Do or Die

by Footloose

Summary

It's time for war.

More than anything, it's time for the war to end.

The men of Excalibur are soldiers above all. They know every time they leave the base, every time they leave each other's line of sight, it might be the last time they see each other again.

Their lives is a sacrifice they're willing to make if it will mean peace. But it's love -- love for their families, their friends, their brothers and sisters in arms, and for each other that drives them to the end.

Notes

I don't own the characters to Merlin(TV) and am not profiting from this work.
This is part fifteen in the Loaded March series.
My thanks go to the members of the Hive who participated in a chat ages, ages ago and assisted me with information and location details. Thanks also to Detochkina (AO3) for the thorough beta. Any mistakes that remain are entirely my own. Liberties were taken with history, mythology, and locations; any errors are deliberate to protect the innocent.
As always, be aware that 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.
On a personal note:

Usually, I don't know what the story wants to be called until I'm finished writing it. For part 15 of the Loaded March series, I had the title nearly a year before I wrote word one.

*Do or Die* is a phrase that comes from two different poems, both of which are historically significant and which reflect an aspect of the story. One of those poems is *The Charge of the Light Brigade* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The other is *Scots Wha Hae* by Robert Burns.

If you're inclined, I leave it to you to read the poems before or after you read LM15, if you elect to read them at all. Reading these two poems isn't a requirement or a necessity. But if you wonder where my heart was as I wrote *Do or Die*, it was buried in these two poems.
"As you can see behind me, there is increased activity at the command post just outside Parliament. It's safe to say that it is in response to public outcry demanding action be taken not only to capture and imprison the terrorists who occupied the House of Commons and brutally assassinated several soldiers, but also to restore order."

The reporter moved out of frame and the camera zoomed in on the command center. Soldiers in body armour and armed with standard weapons -- holstered guns at their hips, semiautomatic rifles slung from one shoulder and held close to the chest -- were stationed at various points along a flimsy wooden barricade spray-painted with Authorized Personnel Only in crisp stencils. On the right side of the line, soldiers in a variety of uniforms -- beige-and-black-and-grey camouflage and functional khakis -- hurried at a controlled pace, intent on their tasks.

The command post was a series of large, slightly domed buildings that were high-technology hybrids between flexible projectile-resistant materials and collapsible walls. From the camera's position, it was large and ominous, without visible opening, and there was no telling what was going on inside.

"Over there!" the reporter shouted. The camera whipped around in a dizzying spiral of moving buildings and warped skies and unsteady ground, finally stabilizing on the largely-empty city streets.

Several large SUVs rumbled toward the command post. Just barely visible at the end of the convoy was a covered lorry.

"That's the last of it, sir," former Staff Sergeant Jackson Page, now a Quartermaster at Pendragon Consulting, said.

Page's uniform was a nondescript outfit of trousers and shirt with a ratty coat, scuffed boots, and a beanie that might have been a moth's nest, once. Nothing about him stood out, and Arthur approved. They didn't need the attention. Not now. Not when they'd have the eyes of the bloody world on them in a few short hours.

"Appreciate it," Arthur said, clamping a hand on the man's shoulder. "Now get your family to Camelot."

"I'll send the wife and the kids," Page said, sticking his thumbs into his belt, his shoulders pushed back, his head held high. "Begging your pardon, sir, I'd rather stay where I can be the most use."

Arthur was acutely aware of the half-dozen Pendragon Consulting personnel that Page had scrounged up to help pull together the equipment on Arthur's list. They were veterans, just like Page. Men and women who were honourably discharged at the end of their tours, who were forced to take early retirement after life-changing injuries, and who suffered from PTSD so debilitating, they had never been able to hold down another job until Arthur had given them a chance.

"We all would," Page said, his tone firm, brokering no argument. "Just tell us what you need us to do."
Arthur exchanged a long look with Leon. A good quartermaster was worth their weight in gold, and Arthur knew the team couldn't do without. Arthur had been prepared to work without a net, and that had meant equipping the team with everything they could carry and load into the transports. For the quartermaster and his men to volunteer when they were civilians and should rightfully protect their families somewhere far away from the conflict? Arthur found himself at a loss for words.

"You're not going to convince us otherwise, sir. I mean, we're not stupid. We know what this equipment does and we can figure out what you're meaning to do. The Army's got its hands full. They don't need us, and you can't do this alone. We're with you, Captain," Page said.

Arthur swallowed hard. "Thank you, Master Sergeant."

Leon went to Merlin, liberated one of the modified radios, and slapped it into Page's hand.

"The vehicles are unmarked," the reporter was saying off-screen. "I can't see the plates -- they've been blacked out. The lorry looks like it's military grade, and maybe they're trucking in new personnel? It's hard to see. They've been stopped at the barricade and they're talking to the MPs. Can you get a tighter shot; see if you can identify them?"

The image slowly zoomed in until it was grainy and pixelated, vibrating faintly. The MP was blurred but still identifiable; he was on full alert, his men with him, as they spoke to someone on the driver's side. The driver and passengers were difficult to see through the glare of light hitting the windshield, which was strange, because it was a cloudy day.

"Can't see anything, the light's too bright," the cameraman said, zooming out. The image sharpened and steadied. One of the soldiers came up to the MP, handing him a radio.

"The MP's calling someone," the reporter said. "The barricade's opening up. They're going to have to come past us. Quick, let's move, see if we can get a better shot."

The image was surprisingly steady as the cameraman followed the reporter, following the vehicles as they drove by.

"Still can't get them," the cameraman said. "Blackout windows."

"Damn it," the reporter said.

"We're not going to be able to stay anonymous for long," Arthur said, looking at his men one by one. The vehicles were loaded up and ready to go, and they were at the table for one last sit-down before they left. "From the minute that we act, from the very second we start to push them back, everyone's going to want to know who we are. The public -- innocent or otherwise. Other soldiers. The NWO. Every rogue sorcerer who's out for their own gain, every crime lord that's dug in and claimed a foothold of territory when everyone was too busy fighting to survive."
"Tristan's already out there," Merlin said. "He'll know about me, at least."

"That's assuming he didn't find a place to hide or get killed outright," Will said. "After... After the club blew up, he probably doesn't trust that the others will let him live when he wasn't supposed to in the first place."

"Fair," Merlin said. From the way both Will and Merlin's expressions clouded over, Arthur knew they were thinking about Freya.

"The longer we're anonymous, the better," Arthur said, raising a meaningful brow at Gwaine. "No showboating, no looking for the limelight, no talking to someone you don't trust implicitly. Are you with me?"

"Why are you looking at me?" Gwaine said, glaring around the table. "It happened once. Once."

Perceval raised a brow.

"Fine. Twice. You can't still be holding that against me. That was ages ago, I've learned to keep my gob shut since then," Gwaine groused.

"As long as you do. As long as we all do," Arthur said.

"The media will be the worst," Morgana said. She was small against Leon, dwarfed by his equipment and plain black uniform, a pale hand wound around his arm and holding him tightly.

"I'm sure there are exceptions, but reporters don't have a bloody soul."

"They just want to know what's going on," Gwen said, a hand on her belly. Lance got up and gave her his chair, pressing a kiss on her forehead as they made the exchange. She sat with a groan, and added, "Same as everyone."

Arthur was silent for a long time. He heaved a heavy sigh. "It's not about us," he said finally, putting his hands down. He flattened his palms on the table. "It's about everyone here. Our families. Our friends. It's about everyone out there who knows us. How long will it take the NWO to find the ones we care about once they know who we are? How long before they threaten people - even those we don't know -- to call us out by name? How many of you can honestly say you wouldn't give yourselves up if it meant saving an innocent?"

Bran pulled his arm away from where it had been glued around Kay's shoulders and stepped away, staring down at the table. He sniffled, because he'd been one of the ones that Kay and Will had stuck around to save.

Will reached over and ruffled a hand through Bran's hair. He looked as if he were about to say something, but thought better of it, and stayed silent.

"Media blackout. I can do that," Gwen said.

"I can keep an eye on the web, make sure amateur videos don't go viral," Elyan said.

Morgana sat up, her eyes blazing fiercely. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Let's move. They've got to get out of the vehicles sometime," the reporter said, pulling his
They approached the barricade as close they dared. The soldiers couldn't do anything about them as long as they stayed on the outside of a buffer zone, and with a top-of-the-line camera, they were able to capture sharp images. The way the command post was structured, however, limited their view to little else besides a few non-essential personnel, soldiers on patrol and guard duty, vehicle arrival and departure, and the backside of the tent.

The SUVs parked all along the barricade, offering even more cover. The lorry was driven to the front of the line where it merged into a broader security zone. The scene didn't change for several long minutes, and finally, there was movement.

Much to the reporter's audible disgust, none of the passengers emerged on the side closest to the barricade, scooting over instead across the seats to emerge through the other door. The cameraman moved off to the side for a better angle.

The video feed showed several men exiting from the vehicles. They wore black utility uniforms with nylon webbing, holsters, and boots. A handful wore heavy coats that hid their frames, but all of them were masked by black caps pulled low over their heads, reflective aviator sunglasses, and red handkerchiefs over their faces.

"Fuck," the reporter said, off-screen.

In the living room of the Pendragon cottage in Camelot, Bran threw the remnants of his apple at the telly and said, "Suck it."

"According to these reports, there won't be much in our favour," Leon said, his voice crackling over the E-channel. "We won't have surprise advantage."

"Fucking media," Gareth muttered, but his microphone pick-up must have been on full, because everyone in the convoy heard him loud and clear.

"That's why we're going in as soon as we arrive," Arthur said, glancing sideways at Merlin, who nodded.

"Without confirmation from military authorities, I can only assume that the new arrivals are yet another team of specialists called in from parts unknown to address the current situation," the reporter said. He was square in the middle of the screen now, only partially hiding the activity behind him.

The team of masked soldiers were unloading equipment onto a pallet. Case upon unmarked case
were piled high until the forklift groaned to raise the load off the ground. One of the larger men in the group was behind the controls, expertly maneuvering the awkward vehicle through a narrow gullet between the command centre and a staging area.

The reporter turned to observe for a few seconds before facing the camera. "They are currently unloading some sort of equipment, most likely in preparation for another attempt to recover control of the House of Commons and to rescue the captive soldiers.

"I'm not sure what they're going to do. Since the brutal murders of the two young Sergeants, there have been several attempts to re-take the House of Commons. Some groups have been more successful than others, even managing to get into the building, only to be driven out or ambushed. Tactical analysts have described the situation no different than attempting to siege a fortress, with the attacking army held back by the walls and only able to cause minor damage. When a fortress is difficult to breach, often the only recourse is to wait them out. Eventually, the enemy inside would run out of food and munitions.

"If another attempt to breach the metaphorical walls is forthcoming, we are told to expect a nighttime incursion, when fresh soldiers would have the advantage after the terrorists have had a full, tiring day --"

"They killed another one." Elyan's voice over the radio was solemn.

Arthur closed his eyes, exhaling slowly, and was grateful that Elyan didn't go into details. The sorcerers wouldn't kill off the soldiers -- the soldiers were the only bargaining chip that they had. For them to have murdered another hostage after they'd already proved a point hinted at either growing mental instability, or that the soldier had attempted to fight back.

No one spoke for the longest time.

"Fuck, I really hate these guys," Will said, leaning forward. He crossed his arms over the bench seat and pressed his forehead on his arms.

"Pretty sure everyone does," Gareth said over the E-channel.

Without anything new to show, the newscasts over different channels ran through video feed from on-site reporters, who provided random sound bites against the forbidding backdrop of the command centre. The footage from inside the House of Commons was grainy and aimed at the exhausted hostages, with little change; it was cycled in-between clips from so-called experts in the field, who either discussed potential tactics or who denigrated the military for not acting sooner.

Abruptly, the anchorperson interrupted his guest to turn and face the screen. An image of the Commons Chamber appeared in the upper right corner, the phrase Hostage Crisis slashed across the middle.

"Thank you for your commentary, Mr Malone --"
"Doctor Malone," the guest corrected with a huff.

"-- but we'll have to get back to you. I've just received word that a small military unit has entered Palace of Westminster --"

"Are they insane?" Dr Malone shrieked. "It's still daylight. That's a suicide mission. They need to wait until night falls, cut off the power and the lights, and wait until the terrorists could be taken off-guard --"

"Someone get him off the air," the anchorperson said, glaring at his guest.

"With pleasure!" Dr Malone stormed off the stage, a harried producer in his wake, both of them disappearing off-screen.

"-- and from the descriptions received by eyewitnesses, the assault team appears to be the same group that arrived on-site less than an hour ago. We've obtained amateur video footage --"

The image blinked out and showed a black screen. It went on for nearly a minute before it blinked back to a red-faced anchorperson. "Our apologies, we appear to be experiencing technical difficulties --"

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"I guess someone's getting a raise," Gwen remarked, crossing her arms. "I thought you didn't like George."

"Worth it," Morgana said, smug.

Bran threw up his arm in the air for a high-five; Morgana slapped his hand and held on, because, as smart as Dr Malone was, he had a tendency to be a little flaky. Asking him why he needed to make himself available as an expert in military tactics and weaponry without explaining why it needed to be done had been more difficult than it had needed to be, but not one single network would turn down someone with George's credentials.

It was lucky that Gwen and Elyan had been able to hack the other news offices to keep an eye out for anything that would cause trouble for their boys, but one station in particular operated with a complicated, convoluted series of firewalls that would've taken Elyan too long to crack. Dr George Malone had been a last resort. Sending him in with a thumb drive to kill the firewalls had saved them precious time..

"And besides, it's a raise, not a promotion. I won't have to deal with him at department meetings. Assuming we ever have department meetings ever again."

"I have them on the internal CCTV," Elyan announced.

Morgana let go of Bran's hand and followed Gwen to the complicated setup that took over most of the living room. The cottage was off-limits to most of the people in Camelot and the building was blessedly silent, letting them work without interruptions.

Bran, however, was an interruption. He squeezed between Morgana and Gwen and scrambled on the seat next to Elyan. "What are they doing now? Where are they?"
They were an hour outside of London, already picking their way through the debris littering the roads. Gareth and Bohrs weren’t slowing down, which resulted in a few nicks here and there, but the other cars behind them fell behind. Perceval cracked the order to stay together, forcing the two lead vehicles to reduce speed.

Arthur waited for the E-channel chatter to die down before turning to look at Merlin. There was an order he had to give -- and it was an order he didn’t want to give.

Merlin had revealed his magic to the team of his own free will. He’d made that decision when he’d saved them from the sorcerers in Paris. But he had also spent his lifetime hiding who and what he was, all in the interest of keeping himself safe.

And Arthur was going to take that away from him.

