing two completely unrelated acts. It's impossible to tell if she's working with the NWO, if she is the NWO, or if she's using the cover of the NWO for her own means and purposes."

"If you had to guess?"

Arthur exhaled. He paused in consideration, but Merlin knew he was sorting his thoughts out properly rather than coming up with an answer. "She's well-prepared, highly-organized, and fearless. She's broken into the Directory and taken God only knows. She went into the CIA depositories and snatched an object of power. She may have done the same thing in other countries. She's contracted the Pendragon custom weapons division for several objects that Gwen will be working out tomorrow, which strikes me as getting the enemy to do her work for her. If she's associated with someone like Aredian --"

At that, he glanced at Merlin, almost in apology for bringing him up. Merlin nodded faintly in appreciation, but he hadn't even noticed. He was too distracted by how fucking clever Arthur was.

"-- then we haven't found it yet, but we haven't had the chance to start looking."

Merlin made a mental note to start running searches on Aredian's database. Arthur continued:

"If it's the same person, past and present, we're dealing with something none of us understand. She's underhanded, off the radar, and not even on the target range. If she had anything to do with anything, it's only after the fact, when no one remembers her ever being there. My best bet? She's going to use the war as a distraction. Do whatever it is that she's planning to do. She's prepared for whatever and whomever might stop her," Arthur said. "If she knows about us, and I'm going to be surprised if she doesn't, she's going to be waiting for us to make an appearance, and she's going to try to take us out."

The photograph that they'd obtained from the CIA had been grainy and blurred, the quality decayed - something about the building affecting electronics, too, but Merlin privately thought that the woman had her own face-scrambling magic. Still, it had been enough to show McGraw earlier in the evening, and the former mayor had hemmed and hawed before saying, I suppose that could be her granddaughter?

"She'll need something she doesn't know about," Will said. His eyes narrowed. "You bloody bugger, you've been playing me all along, weren't you? You've been trying to figure me out, dropping breadcrumbs you know I'd have no choice to pick up, pushing me and testing me, all to see what it would take to get me on your side --"

Merlin held out his hands on either side of him, ready to stop Will from lunging at Arthur.

Arthur, though, was a smug prat. He raised both brows knowingly and smiled. "Took you long enough to sort it."

Will didn't look pleased, but he jutted out his chin in grudging respect. Merlin risked taking his eyes off of Will to glance at Arthur, and was pleased when Arthur only tilted his head in acknowledgement and didn't even try to rub it in.
"Fine. Bollocks. I'm in, but you knew that," Will said.

No one said anything for a few minutes. Kay reached for a plastic mug on the table, but put it back down when it was empty. Will gestured at the one in front of him, and Kay sniffed at the contents before emptying it. "God help us all," he muttered.

"I feel the love," Will said, half-chuckling, but there was a haunted look in his eyes that Merlin recognized from their third year of uni and Will didn't have a bloody clue how to work his way out of a particularly stubborn problem set.

The silence stretched, and across from Merlin, Elyan slowly put his beer bottle down, positioning it amongst the small city in the middle. "I'm in, too."

"Elyan --" Arthur started.

"Your sister would kill us. More importantly, she'd kill me," Lance said, his tone vehement. "Put that out of your head right now."

"I might not have your training, but I can handle it," Elyan said. When Lance started to protest, Elyan held up his hand for silence before leaning on the table, arms crossed, and stared hard at Arthur. "You said you won't be surprised if she's already expecting Excalibur. You're counting on her not knowing about Will. She's definitely not going to predict me.

"I know my way around a gun. I'm not in bad shape. And I warrant I'm better at cracking a system than any of you." Elyan paused and grinned at Merlin. "Except maybe Merlin, but he's wizard, so it's not a fair comparison. When the Brass calls you in, they're going to set you up with a command post. But what's going to happen if that FOB goes down? I don't mean to be on the front lines running the gauntlet with you blokes, I'm not gone in the head like you are. But I can be your command center. You want satellite images, direction, tracking, cracking, codes? I'll get them for you --"

"You're not trained for that," Owain said, his tone gentle, trying for placating.

"There's a reason why he's not allowed to play Call of Duty with us," Gwaine said, scoffing.

Lance glared at Gwaine so hard that everyone heard Gwaine swallow a gulp, realizing full well that he was going to have to deal with the wrath of Gwen for speaking up in Elyan's defence.

"Look, it's not because he's a better shot than I am --"

"My privilege," Will said.

"Fuck off, you," Gwaine said. "And it's not because he strategizes better than Arthur --"

"Not many do," Bohrs said.

"It's because he has the whole visual field in his head all the bloody time," Gwaine said. He turned to Arthur. "When Pendragon Consulting was working on the military's VR training course and couldn't get it working, who was called in?"

"Not Elyan," Arthur said.

"Right, not Elyan, and you know damn well it should've been. The only reason he wasn't is because Uther didn't want a petty criminal on the payroll," Gwaine snapped.

"Oi," Elyan said, looking hurt. "Alleged petty criminal, thanks."
"What can it hurt to try?" Gwaine asked. "We've got former operators here. I don't care how much you like your toys, Arthur. I know you like it old school. Let Elyan train with them. We'll put him through his paces. Gwen's not even going to kill us -- or me, please, God -- because Elyan doesn't even have to leave Camelot. Merlin can set up the radio --"

Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin's eyes darted between Elyan, who was subdued, but obviously holding himself in check, and Gwaine, who was earnestly fighting for Elyan's sake. Then, slowly, he nodded. He could fix the E-channel, making it impenetrable and un-jammeable. He could extend the range. He could tweak it with a bit of magic, too, and do what he did to Will's old radio. Merlin already had a plan in place to correct for the interference caused by the other radio signals, and bolstering their channel while adding in extra securities couldn't hurt.

"-- and Gwen can maintain it," Gwaine was saying. He paused for breath, and even Perceval looked impressed by how much he'd gotten out in one go. "We'll run through training with him. Have him get a feel for live-action. It's not as if he hasn't directed us in a game, yeah?"

Arthur didn't answer. He looked as if he were evaluating the option.

When the silence became too much for Gwaine to bear, he said, "Look, let him have at least one go - -"

"All right," Arthur said, and the collective held breath in the reception tent was released. "We'll let him have a go. As long as he never forgets that we're his first priority, that he can't let us go anywhere blind, and that he can't fucking freeze up when it looks bad…"

"I won't," Elyan promised.

Gwaine's entire body caved, as if breathing out a sigh of relief. Merlin suspected this was Arthur's way of helping Gwaine deal with his rabid fear of losing not only lines of sight, but his other team members in a dizzying city square.

"Huh," Lance said. He shrugged. "If Gwen asks, I'm not a fan of the idea."

"Scared of the wife?" Bedivere asked.

"I'm more interested in knowing why you're not scared of her," Lance said. "When they passed out self-preservation skills, did you skip the line?"

Bedivere snorted.

"You poor sod," Owain said, sympathetic. He clapped a hand on Elyan's shoulder and said, "I'll talk to my dad. He's a genius with radio codes. If that man can talk me through dismantling a bomb from a thousand kilometres away, he can teach you to do the same."

"Great," Elyan said, a little weakly. "I'm not doing that, am I?"

The group snickered.

"Speaking of, there's something else Nimueh's not going to account for," Lucan said, folding his hands behind his head and leaning backward in a satisfying stretch. "Mordred."

"Um," Lance said.

Gwaine sat up straight and leaned back against Perceval before raising a brow.
Pellinor coughed and stared at the table before spreading his hands in consideration.

Even Will was considering it. Merlin narrowed his eyes at his best friend and wondered when he'd been thrown under the tram -- had he only just noticed?

Arthur was the only one whose expression remained unreadable. The only giveaway to hint that he was even thinking about it was the steady tap-tap-tap of his finger against his knee.

Merlin scratched at a loose thread and shook his head. It wasn't about him, he knew. It was taking advantage of every resource they had at their disposal, and they all knew that they didn't have much to go on. The question wasn't whether Mordred could fight with them. He'd demonstrated, both on video clips from military surveillance and in person, that he had more than a passing grasp of magic and military tactics to be of use.

The question was whether they could trust Mordred. And, worse than that, they would have to ask him to come with them in the middle of a war, and no one knew if he could handle it.

Arthur blew out held breath and shook his head. "I'll talk to him."

"He's done right by us, at the very least," Bohrs said. "We treated him like shite in the beginning, but he's never looked at us cross-eyed."

"Kind of felt like he thought he deserved it," Gareth said. He got to his feet. "Anyone want another drink?"

"All of us," Perceval said quietly, looking just as tired as the rest of them. There was a pinch in his brow as if the entire conversation had given him a headache.

Geraint drummed the table with his fingers and met everyone's eyes earnestly. "I can't believe we're not thinking of the obvious. I mean, we've got something at our disposal that no one could possibly anticipate."

No one paid him any mind.

"Anyone? Anyone care to guess?"

Galahad snored softly besides him.

Kay took the beer bottle from Gareth and sighed. "I'll take one for the team. All right. I'll bite. What's that?"

Geraint waved jazz hands in the air and said, "Dragons."

The entire table -- not including Galahad -- came to life, and the chatter was almost at a dull roar as everyone laid out possible scenarios. Merlin held back, still too stunned by West's vicious attack and Alfred's attempt to lure them to some sort of magical complacency to really comment, never mind be comfortable putting the lives of his teammates in a dragon's hand.

Fortunately, Arthur looked as if he was thinking exactly the same thing. It wasn't until Arthur had taken a good, long pull of his beer and clattered it on the tabletop that the noise died down, and everyone looked at him expectantly.

"Oh, I thought about it. But in case the lot of you are bloody blind and missed how he was ready to kill me all through the entire reception, convincing Balinor to help us is an exercise in futility."
Everyone deflated.
"Oh. Right. Yeah, I noticed that," Geraint said. "Probably doesn't like it too much that you're shagging his kid."

"Fuck him," Bohrs said, and it was so vehement that everyone at the table shut up.

Merlin stared at Arthur for a very long time before coming to the slow realization that if Arthur had thought about it, it also meant that he had a workable plan to include the dragons in battle. Overcoming Balinor's distaste of working with Arthur and seeing past Uther Pendragon to the man who was nothing like the sire, however, was something that Arthur hadn't figured it out yet.

And when everything went down the way Arthur predicted it, they couldn't do without every advantage.

Merlin sighed heavily, but he couldn't muster a good reason not to do what he dearly didn't want to do.

"I'll talk to him."

ooOOoo

It wasn't the sun that woke him. Nor the activity outside.

It was Merlin's soft sigh, warm breath against the back of Arthur's neck, and the tiny, sleepy hitch of Merlin's hips, grinding his cock into the cleft of Arthur's arse.

Too many years in the army and too much strain over the last few months meant that Arthur rarely woke up with the same sort of sleepy daze that he'd enjoyed during his teenage years -- particularly those that came with weekends of sleeping in.

And yet, with the midmorning sun streaming through the frosted glass of the narrow attic compartment that had been converted into a bedroom over the last few days, Arthur found that he had not only slept in, but that he couldn't quite shake the bone-deep weariness that made him ache to return to sleep, even with the teasing invitation of Merlin's body against his.

Arthur didn't have the heart to wake Merlin and to have his way with him, and besides, this was nice. Cuddling together in a too-narrow bed, trying to drink of each other's warmth against the chill seeping through the unpatched cracks around the octagonal window.

He was tired, and he wanted to sleep, damn it. He supposed it was inevitable, given the sheer amount of work he had taken on in Leon and Morgana's absence and the training sessions he had implemented.

Ensuring the camp's safety, sorting out work for everyone to do, maintaining stocks and supplies while continuing to maintain an amicable relationship with their nearest neighbours had been part of Leon's job and something that every member of the team was trained to do during wartime. Still, Arthur didn't doubt for a single second that Morgana's hand had weighed heavily in how smoothly that the encampment had been running. This kind of work wasn't easy, and there was always something that needed attending to, taking not only Arthur, but every member of the team away from all the training sessions that he was trying to run.
As predicted, when they had called headquarters, Mandrake had given them the expected *sit tight* orders, with a request to be ready when they were needed. From all the information that Elyan had been able to glean from the spotty news reports and the inconstant stream of military data, not even Arthur was able to predict when the NWO was going to strike. Merlin had written a quick search algorithm to scour worldwide media patterns on the internet based on some sort of predictive mathematical equation that Will had scribbled out on the clean side of a napkin while holding a lukewarm beer bottle against his throbbing forehead. Even that wasn't turning up any better results, either, not when the situation worldwide was advancing and retreating in an unsteady pattern.

Arthur was certain that he needed to get three things sorted, and *immediately*. The first was getting past the fact that Will was apparently some sort of genius -- Arthur really should have thought of asking Merlin what Will had studied in uni sooner, because it would have sorted out some of their problems. The second was delegating as much of the daily tasks to the very capable members of their encampment so that the team could retreat to a private corner of the Pendragon property and resume their training unhindered.

And, finally, Arthur had to talk to Mordred. He might have said that he would -- and it had been an empty sort of promise without any real meaning behind it -- but now...

The team was right. If Mordred could be brought onto their side, if he could help them... Arthur would be a fool to ignore the advantage that it would give them.

He groaned inwardly and stretched carefully, not wanting to dislodge Merlin's arm around his waist. He considered getting out of bed, but no one had come knocking on the attic asking after Arthur, and, well, Arthur was certain no one minded skipping an early morning run. He'd make it up to the team later.

"You're thinking too loud," Merlin murmured, his voice sleep-rough. "Supposed to be sleeping."

"Supposed to be doing a lot of things," Arthur murmured. He unconsciously ticked them off from his mental list. "Morning run. PT. Run through a few exercises. Check on the new supplies. Take Elyan through the codes again. Set up the patrol schedule. See how the filtration system is working out --"


"There's always something to do," Arthur said, turning his head. He blew Merlin's hair out of his face, twitching his nose when the curls tickled his skin.

"Nope. Everything's taken care of," Merlin said. He shifted, as if trying to get even closer, and Arthur closed his eyes when he felt lips nibbling at his ear. "Besides. It's been six days. Less than four hours of sleep every night. Can't keep that up forever."

Merlin's hand closed around Arthur's cock; Arthur bucked up into Merlin's loose grip. Merlin wasn't the only one to wake up with a morning -- *mid-morning* -- wood.

"You have things to do," Arthur said breathily.

"Doing it right now," Merlin said. He kissed the back of Arthur's neck and continued to stroke Arthur's cock, his touch annoyingly loose and feather-light.

"The E-channel --"
"Finished the upgrades last night," Merlin said, nibbling at Arthur's shoulder.

"Aredian's database. Nimueh --"

"Nothing concrete turned up. Tightened the search, started it again before bed last night," Merlin said, nudging his leg between Arthur's. Arthur shifted obligingly, curling a foot behind Merlin's calf.

"Dragons," Arthur murmured, but he hated himself nearly as soon as he said it. Merlin stiffened behind him, his fingers squeezing a little too tightly around Arthur's cock before slackening.

Merlin exhaled slowly, his breath teasing a wet spot along Arthur's collarbone. After an instant, Merlin resumed his slow, lazy stroke, and Arthur couldn't help it. He ground back against Merlin's cock. "I'll talk to him when you talk to Mordred."

Maybe that was what they'd been doing all along, the two of them. Working so hard on the camp and making sure that everything was safe, secure and well-supplied when it very obviously was, always finding something new to do or scrounging up the team for training instead of taking a moment's peace to sort out what they would do and say to Mordred and Balinor.

"Later," Arthur said, turning his head and trying to reach Merlin's lips. Merlin let go of Arthur's cock and shifted; Arthur rolled onto his back into the space that Merlin made, and readily took Merlin's weight on top of him. Merlin's legs fell to either side of his, and the contact between their cocks made them both shudder.

Arthur pulled Merlin down, crushing their lips together.

Slow and lazy became hungry and passionate. Their kisses were not gentle. They were full of insistence and biting nips and bruising force. Arthur's hands were too tight around Merlin's hips; Merlin's fingers left bruises on Arthur's shoulders. Arthur pushed up for more contact; Merlin arched his back. The drag of cock on flesh was at once too rough against dry skin and too much against the flat plane of a muscled stomach and the dips and bends of sinew and muscle and bone.

Arthur's mouth found the crook of Merlin's collarbone and sucked bruises into his fair skin. Merlin retaliated by dipping his head down and scratching a bite along Arthur's jaw.

Arthur tilted Merlin onto his side and rolled on top of him so quickly that they nearly slid from the blankets and the cots onto the floor. A breathy laugh escaped Merlin's lips, and that just wouldn't do; that wasn't the sort of sound that Arthur wanted to hear from his mouth right now.

He leaned away from Merlin, bowing his body just so, making space between them so that he could put his hand on Merlin's cock. Merlin moaned -- there, that's better -- and thrust into the loose circle of Arthur's fingers. Arthur let him do that a few more times, biting his lip as he watched the little undulations of Merlin's body, matching Merlin's noises with appreciative ones of his own. Arthur swept his thumb over the head to collect the pre-come and slid it down Merlin's length, slicking him up, again and again, before aligning himself against Merlin and adding his own to the mix.

It didn't take them long, not like this. Not with Merlin's unfiltered moans or the way he mouthed filthy words of encouragements that never made it further than Arthur's ear. Not when Merlin's legs fell open even more or when his knees pressed against Arthur's thighs. Not when Merlin rocked up against him or reached down between them to help.

They were like teenagers trying to stroke off quickly, before someone came home and knocked on their door or barged in, both of them trying to do something, anything, that would get the other off. Pleads and begs and teasing encouragements. Pinches and bites and licks in sensitive places. A twist
of the wrist, a crook of a finger, a husky groan. A promise, somewhere in there, that if they could have this little bit now, they might have enough time for more afterward.

Arthur came first with a stutter to his movements, biting down on the bony part of Merlin's shoulder, the hot cold flash of orgasm pulsing through him robbing him of sense and consciousness to work Merlin through his own. Merlin needed only two more pumps, two more stuttering thrusts into Arthur's loosening grip, before he groaned and came in spurts that left him both rigid and relaxed.

Arthur collapsed on top of him, not caring that they were both a mess and he was making it worse, or that the shower was down the stairs and on the far side of the corridor. He dug his arms beneath Merlin, smiling into Merlin's shoulder when he felt Merlin's arms tighten around him, and they stayed like that until their breathing evened out and their heartbeats weren't as erratic anymore.

"Morgana and Leon are back today," Merlin said.

Arthur hummed acknowledgement. He was well aware that he was going to have to worship at Morgana's feet for not only managing the encampment and every situation that had arisen since Camelot had been established, but for having done so without the least bit of complaint. He'd always known that his sister was nothing short of brilliant, and these days, she was a force to be reckoned with.

"I know I'm taking one for the team here, making sure you don't run yourself ragged, but we eventually do need to get up," Merlin said. When Arthur didn't answer, Merlin added, "Preferably before we get stuck together permanently."

"I have no objection to that," Arthur mumbled.

Merlin's laugh was short, soft, and fond. His hands slid up Arthur's back and ruffled his hair. "Gwaine said he'd only keep the masses from knocking on our door until noon."

It wasn't noon, not yet, and although Arthur's stomach rumbled with hunger, he didn't move. If anything, he closed his eyes tightly, let his body go lax, and snored noisily.

Merlin pinched him. "Get off of me, you arse," he said, his words gentle.

Arthur groaned inwardly. If Merlin had at least made an attempt at irritation or annoyance, Arthur would have had every reason to cling tighter. Unfortunately, Merlin was being adorable, and he'd snuck a tone of common sense in his voice while Arthur wasn't looking.

He rolled off with difficulty, wincing as their skin tore apart, taking some body hair along with it, and balanced on his side. He could feel the edge of the bed on his hip. One wrong move, and --

Merlin shoved him.

Alarmed, Arthur's eyes blinked wide open and he grabbed Merlin --

Merlin yelped --

Arthur grunted twice -- once, when he landed, and again when Merlin landed on him, his elbow catching Arthur across the jaw. The first impact wasn't terrible. The cot wasn't far from the floor, and anything hard and objectionable to his soft bits was well out of reach. But Merlin's weight on him was sudden and something he couldn't prepare for, and he gasped for breath, managing a small laugh.

"Well. I'm off," Arthur remarked.
"Sorry," Merlin said, chuckling. He pushed himself off, leaned down for a quick kiss that Arthur stretched out as long as he could, and stood up. Arthur didn't move from his spot, opting to watch Merlin instead. Merlin wiped himself off with a dirty shirt that he threw at Arthur, and quickly got dressed in trousers. "Do you want to shower first?"

Arthur considered. He couldn't really hear anyone in the house, but that didn't mean that it was empty -- as they'd found out the hard way, more than once. "Go ahead," he said, sitting up.

Merlin picked up his kit, but instead of leaving, he sat down on the cot, his knee pressing Arthur's arm. "I'm thinking the same thing as you, you know."

Arthur peered over his shoulder. "What, of making use of the en-suite in Morgana and Leon's room and despoiling it as a welcome-back present?"

His words apparently had the effect of short-circuiting Merlin's brain. Instead of saying whatever had been on his mind, Merlin's jaw clamped shut and he tilted his head, looking thoughtful. Then, as if remembering that Morgana and Leon were returning today, Merlin's face twisted into a wince and he shook his head. "Last thing I want is for them to walk in on us --"

"Not as if Leon hasn't already a few times," Arthur said.

"You really want your sister to see you with your dick up my arse? Or vice versa?" Merlin asked.


Neither of them said anything, but they both had a nearly synchronous shudder at the mere thought of Morgana catching them in the act. Merlin ran his fingers through Arthur's hair and said, "I'm thinking I'd rather be somewhere far away from all this, where we've no chance of being recalled."

Arthur leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. "After," he promised.

"New Zealand? Or did you settle on Thailand for a honeymoon?"

Arthur chuckled, slowly pushing himself to his feet and casting about for his trousers. "It really bothers you that you never found the real file, doesn't it?"

"No, not at all," Merlin answered quickly, getting up. He looked sheepish and shrugged. "Not much."

Arthur flashed him a small smile.

"Are we telling them?" Merlin asked.

Arthur found a pair of sweatpants and pulled them on. They would do until he'd washed up. "Morgana and Leon are back today, aren't they? If neither of us want Morgana to see what we get to when we're alone, neither of us want to be on the receiving end of her ire when she realizes that she's the last to know. We'll tell them today. If you want."

"I want." Merlin's kiss was sweet. They parted reluctantly, and Merlin said, "I won't be long."

Neither of them were. They were at one of the mess tents before the crowds arrived, able to grab a fresh portion of the hot buffet meal being tendered out -- a thick barley soup that was filling on its own, and didn't need to be supplemented by sandwiches made out of coarse rye bread and sliced ham. That didn't stop either of them from trying for second portions.
Arthur was deep in conversation with Pellinor's father over springtime planting in one of the fallow fields at a neighbouring farm that had been found abandoned and long foreclosed by the banks that a few of the men were thinking of purchasing when Merlin came back from sorting out their trays. Merlin waited until the discussion came to a close before leaning in to say, "Mordred's at the filtration pump."

"Not letting me get out of that, are you?" Arthur asked.

What he didn't expect was how Merlin drew back and shrugged. "Unless you've changed your mind. In which case, you should tell the rest of us; we're walking on pins and needles, not sure which way we're going --"

"I'll talk to him," Arthur said, resting a reassuring hand on Merlin's leg. "I said I would. The sooner we get him with us and trained, the better."

Merlin relaxed. "And what are you going to say?"

There was something that Arthur had noticed about Merlin -- the way he held himself a little set aside from the rest of the team. It wasn't that he didn't trust the others. Nothing like that. Arthur had seen it even when Merlin was with Will, as if he was afraid, on some level, of not being understood. And maybe there was some truth in that. The team knew about magic. They knew that Merlin had it. They also had a good idea of the extent that Merlin could push himself to get something done, if need be. And yet, that disjointing separation still existed.

It vanished whenever Merlin had worked with Gaius. It didn't exist when they'd been trapped at the house and Merlin had worked with Kathy on the charms or when Merlin trained Bran to control and to use his magic. There was a sense of understanding between them, deep at the core, of something that they all had in common and didn't need to talk about.

Whatever any of them might feel about Mordred, there was something to be said about the addition of another magic user on the team. The G's were well chuffed at having another long-range shooter to their ranks and teased Will mercilessly at every opportunity. Arthur wouldn't be surprised if Merlin subconsciously craved the same sort of support that he would only find in someone else who was like him.

"Whatever I need to," Arthur said. He tilted his head and slid off the bench, leaving the mess tent. He waited until Merlin fell in step beside him and they were out of earshot before he asked, "Do you trust him?"

Merlin tilted his head in consideration. He tied his long scarf into a knot and zipped up his jacket. "I think he has a long way to go before that'll happen."

"But?"

"It won't happen if we don't give him a chance," Merlin said, shrugging.

Arthur didn't answer right away. He hadn't given Merlin a chance -- not in the beginning. He had been hard on Merlin, giving him all the dirty work, all the tasks that the rest of the base wouldn't want to deal with if they didn't need to. Merlin hadn't even been a greenie, never mind a cadet. He was a lieutenant, someone who had put in his time and was putting in more, who had gone through Hell in one of his last missions and had kept on, who had willingly accepted being on the bottom of the proverbial totem pole if only it meant that he could be out in the field again.

The team had treated Merlin better than Arthur had, back then.
Merlin had proven himself, time and time again. Arthur had still pushed him hard despite accepting him into the team as readily as anyone else, even if it had taken him a lot longer to come around. Arthur tried not to let that bother him too much. He'd been a pillock then; he was a pillock now.

Mordred was, in many ways, exactly where Merlin had been. And, like Merlin, who had had dark clouds shadowing him in the aftermath of a trial gone wrong, Mordred had his past history and association and questionable background following him. It had been hard to look past all the rumours of Merlin's last mission, but the team had managed it. Arthur certainly had, even if it was in no small part helped along by the confidential transcripts of the court-martial. Everything had pointed at Merlin being guilty until a key piece of evidence turned up.

Just like everything pointed at Mordred being guilty, but Arthur doubted that any evidence would turn up to exonerate him.

If Arthur took away the court transcripts, he would have seen past that black mark on Merlin's record and seen Merlin for the man that he was. Eventually. Once he had taken his own head out of his arse.

Maybe he needed to do that with Mordred, too. Merlin was right. Mordred needed a chance. The same sort of chance that Kilgarrah had given Merlin by assigning him to Arthur's team -- whether Arthur had liked it or not.

And it had worked out in the end. It had worked out in ways that not even Arthur could have imagined.

"Okay," Arthur said.

Merlin's eyes were bright when he turned to look at Arthur, and he stared at Arthur with such incredulity that Arthur had to reach out and steady Merlin before Merlin stumbled off the path and into a muddy puddle. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Arthur said easily. "But it'll be on you. I can train him. I can show him the physical side. The rest of it? The magic? That's you, Merlin. He'll work with the team. I'll do what I can to make sure he can react like one of us in combat. Physical training is easy, but trust is hard. He trusts you, or he would never have told you who he really was, and he wouldn't have done everything to get you out of there if he didn't have absolute faith in you. I'll bring him into the team, but he's going to answer to you. Can you do that?"

Merlin looked away. He was silent for nearly the rest of the walk to the section of the lake where Perceval was working with Gaius on a new water filtration system that would be large enough to accommodate any unexpected expansion in numbers as more and more people showed up at the cottage. Arthur was glad for the silence, because it meant Merlin wasn't making a snap decision, that he was thinking this through as carefully as he could.

They climbed around a rocky patch of ground that was completely covered in chunks of ice from where water had pooled in the dips and cracks. Arthur offered a hand up for Merlin, and once they were on even ground, Merlin held him in place instead of continuing on.

They both looked down the rise toward the lake, past the thin curtain of trees. There was a large, blocky construction, half out of cement, half out of wood, just positioned along the water's edge where the bank was shallow. There were pipes leading into the water, disappearing into the murk, and there were pipes leading away, partially -- and temporarily -- buried in a few inches of ground to protect the softer parts from frost damage. Someone had built rickety decking around the filtration system, and there was a small crowd of people around it.
Perceval was half in the water, up to his hips in rubber waders, an arm stretched into the construct. Gaius was on the deck, almost completely doubled over, his body disappearing inside. Gwen, wrapped up in a bright red coat, was sitting cross-legged on the ground, her jeans muddy. One hand was deep in the electronic innards of what Arthur assumed to be the monitoring system, and Mordred was looking over her shoulder, pointing helpfully as he spoke.

"I can do that," Merlin said, looking away from the scene in front of them to meet Arthur's eyes.

Arthur searched his expression. He didn't see any doubt -- not that he felt any himself. He knew Merlin could do it. The only question was whether Merlin would.

"All right," Arthur said. He gestured, and they both walked down.

"Still no luck?" Merlin asked by way of announcing their presence. Perceval nodded in greeting, though he didn't let go of whatever he was holding onto inside the container. Gaius slipped out and looked up, his expression wavering between being glad to see Merlin and unsure of where he stood. Mordred stood and straightened quickly, moving out of the way, wiping his hands on his trousers.

Gwen rolled her eyes. "We have it working."

"That's great --"

"If no one moves," Gwen growled.

Arthur took an uncertain step back, huffing a small laugh. Merlin took the long way around and went to gingerly stand on the wobbly decking next to Gaius; he clapped a hand on Gaius' shoulder.

"What can I do to help?"

Arthur had a moment to appreciate the grateful, relieved and hopeful look on Gaius' face at the offer before realizing that Mordred hadn't only moved out of the way, but that he was quietly and subtly leaving. Arthur followed after him.

"Mordred," Arthur called out.

Mordred's stride faltered. He glanced over his shoulder before slowing down, letting Arthur catch up.

"Do you have a moment? There's something I'd like to talk with you about."

Mordred had spent nearly a decade undercover, working for no agency but his own, following the beliefs of a group of Druids who had nothing but the determination to ensure that a sort of balance was the outcome of the current fiasco. He had disappeared when he was only sixteen, turned up on the radars of secret government agencies as an associate of some of the world's most dangerous mercenaries, and was believed to be behind any number of criminal and terrorist acts.

Someone with that kind of background needed to be able to compartmentalize, to hide his nature and his true intention.

But Arthur caught it. A tiny little slip. Mordred glanced off to the side, his eyes widening in something like fear. His cheeks were red from the cold, but his pallor had paled, and he blew out a tiny breath before everything changed.

His shoulders pushed back. His chin lifted up. His lips pressed together. His eyes narrowed and became distant, almost disinterested. It was a mask he slipped on easily. Too easily. In that instant, everything made sense. Those glimpses of Mordred out of the corner of his eye, lurking in the
corners and dark shadows, watching them all, his shoulders almost to his ears, his head down, chewing the inside of his cheek. Even Leon had noticed, putting Lucan on Mordred in case Mordred was up to no good, but Lucan had said that Mordred was just... awkward.

And he was awkward. Not because he was in a new situation and on uncertain footing.

Mordred had worn that cold, professional mask for so long that he no longer knew how to be himself.

Jesus.

"Certainly," Mordred said, tilting his head in invitation, as if it were his idea. He started walking, angling back toward the path he obviously had been about to avoid. "How can I help you?"

Amused, Arthur caught up to Mordred in a few steps. He didn't answer, not right away; instead, he let Mordred direct them on the path before he answered the question.

"You can begin by saying yes," Arthur said cryptically. He wasn't going to let Mordred run the conversation, and he wasn't going to let Mordred hide behind his mask, not now.

Mordred shot him an uncertain, sidelong look. "To what?"

Arthur decided not to answer. Instead, he changed the subject. "I'm told that you've been helping around the camp as much as you could. The engines, the generators, protecting electronics so that we're not shut down if there's another power failure or an electronic pulse. It's appreciated. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Mordred said. He hesitated, wringing his hands. He looked as if he wanted to ask a question, but didn't know how.

"MI-6 has extensive files on you. Did you know that?" Arthur asked. He kept walking, but he slowed down when he noticed that Mordred's step stuttered, his stride shortening every time he grew uncomfortable. "And by extensive, I mean they have the surveillance video where you climbed onto a bus and disappeared. They documented the fruitless missing persons search -- it went on for months. Your photograph must still be in the police database."

Mordred didn't answer. He bowed his head.

"I'm not judging you," Arthur said. "You did what you had to do. I'm only sorry that you had to do it."

Mordred looked at him again. It was an evaluative glance, searching. Arthur pretended not to notice. Finally, he shrugged dismissively. "When needs must."

Arthur made a soft sound. He didn't speak, letting the silence draw Mordred out.

"It was my choice," Mordred said. He hesitated, his head ducking down. He stared at the ground as he walked, his eyes never roving further than the tops of his boots. "No one put me to it."

Arthur had his opinions about a sixteen-year-old boy deciding to leave school, his family, his friends, everything he had ever known, all to become an undercover soldier in a war against an enemy few people even realized existed. Child soldiers were an unfortunate fact of life in many parts of the world. There was no getting away from that. Arthur had said that he wasn't judging anything that Mordred had done, but it didn't mean that Arthur had to like the idea that even children couldn't be left alone to be children.
Not when he wasn't so sure that he wouldn't have made the same choice when he had been Mordred's age.

"My father is a Druid. Many of my family are. My closest friends," Mordred said, filling in the silence. "I grew up hearing the stories, the prophecies, the portents. There were many nights when I lay in bed and could not sleep. My cousins were not small, but they wept, sometimes. We felt helpless."

Arthur nodded. He knew that feeling well -- it had come and gone many times during his life, but it had never been a constant thing, not like what Mordred seemed to have endured.

"We were... one family. What could we do? My father... he did what he could. He taught us until we were old enough to be formally initiated. I was fostered," Mordred said, trailing off. He raised his chin, squinting, as if trying to see something in the distance. "It didn't matter that I was young. When they spoke about an active movement against the threats to the Balance, the elders spoke in front of everyone."

He paused, and his silence stretched for so long that it was as if he skipped over a great deal of information before he said, "When the opportunity came, I took it."

Just like that. As if it were that simple. Arthur climbed the rise and stopped, looking over the encampment. He couldn't see much, not with the bare trees in the way. Mordred continued on, the tension in his shoulders nearly ready to snap, but he slowed and stopped, turning when he realized that Arthur wasn't with him.

"Who were the threats?"

Mordred's expression gave nothing away. It was a cold, detached mask that slowly cracked and coloured, amusement tugging his lips into a wry smile. "The New World Order. Of course."

"Of course," Arthur said, playing along. When Mordred didn't continue, Arthur added, "Because governments worldwide --"

He stopped, and immediately felt stupid.

He'd known. Subconsciously, somewhere in the back of his mind. But he'd never acknowledged it. The hints had all been there. The signs. Everything that they had ever heard about the NWO involved not only dissemination, distribution, propagation, recruitment, but also...

Infiltration.

All around the world, secret agencies and military units had inexplicably and suddenly begun searching for magical artefacts mentioned, even in passing, in mythology, history, and literature. They had stockpiled their findings, enacted some sort of study-trade across borders, and had even, in two very frightening examples, transformed bits of stone and carved wood into modern-day equivalents with enough power to destroy...

Well.

Everything.

And yet, the important question had never been asked. Arthur had assumed that those agencies had been put in place because the governments were reacting to a very viable, insidious threat to the status quo of civilization, and he had had no reason to believe otherwise. All the information they had been given by the Directory, by MI-6...
There was a saying -- history books were written by the victors. History, apparently, could be twisted by a shadow organization Hell-bent on world domination through supernatural means.

"Oh," Arthur said.

Mordred's mask slipped, and he looked sad.

"Nimueh," Arthur said, without even thinking about it. But no sooner had he spoken the name did he realize that it made sense. He might only have heard about her over the last short while, even coming close -- so close -- to encountering her himself, but her name or her first initial and some variation of Morrigan as a surname had come up too many times and across too many databases for it to be anything other than coincidental.

And the time frame... If Nimueh were one person, or several, working toward the same goal over many generations...

"You know the name," Mordred said.

"Came across it a few times," Arthur said, his tone clipped. His eyes narrowed. "How do you know it?"

"Only in passing, murmured behind cupped hands," Mordred said, quietly. "Hers is the name whispered to misbehaving members, a bedtime story for those who won't settle down and go to sleep. If Generation Zero doesn't come to get you, the Morrigan will -- the maiden, the mother, the crone. She will bring bliss and pleasure and comfort if you are good, but war and tempest and hellfire if you are not. Some say that Nimueh and the Morrigan are one and the same."

"Oh," Arthur said again, and this time, his tone was harsh.

Mordred retreated, flinching, almost cowering, as if he'd forgotten himself.

"And her role in all this?"

The shake of Mordred's head was virtually imperceptible. "I am afraid that I do not know. We think... Cennydd thinks... that she is a construct of those who have created the New World Order, an object of the imagination meant to keep them obedient and focused on their goal."

"And you? What do you think?"

Mordred was silent. When he spoke, it was with a little furrow in his brow. "Some nights, I dream of a world on fire, of open fields streaked red with blood and strewn with the debris of battle, of three large black birds picking apart the banners of war."

Arthur, startled. He tried not to let it show how familiar his description was, and wondered if Mordred had a touch of the sight, like Morgana.

Mordred's cheeks were red. "I believe Nimueh has been manipulating us all along. That she, and others like her, have been working toward this goal for a very long time."

"When you were debriefed, why didn't you mention that?" Arthur asked.

If at all possible, Mordred's head lowered even more. In shame, in embarrassment -- Arthur wasn't sure. "I thought, perhaps, that one woman being behind it all? For decades, if not centuries? Isn't that too ridiculous to be believed?"
Arthur wanted to laugh. Mordred obviously had not spent any length of time in Morgana's presence. He bit the inside of his lip, and when Mordred looked at him, Arthur had only a stoic glare to give. Mordred glanced away, like a frightened animal, searching for an avenue of escape that Arthur didn't give him. Instead, Arthur put a hand on Mordred's shoulder, squeezing -- perhaps too tightly.

"Magic is real. There are bloody dragons," Arthur said. He heaved a sigh. Mordred looked up, startled, and there was just the tiniest of smiles on his lips, though it was strained. "At this point, the definition of ridiculous has packed its bags and left for parts unknown."

Mordred's laugh was so unexpected that he was surprised by it himself. He looked at Arthur with wide eyes without guile, but filled with uncertainty.

"And when you don't know what to believe anymore, the only thing that's left is trust," Arthur said.

Mordred jerked back as if slapped. He turned away, shoving his hands in his coat pockets. "I thought it would come to this."

Arthur tilted his head, not sure what Mordred was on about. It almost felt as if he'd lost the thread of the conversation. "To what?"

Mordred raised his chin and glanced at Arthur, but the eye contact was fleeting. "You're asking me to leave."

When Arthur didn't say anything, Mordred sighed. He forced a smile onto his lips and made a small, sardonic shrug.

"I... did not expect this much. Your men treated me well. They treated me fairly. I could not have wanted for better despite the circumstances. I understand that my history is difficult to overcome, that there are too many unknown factors, that it wouldn't ever be possible to... To stay here."

"You don't want to return home?" Arthur asked. "To see your family? To get away from the war? To go where it's safe?"

"I don't think my family would recognize me anymore," Mordred admitted. "And when the war comes, there will be few places that will be truly safe."

"You're probably right," Arthur said.

Mordred bowed his head. "I'll go."

"Why?" Arthur asked. "No one's telling you to go."

Mordred's eyes were wide when he looked up at Arthur, and his mouth fell open in a soundless, But --

Arthur looked at Mordred for a very long time before he shook his head. "You couldn't be further from the mark, actually. What I'm going to ask you is something far worse than that."

Mordred half-turned, his brow furrowed, his mouth opened, but he didn't speak, almost as if afraid of the answer.

"I'm going to give you a chance to earn our trust, Mordred. I'm asking you to join my team."

ooOoo
"And, in conclusion, don't ever leave me in charge again," Arthur said, half in jest. There were faint chuckles all around them, and Morgana's smile was wry. They knew full well that if Arthur hadn’t also been trying to get the team ready for the upcoming war, running the camp would have been a walk in the park. Both Arthur and Morgana had been raised to lead; it didn't matter the circumstance.

"All hail the Queen of Camelot," Gwaine said, raising his glass. Merlin noted that he’d stuck to non-alcoholic drinks through dinner and the meeting that followed, and that was probably a sign that the rest of the team should be picking up on right now. Gwaine always had a second sense for when Arthur was about to call an impromptu training session, and there was a fairly good chance that he wasn't wrong this time, either.

Merlin glanced down at his unfinished beer with something of a grimace. He was only on his second and a long way away from labelling himself as tipsy, but he was tired despite the lie-in that morning and the beer was making him drowsy.

With a shrug, he finished off his beer. If Arthur was about to order nighttime exercises, the explosions going off all around them would both wake him up and sober up the rest of the team in no time.

"All hail," the rest of Excalibur said in chorus, and Morgana laughed, colour spreading across her cheeks. The truth was, she hadn't stopped laughing after Arthur had told her the story of the water purification unit -- they'd gotten it working again, but not until after Gaius ended up with a face full of muck, Perceval nearly drowning in a metre-and-a-half of water, Merlin getting electrocuted, and Gwen...

Gwen had never looked up from her tinkering with the electronics, though she had had the foresight to ask, "Let me know if this works, guys," right before they had all been nearly blown to Mars.

"I'm not sure that would've gone over any better if I'd been here," Morgana said, giggling.

"You could've stopped Arthur from taking away my assistant," Gwen said. And, as soon as she realized what she said, her cheeks coloured and she turned to Merlin. "I mean, not that you don't make a lovely partner --"

"Cheers for that," Merlin said, raising his empty bottle.

"-- it's just that Mordred had been helping me and already knew what the different connections were. Not that you wouldn't have figured it out yourself if you had enough time, and oh, sod it, I'm not calling you slow, either. I'm just saying that things might have been different if Arthur hadn't decided to talk to Mordred --"

"Because it was all premeditated, of course," Arthur said, looking at once abashed and insulted. Merlin noted that he hadn't touched his beer, and sighed inwardly, because it was going to be a long, long night. He wondered if his socks were dry by now or if he needed to break out a new pair.

"Everything you do is premeditated," Gwen retorted.

"She's got you there, mate," Lance said, grinning.

"In any case, the water unit is working, innit?" Will asked, taking a long pull of his beer. Merlin winced, because he had no idea of what was coming. That was his fourth -- maybe his fifth. Will waved the bottle in the air before putting it on the table with a flourish. "Huzzah."
Gwaine grinned at Will's forlorn tone. "Don't mind him. He's sour because he lost our shooting competition."

"You had another one?" Leon asked, sounding disappointed that he'd missed it.

"I have a feeling these two are going to have shooting competitions until they're old and rickety and going at it from their rocking chairs," Kay said, grinning.

"You smudged my glasses, it's your fault I missed," Perceval said, imitating an older, gravely-voiced Gwaine.

"This isn't my gun. Where's my gun? Why am I shooting with my cane?" Geraint said. He couldn't quite match Will's voice, but it was close.

"You put that pebble under the rocker of my chair to throw me off my aim, didn't you?" Pellinor mocked, bursting into laughter when Gwaine glared at him.

"The target moved. Did you see that? Shifted two inches to the left, knocked me off target by a mile," Merlin said, grinning at Will's hurt look.

"Oi, whose side are you on?" Will asked, a hand on his chest.

"Whatever side you're not pointing your rifle," Merlin said. Will raised two fingers and took another long pull from his beer.

"By the time we're old and grey, we'll have the question of best shooter settled," Will promised.

Kay shook his head in disbelief. "Do you lie to yourself often?"

"All the time," Will said cheerfully.

"It's the only way he can put up with himself," Merlin said.

"And what's your excuse?" Will asked, tossing the dinner debris in Merlin's direction. "You've been my best mate since we were wee lads --"

"By the time I knew better, I were stuck in it, weren't I?" Merlin retorted.

"Damn right," Will said, grinning.

Out of the corner of his eye, Merlin saw a small smile pull at Mordred's mouth. Mordred hadn't relaxed, not quite, but it was only a matter of time until he settled in. Mordred was sitting on the edge of his seat, and had since dinner, and everyone was pointedly not looking directly at Mordred in case it would make the newest member of the team bolt. There might have been a couple of occasions where that had been a near thing. At least, now, he was leaning forward, his arms crossed on the table. It was a big change from when he'd only gingerly held a knife and fork in his hand through dinner, leaning away the entire time as if maximizing the distance between himself and the rest of the team.

It was nearly midnight and Mordred had only been part of Excalibur for a few hours. It had taken months before Merlin had felt completely at ease with his team, and he supposed that Mordred was doing better than Merlin had.

"Anyway," Arthur said gravely, the weight in his tone wiping out all the lingering humour in the room. "I'm glad you're back. I hope you enjoyed your honeymoon, and I'll thank both of you to keep
the details to yourself --"

"But if you need an ear to bend, I'm here for you," Gwaine said. Perceval, beside him, rolled his eyes.

"Out of wank material already?" Will asked.

Gwaine made a face and pointed at Perceval. "Excuse you. I'm sleeping with the *embodiment* of wank material, thank you very much."

Perceval flushed. He reached for Gwaine and put a hand on his mouth. "Sorry, Captain."

Arthur nodded, but there was no mistaking the amused twinkle in his eyes. The steeliness in his tone didn't fade, though, as he continued, "But I have an announcement to make."

Merlin kept his eyes down, ignoring the flutter in his stomach. A part of him had thought that he should make amends with his mother and at least tell her first, but there was something right about the team finding out now. No sooner had he peeled a strip from the beer bottle label that he heard a chorus of groans.

"I told you," Gwaine said, suddenly free of his gag. Perceval leaned his head back and sighed.

Galahad banged his head on the table.

"I'm glad I didn't change out of my greens," Lucan muttered. He'd been out on patrol with some of the other men for most of the day.

"We've been up since the crack of dawn while you were having a lie-in," Bohrs said. "Give us a break."

"Someone care to let the rest of us know what's going on?" Will said. He looked around the table, a little confused. Elyan looked a little pale -- of the three newest members of the team, he'd have at least a suspicion of what was happening. Mordred's smile had vanished, and the only exception to his otherwise stony expression was the pinch in his brow.

"PT and night manoeuvres," Kay said, and he was probably the only member of the team who actually sounded a little bit happy at the thought.

Will stared at the beer bottles in front of him and said, "Fuck that."

"No escape, mate," Gareth said, leaning across the table to clap Will on the shoulder. In the process, though, he knocked over two glasses of water and the salt shaker.

Lamorak hastily straightened everything up, pinched the salt between his fingers, and threw it over Gareth's shoulder.

Merlin hid a smile.

Everyone turned to look at Arthur in anticipation. Arthur, for his part, looked only somewhat amused, no doubt getting some perverse pleasure out of seeing his team getting worked up for training sessions. "Belay that last. I have *two* announcements."

There were a few uncertain looks exchanged over the table, but no one spoke.

"The first, as you accurately deduced, are night manoeuvres," Arthur said. "I want everyone in their gear in..."
He raised his arm and flicked his wrist, staring at his watch for several long seconds. The rest of the team -- at least, those who were accustomed to Arthur's rank and file of absolute precision -- did the same.

"Twenty minutes. Lucan, since you're mostly suited up, help Mordred get equipped."

"Yes, sir," Lucan said. "Any special gear?"

"The usual equipment. Night-vision glasses. We'll be testing Merlin's new communicators against jammers planted at different location. Split into two teams. Elyan will direct Team A, but Team B is going blind. Leon will lead Team A."

"Cheers," Leon said, pleased that he would be running the team that had guidance.

"You won't be thanking me for this next bit," Arthur said, grinning. "Pick anyone you want on your team, but Merlin and Mordred are on B."

Mordred's eyes were wide and round.

"Fuck," Leon said. Morgana patted his arm.

"What's the mission?" Galahad asked. "Capture the flag?"

"My favourite game," Will said, but he didn't sound enthused in the least. He was already rubbing his temples in anticipation for the hangover crash he would be getting once they were in the field.

"You're pap at it, though," Merlin said.

"Shh," Will said. "They don't need to know that."

Arthur grinned. "No. Team A's job is to keep Team B from crossing the boundary. You'll have ten minutes to set up your defences."

"Great," Lamorak said, rubbing his face with both hands. "Barricading against the enemy when all the stopping power is on the other side? This is going to be painful."

"Just a bit," Arthur said, but his smile vanished. Merlin followed his glance to Elyan, whose brow was furrowed in thought. Merlin had only ever heard of the video game escapades with Elyan, but if the stories were true, he already had a few ideas on how he was going to manage Team A. That Arthur was showing any sign of concern at all, hinted that Elyan really was as good as the others said he was.

Gwen held up Lance's arm, tapping a finger on the watchglass. "Eighteen minutes to get geared up and ten more to get in position."

"If anyone's wondering, Gwen's running the jammers," Arthur said.

"Wonderful," Gwaine said, his voice flat.

Everyone got up and started to split up to their rooms to get their equipment. Merlin raised a brow at Arthur, wondering if he'd changed his mind about announcing their engagement, but Arthur had a tiny little smirk on his lips, and every sign of being up to something. He didn't say anything, and instead followed Arthur up to the attic to get geared up.

"You didn't tell them because..."
Arthur shrugged and handed Merlin an undershirt against the cold. Merlin put his turtleneck aside and put the undershirt on instead.

"I have a plan."

"You always have a plan. I thought you wanted Morgana to be there?" Merlin pulled on the sweater and changed out of his trousers. They could get dressed and be ready to go in less than a few minutes; the twenty minutes had been to give Mordred as much time as he needed to find appropriate clothing that fit him, and to get comfortable with his equipment.

"I didn't say that. I don't want her to be the last to know. She'll be listening in," Arthur said, pulling on his overcoat. His beanie went into his pocket; there would be time to put it on later. He waited for Merlin to finish -- Merlin would never know how Arthur finished getting dressed before him. It wasn't as if they didn't have the same amount of clothing or equipment, and Merlin wasn't as broad as Arthur, and didn't have as much to cover -- and swept a hand in a you first invitation. "I decided it was best if we're well out of her reach when she hears."

"But..." Merlin frowned, coming down the stairs. He studied Arthur's expression and asked, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Arthur scowled. "I tell you everything, Merlin."

"Huh," Merlin said, heading downstairs. He thought it was his imagination, but he could've sworn that Arthur muttered, eventually under his breath. Before he could ask, they had returned to the main room. Morgana and Gwen were still there, having magically acquired heavy coats, caps and gloves in their absence. Leon and Lance arrived seconds later, and the rest of the team trickled in. Mordred and Lucan, surprisingly, weren't the last to arrive.

That award went to Will, who hopped down the hallway on one foot while struggling to get his other boot on.

"Didn't have his proper shoes, did he?" Kay said by way of explanation, his expression dark. "He ran out to Kathy's tent to get them."

Pellinor whistled. Owain catcalled.

"And if he knows what's good for him, his bloody boots weren't in Kathy's tent for the reasons we all think they are," Kay growled.

Will stood up straight and smiled, showing teeth, and Merlin couldn't help it. He laughed. That was his completely unamused smile, the one where he refused to hint at not having the upper hand. "No, it were bloody Bran. I put salt in the sugar bowl at brekkie. He dyed my pants pink and put bunny slippers under my bunk where I keep my bloody boots."

Kay grunted, only partially mollified.

"Even split down the middle?" Leon asked.

Arthur tilted his head thoughtfully. "I'll let you have a four-man advantage."

"Generous," Leon said. "Do I also get first choice?"

"No," Arthur said, clapping a hand on Leon's shoulder. "But I'll let you pick your four."

Arthur narrowed his eyes at Leon. "How predictable. Lucan."

"Gareth," Leon said.

"Kay," Arthur said.

"You're going with that gambit?" Leon asked. "Lamorak."

"No," Arthur said, looking right pleased with himself. "Like I said, I have a plan. Perceval."

"Fuck," Leon said. He looked over the team members, crossing his arms over his chest, putting his thumb against his lower lip in thought.

Merlin went to stand next to Mordred, their arms brushing. They already had a team and were standing out of the way. "What are they doing?" Mordred whispered.

"No idea," Merlin said, shaking his head. "Arthur's got a playbook more complicated than all of the league footie teams, and it's about as thick as..."

He grasped at straws, trying for a suitable comparison and failing.

"Artamène?" Mordred suggested.

Merlin looked at Mordred for a long time, not sure what Artamène was.

"It's a book?" Mordred said. "One of the longest books in the world?"

"You've read it?"

"It's online," Mordred said with a vague shrug. After a moment, he said, "I had a great deal of downtime. Also, I'm afraid that I have a soft spot for period heroic historical romances."

"Oh," Merlin said, unable to help himself. He chuckled. "Well, you're not the only one. Is it any good?"

Mordred's mouth pulled into a small smile. "It did drag on in some of the parts."

Merlin watched Arthur select team members without hesitation, but it was Leon who had slowed down and was trying to anticipate Arthur's plan. At this point, though, it was impossible.

Leon obviously had been going for positioning the snipers and the scouts across the field of play, expecting that Arthur would make use of the sneakiest members of the team. He'd countered by pulling Gareth and Lamorak to balance out Kay and Lucan on Arthur's side, but instead of following in the same pattern and electing for the smaller, slighter, and fastest members of the team, Arthur had edged sideways and had opted for Perceval and Bohrs. They were both stealthy, but they would be sacrificing speed in exchange.

It made sense for Arthur to limit the stealth and to use them to divert attention away from the main body of the team, but with two heavies, Arthur was either going to use them as distraction, or he was going to use them as the driving force.

In other words, Merlin had absolutely no idea what Arthur had planned. At all. Leon likely did, but from the longer and longer pauses before he selected a team member, it was equally plausible that Leon would be operating on the fly.

Merlin suspected, suddenly, that Leon's four-man advantage had been meant to get rid of the snipers
on the team. From the way Leon winced, he'd just come to that realization, too.

Merlin pulled Mordred aside even more. Kay and Perceval were closest, so they wouldn't be in danger of being overheard by the other team. "Look, whatever's going to happen, we both have to remember to communicate. We don't want to get in each other's way."

Mordred looked at the others before nodding. "Because that's what you believe the NWO will do."

Merlin glanced at him. "You don't think so?"

Mordred tilted his head, but his eyes were wide when he looked at Merlin. "I have observed them long enough to know that there is a high probability that they will do your work for you."

Merlin ignored how Mordred said your work instead of our work, because it did take a while to get used to being part of a team, and Mordred wasn't anywhere near that point, yet. But he picked up on the hesitation in Mordred's tone and asked, "But?"

"Aredian," Mordred said, half as a frustrated sigh. "However much they antagonized the NWO, and vice versa, Aredian will not hesitate to take advantage."

"Why would he come to England?" Merlin asked. "I'd rather think him the sort to carve out a kingdom wherever suits him best."

Mordred rubbed his jaw. In a very quiet voice, he said, "I was never able to truly unveil the identity of Aredian's employer."

Merlin studied him. As far as Arthur had been able to figure, Aredian had been playing multiple sides, sometimes one against the other, all in an effort to gain the advantage. In most cases, he had gained that advantage. He'd worked for the NWO until it ceased to be profitable for him, and when he had the object of his desires in his hands, the NWO had become ballast, and he was waiting for the right moment to jettison them. If it wasn't the NWO, if it weren't the investors in the illegal weapons trade community, who was it?

Arthur didn't think that Aredian had been working on his own, at least not in the beginning. If he were still working for someone, the candidate pool of prospective employers was very small, and whatever the terms of the original contract, they would be muddled beyond sorting.

"I don't think it matters anymore," Merlin said, touching Mordred's arm. It looked as if Leon and Arthur had sorted out their teams and that they were moving out. Bedivere was a little put out at being selected last, but considering that he was usually among the first, he took the ribbing from the others in good spirits. Merlin caught Arthur's eye and nodded when Arthur tilted his head toward the door. Merlin pulled Mordred after him. "If you think Aredian's going to be a player in this game, you need to let Arthur know."

"I have," Mordred said, and in a regretful tone, added, "He did not seem overly concerned."

Merlin rolled his eyes and braced against the cold when they filed outside. It took him a second to adjust to the darkness, and he directed Mordred towards one of the two vehicles that Arthur had appropriated for them. "In that case, I wouldn't worry. That only means Arthur's already got a plan for dealing with him."

"That's reassuring," Mordred said, getting onto the rear of the open-box lorry.

No one spoke until they reached their destination. They filed out and circled around Arthur. There was no sign of the other lorry, but that didn't come as a surprise.
They were in a small clearing on the edge of a gravel road, the front bumper nudging against a rickety chain-link fence that looked as if it had seen better days. There was a substantial amount of leaf litter on the ground, enough to indicate that the area didn't see much by way of foot traffic or tourists, if it saw any at all, and the forest around them was thick and looming, but not so much to make passage difficult.

"All right," Arthur said. "If you know where we are, good on you. If you don't, the cottage is seven kilometres to the east. The end of the property is eight kilometres to the west, and you're off the reservation if you come across flagged stakes or run-down fencing like that."

Arthur gestured toward the rusty chain-link fence.

"Our target is three kilometres to the south. We have a map, but they don't. They have satellite imagery, but we don't. Leon and Elyan don't know it yet, but they will have no choice but to set a boundary line five hundred metres from the target. That gives us a lot of room to play. The goal is to get Merlin and Mordred across that line, preferably without being seen. Casualties to a minimum, but if you're feeling particularly ambitious, by all means, take down the snipers first. Map."

Arthur unrolled his map, and by long habit, the members of the team reached out to take the corners and hold it out. Perceval flicked his torch on and lit up the map. Arthur went through their positions once more before catching Mordred's attention. "This is a training exercise to see how the team does in defending against magic users. We have several defensive strategies in place, but I've crippled Leon's options by pulling the heavy hitters and taking the two best combatants.

"We know our tactics work, but they've only been tested under controlled conditions and against sorcerers who have never seen combat."

"Or against me," Merlin said.

"Or against Merlin," Arthur agreed. "I'm not counting the tussle with Aredian's men in Paris. We caught them by surprise; that's not going to happen here."

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

Arthur looked across the group at Merlin. "That's not up to me. I'm not running Team B. This is Merlin's show."

Merlin's squawk was undignified. "I hope that's going to be as much of a surprise to Leon and the others as it is to me."

"More," Arthur said, grinning. "Leon's expecting my tactics. It's going to take him a while to catch on, so let's take advantage of the element of surprise as long as we can."

Merlin stared at him for a minute before shaking his head. Perceval tilted the torch so that the glare didn't immediately bounce off the laminate into his eyes -- and dithered for several long seconds before he said, "We need to get to the boundary line as quickly as possible. Leon's going to have his men out forward, isn't he?"

"He will," Perceval said. "He'll also have Elyan and the satellite."

Merlin drummed his fingers on the map; the map vibrated. "How long to get in position?" Merlin asked.

"As soon as Leon calls in," Arthur said. "We have the time advantage. He'll have ten minutes to rally his men."
"If we hurry, we can get as close to the line as we can in those ten minutes, get the jump on them," Kay said.

Merlin nodded. "Let's do that. Kay, Lucan, you two take point to come out here and here."

He tapped at two locations on the map.

"Arthur, Owain, go with Kay and flank him. Owain, can you set up a big, harmless distraction to make it look like it's me or Mordred?"

Owain's smile was full of teeth. "'Course I can. Picked up some special chemicals, they'll make all sorts of funny colours."

"Colloquially known as fireworks," Lucan said dryly.

"Still a controlled explosion," Owain said defensively.

"Perce and Bohrs, you're with Lucan. If I know Will, he'll go for the least protected vantage point --"

"Considering their ongoing competition, Gwaine will, too," Kay said. Arthur grunted in agreement.

"Your job is to take out the snipers," Merlin said. "That's all of them. Don't forget they've got Geraint and Galahad."

"I'll take care of them," Lucan said mildly.

"Dibs on Gwaine," Perceval said, grinning.

"I suppose that leaves Will to me. He'll be over hereabouts, you said?" Bohrs asked, circling a ridge.

"Look for any funny vegetation," Merlin said. "If he's only going to have ten minutes, he'll sacrifice realism in order to get in position."

"Funny vegetation," Bohrs repeated, grinning. "I'm all over that."

"What about you and Mordred?" Arthur asked.

Merlin hesitated, staring at the map. He tilted his head and grinned. "Oh, I figure we'll just waltz down the middle, catch them with their pants down."

Mordred's eyes widened when Merlin turned on him.

"You did a trick, a while back. Raised a sandstorm that messed with the satellite, made central command lose communications and visuals. Think you can do something like that again? Except with something more subtle --"

"Like fog?" Mordred suggested. His voice was very small, almost awkward, uncertain of his own suggestions.

"Perfect," Arthur said, laughing softly. "It'll make Elyan really have to think his way through this."

"Can you start now?" Merlin asked Mordred. "Less suspicious if it doesn't come out of the blue."

"I can," Mordred said, his smile widening slowly.

Merlin looked at the others. "Are we ready? You're clear on what to do?"
"Clear," Perceval said.

"Got it," Kay said.

There was an echo around the team confirming their orders. Merlin held Arthur's gaze before giving the order to get underway. "All right. Let's go. We've got time before Leon calls in, let's make use of it."

It wasn't long before Merlin lost sight of the other members of his team. They would be maintaining radio silence until Leon called in to activate the ten minute timer. Once the acknowledgement came through, Team B would switch to an isolated sub-frequency, and Team A would be doing the same.

Running in the dark with few reference points made it difficult to gauge distances, but Merlin was an old hand at this. He kept a running count of his footfalls, and estimated that they'd run nearly one and a quarter kilometres before Leon's voice crackled over the comms.


Merlin pulled Mordred to a stop and fought to control his breathing. He didn't want to let on that they'd been running. Apparently Arthur had thought the same, because there was a short delay before he answered.

"Confirm," Arthur said. "Are we ready to get into move?"

"Ten minutes, mark," Leon said.

"Mark," Arthur confirmed.

"Before we go off radio and start to strategize, I have a question," Gareth said. "You said you had two announcements. You only mentioned one."

There was a pause. "Oh, right. I'd forgotten."

Merlin rolled his eyes.

"About that. Well. I won't cut too much into your time. I'll make it simple. Are Morgana and Gwen listening?" Arthur asked.

"We are," Gwen confirmed.

"Perfect. Since I have everyone on the comms, I should mention that Merlin and I are engaged," Arthur said.

His announcement was greeted with static, and Merlin wasn't sure if the nausea that had come over him was because of those damned butterflies in his belly or because of the complete lack of reaction on the line. He didn't need to worry, because a second later, the radio exploded with commentary.

"Holy shite --"

"Who had today in the pool?"

"Not me, that's for sure."

"I called it. Didn't I call it?"

"You've been saying that they've been married all along, not that they were getting married --"
Merlin frowned, tilting his head. He glanced at Mordred, who looked vaguely amused.

"Arthur, why didn't you tell me?" Morgana bellowed.

Someone was giggling and clapping their hands in the background -- Merlin assumed it was Gwen.

All the chatter ended abruptly when Gwaine roared, "Quiet!" When not even a cricket's chirp could be heard, Gwaine cleared his throat loudly and repeatedly before saying, "Arthur. My best mate. My oldest mate. Can you clarify something for us?"

"I can try," Arthur hedged.

Gwaine hesitated. He released a huff of breath. "So, the night we went in and rescued Merlin, when you flipped your lid and said something about the enemy having your husband, was that foreshadowing, or are you two already married? This is important. There is a pool at stake."

"You and your fucking pools," Lamorak chimed in.

"Right," Arthur blurted out. "Team B, switch to the subfrequency now."

"No, wait, you can't do that to us -- goddamn it, Arthur --"

There was the tiniest click on the line. It was quickly followed by four more, then a fifth, until Merlin could only stand there, paralyzed by what Gwaine had revealed and the realisation that Arthur had already informed the team of their change in marital status, even if it had happened while he'd been under tremendous amount of stress.

"Wait, that was only six clicks. Merlin? Merlin, are you still on the line?" Will asked.

Merlin grimaced and quickly switched to the subfrequency.

"… well, I'm sorry if I don't sound more enthusiastic, but it doesn't really come as a surprise. Congratulations, mate," Perceval said. "You'll be wanting to answer that question, though. Gwaine's been saying that the two of you have been married since you disappeared that night, had us all in conniptions because we couldn't reach you."

"How much does he have in that pool?" Kay asked. "Also, congrats, by the way. Will there be another quickie wedding like Morgana's, or do we get the opportunity to duel for Best Mate?"

"I think we should continue on," Arthur said gravely, neatly sidestepping the question. "We've got a training exercise to win."

"I think you timed this announcement to screw with them," Lucan said. "Smart."

"Quit talking and get into position," Arthur said.

Merlin glanced at Mordred. He was smiling softly, if a little wistfully, and Merlin wondered who he was thinking about. "Congratulations, Merlin."

Merlin nodded, and gestured that they should get going. They both continued on at an easy run before something occurred to Merlin.

"I have a question," Merlin said.

"Can it wait?" Arthur asked, sounding pained.
"Actually, no." Merlin said. "I'm just wondering. I mean, I understand that you didn't want to say anything sooner, because Morgana would get mad. And the Gods know that we're going to have some explaining to do if Mum finds out."

"Are you saying Gwaine's right?" Perceval asked. "Are you already married?"

Merlin went on as if Perceval hadn't hammered the nail in the head. "Always best to be out of the line of fire when either of those two situations have a high probability of happening. But here's my question."

"The answer is yes, Merlin. Can you not --"

"Is the reason why you announced it now instead of waiting until we were all together again because you wanted some distance between us when I found out that you'd already spilled the beans?"

There was a long silence. It was peppered with a breathy laugh that was either coming from Lucan or Kay -- Merlin couldn't tell.

Finally, Arthur cleared his throat and admitted, "There was that slim possibility, yes. I'd hoped they'd all forgotten about it, actually. Are you mad?"

Merlin was laughing so hard that he had to lean against a nearby tree or lose his balance. "You're such a prat."

"Well-established," Arthur said tersely. "Now, can we get on with the exercise? I'd like to catch Leon by surprise."

ooOOoo

The team wasn't where Arthur had hoped they would be after a full night of training exercises, but they were doing far better than originally expected. Team B had routed Team A on the first go, of course, and every additional attempt to breach the boundary and gain into Team A's territory became progressively more difficult. Both sides took a few minutes to go over what worked and what didn't before splitting up again for another go.

As the night wore on, Arthur restructured the teams, even setting himself against Merlin and Mordred on more than one occasion. Mordred had been given a chance at leadership that he had at first refused, but after a few more rounds of battle and Merlin admitting that he was running out of ideas, Mordred's unconventional tactics had left the other side swearing a blue streak.

The night might not have gone as planned -- Arthur could hope for, but would never attain the dream of going in for a stint on the training field, emerging a few hours later with a perfectly-honed team ready for the battle ahead. He could only make sure that they were as prepared as he could make them, and given that the team without magic had triumphed over the team with magic one third of the time, they were doing fairly well.

The odds would be more in their favour with a magic user, of course, but that was a training session for another night.

Still, Arthur had gotten off lightly, and he knew it.
He'd avoided Morgana's shriek of... it was hard to tell if it was *glee, outrage*, or some twisted combination of the two where he was in danger of having his balls torn off and fed to him raw. He'd also likewise avoided Morgana's long, convoluted lecturing and admonishing, but only because Leon had crowded her out of their makeshift FOB and escorted her to bed.

Gwen had only sighed, shaken her head, and took Lance off to their bedroom with a backward warning that they'd "have a little chat about all this after we've gotten some sleep", and Arthur was dreading that.

He twisted his body slowly, careful not to dislodge Merlin, and pulled the blankets more firmly over the two of them.

"You're thinking about sneaking out the back way and avoiding Morgana for the rest of the day, aren't you?" Merlin asked, adjusting himself against Arthur's shoulder. There was a faint flutter on Arthur's shoulder; Merlin blinked, groaned against the sunlight, and waved a hand in the air.

The sunlight streaming through the attic window suddenly went out, as if someone had flicked a light switch. Arthur craned his head to see if Merlin had *turned off the sun*, because he wouldn't put it past Merlin, but found that the glass had been smudged charcoal-black, instead. There was just enough light to see by.

"I'm not thinking about it. I'm going to do it," Arthur said, tangling his legs with Merlin's. "It's not just Morgana that I'm worried about. We never gave them a straight answer."

"Morgana's scary," Merlin agreed sleepily. "My Mum's scarier. You're coming with me, yeah? To tell her?"

Arthur grimaced.

The silence must have lasted too long, because Merlin raised his head from Arthur's shoulder. Arthur couldn't make out Merlin's expression, but from the tone of his voice when he spoke, it was probably *Not Happy*.