Merlin shifted on the bench seat, unconsciously turning toward Arthur despite having his attention focused on his laptop. He was doing his best to help Elyan and Gwen set up hacking routines, writing a sloppy virus that would target specific keywords and to bring down websites and pages that would prematurely reveal who the members of the team were. His fingers tapped on the keyboard, entering a long string of encryption code that would protect the virus from immunization, and --

His fingers slowed, stopped. He looked at Arthur, and --

His expression drifted from simple curiosity to a concerned frown. Arthur held his breath, trying to come up with the words.

Merlin’s ability to surprise Arthur seemed to be never-ending, because the frown became a soft sigh of understanding. He finished what he was working on, sent the file off, and closed the laptop before turning fully to face Arthur. He took Arthur’s hand and squeezed.

"It’s okay,” Merlin said. "I knew it was coming. Mordred, too. It’s kind of inevitable, but this is the sort of war that we’ve got to fight now, and we’ve got to use all the weapons that we’ve got if we hope to get out of this alive. If we hope of putting a stop to all this shite going on. Mordred and me? We talked about it. We’re ready."

Arthur found himself at a loss for words yet once again.

Merlin tapped the E-channel. The background chatter fizzled out as the team heard the click as Merlin connected from passive to active mode.

"All right. Here’s the thing. There’s no way that we’re going to remain anonymous forever. Elyan and Gwen and Morgana can only do so much. We can’t always keep covering our faces when we’re busy covering our arses. So when the time comes… Mordred and me… we’re not going to hide. We don’t want anyone making a ridiculous swan dive to protect us or to go after someone who saw us do something. We stay on mission. We follow orders. Is that clear? Whatever happens, we can take it."

The line was strained with a silence so loud that Arthur swore he heard an echo of the vehicle tyres rumbling on the road. Will leaned forward and clamped a reassuring hand on Merlin’s shoulder, Pellinor glanced in the rear-view mirror and gave Merlin a firm nod, and Lucan reached back,
offering Merlin some gum.

Gwaine groaned over the line. "That was so fucking heartfelt, Merlin. Now I can't bring myself to make a sex joke."

"How about the one where he definitely can take it, but none of us want to hear about it?" Will asked.

"That's a good one, yeah."

"Oh, shut it, you two," Merlin said, but he smiled.

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"I think they're... here," Elyan said unhelpfully, waving a hand in a circular motion over a photograph of the House of Parliament. At Gwen's withering look, he held up his hands in the air and said, "I was sick the day my mates went on the school trip."

"Sick," Gwen repeated, her tone flat. "Right. You weren't with your other mates, nicking electronics from a shop, or spray-painting the bridge?"

Instead of answering, Elyan rolled his chair back and swept his hand toward the building CCTV feed. "You went on the tour. You tell me where they are."

Gwen rolled her eyes. Morgana pinched the bridge of her nose in an attempt to hide her nerves and muttered, "I thought Arthur and I were bad."

"They're in the Tower," Bran said, reaching over to tap the screen. The team member holding up the rear passed by a security feed -- tall and slightly stoop-shouldered, walking with a tell-tale gait. Pellinor looked scrawnier than usual, but that was probably the camera angle and the close-fitting black uniforms and body armour.

Morgana raised a brow and turned to Bran. Gwen and Elyan were also giving him incredulous looks.

Bran shrugged. "What? I went on the tour."

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"... under absolutely no circumstance are any of you to divulge what you hear for the next hour."

Arthur entered the command centre, making eye contact with Colonel Mandrake. Mandrake paused, stood up straighter, and nodded firmly before he returned his attention to a handful of haggard soldiers.

"Most importantly, you are absolutely forbidden from revealing the identities of the men you're about to meet. I don't care if it's your wife, I don't care if it's your mother, I don't care if it's your long-lost twin sister. If your C.O. or your teammates ask where you were, what you were talking
about, and who you were with, kindly tell them where to shove it. If a superior officer is being a nosy fucker, you refer them to me. If you sleep-talk, if you open your mouth and garbage comes out, I will find out, and I will tear your throats out with my bare hands. Is that clear?"

At least three soldiers swallowed hard. The rest managed a feeble, but exhausted, “Yes, Sir!”, and looked very much as if they wanted to be somewhere else right now.

Arthur didn’t blame them. They looked in sorry shape, needing either a trip to the medical unit or some serious rack time. He hoped that whoever had the bright idea of sending them in against the Brass’ orders had gotten their arses chewed out. Regardless of what he thought about it, they were still the only team who had made any significant advance on the House of Commons before being forced to retreat. Intelligence was intelligence, however stupidly it was acquired.

"Clear the room!" Mandrake roared.

The tent vibrated with activity as personnel of every grade and classification locked their stations and left through one of several entrances. It was done with quick, orderly finesse, as if it weren't the only time that they'd been abruptly ordered out. The only ones to remain behind were Colonel Mandrake, General Tachnathar, and the small group of soldiers.

Arthur stepped aside and gestured. Leon, Perceval and Merlin followed him inside.

Arthur pulled his red handkerchief down and approached the soldiers. They looked at him wearily before shifting to stand at attention, though there was an uncertainty to their movements. They didn't know what Arthur's rank was, and were erring on the side of better safe than sorry.

A quick glance at Merlin confirmed that the tent had been magically soundproofed. Arthur turned to the soldiers.

"Your entry point, your route, observed security weaknesses. Go," he ordered.

Two of the junior soldiers exchanged glances.

The Master Sergeant in the group stepped forward and said, "Approached from the East across the green. We disabled the security at the portcullis, cleared the area, and went toward the Library. There were no signs of hostiles. We secured a retreat point and advanced to the lobby. We didn't make it ten metres before they were on us, Sir."

"Pretty sure we triggered an alarm," the man next to him said.

"How many men?" Arthur asked.

"Three," the Master Sergeant said. "We already went through this during debrief --"

"Were we there?" Arthur asked sharply.

"Uh. No, sir." The Master Sergeant had the good grace to look sheepish, because he cleared his throat and stood up straighter. "Sorry, sir. Two of them we recognized from the video feed from inside the Commons. The third bloke is a new face."

Arthur nodded. He'd expected as much. It went to reason that the more powerful sorcerers in the NWO would be able to impose a strict discipline and command structure the way that Tristan's group didn’t… quite… have. It seemed that, in this situation at least, Sigan had organized his men in much the same way as Aredian. Mordred had described the difference between the two men with a simple sentence -- one’s a fanatic hell-bent on martyrdom, the other's a mercenary who was in it
for power and money.

Either way, they'd protect their position by having people positioned at key points. Sigan's group was larger than the army had first thought.

"How'd they stop you?" Perceval asked.

"Opened fire, Sir. The bullets hit their... magic wall, I guess," the Master Sergeant said. "Half of us got knocked on our arses. The other half took off. We held them off as long as we could to cover the retreat before we had to go." The Master Sergeant glanced at the others, who nodded encouragingly. He turned to look at Colonel Mandrake "Our C.O., sir. What's going to happen to him?"

"Is he still inside?" Leon asked, frowning. They hadn't received reports of any additional prisoners. A few casualties, but none of them fatal.

"Wouldn't happen to be Captain Cedric Walsh, would it?" Merlin asked, his tone emotionless and flat.

Arthur felt something in him grow cold, chilling him from the outward-in, and from the way the Master Sergeant barely managed to suppress a shiver, the ice in the room was Merlin's unconscious doing.

"Uh, yes, Sir. How'd you know, Sir?" the Master Sergeant asked.

Merlin glanced at Arthur. "Just sounds familiar, that's all."

"You're dismissed," Arthur said abruptly.

The Master Sergeant didn't wait for confirmation from Colonel Mandrake -- he left the command tent, the other soldiers following in his wake.

After a moment of silence, Mandrake stepped forward and said, "It's good to see you, Captain --"

"You won't be saying that tomorrow," Arthur said, turning to the General. "Sir. I assume you received the packet I sent?"

The General chewed the inside of his cheek for a good long while before answering. He exhaled in a quiet sigh that made Arthur think of Kilgarrah and wonder how many fucking dragons there were in the British Army. With a shift of movement that seemed to rearrange everything in the room, he slowly rounded on his heel and faced Arthur.

"I have."

"And?"

"It's under consideration," General Tachnathar said slowly, ponderously, as if even that small concession was painful for him. "You're ballsy, Captain Pendragon."

Merlin snorted. Leon bit down on his smirk. Perceval raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms.

"You have no idea," Arthur said, pulling the scarf over his face. He signalled his men. "Let's go."
The CCTV footage was black-and-white, grainy, and of poor quality, but there was no missing the single-minded focus of Excalibur’s members as they cleared all the openings along the corridor leading toward the central part of the House of Parliament. Several of the men --

"Geraint and Galahad," Elyan said, tapping one screen. He pointed toward another. "Gareth and Gwaine."

-- split up in different directions, working their way down the corridors.

"How do you even know?" Bran asked.

"They move like they play," Elyan said. At Bran's confused look, he added, "Call of Duty? We play at least one multi-player whenever they're on leave."

"Oh," Bran said. Then, perking up, he asked, "Where's Kay and Will?"

"Kay," Elyan said, singling him out from the middle of the group heading down the main corridor without hesitation. His hand hovered over the displays before he reluctantly tapped another screen. "Will. Probably. Never gamed with him, but he's stockier than Mordred, so I'm guessing."

"This is Lance," Gwen said, picking him out. He was at the head of the group.

"Leon," Morgana said, her fingernail tapping on the screen. He was about midway down the line, just after Kay. Her hand drifted to the leader of the group and she gestured. "And this pillock is Arthur."

The two two-man teams that had split off rejoined the main group, reshuffling their positions.

"I don't remember that," Bran piped up suddenly.

On the hacked CCTV feed, they watched the team approach a security station in the corridor that blocked the way. The station allowed only one person entrance at a time through a narrow electronic gate with an industrial-grade body scanner. The men slowed, cleared the section, and flattened against the wall.


"We're recording this, right?" Morgana asked.

Elyan gave her an owlish look. "We can?"

"Do it," she said. "Audio too. In fact, every mission they're on, record it."

Elyan frowned, but he didn't ask. He typed a few commands on the computer before nodding. "Done."

Morgana caught Gwen watching her and shook her head. "I have a plan."

"Of course you do," Gwen said, and left it at that.
"How long have you been holding onto that packet?" Merlin asked. He kept his voice low so that they wouldn't be overheard by anyone who wasn't on the team, but it didn't matter. The handkerchiefs were doing a good job masking their faces and muffling their voices.

"Since a week after we were sent for Directory training," Arthur said. He turned and nodded at Leon and Perceval, who split up to make sure the team were briefed. "You didn't read it, did you?"

"No," Merlin hedged. "But now that I know when you wrote it, I'm pretty sure I know what it is."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Merlin said. His eyes were crinkled at the corners as if he were smiling under his mask. "What else could it be? You planned for the aftermath of the magic apocalypse, didn't you? Just for fun, too. You're such a prat."

"Shut up, Merlin," Arthur said, shoving him toward their assigned zone.

"They've done a job designing this," Owain said, running a sensor on the outside of the security cage. He took a step back and gestured. "The body scanner's no big deal. No one's manning it so it's on standby. The problem's the metal detectors hidden in the paneling. We walk through, we set off the alarm."

"Can you disarm it?" Arthur asked.

"Sure. From the inside of the box," Owain said, pointing at the security cage. Arthur touched his ear and there was a faint click on the line, activating an external comm. "Watchtower, can you take care of this problem?"

"Trying," Elyan said into his unit. "The firewalls were a pain, but it looks like -- no. Sorry, can't do it. It's all off-network. I'm looking at plans for a standalone generator and no networked computer."

"Amateur," Owain said. He shrugged out of his equipment, handing his weapons to whoever was in reach and went on to remove anything that might set off the metal detector, right down to his belt and his boots.

"If I knew we'd be getting a strip show, I'd have brought along a few spare quid," Gwaine quipped.

"Shut it, you," Owain said, without heat. He checked himself again; another teammate checked him over, too, just to make sure. He held a small packet in his hand and pointed at someone in the group. "Oi. You've got me covered, yeah?"

"'Course I do," Merlin said, sounding offended.

Owain nodded curtly, turned toward the security cage, and tip-toed gingerly down the corridor. A light blinked on and off at the very top of the security cage, and everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. Whatever metal was still on his person wasn't enough to trigger an alarm. He went through the body scanner in his socked feet, slipped around the corner --

Elyan switched the feed. The screen showed an angle pointed toward the security cage, though from the other side of the corridor.
and stood in front of a closed door.

Morgana bit at her cuticles. She couldn't tell what Owain was doing, but less than a minute later, he said, "Standard lock. I'm in. Give me a second, and..."

Gwen took Morgana's wrist and pulled her hand away. "You'll ruin your manicure."

"We're clear," Owain announced.

The team advanced down the corridor, moved through the security check, and took positions along the far wall of the cage. They could see Owain hopping on one foot as he hurried into his boots. He was re-equipped in a few seconds and took his position in the line. From the angle of the CCTV in the security cage, it was difficult to tell who was where, and there wasn't enough room for the entire team to fit in there, not with their equipment. But they were keeping well clear of the glass doorway.

"Watchtower." Arthur's voice was muted, taking care not to be overheard. "Do you have eyes?"

Elyan flipped through several screens and muttered under his breath as each screen came up black. "No change from the standard. System is operational but there's no feed. Watchtower is blind. Do you copy? Watchtower is blind."

Gwen made a small sound, covering her mouth before it reached the microphone. It wasn't that the sorcerers had cut the video, or that they couldn't get into the system to access the CCTV. The earliest feed showed them spraying paint on the cameras. The only video they were getting from inside the Commons area was under the sorcerer's control.

"Like we practiced, gentlemen," Arthur said. "Red Two, take the right. Hellburners, take point. Everybody else, try not to break the valuables."

Two of the soldiers moved forward -- Merlin stood just ahead of Arthur, with a second man ahead of Leon. With a final check, they disappeared through the door.


"There's no clear lines and even if there were, I don't see how you can do without any of us inside," Gwaine said. One of the original plans called for snipers in Westminster Hall and just off the Commons Library to take out whoever were patrolling the corridors around the Commons proper. They weren't the only ones to come up with the idea, because one of the earliest assault attempts had relied on sniper strength to take them down.

The sorcerers had been smart enough to draw curtains over the windows and to cover up the rest with whatever they had on hand -- spray paint, furniture, even a turned-out painting of one of the former Prime Ministers, his face done up with round glasses, devil horns, and a sinister goatee. The painting had been featured on more than one newscast, which was unfortunate, because the former Prime Minister had not been well-liked, and the vandalism was no doubt winning the sorcerers a fair number of sympathizers.