"The only reason I'm not completely murderous about the coward's way out that you took to announce our engagement is because you practically told everyone that we were married the night you showed Aredian what for," Merlin said. His voice softened, and he added, "Should've told me about it, though."

Arthur nodded. "Didn't think it would help anyone, finding out how close I was to breaking."

Merlin didn't answer. He resettled himself on Arthur's shoulder. There was a noisy yawn and an all-over body shudder before Merlin stretched out, humming contentedly like a kitten against Arthur.

"I suppose we could've told them about the handfasting," Arthur admitted.

"And I suppose you'll take the credit for that idea and blame me for not wanting to mention it to anyone," Merlin muttered.

"Technically, you didn't want it to get back to your Mum, because she would eviscerate Gaius and use his intestines as sausage casings," Arthur said.

"That's... descriptive. Thanks. I won't get back to sleep now," Merlin said, leaning away from Arthur. There wasn't much space for him to go, though, and there was a soft *thunk* when he hit his head against the wall. There was a long silence before he said, "You know, they'll be full of questions as soon as we leave the room."
"Knowing Gwaine, he'll want to know every detail. Right down to the minute." Arthur slid up into a semi-sitting position, pulling the pillow up with him. He rubbed his face. "I think he has four or five different pools on us."

"Closer to a dozen," Merlin said grumpily. Arthur saw a flash of gold, and the darkened windows became less so gradually, slowly letting in the late morning light. "Are we telling them everything?"

"Only if you protect me from Morgana," Arthur said, reaching for Merlin's hand. He twined his fingers through Merlin's.

"Could do," Merlin said. "I rather like your bollocks where they are, rather than around your neck like she'd promised they'd go."

Arthur winced. "If I let her have some input on the wedding, she'd leave me reasonably intact for the wedding night, wouldn't she?"

"I don't know," Merlin said with a chuckle. "Would she believe, even for one second, that you'd let her have any say?"

Arthur considered. He was still considering it when Merlin kissed him firmly on the lips and slid out of bed to get dressed. "In any case, the questions can wait until after we've spoken to Mum, all right?"

Arthur reached for an overshirt and pulled it on.

"I mean, they've waited this long to sort out who won the bloody pool. *Any* of the bloody pools. They can wait longer, yeah? I just… I need to talk to Mum. I have to… I have to sort things out, I think," Merlin said, running his hands through his hair. The too-long curls stood up straight on one side; he swatted Arthur's hands away when Arthur came over to smooth them down.

"You know what I think?" Arthur asked, sliding his arms around Merlin's waist and keeping him still. "I think we're both cowards. You with your mum, me with Morgana."

"You've met my Mum, can you blame me?" Merlin asked, his forehead banging lightly on Arthur's shoulder. "You've met Morgana, can you blame *me*?" Arthur asked. He ignored how his voice cracked.

Merlin leaned back to look at Arthur, his eyes narrowed. "You *were* going to tell the team, weren't you? I mean, we were going to. At the table, right after dinner. That was the plan, wasn't it? Why didn't we?"

Arthur loosed a hand from Merlin's waist and rubbed his forehead, ignoring the pounding behind his eyes. He started to say, *I don't know*, but that was wrong. He did know. He tried to blow it off as, *she was watching me all night like she knew something*, but that wasn't true, either. Finally, he shrugged and said, his voice soft, "I just… I saw her at the head of the table, and she was so happy. We value her. We always have. And it's the first time I've seen her really believe it. I've been trying to make her see that our entire lives. Uther did a number on her --"

"On both of you," Merlin said, and Arthur couldn't meet his eyes, couldn't acknowledge the impact Uther had on his life. He squeezed Merlin's waist, pulling him close, and that seemed to be enough, because Merlin made a soft sound, running his hands down Arthur's arms.

"I was the golden child. I didn't want to be. Maybe I had it easier, maybe I didn't. It doesn't matter.
But she was always made to feel as if she wasn't worth anything, that she was always second best.”

Arthur lowered his eyes.

Nothing was ever easy, not with Uther, not with Morgana. When she was accepted in a prestigious university, Arthur hadn’t said anything about his own letter until she announced her news. But, of course, Uther dismissed her out of hand and focused on Arthur. Arthur had never forgotten the hurt and betrayal that came over her expression before she hid everything behind a mask and stormed out of the room.

Arthur couldn't win. If he scored the winning goal at a footie match on the same night that Morgana came home with top marks on a school assignment she'd been killing herself over, Uther barely glanced her way. When Arthur convinced Morgana to take a position at Pendragon Consulting and left to join the army, Uther praised him, and there was no missing the scorn on Morgana's face.

No matter what Arthur did, he was either overshadowing everything Morgana did, or he was stealing her thunder.

Morgana didn't get the over-the-top engagement that she had always wanted because Leon wasn't an over-the-top sort of bloke -- and even if he was, Morgana had ruined it when she found the engagement ring well before Leon had had a chance to propose.

Morgana didn't get the wedding that she wanted because the bloody world was ending. Even if Excalibur wasn't to blame for it, they were responsible, somehow. It had been Arthur who had led them through the increasingly catastrophic undercover mission until none of them saw any way out of the tangled spider's weave.

Arthur might have teased her when they were children. He might have been an arse to her more than once in his life. And maybe he tried to do everything he could to let her have her shining moments, though those never seemed to work out because Arthur was always pushed to the forefront.

But nothing, absolutely nothing, was better than watching Morgana at the head of the table, soaking in all the attention. Basking in it. Arthur hadn't made a mess of running things, at least not as badly as he’d made himself out to, and the team took the piss out of him because they wouldn't be part of Excalibur if they didn't at least try to take someone down a notch or two. He fully acknowledged, even if only to himself, that his attention was elsewhere, where they needed to be, and Morgana -- Morgana had stepped up to the task in ways that Arthur couldn't.

He didn't want to take that away from her. Not for a second.

When he saw the delighted smile on Morgana's face, when he heard the way she laughed -- gleeful and without restraint, when he saw how she’d glowed when she was announced the Queen of Camelot, Arthur couldn't... He couldn't take that away from her, either.

And there was Merlin.

His friend, his love, his handfasted partner, his husband in everything except a piece of legal paper and an ostentatious ceremony in front of friends and family.

Arthur didn't want to keep their binding a secret. Not anymore. He wanted to be free to claim Merlin as his, to hear Merlin do the same. He'd thought that...

He'd thought since Morgana had had her day -- one day where Arthur hadn't said or done something to outshine her, however accidentally -- that he could have his turn in that limelight, however briefly, without taking anything away from her.
Arthur had very nearly not said anything at all. He could have waited another day, hoping that Merlin would forgive him.

"You're more than I deserve," Arthur said, pulling Merlin close, pressing his lips to his cheek.

He wasn't sure if Merlin understood what was going on in his mind. Maybe he did; Arthur had realised a long time ago that Merlin had an uncanny ability to read him like a book. If he didn't, well... he put up with Arthur anyway.

"Let's see if you still feel that way after we go see my Mum," Merlin said, trying for a light tone, but unable to hide how terrified he was.

Arthur chuckled. "She won't be mad."

Merlin grunted.

It's not as if she has a leg to stand on, Arthur nearly said. Instead, he let Merlin go and said, "Put on your trousers. Do you want some food before we go?"

"If I thought it would stay down, maybe," Merlin said. "Maybe after. But only if that means we can avoid everyone else for a while longer, yeah?"

"Only if by avoid, you mean torture," Arthur said, and he saw the faint flash of a grin across Merlin's face before Merlin started fretting again.

Arthur found his trousers and put them on. Civilian clothes would do for now. If anyone was watching the cottage, they would be hard-pressed to pick out anyone in charge, never mind a military presence, and, in any case, his camos were still soaked.

"Is anyone downstairs?" Merlin asked, studying the closed hatch with apprehension.

"Haven't any choice but to go out that way," Arthur said, pulling on his coat.

"There's the window," Merlin said, but he crouched down, flipped the hatch open, and extended the collapsible attic stairs.

Faint voices drifted up from the main floor and lured them past the kitchen and the group who had pulled cooking duty for tea. Neither of them lingered -- if anything, Arthur pushed Merlin along faster before Pellinor's mother spotted and cornered them, demanding answers. He didn't doubt that the team had spread the word by now, but he sincerely hoped that they had all made good on their promise not to say anything until Merlin had broken the news to his Mum.

It was probably sheer luck that they didn't encounter anyone along the way. Most of the team would still be sleeping, greedily soaking up every minute until they absolutely had to get out of bed and attend to their regular duties. They knew the routine -- training, more training, specialized training, and manoeuvres and exercises out in the field.

At least, everyone knew the routine except for Will, Elyan and Mordred, but they would pick up on the schedule quickly enough.

Arthur kept himself distracted with thoughts of the day's training to keep from focusing on the way that Merlin pulled at his clothes. He knew that Merlin hadn't spoken to his mother since the day of Morgana's wedding, and he also knew that, although the property around the cottage was large, there was no avoiding that could be performed with any degree of success, not for long.
Admittedly, Lucan did a fair job of it.

Although the large, accessible lowest level of the cottage had been transformed into a medical clinic for anyone who needed help, Hunith no longer came to treat patients there. Instead, she went from tent to tent, structure to structure, and checked on people, making sure they maintained their health despite the harsh weather conditions. When necessary, she escorted them to the clinic, but she didn't enter, as if she didn't dare to step foot in the same building where Merlin lived, not until she had his forgiveness.

Arthur wasn't sure who was the more stubborn of the two.

Arthur didn't say anything when Merlin stood in front of the hut where Hunith had made her home. He ignored the way Merlin's lips moved as if repeating a speech that he didn't want to forget. He resisted the urge to take Merlin's hand when Merlin's fingers twitched and drummed in the air.

But he let himself have one, tiny, privilege. When he saw Balinor walking down the path toward the tent, his step hurrying when he saw them, Arthur moved to block Merlin from sight and shook his head at Balinor.

Merlin wanted to tell his Mum that he was handfasted, that he was engaged to be married. That was a sign as any that he was ready to forgive her for lying to him almost his entire life. This visit was about Merlin and Hunith, not Merlin and Balinor -- Balinor represented a crushing time in Merlin's life and the loneliness he'd suffered this entire time.

Arthur didn't think Merlin would ever forgive the man.

Merlin knocked on the door.

There was a faint "Come in," from the other side.

Merlin took a deep breath, steeling himself. He grabbed Arthur's hand, squeezing tight, and pulled Arthur inside behind him.

"I'll be just a moment," Hunith said, her back to them. She was cleaning up the tiny seating area in the front of the hut. It was sparse, with two chairs and a rickety low table pushed under a window covered in protective plastic sheeting. A lamp was in the corner, the shade tucked under a chair and the bulb bare, bright enough to light up the entire hut.

There was a large medical kit nearby, the lid leaning against the wall. There was a stethoscope and a box of gloves on a clean paper towel on the low table, a box of facial tissues, a bottle of hand sanitizer.

Arthur raised a brow. He supposed that when Hunith stopped coming to the cottage to see patients, she had started to bring them here for a quick assessment.

"Please take a seat," Hunith said, turning around.

Her eyes widened and her entire body twitched in aborted reaction as she held herself back from throwing her arms around Merlin. Her hands twitched, and she held them in front of herself, palms out, placating a wild animal she thought would bolt at the slightest provocation. Her mouth was open as if she meant to say something, only to snap shut with the restraint of someone who desperately wanted to say what was on her mind, but didn't dare share it in case it was the last thing Merlin wanted to hear.

And Merlin…
Merlin's face went through a complicated cascade of emotions that Arthur could only describe as *wrecked*. He glanced down guiltily, taking several deep breaths before he forced the tension out of his own shoulders with a heavy slump, and looked up with determination.

"Mum," he said, his voice breaking.

Whatever walls Merlin had built around himself since arriving at the cottage -- the very same walls that Arthur had carried around himself, a long time ago, out of denial and grief -- they came crumbling down now, washed away by a wave of emotion. Arthur wasn't sure which of the two moved first; if the two of them moved at the same time, or if there was some sort of space-time continuum that had erupted between them to bridge the distance. There was one certainty, and only one: Merlin loved his Mum, and Hunith loved her son.

Arthur quietly shut the door behind him, but not before he caught a glimpse of Balinor on the other side of the footpath, lingering between two pre-fab buildings that had been snapped together on top of a raised wooden floor. The collar of his jacket had been turned up, his hands were in his pockets, his hair was tied back and his beard trimmed, but there was a sad, distant look in his eyes and a downturn to the set of his mouth. He wavered, one foot on the step, his weight shifting, everything in his body language *screaming* his intention to cross the narrow road and enter the hut, despite Arthur's earlier warning.

Arthur waited for the knock, if Balinor was inclined on knocking. He waited for the handle to jiggle, for the latch to release. He thought the door might fall open and pressed his weight against it.

Nothing happened.

Through the window, Arthur saw Balinor walking away. Either his courage had left him, or he had thought the better of it. Arthur decided that Balinor's reasons were his own, and was glad, because Merlin needed this moment, alone, with his mother.

Arthur didn't move. He kept his head averted and didn't listen to Hunith's soft murmurs, wanting them to have that little bit of privacy. He didn't know how long they stood there, holding onto the other as if, at any moment, they might drift apart, never to be close again, but eventually, Hunith loosened her hold and took a tiny step back to look up at Merlin. She put her hands on Merlin's face and held him in place, not letting him look away.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Hers was the voice of a mother who had sat at her son's bedside for days upon days. Who watched the line rise and dip and flatten and repeat over and over on the heart monitors. Who fretted and adjusted the oxygen readings and the saline drip after yet another surgery performed to try and save Merlin's life.

Hers were the eyes of a mother who could never judge her son, who sat quietly outside Merlin's trial because she couldn't stand to listen to all the things that had been said against him. Who hounded the defence for details, who studied the faces of all of the men and women who sat upon the disciplinary panel and weighed Merlin for crimes he had never performed.

Hers were the hands of a mother who would stand with her son no matter what the odds, who would fight to protect him even at the cost of her own life. Who calmed and healed with a touch, who held him firm when he was close to breaking, and who had, in the end, been uncovered for a villainous deed that any parent would have done if it meant keeping their child safe.

Arthur closed his eyes, aching for a mother he barely remembered, but whose name he had called out
for, more than once -- while lying on a hospital bed, frightened and alone; while out in the desert on his own, his former Captain dead, his squad mates dispersed and lost behind enemy lines, bleeding from a bullet wound to his thigh that just wouldn't stop bleeding; while sitting helplessly on a bunk in some hideout somewhere, staring off in the distance and not knowing out what to do without Merlin.

"I'll be fine," Merlin said softly. Arthur turned to look at Merlin and found Merlin looking back at him. His eyes red and watery, his lower swollen where he had been biting on it, his expression pleading with Arthur not to mention how, sometimes, Merlin still twitched in his sleep, or how he woke up, a scream on his lips, until he sorted out where he was.

Arthur nodded faintly, glancing away before Hunith could follow Merlin's eyes to him.

"You know you can tell me, Merlin," Hunith said, her voice soft, gentle.

"I know," Merlin said. He pulled himself free, stepping back, but he didn't let go of her wrists. After a moment, her hands slid into his, and he stared at them for a long time before he said, "There's nothing I want to tell you. Not… Not about that."

Hunith started to speak, but Merlin shook his head.

"Don't ask me to, Mum. I'll talk to someone. I am talking to someone," Merlin said. Arthur stared at a stain on the floor and wondered how it had been made, trying not to look… jealous. Merlin didn't talk to him -- just like he wouldn't talk to his Mum. Arthur suspected that Merlin might be talking to Geraint, particularly lately, and if he was, Arthur was glad. If anyone could understand what Merlin had gone through, it would be him. Or Kay. Or Will.

But the wounds were too fresh for Kay, who would never open up to anyone like that, and Will… Will had his own way of coping, and that was hours and hours of competitive shooting out in the field with Gwaine.

Hunith deflated. Her lips pressed together in a tight line before she sighed softly, with a faint huff of understanding that might also be pain and sadness.

They stood in silence for several minutes, neither one of them knowing what to say. Merlin seemed to have lost all the words he'd rehearsed under his breath on the walk over, and Hunith was nearly bursting with everything that coursed through her mind.

"I'm sorry," Hunith said, breaking first.

Merlin looked away. Arthur didn't see his expression, but he didn't need to. Merlin let go of his mother, his hands falling at his sides, fingers curled into clenched fists. He shook his head, the movement so faint that Arthur hadn't noticed it at first.

"No, Mum, you're not," Merlin said. The words were harsh, but Merlin's voice wasn't. It was soft, almost resigned.

"Merlin, I --"

"Don't," Merlin said. He shook his head again, this time more resolutely; his body turned to face her, but he didn't look up. "I... I get it. You did it because he asked you to. You did it because you thought it was the right thing to do. And maybe it was. Maybe it was more important to let me keep believing that my father was dead if it meant protecting him from whoever was after him, if it meant protecting us..."

Merlin trailed off.
"We were trying to protect you," Hunith whispered. She didn't know what to do with her hands. She reached out for Merlin, the movement aborted before she even touched him.

Merlin's little huff encompassed a world of emotion. He nodded, as if he'd expected that. His lips thinned and the corners of his mouth turned up in a tiny, forced smile completely bereft of amusement.

"It doesn't matter," Merlin said. He raised his head and looked at her. "It doesn't, all right? I didn't come here to... To yell at you. I don't want to fight about this. You're my Mum. I love you. I need you."

Hunith's eyes watered with tears. This time, when she reached out, her hand landed on Merlin's arm and squeezed.

"Mum..." Merlin looked down on the ground. "I've spent my entire life hiding what I am. You taught me how important it was to keep it a secret, and I did, I did. I never knew how hard it was to do that until I finally told someone, until it wasn't only my secret anymore.

"You carried my secret, Mum. For a long time, it was just you and me and Gaius. When it got to be too much, you made sure I would be okay." Merlin's voice was thick with emotion, and he stopped, swallowing hard. He took a deep breath and released it in a hoarse huff. "I'm sorry, Mum. I'm sorry that I couldn't be there for you. That I couldn't carry some of the burden when it got too hard for you."

Oh, fuck.

Merlin's words were a sucker punch, revealing just how much he cared about other people. Arthur closed his eyes against the burning in them. He swallowed thickly, unable to parse with his emotions, and held himself still instead of grabbing Merlin and pulling him close. He just... He just wanted to keep Merlin from this self-torture, to console and comfort, to soothe away the pain.

Tears ran down Hunith's face. She covered her mouth with her hands and muffled a sob. Her shoulders shook and her body sank.

Merlin caught her before she fell. He guided her to a chair and went to his knees in front of her. His eyes were red, but he wasn't crying. He was wrecked, but not in grief or sadness or pain. It was almost in relief at saying out loud what he'd held bottled up for weeks.

"I wish..." he stopped, bit his lip, and tried again. "I don't know... I don't know if I would've made the same choice, not if it were Arthur who'd fucked off and left me with our kids --"

I wouldn't fuck off, Arthur wanted to say, but it wasn't his place, and this wasn't about him.

"-- it's just. I wasn't there, so I don't know what it was like. I can't judge you for making the decision you did. I can... understand. Maybe. A little bit. I just... I just want you to know that."

Hunith wiped the tears from her face. The expression of tenderness, of love, as she looked at Merlin was so intense that Arthur had to look away.

"Merlin, can I... Can I explain?"

"No." Merlin shook his head vehemently. "No. No, Mum. I don't... I'm not ready to hear it. You could've told me when I was old enough, but you didn't. You lied to me and said you were off on holiday with the girls when you were seeing him. And that's... That hurts. You have to give me time."
"Oh, Merlin," Hunith said, her voice faltering. Arthur could hear everything that she didn't say out loud in her tone. How she would give anything if she could make everything all right again.

Merlin nodded, this time more resolutely, as if he'd heard what she hadn't said, and was silently telling her that it was all right, that they would be okay, that they would get past this.

Slowly, Merlin pulled away from her. Hunith's expression fell, as if she thought he was leaving her, but she caught herself and glanced away to compose herself. She watched Merlin, first with sadness, then with confusion when he slid on the other chair.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, the flat of his hands pressed together, his head bowed. He'd run a confidence course full of emotional obstacles and had crawled out the other end, exhausted, with nothing left. His face was rough and drawn and pale, and it came as a surprise to all of them when he laughed softly.

"This isn't why I came here, Mum," he admitted. "I just... I need to talk to you about something else."

Arthur breathed, his chest hurting, feeling a swell of onrushing emotion that he wasn't prepared for, not after seeing Merlin torn to bits and Hunith not much better. He didn't think either of them were ready for anything else, least of all an announcement that should be happy, and not the bittersweet outcome with mixed emotions in its wake.

"Shall I put the kettle on?" Arthur asked, already moving away from the door where he'd been standing guard.

The kettle's whistle broke the tension lingering in the front room. Hunith abruptly rose, wiping her face some more, and fluttered around the single burner. Arthur let her take over, though he stepped in whenever she wavered with uncertainty. He put a hand on her shoulder, once, and squeezed; she leaned against him and quietly brushed fresh tears away.

"It'll sort itself," Arthur said quietly. His words were an empty reassurance, particularly now, but Hunith raised her chin and some of the tension in her shoulders ebbed away.

Making tea was an act of mere minutes once the water had boiled, but they took their time, arguing half-heartedly about Earl Grey versus Ceylon, even though it wasn't as if they had much choice. The team had stocked up on tea -- along with coffee, tea had been one of the first things on the list when Arthur had sent out the men to start collecting supplies -- but he suspected that the team had let Geraint take care of that, even though Geraint didn't have much of a preference beyond hot and strong when it came to his tea.

Hunith rustled up a small package of biscuits -- obviously hoarded from her rations and kept aside for a special occasion, and left it on the table in the sitting space, the flaps open and the opening gently nudged toward Merlin in some sort of unconscious bribe. It seemed to work, because Merlin reached over without thinking, taking two and giving one to Arthur when Arthur came to sit down next to him.

Arthur glanced at Hunith and saw her expression shift from braced to fond, accepting that whatever happened between her and Merlin, however they sorted things out, Merlin was still her son, and that would never change.

"I heard…" Hunith trailed off, suddenly unsure of her place, but at Arthur's raised brow and Merlin's panicked expression, she fell silent for a moment longer before continuing. "You're training the team again?"
"Night exercises," Arthur said, covering up Merlin's relieved sigh. "I'm pretty sure everyone knows that we're going to get called out. It's just a matter of time."

Hunith's fingers tapped around her mug in much the same way Merlin's did when he was unhappy about something. "Is there anything that we can do? With Allan's men here, we have --"

"A very solid group of people with military experience and knowledge, most of which is outdated," Arthur said, interrupting whatever Hunith had in mind. She might outrank him, but he had no intention of putting anyone in the line of fire if he could help it. "I know old reflexes die hard, and I know some of you are still technically in active service --"

Hunith's mouth quirked in a quick smile.

"-- and I see myself calling on some or all of you at some point in the future, if necessary. For now, Morgana's in charge, and we both agree that the safety and security of all those who have taken refuge here comes first."

"Allan thought you would say that." Arthur wasn't sure if Hunith was being disapproving or merely thoughtful. He decided that she was somewhere in-between, distracted by Merlin.

"Considering he badgered me about it three days ago, I'm surprised that sank in," Arthur said. After that incident, he finally understood where Will had gotten that particular trait.

"Mum," Merlin said suddenly. "Um."


"Do you want me to…"

"No!" Merlin said sharply. "No! I've seen your idea of telling people things."

"Is it…" Hunith had gone a little pale, her expression drawn, her hands tightening around the mug in her hands. A heartbeat passed, then two; her expression became resolute, and she steeled herself. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"Oh, my Gods," Merlin said, half-throwing up his hands. He caught himself before he spilled his tea everywhere and hastily put it on the table, shaking out his hand. "No, Mum. It's not what you're thinking. It's never what you're thinking."

"Until it is," Hunith said pointedly. The tips of Merlin's ears reddened.

"That was one time," Merlin said, so plaintive and so Merlin that Arthur chuckled and Hunith smiled. And, just like that, the rest of the tension in the hut vanished, pushing aside the hurt, the pain, and the sadness. There wouldn't be any easy forgiveness, not here, and not for a while, but Arthur
suspected Merlin would get there quickly enough. It was his Mum.

Merlin reached for Arthur blindly, patting around until Arthur took mercy on him and took his hand.

"Mum. We're getting married."

Hunith's hands twitched. The mug slid out of her fingers when she brought both hands to her face and covered her mouth, but not quickly enough to muffle her gasp of surprise or the quick smile that spread across her face.

The mug slowed, hovered, and levitated to the table.

"Oh, Merlin. Merlin," Hunith said, dropping her hands and reaching for him. Her eyes were bright with different kind of tears now and her soft laugh of joy was genuine. "I'm so happy for you."

This time, Merlin didn't hesitate to wrap his arms around Hunith. Hunith let Merlin go and reached for Arthur, hugging him so tightly that Arthur thought she might snap a rib. When she stepped back, she patted Arthur's cheek.

It was such a gentle, unconscious gesture that it made Arthur ache for a mother he'd never known, and he found himself leaning into the touch.

"Have you decided --"

"No, Mum. Barely talked about it, really," Merlin said. He met Arthur's eyes with a pinched brow, a silent warning to don't tell her about all your bloody plans. He hesitated, and added, "But here's the thing, Mum. You've got to promise not to be mad."

Hunith turned around. "For goodness sake, why would I be mad? My son is getting married. I'm happy."


Hunith's eyes narrowed. "What… what have you done, Merlin?"

"Promise, Mum."

"I promise," Hunith said.

"Say it, Mum. Promise that you won't be mad and you won't go on a murderous baking spree," Merlin said.

Hunith glanced at Arthur. Arthur held his hands up. "I'm sort of with Merlin on this one."

Hunith made an exasperated noise. "I promise. I won't be mad and I won't go on a murderous baking spree. Now, what is it?"

"I just wanted you to know from me, before it got out," Merlin said, chewing the corner of his mouth. "And just remember, you promised."

Hunith's tone turned dangerous. "Are you pregnant?"

Arthur tried not to choke on his swallowed tongue.

that means you didn't fail human anatomy. No, Mum. *Gods.* It's nothing like that. It's just, we didn't really wait, all right? We're sort of already married. We've been handfasted for… for a couple of months --"

It was longer than a couple of months, actually, but given Hunith's darkening expression, it was best to keep silent on the fine details.

Arthur was pretty sure that Hunith didn't have any magic whatsoever, but the air in the room suddenly went very still and very cold. Merlin trailed off, wincing, and pressed his lips together. He brought his arms close to his body, bracing for the worst; Arthur found himself doing much the same.

Instead of the expected explosion that Merlin had been so sure would happen, Hunith smiled. It was a stiff smile, forced, almost predatory.

"Mum?"

"I think I would have liked it better if you were pregnant," Hunith said slowly, turning on her heel. She went to the door, took her coat off the hook, and put it on.

"Mum?" Merlin wrung his hands together. "Are you… Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Hunith said, her tone flat. "I'm *pleased.* My son is getting married. Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"Where are you going?" Merlin asked.

"I just remembered where Gaius is working today, that's all. I thought I would go say hello," Hunith said. She walked out the door, slamming it shut behind her.

They saw her shadow cross the window before she disappeared up the alley.

"Shite," Merlin said. He turned to look at Arthur, his eyes wide. "I hope you have a plan for damage control."

Arthur twitched. He considered Hunith's expression before asking. "I don't think that plan is going to work."

"Full retreat, then?" Merlin asked.

Arthur nodded and held out his hand. "Let's go. Quick."

**ooOoOo**

It was four days, three hours, sixteen seconds, countless training exercises, and an indefinite -- but ebbing -- quantity of harassment from the rest of the team later, when Merlin found himself excused from the training exercises.

"You meant I could've had a lie-in?" Merlin asked, staring incredulously at Arthur.

"I suppose you could have had," Arthur said, shrugging. There was a prattish smirk on his face when he glanced at Merlin sidelong before studying the maps. He had been looking at the map with such an intensity that Merlin was surprised it wasn't permanently embedded in his head.
"Explain it to me again," Merlin said, shifting the weight of his equipment just a little. His shoulder ached. He was pretty sure that Will hadn't meant to pummel him with rubber bullets right where his old injury was, but it was hard to tell. Will was a sore loser, and he still hadn't forgiven Merlin for whipping the ground out under his feet like it was a carpet when Will had Merlin pinned down.

Merlin's Mum had shot a dark glare at Will -- Hell, the entire team had very nearly done worse than glare until they realized how white Will had turned when he'd realized what he'd done -- and forced Merlin to keep his shoulder and chest iced for hours.

And hours.

The swelling wasn't too bad, now, but Merlin couldn't get his rucksack to settle comfortably. The shoulder strap was digging in exactly the wrong spot. Tightening it made it worse; loosening it put him off-balance. Most of the pack's weight was on his hips, but he knew from experience that if he started running, the pack would list badly to the right.

He wished his body had a bit more padding -- it would make things easier. His Mum might have been helping Arthur's efforts to fatten him up some, but all the physical training and magic use had kept him on the slim side. Granted, he was a lot less skeletal and more lean at this point, but no one was complaining, least of all Arthur, if the giant hickey he'd left on Merlin's hip was any indication.

"Explain what?" Arthur asked, confused.

"Explain your reasoning for dragging me out of bed, making me run PT with the rest of you, load up with equipment, and sludge my way through all this bloody mud when I could've rolled over in bed and waved bye-bye instead. Because I seem to have missed it the first time. Was I sleeping?"

"I'm not sure, actually. You snuffled something that sounded very much like assent," Arthur said. He shrugged nonchalantly. "I thought you'd heard me. Imagine my surprise when you dragged yourself out of bed and joined us on the run. We appreciate the show of solidarity, though."

"You're an arse," Merlin said. He fiddled with his pack one more time before noticing Arthur's eyes following his fingers. Arthur's mouth was in a tight, unhappy line. "You know, if you just want me to sit this one out to recover, you could've just said so."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Arthur said, feigning innocence. "The maneuvers we're doing today don't call for you to be there."

"Right," Merlin said, rolling his eyes. "I'm not Gwaine, you know. You don't have to sugar-coat it to protect my fragile ego. You want me to stand down, just tell me to stand down. But I'm telling you now, I don't need my shoulder to use my magic."

Arthur sighed, glancing heavenward. The tent flaps shifted and Mordred walked in.

"Leon said you wanted me today?" Mordred asked.

Arthur winced. He deliberately did not look at Merlin.

Merlin crossed his arms. "Oh, so you've already found my replacement. That's fine. I'll just find something else to do."

"For fuck's sake, Merlin. You're injured. You're exhausted. You've been pushing yourself harder than any of us. I need you to take it easy. These are exercises. We'll need you at full strength when we get the call," Arthur said. "I'm not bloody well replacing you. I thought you said you didn't have a fragile ego?"
"I don't," Merlin snapped. He deflated with a sigh at Arthur's raised brow. "Fine. Today, I will take it easy."

"And Mordred gets to take point, for once. He needs the practice," Arthur said. They both turned to look at Mordred, who had gone a shade whiter than usual. Mordred swallowed hard, but he nodded. Merlin thought he was going to pass out. He put a steadying hand on Mordred's shoulder and said, "Breathe. Don't forget to breathe. Just do it like we trained, yeah?"

"Yeah," Mordred whispered. "Protect the team. I can do that."

"Actually, today you're going on offence," Arthur said.

"Oh, in that case," Merlin said, feeling more gleeful than usual. He gave Mordred a stout shake and said, "Give them Hell. And if you can do the rug-pull trick on Will again for me, just on principle, I'll buy you a drink."

Mordred's laugh was rough with surprise, and he glanced at Arthur for confirmation. Arthur shrugged, as if it didn't matter to him, but Merlin knew better. Every time Merlin had needed to change ice packs, Arthur had muttered angrily under his breath. He still didn't know what Arthur had been going on about, but he'd heard Will and arse more than once.

"If you happen to focus your offensive spells in approximately this area," Arthur said, waving a finger in the air over a portion of the map before resolutely tapping at one particular point, "That would be your choice, of course. You'll have Lucan and Lamorak with you as backup."

"I… suppose I should start making plans," Mordred said hesitantly. He tapped the same spot that Arthur had picked out. "Over here, you said?"

"Thereabouts, yes," Arthur said.

"Just don't kill him," Merlin said with a sigh. He thought about watching how the training would go, but Elyan became prickly when someone watched the screens over his shoulder. Gwen was working on modifications to protect their equipment from magical charges and EMPs, and Morgana was meeting with some of the druids to go over their plans for the spring. It wasn't even Christmas yet, but the intel that they'd been able to receive from Olaf and Colonel Mandrake only confirmed that the situation was still untenable. It wouldn't be safe for anyone to go home, not for a long, long time.

"Temporary maimings are on the table, though," Arthur said. He grinned, but that smile faded when he frowned and made a shooping motion at Merlin. "You're on R&R for the rest of the day. If I hear that you've been pesteruing Elyan or Gwen, I'll…"

He trailed off, as if trying to come up with an appropriate punishment.

"Extend my R&R another day?" Merlin asked hopefully. "Preferably with advance notice, because, you know. Lie-ins are nice."

"Go, or I'll withhold sex for a week," Arthur scowled, a sour expression on his face. Mordred bowed his head and chuckled quietly.

Merlin grinned brightly. "You'd never last a day, sweetheart."

"Don't test me," Arthur said. He made another motion toward the tent. "Go."
Leaving the field was a bittersweet sensation. He didn't want to leave the team, and he didn't want to miss out on watching how the plans and contingency plans worked out, but the further away he was, the more he added to a mental checklist of all the things he needed to be working on.

As much as Merlin had been training Mordred, getting him battle ready, Mordred had been teaching Merlin, too. He'd shown Merlin how to modify electronics to tolerate magical influence, like the computer that Cennydd couldn't operate, but could activate with a judicial use of magic. Merlin had gone one further and established a sort of magical encryption code for the operation of the device -- whatever device it was -- and Mordred had stared at him in consternation for several long minutes before demanding to be taught how Merlin had done that.

He still needed to fine-tune the radio systems and to incorporate the magical enhancements, too. One of the druids had shown him how to protect the radio signals from intrusion from other sources -- a filter, so to speak. It had originally been a little, modified spell to clear up telescope signals for an amateur astronomist, but Merlin could see the potential, and he wanted to talk to Gaius about it.

It was… It was about time he talked to his uncle, anyway.

Merlin stopped by the cottage to dump his equipment. He didn't bother to change out of his uniform, not when it was warmer than his civilian clothes. He stopped by the clinic on the ground floor of the cottage to see his Mum, and ended up spending half an hour there while she poked and prodded at his shoulder.

"Have you been doing your exercises?" Hunith asked, gesturing for him to put on his clothes again.

Merlin grimaced. He didn't answer right away, struggling through a long-sleeved thermal undershirt, a short-sleeve, an overshirt, and his coat. "Right, Mum. I have to get going --"

"Merlin," Hunith said, her tone warning. "The physiotherapist --"

"-- was the inspiration for every sadistic Bond villain in existence, and you can't tell me otherwise," Merlin said. At his Mum's raised brow, he groaned. "I know, Mum. I'm supposed to keep working the area to keep the scar tissue from stiffening up. It's just…"

Merlin stopped himself from saying, not like I had the chance to do anything about it and tried to come up with something that his Mum would accept and that also wouldn't upset her at the same time.

"… I just haven't needed it, all right? It's not like Arthur didn't notice when I contorted myself into a pretzel, figured out what it was for, and incorporated it in my PT plan. Which he makes me do every. Damn. Day."

Hunith raised the other brow at that, her eyes narrowing in consideration. For a minute, Merlin thought that she wasn't going to believe him, but she finally nodded her assent. "Arthur's taking care of you?"

"Whether I like it or not," Merlin said through gritted teeth, still sore at the enforced R&R. "I'm okay, Mum. I promise."

"If you need --"

"The first sign of stiffening up or swelling, I'm going to be waking you up at the arse-end of dawn begging you for a cortisol shot, Mum. I promise," Merlin said.

Hunith looked as if she was considering extracting another promise from him, but she was distracted
when one of the kids started coughing. It was a dry, raspy sore-throat cough that Merlin had fled from as if it were the plague -- he didn't need to get sick, too, on top of his R&R. Merlin took advantage of the distraction and escaped out the door.

He was still zipping up his coat when he emerged from the cottage, flinching against the cold wind. He pulled up his collar, squinting up at the sky, and patted his pockets until he found his gloves.

"It's going to rain," someone nearby remarked. Merlin didn't recognize her, but he assumed she was one of the druids-in-training from the village, elected to act as a go-between when the unreliable phone lines went down and the more common radio frequencies were jammed by too much chatter.

"Looks like," Merlin said, though he really couldn't tell. The sky was cloudy, as usual. The cover looked thick enough, but the slowly swirling mass was on the light side, nowhere near as dark as it usually was before it started to piss all over the countryside. "Are you looking for Morgana? I think I saw her --"

"No, Emrys. I'm looking for you, though the Gods only know why, if you're this thick," the woman said, a pinch in her brow. Her hands went to her hips, and she looked him up and down. Merlin had the feeling that she had found him wanting, and he almost thought that he should be insulted. Almost.

He wasn't a druid. He'd never trained like one, and he didn't know their most precious mysteries. Even Gaius, for all his knowledge, could only postulate on a druid's meaning when the teachings were more like one of Morgana's indescribable prophecies. Mordred could give them some insight, sometimes, but he'd admitted that he had jumped over some training as a child in order to complete it so that he could... leave.

Merlin wondered what Mordred would say about the woman's weather forecast.

"Do it," the woman said, almost in an aside, as if she were talking to someone beside her. Her stance shifted, as if listening to the first voice, and she bowed her head with the sort of noble grace that only came with age.

For an instant, the woman was old. Stoop-shouldered, a tremble to her limbs, half-hooded eyes, a surety of wisdom that was always lacking in youth.

"It's going to rain," the woman repeated, the emphasis made not only by word and tone, but by the pale orange flash of her eyes. "It is the sort of rain that comes when there's too much magic in the air. It will fall, and the earth will be cleansed, Emrys."

Merlin stilled. He glanced around, his eyes drifting up to the sky, idly thinking the phrase danger from above and trying to remember which movie he'd gotten that from. He reached out with his magic, letting him acknowledge his surroundings with more than five senses.

He could feel a tickle of magic nearby. Kathy's windchimes, tinkling in the breeze, but ensoncelled to shrill a warning klaxon if anything crossed the wards Mordred -- and reinforced by Merlin -- had set around the property. Bran, playing with his magic, entertaining the younger children, and Merlin really was going to have to have a chat with him, because gambling was not an acceptable use of magic, no matter how much Will believed it was. There were a few men and women in the camp, too, whose natural, but previously latent magic had awakened, and Gaius and some of the other former army men had taken them in, teaching them control.

He could sense Gaius, too, somewhere in the workshop off to the far end of the campsite, where the
sound of construction wouldn't disturb anyone, but if Gaius was using magic, it was very subtle, the way he did everything else -- with a subtle, gentle touch, encouraging and guiding, never pushing or forcing. If it was meant to work a certain way, Gaius would say, whatever he was constructing would hook together seamlessly and without effort. If it didn't, he would shrug and decide, back to the drawing board.

More than anything, he could sense the woman in front of him, studying him with a judging eye.

Her magic was wild, uncontrolled. She was a pressure pot with a lid fastened too tight and the temperature cranked up too high, ready to blow. There was steam slipping through the cracks, and the pot wobbled on the surface, click-click-clattering its way toward the precipice.

Merlin had worked with Mordred so much over the last week that he had become accustomed to the feel of his magic. He'd come across the druids from the village so often that he could probably identify most of them merely from the way their magic reached out, almost on instinct, to greet him before they ever saw the other. He was aware of how unnervingly calm their magic was, neither bridled nor bound. From the youngest to the oldest, they treated magic as a river, never stopping or damming the flow.

This woman was no druid.

He forced himself to maintain his confusion through the turmoil of questions that raced through his mind. How had she gotten past the barriers? How was it that no one questioned her presence before now? What did she come here to do? Why was she looking for him?

"What do you mean? Like the storm we had a few weeks ago? I don't remember there being any rain," Merlin said.

The woman released a startled, barking laugh.

"Thick," she said again. She was amused one second, disappointed the next. "You aren't supposed to be slow, too."

Merlin frowned. He fingered at the edge of his coat, glad that Arthur had ordered that no one leave their bunks unarmed. Merlin wished he had kept his earwig when he'd dumped his equipment, but at least he had his gun. "There's no need to be rude."

The woman bowed her head in what seemed to be an apology. "I apologize, Emrys. You are not what we expected."

Merlin suppressed a shudder.

"Sorry to disappoint," Merlin said, breaking into a small grin he didn't really feel, but tried for, anyway. They were too close to the cottage. Too close to the encampment. There were people everywhere, and no one had a clue. "So, you were looking for me, yeah? How can I help you?"

The woman was silent. Her body shifted. Merlin tried to read her, but it was impossible. It was as if he was unable to see what was in front of him. The woman jerked, and there was the flash of an arrogant sneer, the haughty rise of a chin. Her shoulders were down, her head held high, and she looked down with an imperious stare.

"What makes you think the likes of you can help us?"
"He doesn't understand. He doesn't. He doesn't," a chorus of voices rumbled, making Merlin dizzy from the echo. The woman's mouth hadn't moved, and the words hadn't come from her.

He glanced around, trying not to look spooked, but he was. This woman had either gone off the bend, snapping under the pressures and the strain of the quiet battle raging around the world, or something else was going on.

*Something else was going on.*

"That's why you're here, aren't you?" Merlin pressed. "Isn't that… Most people from the village come for something else, and we help each other -- don't you know that? They didn't tell you before you came out here?"

"I'm not from the village," the woman said. She sounded annoyed.

"Oh," Merlin said. He felt the rough texture of the gun holster, and shifted slightly so that she couldn't see what he was doing.

The woman was a short brunette, narrow-shouldered and slim, her face an olive complexion, colourless and somewhat wan. She wore jeans and a coat that looked new, though her knee-high boots were scuffed around the toes. She wasn't tall enough to be Nimueh or Morgause or any other woman that had been identified as NWO, and, in any case, Merlin couldn't sense any illusion wrapped around her.

There were smudges of dirt on her face. A scrape of blood at her throat where the scarf had fallen open; it was strangely shaped, almost like a rune. At first glance, even with the newer winter clothes, she didn't look any different than anyone else in the camp.

But beneath that, beneath all that, the girl was young. Seventeen. Maybe sixteen. Not a woman at all, not like he'd originally thought, but the personalities that had overlaid her youthful features had made her appear older, then older, and older still.

"Where do you come from, then?" Despite the magic tingling under the surface of his skin, the gun was a reassuring weight in Merlin's hand. He kept his body angled away from the woman, giving her a shy smile. "I mean, I haven't seen you around. What's your name?"

"Do it now," three voices whispered, filling several vocal ranges. "Tease and taunt no more. He knows. He knows. He knows."

Merlin shivered, and not because of the eerie stillness that burst through the clearing. It was in how the woman in front of him became a girl again, shy and nervous, determination bright in her eyes.

"Annie," she said, smiling thinly. It didn't reach her eyes. "The matron heard the Druids speak your name. She told us to find you."

*The matron.*

Merlin forced himself not to startle.

"That was nice of her," Merlin said, playing stupid. He didn't know if he should even bother, but he did it anyway, trying to buy time. He ran a hand through his hair with the best *shy boy talking to pretty girl* gesture that he could manage, and glanced around, trying to spot the fastest route away from everyone else. He dropped his hand and pointed toward the road. "I was going this way. Maybe you could tell me why you came to find me while we walk?"
"That…" Annie looked where he'd pointed, more curious than anything. Then, as if deciding that the area met her needs, she said, "Yes."

Merlin took a tentative step in that direction, luring her along, and extended his strides until she had to hurry to keep up. Her boots weren't suited to run, and barely had any traction; she slid twice before she caught up to him. Merlin waited until they were halfway to the forestline before asking, "Why did the matron send you to me? I mean, who is she?"

"It doesn't really matter," Annie said, shrugging. Her tone was slow, listless, like she was thinking through a fog. "That's for me to know."

Merlin tried very hard not to think how much that sounded like I have to kill you.

"All right. I'm really confused. Why me?" Merlin asked, his hackles on edge.

"To tell you that it's going to rain," Annie said again.

Merlin forced a grin on his face and resisted the urge to rub his throbbing temples. He was much better at being on the interrogating end than being the interrogator, it seemed. He wished that Lucan was here, or Kay. Even Arthur was better at extricating details. "It's England. Of course it's going to rain. And you said it wasn't like the storm we had before. I have no idea what it means or why you think it's important."

Annie didn't answer. She stared off in the distance as they walked, her brow furrowing. When she finally spoke, it was with a haunted detachment that Merlin knew all too well.

From Morgana.

"I see it all the time," Annie said. There was a childish lilt to her voice, as if she was forcing herself to be cheerful. "I see you. Always so bright. You're like a storm. Or a sun. Or a star. Something bright and powerful and it's hard to look at you and it's hard to look away."

Merlin stopped walking. Annie trailed off a few more steps before turning to look at him in surprise.

"My papa told me stories about you. The earth and the sky in your hands. The stars and the sea in your eyes. Old magic and new magic and everything in between and everything beyond. I knew you were real, not just a story. That's why the matron took me. My papa... I miss my papa. I want to see him, but the matron said you were here, I didn't have a choice. I had to come."

"Annie," Merlin said gently, pressing the gun against his thigh, adjusting his grip. Annie's eyes were glassy, lost in a struggle that was betrayed by the tiny, aborted gestures of her left hand, as if she were trying to write something down. Saying her name seemed to pull her out of the fugue, so he said it again. "Annie, are you here with me?"

"Of course, Emrys. Do you see the rain?"

Merlin saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He glanced at Annie, but Annie was lost in her own world. Merlin changed position slowly, subtly, trying to see if there was anyone else nearby. He didn't sense any magic or anything out of the ordinary, but that didn't mean much at this point. The wards had obviously failed if someone with Annie's unstable power had managed to come through.

He ignored how Annie's magic vibrated, like a car being gunned at the starting line.

"You see it all the time. You see it -- what is it, exactly?"
"Burning," Annie said, sweet as pie. Her eyes were molten lava, orange-red and shining bright.

Merlin took a step back, but he didn't raise his gun.

"Everything's burning. The ground is scorched. Buildings fall. The rivers are dry. The oceans are aflame. The way beyond is gone.

"There is no sun. There is only smoke. People are fighting, but there's nothing to fight for, not anymore. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to live. Nowhere to die.

"It's raining, Emrys. It's raining fire."

Merlin knew those words. He knew those images. They were from Morgana's visions.

Visions that weren't hers alone.

"Do you remember, Emrys?" Annie asked, but her voice reverberated in a treble note, maiden, matron, crone. "It won't happen again."

He'd forgotten what it was like to feel the sun upon his skin on a warm summer day, but he could never forget the colour of the sky. The sky had always been the colour of his King's eyes.

He was looking into them now. They were rimmed red and framed with the dusky shade of ash. There was a bright light behind his King, but it was the wrong colour. It tarnished the once-golden crown, turning him into a pauper King, a lesser man, a man like all the rest of them.

"My love," he whispered. He reached to touch his King's face, to wipe the tear streaking a path down his scruffy face, but he couldn't move. He was so weak.

His King sobbed. He bowed his head. The King pressed dry, cracked lips in one last kiss upon his lips, and it hurt. It hurt so much to know that it would be the last.

His King raised his chin and looked all around them. He looked up into the black clouds above. He looked down, and there was nothing for the sorcerer but the blue of clear skies.

"Do it," his King said. "Do it now."

"Never again," Annie said.

A gun fired.

Annie's face went slack. She fell forward.

A gun fired again. Two bullets. Chest and leg.

Annie dropped the knife in her hand. She crumpled to the ground.

Merlin took a step back. Another, and then another. The blood spread, trickling in the grooves and cracks in the gravel road, never sinking below the frozen surface.

He stared at Annie, trying to clear his head. He had the image of a planet on fire, of scorched earth and burning seas and clouds of ash. He saw dragons flying in formation, he saw men fighting, he saw banners of every colour and shape and conformation hanging listlessly from every quarter.

Never again, Annie had said.
The images faded as quickly as they had come, fading from memory, fragmented and broken, before they were gone. Merlin tried to bring them back, but they were gone.

He stumbled off the road and into the pit. A tree stopped his retreat. He sank into a crouch, trembling.

He stared at the gun in his hand. He hadn't fired a single shot. Merlin turned to see who had saved his life.

It was Balinor.

He stood at the forestline, just inside the broken shadows of the leafless trees, an arm up to protect his eyesight from the glare, the other holding his gun.

Merlin stared at him until Balinor looked away from the girl's body, from Annie's body, and met his gaze.

Balinor was a man that Merlin had known, once, long ago. A father forgotten to childhood, a man that Merlin no longer recognized, but still a father, still a protector, still doing whatever he needed to do to keep his son safe.

He dropped his gun arm and strode forward in sure steps, but Merlin knew at once that Balinor wasn't coming for him. He walked toward Annie, and --

Magic crested. The seal on the pressure pot cracked and split. The pot boiled over. Magic fizzled and burned and scalded as it dripped out of Annie's body, no longer restrained.

"Don't touch her," Merlin warned.

Balinor's hand hovered just over Annie's shoulder. He stared hard at Merlin before dismissing him with an imperceptible shake of his head.

Merlin scrambled forward, on his knees, to his feet.

Balinor rolled Annie onto her side, but she slipped out of his grasp and slumped onto her back. Her head lolled to the side.

"I said, don't touch her --"  

A container with contents under immense pressure never looked dangerous until conditions changed. In this case, it wasn't only Annie's death. It was the sudden, jarring force of her body being manipulated by someone else, of the unexpected and likely unwanted contact of a stranger.

The magic reacted --

Merlin wrenched Balinor out of the way, throwing him as far as he could with a blind swing of his hand, his magic sweeping out in a broad swath. Merlin registered the connection; he was aware of Balinor's angry yell; he knew exactly where Balinor had fallen, and how he'd groaned in pain. He couldn't make himself care, not now, not --

The pressure pot cracked clean down the side. Magic steamed out in sputtering foam, temporarily sealing itself.

Scield -- Merlin didn't so much as think the spell as to tear it out of the firmament, to draw from the magic of a crisscross of leylines buried deep, deep, deep in the ground. The wild magic surged up at
his command, twining with his own, shaping and reshaping until it had formed a dome above the ground and a dome beneath.

Annie's body *shuddered*. There was a *thundercrack*.

It was the Pentagram all over again, except there were no architectural wards, no raised platform, no leaching of power and energy from the innocent, no sacrificial lamb.

Magic exploded. It expanded in a massive, unwinding thermoclastic cloud, thick and corrupted, like sheaves of ice cracking from an iceberg, like lava cooling on the ground as magma bubbled up from beneath.

The shield glittered, fogged, darkened, turned opaque. The surface glistened, solidified, becoming crystalline.

It cracked.

Merlin *reached*. He found more untapped leylines and dragged the magic up from the depths of the earth. He wove them in tendrils of his own to strengthen the net. He dragged another shield around the globe, strengthening it.

Just in time.

The inner shield shattered and exploded; the shards of magic battered the inside of the second shield. The ground shuddered and rippled, shifting as if an earthquake had struck. But the first had done its job in absorbing the force of the explosion, and the second took care of the rest, absorbing the excess energy, quelling, calming, soothing.

Merlin relaxed his hold, dropping the arms he had thrown up to brace against the bomb. He could feel the leyline magic unwinding from his own with a sensuous tease, drifting away, taking all the magic that it had collected from Annie along with it.

Annie's magic had been twisted, turned, *transformed*. As Merlin watched, the leylines absorbed it; the remainder of Annie's essence was cleaned and scrubbed of filth and corruption. The leylines were filtering the magic as it passed through the earth to return to rest underground.

Merlin stared at Annie. Her coat had been torn open. Her scarf was in tatters. She was wearing an ironic *Team Edward* T-shirt with a faded logo over jeans. Her hair fanned out around her head, and her eyes, once a dark brown, were white and opaque, bleached from the magic.

Merlin closed his eyes and tried to ignore how he was trembling.

A suicide bomber. A fucking suicide bomber.

He'd encountered his share. Both before he'd joined Excalibur and after. And it was never easy to deal with them. Not before, when their goal was to ensure that civilians weren't injured in the blast. Not during, when they tried to interrupt the detonator from the tangle of wires laced throughout the explosive. Not after, when they'd had no choice but to evacuate the area and to leave the person there to die.

Sometimes they died willingly, a prayer of adulation on their lips, a faithfulness in their cause that Merlin had never been able to understand until he put it in a context that made sense to him -- that he'd do the same, too, if it meant protecting his friends, his family, his team. If it meant protecting
Arthur.

Sometimes, the bombers' last, sobbing words, pleading for help and for mercy, were burned into the minds and hearts of all those close enough to hear.

Never again, Annie had said, brandishing her magic like a weapon.

Do it, his King had said, the memory vision fading, the words resonating in Merlin's head, and he thought, for an instant, that he knew why.

A rough hand on his arm yanked him out of his thoughts and pulled him down the road.

"Get out of there," Balinor warned.

Merlin wrenched himself free, in the process forcing Balinor to a stop. Merlin didn't think. He reacted, punching Balinor in the face.

Balinor, already off balance, stumbled, listed, and fell.

"What is wrong with you?" Merlin shouted. "I told you not to touch her! I told you to leave her alone!"

"I'm trying to protect you," Balinor said, getting to his feet slowly. There was a red mark across his cheek; a small cut under his eye.

"How?" Merlin asked. "By running away? Pretending you were dead? Activating a bomb? Good job."

"You don't understand --"

"Shut up! Don't you fucking dare tell me what I don't understand! You left us! I don't bloody well care why. You were my dad. We went to your funeral. I put flowers on a plaque on the ground for years. And if you think I don't know the exact moment when you called Mum and told her everything, you're fucking bonkers, because she cried. She cried on my birthday. You put her through Hell --"

"Don't you think I know that? Don't you think it hurt me to leave you too? I was trying to save both of you --"

"We did fine without you," Merlin snapped. "Survived just fine. And in case you haven't noticed…"

Merlin swung an arm around, pointing at Annie's body.

"I can protect myself. I don't need you."

He shoved Balinor out of his way with an angry smack of magic.

ooO00oo

Arthur sat at the table in the main room, one foot on a nearby chair. His elbow was bent on the table, wrinkling papers and maps, his chin propped in his hand.
One by one, the members of Excalibur filed in and took their seats. Bedivere and Bohrs were the first -- their orders had been short, to the point, and easy to fulfill. Morgana stopped in, her expression tight, but she didn't stay. Twenty minutes passed before Geraint slunk in, his expression blank. Galahad was another ten minutes after him. Lucan and Kay came in a half hour later, Perceval ten minutes behind them.

Bohrs had secured the training field and eliminated every trace of what they'd been doing. When he finished there, he joined Bedivere and Morgana in crowd control -- calming the families and friends who had no military experience or exposure, because the last thing they needed right now was uncontrolled panic.

Geraint and Galahad had run the circuit of the Pendragon property, touching base with the people patrolling the borders. They'd started at the hidden entrance, gone in different directions, crossed each other, and kept going, checking the circuit twice and making certain that the patrols were on alert, their radios functional. A mandatory check-in in rotating five minute intervals had been implemented until further notice. If anyone failed to respond with the correct code, one of the others would raise the alarm.

Lucan, Kay and Perceval had done a complete search of the encampment and the cottage before folding outward to the forest in a random grid pattern, looking for anything out of place.

None of them needed to say anything. Their silence spoke volumes. The training site was secure. The people in Camelot were unsettled but calm. Geraint and Galahad had checked the borders but hadn't found any troublesome signs or they would have radioed in immediately. The door-to-door check of the semi-permanent residences hadn't turned up anything out of the ordinary.

Arthur stared at the door, waiting for the others. It was another twenty minutes before the distant sound of a door opening and slamming shut.

Will stormed in, threw his pack hard into the corner, and sat down with a frustrated grunt. Gwaine and Leon followed him mere minutes later. Gwaine was only slightly less enraged than Will -- also, he knew to take care of his equipment. Leon took his seat next to Arthur, a smartphone in his hand, and held it out, tilting it for Arthur.

Their assignment had been a bit more difficult. Will and Gwaine had split up to patrol the road that led to the Pendragon property and to try to find where Annie -- if that was her real name -- had come in. Their frustration signalled that they'd found a likely entry point, but nothing obvious. And if they didn't find anything on the gravel turnoff hidden by fencing and shrubbery, they definitely hadn't found any abandoned vehicles parked by the side of the road.

Someone had dropped her off.

As the primary contact point with the village, Leon had headed there to find out who had talked. Until now, there had been no reason why the Druids would reveal to anyone that there was a small community living in relative safety out in the woods on privately-owned land -- they were in as much danger of being found out if any of the more turbulent areas realized the untouched treasure trove that there was in this part of England. But Annie had very clearly said, the matron heard the Druids speak your name, and Arthur didn't need more than that to know that there had been a very grave breach in their security.

Arthur took his eyes from the still-empty doorway and glanced down to the video that Leon had taken.

He was in a sitting room with beige walls. There was a sunflower painting covering most of the
surface of one; the other was covered with dirty fingerprints and handprints that were at about ye\-high, right at the upper range where a child could reach. Arthur recognized the community centre.

A middle-aged man was centred in the middle of the video. His plaid shirt was worn and a little torn, missing a few buttons. The undershirt was stretched at the neck, and there were faint signs of bruising along his jaw, a greenish around his eye socket. Someone had manhandled him -- probably the villagers.

If Leon had found the guilty party -- if it were this man -- he would not have been gentle. Arthur knew this for a fact.

"Talk," someone said, off-screen. "Talk, or so help me, God --"

"Lane?" Arthur asked.

Leon nodded.

"Shut the fuck up," Leon barked. His tone wasn't any softer when he asked, "Do you know why you're here?"

"I didn't have anything to do with it, I swear!" the man said.

"Goddamn it. Don't be an idiot -- our lives are at stake, and so are theirs. We found the phone tree and the CB radio in your basement. You want to explain that, or do we toss you out of the community?" Lane asked.

"It's not me! I can't believe you single me out like this. Haven't I done everything I can to protect the community --"

Leon tapped the screen and fast forwarded through the video, overshooting and rewinding it.

"... sister," the man said. He was crying, appearing both contrite and upset, but that could be fear and nerves. Arthur would get Leon's opinion on it later, when they didn't have a more pressing issue to solve. "We talk, you know. That's the job you gave me. To stay in touch with all the others, to make sure they're all right. Sometimes I'll call my sister to make sure that she's all right. She tells me how things are on her side of the country. She says that there's so many people out there without any food or shelter. Everyone's running and they don't know where to go. She's been sending them to the other encampments, but there's not enough room for everyone. Not enough food.

"I told her we're no different. We have to be careful. But the kids she tells me about, it just broke my heart. I didn't mean to tell her. It slipped out. I said there were places, good places, where she could send people. I... I mentioned the camp. I might have... I might have told her a few names. Not on purpose, not like that. Just in normal conversation, you know. Tommy did this. The Cross guy came over the other day. Emrys helped us with the wards. Oh my Gods. This is my fault. I'm so sorry --"

Leon stopped the video and turned the smartphone upside down. He leaned back so heavily in his chair that the chair creaked in protest.

"You believe him?" Arthur asked. He saw the others, all of them sitting on the edge of their seats, just waiting for an order. Any order.

Leon rubbed his face, dropping his arms with a frustrated grunt. "I don't want to. Fuck. We knew about the CB radio and their network. I warned them never to use our names, but... There was a breakdown, somewhere, and he didn't get the message, or he just plain forgot the rules."
Arthur nodded. He didn't know what to say to that. He'd seen the directory that the druids had -- a loose-leaf binder with names and phone numbers and addresses. It was organized by geological location, nearest to furthest, along cardinal directions, grouped according to the senior representative and the area contact. Even if they tracked the man's sister and found out who else knew of their existence, that information would be useless. It would have spread and spread with just a thoughtless word or a careless phrase, and if there was one thing that Arthur knew, it was that the druids gossiped about every magic user they came across.

Mordred's name was probably out there, too.

_Fuck._

Gareth came in, looking drawn and tired. He sat down lightly, as if he half-expected a bed of nails. "You're not going to like this."

"I already don't," Arthur retorted.

"You'll like this _less_ then," Pellinor said, taking his usual seat. Unlike Gareth, Pellinor was at ease, with a casual relaxation that set the alarm bells ringing. "We tracked Balinor down. Found him with some of his squad out in the woods on the other side of the lake. Three blokes. Andrew Carlisle, Evie -- Everett Anderson, Reggie Coleman."

Arthur sat up straight, his teeth gritting.

Arthur knew the names from the file reports he'd read on Balinor and his team, a long time ago. They were good men, Sergeants all, with impeccable records with matching MIA stamps. He didn't know anything about them beyond that.

As far as anyone knew, Balinor had come to the encampment alone, leaving Phillip and Michael and whoever else behind, scattered throughout Europe. Their presence here -- a presence that hadn't so much as raised the alarms -- indicated that not only did Balinor have a way of communicating out that was outside of Merlin and Gwen's setup, but they also had a mode of transportation that allowed them to bypass the wards around the property _completely_.

"And the dragons?" Arthur asked.

"Well-spotted," Pellinor said, raising an impressed brow. "Took us a good five minutes to figure out how they'd made it in without the lot of us knowing. Remembered to look up a little too late, saw a couple of black specks in the sky for a few seconds before losing them in the clouds."

"They're here with gear," Gareth said, rubbing circles in his head. "Heard them say the others were getting ready. Balinor's not happy, though. He's downright furious, wasn't he? Fucking Rambo lone wolf shite. Why did we bring him in again?"

Arthur was wondering that himself. He raised his brows and said, "Good question. Did you find out why he was following Merlin?"

Arthur wasn't sure how he felt about that. On the one hand, Balinor had shot and killed a girl who had come to Camelot for the express purpose of killing Merlin. On the other, Merlin had known from the start that something wasn't right and had been trying to get more information. Merlin admitted that for one instant, he'd...

He'd been _distracted_, which had become their private code word for the flashes of visions that Morgana would get, sometimes.
... and either he'd snapped out of it on his own or the gunfire had dragged him out of it. Merlin hadn’t been sure.

And, finally, however well-meaning Balinor was in keeping a watchful eye over his son, he'd set off a bomb.

The echo of Mordred's frantic voice over the team's communication channel, breaking the radio silence protocol, still rang in Arthur's head. "Something's wrong. Something's wrong. We have to get back to the camp. Now. Fuck. It's Merlin --"

Arthur's chest still ached from the mere thought that something had happened to Merlin, but he had found out what Mordred hadn't said over the radio when they'd both clambered onto hard seats in the back of the transport lorry.

"Does he even know how strong he is?" Mordred's eyes were wide and gleaming despite the darkness of the covered truck, but they were close enough to the opening that Arthur could see his face. There was awe in Mordred's tone, and maybe a little bit of fear, too.

"Is he all right?" Arthur asked instead. Absolutely no one cared how strong Merlin was. That was an afterthought. Everyone in the truck vibrated with the nerves and anxiety that came with not knowing if one of their own was safe. Arthur wasn't the only one who had lost Merlin; they were not losing anyone again.

Mordred didn't answer. His eyes were downcast. There was a faint flash of yellow-gold, nowhere near as crisp or white or pure as Merlin's, but bright enough all the same, and after a moment, he nodded. "He's all right."

Arthur exhaled slowly.

"He wasn't in a particularly talkative mood, not when he realized we'd found him and his lot," Gareth said sourly. "Clammed up tighter than Gwaine's wallet at the pub."

"I expect he's always been keeping an eye on Merlin," Lucan said, breaking his silence. "Leaves well enough alone if Merlin's with the rest of us, but I've followed him following Merlin a few times. I told you about that."

Arthur nodded. He'd expected that Balinor would have done something of the sort, and he'd been gratified to know that he'd been right -- the way Balinor had suddenly shown up outside Hunith's hut in the middle of the day had been fairly telling. Arthur was torn between being glad that someone had been with Merlin at the time, and wishing to fuck that it hadn't been Balinor.

"Who's watching them now?" Arthur asked, because that was more important than how he felt about Balinor.

"Allan and his boys," Gareth said. "Turns out none of them are all that fond of Balinor buggering off in the first place."

Will snorted, but he didn't say anything, for once.

"Hunith's right pissed, too," Pellinor said. "Wouldn't want to be in her line of sight right now."

There was a distant creak and the sound of three pairs of footsteps marching up the stairs from the basement in double-time. Lamorak carried a couple of laptops into the room, Elyan was cradling a few peripherals, and Owain lugged a large-screen monitor, squeezing himself through while gingerly
making certain that the monitor wasn't nicked on a corner.

Arthur didn't have to ask. They wouldn't be bringing in equipment if they hadn't found something.

"Satellite footage was spotty, but we got a grainy image of a car dropping her off halfway between the outer marker of the property and the next town," Lamorak said, not even looking up. "Took us a while to sort through it."

"Lots of static, though. Makes it hard to see clearly. Gwen's writing code to clean up the image," Elyan said. He paused and turned to look around the room, grinning. He was obviously proud of his sister -- they all were -- but one glance at their sombre expressions was enough to remind him why Gwen was still in the basement, cleaning up satellite images. "Anyway, she thinks she can get a license plate, or at least the driver's face."

"She thinks, or she knows?" Arthur asked. He shook his head at Elyan's blank look. "If the resolution's crap and the data's missing, no amount of processing power will fill in the blanks."

Elyan grunted. "Well, look at who's been paying attention in class."

"More like, who's been listening when Merlin talks?" Gwaine muttered. His teasing tone was humourless and half-hearted; he ran his hand over his thigh, as if trying to will away a bout of phantom pain.

"Tell Gwen not to waste her time," Arthur said.

"I'll do that," Owain said, leaving the room.

There were voices in the corridor -- a muffled greeting, a quiet word. Less than a minute later, Merlin arrived with Mordred, the two of them looking on the haggard side. Neither man had been very well rested before the training exercises that Merlin had been excused from, and they both looked all the worse for wear after having to reroute the damaging power of a magical bomb meant to do actual, physical damage, and from reinforcing all the wards.

"I know," Merlin said wearily, sinking into the chair next to Arthur with the sort of boneless grace that only came with being pulverised with exhaustion. "They tripped the wards, but the wards weren't designed to stop them."

"It's not like we thought dragons would be dive-bombing Camelot," Mordred snarked, elbows on the table, the heels of his hands rubbing his eyes. He stretched his arms out, his knuckles rapping the table. "Should we ward against everything? I thought there was a dryad in that white birch tree."

"That wasn't a dryad. That was a nymph. She was trying to get to the lake," Merlin said, sounding irritated.

"There aren't any nymphs in this part of the country. Too cold. Maybe it was a mermaid?" Mordred said.

"Seriously? A mermaid? What am I, thick?" Merlin asked, his eyes narrowing. "Next you'll be telling me that it wasn't a narwhal in the water, it was a bloody unicorn taking a bath."

"And what if it was?"

"It should've spooked," Merlin said. "Not like either of us are virgins --"

"Oi. Shut it for a second," Will said, holding his arms out -- one toward Merlin, the other toward
Mordred -- as if fully intending to get in between them if it was going to turn into a fight. He looked between the two, and very seriously said, "Naked dryads? Water nymphs all wet and, well, naked? And mermaids -- also naked? You two plonkers couldn't be arsed to call that in?"

"They're creatures of nature, Will. I can't even imagine the sort of power they might have. The last thing we want to do is offend them," Merlin said.

"No, the very last thing we want to do is letting that one try to chat up a sprite." Mordred thumbed toward Will and rolled his eyes.

"That's not fair. I can be smooth when I want to be --"

Kay snorted.

"-- I should be in charge of interspecies diplomatic relations," Will said. He paused. He looked between the two of them. "Are you having me on?"

Merlin and Mordred exchanged glances. A small smile touched their lips, but they both shrugged. "Honestly, mate, we don't know. There's dragons. Why not the rest of the pantheon in *Encyclopaedia Mythica*?"

Arthur reached over and put a hand on the back of Merlin's neck, rubbing gently. Merlin wasn't tense. Merlin was tired, and Mordred must be, too, if he couldn't be bothered to maintain his usual, proper mannerisms. Arthur thought he liked Mordred better this way. He was more down to earth, more approachable, real. This was Mordred -- the Mordred he would have been if he hadn't gone to war at such a young age.

"Rude," Will said, pulling a face. He made a two-fingered gesture in both Merlin and Mordred's direction, and somehow, that set the entire group off into a fit of giggles.