"There'll be all hands on deck," Arthur said, buckling his gun belt. He didn't look at the schematics -- he didn't need to. He'd studied them so much on the drive down that he had them burned into the back of his eyelids. "Two teams. Half with me, half with Leon."
"You mean, half with Merlin, half with Mordred," Leon said, pulling down a black handkerchief over his hair. His hair had grown out since before they became victim to the Directory's whims, and his tell-tale blond curls were too recognizable.

"Dibs on Merlin," Gwaine said.

"Dibs on Mordred," Lucan said.

Arthur looked around the cramped tent and raised a brow. "Teams are assigned. No arguments, no trading off. You'll take your positions and you'll like it."

Gwaine and Lucan glanced at each other.

"So I'm with Merlin, then?" Gwaine asked.

"Excellent. I'm with Mordred," Lucan said, clapping his hands together.

Arthur rolled his eyes. He glanced at Mordred and Merlin, who were watching the group with raised brows.

"You know," Mordred said slowly, "I was never this popular in school. It's very..."

"Awkward?" Merlin suggested.

"Yes. I keep half-expecting them to dunk me in the loo."

"To be fair, they might do that anyway," Merlin said.

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"There's a ward," Merlin said, shifting at an angle to look through the glass. "Open the door, break the ward, trigger the alarm. Pretty standard shite."

"Can you --" Arthur started, trailing off when Merlin nodded curtly.

"Done."

"Ready?" Arthur asked. He received a murmur of agreement before turning to Merlin and giving him the signal.

Merlin turned the doorknob carefully and slowly pushed the door outward. He waited, the door barely open a crack, and tilted his head. Arthur would think that he was listening for footsteps if there wasn't a faint golden glow to his eyes.

_Clear_, Merlin signalled, pushing the door open all the way.

Merlin was the first out of the security cage, his semiautomatic rifle hanging from his lanyard, his arms stretching, palms out, to cast a shield at both ends of the corridor. It gave the team some breathing room and allowed them to take positions.

As soon as the shield was set, Merlin raised his weapon to his shoulder to guard the left-hand corridor, lowering it only when Arthur brushed past to take over. Arthur was peripherally aware of Merlin murmuring something under his breath to Mordred, making quick physical contact to tie
one of the two shields to Mordred so that he could move it as the second team moved forward.

"In position?" Arthur asked, keeping his voice low. Merlin had promised that the shields would also muffle sound, but Arthur didn't want to test that theory. Sorcerers or not, military discipline or terrorist training, there was bound to be a patrol nearby. The corridors around the House of Commons weren't that long, but they were straight and direct; Arthur wanted a quick and controlled advance, with as few triggered alarms as possible.

"In position," Leon replied, his tone equally low. "I'm counting three midway, two more at the far end."

Arthur studied the reflection in the mirror carefully. "One proximal, ten metres. Two midway. Two at the far end. Shooters, take position."

"Hold," Leon said, hushed. "One man from midpoint advancing on our position. He's armed."

Arthur waited. He kept an eye on the mirror. The man closest to them hadn't moved, but he was walking back and forth, scratching the back of his neck. His eyes were fixed on a device on his hand; Arthur could make out dialogue, and --

"Coronation Street," Kay said, his voice hushed.

Arthur nodded in agreement. He gestured for Kay to move forward in case he was needed, positioning himself to do the same. He didn't have to look to know that Leon had done the same.

"Clear," Leon said.

"On three," Arthur said. "One. Two --"

There was no three. The snipers moved around the corner, weapons buttressed against their shoulders, barely spending a split second to aim. Kay and Arthur followed Will and Geraint, keeping low and out of the way.

The man ten metres away went down first at a silenced gunshot to the chest. The two sorcerers at the midway point turned, alarmed, and one of the two went down from another, well-aimed shot. The second dropped behind what looked to be an antique decorative piece of furniture, wide enough to give them some coverage.

The three sorcerers at the end were slower to react. One of them ran for cover only to crumple flat. Two of the others moved forward, hands raised, eyes glowing.

A sorcerer's head whipped back, his body following after. The last remaining sorcerer was protected behind a shield.

"Bugger," Will muttered, but he didn't move forward.

Geraint crouched down, making himself into a smaller target, and grunted in agreement.

Arthur advanced while Will and Geraint provided cover fire. Kay mirrored his movements from the other side of the corridor, trailing behind Arthur a little. The sorcerer behind the antique wall table glanced around the edge; a vase that had probably been a gift from a visiting dignitary went flying for Arthur's head.

He caught it with a grunt. A flash of movement was Kay crossing the corridor in five quick steps, hauling the sorcerer out from his shelter. Arthur put the vase down carefully.
The team moved. There was some chatter coming from the other corridor, but Arthur didn't have time to listen in. They had one more sorcerer to disable. For some reason, this one hadn't raised the alarm yet.

Maybe there was no need. Maybe the sorcerer knew that he wouldn't be getting backup. Maybe --

Arthur didn't have time to finish his thought process, because Will and Geraint were leapfrogging their way forward as the team progressed. No sooner had they reached the halfway point that --

A blinding flash of light nearly seared Arthur's eyeballs, his coated glasses barely compensating in time. Immediately after the flash, there was a series of directed projectiles, all of them small and round and burning --

"Cover," Perceval ordered, beating Arthur to it.

Arthur sank down and braced, covering his face. He saw Geraint barrel into Will and shove him into the wall. "Team Two, watch your twelve o'clock. Flash bang trap at the halfway point," Arthur barked.

"Acknowledged," Leon said.

The barrage that Arthur was expecting never happened. He dropped his arm and looked up to see -- Merlin.

Of course. Merlin. Merlin was standing in the middle of the corridor five, maybe six metres away, his rifle held in his dominant hand, his left arm outstretched. His eyes were glowing even through the darkened glasses, and his shield rippled where it had curved inward, capturing all of the magical projectiles, keeping them intact.

Down the corridor, the sorcerer's glee evaporated.

Merlin pulled his arm back, and the shield flexed as if it were the pocket of a slingshot.

The sorcerer's eyes widened with alarm, and --

The shield sprung back into place, gyrating with a visible, disorienting warble before it settled. The projectiles were redirected at the sorcerer, some of them catching on his shield, most of them pelting through as the shield failed completely.

The sorcerer's body crumpled, his clothing catching fire. The wall behind him fizzled and burned.

A commotion behind Arthur caught his attention. The last sorcerer must have gotten away from Kay, because he was in the middle of the corridor, scrambling on his hands and knees.

A single, muffled pop, and the sorcerer was dead.

Arthur didn't look to see who had fired. It could have been any of them.

He gestured, and his men fell into formation. Arthur put a hand on Merlin's shoulder, and Merlin nodded at the unspoken signal. He moved forward, leading the way, the shield staying several metres in front of them.

"In position," Leon said.

Arthur acknowledged and confirmed that his team had also reached the secondary position. He
moved against the inner wall and used his mirror to look around the corner. Except for furniture and decoration, the hallway was empty, and the only thing that moved was Leon's mirror at the other end. The lack of bodies in the area didn't mean that no one had ever been there. When Merlin took out the sorcerer, it was entirely possible that someone had seen and had gone inside to warn the others.

Arthur tapped his radio. "Watchtower. Any reactions inside?"

"No change," Elyan said. "Half of them are napping. Couple of them at the entrance, having a smoke. The Big Bad looks like he's winding himself up for another rant."

Arthur exchanged glances with Merlin. If Sigan was going to start proselytizing, another hostage was going to die. They had to move.

"Anything?" Arthur asked.

"No traps or triggers," Merlin said. "Can't be sure of the door to the Lobby."

"We'll worry about that later," Arthur said. Merlin had already warned the team about the possibility, and in a way, Arthur was counting on the less-disciplined group to forget about the traps and run through them first. He keyed his radio again. "Team one, team two. On my count, take positions. One, two --"
House of Commons. We'll be joining the ongoing video feed shortly. Please be advised that there may be some graphic images --"

Whoever was behind the controls didn't wait for the reporter to finish talking, because suddenly, the screen switched over to the somewhat-static video feed from inside the House of Commons. The soldiers looked more roughed up than they had less than an hour ago, and most of the sorcerers and random terrorists in the large room were scattered on benches everywhere, lying about and taking naps. The Big Bad -- Sigan -- was in the middle of the room, behind the soldiers, his back to the camera.

That was when Bran saw them. The team. They'd made it.

"They're there!" Bran shouted excitedly, scrambling to sit up straight. He leaned forward, wishing that the video was a better resolution, or at least that he could get a better view of the room.

Morgana joined him on the couch, a hand pressed to her ear. Gwen stayed at the computers with Elyan, who couldn't leave his station, anyway.

The team swept into the room from several different directions. They were broken up into smaller two-man teams, with most of them diverging through the galleries, the rest of them moving at ground level toward where Sigan had set himself up, centre-stage, near the Speaker's chair.

There was a commotion as Sigan finally registered what he was seeing and shouted an alarm. Some of the more alert terrorists reacted right away, even before Sigan raised the alarm, while the rest woke up with a groggy start.

Flashes of lights coming from the galleries were bodies dropping as the team moved through the aisles with razor-sharp efficiency. No wasted movements, no misplaced shots, nothing but pinpoint precision as they cleared the area. Their black uniforms, red handkerchiefs and glossed-over glasses turned them into anonymous avenging angels, fearsome and merciless. Bran cheered when the team down at floor level fanned out in an inverted V formation, firing on anyone making a threatening move.

"I… I'm going to say it," Mordred said, his head bowed down. He wrung his hands as if trying to wash them clean of a stain only he could see. "If we want this to work, we have to kill them. They're magic users, Arthur. They won't stop unless you stop them."

No one spoke. It was Elyan who spoke up, shaking his head minutely. "They've got weapons in their hands even without a gun."

"They're people," Lance said. "Magic or not. They're human beings. No different than the rest of us."

"We know Sigan's a nutjob," Will said. He was watching Merlin. "But that doesn't mean they all are."

"Plus, it's being broadcast live," Gwaine said, shrugging. "We can dance around the cameras all we want, waste time cutting off the vid feed, but they've got that one camera we can't cut."

"Shoot the cameraman," Galahad suggested.
“Shoot the camera, he means,” Geraint said.

Arthur exhaled a quiet sigh. He stared at the photographs on the table -- everything they could get off the Web, schematics and all, including confidential blueprints flagged full of passages and doorways that weren't on the official plans. "That's not my call. The word's come down. The Brass wants these blokes eliminated with extreme prejudice."

Mordred was pale. "They want to teach us a lesson."

"Them," Arthur corrected. He pointed at the telly off to the side, which had been on the same channel ever since they received their orders. "Them, and every pillock like them. Not you, Mordred. Never you, Merlin. Not Morgana, not Kathy, not Gaius."

He paused. He didn't like the orders any more than the rest of the team, and he was well aware that the situation on the scene could change, that in the end, it would be his call to make.

"We cannot afford to raise the alarm or to be attacked from behind. This mission needs to succeed. Protect yourselves first. Protect the team. But once we're inside…"

"It's going to be all eyes on us, men. We're leading the way. We have to show the others how it can be done. How it should be done. Once we have the Commons under control, we only have one target, and that's Sigan. The rest of them… Disable them if you can. Gag them and bind them. No unnecessary deaths."

"Gag them and bind them," Merlin repeated, his voice hollow. He was watching Mordred, who looked up slowly, as if he'd heard the tone in Merlin's voice.

Slowly, Mordred nodded. Arthur pretended he didn't know what it meant.

---

Less than two minutes later, they'd reached a stalemate.

The terrorists in the galleries had been dealt with and most of the team was now on the floor. The snipers were high and in position in those locations, their guns steady and trained on their targets. The sorcerers were huddled in the middle of the Commons, surrounded on all sides by Excalibur. The hostages were there, too, out of reach, and someone had taken control of the camera, because the camera was sweeping all around Sigan. The images were wobbly and rolled with roller-coaster-levels of nausea, stopping on each and every member of the team.

They looked more menacing up close than they did through the fixed point CCTVs all around the chamber. Each of them stood with planted feet, weapons buttressed against their shoulder and ready to go, faces nearly covered by the red handkerchief, Pendragon Consulting prototype safety and variable lighting compensation glasses, and caps.

None of them moved or reacted as the camera came in close. If the cameraman was taunting them, the team gave no sign of it. They were stoic and immobile, almost frozen in place.

As if by a spell.

But it wasn't a spell that had ensorcelled them.
A shield glittered like emeralds in the light, sickly sweet with various hues of green and yellow. It cast an off-shade on anything that was outside of it, turning the black, unadorned uniforms a strange shade of grey, the red handkerchief a duller, rusty shade.

Morgana jumped when Bran pinched her, and gasped for air when she realized she'd forgotten how to breathe.

The cameraman finally turned to Sigan. For a brief moment, there was a shaken edge to him. He'd obviously been taken by surprise by the team's unexpected arrival. Morgana knew that the army would have made at least a handful of attempts at getting into the House of Commons, but for none to have made it in by now was telling.

Aware that he was now on camera, Sigan stood up straighter, shoulders back, chin up. He brushed his clothes of imaginary lint. "I am pleased that you've accepted my invitation. I did not, however, realize that it would take this long for you to arrive."

"Sorry we're late to the party. Our cards were lost in the mail," one of the team members said.

Morgana looked over her shoulder and thumbed up at Gwen. The voice modifiers that she'd worked on with Gaius were working. Except for his bloody attitude, Morgana wouldn't have recognized Gwaine's voice.

"Is that Will?" Bran asked.

Or maybe it's Will, she decided. It was hard to tell. They were both cocky arses.

"It's of no matter. Your presence ensures that we won't run out of hostages," Sigan admitted, shrugging nonchalantly.

The camera swept over the exhausted and frightened faces of the soldiers held captive. Not only were the surviving soldiers present, but there was at least half a dozen new ones, all in stripped-down tactical gear.

"Trade you. Us for them," another team member said. It was too blunt and abrupt to be Arthur, and Leon had been absolutely forbidden from taking stupid heroic risks.

"Kay?" Bran asked.

"Maybe Lucan," Morgana said, putting a hand to her ear before belatedly realizing that listening to the conversation both on the TV and through the earpiece resulted in an awkward echo.

"Lamorak, actually," Gwen said.

On the telly, Sigan appeared to be giving the offer some consideration. Finally, he shook his head.

"Their deaths won't serve a purpose," another team member said. "If you hurt them, you're only going to make people hate you even more."

"That's where you're wrong," Sigan said with a snort. "Their deaths will be on your hands. The Queen signed their death warrant when she sent you in after us. The government, your military masters -- the blood of their soldiers is on their hands. Stopping these men is a small payment for all the suffering innocents have endured."