"Don't worry," Merlin said, leaning into Arthur's touch. "We'll finish up after the meeting. Make sure they can't drop anyone else in without our say so. No swooping down and carting off our sheep, either."

"Tomorrow," Arthur said calmly. "After you both have had some rest."

"Tonight," Merlin said, his tone brokering no argument. Arthur thought back on the absolutely stormy look on Merlin's face, still furious with Balinor, and decided it was best if he agreed. Balinor was already on Merlin's shite list. Arthur did not want to be anywhere near that shite list.

Morgana and Gwen came in together, talking animatedly but quietly and gesturing at a tablet. The conversation continued until Morgana paused to lean in and kiss Leon's cheek. She detoured to ruffle Arthur's hair and to wrap an arm around Merlin in a gentle hug. Owain came in, blinking as if shell-shocked, and sat down, elbowing Pellinor. "'Gana ran into your da."

"What," Pellinor asked, distracted.

"Morgana was talking with your da," Owain.

"Huh?" Pellinor asked, frowning. A second later, he said, "Oh."

"What is it?" Arthur asked, looking from Pellinor to Morgana. Gwen didn't look up; Morgana gently pushed her into an empty seat before she roughly inserted her own chair next to Leon and Perceval.

Pellinor's father was a calm, quiet, unassuming man who often stood in the background while he
read a book, observed his surroundings, and stood by to let his wife handle every given situation with her usual elegant flair. Though he was retired now, Arthur knew that the man still worked for the British Geological Survey on occasion. He described himself as a simple prospector, but Pellinor's father, like the son, was a modest man. He was a honest-to-goodness genius with two doctorates to his name, and his biggest claim to fame was his engineering work in turning geothermal deposits into efficient conductors of renewable heat and electricity.

Many people -- all of them members of Excalibur -- teased Pellinor for having rocks as toys growing up, but Pellinor's passion for deep water diving was eclipsed only by his love for cave diving.

It just so happened that he'd learned how to cave dive from his father.

Still, knowing all that didn't explain the look on Owain's face or Pellinor's dumbfounded Oh. Morgana's wry smile told Arthur absolutely nothing, and by way of explanation, she yanked the tablet out of Gwen's hands and held it in front of Arthur's face.

Gwen blinked owlishly, the pinch in her brow turning into one of confusion until she realized that she wasn't holding the tablet anymore, and that was all that Arthur saw before Morgana banged the tablet on his nose. "Take a look."

Arthur looked. He saw numbers. More numbers. A schematic of some sort. He zoomed out, not wanting to admit to Morgana that he had no clue, and appreciating the momentary distraction from the problem at hand. It took him a minute. Two. Maybe ten, but combined with what little he could glean from the data in his hands and geothermal engineer, he blurted out, "There are no hot springs in this area."

"There are now," Morgana said smugly, raising an eyebrow toward Merlin.

Merlin glanced at Mordred. Mordred shrugged a shoulder and raised a hand in an I told you gesture. Arthur held the tablet out for Gwen. She jumped on it like as if it whatever she was craving right now, which was, if Lance was reliable, chocolate bars dipped in strawberry jam. Arthur twisted in his seat and glared at Merlin and Mordred, waiting for an explanation.

"I had to direct the excess magic somewhere," Merlin said wearily. "I shoved it into the ground."

"And at the leylines? Are you some sort of thick --" Will started, trailing off at Merlin's short-tempered glare. "What?"

"It weren't like that. Not like the Pentagram. This was a..." Merlin sighed. "This was a suicide bomber."

"Better to the ground than to the air, in any case," Mordred said. "It would have gone off like a flare, attracted attention here. Merlin did the right thing. What he did only awakened the old magic buried deep below, giving it a bit of a nudge."

"In English," Kay said.

"The earth's waking up," Mordred said. Merlin snorted and rolled his eyes. Mordred grinned, though there was a weariness to it, but he was... pleased, Arthur thought. As if it was a good thing. Mordred gestured toward Gwen -- or rather, the tablet in her hands -- and added, "Just as excess magic in the air can manipulate a storm no one can see, excess magic directed into the heart of the earth can..."

"Produce geothermal vents that can be tapped in case we have to go off the grid," Morgana said. "Dr. Pellinor wants to collect more data to see if it's stable."
"This just happened," Will said. "How does he even have numbers?"

No one said anything, but every pair of eyes turned to look at Pellinor. Pellinor's slow smile was dark, bordering on evil, and he said, "I think I should introduce you to my dad. Great guy. You'll love him."

Arthur agreed with that assessment. Dr. Pellinor was a quiet, enigmatic man who could go on for hours and hours about his favourite topic. It was enough to make anyone's eyes glaze over. Arthur liked the man already, if only for the prospect of leaving Will to him. On the other hand, Will might be one of the few people to enjoy the conversation, now that Arthur knew what he'd studied in uni.

"How'd he even know?" Owain asked. Hastily, he raised his hands. "Not that I want to know the detail. Just. Short answer, please?"

"The lake thawed out," Morgana said. "Not a speck of ice anywhere. You could probably bathe in it now."

"Skinny dipping in winter," Gwaine said, sounding cheered. There was even a wan smile on his face when he looked at Perceval. "I'm up for it."

"I'm not," Perceval said, straightening in his seat. He crossed his arms over his chest and raised a brow.

"You're right. We should build another sauna, closer to the water," Gwaine said, looking thoughtful. "I wonder if Gaius --"

As if speaking his name had summoned him, Gaius entered the room. He paused in the entrance, uncertain; Arthur glanced at Merlin, but Merlin looked equally as confused as Arthur felt. This was a team meeting, and as much as Gaius' advice had been invaluable during training in the early days, before Excalibur had a grasp of the extent of Merlin's abilities, Gaius had never been considered part of the team. Not really.

A quick glance around the room confirmed to Arthur that no one had invited him, but it wasn't until Lance squeezed around Gaius, that Arthur pinpointed why Gaius was there.

"I brought Gaius along. He can explain what we found better than I can," Lance said, by way of explanation. At Arthur's nod, Gareth got up and offered Gaius his chair, and went to fetch a new chair for himself from one of the back rooms.

Lance slid a short stack of papers across the table toward Arthur. He walked around the table and kissed Gwen's forehead -- and that was the first thing that Arthur had seen of Gwen's Shut Up I'm Doing Science mask slipping from her face. Lance murmured in her ear before standing up straight. He gestured at the laptop that had been set up. "Can I --"

"Yeah, go ahead," Elyan said, already clicking through the menus to minimize the windows already open.

Arthur reached out for the papers, going through them one by one. Some sheets were handwritten notes on forms that someone must have nicked from the hospital, most of the headers scratched out. Others were makeshift police reports in a familiar handwriting -- Arthur thought it might be one of Owain's older brothers, probably the one who worked in the Violent Crimes division -- with thorough descriptions of what was found on the body.

"Didn't find any identification on the girl," Lance said, waiting for the laptop to recognize his thumb drive. "No papers, no jewellery. Best we can figure, she's sixteen or seventeen years old, five-seven,
a hundred pounds soaking wet. Seriously underweight and undernourished, and there's signs that it's been like that for a long time for her. Maybe four or five years, maybe longer.

"There's persistent bruising on her body -- old bruises, not recent. Thin scars on her arms -- Gregory said he'd seen that before, thinks she might have been cutting herself when she was younger."

"Cause of death's obvious -- Balinor nearly emptied his gun in her," Lance said, his tone clinical. "The eyes going white, that was new. The Directory showed me reports on magical oversaturation and how it correlates with eye colour -- the paler, the stronger -- something about pure magic being white or silver."

"Also gold. I can confirm that," Gaius said quietly.

Most of the team shot surreptitious glances toward Merlin and Mordred. Merlin rolled his eyes, but Mordred glanced down, self-conscious.

"So," Will said, holding up his fingers and counting them down, "No ID, no way of tracking where she came from, probably was dropped off using a stolen car. Annie's a fake name --"

"No," Merlin said, sounding sad. "It was her name."

Will faltered, but he nodded. "All right, then. Annie's her name. Comes down to, we don't know who dropped her off --"

Lance abruptly turned toward the computer, pulling up a string of images. He clicked through them so fast that at first it was nothing but a dizzying slideshow of crime scene-style photographs, complete with handmade measurement placards. Owain's uncle, Gregory, had done a thorough job documenting the evidence. Finally, he slowed down and flipped through several images until he came to one that had a scratch on the skin in full display.

"-- and we don't know if anyone's waiting for her somewhere or if she's supposed to check in and give them the all clear," Will said, staring distractedly at the image.

Arthur nodded in agreement with everything that Will had said. It was the conclusion that everyone had come to. Someone had dropped Annie off; she wasn't working alone. According to Merlin, she had seemed distracted, uncertain, even reluctant, as if she wasn't wholly acting of her own free will. They didn't know what Annie's orders had been, and by not knowing, they had no way of judging the degree of threat that would come on the encampment and all the people they'd been keeping safe.

"What's that?"

Arthur followed Will's gaze to the monitor. One by one, everyone turned to take a look.

"She had this on her --"

"Oh, my gods," Mordred said, suddenly rigid in his seat. His hands closed into tight, white-knuckled fists.

"-- on her neck. I thought it was a scratch at first, but it's Hunith who said it's actually a really fine brand," Lance said, staring curiously at Mordred. "You recognize it?"

"Uh," Mordred said, nodding faintly. He was a little green around the edges, washed out as if he'd been swept away by the ocean, the undertow dragging him off, too stunned to swim for shore. "I was always taught that it was a symbol of the last judgment."
It was hard to see clearly. Annie must have been scratching at it for a while. But the more he looked, the more Arthur could make out its shape. The sigil was a tripod with a long line down the centre, a sort of peace symbol without the circle. The flesh was raised in a pale pink welt, the burn depressed in the middle, almost needle-thin in width where it wasn’t swollen and enflamed.

"That is… part of it, yes," Gaius said. He glanced from Mordred to Merlin before meeting Arthur's gaze. "Through history, it has been called many things. A broken cross. A crow's foot. A witch's foot. It is also called a todesrune or a death rune. But those are names given to it in modern times, by people who do not understand its origins and have corrupted its significance for their own means.

"It is the algiz. In Old English, it was the eolh. Its application and pronunciation varies depending on the speaker, and its roots and significance. Its meaning, however, has always been mutable. I can tell you with certainty that it is associated with protection, not unlike the sort that comes in the form of vengeance performed to correct a wrong."

Merlin blew out his breath slowly, obviously done. "Great. I've pissed someone off and they want to blow me up. Or shoot me. That's nothing new."

Kay made a sound like sucking air through his teeth.

"Too soon?" Merlin asked.

"Too soon," Kay said, grimacing.

"Sorry," Merlin said quietly. Kay raised his hand in a forget it gesture, and a short silence settled in the room. Arthur moved his hand from the back of Merlin's neck to flick his ear.

"Ow," Merlin said, rubbing his ear. He scowled. "What was that for?"

"For forgetting that it's always going to be too soon," Arthur said. He raised a brow at Merlin, who lowered his eyes, sheepish. Arthur ran a hand through Merlin's hair before dropping his arm, self-conscious of the way everyone was watching them with small smiles. He fixed his attention on Gaius. "All etymology aside, what does it mean, and why does Mordred look as if he's not going to sleep at all tonight?"

Gaius cleared his throat. "Perhaps because the significance of this symbol among the Druids who follow the old traditions. You see, every symbol evolves. The algiz may still be in use today, corrupted over time for other purposes, but it remains a root. An origin. It is the pure symbol of a faith that is more familiarly represented by an alteration of the algiz --"

He patted his chest, his coat pocket. Almost as one, the team realized what he was looking for and searched their own pockets. Gwaine was the first to find a pencil and to hand it over, but Lamorak reached for the tablet in Gwen's hands, murmured, "Sorry, Gwennie. It's just for a second," and went through the pages of icons until he found a drawing app.

Gaius took it gratefully, and after a moment of studying the interface, touched the screen. He drew something in three curt gestures, turning it around to show the group the same symbol that was on Annie's neck.

Then, looking at everyone meaningfully, he put the tablet on the table and touched with his finger. Instead of repeating the algiz, Gaius drew a long, curved line from the top, twisting it in a circular motion down and to the right, drawing an oval that swept toward the left in a mirror pattern. The line continued up until it connected with the starting point, completing a third circle. He lifted his finger and moved away.
The team craned their necks to take a look, but there was no recognition in their eyes. Mordred tilted his head up to see, but his expression turned even more mortified now that he had seen it, and he tensed as if he were about to bolt. Merlin stood up to get a better view; the tablet was passed up, and...

Merlin stilled.

It was one long, unbroken line, and Arthur could see how it had evolved from the crude scratches of the runic algiz to a sweeping, elegant symbol. There were three ovals with pointed tips, the lines intersecting in a simple Celtic knot.

"This is a triquetra," Gaius said. "It represents an interconnected trinity, such as the Mother, the Father and the Child, or the Past, the Present, the Future."

Arthur stared at the symbol. The words were out of his mouth in a hoarse whisper before he'd even realized that he'd spoken. "Maiden, Matron, Crone."

Gaius looked at him in approval. "Yes. Exactly like that. In fact, the triquetra is used to represent faith and worship of the Triple Goddess --"

Arthur didn't hear the rest of what Gaius said. The information that Arthur and Merlin had received from the CIA had been freely shared within Excalibur, but few outside of the team had been included in that particular detail. He saw understanding click in the expressions of his men, leaving them with grim, pale faces.

The Morrigan was a Triple Goddess.

Arthur turned and met Merlin's eyes, and they just knew.

They had shown Merlin's hand, revealing him as a sorcerer. They had let Tristan escape with this information after witnessing Merlin's strength himself. Word had no doubt reached the NWO, but it had also gone beyond that to the precursors, the initiators of this complex plan to do... whatever it was that Nimueh and her ilk strove to do. They knew, and they had reacted in both the worst and best possible ways.

They saw Merlin as a threat to their plans, and not only because Merlin was powerful, but because of some sort of perceived fear that he could do something to stop them.

Merlin nodded faintly, signalling his understanding. And, as if they were of the same mind, they both turned to look at Mordred, finding him already watching them.

His eyes were wide with realization, glee, exultation, as if everything he had said all along, everything that he believed, was coming to fruition. He'd rescued Merlin for a reason, and that reason had everything to do with restoring a balance. This attack, directed against Merlin, seemed intent on removing anything that could reach that goal.

"Gaius," Arthur said, interrupting a historical summary of the evolution of the Triple Goddess in mythology. "If the triquetra signifies the Triple Goddess, what does the algiz mean in that context? You said it meant protection resulting from a drive for vengeance. Is it a message of some sort?"

"Oh," Gaius said thoughtfully. Slowly, he shook his head. "No. No, I don't believe so. I don't have my books with me, and I will have to speak with the Druids to verify my memory. But I do recall the brief mention of a strictly orthodox sect of the faith. They are called the Disir, and they are the nominates of the highest court of the Old Religion. Their purpose is to pass judgment against those who have committed crimes against their faith, either through oppression or suppression, or by
outright elimination."

Arthur processed the information slowly, stretching and manipulating it, twisting and contorting, until he was satisfied that, yes, yes, this fit. These were the instigators, the origin of this entire complex, chaotic plot, the force that guided and pushed and prodded and set all the pieces in play.

"Would you say that they are a militant group?" Arthur said.

"I would say, yes," Gaius said without hesitation. "They were. The old stories were very clear. The Disir would judge a man or a woman, regardless of whether they were present to defend themselves, and personally deliver the punishment. Fall to the notice of the Disir was tantamount to a death sentence."

"Grand," Merlin whispered. Arthur reached under the table and took his hand.

"You said were," Will said. "Past tense? They're not around anymore?"

"Their standards for membership, as I understand them, were particularly exacting, the dedication they required absolute. I suppose recruitment became difficult with the advent of Christianity. The sect ceased to exist several hundred years ago," Gaius said.

"Are you sure?" Arthur asked. "Are you absolutely sure about that?"

Everyone turned to look at the photograph of the brand on Annie's neck.

Gaius didn't answer for a long time. Finally, he shook his head.

ooOOoo

Merlin and Mordred reached the first ward point around the Pendragon territory before either of them spoke, both lost in their own thoughts. The meeting had only escalated from the revelation that there was yet another group involved in this whole flipping mess. Merlin thought that he should be surprised about that, but he was just resigned. All sorts of nutters were coming out of the woodwork now, but there had been several very astute observations, a few rattling conclusions, and many decisions made.

The first order of business was to protect Camelot.

Against dragons, first and foremost -- no one wanted any more surprise drop-ins. Mordred had come up with the idea of a dome-shape shield over and around Camelot, Merlin refined it to a sort of netting tied to intent, and Gaius suggested fastening it to the existing wards the way a large balloon was tied to a basket, in case they needed to open the airspace for emergency assistance.

Against the Disir -- or more suicide bombers, because no one thought, not for a second, that Annie was the only one who had been sent out. As far as Leon had been able to ascertain -- and he was vicious when it came to ensuring the safety of all those he held dear, particularly when one of those people was Morgana -- the exact location of Camelot hadn't been broadcasted throughout the Druid network. Halfway through their meeting, McGraw called and informed them of the result of their search for the vehicle that had dropped Annie off at the side of the road. Annie had, apparently, shown up at the diner and had meekly said that she'd gotten lost and couldn't find her way home.
A kindly old man had assumed she'd come from Camelot and had dropped her off. He hadn't been sure where the entrance was, but Annie had said that she knew where to go from there.

They hadn't found a cell phone on her, and if there had been a magical tracker, it had been burned out by the sheer amount of magic triggered by her death.

No one could be certain whether the Disir knew where Annie had gone or if they were aware of her death in attempting to kill Merlin. Will had scratched a finger on the table, silent throughout the entire discussion, before quietly announcing that the probability was high that the enemy might know the general location, but no specifics.

That calculation had led to a long, angry silence that was only broken when Leon mentioned that the druids over at the village had spoken about the fog protecting the village, and that the next step was to turn it invisible.

"We can do that," Mordred had said, pausing to rub a tired hand against the side of his head. "Or rather, Merlin can. If he can draw from the deepest ley lines, I mean. I certainly cannot; I can barely sense them, and that's only after realizing that they are indeed present. Surely the Disir won't be able to sense it."

"Surely," Arthur had said, not liking generalities.

"It's possible," Gaius had said carefully, his brow furrowed in thought. "If the Disir follow tradition, they are most likely to scry for us rather than to detect our presence using a tracking spell. If the area is rendered invisible to all whose intent against us is to do harm, the Disir will only see… nothing."

Arthur's expression had soured, but he'd nodded.

It took an hour to layer the additional protection onto the first ward -- the first key point. It took two more hours to interconnect the wards across the property. It was nearly sunrise by the time they finished.

"I'm going to sleep for five hundred years," Merlin said, sitting down heavily on a broken tree stump. His head was buzzing, his body didn't feel like it belonged to him, and he suspected that if he closed his eyes, he wouldn't wake up.

Mordred wasn't in any better shape -- he wavered on his own two feet. Merlin wondered if Mordred was as light-headed as he was. Mordred might not have done the same heavy lifting that Merlin had, but he had worked the weave with careful concentration until the netting was as intricate as the most complicated Celtic knot Merlin had ever seen, and that sort of focus would take a toll out of anyone.

"Do you suppose it would be extravagant if we called in and asked for someone to carry us back to the cottage?" Mordred asked. He was listing to the left, but before Merlin could warn him, Mordred caught himself against a tree, leaning heavily against it.

"Knowing Arthur? He's probably got half the team dogging our tails waiting for us to pass out," Merlin said.

"Oh, good. That's kind of him," Mordred said mildly, wrapping his arms around the tree trunk. His head was bowed, and he stared at the ground as if contemplating making a nest right then and there.

"I wouldn't," Merlin said.

"Hm?" Mordred asked.
"Pass out," Merlin said. He shook his head and immediately regretted it when the world swam. "If the team catches us sleeping and have to drag our arses back, they'll make us pay for it."

"Hm?" Mordred asked.

"Geraint would draw things on your face in permanent ink, for example. The last thing you want to do is walk around the camp with a giant dick pointing toward your mouth," Merlin said, patting his pockets. Arthur had shoved a half-dozen protein bars in Merlin's pocket before they'd set out -- surely he had one or two left. "Gwaine would take your clothes off and put them back on inside-out, pants showing, and the Gods help you if Kay gets his hands on you."

"Hm?" Mordred asked.

"Or Will," Merlin said, frowning. "Will's the worst. Dressed me up like a bird, once. Not sure who did the makeup or the hair -- couldn't have been him, though. He can't art worth shit, never mind do wing-tip eyeliner. Either way, he's got good taste in clothes. Got me this nice A-line dress, light blue silk with a dark sash. Matching undies, too. Lovely little lace bra with a bow tie in the middle, ridiculously padded, with fake tits up to here --"

Merlin gestured with his hands.

"-- don't know how women do it, really don't, I was top-heavy and they were full of tissues. And the pants? This little number with a V cut, don't hardly know how he got my cock in them, really don't want to know --"

"Hm?" Mordred asked.

Merlin looked up. Mordred was leaning heavily against the tree; the tree was slightly bent under the weight. Mordred snuffled the bark as if nuzzling deeper into a pillow, and Merlin winced, because there might be some painful splinters in his face when he woke up. "Mordred? Are you awake?"

"Nn-hmm," Mordred answered.

Merlin rubbed his hand through his hair. He allowed himself ten seconds of feeling sorry for Mordred and twenty seconds of building a solid alibi before he leaned back and glanced into the dark pitch of the forest. "You're not as subtle as you think you are."

They really weren't. Merlin might not be operating on every cylinder right now, but he knew that if Arthur had sent anyone to make sure Merlin and Mordred were all right, they wouldn't be hiding. And if they were hiding, that meant they were plotting, and…

It wasn't a coincidence that he'd been talking about hazings, either. He'd been trying to warn Mordred as much as he'd been trying to convince the others otherwise, though he doubted that he'd succeeded.

Geraint and Galahad came out first, followed by Kay and Will, and none of them had the good grace to look the least bit ashamed. Merlin was not surprised to see that Gwaine wasn't among them -- from what he'd gathered from the conversation overheard before Merlin and Mordred headed out, Gwaine was going to collect the equipment, whatever that meant. All Merlin knew was that he'd rather not get hazed again by this lot.

"A dress, huh?" Kay asked, side-eyeing Merlin. "I thought you said that no one would put you in a dress."

"Not willingly!" Merlin protested. "I was not willing. There was no willingness involved."
Kay smirked. "I bet you were cute."

Merlin groaned, rubbing his face with his hands. "I was drunk, okay? I was drunk and Will lied to me, he said he was helping me get dressed --"

"Cute as a bug snug in a rug," Will said. "He'll deny it, but I know he still has the dress."

Geraint laughed. "You still have the dress? Do you trot it out for special occasions?"

"Does Arthur know about it?" Galahad asked. "I think Arthur needs to know about it. I bet Arthur would buy all the dresses for Merlin if he wanted."

"Maybe when all this is over, you could do us a fashion show?" Kay asked, exaggerating a hip wriggle walk with smouldering looks and unnecessary arm vogueing.

"Fuck you," Merlin said. The bite in his tone was softened by his loud yawn.

"I wore gloves, by the way," Will said. "You're my best mate and all, but I wasn't going to touch your dick with my bare hand."

"I should be grateful, I don't know where your hand's been," Merlin said. He pushed himself to his feet and wobbled unsteadily. Kay slapped something into his hands, and Merlin made a grateful noise when he saw the chocolate bar. He didn't hesitate -- he tore into the wrapping and bit down into the lovely, lovely dark chocolate with a quiet moan. Chocolate was a hot commodity right now, squirreled away and carefully rationed, used as barter and trading material. Merlin didn't know where Kay had gotten it, but he chose to see it as less of a bribe for what they were about to do, and more as a concern for a mate who was about to have an energy crash.

"Jacking himself off, mostly," Kay said, raising a brow.

"Oi!" Will said, but whatever protest he had over the insult to his personal integrity -- it was muffled as Geraint and Galahad carefully manoeuvred Mordred around so that Will could heft him onto his shoulder.

Merlin had seen hazings in the military -- mostly, they weren't terrible. The ones that everyone heard about, though? They made national headlines while the Brass was busy trying to cover them up while simultaneously covering their own arses. Officially, hazings didn't happen, and if they did, they weren't mandated by the British Army. If someone was caught hazing another soldier, there would be some very drastic charges levelled against the perpetrators, up to and including a dishonourable discharge.

Unofficially, in the interest of brotherhood and camaraderie, the hazings continued. They occurred away from a superior officer's notice, because no one wanted to be tossed in the brig, and ranged the gamut of an outright beating by squadmates to embarrassing humiliation.

Excalibur leaned toward harmless pranks. Arthur wouldn't -- unofficially -- condone anything else.

Merlin, like Arthur and Leon, couldn't knowingly participate in a hazing without charging themselves with misconduct, and as far as Merlin knew, the others were helping an exhausted Mordred get to his bunk after a long night's work.

Still, he couldn't help but ask, "You're not going to hurt him, are you?"

"'Course not," Will said with a snort.
Merlin looked at Mordred and couldn't help himself. "He's exhausted. Maybe you should leave it for another night?"

"He'll be fine, I promise," Galahad said.

"We already vetoed most of Gwaine's ideas," Geraint said.

Kay smacked Merlin on the arm, and the gesture was so unexpected that Merlin stumbled. "And besides, Lucan's got a soft spot for Mordred. He'll make sure we don't go too far."

"Too far with what?" Merlin asked, raising a meaningful brow. Kay's mouth quirked as if he really wanted to share their plans with Merlin, but he had enough good sense to keep his mouth shut.

"Taking him to barracks, that's all we're doing," Kay said. He winked. "He'll be fine."

"As long as that's all that you're doing with him," Merlin muttered. Technically, if the four of them brought Mordred to the barracks and did nothing else, he wasn't being lied to, and all their arses were covered. Absentmindedly, he waved them off.

"You'll be all right?" Will asked. "You look set to fall flat on your face."

"'M fine," Merlin said.

"I'll take him," Galahad volunteered. Merlin had absolutely no illusions that Galahad would take him anywhere near where they were taking Mordred, but he nodded gratefully. Will wasn't wrong. As it was, Merlin wasn't entirely certain which way to go to get back to the cottage, and he wouldn't complain if Galahad offered a steadying hand.

They'd walked less than ten minutes on an overgrown deer trail that was becoming less so with every new patrol, when something occurred to Merlin. "What about Will?"

"What about him?" Galahad asked, his tone a sing-song of innocence.

"Oh," Merlin said, realizing why. Will might think he was helping with the hazing, but he was going to be just as much a victim of it as Mordred. Merlin thought of asking about Elyan, though, but decided against it. He was better off not knowing. "Never mind."

"He might," Galahad said, flashing a smile so bright that Merlin could see it clearly through the dark shadows of the forest. He didn't even need his torch. Merlin suddenly regretted being of higher rank than the others. He might not be particularly pleased that Mordred was getting hazed into the team, not when he didn't have any clue what to expect, but Will…

Now, he was someone Merlin would willingly lose a rank or two if it meant that he could participate. He had to settle for the knowledge that neither Gwaine nor Kay would let Will off lightly.

There was a bit of a detour around a stream that had iced over, too wide to cross easily, the ice not thick enough to bear their weight. Neither of them wanted to get their boots wet, not when Arthur was going to step up the training as soon as Merlin and Mordred were up to it again.

It wasn't long before the cottage and the encampment was in sight. Galahad walked Merlin across the open field and paused on the gravel road, hopping on the balls of his feet with unbridled impatience. "Can I --"

"I don't want to know," Merlin said, waving a hand in dismissal. He pointedly did not look to see
which way Galahad went, and trudged the rest of the way to the cottage.

He had barely put his foot on the step when Gaius emerged from the building, closing the door silently behind him. "Arthur still up?" Merlin asked.

"He was still going over the plans when I left him," Gaius said. He stopped in front of Merlin and put his hands on Merlin's shoulders. A look of concern crossed his features. "Are you all right, my boy?"

"Could use some sleep," Merlin said. Gaius nodded and stepped aside to let Merlin pass, though his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard," Gaius said.

"I don't think we have much choice," Merlin said. His stomach rumbled traitorously, and they both looked down at his belly. Merlin grimaced, and shrugged at Gaius' raised brow. "It's not like we've got a surfeit of magic users around here."

Gaius' brow rose higher.

"Fine," Merlin said. "Kathy could do some of it. Bran picks new tricks quickly. You're a bit rusty, and some of the old boys are too, and I know you could've managed it. We've got Druids who owe us a huge favour for this muck-up, so they could've helped, and as soon as things settle down a bit, I'll take you and Kathy around and show you what we've done so that you can manage it when we've gone --"

Merlin trailed off, only just noticing that Gaius had turned him around and was escorting him to the mess tent.

"What," Merlin said.

"The sooner you have something to eat, the better you'll sleep, and the sooner you can show us," Gaius said.

Merlin gave an experimental tug of his arm. Gaius' grasp wasn't that firm, but Merlin was too tired to really work at getting free. Also, he could eat, and only because it meant that Arthur wouldn't have a reason to force-feed him protein shakes.

"Sorry about Mum," Merlin said. "What did she say?"

"Oh," Gaius said, shaking his head. "The usual barrage of how could you and why didn't you tell me and you're supposed to tell me these things, what do I pay you for -- it lasted twenty excruciating minutes, during which I wasn't certain whether she was going to grab one of my screwdrivers and stab me with it, or if she were about to thump me on the head."

Merlin glanced at him. "No bruises and no blood. What was option number three?"

"Collapsing on the nearest stool and weeping with joy," Gaius said, his expression disapproving, but his tone fond. "She's happy for you, Merlin. We all are. But she's happiest of all to know that you don't hate her for what she's done."

"I did," Merlin admitted. "But she's my Mum."

Gaius was silent for a few steps. He exhaled a heavy sigh and said, "None of us have done right by you. For my part, Merlin, I truly am sorry."
Merlin stopped walking. He looked everywhere but at Gaius, and when he finally looked at him, it was with shrug. "I'm not saying I'm not still mad about it."

"Of course," Gaius said, accepting Merlin's words with crestfallen grace.

"And I'm not saying, considering how much magic I have now, that it might have been the right decision," Merlin hedged.

Gaius blinked in surprise, but when he started to speak, Merlin shook his head.

"I tried to picture myself as a kid without a fetter," Merlin said. He grimaced. Arthur had been the one who had pointed it out to him, late at night when they were both in bed, neither one of them able to sleep. Merlin definitely hadn't been able to sleep after that, not for days, plagued with the nightmare of being six years old all over again and learning that his father was dead.

There would be no forgetting the grief and the rage and the denial that he'd felt at that age -- Merlin was *scarred* by those emotions, and some spots deep inside had been raw, gaping wounds for years. He was doubly scarred by them, now that he knew that Balinor's death had been a lie.

But that much grief and rage and fury in a six-year old's body, without the temper of maturity and the discipline of years of training to control all his magic?

The nightmares had shown Merlin so many different variations of an aftermath that it made him sick to think of it.

"It would've been bad," Merlin said. "Uncle Gaius, I'm not blaming you. I'm angry that you didn't tell me when I was old enough to handle it."

Gaius bowed his head.

"And I want to think that you might've told me, if you'd known how to break it," Merlin said. "I would have," Gaius murmured.

They stared at each other for a few minutes. Merlin sighed and hugged him. "Promise me that you're not hiding anything else from me?"

"There's nothing else," Gaius said, his voice thick with emotion. "And there never will be. There may be a few things we need to talk about, some things I never taught you…"

"They can wait." Merlin let Gaius go with a solid clap on his back. He tilted his head toward the large tent and said, "Let's get some food."

It was too early in the morning for the breakfast rush, but a fair number of people were already there, taking advantage of the first round of French toast and sausages. There was fruit salad too, from what Merlin could see, and it was probably the last of the fresh produce, at least for a while. There was no telling when any of the villages or towns would start receiving regular deliveries again, if ever, and most of the conversation overheard on the way to the breakfast queue had to do with opening up nearby farms, planting variety, and delivering locally.

The people who were in Camelot would be fine. There would be some belt tightening during the rationing periods, and although there was enough stock to see them through to the spring, the sooner they could establish goods for trading with other communities, the better off they'd be.

Some of the men at a nearby table were talking about a few warehouses in a town a few hours away...
where there might be unperishables meant for Tesco's shelves, and they were debating the odds that
the food would still be there. No doubt they would put it past Morgana, who would tell Arthur to see
what he thought -- and either Morgana would give the men permission to head over to the town to
acquire the supplies, or Arthur would use it as a training exercise.

Or both.

Merlin could imagine them escorting a convoy, at the very least. Some of the violence in the larger
towns and cities might have died down, but the proliferation of gangs was something of a concern.

His train of thought was interrupted when Gaius asked, "Coffee?"

Merlin considered how much good caffeine would do in his current condition and shook his head.
He reached for the tea instead. "Best not. I can barely keep my eyes open. I'd like to sleep without a
constant buzz in my head."

He took his tray and followed Gaius to an empty table, tangling himself in his own equipment before
settling in his seat. The food smelled delicious, and his attempt at absorbing it through face-plant
osmosis was foiled by Gaius' careful nudge to keep him from falling over the border well past
unconscious and into coma. Merlin ate slowly, waking up a little at the sugar-sweet of the French
toast and ravenously chasing after the meaty-salt of the sausages on his plate.

There were more sausages than he’d been served, but he didn't realize until later that Gaius had
moved them off his plate and onto Merlin's. He gave Gaius a small smile and a grateful nod. His
stomach was a bottomless pit, and the hungry rumblings were slowly being quieted.

He glanced up to see Gaius staring at a point over Merlin's shoulder, his expression slack, somewhat
stricken. Merlin twisted to see what was going on.

Three men Merlin didn't recognize had entered the mess tent. None of them spoke, but their eyes
were eagle-sharp, as if scanning their surroundings and establishing safe escape routes while casually
making themselves at home.

Merlin felt himself bristle, the hackles rising on the back of his neck, and he turned away, wanting to
finish his meal and leave.

The three men walked past their table, heading for the queue and making short work of getting their
morning meals and steaming cups of coffee, and Merlin took advantage of their distraction to study
them carefully.

One man was in his fifties, fit and solid under a worn bomber jacket with goggles hanging around his
throat. He wore black utility trousers tucked into knee-high boots, and the only thing keeping him
from fitting the image of a World War I pilot was the missing white fringe scarf and a skullcap on his
head. He had ruddy, pockmarked skin, a four day old scruff on his chin, dark hair and heavy brows
and pale blue, piercing eyes.