"You're no innocent," someone said.
"I have a clear conscience," Sigan said. "No man has died of my hand."

"No, they died because you willed it and you have the power to act on it," another voice chimed in, and Morgana guessed it was Mordred from the ice in his tone. "They came to harm because of you. Because you decided to take their lives. And you did it because --"

"He's a twisted, psychopathic soulless pillock, that's why," the first voice said. Again, Morgana couldn't tell if it was Will or Gwaine.

"-- you can't see past your own ego," Mordred said. "You're not doing this for anyone. You're doing this for you. This is on you."

There was a curious tone to his voice, full of resignation and irritation, as if he knew well what he was talking about. And maybe he did. Morgana had never found out what, exactly, Mordred had done for the enemy other than to learn he'd gone undercover, but the flashes of vision that she'd received during her training sessions with him had been…

Chilling.

More chilling than the twisted smile on Sigan's face. Sigan spread a hand around the room, indicating his small army. There were a good twenty men and women protected by the confines of Sigan's shield, and none of them looked happy. Into the camera, Sigan said, "I am but the vessel of civilization's vengeance. I speak and act for everyone who has been wronged."

"You don't speak for all of us, you limp twat," Bran shouted at the screen. He slumped heavily onto the couch and said, "What a bloody bag of dicks!"

Gwen swatted Bran on the head; he lurched forward, a hand on his head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

Gwen gave Bran a pointed look. "Kay might've asked me to keep an eye on you, but Will asked me to make sure you didn't swear."

Morgana laughed softly, anxiously, grateful for the distraction. But when she turned to look, Bran wasn't listening to her. He was gutted, his eyes watery, his hands clenching into fists as if he expected the worst to happen and he'd lose the two men he followed around camp as if he were a puppy.

A familiar crackle of magic flaring to life pulled them all to stare at the screen.

"Surrender. Or he dies," Sigan said over the telly. He pointed toward one of the hostages without looking at them. The youngest of the soldiers climbed to his feet with jerky movements, his face tight with strain as he resisted the magic clinging to his skin. As soon as he was upright, he floated off the ground, a pained gasp escaping his chest as he clawed at an invisible force at his throat.

The crowd gathered around the electronics shop stared at the video feed with horror. There was no escaping the sight of the poor boy being strangled by… by thin air. It was on every screen in the window display, and despite the broken glass, they had barely been able to hear the early conversation between the masked men and the terrorists. Someone had reached through the bars
and increased the volume on one of the television sets, and the reporter on the scene still couldn't quite hear clearly, not over the heart-in-throat hush of the crowd.

The reporter couldn't watch this. He couldn't.

When the soldiers he'd seen arrive at the command centre showed up inside the House of Commons, something in him had broken. He hadn't recognized sheer relief at finally believing that everything would be all right until this moment, when the heroes he'd been secretly hoping for were about to fail.

Just like everyone else.

The cameraman had his video trained on the reporter's face, on the crowd, capturing their reactions even as he himself stared at the telly, unable to look away.

"Get that bloody camera off of me," the reporter said, shoving it aside. The cameraman steadied it easily, but he redirected the camera somewhere else.

"Put your weapons on the floor and get to your knees," Sigan said.

"Don't do it. Don't do it," a woman in the crowd repeated quietly. The man next to her repeated her words with a fervent whisper that spread until they were all chanting the plea, even the reporter.

"Counteroffer," one of the black-clad soldiers said, stepping forward. His weapon was lowered and he held a placating hand out. The reporter thought that he might try to negotiate with the sorcerer, but he thought wrong when the soldier said, "You put him down, and I might let you live."

In response, the strangling soldier rose up even higher, his legs kicking out viciously. Sigan laughed. It was a hoarse, throaty, high-pitched laugh that abruptly cut off when --

The hanging, suffocating soldier fell ten feet before he was caught, somehow, and eased to the ground.

The soldier's arm was still out, but instead of in a mollifying gesture, it was pointed and directed, fingers faintly curled.

"Fuck, yeah," someone in the crowd shouted. A woman next to the reporter covered her mouth with both hands, taking short, hiccupping breaths.

Sigan stared at him in disbelief for less than a heartbeat before his expression dawned with realization and twisted with unspeakable rage. "Traitor!"

A greenish-yellow ball of flame appeared in his hand in the blink of an eye, and he flung it at the black-clad soldier.

The cameraman shifted positions and dodged; the video was a dizzying jumble of movement, light, and noise. The tactical team sprang into action just as the greenish haze of what was understood to be some sort of magical shield crumbled like shattered stained glass. Sigan threw another ball of flame, the other sorcerers were reacting similarly, with varying sorts of incandescent, burning substances, and --

The camera dropped, bounced on the ground, and filmed the bottom of the long table in the middle of the Commons to the chaotic soundtrack of gunfire and magic.
"No, no, no, no," Bran vaulted over the back of the sofa when the camera fell, but Morgana beat him to the control centre. Elyan had every CCTV camera in the commons on the monitors in front of him, but his attention was focused on the screen immediately in front of him as he monitored the feed. Media outlets had had access to the CCTV from the Commons before the military ruthlessly throttled it, and he was making sure that no one was hacking the feeds.

Morgana searched the screens for someone who might be Leon. A member of Excalibur was fighting hand-to-hand against two sorcerers, moving with familiar sinuous fluidity. Kay kept both sorcerers so thoroughly distracted that neither had the time or opportunity to cast a spell before they were both disabled, both of them knocked out. His teammate -- Perceval, it looked like -- flipped one man over onto his stomach and quickly zip-tied his hands together while Kay took care to gag them.

In the upper right-hand corner of the bank of monitors, three sorcerers focused missile fire in one corner of the room while a fourth flung offending furniture and barriers out of the way with a careless wave of their hand. The terrorists were pinned down, occasionally returning fire and drawing attention while the snipers in the galleries picked off the sorcerers one by one.

A stray blast of magic took out three cameras along the far end of the Commons and twisted one camera around. The fourth camera caught a fuzzy glimpse of one of the snipers ducking out of the way before his position was blown away by something that took out half of the balcony.

One of the team members ran down the Commons, ducking and dodging the sorcerers who got in his way. He was smaller than most of the others and didn't look to have fired his weapon once, but he barrelled fearlessly into a sorcerer who was standing, hands raised and glowing, near the soldiers. When they broke apart, the sorcerer raised his arm and swatted the air, throwing the enemy aside.

It had to be Mordred, because a taller team member -- Merlin -- was facing off against Sigan.

Sigan was manic, throwing everything and whatever he had at Merlin. Magical missiles of every shape and size -- bright white and blue like lightning, sickly green and yellow like Greek Fire, blazing orange and sticky like napalm. Merlin diverted them, contained them, quenched them, and although scorch marks appeared in the Commons and would cost taxpayers a small fortune to restore, nothing burned.

Bit by bit, the fighting died down. The sorcerers were quickly and thoroughly subdued. Those who refused to stop fighting were pinned down until they were overwhelmed by superior tactics and greater offensive power. Through it all, the radio chatter was down to a minimum, the team a silent, effective force working together seamlessly, instinctively knowing where assistance was needed and moving accordingly.

And finally...

Sigan released one last blast before sagging. The sign of weakness was brief, because he straightened, shoulders back, and glared at Merlin.

"Your men are down. You're surrounded," Merlin said.

They'd changed position through the fight and it had looked, for a while, as if Sigan had been battering him backward, forcing a retreat, but now, Morgana realized that Merlin had been luring
Sigan away from the prisoners. On another monitor, two team members were freeing the soldiers and herding them out of the line of fire, while a third tended to their injuries.

"Give up," Merlin said. He didn't appear to be the worse for wear. The red handkerchief around his face was ruffled, but still in place. His uniform had a few cuts, but nothing that compromised the integrity of his body armour.

In contrast, Sigan was dishevelled, his clothing frumpy and wrinkled, drenched in sweat. Bravado might be all in the mind, but Sigan didn't look the part. The apocalypse-chic look had been all strut and bluster, and he wasn't any different than the rest of the population -- wearing what he could to stay warm, wearing everything he owned to keep moving. Morgana frowned.

"Guys," Morgana said, touching her earpiece. She started to say something more, only to trail off in mid-syllable --

No luck foraging. Not today. Slim pickings. His stomach growled feebly before falling silent, as if knowing that food wouldn't be coming and there was no point in crying plaintively for a meal.

Neil rubbed his belly anyway, out of habit, and tried to look inconspicuous as he emerged from the alley behind Tesco's. He walked down the road, his head bowed, looking behind him every now and then. He didn't want to run into the dealers again. They nearly bust his eye open the last time they caught him. It wasn't Neil's fault he sucked at selling drugs.

Great at using, though.

It made everything else bearable. He could touch things when he was using. It was a fucking relief to fuck someone and not see every partner they'd ever had. He liked being able to pick up a sandwich and not know or care if someone had washed their hands before they'd made it. He didn't really need to know how many fucking kids tossed off in the corner stall at the dinner because they got a glimpse up the waitress' too-short skirt.

His mom didn't understand. His dad called him a sissy. The other kids in school thought he was a weirdo because he didn't like touching things.

Neil took a circuitous route to the hole in the wall where he made his nest, in a hurry to get there before it got too cold. He'd overheard the crotchety couple a few blocks away complain about the snow that was supposed to fall that night and he wanted to make sure he'd be warm.

He slowed down when he saw someone standing right in front of the pile of bricks and debris that hid the entrance to his little makeshift den.

It was a pretty, older woman with brown hair blowing loose in the wind. Her skin was milky pale and her lips painted a startling red. She was wearing a thin trench coat that was tied tightly around her waist but did nothing to hide her shapely bare legs, and those expensive high heels weren't suited for walking through gravel and broken cobblestones.

She was watching him, her hands in her pockets, a thoughtful glint in her eyes.

Neil hadn't been living on the streets for very long and didn't have his cop instincts yet, but he knew enough not to turn around on his heels and walk away -- that was too obvious. Instead, he broke eye contact and kept walking, and when he was close enough, he heard her say, "There you are, Cornelius. I've been looking for you."

"Morgana?" Gwen asked, touching her arm.
Morgana didn't answer. She shut her eyes tightly against the onslaught from the vision. How Nimueh had promised to take care of Cornelius, that she could teach him how to control his powers. She'd taken him under her wing, setting him up in an apartment, introducing him to other boys and girls like him. Nimueh fulfilled her promise, and young Cornelius "Neil" Sigan flourished, even going so far as to hold down a job stocking at the same Tesco's where he used to scavenge for food.

Then, one day, Nimueh asked him for a favour.

*He fucking knew it. He knew it. No one ever did anything for free. This whole thing had been too good to be true. Of course, she'd want something from him.*

*Part of him wanted to storm out. He wasn't going to be used. He didn't owe her anything. Just because she had a propensity for rescuing kids off the streets like some sort of supernatural Good Samaritan didn't mean that he had to do shite for her.*

*Another part of him caved in. She was looking at him so with so much hope that he knew he'd feel like an arse if he said no. And she hadn't needed to do anything to help him. She could've left him on the streets. Neil knew that he would've been dead within weeks of their meeting, bleeding to death on the kerb after getting stabbed in the kidneys by one of the drug dealers he owed money to.*

*Nimueh hadn't needed to help him. Just like he didn't need to help her.*

*With a sigh, Neil asked, "What do you want me to do?"*

*Nimueh gave him the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. "I need you to clean something for me."

*She showed him a blue gem.*

Morgana didn't understand what she was seeing in her vision. Not right away. The time frame was wrong. Neil -- Cornelius -- was young in Morgana's visions, but he was in his mid-thirties now. The gem that Nimueh had given Neil was the same gem she'd stolen out of the CIA repository not that long ago.

It made sense when she remembered what Arthur had said about Nimueh. How she'd used Pendragon Consulting as a storage shop for custom items and had probably done the same with the Directory and the CIA safehouse in London.

How she'd approached the former mayor of the nearby village and used him to do what she needed.

*Neil chuckled nervously, looking at the jewel. It didn't look real. It couldn't be real. Plastic and paste and a lot of paint, probably. She had to be fucking with him.*

*Nimueh raised the gem encouragingly, and he reached out. It wasn't until he made contact with his bare fingertips that he thought to wonder why Nimueh was wearing gloves.*

*And then, he didn't wonder at all.*

*There was a rush of power. He was caught in a torrent of it. Energy pounded into him with the force of a waterfall, beating and battering him until he was surrounded by darkness.*

*The cold shock of it faded slowly, and he screamed, screamed, screamed, because he was surrounded by evil.*

"He's possessed," Morgana blurted out.
Her surroundings swam in and out. She steadied herself against the back of Elyan's chair. She was only peripherally aware of a missing Bran, the sound of running footsteps and a door slamming in the distance. She focused on the monitor in the middle of the control center and watched in growing horror as Sigan was surrounded by swirling wisps of energy that were the same blue colour as the gem.


"We can't contain him if you're in our way," Mordred protested.

"Move away," Arthur barked, but no one moved.

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No one wanted to move. That was the problem. The hostages -- both the originals and those who had been acquired through ill-advised attempts to secure the Commons -- were out of direct line of fire and the sorcerers and mundane support were either dead or out of commission. Except for Lance, who was tending to the injured, and Bohrs and Pellinor, who were keeping an eye on the prisoners, the rest of the team had surrounded Sigan and Merlin, though they stayed at a safe distance.

Will and Gwaine were vibrating with anger and Arthur could see them struggling to keep their fingers from squeezing the trigger of their weapons. They were holding back not only because Arthur had ordered them, but because everyone remembered what they'd been taught at the Directory about possession.

It wasn't much, but it was critical: no one knew what would happen if someone possessed by a spirit was killed. The recommendation was to capture them alive.

"Goddamn it," Arthur muttered under his breath. He couldn't blame Merlin. Merlin had done exactly what he had been supposed to do, which was to draw Sigan's attention away from the hostages. Subduing Sigan had been difficult when Sigan had been bombarding Merlin with a variety of magical attacks, but in that brief moment when Sigan had waivered, Merlin could have...

Merlin could have finished him.

"She's right," Merlin said, his voice tinny and breathless over the radio. "I could --"

"You're not a bloody exorcist," Will snapped. "Someone give me the kill order. Please."

"There's an innocent in there," Merlin protested.

"You don't know that," Will said. "He could be the meanest son-of-a-bitch on the bloody planet. Why else would he be possessed?"

"That is not necessarily a prerequisite for possession," Mordred cut in. "And until we know what is possessing him, we cannot make allusions to his personality. However…"

There was a brief pause.

"However, Sigan does not have the best reputation," Mordred added.

"No shite, Sherlock," Gwaine said.
Mordred had briefed the team on the way to London, but he only knew Sigan from word of mouth. There was virtually nothing in the MI-5 or MI-6 databases or any of the records they were able to access on such short notice. The only thing that the information agreed with was Sigan's abrupt appearance approximately eight years ago.

The time frame agreed with what Morgana had quickly told them about her vision. The gem, the transferral, the possession -- it spoke to something else. Nimueh had gone out of her way to obtain the gem from the CIA repository twice, and Cornelius Sigan was her way of preparing the gem for something. To clean it. To remove the taint. But why?

Whatever was in Sigan, it wasn't part of Nimueh's end game. It was a distraction. The longer that Sigan kept the army occupied here, the more time she had to set up whatever it was that she was planning.

Arthur watched the blue light spiral around Sigan. Sigan had stopped talking, and although he was still standing tall and unaffected, there were signs of strain. His stance was slightly off-kilter, not quite balanced. His fingers trembled and twitched. His hair was damp with sweat. He panted in heavy, laboured gasps, as if he were struggling to hide how physically exhausted he was.

Despite the release of magic into the world, not every sorcerer had the same ability to channel or to use it. It was possible, Arthur decided, that Nimueh had chosen Cornelius Sigan because he wasn't as strong a sorcerer as the thing that possessed him. The barrage of magic he'd sent at Merlin had been immense, almost on a scale with some of the things that Arthur knew Merlin could do, but unlike Merlin, Sigan was... Flagging.

Arthur steeled himself to make a decision. They had to shut Sigan down immediately. But he couldn't and wouldn't give the order to kill an innocent. If Neil was alive somewhere in Cornelius Sigan's body...

"Contain him," Arthur said.

The blue spirals danced around Sigan in a loose and easy pattern only once more before suddenly flaring outward, composing themselves into a rigid spear shape. It became more and more tangible as additional blue spirals pulled free from Sigan's body to wrap around the spear.

The chorus of what the fuck and get out of there over the radio was distracting, and Morgana didn't notice Gaius' and Bran's arrival until Gaius put a hand on her shoulder. The physical contact was grounding, chasing away the lightheadedness that lingered after a vision, but before she could sag in relief, Gaius asked, "Bran said something about a possession?"

"Here," Elyan said, tapping the screen. Gaius leaned in closer, raising his chin and squinting for a better look, adjusting his glasses on the tip of his nose. He didn't study the screen for more than a few seconds before he held out his hand and demanded, "Radio."

Gwen handed over an earpiece and helped him adjust the microphone.
"The spirit must not come into contact with anyone," Gaius said brusquely.

No sooner had he spoken did Sigan's body drop limply to the ground. The bright blue spear contracted on itself and launched at Merlin. Merlin threw out his hand in time to cast a hasty shield; the spear flattened on impact before bouncing off, reforming itself into a compact, oblong object.

"It needs another host to sustain it," Gaius said. "You must contain it before --"

The spirit crashed against Merlin's shield one more time before abruptly detouring toward another member of the team. There was a sharp cry from Mordred before he called up a shield of his own. It cracked on impact, nowhere near as solid or as impenetrable as Merlin's shield appeared to be. Merlin moved, crossing the distance quickly, his arm outstretched as he manipulated his shield to completely surround the blue object.

When it couldn't reach Mordred, it went for another potential victim. Kay let out a strangled sound and raised his weapon, but he didn't fire. His breath of relief was audible as the seconds passed and Merlin's shield held fast.

Bran gripped Morgana's elbow tightly, making a soft, whimpering sound.

Gaius brushed through a few loose pages on the desk and found the list of call signs for the mission. "Hellburners, you need to surround it. The containment won't last."

"No shite," Merlin said. It sounded as if he were speaking through grit teeth.

"We can't surround him. We're only two of us," Mordred said.

"He came after me, too. I mean, I'm not magic, but --" Kay said. He sounded shaky, unsure, and thoroughly confused.

"Yes. He did," Gaius said. "Though we'll examine the reasons why later. The three of you, form a triangle. You will need a small object."

"Clarify," Arthur said.

"A closed box, a crystal, anything that is completely enclosed and cannot be opened," Gaius said.

"I'm on it," Lucan said. He moved away from the group and was joined by another teammate.

"Hellburner One, you know the words. Begin the spell," Gaius said. "Be prepared. It will fight you. Hellburner Two, you need to help contain the spirit."

"And me?" Kay asked.

"When you have a suitable object, all three of you will need to repeat these words exactly as I say them," Gaius said.

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"Ásælan ōu fram ádréogan hearm," Merlin said.

At any other time, Arthur's attention would be on how bloody hot it was to listen to Merlin when
he was casting a spell, but instead, he let himself be distracted by a fleeting glimpse Lucan and Lamorak as they ran out of the Commons. That proved to be a mistake.

He was startled -- hell, they all were, if the shouts were anything to go by -- when the blue ball hit Merlin's shield. The shield vibrated violently and emitted a golden light so vibrant that it was like staring into the sun.

Merlin strained, dropping his hold on his rifle to hold onto his magic with both hands. The rifle hung on Merlin's sling, banging on his hip, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Ásælan ōu fram ádréogan hearm," Merlin repeated.

This time, the blue ball reacted immediately, crashing into the shield with so much violence that there were sparks, metallic-white and burning, like hot metal scraping against metal. Merlin grunted this time, but he didn't waver.

Arthur checked the room. The hostages they'd rescued had recovered their weapons and were guarding the prisoners under his men's guidance, which was for the best. They were nervous enough as it was, being this close to magic, and Arthur didn't need or want them to get in harm's way.

A quick glance at Kay revealed jittery nervousness, but Mordred was very still, as if stunned. The red handkerchiefs hid their expressions, but Arthur was certain he'd see complete concentration on their faces.

"What's the ETA on the object?" Arthur asked.

"Bringing multiple options now," Lucan said.

Lamorak ran through the open doors first, and at that exact moment, Merlin said, "Ásælan ōu fram ádréogan hearm."

There was a loud, terrifying crash that was a solid 9.0 on the Richter scale, if only it had been an earthquake. The galleries shook; the Speaker's chair tumbled over, a table cracked.

Even with the goggles protecting them, it took several uncomfortable seconds before Arthur could see clearly again, though spots still danced in his eyes. Merlin had lost his footing and had been pushed away; he had skidded several feet from his original position. Mordred was leaning back, drag marks ripping the flooring behind him. Kay had moved, too, though whether it was of his own volition or if he'd been pulled along by the spirit, too, Arthur wasn't sure.

"I've got a lightbulb --"

"Too fragile," Gaius said. Lamorak threw it over his shoulder; it bounced on a bench and shattered.

"-- a glass case --"

"Is it completely enclosed?" Gaius asked.

"No, but it fits on a stand," Lamorak said. He put it aside anyway. "And a jade thingamabob that was in the case."

"Is it one carved piece?"

There was a pause, and Lamorak said, defeated, "This place is full of rubbish, I haven't got
anything useful."

"Crystal chandelier," Lucan said, dragging it into the Commons.

Arthur had absolutely no idea where Lucan had found it, and decided that he didn't want to know as long as it would work.

"That will do. The largest piece, without cracks or seams," Gaius said.

Arthur felt like plunging in to help Lucan and Lamorak, but they came out of the tangle of wires with a large, icicle-shaped crystal.

"Throw it beneath the circle," Gaius said.

"I can't hold it much longer," Merlin grit out.

Lucan handed the icicle to Gwaine. "You've got better aim."

"No pressure, mate," Gwaine muttered, but he rolled it carefully to make sure it didn't break, and it came to a stop exactly beneath the shielded blue blob.

"Recite the spell now," Gaius said. "In chorus. With the wisdom --"

"-- of the Old Religion and the blessing of Brighid the Bright, I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm. You are bound to this plane, soul and spirit, cast into the void, never to return."

Merlin, Mordred and Kay were slightly out of sync, and it showed. The spirit found some strength, somewhere, because it battered violently against the shield, pushing at it so much that the three of them shifted position again.

"Come on, Kay. Channel Kathy or something," Will said.

"Again," Gaius said.

"With the wisdom of the Old Religion and the blessing of Brighid the Bright, I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm. You are bound to this plane, soul and spirit, cast into the void, never to return."

This time, there was an eerie echo in their voices, an almost ethereal quality that was both hollow and profound. A faint light tracked between Merlin to Kay, from Kay to Mordred, from Mordred to Merlin, pulsing faster and faster until there was a glowing triangle connecting them.

"Again," Gaius said.

"With the wisdom of the Old Religion and the blessing of Brighid the Bright, I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm. I bind you from doing harm. You are bound to this plane, soul and spirit, cast into the void, never to return --"

The chorus was perfect, resonating with an exotic choir. The light that surrounded them diverged and completed a circle that glowed an iridescent silver.

"Step out of the circle on my count. Merlin, drop the shield at the same time," Gaius said. "One, two --"

None of them waited for three, just like Arthur taught them. Merlin, Mordred and Kay took a deep
step backward and the shield dissipated with a blinding flare, dripping down like molten gold.

The blue ball seemed to realize that it was now free of its confines, because it surged for Merlin. Arthur grabbed Merlin, pulling him back, and --

The circle brightened, but it held firm, stronger than Merlin's shield. It barely flexed, apparently impervious to the spirit's attempts at freedom. The ball battered against its confines, bouncing madly and ricocheting in every direction as the circle and the triangle shrank in size. The blue ball of energy was constricted in size, becoming smaller and smaller until it was forced into the only space that there was left -- inside the crystal.

The iridescent light went almost as bright as a flash-bang before dimming, coating the crystal with a fine, almost slick sheen, and it was gone.

No one spoke for a good minute.

"Is it done?" Kay asked.

"Looks like," Merlin said.

"That was really fucking anticlimactic," Will said. "My heart was in my throat the whole time. There should've been a bigger payoff than that."

"You've been watching too many movies," Gareth said.

Arthur checked his watch. They'd already been in the Commons longer than he'd liked, but they were well within the time frame he'd established. "Check in. Are we good to go?"

"Checking in," Leon said.

"Wounded are clear to be moved," Lance confirmed.

"Red Two, take your team and get the hostages out. Red Two, follow with the prisoners. Gag them and tag them. Take Hellburner Two with you. Hellburner One, Red Five, Shadow One, Shadow Two, you're with me, we'll secure the crystal," Arthur said.

"Copy," Leon said. A moment later, Perceval's voice came over the radio to acknowledge his orders.

Lance lingered on one of the injured soldiers and was among the last to leave with the hostages. Perceval made sure there was at least one man keeping an eye on two sorcerers -- bound, gagged, and tagged with a combination of a location chip and a low-dose somnolent, the surviving terrorists were easy to herd out, but the hard part was getting them moving in the first place.

The bodies were left behind. Lucan went to check on Sigan, but he'd barely taken two steps when --

"Captain," Lucan said slowly, frozen to the spot. "He's awake."

Arthur turned, his weapon up --

"No!" Merlin raised his hand. Arthur saw the crystal roll away, gaining momentum, but Sigan was faster.

The terrorist's camera crashed on top of the crystal.

Lucan was there a bare instant later, grabbing Sigan and hauling him away. Arthur stared at the
shattered crystal with a frisson of fear, fully expecting the spirit to emerge, angry and vengeful.

Nothing happened.

Merlin's fingers curled and he dropped his hand slowly.

Kay heaved a heavy breath and muttered, "It's not the bullets that are going to kill me. It's going to be the fucking heart attacks."

"It's okay, it's okay," Sigan was saying, weakly struggling against Lucan. He seemed delirious. "The gem. It couldn't be broken. It knew it was safe in the gem. I knew... I just knew..."

Arthur approached cautiously, crouching down. "Cornelius?"

"No, no," Sigan said, shaking his head. He laughed a bit. "Mum's the only one... Neil. My name's Neil."


"And the thing?" Arthur asked, waving toward the slivers of shattered crystal under the bits and pieces of broken camera.

Merlin wasn't as quick to answer this time, and Arthur could only think that it was because he was double-checking to be absolutely certain. After almost a minute, he shook his head. "Gone."

"Watchtower?" Arthur asked, keying in Elyan. "What does our consultant say?"

Gaius' voice came on the line, though he was slow to respond, his tone full of surprise. "I suppose... it might have... when Sigan was too weak to carry on, it went after someone else because it knew it might die if it burned out the physical vessel. It's entirely possible that it was vulnerable depending on its physical form."

"In other words, it's dead?" Kay asked.

"Seems like," Merlin confirmed.

Lamorak cautiously kicked at the shards and said, "I guess the lightbulb would've worked."

Arthur clasped him on his arm and said, "All right. Let's move out."
"Pendragon!"

The shout was muffled, just like everything else outside the portable barracks, the spell letting only the bare minimum through to let the team rest and to ensure their conversations remained confidential. Merlin blinked blearily in the gloom, rolling over onto his side on a hard army-issue cot he definitely hadn't missed, and squinted at his watch.

It was barely 2100, and Merlin had slept through tea, though from the looks of it, he wasn't the only one. Will was splayed face-down on his pillow a few cots away, Perceval was snoring softly on the other end of the barracks, and Mordred had finally hit his adrenaline crash and was passed out on what was Lucan's assigned bunk, though Lucan was nowhere to be seen.

Arthur was gone, and he must have taken half of the team with him, because Leon wasn't around, and so was Owain and Gwaine, Lance and Pellinor, Gareth and Lamorak --

A loud banging on the plywood-thin excuse for a door started Merlin out of his checklist.

Perceval grumbled something incoherent and pulled his pillow over his head, Will mumbled, "Not now, sweetheart," and Kay sat up with a sleepy, "Someone had better be dying."

"Someone will be," Merlin promised after ten seconds of staring murderously at the door. He'd keyed the protection and privacy spell to the team members, and none of them would have any difficulty getting in. Whoever was trying to barge into the barracks was either an enthusiastic greenie or someone with more balls than brass. "Go back to sleep. I'll get it."

Kay mumbled drowsily before rolling onto his side, blanket rucked up around his shoulders. Merlin rubbed his face a few times, trying to wake himself up, but it didn't help.

With a grunt, Merlin shoved himself out of his cot, pulled on a pair of standard-issue utility trousers and a plain white shirt, and padded barefoot to the door. He put one hand on the frame and listened to the knock-knock-knockity-knock for a few more seconds before abruptly yanking the door open.

"What."

Olaf caught himself before stumbling through the doorway and into Merlin. He took a moment to smooth down a shirt that looked baggy on him. The shoulders fit fine, but the waist billowed out a little, and his vest needed tailoring. "Arthur. Where is he?"

"Out," Merlin said. He waved a hand in the air.

At last notice, Arthur was with Colonel Mandrake, sorting through the incidents through the city and going over how best to attend to them. By now, he might either be with General Tachnathar or trying to hunt down Major Kilgarrah, who had been spotted to be somewhere on the forward operating base, though that might only be a rumour.