The other two were in their thirties, one taller than the other. One was fair, with blond hair and blue
eyes and pale skin peppered with freckles across his nose and cheeks; the other was dark, with
tightly-coiled hair in a buzz cut that was quickly growing out, brown eyes that didn't miss anything,
and a dour expression. They were both wearing motorcycle leathers -- black upon black upon black.
The blond had a blue handkerchief fastened around his throat and wraparound glasses shoved up on
his hair; the other man had reflective sunglasses tucked in the shirt he wore under his open jacket.

Merlin matched their descriptions with their names -- Andrew Carlisle, Everett Anderson and Reggie
Coleman.

He hid his scrutiny behind his tea as they walked away from the buffet line, looking for somewhere to sit. Merlin wasn't fooled, not for a second, because Carlisle was deliberately not looking their way before abruptly changing directions to approach their table.

"Gaius," Merlin warned, but he saw he didn't need to. Gaius sat back, his spine straight, his mouth set in a thin line.

Any of the three men alone didn't have imposing presence. Together, they made for an intimidating shadow. Merlin had the sensation of *windrush* and *wildmusk* and recognized the same lingering magic on their skin that he'd encountered when he'd come face-to-face with dragons.

"Gaius," Carlisle said, flashing very white teeth and a smile full of fake cheer. "It's been years. You're looking well."

"Andrew," Gaius said, his tone curt. "Of all the faces I had hoped to see again, yours was not among them."

Anderson and Coleman exchanged uncertain glances, but Carlisle grinned as if he had expected as much. Carlisle put his tray down on the table next to Gaius and sat, pausing to take a sip of his coffee. "As charming as ever, I see."

Gaius didn't reply. Carlisle glanced at Anderson and Coleman, tilting his head in an unspoken order, and the two men moved to sit down on Merlin's side of the table.

On either side of Merlin.

Merlin rolled his eyes. He'd had a long week. He'd had a long *night*. He was tired, and even with the food heavy in his belly, he was still running on fumes. All he wanted was to find Arthur, because Arthur would have stupidly stayed up until Merlin and Mordred had returned. He didn't know what Carlisle wanted or what he thought he was doing, but if it was some sort of posturing bollocks…

Merlin didn't have time for this shite. The goddamn *world* was at war with itself and it wouldn't be much longer before the NWO stepped forward to demolish the rest and take over what was left.

His fingers curled around the edges of the tray and he started to stand up, but he froze when Carlisle said, "You must be Balinor's boy."

Before Merlin could so much as respond with the most scathing reply he could think of, Carlisle continued.

"I'm Andrew Carlisle. These are my apprentices, Everett Anderson and Reggie Coleman. We've been looking forward to meeting you."

"You can call me Evie," the blond said, twisting to offer Merlin his hand.

Merlin stared at the open palm for a long time, unable to hold back his disdain. Evie, obviously picking up on Merlin's mood, hesitantly pulled his hand away.

"Um. We heard a lot about you," Evie said, his eyes round, his manner keen. He reminded Merlin of an eager puppy trying to get the attention of a human who had taken its fancy in the hopes of getting petted, or maybe given a treat. "All good things, I assure you. Andrew says we'll be working together --"
Merlin raised a brow, and Evie trailed off, his brows pinching in the middle, unsure.

"Stop sucking up to him, Evie," Reggie said, cutting up his French toast in four precise squares. "It's really embarrassing."

"Well, it's not every day that we meet a born Dragonlord," Evie said, and promptly winced, hissing in pain. There was movement across the table, and Evie reached down as if rubbing his leg. Andrew was looking at him sternly, but Merlin wasn't looking at him.

_Dragonlord?

He was looking at Gaius. "One of the things we needed to talk about?"

Gaius' expression wavered between _contrite_ and _enraged_, but his ire wasn't directed at Merlin. He turned to glare at Andrew. "I see that you are still the same scheming, under-handed son-of-a-bitch. You could never leave well enough alone. This is Balinor's story to tell, his birthright to give his son."

Andrew was unrepentant. He made the same half-arsed shrug that Merlin had seen fighter pilots make, full of insouciance and arrogance. It was an unhealthy blend of _look at all the fucks I don't give_ and _look at all the amazing things I do._

"It's not my fault the man's a coward," Andrew said. "He should've brought his son into this a long time ago, and you know it, Gaius. It's tradition."

Merlin had no loyalty to a man who had abandoned him. No desire to protect him or defend him. And, at the same time, he couldn't help the flare of anger that this complete stranger would talk ill of Balinor.

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from saying anything.

"Why are you here, Andrew?" Gaius asked, his tone low, warning, full of fight.

"Take off your jeweler's eyeglass and look around, Gaius," Andrew said harshly. "It's time. We're going to war. Balinor can refuse to join the battle all that he wants, but we'll need him, and he knows it. More than that, he knows we will need _every_ Dragonlord --"

"Let me get this straight," Merlin said, his voice as cold as he could make it. "You weren't invited. You _dropped by?"

"Um," Evie said, glancing at Andrew.

"To _recruit_ me?" Merlin eyed them all carefully. Reggie looked bored, Evie was panicked, and Andrew was smug and self-satisfied, not ruffled in the least. The only one of them who was appropriately outraged was Gaius. "For some sort of… dragon army?"

Andrew smiled, big and broad, as if he were particularly proud of Merlin for coming to that conclusion himself. "You'd be a great addition to our wing. Your voice is particularly strong. We wouldn't have known where you were if you hadn't called out. Our dragons heard you from all the way out in Tunguska --"

"Stop," Merlin said, holding up a hand.

Andrew was so surprised that he stuttered. Merlin ignored his attempts to bring the conversation back on track and tried to pull together everything that he knew about dragons. It was, admittedly, limited
to what little that they'd learned at the Directory ("They existed, once upon a time. No one knows what happened to them."), the revelation that they'd been around all along and were hiding in human form, and that they were as cunning and as manipulative as they were in some of the Science Fiction and Fantasy books Merlin had read growing up.

"You would be an important asset --" Andrew tried again.

"Stop," Merlin repeated. "Are you telling me that there's an Imperial Attack Wing out in the arse-end of nowhere, practicing aerial dogfight maneuvers in anticipation of a war? How long have you been training?"

"Decades," Andrew said, his grin returning. Obviously, he was misinterpreting Merlin's narrow-eyed question as interest, because he opened his mouth to say, "We have twenty teams of five ready to dispatch anywhere --"

"Stop," Merlin repeated. He gestured toward himself. "I'm asking the questions. You're answering them. Don't give me a hard sell. I don't care."

Andrew sat up straight, shoulders out, his brow furrowed angrily. He glanced at Gaius, but Gaius didn't make eye contact, instead smirking into his coffee.

"You're telling me you've been sitting on your thumbs for decades, doing loop-de-loops and pitchbacks and pretending you were the bloody Dragonriders of Pern? That you've been preparing for this war, and you've done absolutely nothing to stop it before it got this far?"

Andrew's face fell completely, and he held out his hand. "Hey, now. I wouldn't say that we haven't been doing anything --"

"Oi, shut it," Merlin snapped. "Do you even have military experience?"

"I was RAF --"

"Did you fly anything other than crop dusters? Two-man helis? Have you ever led a squadron into combat? Or are you just some sort of glorified recruiting officer?" Besides Merlin, Reggie snorted, choking on his French toast. Evie, however, leaned back as if preparing to jump out of the way to avoid strafing fire.

"You can't talk to me like that," Andrew said, his tone dark.

"He just did," Gaius said, and this time, he did absolutely nothing to contain his amusement.

Andrew half-rose to his feet. "I outrank you --"

"I don't give a fuck," Merlin said darkly, only peripherally aware that he was attracting attention. "You sit your fucking arse down and shut the fuck up."

Andrew stared at him, taken aback; Merlin stared back. Slowly, as if sinking in quicksand, Andrew sat down.

"As far as I'm concerned, there's one person in charge here, and that's my Captain. I report to him. I answer to him. And I'm damned if I'm going to leave my team to go a-dragonback just because I'm some sort of legacy," Merlin said. He glanced at Gaius for confirmation. Gaius lowered his eyes and nodded.

Andrew's expression twisted. He forced himself into the semblance of complacency, of empathy. It
was the recruitment face again, bright eyes and big smiles and white frayed scarf flying in the wind while striking a pose, only, this time it was accompanied by a thoughtful tone and the faintest orange tint to his eyes.

"You're more than that, Merlin," Andrew said, spreading his hands as if trying to appease an angry beast. "Far, far more. You're the last in a long line of Dragonlords, one of the few left on the planet who shares blood and kinship with dragonkind."

He spoke in a soothing cadence, and if Merlin wasn't already exhausted, it wouldn't have lulled him to a temper that was several degrees cooler that it had been a minute ago. Whatever Andrew was doing to lure him to complacency, it didn't work, not after Gaius grabbed Andrew's arm and distracted him. Merlin was left bereft, without the calming magical blanket that had smoothed down his bristles, and everything suddenly grated.

"Are you fucking serious with me right now?" Merlin shouted. "Did you just try to control me? Is this your plan B? You're going to enchant me and walk me out of here and recruit me for your so-called dragon corps -- if that's even real --"

Merlin cut himself off when he saw Balinor approaching.

"It's real," Balinor said. Merlin stood up and glared at him, but Balinor only inclined his head, refusing to meet his eyes. "They exist. They're ready for battle, but it's a shame about their commander."

Merlin saw the way Balinor's eyebrows rose, or as he gestured toward Andrew. "Bit of a thick one, isn't he?"

A corner of Balinor's mouth twitched, and he shrugged. "He has good intentions, but the execution is lacking."

"The execution, huh?" Merlin ran his hands through his hair. His emotions were scattered and he didn't know what he was feeling right now -- annoyance toward a pompous dragon-jockey who thought he had the solution to everyone's problems when he should have trotted it out decades ago; anger that Balinor had felt the need to jump in where he wasn't welcome; exhaustion so deep down in his bones and the only cure was to find Arthur and to fall asleep on him for the next millennia. And it didn't matter.

What mattered was that he'd volunteered for a task and he'd been putting it off and putting it off until the opportunity was staring him in the face. Arthur needed the dragons as part of his plan. He could do without, but it would help them all if, in the long run, the dragons were firmly on their side.

If Merlin were honest, he'd admit that he had no idea how he would approach the situation. Bargain with Balinor? Threaten him? Promise him grudging forgiveness in exchange for the dragons' help? None of those options had been particularly appealing. The diplomatic route wouldn't have worked, he didn't think. Also, he'd had it up to his eyeballs with this bloody rollercoaster of people wooing him to their side or trying to kill him.

Merlin turned to Andrew. He put his hands on the table and leaned forward. "Let me guess. Your plan is to grab your squadron, spread across the globe, and to raze the earth with your flying flamethrowers without knowing what the fuck you're doing or who the real targets are."

Andrew's smile faded a little. "Nothing so… crude --"

"Shut up. Shut the fuck up. I don't want to hear it. I've just spent eight hours with my teammate
strengthening the wards. The last thing I want to do is to listen to every *moronic* Top Gun tactic that you came up with after watching too many old bomber movies. If you want any hope of getting on my good side, you're going to sit down with Balinor, you're going to tell him your plans -- every single one of them, don't you fucking test me -- and the forces you have at your disposal. He is going to be your liaison to our group. He will give you our orders. You will follow those orders to a bloody T. Any deviation, any hesitation, any refusal, never mind Captain Pendragon. The worst he'd do is the *tamest* that I would."

Merlin gave Andrew a few seconds to digest what he'd just said.

"Um," Evie said.

"Shut it," Reggie hissed.

Andrew swallowed with difficulty. He gave Merlin a short, abject nod.

Merlin nodded with satisfaction. He met Gaius' amused eyes and said, "We'll talk later. I'm knackered."

"Of course," Gaius said.

Merlin had no choice but to walk past Balinor if he wanted to leave, and he paused long enough to see Balinor's guarded expression. It was quiet and evaluating but didn't reveal much else, but he seemed to be holding his breath, unsure of what Merlin would do next.

"You keep them in line," Merlin said.

Balinor nodded curtly. His voice was neutral, but he said, "Yes, sir."

And still, Merlin couldn't step away. He felt as if he should give Balinor *something*, even though he knew he didn't owe the man anything. It nagged at him for several long, strained seconds before he remembered the protective flare that he'd felt when Andrew had insulted Balinor. It wasn't so much for Balinor, but for *Merlin* himself -- he couldn't remember the number of times someone had put him down, but the chain of command made it hard for him to do anything but stand fast and *take it*.

He'd always hated that. His Mum always told him that he took after his dad that way.

Merlin half turned to raise a brow at Andrew.

"Oh, and Andrew... For the record, if you're calling Balinor Emrys a coward, you'd best do it to his face."

There was great satisfaction to be had in seeing how Andrew paled when Balinor raised a brow at him.

---

**ooOoOoo**

Arthur muffled his laugh in Merlin's bare shoulder. He didn't know what he'd expected. When Merlin stomped into the cottage that morning, ready to tear someone apart with his bare hands while simultaneously about to fall flat under the weight of his exhaustion.

If anything could tear Arthur away from his propensity to study maps until they were burned into his
brain and to prepare plans until he'd had every second of a mission completely mapped out beforehand, it was *that* -- a bleary-eyed Merlin about to chew nails.

Arthur liked to think that he could be considerate -- which was why he'd ushered Merlin to the attic, stripped him of his equipment and his clothes, and nudged him into bed. Arthur liked to think that he could also be patient -- which was why he'd joined Merlin in bed, curled around him, and fell asleep, too, otherwise he'd have been climbing the walls waiting for Merlin to wake up and tell him what had happened.

It was six solid hours of sleep later and well past tea time when Merlin finally stirred, and whatever light had been lingering in the sky had set while Merlin told him the story.

Nothing serious -- not like what Arthur had thought at first. He'd worried that something had happened to Merlin or Mordred while they were out in the field, setting up the additional protections on the wards. That worry had been quickly discounted when Arthur hadn't heard any alarms.

And nothing that Arthur had expected, either, though he couldn't believe the gall of the new arrivals. He'd been ready to dismiss them as more of Balinor's men, lackeys meant to subvert and take over whatever it was that Balinor wanted to subvert and take over, but that apparently hadn't been the case.

"... recruiting me to sit on a dragon's back all fluffed up in ridiculous bomber jacket when bloody dragons don't need bloody jockeys, for fuck's sake. Kilgarrah's a dragon. Mandrake's a dragon. West's a dragon -- never mind that he was probably trying to *eat* me. They've got half a brain, and that's a good half more than what Carlisle has in the hollow that he calls his head. What do they need riders for? They can talk to each other, we can equip them with radios, and what the *fuck* was that about a legacy and dragons being able to hear me over in Tunguska --"

Arthur would be verifying that the situation hadn't been some sort of ploy on Balinor's behalf, an attempt to get closer to Merlin than Merlin had been permitting. He didn't think it was, not after he'd questioned Pellinor and Gareth further about their newest arrivals.

"Balinor looked as if he were ready to murder them, if you ask me," Gareth said, shaking his head. "I've never seen anyone so unhappy to see their mates. Stalked off after the younger two held him back from knocking Carlisle across the jaw. That's when we went over, found out their names --"

Merlin and Mordred had already been gone by then, or Merlin would have known that Balinor and the newcomers weren't friends. Arthur had sent Pellinor and Gareth out again, after the meeting, wanting to make sure that there wasn't going to be another *Annie* incident. A few hours later, Pellinor reported back that Balinor was in his hut with Hunith, ranting and raging about *fekkin' idiots who don't know what the fuck they're doing*, and that the other three had found their way to one of the temporary bunks, with no real indication of why they'd come to Camelot beyond *seeing an old friend*.

Well, now they knew, and Arthur couldn't help but laugh. Merlin's irritation was outmatched by the sheer *dismain* dripping from his tone, and as much as a part of Arthur felt possessive and territorial, there was obviously no need to storm over to wherever the dragon riders were squatting and give them a piece of his mind. Merlin had more than taken care of that.

"... *Gods*, I should've kicked them out, that's what I should've done. I must've been half out of my mind, giving Balinor the authority over them. I'm not even sure if it'll stick. If *Wing Commander* Pompous had the bloody gall to throw his rank in my face, he's not going to listen to Balinor," Merlin said, untangling an arm from Arthur. He rubbed his face and scratched his fingers through his hair.
"I'm sure he'll find a way," Arthur said, kissing Merlin's shoulder. His lips brushed over Merlin's scars, and Merlin's hand fell on the back of Arthur's head, his touch light, like a caress.

After a long, silence full of comforting silence, Merlin asked, "Do we have to get up?"

"Should do," Arthur mumbled, turning his head to rest his cheek on Merlin's chest. "Find out what happened in the last few hours, do damage control if we need to. Liaise with the druids, see if they have more information on their telephone tree and if they've pinpointed how the Disir found out about you, exactly --"

"That wanker, Tristan," Merlin said. "He's the most likely source. Put my name on the radar -- he's not just a pretty face of a keen touch typist, but he's the reason I didn't get bleached out when the bomb went off --"

"We'll pay him a visit when we go to London," Arthur said absentmindedly. He rolled onto his side, but didn't completely detangle himself from Merlin. Merlin, finally freed of Arthur's weight, stretched his arms over his head, and squirmed like a cat until he exhaled a satisfied, boneless sigh.

A very fucking sinful cat. Arthur made an appreciative noise when the blankets drifted lower, showing a hint of Merlin's treasure trail. He ran his hand over Merlin's stomach, half-wishing that he had more light so that he could enjoy the sight of Merlin like this -- sleep-mussed, indignantly grumpy, pliable and compliant.

"What's there to do on your to-do list?" Merlin asked, running his fingers absentmindedly through Arthur's hair.

"The usual. Contact Olaf, see if he has anything on the Disir. Mandrake should have an update on troop movements and a better idea when he wants us to arrive. I want to talk to Kilgarrah again, but he hasn't been available."

"Ducking your calls," Merlin muttered.

"Trying to get his hands on Bayard, actually, if what Olaf's been telling me is halfway true," Arthur said, closing his eyes. He rolled away and onto his back, closing his eyes.

He felt Merlin's fingers card through his hair, the gentlest of touches against his brow, as if trying to smooth out a frown that Arthur was almost certain was a permanent fixture on his face, now. The cot shifted, and Merlin made room, pulling Arthur away from the edge. Arthur grunted and wriggled closer. They hadn't done anything about the drafts from the window, and the evening air was cold. The blankets were fine, but Merlin was warmer.

"What else did he tell you?" Merlin asked.

Arthur didn't want to answer. He reached out and blindly swatted at Merlin's hand, ignoring the way Merlin tugged at his hair instead. It was a light, relentless tug, demanding an answer with the persistence of a two-year-old asking why.

"It's what he didn't say," Arthur said, relenting. He opened his eyes. The attic was nearly pitch black, but it was early enough in the evening that light drifted through the cracks around the ladder-door. There were lights from the encampment, too, giving the area a faint firelight glow, and he could just make out the pinch in Merlin's brow. "I asked him about Uther."

Merlin didn't speak, but he didn't need to. His hand pressed against Arthur's chest, right over Arthur's heart, and Arthur felt the ragged heartbeat stumble and ease, calming down slowly.
"Olaf confirmed that Uther's in London," Arthur said, staring at the drifting shadows on the ceiling. "The rest of it, I expected."

"What else?" Merlin asked.

Arthur waved a hand in the air, almost in dismissal. He said, "Olaf mentioned a few people in charge of the command centre, contacts if we need them. I recognize the names. I know them, actually. They've been over to Uther's a few times when we were growing up. Friends of his."

Arthur's chuckle was dry.

"Typical Uther. Calling a few mates, reminding them of everything he's ever done for them -- legal or not. Reminding them of his military experience, his field commission, his wartime battle tactics. Maybe even offering up the weapons that are stockpiled in secure warehouses throughout the city. Making himself indispensable, putting himself right where he needs to be to..."

Arthur trailed off. He covered Merlin's hand with his own, and after a moment, Merlin turned his hand palm-up, intertwining their fingers.

"I don't know what his end game is," Arthur admitted. "We've seen the database. We know that he pushed through production of the prototype that was tested on the field. Did he put more people on the project because he knew he was going to need it? And the gem that Nimueh stole. Is it a coincidence that it's a power source? Am I the only one who has a bad feeling that it's exactly what he needs to power a large-scale EMP or whatever it is that Will's calling it now? Are they working together? Is he working against her?"

The projects that Nimueh -- in all her aliases -- had sent to the customs department of Pendragon Consulting were damning evidence of collaboration, and Uther wasn't stupid enough not to notice that sort of activity in the business he'd built from the ground up. At the same time, given the uncomfortably thin file and loose psychological profile that they had on Nimueh, it wouldn't be outside of her character to blatantly mock her enemy by openly making use of Pendragon Consulting's more public-oriented division. Uther wouldn't be able to cancel the custom orders without drawing unwanted attention to himself.

Gwen hadn't had the time to study the schematics of the items that Nimueh had commissioned. Arthur suspected that there was as much garbage as there were precious replicates in the short list of orders -- orders that had been paid in full. The only thing that he didn't know was --

Merlin kissed Arthur's shoulder and continued on in a distracting line that almost made Arthur lose his train of thought.

"Those invoices for the custom work -- did she pick up any of them?"

Merlin paused, his lips in the hollow of Arthur's collarbone. The kiss became a bite, and at Arthur's yelp, he rolled back before sitting up. "Right, then. That answers that."

"Answers what?" Arthur asked. The cot rocked under Merlin's weight as he tossed the blankets from their legs and climbed off.

"Whether we're going to stay in bed or not," Merlin said. There was a faint click, and the desk lamp came on, bright yellow and blinding. Arthur glanced away, squinting, unsure whether he should let himself get used to the change in lighting or if he should preserve what little night vision he had. He opted for the former and watched Merlin walk naked across the room.

"I could be persuaded, actually," Arthur said.
The team received extra rations to compensate for all their extra training, Merlin getting more than most to get him back to his fighting weight and to adjust for the calories he was expending when using his magic. It showed, too. Some of his old muscle mass had returned, though he was leaner than Arthur remembered. His shoulders were still broad, his hips narrower, and the lines of his body were crisper, as if carved in stone and left angular, unpolished.

"I could be, too, actually," Merlin said, leaning over the desk tucked in the corner of the room. It wasn't much more than a rickety folding table that they'd dug out of the basement when making room for the medical supplies and the attached clinic, and it was bowed in the middle under the weight of Merlin's scattered tools and equipment. Somehow, it hadn't collapsed yet, though it did groan every now and then.

Arthur stared unashamedly at the dimples in the small of Merlin's back, right above his arse, and shifted on the cot, trying for an alluring pose. He settled on lying on his side, one leg up, the thinnest sheet artfully bunched up in front of a half-hard cock. "I have a very convincing offer on hand."

Merlin glanced over his shoulder. It was quick, there-and-gone, and if it had been anyone else, Arthur would be annoyed by the lack of attention. But Merlin was a member of his team, and his observational skills had been refined to capturing the contents of an entire room within the blink of an eye, simultaneously identifying any enemy positions and hostages to be rescued.

Arthur gave it a second. Merlin's hand hovered over his laptop, curling over a few keys, and he slowly turned around.

The way Merlin eyed him made Arthur go from half- to full-mast. Arthur ran his hand over his cock and stroked it lightly.

He was rewarded by a pained groan that was muffled when Merlin bit his lower lip. A conflicted expression passed over his features, and he released a frustrated huff. "Keep doing that."

Arthur spotted Merlin reach down, but he didn't see what Merlin did. There was a small little grunt that Arthur recognized -- Merlin was playing with himself, too.

"I could be doing something else," Arthur said.

"And you had an excellent question that I want to know the answer to before I'm too fucked out to care," Merlin said. His other hand returned to the keyboard; Arthur heard faint tapping.

Arthur grunted and, after a few more strokes, climbed out of the bed. He grabbed the lube from the floor and stood behind Merlin. Merlin made an indescribable sound when Arthur pressed flush against him, pushing his cock against the cleft of Merlin's rather nice arse.

"Well. Don't let me stop you," Arthur murmured. He wrapped his arms around Merlin's waist and uncapped the bottle of lube.

"Prat," Merlin said through gritted teeth.

Arthur poured the lube onto his fingers to the sound of Merlin hastily typing, backspacing to correct mistakes, and tapping the touchpad. The screen lit up with several windows, prompts were filled, and the database query that Merlin had been about to enter was abruptly aborted when Arthur reached between their bodies with his slick fingers and traced a circle around Merlin's hole.

The extent of Merlin's typos increased when Arthur pushed a finger in.

Merlin cursed under his breath and pounded mercilessly on the delete key until the prompt box was
empty. He steadied himself with one hand on the table when Arthur thrust his finger in and out. He
typed six letters and a hashtag into the query, one character at a time, and grunted when Arthur
added a second finger.

"I thought you'd optimized the database. It doesn't normally take that long to run a search," Arthur
murmured.

"Prat," Merlin said again. He stabbed the return key.

The screen scrolled down in a flash of data, listing all the directories searched and scanned. Files
matching the query began to populate a box on the right hand side of the program.

"I was thinking," Merlin said breathlessly, pausing in-between each slow thrust and scissor of
Arthur's fingers. "Didn't you give that bloke a job?"

"Which bloke?" Arthur asked. He looked down, mesmerized by the sight of his fingers disappearing
into Merlin. He grinned when Merlin tilted his hips, pushing back against them.

"Back on the base. Master Sergeant. The... The quartermaster. Was about to retire. Pretty sure... he
did?"

"I remember him," Arthur murmured. "Lovely bloke. Gave him a job as soon as I heard he was in
London. Told him to take his wife on vacation in Spain like she'd always dreamed and his position
would still be there when he got back."

"You're a pri--ince," Merlin said, ending on a high note when Arthur added a third finger.

Arthur watched the long line of Merlin's neck as he bowed his head, his eyes fluttering shut. He'd
given up on the laptop and was now clutching to the edges of the table for balance. "What about
him?"

"Huh?" Merlin mumbled.

"The quartermaster? What about him?" Arthur left his fingers in Merlin for a moment before pulling
out slowly.

Merlin groaned. He muttered something unintelligible under his breath that left Arthur grinning.
"Didn't you... didn't you put him in charge? Not just... Not just one warehouse. All of them?"

"I did," Arthur said. "Had some good ideas about re-indexing our stocks."

"Could he... fuck, Arthur," Merlin pushed back against Arthur's fingers, impatient for more. His feet
slid apart, and there was no missing the invitation. "Could he get us whatever Nimueh left behind
before --"

Merlin gasped.

Arthur paused. He followed Merlin's train of thought to completion -- before Uther gets his hands on
them, or before she returns for them -- and said, "Get me a list of whatever was marked unclaimed.
I'll call him tonight."

could just move --"

Arthur bit Merlin's shoulder, half to tease, half in apology. Merlin made a soft sound when Arthur
withdrew his fingers to slick up his cock, and neither of them paid any mind when the bottle of lube fell off the table. It was nearly empty, anyway.

"Here?" Arthur asked, because he knew how particular Merlin could be about his equipment. The way they were positioned, there was no avoiding a cum shot, or that it wouldn't land on his equipment. Arthur did not want to relive the day Merlin spent cleaning his laptop, bitching and moaning under his breath.

"Yes --"

Arthur pressed in slowly, breaching the ring; he pushed in the rest of the way with a steady slide, pulling back only once before seating himself against Merlin.

Merlin made a tiny, little panting grunt. His hips twitched against Arthur, but Arthur wasn't giving him any room to budge. Arthur put a hand between Merlin's shoulderblades to hold him in place and fucked into him -- once, twice, three times, the thrust harder each time.

"Arthur," Merlin half-moaned, the rest of his train of thought disappearing when Arthur found the right angle.

The table wobbled. The locks on the equipment case rattled. A few tools rolled back and forth on the table before finally falling off, clattering on the floor.

The sound woke Merlin up a little, pulling him out of his daze, because he reached back and patted Arthur's hip. "Wait -- I'm not... ngh... I'm making you clean up... ngh... if I come all over -- fuck, Arthur --"

Arthur didn't have to be told twice. Merlin was particular. No clean up job would satisfy him, not even if Arthur popped off the keys on the keyboard and polished them with a cotton swab. He pulled out without warning --

Merlin mewed, half-startled, half-irritated.

-- and guided Merlin toward the window a few steps away. He might have been a little rough, but Merlin didn't seem to mind. He planted his hands against the glass and jutted his arse out. The look he tossed Arthur over his shoulder was sly and demanding, and who was Arthur not to oblige?

He positioned himself behind Merlin again, pushing in easily. Merlin's head bowed down, and the moan he made was loud enough to hear all over the house.

Arthur didn't care. It wasn't as if he hadn't had to hear Gwaine or Perceval. Or Lance and Gwen. Or -- worst of all -- Leon and Morgana.

Fair was fair.

He fucked Merlin at a steady pace, alternating between gripping Merlin's hips and running his hands over the smooth skin of his back. They were both covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and --

"Shite --"

Merlin waved a hand, and two things happened. He lost his grip on the wood panes of the window and went crashing against the glass, bracing himself on his elbows. The light behind them crashed to the floor, flaring bright for a second, flickering for two, and going out completely.

Arthur adjusted himself, taking a single step closer, finding Merlin's prostate on the next thrust. He
glanced at the window, finally realizing why Merlin had turned off the light. The round window might be frosted over, but with the light behind them, they must have made for one hell of a silhouette.

Something about that appealed to his exhibitionist streak. Arthur snapped his hips, fucking harder, his rhythm stuttering and erratic, and --

He continued to rock against Merlin as he came in blinding pulses, biting on Merlin's shoulder to muffle his moan. When he came down enough to rub two brain cells together, he reached around to take Merlin in hand only to find Merlin already there, stroking himself to completion. The moment Arthur's hand wrapped around Merlin, Merlin came, shooting come on the window.

Arthur pulled out of Merlin again, this time more careful and considerate. He couldn't help it -- when he saw the glisten of come dripping down Merlin's thigh, he collected and pushed it back in with two fingers, stroking in and out as gently as he could until Merlin made a soft, pained, over sensitized sound.

Arthur slid to the cold floor, leaning back against the even colder glass. It felt nice against his hot skin, but what was even better was how Merlin eased himself down against him. Arthur wrapped his arms around Merlin, the two of them tangled together awkwardly, but it couldn't get any more comfortable than this, nestled together, with little else on their minds.

It took a minute for Arthur's eyes to adjust to the darkness, to take in the edges of furniture and assorted equipment and random boxes that were illuminated with the lights from outside and from the orange glow drifting in from the attic door. He stared at the lamp for a very long time before chuckling to himself, planting a kiss on Merlin's neck.

"Didn't have to do that," Arthur said. "I don't want to be the one to ask Morgana for another one. She'll make me explain."

Merlin didn't answer him right away. From what Arthur could tell, the shade was crumpled on one side, the ugly body bent where it must have hit the edge of a gun case, and even though it didn't look as if the bulb was broken, it might need a bit of prompting before it would work again.

"I'll fix it if you get the window cleaner," Merlin said, glancing up. In the light from the campsite, his cum looked odd, like a smear of translucent, semi-opaque material. The come streaked a path down the glass, collecting in one of the grooves.

"You have a deal," Arthur said, pressing his lips in the crook of Merlin's neck.

Neither of them moved for what seemed to be the longest time. Arthur stretched out a leg; Merlin shifted until his bum wasn't entirely on Arthur's thighs. He hissed at the cold contact with the floor, and Arthur started to feel a chill running down his spine.

The laptop beeped.

"List's done," Merlin said. He crawled away from Arthur, and Arthur grumbled at the loss of Merlin's body heat, but they really did have a lot to do, and the sooner they got to it, the better. Merlin found a wash cloth and wiped at the cum dripping down his leg and went to lean over the worktable again.

Arthur's cock twitched and made a valiant effort to come back to life. Instead, he rolled to his feet and went to find some clothes.

"Do we have PT tonight?" Merlin asked.
Arthur considered, but shook his head. He tripped on Merlin's boots and kicked them out of his way until he reached the other end of the room, turning on a second lamp. "No. Everyone's been running tasks all day, if not longer. We'll take the night off. Eat, get some more sleep. PT in the morning."

A small printer whirred in the corner. Arthur finished dressing before going to retrieve the sheets coming out, and he raised a brow at the number of custom jobs that hadn't been picked up. If he wasn't mistaken, the way the storage operations worked in that department was to dump them in a basement space under rather flimsy security. He flipped through the sheets.

"Paid in full, including a storage fee," Arthur said. "Do you suppose she's storing until she's ready for them?"

"Didn't seem to have any problem using the CIA repository to hold onto that gem," Merlin said. He pulled on a shirt, and his next words were muffled.

"What?"

"I said, odds are they're already gone," Merlin said. He sounded unhappy by the prospect of more magical artefacts out there, of unknown provenance, intended use and effectiveness, and Arthur didn't blame him. Either the customized items would work against those who didn't have magic, or it would work against those who did. "Either because Nimueh went to get them, or Uther moved them somewhere else."

Arthur picked up a few more sheets from the printer. "I'll call now, have our quartermaster head in first thing in the morning. I want to know either way."

A shadow blocked the light, and he looked up from his reading. Merlin stood next to him, a small smile on his face. Arthur raised a brow, but his question died on his lips when Merlin leaned in and kissed him.

It was gentle, familiar, domestic. There were no demands behind it, no ulterior motives, nothing but affection. Arthur put a hand on Merlin's hip; Merlin touched Arthur's cheek.

They broke away and stared at each other. Arthur studied the curl of Merlin's lips, the sharp jut of his cheekbones, and let himself drown in the way Merlin's eyes were full of exasperated fondness. "Remember to breathe, Arthur. There's such a thing as delegation."

"Is there, now," Arthur said, raising a brow. "I wasn't aware. And in any case, one phone call won't break my back."

Merlin snorted. He started to say something else when he was interrupted by a pounding on the locked hatch to the attic.

"What?" Arthur asked, raising his voice to be heard.

"I picked the short straw, so for the love of all that's holy, tell me that you're decent. Even if you're not," Bedivere said.

"We're decent," Merlin said. He walked over and unlocked the hatch, pulling it open.

"Good," Bedivere answered, though he kept his eyes averted. "The two of you are wanted downstairs. There's something you need to see on the telly."