Olaf's mouth set in a thin line. Then, curtly, he said, "Leon?"

Merlin made an exaggerated shrug. Leon's orders were to take care of Sigan. While absolutely no one thought it was a good idea to turn him over to the Directory, they didn't have any other recourse for proper containment. Leon was likely still with Sigan -- who was more of a teenager,
mentally, than a man in his thirties -- in an attempt to get as much information from him as possible.

"Perceval?" Olaf asked, casting about for options.

Merlin glanced over his shoulder. "You want to wake him, be my guest."

Olaf's face scrunched as if he were contemplating doing just that while simultaneously weighing the outcome. He looked Merlin up and down, nodded firmly, and said, "You'll do."

"You know how to flatter a bloke," Merlin said, scratching the back of his head. "But. No."

"It's a matter of national security," Olaf said.

"Well, I suppose that explains why we're all here," Merlin said, leaning out the door and into Olaf's space to take a long, pointed look around at the soldiers walking down the corridor of tents and barracks. Olaf stumbled back a step, and that was when Merlin spotted Olaf's bodyguards.

"There's something you need to know," Olaf said. "And I'd rather not discuss it in front of --"

Merlin growled low in his throat and shut the door in Olaf's face.

Two seconds passed. Olaf banged on the door again.

"Jesus," Merlin said, hanging his head. He debated the merits of frying Olaf right on the doorstop in front of everyone, but decided that would end up outing the team before they were ready. Arthur had been very firm on that -- none of them were to wear the red handkerchiefs outside of an active mission.

Merlin looked up when someone nudged his arm, and was greeted with a face full of his own boots and socks. He recoiled at the smell and frowned at --

Will.

Will's boots were on, but unlaced. His gun belt was slung low on his hips and was in danger of sliding off entirely. He'd only managed to pull one arm through his jacket, and he had the absolute worst case of bed head that Merlin had ever seen -- and they'd shared a room in uni.

Will gestured at the door, yawning loudly through grumble-groaned words, and rubbed his eye with a knuckled fist.

"Groawl gwmwa gabboebwe what?" Merlin squinted, taking his boots before Will dropped them.

Will stretched like a peacock, all jutted chest and arched back and hair in full fan. He fell back onto himself with a huff and sleepily pulled on his jacket. "Should see what he wants. Better us than Arthur, yeah? Him and the rest, they've been up nearly two days straight, and Perce's barely been back fifteen minutes."

"Since when do you care about the well-being of people who aren't named Will," Merlin muttered. He knew he wasn't being fair, but he was grumpy, too.

For all of Will's quirks, he was a soldier to the core, as accepting of his duty as any of them, even if he griped about it at length. Merlin leaned against the door to put on his socks and boots. Will clomped away, rustled through a small pile of equipment, and came back fully geared up, right down to his body armour, lid, and rifle. It took a little longer for Merlin to get ready, and he spent a
few fruitless minutes looking for his pack before Will sleepily pointed it out to him.

Merlin nodded his thanks and checked his handgun and rifle, checking the magazines on both and absentmindedly taking the extras that Will passed over. As far as the team was concerned, they were once again on active duty, and there was no leaving the base, never mind their temporary barracks, without their full gear. The only exception to their usual was that their red handkerchiefs were kept secure in a pocket, ready to be put on in emergencies.

He yanked on his jacket and turned to stare at the door.

It was vibrating from the rapid-fire rap-rap-rap, which was either Olaf's way of expressing urgency, or he'd ordered one of his lackeys to take over.

Merlin heaved a steeling breath before yanking the door open again. He moved just in time to watch one of Olaf's field agents stumble forward, catching themselves before they fell through.

"What the --"

Olaf took one quick, evaluating glance at Merlin and Will before gesturing. "This way."

"Where are we going?" Will asked. He yawned noisily, scratching the back of his head.

"The Office," Olaf said.

Merlin waited for the agent to scramble out of the way. He used the time to check his pockets for his phone, various pieces of small equipment, and a few tools before shutting the door behind him. He followed after Will and Olaf, thumbing a quick message to Arthur.

*Olaf came by. Going to the Office with him.*

The response came barely a minute later: *I'll meet you there.*

Merlin rolled his eyes. *What you're going to do is get some rack time. I'll fill you in when I get back. Will's with me.*

*In that case, bring back some decent coffee. I know Olaf's got some stashed away.*

Merlin smirked, putting his phone away after a quick, *Will do, Captain Prat.* He hurried to catch up.

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Olaf was on his mobile from the moment they stepped into the front passenger side of a black luxury four-door sedan that had seen better days, dented and battered despite the bulletproof armour that was under its metal sheen. There were all sorts of rules and regulations about stepping off "base" for any reason, but Olaf's car drove them through the barricade without so much as an ID check or a call to HQ to confirm base-release orders.

"You didn't have to come and get us yourself," Merlin said.

Olaf's eyebrows raised and he tilted his head the way a bird would look at a very tasty bug, and said, "Yes, I really did."
"What, your Moneypenny refused to run errands for you again?" Will quipped, trying vainly to smooth down his hair.

"My Moneypenny, as you describe her, was killed in an assault on MI-5 thirty-six days ago. She held the line until the rest of us could get away, buying enough time for reinforcements to arrive," Olaf said coldly. "Her name was Maggie. Maggie Hightower."

Will held up his hands in apology, but Olaf dismissed him with a curt nod, turning his attention to the phone call.

Merlin and Will exchanged glances. Merlin shook his head at Will. "And that's why you can't have nice things."

Will shoved him into the far door. "Oi, like you do any better when it comes to this newfangled polite bollocks."


Will feigned a surprised look. "Oh, that's what we call slamming doors in people's faces now?" He turned to Olaf, reaching out to tap him on the shoulder. "Those reinforcements. Were they Directory?"

If Olaf's glare had been just a few degrees hotter, Merlin was certain that Will would have caught on fire. Instead, Will leaned back with the same sort of slowness he'd used as a kid to get away from an angry bull when he'd "accidentally" shot it in the arse with a pellet gun.

"Well, that answers that," Will said. He turned to Merlin. "Weren't you telling me that lot was full of incompetents?"

"Not full of, no," Merlin said. The sorcerers the team had interacted with had been competent within their own limited sphere of expertise. Merlin couldn't imagine them getting any better now that they had access to more power, and although the team had trained to handle sorcerers while under fire, he doubted that the reverse were true. Mordred might have had been exposed to Aredian and his mercenaries, but even he had had a challenge trying to keep up with Merlin and the others during the first few combat exercises.

Will sucked a tooth. He turned to watch the city flash by. Shop doors were wide open, even though their windows had been boarded up. There were a few people picking up debris and rubbish, and sweeping along the sidewalk. Several young men and women were walking down the street, ostensibly headed somewhere at an unhurried pace. The tension in the city had eased since the House of Parliament had been retaken, and there was almost an easy air to people who had relaxed beyond the traditional stiff upper lip and the keep calm and carry on that was England's war motto.

There hadn't been any additional incidents, but it was early yet. The team had scrambled -- establishing their quarters, setting up their equipment depot, establishing a perimeter, going on mission without a full debriefing, returning with freed hostages and prisoners -- and they'd hardly had enough time for a few hours of sleep. Merlin really hoped that everything would be quiet for at least another couple of days. The team would fall asleep on their feet if they were sent out again.

"What do you figure this is about?" Will asked, keeping his voice low.

Merlin shook his head. He didn't know. He palmed his phone and checked his text messages. Of course, there would be one from Arthur with a notice to check his email ASAP. Merlin thumbed through the screens and opened Arthur's email.
"Think they've got another undercover mission for us?" Will asked.

Merlin glared at Will, then at Olaf, and snorted. If that were the case, he'd grab Will's arm and walk him out of MI-5 before Olaf could finish making them any kind of offer. He returned his attention to the document Arthur had sent him -- a list of possible reasons why Olaf would want to talk to anyone on the team. It was hastily done and full of typos, but the document properties indicated that Arthur had pulled it together sometime around 0300, which meant that Arthur had known that Olaf was coming and had been ready for him.

He made a small, impressed sound as he read all the contingencies that Arthur had put together. It read something like a script for a tactical negotiation. What demands to make, what to promise, what information to give, what to hold back -- right down to including how Olaf would react. He scoffed a little and shook his head, because this was so bloody typical of Arthur.

"Really?" Will asked. "You think so?"

Merlin glanced up. "What?"

"I asked if you thought Kay had…" Will made a small, aborted gesture in the air and wriggled his eyebrows meaningfully.

"I don't know, mate," Merlin said, blowing out breath. "It hasn't exactly been our top priority."

"Pretty sure it's Kay's first priority," Will muttered.

"Pretty sure Kay's first priority is the mission," Merlin retorted. "And even then, he probably doesn't care."

"Maybe he doesn't, but I sure as fuck do," Will said. "What if --"

"Don't think about it," Merlin said, returning his attention to the solid block of text that was Arthur's 0300 verbal diarrhea and runaway train wreck of over-planning. He would rather focus on how to handle Olaf than to spend any more time thinking about that viscous, glowing blue ball of ectoplasmic evil. A shower hadn't helped him wash off the sensation of being so close to it, and his nightmares had reminded him of how near it had come to taking over any of them.

A quick follow-up phone call with Gaius had confirmed that Neil's body had simply run out of energy, and that the most likely reason for the largely anticlimactic capture had been because of the blue blob's self-preservation instincts. It had made sense for the blob to have gone after Merlin first. Between Merlin and Mordred, Merlin was the strongest magic user. But Kay?

Why would it have gone for Kay? There had been other people closer, but it had very distinctly gone for him first.

"What am I supposed to think about, then? It's this, or I think about things that do my head in," Will said.

Merlin reached out blindly until he had a hand on Will's head, then patted him like he would a dog. "Do your multiplication tables. That usually calms you down."

"Oh, fuck you," Will said, swatting away Merlin's hand.

Merlin skimmed the section about the prototype EMP device and how Olaf might bring it up again, and that if he didn't, Merlin was definitely to bring it up, particularly since they'd received confirmation that Uther Pendragon was taking an active participant role in the war against the
NWO. Merlin frowned -- less for the unsurprising news about Uther, and more at the reminder of the prototype -- and he wondered yet once again why Aredian's people had bothered to bring Kay along.

Why they'd bothered keeping him alive.

He had a dim recollection of Bayard testing the members of the team. To float a bloody pen. He hadn't stuck around to see how the other members of the team had done, but if Kay had… shown any burgeoning signs of magic? Would it have been obvious to Bayard? To Aredian?

Merlin closed the document reader and stared at the back of the driver's head, tapping the edge of his smartphone on his knee.

"What are you thinking about?" Will asked, elbowing him.

"Kay," Merlin said, and shrugged.

There wasn't much that Merlin didn't know about Kay. He didn't think that Kay knew much more than he'd already shared with the rest of the team. He was an orphan, bounced from foster home to foster home, running away more than once when his foster parents turned out to be right bastards. He didn't talk much about his Mum, but from the brief mentions, Merlin suspected that Kay had barely known her and held onto those few memories as tightly as he could. He'd never mentioned his dad, and as far as Kay was concerned, he was immaculately conceived.

Merlin drummed his fingers on the back of his phone. Kay had never seemed bothered by the lack of a past, and it was a huge breach of trust --

But Merlin needed to know. Arthur needed to know. If Kay could be targeted because he was appealing to a mercenary faction or because a magical blob of evil thought he was the next best option after Merlin and Mordred -- the next best over all the sorcerers who had been in the room…

Then he was in danger, and the team needed to make sure he was safe.

Merlin opened another app. It was a Merlinware remote hack program, small and compact, with limited features and options, but it would do for what he wanted to look for. He typed in a search query, filtered the databases in order of preference, and let the virus loose on the Web.

"He's going to be pissed," Will remarked, his voice low. The driver pulled the car into a basement garage and the lights went dark.

"Who?" Merlin asked, playing innocent.

Will shot him a droll, dry look. "Background check on Kay? Really?"

"It's not what you think," Merlin said, falling silent when the car pulled to a stop.

Olaf left the car, slamming the door behind him. Merlin and Will followed suit, the driver staying in the car. The two spools who had been with Olaf pulled up in a different car and parked in a nearby spot.

"Not what I think?" Will asked, grabbing Merlin's arm and keeping him close. "Go on, then. Tell me what I'm thinking."

"That he's a deep cover mole," Merlin said, pulling his arm free and grabbing Will's shoulder, leading him out of earshot. Olaf was still on the phone, but the conversation he was having over the
phone now involved several cutting gestures in the air. Merlin edged closer to listen in, but Olaf only glared and moved away. The spooks eyed them warily but left them alone otherwise. "Except Arthur's known him since they were kids. I can't believe you think someone programmed Kay when he was a baby and planted him in Arthur's pre-school."

Will scowled. In the dim underground parking light, Will was pale, drawn, and exhausted, the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced. "All right. Fine. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking Kay might have magic," Merlin said.

Before Will could react, Olaf called out, "Are you coming or what?"

Will walked through the corridors as if he'd been there before, which, Merlin realized, he must have had an on-site debriefing at some point when he was undercover at the NWO. Merlin wasn't so sure that Will knew all of the people he greeted, particularly since they were pretty women, and, well. Merlin knew Will. He wasn't just a shameless flirt. He also acted like this when he was nervous or uncertain and he was trying to cover up how jittery he really was.

Will knew that Merlin knew that, because when Merlin caught his eye and raised a questioning eyebrow, Will shrugged and shook his head. "Remember Angie Brown?"

"Vaguely," Merlin said, which was code for I don't keep a fucking tally of all the birds you've shagged.

Will took his answer in stride, because he shrugged and said, "The one I dated first year of uni? Pretty blonde, big blue eyes, big --"

He made a gesture in front of his chest.

"-- you know," he said, and this time, it was Will's turn to raise his eyebrows. His expression, however, didn't match his words.

"The one you dumped me for at that party?" Merlin asked carefully, not sure where Will was going with this.

"No, the other one. I must've dated six or seven different Angies," Will said. He frowned. "One of them might've even been twice. I'm not sure."

Merlin caught a reflection in a passing mirror and used the opportunity to look behind them. The two spooks trailing them were blank-faced and emotionless. Either they were paying attention to the conversation and didn't care, or they weren't listening and everything was fine. Given they were in MI-5 at Olaf's mercy and Will wasn't making sense, Merlin decided on option number three, which was, Will's spider sense was tingling.

"Was it the one who invited you in a threesome with her bloke?" Merlin asked, trying for one of their codes.
"Oi, it was her twin sister, thanks," Will snorted, which meant, no, they weren't in any immediate danger.

"The one whose boyfriend walked in on you when you were," Merlin steeled himself and used the phrasing Will had insisted on, "balls deep?"

Will tapped his nose and nodded. "That would be the one, yeah."

"Ah," Merlin said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Whatever was eating at Will, it had to do with *don't believe anything she says*. He didn't know how to tell Will that he'd met Olaf before, and that his warning was par for the course. To double-check, he asked, "Didn't you get crabs from that?"

Will sucked a tooth and glanced over his shoulder. Merlin did, too, and he saw the mocking smirks. "Yes," Will said grudgingly, and Merlin had to laugh, because *Will* was the one who had thought up this particular line of code.

The two men following them snorted. Merlin ignored them and nodded when Will glanced at him. If he thought that this was a trap, it probably was.

Olaf wasn't the only one who was shabbily put together and dishevelled, Merlin noted as they walked through a giant bullpen full of analysts. Most of them had heads bowed over their keyboards while the rest stared unblinkingly at their computer screens. Their passage, if noticed, was remarked upon as a matter of course, but no one spoke or stopped them as Olaf led them further into the building.

They went past several security doors and guards. There was a military presence, but they were stationed off to the side, there to act as additional brute force if required. The deeper they went, the more personnel there was -- both MI-5 and military. Security measures became strict and convoluted, and the soldiers, while well-armed on duty, were even more so now.

Will's brow weighed down into a heavy frown, and he shook his head every time he saw something out of the ordinary. "Maybe I was wrong," he muttered. Louder, he said, "Oi, Olaf, what's this place?"

Olaf hunched over an electronic panel, using his body to block the view as he entered the access code. "The CIA and the Directory aren't the only ones with a repository of artefacts."

A heavy door rumbled open, rolling toward the right. The wall was thicker than a bank vault, and although Merlin couldn't see beyond the plaster covering it up, the insides looked to be reinforced with thick sheets of metal. Inside was a gated walkway, illuminated by a length of fluorescent light but not much else.

Olaf waved them inside. He pointed at the two agents following them and said, "Stay here."

The door rolled shut behind them, a gate clanged across the entryway, and the short walkway jerked before it cranked downward. Merlin grabbed the railing for balance, but Will grinned like the child that he was and clapped his hands. "This is some mad spy shite. Why didn't you show me this place before?"

"Need to know, and you didn't need to know," Olaf said.
Merlin rolled his eyes. "And we need to know now?"

They passed a few strips of lights embedded in the tunnel before Olaf replied. "No."

Merlin exchanged a glance with Will. Will's enthusiasm dampened, his glee fading into confusion.

"You may want to elaborate on that," Merlin said.

Water seeped through the cement surrounding the elevator, hinting that they were now below the waterline. A pale blue light flashed across Olaf's face as they continued to descend, and Merlin thought that Olaf looked… old, worn, a shade of his usual self.

Merlin wondered if Olaf had even left the building since the world went to Hell.

"Olaf," Will said softly, his hand on his gun. "You should answer the man. See, wasn't too long ago that we were at the mercy of some sick fuckers, and we'd like to avoid a repeat visit."

Olaf sighed. His jaw worked to chew on whatever he was about to say, tasting the words and moving them around in his mouth. "It's not that you need to know. It's that you have to know."

The elevator platform clanked to a wobbly stop. Latches were released with a click, and a second door -- twin to the one above them -- rolled open and bright white light filled the dim tunnel. Inside was a gleaming corridor lined with a plastic, reflective sheen -- walls, ceiling and floor.

"Congratulations, gentlemen. Excalibur has been elevated to the highest security clearance I'm authorized to give," Olaf said.

He walked down the hall.

Merlin and Will glanced at each other. Merlin held up a finger. "Don't say it."

"I knew the Laundry was real," Will said, and sauntered after Olaf.

There were several more levels of security to pass before they arrived at their destination, but Merlin knew that they were getting closer.

A crawling sensation had settled under his skin. It was almost cloying, sickeningly appealing, with a muffled siren's call that pulled Merlin closer, faster, in invitation.

Magic.

Twisted magic. Captive magic.

Merlin glanced at Olaf, but he was either used to the sensation or he wasn't conscious of it. Will glanced around with a pinched frown in a familiar expression of something's not right and can't tell what it is, and Merlin shook his head when Will met his eyes, because he didn't know what it was, either.

A few more turns in the corridor, a set of stairs down a narrow, unmarked corridor, a handprint security check along with voice recognition and security code, and they had arrived.
The core of the building was called the *Pit* and was in the oblong shape of a bunker more than a century old. The walls were brick and concrete, reinforced with steel girders to protect the long aisles of shelving weighed down by large, oddly-shaped containers. The few overhead lights strained to illuminate the entire length of the bunker, which seemed to go on for kilometres beneath London.

Merlin saw Will subtly pull out his phone and check the GPS app, but his frown and grumpy shake of his head only confirmed that the decrepit look of the repository was more for appearances. Merlin could tell that there was something different about this place and that it was intended to protect whatever was inside. It wasn't quite like the echoing dead zone that had been crudely constructed into a brickstone building playing host to an off-site CIA archive. No, it was reflective, like staring into a standing pool and watching the ripples wobble along the surface, tenacious and never-fading.

Except for a distant, mechanical sound, the archive was as silent as a tomb, yet, there were too many living bodies for it to be one. At Merlin's count, a half-dozen personnel walked up and down the aisles, carrying a tablet in one hand and a stylus in the other. Some wore lab coats, others, simple office-wear, and one woman in a pencil skirt and white button-down was wearing sneakers.

"After the break-in at the CIA, I ordered an inventory done," Olaf said, walking down the metal catwalk. He crossed a rickety-looking wooden bridge over a flowing gullet of water and urged them to move quickly. "There's a lot to go through, but we focused on items that were collected in the same time frame as the missing stone."

"And?"

"And you wouldn't be here for a bloody tour," Olaf snapped.

Will gave Olaf a sour look, but Merlin's patience was fraying. "Just get on with it, Olaf. We don't have time for this."

"You'll make the time," Olaf said, heading over to one of the fixed computer terminals. The terminal was ancient -- a little over half the width of the desk with a tiny monitor and glowing green text against a black background -- and it gave off enough heat to warm up the entire bunker. "We did a quick visual count of time-stamped containers matching the same period. We're missing one container."

Merlin glanced at Will. Will looked grim. Merlin exhaled heavily. "All right. I'll bite. What was in it?"

"A staff," Olaf said, typing a code in the computer. An inventory number flashed back at him, and he took one of the tablets stacked to the side, tapping through the screens. "One-point-seven-one metres, polished European yew, tentatively age-dated between 650 and 1100. Approximately six centimetres in diameter, with a one-degree curvature from the centre of the staff. Multiple carvings --"

He handed over the tablet. Merlin took it tentatively and frowned at the image.

It showed a wide shot of the staff on a black surface, standing out stark and white in contrast. Almost straight, the bottom roughened and textured, the staff's top end arched up in a multitude of snarled tangles widely spread around an empty core. Merlin flipped to the next image and saw it was a close-up of the base, which was in a cross-hatch pattern for approximately twenty centimetres before each line wove up and into different patterns.
There were oghamic symbols of power, runic spellwork, rarely-invoked symbols. Merlin only recognized a few of them from his time learning at Gaius' knee and from spending days with the Druids over in Camelot to help fortify both the village and the camp, but there was one symbol that was repeated again and again throughout the carvings -- the symbol of the Old Religion.

A chill went up Merlin's spine. "Jesus."

"What?" Will asked, leaning to look over Merlin's shoulder.

Merlin held up a finger and continued to scroll through the images. Licking their way up the snarled tangle of branches were powerful words that he didn't dare speak out loud. He was wide-eyed when he looked at Olaf, his heart pounding painfully in his chest. "You've lost this?"

Olaf's eyes gleamed with curiosity. "You know what it is?"

"I know what it could be used for," Merlin said.

"And?" Olaf inched closer, trying to get a glimpse of the last image that Merlin had stopped on. "How could it be used?"

Merlin's eyes narrowed. "Don't play games, Olaf. You already know."

Merlin let Will take the tablet out of his hands. Olaf took Will's elbow in his chest with a grunt. "I was never in charge of the repository --"

"Try again, and sod the games," Merlin said.

Olaf straightened, his shoulders back, his chin firm and arrogant. He glanced at Will, quirking a do you believe this bloke eyebrow that withered under Will's unimpressed glare. The desk creaked when he leaned back against it, his arms crossed over his chest tightly, like a petulant child insisting that he wasn't responsible for the latest cock-up.

"We are aware of the significance of the symbols," Olaf allowed, uncrossing his arms to scratch his head. He blew out his breath and dropped his hand to rub over his face.

"And?" Merlin prompted.

Olaf sighed laboriously. "You have to understand the situation at the time of acquisition. Our relationship with other governments were beginning to fray and the Directory was slowly pulling back. We maintained enough cooperation from the Directory to obtain a rudimentary translation of the symbols."

"And?" Merlin repeated, ignoring the growing dread in his belly.

"I'll get the bloody pliers, I swear," Will said, shifting his weight from foot to foot like a boxer ready to throw a punch.

Olaf must have recognized Will's short fuse, because he twitched. "We categorize the objects based on the lore that led us to their location and on the degree of confirmation that the object is the artefact in the mythology. The information we received from the Directory contradicted the documentation, and --"

Merlin stared heavenward, studying the cracks in the concrete brick and mortar, following the arch of polished stainless steel from one bend to the next. The distraction quashed some of the frustration bubbling up, but not all, because he had too vivid an image in his head describing how
this had all played out.

They'd found the staff. The Directory's so-called experts had translated the symbols, purposefully making a mistake. The government agency had reviewed the data and flagged the staff as unknown or low priority and for future review. The staff was forgotten until…

Until someone misplaced the staff. Only, no one noticed, and when the photographs were pulled from the archive and put through modern translators…

Merlin felt a pain in the middle of his forehead and ruthlessly suppressed the urge to pinch his brow. He held up a hand and in a very dull voice, stated the obvious. "I assume you know what happened to the staff."

"Yes," Olaf grudgingly admitted.

Merlin nodded, hands on his hips, and stared at Olaf for a good few minutes. To his credit, the agent didn't so much as squirm. "Let me guess. Pretty brunette, dressed up to look like any one of your regular people, goes by the first name Nimueh, and some variation of Morrigan as her surname?"

"Yes," Olaf said.

"Well, fuck," Will said. "You couldn't have said that first?"

"How long ago?" Merlin asked, ignoring Will.

Olaf sighed, as if the entire situation was a personal slight. "Thirty-six hours after the CIA branch was hit. We're reviewing the security footage, checking the inventory to see if there was anything else taken --"

"Wait," Will said, taking a step forward. "That was a ways back. You mean to tell us, all those security checks are completely useless? She just waltzed in and helped herself?"

Olaf's glare was withering, but he was saved from having to answer by a staff member approaching them cautiously, her tablet held out. "Sir?"

Olaf snatched the tablet out of her hands. He flicked through the screens, growing all the more pale. He stopped at one screen in particular and stared at it for such a long time that Merlin had to reach out and grab Will before he went on a hunt for Cthulhu out of sheer boredom. And, when Olaf finally looked up, it was with a glassy-eyed, distant stare.

"What else is missing?" Merlin asked, keeping his voice down.

Olaf tapped the screen and handed the tablet over. Merlin flicked through the screens -- a bracelet, a small white crystal, two dented goblets with dull gems around the lip, a pair of rusty, unremarkable swords, a pockmarked shield with two twisted serpents on it -- without knowing what he was seeing and not understanding Olaf's defeated reaction until…

Until he saw the last image.

A cup.

He didn't know what it was or what it did. There weren't any symbols on the smooth, silvery surface. It was pristine, un tarnished by time, no different than some of the plainer tchotchkes at high-end jewellery stores. And yet, in combination with everything else, it screamed all sorts of
wrong to Merlin, even though he couldn't understand why.

"Tell me you have a contingency plan," he heard himself say.

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"Care to clue me in?"

Merlin shot Will a sidelong look and shook his head. "Not here."

Merlin led the way out of the building, squinting against the sunshine splitting through the tumultuous clouds. He oriented himself quickly, shouldered his rifle, and plugged his earpiece into his ear, motioning for Will to do the same.

Olaf hadn't offered a car back to the temporary base, not after Merlin had copied the entirety of the magical artefacts database, and Merlin hadn't asked for one, either. After the discovery of the missing cup, there was a flurry of other discoveries from not only missing containers, but *empty* containers. The personnel working in that division were harried with the order to go through the inventory again, this time opening every single box, crate, and drum, and Olaf was leading the charge, barely bothering with Merlin and Will, except to distractedly extract a promise to pass on the information to Arthur and to direct one of the agents to escort them out of the building.

Merlin waited until they were on the kerb across the empty street. "Keep an eye out."

"Don't I always?" Will asked.

There were a few citizens out and about, some with flimsy cloth shopping bags that were barely half-full, others loitering on the building steps and smoking through their ration of cigarettes. A street over, a handful of police officers on active duty kept a watchful eye on the barricade that was still raised around the Parliamentary building, their numbers supplemented by army personnel.

Merlin checked his watch. If he were lucky, Arthur would have gone to barracks a few minutes after Merlin had left with Olaf and logged some rack time, which, by now, would count to nearly four hours. If he weren't, Arthur was still awake and punch-drunk, slower with command decisions. Either way, Arthur needed to know what was going on immediately. Merlin switched to the team's private channel and tapped his earpiece.

"If someone's not monitoring this channel, I'm going to kick someone's arse," Merlin said, glancing at Will. "Two outbound calling in. Copy my signal."

A *click* echoed over the line. "Copying your signal, Outbound One. What's your position?"

Merlin gave their coordinates and said, "Returning to base on foot. Our ETA --"

Will held up four, then five fingers.

"-- forty-five minutes, with a detour for some decent coffee for the Captain. Is he around?" Merlin asked.

"Just walked in," Pellinor said. "He's been fretting like a mother hen. Handing you over now."

A faint rustle heralded an exchange of equipment, and Arthur's voice rumbled with the slow drawl of exhaustion, "What did he want?"
"Hello to you too, Captain Prat," Merlin said, grinning fondly. Will rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Nothing like what you expected, but thanks for the tips on handling him. I think we made away with more than he wanted to give us. But you'll need to get some sleep, and you'll need it now, because what we have isn't pretty."

"I'll sleep when you're back," Arthur said, predictably. Merlin rolled his eyes. Will shook his head but kept an eye out, occasionally looking over their shoulders.

London might appear, on the surface, to be a civilized city that was finally getting its shite under control, but they both knew better. It was a boiler bubbling under pressure, inching closer to the tipping point that would tip the seesaw's balance in either direction.