Arthur exchanged glances with Merlin. Arthur tossed Merlin's boots at him and grabbed his own; Merlin was already down the stairs, padding barefoot after Bedivere while digging his socks out.
form the boots themselves.

"What's going on?" Merlin asked.

"Pretty sure it's what we've been waiting for," Bedivere said. "There's a broadcast from the United States. Small town in Connecticut just got hit."

"How?" Arthur asked.

"I don't know," Bedivere said. "I walked in last, missed the reel, got told to go and fetch you two."

None of them spoke as they descended to the main floor. The large plasma television had been turned into a technological spaghetti machine, with wires and antennas coming out of it from every direction, all of them hooked up through a crude electronic box that was playing host to all the connections. There was a locking knob in the front; the switch was currently on a pirated satellite transmission.

The image on the screen was fuzzy, but Arthur knew from experience that it had less to do with the monstrous setup allowing them to maintain a sort of connection with everything that was happening outside Camelot, and more to do with the quality of the broadcast itself. There were no reporters in the middle of the screen, and the image looked to be a live transmission from a cameraman hurriedly -- and jerkily -- running away from the scene.

It came to an abrupt stop around the corner. There was a nauseating readjustment giving them a rapidly panning look at a brick wall and a cement pavement before the camera was slowly extended outward and to the right to show what was going on at the other end of the street.

At first, there was nothing out of the ordinary. The newscasts from around the world had been showing what amounted to the same sort of unfolding events -- a clash between groups, a heavy police presence, sometimes even military. It took some doing to pick out the players in this particular scene, but the camera finally zoomed in.

While there were a lot of people there, most of whom were wearing civilian clothing and bulked up against the cold temperatures, it was easy to see that they weren't the main group present. They were screaming, some of them in fear, others in anger, and that emotion was aimed at the double-thick line of head-to-toe armoured police officers who must have been tasked to get this situation under control.

Except those people were standing off at the sides, hugging the walls of the buildings on either side of the street, staying out of the way. If the police wanted to corral them into some semblance of order, they would need to split up, which would reduce their numbers and their capabilities drastically. The police in this scenario, though, were obviously trained for the occasion, because they stayed together rather than be drawn in what was obviously a trap intended to weaken them.

And yet, the police didn't advance -- if Arthur watched carefully, he could make out their very slow, careful retreat. If he tuned out the ambient noise in the room and listened to what the people were shouting in the background, he could make out not shouts of anger or rallying cries, but encouragements.

Arthur looked around the room. Everyone was grim-faced. Leon's brows were pinched in the middle, and he had an arm around Morgana's shoulders. Morgana wasn't looking at the screen -- obviously she'd had enough, but she didn't want to move away, either.

Leon turned to meet Arthur's eyes. He didn't say anything, but he tilted his head toward the screen. Whatever was going on, it was bad enough that Arthur needed to pay attention.
He started to turn back, but his attention was caught by a red strip of paint on the side of Mordred's face. It was streaked, as if he'd been trying to wash it off without much success.

Arthur raised a brow and decided that he really didn't want to know before returning his attention to the telly.

The camera angle was bad. At the most, they could only see the policemen's arses. They were slowly backing away, and whatever it was that they were up against to make them retreat, it had to be bad, and Arthur commended them for not losing their shite and scattering like he'd seen many police forces around the world do on more than one occasion.

Abruptly, the perfect line broke formation. The policemen in the middle of the front of the line were shoved back by something Arthur couldn't see. Their defensive shields raised to defend themselves from whatever it was, but the two men in the middle of the attack stumbled back, falling hard against the men immediately behind them.

A breathless voice whispered into the camera's microphone. "All right, all right. Okay, people, the broadcast desk wants a play-by-play, but I lost Jimmy a couple of blocks over, the man really needs to lose thirty pounds and start a running regimen, I'm not kidding. I'm not a reporter, but I'm going to tell you what I'm seeing here.

"Actually, I… don't know what the fuck I'm seeing here -- what? I'll swear if I want to. I'm about to piss my pants. If you were here, you would, too, so just have someone handy on the red censor button or something, I don't care.

"Anyway, I don't know what the cops were doing out here. One second we're filming a feel-good piece about community citizens banding together and taking care of each other. The next, the police is swarming out of every corner wearing SWAT equipment. They're yelling get down, get the fuck down --"

A buzzer came two seconds too late and muted out some of what the cameraman was saying.

"I mean, seriously, none of us had a clue what was going on. We've got our faces on the ground, Jimmy and me. Except we're the only ones. It went from being one of those touchy-feely ten second filler clips for the network to a fucking crime drama on television, blowing the shit out the bad guys. If you ask me, I don't know how the Hell anyone's supposed to tell them apart. I mean, there was an old lady there, I swear to God she was my grandma's twin. Might've been my grandma, I haven't seen her in a few years. I'm a bad grandson, I'll make it up to her if I survive this. If I don't, someone tell my grandma I love her and that I'm really sorry about the crystal bowl, the one she keeps all those disgusting mints in. I used to wear it as a helmet when playing with her next-door neighbour's kids, and I might've broken it and blamed it on Mikey. Mikey, if you're watching this, I'm sorry you got grounded and missed seeing The Hobbit, I know how much you wanted to see it --"

"Anyway, I blink and suddenly it's a fucking battle and shit starts flying all over the place. I thought that people were throwing things around --"

On the telly, an automobile flipped up and over in the air, arse over tits, and came crashing down on top of a police line scrambling to get away. The video jerked, and suddenly they were several feet lower, staring at the legs of the scattering officers.

"Holy fucking shitballs," the cameraman said. A series of bleeps followed. "Did you fucking see *bleep*? Did you? I'm not fucking kidding you, *bleep* shit is fucking *bleep* *bleep* *bleep* *bleep*"
The bleeping continued, and the video continued to roll. The automobile was shoved aside so hard that it jammed in the entrance of a narrow alley, almost collapsing double onto itself. Now that the police weren't in the way and the four-door sedan wasn't blocking the shot, they got a good look at who was causing the damage.

A kid.

A fucking kid.

She couldn't be more than ten years old. She wore a pink coat over a purple hoodie over navy blue leggings. There were green boots with faded yellow splotches on them, and mittens hung from her coat sleeves. One arm was outstretched, and her eyes were glowing orange-yellow.

"Fuck," someone whispered. It might have been Lance.

The little girl wasn't alone. There was an older boy behind her. He wore dirty jeans and several layers of plaid shirts under what looked to be a sports team jacket. His blond hair stuck up in every direction, and he had a crooked grin on his face.

And, like the little girl, his eyes were glowing that sickly, fiery colour.

Abruptly, the video cut out. The screen was black for less than three seconds before it was replaced with an image of a news desk. There was a man and a woman seated behind the desk, their faces full of twinned disbelief.

The silence stretched. They could hear the production team hesitantly encourage the anchorpeople to start speaking to the camera.

Arthur crossed his arms, aware that his team was turning to look at him. He found himself looking toward Leon, but it was Morgana's eyes he caught.

Neither of them looked away.

"We've been asking ourselves what they've been waiting for," Arthur said calmly, wondering when Morgana's eyes started sparkling the way Merlin's eyes did when he was coming down from a magic high. He knew without knowing how he could possibly know that Morgana had had a vision, and from the expression of sheer terror in her eyes, he knew what she must have seen.

She'd seen exactly what they were all dreading.

"The NWO doesn't have an army. They have ragtag clusters and their version of terrorist cells. If they attack, they'll attack in guerilla style, but not until everyone else -- everyone with magic, from the oldest man to the youngest child, has already come out and started to fight for themselves."

Arthur met everyone's eyes. He didn't speak again until he had turned to look at Merlin.

"They've been waiting for an incipient event," Arthur said. "Something to trigger everyone into fighting against whatever restrictions have been imposed by their government. Martial law. Rationing. Curfews. After this… After this, it's going to go downhill from here."

No one spoke. Perceval made an angry sound.

"Elyan," Arthur said, turning to look at him. He blinked when he saw a blue splotch across his face. Most of it had been washed off except for a solid line down his nose. "Lamorak. Bedivere. Owain. I want the four of you on all the communication networks that we have. Monitor for any additional
"We'll be called to war."

ooOOoo

"…twenty-two adolescent dragons, three adults, and a clutch of two hundred unhatched eggs waiting for their riders to call them forth," Balinor said, snorting. He shook his head with the annoyance of someone who had had enough, but his eyes tracked the people running toward the cottage.

Merlin was resolutely ignoring the scrambling pilgrimage. If it were a footie game, he would be among the first to jostle for a place at the very front of the telly. Unfortunately, it wasn't a footie game attracting the camp to the cottage. There had been a nearly-continuous broadcast since the first show of power by a handful of children -- children, Merlin still couldn't believe it -- in the United States, with every station worldwide broadcasting new incidents as they occurred.

After the first few, Merlin couldn't watch anymore, too stomach-sick and nauseous to witness the blatant misuse of magic. The rest of the team stayed behind to evaluate the strategies used by the sorcerers until it became obvious that there was no strategy beyond brute force, returning to their assigned duties and training instead. Most of the magic users in the cottage couldn't watch, either, though Mordred stayed the longest, his expression becoming increasingly drawn with disgust and dismay.

The only member of Excalibur who was still watching the news broadcasts was Elyan, on the grounds that he wanted to know what kind of field of battle he would have to talk the team through, if it ever came to that.

It took three days for the skirmishes to spread across the globe, and now, there wasn't an hour that went by without a fight breaking out somewhere. Shortly after that, the police forces and reservists were joined by the army, with each division having their own ideas on combatting the magic users -- most unsuccessfully. As the attacks spread, the armies worldwide were split up into ever-dwindling sizes and dispatched wherever they were needed.

Arthur had predicted all this, but to see it unfold in real time? No one was more displeased to be right than Arthur. He had been the first to walk away from the broadcasts, leaving before even Merlin. Merlin had found Arthur, much later, talking to someone on his brand new MERLINware phone. Mandrake, maybe. Kilgarrah. Merlin didn't know, but Arthur had hung up, his expression grim, shaking his head when he made eye contact with Merlin.

Not yet.

With each attack, the British Army increased their alert and readiness status. The ticker tape at the bottom of the news broadcast were constant updates for different parts of the country and reminders for people to stay in their homes and call if observing unusual activity.

The army couldn't do much. They tried. A couple of times, they got lucky and chased the sorcerers back to their hiding places. At least once, they overwhelmed the sorcerers with sheer numbers and relentless firepower and arrested them -- only to lose them in secure transport hours later when the convoy escorting them to a holding centre was ambushed.
Merlin knew that the government had recalled troops stationed around the world and had tucked them in reserve should the need arise. Those men had long since been dispatched to try to maintain some sort of order in the chaos.

After a frustrating check-in, Arthur reported some good news: at least one SAS team had been put into the field. They were the first -- not counting Excalibur -- who had received and completed rudimentary magical defense and subdue training from the Directory, and their first skirmish had been cutthroat-quick, resulting in a very clear win and capture.

The bad news eclipsed the good, however. The subdue part of the training amounted to eliminate the threat, which made Merlin and Mordred exchange uncomfortable glances and muttering something along the lines of becoming targets for friendly fire. And, worse than that, Major Kilgarrah himself had risen from wherever he'd been hiding long enough to insist that they remain in stand down.

Merlin scratched his cheek. After one more glance toward the cottage, Merlin met Balinor's gaze and gestured toward the mess tent.

Balinor changed direction without a word, and the two of them walked in silence. They ducked beneath the tent flaps and found the mess hall was largely empty, with only two people manning the perpetual buffet line and a few members of the team taking a moment to refuel before returned to sentry duty and perimeter patrol. Merlin ruffled Will's hair when he walked by.

"Oi," Will said half-heartedly, and didn't even bother smoothing back his hair.

Arthur wasn't driving the team ragged -- the opposite, really. He'd throttled back on training exercises and dialed down on the PT. He insisted that the team get a solid eight hours of sleep, splitting them up into groups of four, offsetting each group's rack time by two hours to ensure that at least one team was always up and alert, manning the phone and keeping watch. Will wasn't tired -- he was worn down with the same nerves that the rest of the team had.

Hurry up and wait had never been any soldier's favourite mode of operation.

Merlin helped himself to coffee; Balinor prepared a large mug of tea for himself. They sat a few tables over from Will and Geraint and just out of earshot of the card game being played between Lamorak, Gareth, Lucan and Pellinor.

Merlin studied Balinor for a long time. The man was difficult to read, holding his emotions in check, and he was so different from the man that Merlin had known as a child that it was hard to believe that they had ever known the other at all.

He forced himself not to think about it. They were managing a civil working relationship, and it would stay civil. Arthur took on too much. The team did what they could, taking care of minor incidents as they occurred and maintaining communication with the outside world, and dealing with Balinor and the so-called dragonriders was Merlin's way of giving Arthur a break.

He went over what Balinor had said earlier, and asked, "By adolescent, is it fair to say they'll have poor impulse control, they'll think they know better than mere humans, and they'll disobey orders?"

"Fair to say," Balinor said, nodding. His eyes scrunched up when he sipped his steaming tea. "The adults don't fly. Too badly injured from the last war. They happened to be nesting in the area, guarding the clutch, when the third showed up with Carlisle. Carlisle got lucky and managed to wake up some of the eggs. The dragons flying in his wing are all starry-eyed. They fell for his recruitment speech and aren't listening to the adults."
"How do you figure?" Merlin asked.

Balinor gave him a long, intense stare before glancing down into his tea. He put his mug on the table with deliberate care, turning the handle around and around in something of a mindless gesture before he wrapped his fingers around the base.

"Dragon eggs don't hatch when magic is weak," Balinor said, speaking with the care of someone who was putting his thoughts together, trying for the most information in the fewest words. He watched Merlin intently, as if making certain that Merlin stayed to hear everything that he had to say, and that he wasn't about to get up and walk off like he'd done several times over the last few days.

Merlin refused to feel guilty about that.

"And the magic has been weak for a very long time. It's not unusual for a dragon to be called forth from the egg before it's ready, and it is only ever done when a dragonlord shares his or her power with the dragon so that they'll have the strength to emerge." Balinor looked sour. "Carlisle may be a dragonlord by birthright, but he doesn't have the magic to share. He's lucky, very lucky, that the clutch he came across is in a location far from civilization, and where the magic is close to the surface. The area was strong enough to sustain them for decades, but he can't take the credit for their awakening beyond funnelling power that was already there and giving them their names."

Merlin sipped his coffee. It was too hot by far, which was both needed and appreciated given the colder temperatures that had hit the area of late, and someone had brewed it stronger than he was used to. Geraint again, probably, or a member of his family.

He considered what Balinor told him. Gaius had shared all that he knew about dragonlords, which, admittedly, wasn't much and had been information gleaned from Balinor himself and stories repeated by the Druids. In essence, the bloodlines of dragonlords could be traced back to the time of the first dragons, where mythology hinted at a shared parentage between human and dragon.

Merlin did not want to consider the sexual mechanics. At all. Will had tried, making rude gestures with his hands that Merlin was never going to be able to forget and had the rest of the team making faces.

As the story went, the dragonlords were meant to be guardians to the dragons as much as they were protectors of mankind. While the dragons slumbered when the magic was at an ebb, the dragonlords watched over them, providing them with physical guises if they desired, or found them distant, remote locations where they could rest until the magic rose again. And when the tide crested, the dragonlords would guide the dragons, providing sage counsel in their affairs with man. The dragonlords were as much a pivot point in the see-saw of magic as was magic itself, and just as critical to the so-called heartbeat of the world as the druidic balance.

Merlin put down his cup. "Evie said one of the dragons was named the Red Baron."

Balinor's usually stony expression cracked. His brows pinched in the middle of his forehead and he pursed his lips. There was a faint crackle in the air and a spark of gold in his eyes that was there-and-gone before Merlin could appreciate the knowledge that, yes, this was the man from whom he'd inherited his temper. His Mum was fierce when she was angry, but she was slower to come to a boil, and she cooled down nearly as soon as someone took her off the flame.

"Carlisle is a fekkin' idiot," Balinor snarled, pausing to sip his tea. "That is not a proper name for a dragon. But that's an example of why this generation would listen to him instead of the adults. Carlisle hatched them too early. They grew up at a time when there was barely enough magic to help them grow. And they grow, dragons do, big and broad, wings as wide as they're long, and that's
snout to tail. Imagine what it must have been like for them, hatching when they couldn't take to the air because there's not enough magic to sustain them. Or how, when the wind currents were right and the land around their nest thawed enough to release magic, they couldn't fly as high as they wanted because they'd be detected by radar? Or they couldn't fly at all, grounded because the satellites were pointed in their direction?"

Merlin grunted. "Probably as annoying as growing up with fetters on your magic."

It was a low blow, and it scored a hit with Balinor. Balinor winced visibly before raising both brows and pointing a finger at Merlin.

"Let me ask you something," Balinor said, his voice low. "If you were Carlisle's kid, grew up listening to him tell you all these fantastic stories from the past? Big magical fights, sorcerers duelling for their lairs and ladies, countries going to war and watching the battles was like watching fireworks on New Year's day? You'd be chawing at the bit to be let loose. You'd sneak off even though all the other adults around you are telling you no, it's too dangerous, and you'd practice. You'd grab Will and go over to the river, thinking no one would see you, and you'd play breach the fortress or whatever games kids play these days. It's no different with those dragons. They're too young. All they want to do is to stretch out their wings and let loose, because Carlisle's been feeding them stories from the old myths that no one remembers anymore, and he's twisted them to make it look like the dragons were the bloody heroes."

Balinor shook his head, not hiding his disgust this time.

"Red Baron my arse. If Carlisle's been telling World War II dogfight stories to those damn kids, we're all fucked," Balinor said.

Merlin drank his coffee. He could see Balinor's point. He'd already come to that conclusion himself. Without fetters, Merlin might have gone off the handle, been seen, and kidnapped to become a lackluster drone among the Directory sorcerers -- or worse. But his Mum had raised him right, and except for a few minor incidents that were easily swept under the rug, sometimes quite literally, Merlin couldn't remember a time when he had ever wanted to play storm the castle in full sorcerer glory, blowing apart Will's fort. If anything, Merlin always fought Will over who got to carry the plastic sword they'd found in someone's abandoned toy chest.

On the other hand, if impressionable young dragons were being raised by Carlisle and his ilk, that didn't bode well for the war.

Merlin put his cup down with a deliberate clink. With a soft voice, he said, "If I were Carlisle's kid, at least I would've had stories to listen to."

Balinor turned his head away as if struck, refusing to make eye contact. He huffed a small, helpless laugh. When he looked at Merlin again, his mouth opening as if to say something, Merlin held up his hand.

"But I see your point," Merlin said, interrupting whatever apologies or explanations Balinor had been about to make. He didn't care what Balinor had to say, and he didn't want to listen to anything out of his mouth unless it had to do with the assignments they'd both been given. "Basically, we can't rely on them for backup. They'd sooner chase their own tails and set the whole countryside aflame chasing after a stray lamb because they're hungry and they didn't get their snacks yet."

Balinor grunted.

"They'll do more harm than good and we'd rather they stayed out of the way. We ground them,"
"Is that even possible?"

"We have Carlisle here," Balinor said, tilting his head and making a half-shrug that reminded Merlin of Gwaine and Will when they weren't being particularly charitable, and Merlin imagined Balinor gleefully locking Carlisle in the hut out at the firing range. It was cold out there, with a sub-par heater, the walls drafty as fuck, and bullets had a tendency to whizz out past the targets and hit the hut's backside.

"So?" Merlin asked. "We've also got Evie and Reggie. That leaves nineteen other 'dragonriders' out there to lead the charge."

"Carlisle didn't do himself any favours sending his dragons away. So bloody sure he would recruit you to his side, too." Balinor shook his head. "None of them have the range to summon the wing. Unless someone slips and gives them the radio code, they have no way of signalling their forces to come by and pick them up, never mind issuing commands. Also, if you line all the dragonlords up according to rank and authority, he falls at the end of the queue, after even those two boys he dragged along."

Merlin snorted. Reggie was a good kid. He was down to earth and had a good head on his shoulders. He took everything that Carlisle said with a grain of salt, but he did want to see some action out in the skies. Evie was a bit more head-in-the-clouds, easily excited and over-eager, but the two of them were so unlike Carlisle that Merlin wondered why they'd been brought along.

"Carlisle said something along those lines," Merlin said thoughtfully. "The dragons apparently can hear me in Tunguska."

"Hm," Balinor said, one eyebrow arching in surprise, but he didn't add anything more.

Merlin drank the dregs of his coffee and contemplated a second cup. Instead, he asked, "So the dragonlords have a hierarchy? How does that work?"

"Same as it does anywhere else," Balinor said. "The eldest in the family line speaks at the council of dragons. The older one is in their Clan, the more respect they get from the dragons --"

"And the more they'll listen to them," Merlin finished, rolling his eyes. "And when everyone at council doesn't agree? Who calls the shots?"

There was a long silence, and it was almost as if Balinor were hedging his answer. Finally, he said, "The strongest."

"And who's that, these days?" Merlin asked. He saw Bohrs lingering halfway in the mess tent, watching them intently, and had the impression that Bohrs would sit with them if he so much as saw something he didn't like. Merlin gave Bohrs a minute shake of his head and hoped that Bohrs would get the hint.

Bohrs' expression soured, but he nodded and sat down at Will's table, shoving Will off to the side so that Bohrs could watch Merlin.

Merlin's attention returned to Balinor. Balinor hadn't answered, but his eyes were narrow, almost calculating; he tapped a fingernail on the side of the mug. Finally, when he answered, it was grudgingly, inviting more questions than answers. "There aren't many dragonlords whose voices can be heard by dragons half a world away."

Merlin stared at him in disbelief. Of course Balinor wouldn't give him a straight answer, not like this. It would be too much like giving up control, of letting someone else have information that he couldn't
part with. Merlin scoffed. He raised his mug before remembering that it was empty, and slammed it down with more force than he'd intended.

Balinor stared at the mug. Merlin didn't look at it, but he could feel the crack in the ceramic under his fingers.

"Where does this leave us, then?" Merlin asked. Without air support, a part of Arthur's plans wouldn't run as smoothly as he'd like -- as anyone on the team would like. They could do without, but it would be dangerous, and no one wanted to fly a heli in the violent chaos that was coming to London.

Morgana's nightmares were getting worse, and everyone listened when she told them what she saw in her visions. It was worse, far worse, listening to her than watching the events unfold on the telly, but the team suffered through it because they needed to know.

"I'll call my men," Balinor said. "They'll hear me. They're not far. If it's air support you need, I have dragons for you."

Merlin considered. It was a struggle, fighting between his personal desire to keep Balinor out of his life and his business while simultaneously doing his job to the best of his ability. Arthur didn't explicitly need the dragons -- it was phrased very much as a sleepy it would be nice request, but clearly tabbed in the plans that won't work unless I have a key piece in the game category.

Dragons weren't a deal breaker. But they could save lives merely by being there. The extent to which the dragons would be used also depended on how trustworthy they could be on their own, and so far, neither Arthur nor Merlin had been particularly impressed by them, Kilgarrah's scheming and West's attempt to ensnare Merlin notwithstanding.

It came down to something very simple. Arthur was being a prat, as usual -- the sort of lovely prat who didn't want to force Merlin to deal with Balinor while simultaneously knowing that Balinor wouldn't listen to anyone else. In the end, this was war -- if Arthur needed the dragons, Merlin would put his personal feelings on the matter aside.

However difficult it was.

"How many dragons are with you??"

"Not many," Balinor said. When Merlin gave him a stony stare of his own, Balinor leaned back on the bench, taking a deep breath released as a sigh. "Five. Mind, they were never part of my original team. They were allies, only, providing assistance when requested, though over the years, they integrated with us to a certain degree. They will help if I ask. I can't guarantee the others."

"What others?" Merlin asked, pushing his mug aside and folding his arms on the table. "If you're talking about Mandrake and Kilgarrah and… Locher --"

Balinor's eyes flicked to Merlin and froze at the last name, and if Merlin needed confirmation that his cryptography mentor was a dragon, he had it now.

"No," Balinor said softly, released a held breath. "There are others. A legion of them. They live human lives in human guises, or they sleep buried beneath mountains and hills waiting for the next Age to come. They are… older, less impulsive, more…"

"Destructive?" Merlin ventured.

A flash of a smile touched Balinor's lips, and for an instant, he almost looked fond. But that rare
emotion disappeared an instant later, lost behind that distant, detached mask.

Merlin felt as if he'd been whipped. For that moment, however brief, he thought he'd seen the man he'd known as a child, indulging Merlin's questions and irreverent interruptions. To have that returned to him, to see it right in front of him, only to have it snatched away? It stung, reliving the pain of losing him once, and losing him all over again.

Merlin gritted his teeth and looked away.

"… experienced," Balinor said, trailing off. "Pendragon would have more dragons if they had someone to follow."

"They have someone to follow," Merlin snapped. "They have Arthur --"

"They won't follow him," Balinor said, shaking his head. "He can make his case. He can ask them for help. And in the end, they'll think about it and they'll choose to do as he asks or they will tell him that he's a fool. But they won't follow him, Merlin. He isn't a dragonlord."

"Sod you and your bloody dragonlords," Merlin said, his eyes narrowing. "Sod the bloody hierarchy and the balance. You know as well as I do -- no, you know it better than I do, because you threw your family away for a fucking cause. You know that this is war. Do you think that this will end regardless of whether the NWO takes over? No, it won't. The NWO's manifesto will spread like the plague. Someone will always be there to pick up the mantle. They won't die out. We'll have a feudal regime in five years or less, and each and every one of us will be made to bend knee to the likes of Tristan and Bryn or risk being made a slave or worse."

"If the army manages to stop them in their tracks, they'll do it by pulling all the stops. The Pendragon bloody prototypes that can kill magic for weeks. Chemical weapons that can neutralize a bloody city. High-yield air-to-ground missiles with fifty square kilometres' worth of destruction to kill one target, and fuck the innocents who have the misfortune of living next door. W. M. Ds. And when it's over? What kind of world do you think it'll be then? Magic users in a mass internment camp? Experiments worthy of Dr. Mengele? Walking through town with a big M painted on their chests or wearing suppressor collars?"

"The way I see it, it's going to suck either way. Not just for us. For the dragons, too. Because what are they going to do? Keep living in their human bodies? Scheme for a coup or a revolution? Hide in their goddamn caves clawing at clutches of eggs and keeping them close?"

"What's wrong with you -- what's wrong with them if they don't see that they won't be unaffected, no matter what the outcome? They can sit with their thumbs up the arse all they want, but when the war's over, when it's not how it's supposed to end up, they had better damn well not blame us when they didn't do anything to help."

Merlin stood up abruptly. He snatched his empty mug from the table. In the periphery of his vision, he saw that Will and Bohrs and the others had stood up from their table and were coming toward them, concerned. Merlin ignored them and leaned over the table, glaring at Balinor.

"They won't follow Arthur? If they want to survive, they damn well better. And you? You need to make up your mind over what horse you're backing and how much more you'll do with this fucking mission of yours. You were willing to let your family know that you were dead, to let your wife carry your lies, to let your son…" Merlin trailed off. He shook his head, biting back what he'd been about to say. In a calmer voice, he said, "Talking to the dragons on Captain Pendragon's behalf is the least that you can do."
Merlin slammed the coffee mug on the table. It shattered in a thousand tiny pieces, all of them with sharp edges. Merlin narrowly avoided slicing his hand open -- not that he'd have noticed, anyway.

"That's Lieutenant Emrys to you," Merlin snarled. "And unless your next words are the dragons want to know what the Captain wants them to do, I don't want to hear it."

Balinor closed his mouth.

Merlin stalked down the rows of tables, heading toward the exit. He nodded curtly at the others, but didn't even notice that they'd followed him until they were outside.

Will threw his arm around Merlin's shoulders. "You're bloody irresistible when you're mad. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

"Get off of me," Merlin growled.

Merlin elbowed him off, but Will held on. Merlin knew from experience that when Will didn't want to let go, he wouldn't -- he was like a giant squid suffocating a humpback whale, stubborn and relentless. Merlin grunted and suffered Will's version of reassurance, and something in his mood lightened on the walk toward the cottage. As if sensing that Merlin had calmed down, Will eased his stranglehold until his hand slid down Merlin's back and clapped him hard, once.

"All right, mate?" Bohrs asked.

Merlin started to answer, *I'm full of sunshine with rainbows coming out of my arse, what do you think* when he took careful stock of himself. His magic was buzzing faintly under his skin, but it was no different than normal. He hadn't known he'd been carrying a weight on his shoulder all this time, and a tightness in his chest had eased.

"Feeling awfully good, actually," Merlin admitted. He shrugged. "I guess I needed that."

Merlin shot Will a questioning glance.

It was Will's turn to shrug, except somehow he turned it into a full-body twitch. "Hearing him talk at dinner -- bloke's full of himself. I get that your Mum's forgiven him, but to pretend like it never happened and they've been together all along?"

Will shook his head violently.

"No. That doesn't fly. Not with me. Shattered you when you were a kid, not even buying you that mint Captain Britain comic book cheered you up. All those tears on the pages? I blame him for that. The book could've been worth *money* now," Will said.

Merlin snorted. "Were a book you bought with my allowance, don't think I forgot that."

"But I went out and got it, free and clear, and I didn't rob the corner store like I would've, normally. And you'd owe me half of it now if he hadn't completely ruined it by going off and disappearing, so I suppose there's that," Will said.

Bohrs bumped Merlin's shoulder companionably, but Merlin wasn't braced for it and he slipped in the thin layer of snow before crashing into Will, who steadied him.
"If it weren't for me dad, I might've killed him for real. Dad said Balinor's got a lot to make up for," Will said, brushing Merlin off as if he'd fallen.

"That he does," Bohrs said in solemn agreement.

Merlin didn't answer. Will and Bohrs had said everything that Merlin might want to say.

They were almost at the door when Will stopped them from going through. He looked at the battered screen door, at the inner door leading to the mud room, at the tiny roof over the doorway, at the rafters of the overhang. He squirmed in place, as if he were trying to get something out that was completely uncomfortable.

"My dad told me something else," Will said, grimacing. "Don't hit me for it, but my dad's right, and it's worth thinking about. But it takes a lot out of a man to go on a mission and get put in a spot where he thinks he might never make it back. It takes a whole lot more out of them to make the decision never to come back."

"All respects to Allan, he's a good bloke," Bohrs cut in, his tone heavy and dark, "But he doesn't know what it's like, being the one left behind."

"Maybe not," Will said. His expression went thoughtful and distant for a few seconds before he physically shook himself out of it and scowled at Bohrs. "But he might know something about thinking he might never make it home, same as any of us. And anyway, I'm not talking to you, you overgrown teddy bear. I get that you know what Merls has gone through more than anyone else around here, but maybe give stock in the possibility that the man's hurting, too."

"Fat chance of that," Bohrs said, crossing his arms over his chest. Something creaked; it sounded like a stitch popping. After all the PT that Arthur had been putting them through for weeks now, Merlin wasn't the only one to put on more muscle.

But Will's words sank in slowly, and Merlin was stuck on the phrase, *maybe the man's hurting, too.*

"Will?" Merlin asked, confused and dumbstruck, because he'd never heard about any of Allan's assignments, just like he didn't hear about any of Gaius' either. He wondered just how much he didn't know, how much *Will* didn't know, and what Will might have been told that made him soften -- just a tiny bit -- towards Balinor.

"Look, your Mum, she messed up, didn't she? Kept his secret and all. By rights, I'd dump the bathwater over her head, but you -- you're still mad at her, I know. But she's your Mum," Will said. He leaned in, a small smile on his lips. "Be mad all you want at Balinor. It's kinda hot. But he's your dad."

Merlin gave Will a shove hard enough to push him off a step, and Will put a hand on his chest, looking hurt.

"You had your chance to get all up in this in uni," Merlin said, instead of what he *really* wanted to tell Will. And maybe his voice was a little flatter and humourless than it normally would have been, because Will's expression drooped, immediately regretting everything he'd just said.

"You know I'm not taking his side in this?" Will said.

Merlin stared at Will. Will took his lid off and crushed it in his hand. He wasn't contrite, not exactly. It was more *Will* -- typical Will, saying what needed to be said, even if no one wanted to hear it, and hoping that he hadn't shot his foot off with his mouth at the same time.
"Yeah," Merlin said, clenching his jaw. "I know you're not."

A flash of relief passed over Will's face. Bohrs made a curmudgeonly grunt.

And, instead of dealing with the possibility that Balinor was human, after all, Merlin went inside, pointedly shutting the door on them both.

ooO0oo

The sun had barely crested the eastern horizon, but the light diffused through the low clouds and cast a pale grey glow onto the camp.

There was fog rising from the lake, the air chill enough to freeze the mist into glittering crystals small enough and light enough to remain suspended, defying gravity, and while the sight was beautiful and enrapturing, becoming more so as the sun rose, Arthur privately believed that nothing could compare to how Merlin had frozen the rain in place last spring.

He sipped his scalding-hot tea and turned to look on the huts scattered on the plain below the cottage. The fog hadn't spread that far, clinging instead to the forest around the lake, but there was still a faint haze over that area, a blessing of warmth and protection cast by the druids from the village. Small lanterns or candles flickered in the windows of nearly every hut, warding off evil.

The Winter Solstice was a few days away. The pagans in the small community had lightly decorated the area with twined boughs of branches from a variety of trees topped with red and white berries. There were carved logs in the quarters of the property, outward, inward, and centrepoint, all of them burning with a low white light emitting a steady heat. Someone had erected a pole in the middle of a secure area meant as the children's playground, the colourful ribbons wafting faintly. There was no breeze, not this early in the day, but there was something about the sight before him that... made him wonder.

It's one of the times in the year when the spirits come out to play. Earth and fire, water and air, Merlin had explained.

It wasn't that Arthur didn't believe in magic. It was hard not to, given everything he'd witnessed in the last year, but so much of it had been used for evil, and it was hard to think of magic having any other purpose.

Here, in this place where so many people had come to seek shelter from the violence of the cities, banding together to form a community more solid than any Arthur had ever known, under the protection of the magic cast by two of his men and bound together by the witches and warlocks and priests and priestesses, it was hard not to know that magic could be used for good, too.

Arthur closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the glass, hoping, wishing, praying that there was a way to preserve this. The quiet, the calm, the peace. The dragons and the druids talked about balance as if it was a thing to be maintained. That goal, that mandate -- it wasn't something that Arthur understood or accepted, not until this moment.

It wasn't about achieving balance and keeping it by force of magic or by the strength of arms. It was about harmony, and that was something that could only be reached by getting out of its way.

Arthur could live with that. He wanted that.
Faint footsteps shook Arthur out of his thoughts. He opened his eyes and watched the drift of smoke from the mess hall curl and twist into the cold morning air.

"Is there more tea?" Morgana asked, breaking the silence.

Arthur turned.

Morgana was wearing red fuzzy pyjama pants with pink and white hearts all over, her thin frame drowned beneath one of Leon's heavy wool jumpers. She was barefoot, her toes curling into the thin carpet of the main room, her arms crossed over her chest. Her hair was curly and gnarled and knotted, sticking up in an awkward peak on the side of her head, her cheek faintly lined from the folds of her pillow.

She was pale and drawn, exhaustion evident in the dark circles under her eyes and the gaunt hollow of her cheek.

Arthur didn't need telling. He knew. He'd seen Morgana like this too often growing up not to know that she'd had another nightmare. He hadn't understood then, but he did now, and he wordlessly walked over to Morgana, giving her his mostly-untouched mug.

She made a soft sound that might have been a muffled thanks, wrapping her fingers around the ceramic base. She took a quick sip, her shoulders easing as if the tea was the only thing that could sustain her.

It probably was. Leon had made a special trip three hours west of Camelot to replenish their dwindling supplies, and most of the tea acquired then had been selfishly jammed onto the shelves of their kitchen instead of being distributed around the camp.

Arthur squeezed Morgana's shoulder and went into the kitchen to make himself another one. Morgana followed him, sitting in one of the kitchen chairs, her feet up on the edge, the mug balanced on her knees. Her eyes were half-closed, but she stirred when the kettle whistled.

Arthur didn't bring up her nightmare. If Morgana wanted to talk about them, she would. Of late, thanks to Gaius and the druids, the bad dreams didn't come as often, and the waking trance allowed her to control her visions. Arthur had learned -- mostly from Leon, who was strong and comforting when Morgana needed him to be, but who broke down in front of Arthur when he couldn't be strong anymore -- that when a vision was so strong that it plagued Morgana in her sleep, it was bad.

It was very, very bad.

"Toast?" Arthur asked, letting his tea steep.

"Please," Morgana said.

Gone were the days of neatly-sliced bread that was more sugar than wheat, replaced by big loaves of thick-ground flour from the bakery over at the village. Slicing the bread thin enough for the toaster was an acquired skill, so Arthur didn't bother, instead cutting nicely thick slabs that he buttered on both sides and grilled on a skillet.

He was hungry for more than toast, but that would have to wait until later, when the mess hall had a breakfast to offer. The toast would take the edge off, at least.

"Jam?" Arthur asked.

"What is it today?"
Arthur checked the shelf. There were several jars stocked, but the unspoken rule was not to open a new one until the first jar was empty -- a rule that Gwen persistently broke. "Lemon or peaches."

Morgana made a face. "Peanut butter?"

It was Arthur's turn to make a face -- though it was more of a smirk, and he wasn't going to explain why -- but he wordlessly handed over the last of it.

"You're up early," Morgana said, taking the knife Arthur gave her. She scraped the bottom of the jar a few times and asked, "Can't sleep?"

"I sleep fine until I wake up remembering something else I have to do or when I figure out a better way to go through a maneuver," Arthur said, deciding on the lemon jam. He sat down across from Morgana and held out his hand for the knife.

Morgana took her time slathering the peanut butter remnants on her toast and pointedly licked the knife before offering it to him.

He stared at it before taking it anyway.

"That's when you nudge Merlin into helping you fall asleep again," Morgana said smugly, the faintest traces of a smile on her lips.

"First of all, I'm very uncomfortable discussing my sex life with my sister," Arthur said, giving her a dark look. "Secondly, yes, he's quite helpful in that regard."

Morgana's wan smile was fanned to life, and she snorted. "And yet here you are, the first one to the kitchen. You even beat Gwen."

"That's not hard, not since Lance started stocking snacks in their bedroom so that he wouldn't have to get out of bed," Arthur pointed out.

"He's such a sweetheart," Morgana said dryly, and Arthur had to agree with the sentiment. Despite the training sessions and the daily assignments, the team had been taking advantage of spending time with their family and friends. Lance and Gwen were either at her family's, or at his, or alone together somewhere being sickeningly adorable. Arthur didn't begrudge them. He was sure that, if he were faced with the looming threat of war and prolonged separation, Arthur would be spending all of his time following Merlin around like a puppy, too.

He gave Morgana a side-eyed look, wanting to say that Leon was just as bad as Lance, but wisely stayed silent. He suspected that she might take offence at any hint of being a hopeless romantic.

Instead, he shrugged his shoulder and answered her earlier question. "I had a bad feeling."

Morgana put down her tea and stared at him for a long time. He stared back, but he broke eye contact a heartbeat later. There were things he couldn't talk about. As much as he loved his sister, as much as he trusted her, she didn't have the security clearance for some of the information he'd received the night before.

Arthur had checked in with Mandrake at the appointed hour, same as he had done every night since reconnecting with him after setting up camp at the cottage. Mandrake had sounded tired, drawn, almost as if he were running on the remnants of his draconic strength and whatever pep he could get out of too-strong coffee.

The ever-increasing magical attacks from the population were accelerating, and the orders from the
Brass had been to remobilize the regular army to act as a shunt or as shields against the oncoming tide. Regular troops were ill-equipped to deal with magic users, and the casualties were high on every side -- soldiers seriously injured by magic or by friendly fire, allied magic users clipped by a lucky shot, innocent citizens caught in the crossfire. And there were deaths, the numbers slowly creeping upward -- shooting fatalities from snipers, soldiers dying from suffocation or from violent magical strikes, passing vehicles suddenly veering out of control to attack an enemy, occupied buildings collapsing without warning.

The picture that Mandrake painted was far worse than the one shown on news broadcasts. Each incident couldn’t be waved off as merely a young sorcerer "breaking out" or throwing a tantrum. Anywhere and everywhere, the very first tilting point went mostly unnoticed, a circumstance of fear or prejudice, a magic user defending themselves against the expected or the unexpected --

And it would escalate.

It had escalated.

Arthur had learned from Elyan that the NWO's mandate had hit the Internet and had spread like a virus, doubling, tripling, quadrupling each and every time until there were an unknown number of copies on a billion websites and inaccessible personal computer hard drives. The manifesto was the centerpiece of discussion groups and forums and mailing lists and social media, and Arthur didn't need to skim the messages posted to know that the general mood had gone from apathetic to rabidly outraged to outright calls to arms.

There had been a lull in the beginning. An attack, followed by a long silence as the proponents, the targets, and the rest of the world let what just happened sink in.

It was a moment of held breath. A pause as onlookers waited to see which way the pendulum would swing.

It could have fizzled out. Instead, the pendulum veered violently toward freedom, superiority, control, hailing the very tenets of the NWO as a battle chant shouted in the faces of everyone who would defy them, even their own kind.

Somehow, in the middle of all this, Olaf had become as much as a resource as Colonel Mandrake, forwarding data packets at odd, unpredictable intervals or sending any number of coded text messages that made good use of the CrackBox app that Merlin and Elyan had written and loaded onto the team members' smartphones. The data Olaf had sent Arthur was at every defensive and offensive level -- from the information analysts who monitored online and airwave activity to search for key words and forecast future attacks, to real-time voice and video reports from the troops on the streets scouting and securing the areas. There were interrogation recordings from the police questioning anyone arrested as a result of a raid, zoomed-in satellite images with twenty-metre resolution enhancements, a summary of a tip line that had been implemented by the government with a large number of people expressing their suspicion about their neighbours.

There was so much information that Arthur had had to delegate sifting it through it to those who had the patience and the expertise to do so, and it came to no one’s surprise that Allan and his men stepped up to the task of finding needles in the haystacks.

The emails and the text messages were one thing, but what Arthur really waited for were those rare times when Olaf would call.

His voice was always gravely and crackly, as if he had picked up his old habit of smoking just to have an excuse to leave the tumult of the control centres and had brought along a flask full of brandy
or rum or whiskey or whatever he'd been able to purloin from the company's supply repository. There was a weight of weariness in his tone, an edge of frustration and confusion, but he was always succinct and to the point, addressing Arthur as if Arthur were his superior.

And when Olaf asked Arthur what he recommended they do…

It was strange, to say the least. More so when Olaf actually took his advice.

Arthur knew more about the NWO movements than he suspected Colonel Mandrake even knew. He could almost predict which attack was perpetrated by disgruntled newly-awakened sorcerers or by the directed violence of the NWO. He knew the outcome of any conflict between the armed forces and the magic users before they ever clashed arms based on what he already knew of the positions of the different squads, their capabilities, and the sorcerers who were fighting on the other side.

It was numbly that he absorbed the paltry data from Colonel Mandrake. It was with increasing tension that he listened to whatever Olaf had to say.

It was never good news.

The NWO was no longer the only player in the game. Any number of other organizations, either branching out from the main body or springing out whole from the corrupted stream, were joining in the battle -- Aredian had, apparently, joined the fray, and had carved himself a nice little niche in Europe. There were signs that he was casting his sights westward to England, and unconfirmed rumours that he was already in London, his purpose unknown.

And… However much Arthur reminded Allan and his men to look for key phrases or how many more searches Merlin ran through the database or however many times Olaf talked about it…

There was no new information about the woman named Nimueh. Nothing about the Morrigan.

Not even a whisper about the Disir.

Putting it all together...

A bad feeling was putting it mildly.

"How bad?" Morgana asked, her voice so soft that Arthur nearly didn't hear the fragile crackle in her tone.

Arthur brushed the breadcrumbs from his fingers and took both their plates to the sink. He looked out the window, and for an instant --

He hadn't thought that there would be so many. They came from everywhere, with pouches slung over their shoulders or with little else but the clothes on their backs. Their bodies were stooped with unspoken pleading, their gazes lost to a dwindling hope.

And they kept coming. It was an endless stream along a dirt trail that had never been meant to be a road. The campsite had swollen until it couldn't contain any more, and just when he had been certain that it would burst with violent, cataclysmic repercussions, it expanded outward, becoming larger still, taking advantage of the open space and the shelter of the forest to spread out and to make room for more.

This had never been the original intent. He had considered it, of course, but someday, far in the future, if they were valiant toward the end and won the last battle, the final struggle.
He dreamed of a glittering city, of a castle made of stone. Of fortress walls that stood tall and proud, stretching outward to protect those who had chosen to settle here, to live and thrive under his rule.

But that was... a wish, a hope, a craving meant for another time, a glimmer of light in the darkness of battle, something to drive him forward.

It seemed as if his dream would come to fruition of its own volition. The crooked, ruined trail through the forest had been rebuilt until it was sturdy enough to withstand the spring thaw and the autumn rain, the constant stream of wagon wheels and horse hooves and soldier's boots. The King's tent had been moved to the edge of the area, backing against a lake and a tall hill, where it would be better protected, and every time he returned to this place, he found something had changed -- the tent had become a raised building, the raised building had been shifted until it rested upon a solid foundation, and now, there was a carved wall of rough-hewn bluestone that circled into the hill.

The city, the castle, the fortress -- it came not from his design, but from the people who had settled here, as if it was their dream, too.

From nothing, to everything.

His men had brought their families here, to this remote place, for one reason and one reason only -- to keep them safe for as long as possible from the war that raged in the distance, a war that they fought each and every time they returned to the battle lines. His sorcerer, his love, had made this place safe with the help of other men like him, and thus far, the fires hadn't spread, and peace remained in this square.

Tents had become huts. Huts became tiny, one-room houses. Bigger buildings were erected to accommodate the larger families and the transients looking for temporary housing before moving on -- which they rarely did. The soldier barracks were extended as more and more men regained their strength after resting for a time, and joined the King's army.

These were his Knights. His brothers. His sisters. His people.

He was glad to see them thrive, to watch a muddy camp to become a village, but it grated at him to be here, so far away from the front lines, so far away from his love. As soon as his men were recovered, he was riding out. He couldn't be here.

He couldn't be so far from his love.

Arthur glanced up involuntarily, unsure why he'd done it except to have a fleeting thought of Merlin, and he scrambled to complete the thought he'd had before a brief sensation of disgruntlement had overcome him. "You tell me, Morgana. How bad is it?"

She didn't answer him for the longest time, and at first he thought it was because she had answered, but in a voice to soft to be heard over the running water. He rinsed off the plates and put them aside to dry, the clink of porcelain ominous in the silence.

"We should have Christmas now," Morgana said. Her voice was broken, close to tears.

Arthur leaned forward, hands on the edge of the sink, his eyes closed, his head bowed.

He'd known that it would happen soon. That events were accelerating beyond anyone's control. The military would be overwhelmed, and it would come to a point when soldiers were doing little more but diffusing the tide, trying to contain the worst of the damage.
There would be balance, in the end, whether or not the world was ready for it. Magic was an unexpected, unknown entity, neither living nor dead, prevalent in everything — there was no avoiding it, no stopping it, no…

No destroying it. Arthur raised his chin and heaved a heavy sigh, the words resonating in his head. *Destroying it.*

He thought about the prototype on the testing grounds. How *thoroughly* it had rendered Merlin helpless, silencing his magic to the point that Merlin thought he didn't have any, not anymore, not ever again. How it had come back to him in a trickle before erupting nearly out of his control.

He thought about the gem that Nimueh had stolen. The custom work that she had left behind at Pendragon Consulting, waiting for recovery. The power source without an object to power, but there must be something, surely.

And if *Uther* had requested the power source from the CIA… What did he want to use it for? Was there another prototype? Except… what if it wasn't a prototype anymore? Did Uther have a working weapon, something that could cause the balance to stutter?

*Or* worse?

"That bad?" Arthur asked, his voice flat to his own ears. He heard doors open and close in the distance, faint at times and loud at others, voices drifting down from the second and third levels, friendly squabbles over the showers.

"Arthur," Morgana whispered. She turned his name into a plead, and Arthur turned around to see the tears streaming down her face. Her lips were moving, but he couldn't hear what she said.

Arthur leaned against the kitchen counter, his strength sagging. He didn't know how to comfort her. He was even less able to withstand her tears than Leon. All the words he had ever used to reassure her were hollow and empty, and he couldn't even tell *himself* that *everything* would be fine.

He wasn't sure that it would be.

They were one team. Nineteen men. Soldiers all, right down to the greenest of them.

Excalibur couldn't fight an entire civilization. They couldn't fight the whole world. They could fight all that they wanted. They could win battle after battle. They could turn the tide.

But only *here*. In this place. Where they could keep people safe.

He didn't want to leave. He knew his men didn't, either, even if they didn't say it out loud. Arthur could see it in the way their gazes lingered fondly on the campsite, how they smiled brightly around other people, but turned away, broken and sad, when they were alone. This was their place, their home, their loved ones.

But none of them voiced their desires. There was no rebellion, no mutiny. Not a word of complaint. They were soldiers, and they knew his duty.

Just as Arthur knew his. The call would come, and he would lead them out.

He didn't know if they would return. No matter how much he planned ahead, regardless of the training scenarios, there were too many unknown variables, too much ahead of them to consider a way out that also involved everyone being able to come home.
Arthur rubbed his eyes. He wasn't surprised to find that his fingers came away wet.

He pulled at the short sleeve of his shirt and wiped his face. He took the worn dish towel from where it hung from the oven door and walked over to Morgana. He pulled her chair out with her still in it, the legs scraping on the floor. He bent one knee and released a heavy breath before shaking his head and wiping the tears from her face.

"What did we always promise each other?" Arthur asked.

"Arthur --"

"When you left home. When I went to uni. When you ran away with that bloody bloke for a couple of weeks. When I signed up to the army. What did we always promise each other?" Arthur asked, fighting Morgana for the towel. There were smudges of mascara under her lashes, bits of makeup that she hadn't washed off the night before. He was making it worse, and Morgana knew it, but neither of them cared. "Come on, Morgana. Remind me. What did we say?"

"That we'd never say goodbye," Morgana said, the last word breaking on a sob.

"Yeah," Arthur said softly, finally letting go of the towel. "No good byes. No last Christmases. No last anything. Gana, because any day could be our last. Every day should be as normal as possible. That's what we hold on to. That's what we need."

Morgana's shoulders rose and fell; she took a deep, steady breathing. "Even if we know --"

"Especially then," Arthur said, cutting her off when he heard approaching footsteps. He squeezed her hand, half in warning, half in reassurance.

"Anybody? Is anybody --" Bran skittered into the room, his hair sticking up where his head had been wedged in the Vee of a couch corner. A heavy comforter, most likely liberated from someone's bed, was draped around his shoulders and trailing on the floor. He wore baggy grey sweats too big for him and a shirt that hung from his frame -- Kay's clothes, Arthur recognized, belatedly remembering that Bran had refused to leave the telly for a few days now. He hadn't left the cottage except for food runs and chores, and had either taken over the sofa or the floor of the room Kay shared with Lucan and Will. His eyes were wide, and his mouth worked as if trying to find the words still trapped in his sleepy head. "You've got to come. You've got to see this --"

"Later," Arthur said. He'd seen enough television footage to last him a lifetime. The news broadcast showed endless images of doom and gloom without any end in sight. Jumpy camerawork from civilian smartphones or professional equipment or security cameras. Frightened anchorpersons operating on little sleep and looking like it, reciting the newscast with an increasingly stunned tone until they couldn't complete their sentences anymore. Personal entreaties by people trying to find their families and friends. A man wearing a black hood and reflective ski goggles and a colourful bandana across the bottom of his face lunging at the camera with a long pipe in his hand, the picture buzzing out suddenly.

Those were the videos that had been cleared for public consumption, the footage picked out by news broadcast directors and producers to put on the air. The safest of it, the least bloody clips, violent and hurtful, heartbreaking and frustrating.

The footage he received on a regular basis from Olaf -- likely sent from one of his cronies, intending on keeping Arthur completely apprised and up-to-date -- was worse. It was far, far worse.

"No, I'm serious," Bran said, knuckling an eye. "You've got to see the telly. It's bad. It's seriously
"I know you've got a bigger vocabulary than that," Kay said crankily, scratching his belly through his shirt as he walked in. He looked rested, for once, though his head was a flat wall of hair on one side, and the scruff on his cheek hadn't seen the sharp edge of a blade in a few days. "Is there tea?"

Arthur thumbed over his shoulder at the kettle and had been about to say, not your nursemaid when Bran dropped his blanket, roughly turned Kay around, and pushed him out of the kitchen.

Arthur shook his head and raised a brow, watching them go. He glanced at Morgana, taking in the sadness in her eyes, and squeezed her hand again. She sorted herself a little, and he went to pick up the blanket that Bran had left behind.

"Sleeping with your favourite blankie again?" Gwaine asked, running a hand through the curly tangle of his hair.

"My favourite blankie's upstairs," Arthur retorted. "Where's yours?"

"Not stomping about like yours," Perceval said, coming in after Gwaine. He pushed Gwaine out of his way and went for the kettle, refilling it to bring the water to a boil. "Sounds like he fell out of bed and got tangled in his sheets."

"Had something of a strop before he went dead silent," Lucan said, looking over his shoulder at Will. "Oi, Will, you should check on him, make sure he didn't brain himself on something sharp."

Will grunted and answered with an intelligent, "Coffee."

Leon squeezed his way through the door, his curly hair a bird's nest on top of his head -- he was needing a haircut, if he wanted to be presentable ever again -- and made his way over to Morgana. He took her mug and drank the remnants in one go. He grimaced at the taste, squeezing her shoulder as he bent down to put a kiss on the top of her head.

The others streamed down from their sleeping quarters, pausing in the entrance of the kitchen to consider whether fitting another body inside was remotely within the realm of possibility before deciding to wait a bit before getting their coffee. They moved on, heading toward the main room.

There was no sign of Lance or Gwen, but they were workaholics. Arthur wouldn't be surprised to find out that Lance had gone down to tidy up the clinic and to check on the inventory, and that Gwen had detoured toward the old games room -- recently reconverted into an office, though Gwen and Elyan's equipment threatened to take it over entirely, slowly pushing Arthur out of the space. Arthur had taken to bringing most of his papers up to the attic, in any case.

"Arthur!"

Arthur glanced up at the sound of his name, muffled as it was over the chatter. "Arthur!"

The early morning banter cut out abruptly, the sharp tone of Kay's voice finally sinking in. The group cleared, though Gwaine wandered in Arthur's way, blocking the door as he craned his neck out to see what was going on. Arthur smacked him on the head. Perceval dragged Gwaine aside. Arthur walked through with a backward frown at Gwaine, who was ambling along after him like a lost duckling, the rest of the flock following after.

Bran was sitting in the middle of the sofa, right in front of the telly, glued to the screen.
Kay was standing behind him, his arms crossed, his brows pinched. He glanced at Arthur and nodded toward the screen, but didn't offer any explanation.

There was a male announcer on the screen. He was dressed in a rumpled black suit and tie and his hair was slicked back but curling up as if he'd been touching it nervously. He was young, obviously new; it seemed almost as if someone had dragged him to sit at the anchor's desk.

In the upper right corner of the screen was a stock image of Westminster Palace.

Kay tapped Bran's shoulder and gestured for him to increase the volume.

"... early this morning. In what appears to be a daring coup, an unidentified group of men and women have taken over Westminster Palace."

Arthur glanced at the time. Even if there wasn't a state of emergency and the key people in the government moved to a more secure location, it was too early in the day for parliamentary sessions. Staff and representatives would only just be arriving, heading to their offices to prepare for the day. Whoever had stormed the building had either done so without any real information or forethought, or something else was going on.

From the grim look on Kay's face, whatever it was, it was grave.

"We have been informed that they are holding an unknown number of hostages in the Commons Chamber and that --"

The announcer touched fingers to his ear and affected a thoughtful expression that quickly slipped away, drained by shock. He cleared his throat and sat up straight in his seat, fiddling with the papers on the desk in front of him.

"The terrorists have acquired media equipment and are now broadcasting live. The images received may be of a graphic nature, and it is recommended that children or those who may be upset be directed to look away from the screen."

Abruptly, the image changed to a familiar scene -- the Commons. The white lights cast a yellow pall on the room, giving the wood paneling a soft, rich shade of brown. People milled about in the upper gallery, some armed with semiautomatic guns, most unarmored, and the long green benches were largely empty, occupied by insouciant men and women looking to be in their late twenties to late thirties. They wore apocalypse-chic fashions -- layers upon layers, belted and tied, cut and mended, with scuffed army boots or Doc Martens or knee-high lace-ups designed to protect the wearer.

At any given time, the blatant thumbing at tradition and the blatant disrespect would incite outrage, if it wasn't for a more troubling aspect of the image as the camera panned left to right.

In the middle of the room, kneeling on the floor in front of a table, their hands behind their heads, were eight soldiers in stripped-down gear, left only their shirts and trousers. They were young, all of them -- barely in their twenties, about the same age as the youngest of the terrorists --

The door to the house opened and closed; someone stamped their feet and kicked off their shoes before walking in. Everyone turned to see Mordred arrive, holding an oversized travel mug of coffee protectively in his hands, shivering against the cold. He must have run out to the mess tent earlier when everyone was crowding in the kitchen and gotten to the head of the queue.

He paused, looking around the room wide-eyed. "What?"
"Close the house," Arthur said. A part of him didn't want anyone in the camp to see what was about to happen. It wasn't that he was trying to keep secrets. Everyone had the right to know what was going on in the world. It was that he didn't want anyone to see how Excalibur would react.

Mordred glanced at the telly, starting to do as Arthur ordered, and froze. The camera had zoomed in until there was a solid square shot of the soldiers and the men pacing the floor in front and behind them.

"Recognize them?" Arthur asked. Pellinor, closest to Mordred, took the initiative and went to lock down the house, which was tantamount to barricading the door against stragglers and pulling down the black shade on the window facing the pathway to alert anyone coming up that the team was having a private planning session.

"Yes, I… only the man on the left, the one with the long coat," Mordred said. "I don't recall his name."

"Sigan," Will said, his voice flat. He crossed his arms unhappily, almost defensively. "Bit of a ruddy bloke. Never met him, though. Bryn pointed him out to me, once, said if Tristan ever needed shite done, he'd call Sigan's boss, and Sigan would…"

He freed a hand long enough to wave at the telly before tucking it back into the crook of his elbow.

"Who did he answer to?"

"Don't think he really answers to anyone, mate," Will said, looking over his shoulder at Arthur. "And I never got the boss's name. Not for lack of trying, either. Bryn got all mealy-mouthed trying to pronounce it. You probably have him in your files, though. Hedg… something."

"The NWO," Perceval said, a little unnecessarily.

"Finally come out to play, haven't they?" Gwaine said.

No one spoke as Sigan walked right up to the camera, putting his face in it. His grin was crooked and mocking as he took a step back, sweeping a hand around him in a welcome to the show gesture.

He was one of the few who carried a weapon, and Arthur guessed that there was a surplus of sorcerers in the group. He watched with growing dread as the camera followed Sigan toward the line of soldiers.

"Shite," Geraint breathed.

The camera paused for several seconds, taking close-ups of the soldiers' faces. They were even younger up close, still with a bit of baby fat on their cheeks despite boot camp and hard PT. There was a wide assortment of scrapes and bruises, too -- a cut over their eyebrow, a yellowing around the eye, a scrape along the jaw.

The camera panned along the other way, going back and forth a few times until the faces of those soldiers were burned in their minds. They were scared. It showed in their eyes, in the set of their jaw, in the way their body curled inward to hold themselves together, or puffed out in angry defiance.

"Do you see them?" a man said off-camera. "Take a good, long look. The best and brightest of the British Army, patrolling the city streets, keeping the citizens of London safe from the enemy. But who, exactly, is the enemy here?"

The camera panned around the room. The men and women who had made themselves comfortable
on the benches were drawn and haggard, their faces dirty. They didn't make an attempt to hide their weapons, but they didn't try to mask how trying the last few weeks had been on them, either. At least two of the women were severely undernourished, almost dwarfed by their clothing, their cheeks sunken from hunger.

In contrast, the soldiers were well-fed, well-clothed, well-rested, cared for in a way that most people weren't, not in these times. It wouldn't matter how often it was explained that the army were among the first to get strictly rationed meals or how the government had set up locations where citizens could get food and sundries -- if only the gangs weren't attacking the supply convoys. It would only matter that soldiers were being fed, while hundreds of thousands of people in cities throughout Britain were barely scraping by.

"Is it us? Is it you? Or is it those who seek to suppress what they don't understand? To control resources in order to protect the citizens? While the fat cats hide in their mansions and sit on their velvet chairs beside a well-stoked fire, sipping good brandy and eating the finest caviar, what are the rest of us doing?"

"Suffering.

"We're hungry. We're cold.

"This is the way it has always been. A handful of people in power, detached from the common man, bathing in riches and rights. They tread on our lives and punish us and reap the rewards. How is this fair? If we so much as miss a payment, the gas is turned off and our houses grow cold. If we steal a loaf of bread, we're imprisoned."

The camera shifted, and Sigan filled the frame.

"Now, you know something of what we've endured for hundreds of years. For thousands of years. You have a taste of what it's like to be different, to be inferior to those who are pampered and protected against the realities of life.

"It doesn't taste very good, does it? I imagine you want things to change. I can't say that I blame you. It's uncomfortable, isn't it? Being cold? Hungry? To have to rely on other people for your survival? To fear those very same people, never knowing when they will break into your home and take you away?"

"We understand. We truly do. We have endured all this and more. I think we've all had enough of the status quo, don't you think? We need a change. We need a society where leaders are common men, leaders who understand, leaders who can take care of our needs the way they should be taken care of."

There was a scrape of sound, faint footsteps from the stairs, a second set from the corridor to the offices. Arthur didn't turn to see who it was, his eyes riveted to the screen, a sinking sensation in his belly. There was a ripple of movement around the room as the team made room for more, and one of those new arrivals stopped behind Arthur, a comforting warmth.

"For the first time in centuries, we are in a position to change things. And we start with this."

Sigan grabbed the camera lens and dragged it over to the soldiers, knocking one of them in the face. The person controlling the camera took a step back and steadied their stance; the dizzying rock of movement stopped.

"These men are the enforcers of a government intent on stopping the revolution that is spreading
across the globe. A revolution for freedom, for equality, for peace. Their orders were to -- no, wait. You should hear it from them."

Sigan grabbed one of the soldiers. From the insignia on his uniform, he was barely a sergeant, a grade higher in rank than the others, and as young as any of them. He had been watching the terrorists with wariness, his back straight, his head up, refusing to give in to his fear even as his body betrayed him by trembling.

"What was your plan? What were you told to do? Go on, boy. Tell them. They're listening," Sigan said.

The soldier licked his lips. He looked away until he was shaken by Sigan to respond. Then, firmly, the soldier stared at the camera.

Arthur knew at once what was going to happen. It was Leon who took a deep breath and looked away. And Gwaine… Gwaine shook his head and whispered, "Don't."

"My name is Sergeant Johnny Baird. Tell my mother I love her."

There was a snarl, a flash of blue light, and Sergeant Johnny Baird fell to the ground, lifeless.

Morgana didn't make a sound. Gwen, who must have joined them at some point, covered her mouth. A strangled noise came from the couch and Kay reached down, shaking Bran's shoulder. "Come on. You shouldn't be watching this."

"No. No! Let me go. I have to see this. I have to know," Bran said, shaking Kay's hand off. He leaned forward, out of his reach.

A displeased Sigan reappeared on camera. He pasted a smile on his face and smoothed back his hair. "It was… a simple question. All he had to do was answer it."

"You son of a bitch," a soldier said from behind him. He was shaken -- they all were."Do you want to join your squad leader? Or do you want to live to tell Mrs. Baird how much her son loved her? Does she even know what sort of monster he was? How quickly he clicked his heels together and snapped a salute when his commander gave him his orders? Do you even know what he was doing? Did you know that he wasn't bringing all you fine, upstanding up men around to targeted houses all over London to stop the insanity, but to drag innocent women and children out into the streets? Do you know what he is doing with them? He's bringing them to internment camps --"

Arthur shook his head. Not in denial, not in disbelief, but in the sure knowledge that this was going on somewhere in the world, maybe even in Britain. He didn't know. That hadn't been mentioned in any of the briefings that Olaf sent him. He wasn't surprised if it was left out deliberately, because it was need to know, and Excalibur, in Olaf's estimation, didn't need to know.

"Fuckers," Lucan said, but it wasn't clear who he was talking about.

"-- why am I even explaining this to you? You know this. You participated in it. Did you enjoy it?" Sigan asked, leaning down into the young private's space. The soldier curled into himself, trying to get away without moving from his spot. "Did you enjoy frightening them? Did you enjoy hurting them? Did you tell them that everything would be all right while you held them down? Did you kill them when they fought back? Did you kill my wife?"
Sigan turned to the camera. His shoulders slumped; there was a measure of controlled calm in his features, but there was a yellow-orange glow in his eyes.

"This is what they're going to do to you. To all of you. They don't care who you are. They don't care who you voted for. They will hurt you and they will take you away and they will kill you if you resist. How many of you know someone who has lost a loved one in the last few weeks? How many of you have lost a loved one?

"Don't let this happen to you. Don't let this happen again. We have to stop them, you and I. We need to work together to overthrow the government. Nothing will change if we're too afraid to step up to the task."

Sigan moved away from the camera. He looked forlorn, resigned. Arthur wasn't certain how much of it was feigned and how much of it was a hard sell, but one thing was certain. The man was mad, and Arthur couldn't ignore the warning chill running down his spine. This was not someone he wanted to encounter on the battlefield.

He had the feeling that he would, anyway.

"Are you ready to do whatever needs to be done to keep your families safe?" Sigan asked. The compassionate expression faded from his features as he turned to face the soldiers. "I am. I am more than ready."

His hands glowed.

"Bran!" Kay said, reaching over the back of the couch, grabbing for him. Bran wrenched free. Will caught him and carried him away from direct line of sight of the telly. Bran kicked and punched and yelled the whole way, tears streaming down his face.

"Don't let him -- don't let him do that!"

One by one, Sigan set the soldiers on fire.

The flames burst from wherever Sigan touched them. On the crown of one man's head. Down one arm like water dripping down. From the shoulder and across the chest. From the back in a whirlwind spiral.

The soldiers yelped and tried to smack the flames out. They threw themselves onto the ground and tried to snuff the fire. They started screaming once they realized the flames weren't going out.

Their cries vibrated in the room until none of them could take it anymore. Bran wept, tears streaming down his face, but Will kept him from seeing what was on the telly. Gwen had turned away. Morgana stared resolutely forward, her eyes red-rimmed, Leon's arm around her waist, his head bowed.

Gareth found the remote and muted it.

None of them looked away. It was a slow, torturous burn. It could have lasted minutes; it could have lasted hours.

The camera swung away and fixed on Sigan's face. He spoke, but Arthur didn't know what was said. He didn't care.

He turned to look at his team. At grim faces, at the determined set of their jaw. At anger and grief, at silent prayers, at quiet promises of vengeance for the deaths of fellow soldiers killed for no other
reason than they had followed orders.

Mordred had retreated behind his emotionless, detached mask. Gwaine, for once, didn't have anything to say. Perceval sat back heavily on the large chair and stared at nothing at all.

And Bran... Bran tore out of Will's grasp and launched himself across the room, crashing into Kay, wrapping his arms around Kay's waist. "Don't go. Please."

Arthur turned around. Merlin met his eyes.

Something tugged between them. Clicked. They had an entire conversation in that single look, an understanding. An agreement that they could never make with words.


Then, very subtly, he nodded.

Whatever they had to do.

Arthur didn't look away when his mobile rang. He let it ring once, twice, three times. He took it out of his pocket and brought it to his ear without looking at the call display.

"We're on our way."

Chapter End Notes

If you prefer to comment about this fic on livejournal, please do so on this post. 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.

End Notes

The poem read by Gwen at Morgana and Leon's wedding is I carry your heart by e.e. cummings. Leon asked Gwaine to read O My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose by Robert Burns because he's probably the only one on the team who could properly manage the brogue, and also, he's the only one who knows why Leon would want this poem read during the wedding ceremony.

The ceremony is a combination of what legally must be said in the United Kingdom to make the marriage valid and an attempt to design a wedding that would fit Morgana's intricate requirements and what little they have available at the time based on a conglomeration of different ceremonies found on the Web and personal experience from attending Too Many Weddings.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!