Permanently.

"All right," Merlin said, sighing. "Then listen. We've got a payload we're bringing in, but here's the bones of it. MI-5's repository got hit."

"Shite," Arthur said, sounding more awake now. "Go on."

"Olaf heard about the CIA's vaults being breached, ordered a check of personnel accessing their precious goods inventory, and called for a full inventory. They're still checking, and they'll send an agent over with the final list when they're done, but there's about seven or eight items that they can absolutely confirm without a doubt are not on some Q-wannabe's desk for independent study," Merlin said.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Will jerk around, as if startled, but when Merlin looked, there were four women walking down the sidewalk, huddled together for safety and eyeing their surroundings warily.

"That makes four," Arthur said. "The Directory, the CIA, MI-5 --"

"And Pendragon Consulting," Merlin heard Leon add in the background. "Who knows where else?"

Merlin sucked a tooth, a sour sensation settling in the pit of his stomach. The common factor in all those places that were they were located in London. To make it worse, the only object that had been taken from the CIA vault had been imported from the American quarters at -- supposedly -- Uther's request. That heavily implied that Uther was somehow involved with Nimueh, and possibly also with the still-unaccounted for Solomon Bayard, because all of the objects except for one had been in British possession all this time.

Within easy reach, if needed.

Merlin kept that theory to himself, half-suspecting that Arthur had already come to this conclusion.

"What did they take?" Arthur asked.

"Bits and bobs," Will said, putting a hand on Merlin's shoulder and pushing him left on the intersection instead of crossing the street. "Taking an alternate route. Tack on another ten minutes to our ETA."

"Acknowledged," Arthur said. "And I need more than bits and bobs."

"A lot of it they haven't conclusively identified attributed yet," Merlin said. "Apparently there's just not that many professors specializing in this shite. There were bracelets, a couple of swords, one necklace --"
"The sort I'd give a bird," Will said.

"Oh, so it's ugly, then?" Gwaine's voice sounded tinny and distant over the radio.

"-- a shield, that sort of thing. The research they did to locate the items are even more vague when it comes to what, exactly, it is that they're used for. But Olaf tromped all the way over the bridge, flipping his shite looking for you because of one specific item. A spear."

"Copy," Arthur said neutrally, which Merlin took to mean, _hurry up and get to the point._

"In the mythology, the Morrigan goes around and stabs the bodies of the dead or the near-dead on a battlefield. No reason given, but the stories heavily imply that she's claiming their souls as relics of war. There are stories about Cú Chulainn defending Emain Macha against overwhelming odds, and in some of them, he's using a spear he _borrowed_, and I use the term loosely, from the Morrigan to turn the numbers to their advantage."

Merlin paused when he saw Will's startled expression and knew that he was remembering the stories Gaius used to tell them when they were children. He glanced around carefully before continuing.

"Arthur, I saw photographs of the spear. There are literally _thousands_ of marks on it. Like a tally score. Up at the top there are sigils that I know stand for death and resurrection. There's a gnarled snarl of branches, and it looks to me like something's missing. Something about the size and shape of the blue gem that Sigan said Nimueh made him touch."

After being shown the photographs that Arthur had liberated from the CIA, Neil had confirmed that looked as if it were the same gem.

"Olaf thinks something big is coming," Merlin said, and he couldn't help but think about the stolen _cup_. "I think he's right."

"Fucking Hell," Will blurted out. "She's bloody raising zombies?"

"Shut it," Merlin hissed, looking around. A beat-up two-door convertible drove past them, but otherwise, they were alone, with no one within hearing distance. "But yeah. Yeah, that's pretty much it, but a million times worse. If the Morrigan collected the souls of the dead on a battlefield, that means each and every one of them are _warriors_, and some of them might even be mages. The entity that was in Sigan's body sure cast a whole lot of offensive spells --"

"Someone wake up Mordred," Arthur said.

Will was getting twitchier by the second, and Merlin glanced over his shoulder to see what he was looking at. The streets behind them were suddenly busier than they'd been, with people walking at an agitated, hurried pace. They didn't look as if they were coming after Merlin or Will, specifically, but still, it made Merlin frown.

"On it," Lucan volunteered. There was a splash in the background and a loud sputter.

"Get back to base ASAP," Arthur said. "In the meantime, we'll start compiling --"

"Orright," Will cut in, grabbing Merlin's shoulder and stopping him short before he could turn a corner. He pushed Merlin across the road. "We're heading south by southwest now, taking a detour. Our ETA's all sorts of fucked up. Get to control or call Watchtower, because I get the feeling we're walking into something we shouldn't be."
Merlin looked behind them again, and sure enough, there were more people filling the streets, except this time, he could see where they were coming from. They emerged from alleyways and side streets, and a couple of them -- wide-eyed kids with pale faces full of panic -- burst past some of the others to get away.

A potential stampede was in the making. The signs were there -- people who didn't seem to see the ones in front of them, a growing crowd, contagious and quick-flaring emotions. Already, a middle-aged man in a ratty coat and a tousled comb-over had been knocked to his knees, a young woman wearing long skirts hurried along at a trot, dragging a toddler with her while carrying a young child, and --

A police officer in a bright yellow coat emerged out of one of the distant side streets at a run, coming toward them with an expression of sheer fear on his face. "Run!" he shouted.

"Goddamn it," Will said viciously, shoving Merlin out of the way when a large, hefty man nearly ran them both down. "I did not wake up this morning to become an extra in a horror movie. I'm too pretty to die."

"Right," Merlin said distractedly.

He was distantly aware of Leon taking over for Arthur and calling Elyan to bring him online, of Gwaine calling after Arthur as a door slammed shut, of Mordred sleepily mumbling, "What." There was a situation brewing, and Merlin and Will were the ones on the ground. Merlin patted Will's chest and ordered, "Make this official. Call it in."

Merlin pushed past Will and moved through the growing crowd, and this time, it parted around him, as if aware that he was just as dangerous as whatever had spooked them. He grabbed the police officer just as he came within reach and forced him to slow down. "Hey! Hey! What's going on?"

It took the man -- late twenties, early thirties, armed with his bright yellow reflector jacket and little else but a whistle, his other means of defence strangely missing -- a few seconds to register that Merlin was army and armed and to stop fighting. He swung his arm behind him to point, and shrieked, "Fekkin' witches, mate. Witches!"

Merlin shook him violently. "Where?"

The rattle didn't do the man much good. His eyes were wide, pupils blown black with terror. "They twisted my partner completely around! He's dead! He's dead!"

"Get a grip!" Merlin shouted.

The officer startled, shutting up. He stared at Merlin, panted in short, hyperventilating breaths, and his hands trembled.

Merlin forced a reassuring tone to his voice. "Where are they? How many?"

"A bloody pack of them. Bloody wild dogs, they are," the man said, his voice cracking. "They were right behind me."

Merlin glanced over the man's shoulder, at the few people still streaming out from the side alleys and roads. The size of the swarm had abated and only a few stragglers ran toward them, getting away with a hurried shuffle. "All right. I need you to do something for me. I need you to get these people to safety. Can you do that? Yeah?"
The officer calmed down marginally, either out of relief that someone else was taking charge, or from the reminder that he was a member of the police force and that he had a job to do. He nodded firmly, setting his lips in a straight line, and looked around before stepping away from Merlin, barking, "Everyone, follow me!"

Merlin pressed a hand to his ear. "Arthur, did you get that --"

A thunderous explosion blew out of the intersection two blocks away. The ground shook. Brick and mortar debris went flying. A shockwave shoved the parked cars across the street and crushed them. Billowing black smoke coughed out into the open air, chased by blistering orange flames.

"-- Merlin," Arthur said, his voice coming out as a panicked crackle. "Are you --"

"We're fine," Merlin said, "But the bad guys are coming. We're going to have to mask up --"

"Do it," Arthur ordered.

"I don't believe my damn luck," the reporter said.

Ever since the entire world was placed under siege by an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population, something newsworthy happened on nearly every street corner. However prettily dressed up, there was a war going on, and war meant everything bad -- military curfews, food rations, utility restrictions, living on the knife's edge of fear and panic, always wondering if the next door neighbour would snap and kill them without a thought, or if it would happen on their way to the queue for a family-sized box of tea.

For the capitalist industries who reaped the rewards, war meant viewers, ratings, advertiser dollars. Every two-bit hack who'd ever filmed a YouTube video was out on the street, getting in the way of a war correspondent's plum shot. But the war correspondents were the ones with steady network jobs, feeding the mighty engine that was the media, and occasionally -- occasionally -- the mighty engine would hire hungry, out-of-work cameramen and journalists to do the drudge work of hanging around military posts in the hopes of capturing good footage.

They paid with tins of tuna and cans of bean.

Capturing footage of the SUVs, the black-clad men with red handkerchiefs and non-standard uniforms? It had been a fluke and Michael Alexander "Mickey" O'Reilly didn't think that anything would come out of it until later, when footage of the team that had rescued the soldiers, captured the terrorists, and liberated Parliament was broadcast on every channel. Worldwide.

His short-term contract expired, the cameraman was retained, and a prettier reporter was hired and stationed at Mickey's old post. Mickey's old job at the online-only news vlog took him back, but they could only pay in credit chits for redeeming at the building dispensary, which only ever had lukewarm soupy beef stroganoff knock-off and freezer-burn vegetables from five years ago. Worse, the only cameraman who was available was Julia Hall -- a pale, too-skinny blonde whose hair was in a perpetual messy ponytail and whose mouth would not shut the fuck up when they
were broadcasting.

The same cameraman who drove him bloody crazy.

"I don't see how this is lucky," Julia said, keeping up with Mickey just fine, despite the heavy backpack full of extra battery power and the twenty-five-thousand-pound camera she was lugging around.

"Jesus, we're paraphrasing *Avengers* now?" Mickey asked, glancing over his shoulder. He'd never be a war correspondent -- he had a coward's yellow streak a few kilometres wide -- and he felt absolutely no shame for running away from a bunch of nutters who planned on re-taking Parliament and were blowing everything up along the way.

"Seemed appropriate," Julia said. There was a small, pleased smile on her lips, though, because Mickey didn't always get all of her references.

"It's not aliens from -- wait," Mickey said, grabbing Julia's arm, yanking her to a stop. He scanned the area again, looking past all the bodies running away from the chaos. He thought he'd seen a glimpse of red, but it must have been a person's scarf, or a jacket, or -- he pointed suddenly. "There. You see them?"

A police officer in a bright yellow jacket was directing some of the runners. He had his arm around a terrified older woman and was helping her along. Behind him were two soldiers in standard uniform -- standard, that was, except for the red handkerchiefs hiding half of their faces.

"Is it -- is it *them*?" Julia asked, breathless with awe where the run hadn't winded her one bit.

"How many soldiers do you see wearing red?" Mickey asked.

Julia raised her camera and started filming. One of the two -- shorter, stockier -- had his weapon to his shoulder, scanning the area behind them. The other was waving his arm, urging people to move faster. When the last person was through, the second soldier -- taller, broad-shouldered -- waited a moment before gesturing, and his partner nodded.

An explosion rocked the street. Debris flew through the air and clattered on the ground before --

*clink clink clink*

-- being stopped by a glittering golden wall. It looked so much more amazing and impressive in person than it did on the telly. Mickey gasped a small sound that was halfway between a laugh and a shriek of glee.

"It's them," Mickey said.

The police officer paused nearby, waving people down the street. There was a minor stampede as the last stragglers disappeared up the street, the police officer and the older lady pulling the rear, but then, very quickly, the road emptied.

"Your hero worship is showing," Julia said. When Mickey turned around, he was greeted with a face full of camera. Instinctively, he stepped back into the right range away from the lens to stay in the shot, but he didn't say anything. "Well? Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Are we live?"

"If Bertrise is paying attention to the feed, we will be," Julia said. She glanced away from the
They both recoiled at the sound of gunfire, jerking away for shelter. Mickey saw the two soldiers braced against a corner of the golden shield, returning fire.

"Come on, say something," Julia hissed.

Mickey tore his eyes away from the soldiers and looked into the camera.

"Good evening. We are live. I'm Michael O'Reilly with the online newscast, London's Wireless Underground. As you can see behind me, we have yet another skirmish between the soldiers and the terrorists --"

The reporter was harried and on edge, nervous and jerky the way someone would be when they didn't know what might happen behind them. His hair stuck up on one side of his head and his jacket collar was twisted and wrinkled, as if someone had grabbed him and yanked him down.

"The internet has been abuzz with activity from magic activists reacting positively to the terrorist capture of Parliament just a little over twenty-four hours ago. One of the most outspoken appear to belong to a militant organization calling themselves the New World Order. They've been making a lot of noise about picking up where the terrorist, tentatively identified as Cornelius Sigan, left off, and --"

A barrage of gunfire off-screen made O'Reilly duck for cover. The camera jerked toward the left and captured an image of two soldiers holding some sort of invisible line. That invisible line exploded in bright light as something struck what appeared to be an invisible shield.

"And... they're coming," O'Reilly said.

"We've got video on them, Arthur," Elyan said, glancing over his shoulder briefly when a weight barrelled into him. Bran clasped his arm tightly and stared avidly at the computer monitor. "Sending the feed to your phone now. I'll have their position on satellite in a couple more seconds - -"

He continued to type, barely registering the numbers when they came up. He forwarded them to Arthur without waiting for the request, and sent the coordinates to his own satellite hook-up. The greyscale image zoomed in quickly, slowing down as it reached street level. Elyan pulled out a little and managed a better overview of the situation.

"Oh, shite," Bran said. Elyan smacked him lightly in the face out of reflex, since Gwen wasn't around to do it, and ignored the plaintive spluttering. He tapped the communications panel.

"Merlin, Will, you're going to have to pull back. There's six of them keeping you busy, but four more are splitting off and heading your way. Two on your left, two on Will's. You're going to be flanked in less than three minutes."

"Acknowledged," Elyan said. He scanned the map quickly, looking for a better position.

"Your backup is on its way," Arthur said. "Watchtower, plot their rendezvous."
"Working on it. Working on it. Arthur, Merlin. Be advised of an unit coming in from the West. They've intercepted civilians and are moving toward you."

"Get them out of our way," Merlin said, sounding breathless. "These guys have zero discipline. We can wear them out, but not if we've got friendlies in the crossfire."

"Working on it," Arthur said.

Elyan caught movement out of the corner of his eye and glanced at the clock. "I'm rigging a three minute delay on that video feed. Should be enough time for quick edits, if I need to."

"I hope they get my good side," Will said.

Merlin laughed over the line. "You've got a good side?"

---

Mickey stared unmoving at the soldier. He didn't know where to look -- the red handkerchief, the narrow black goggles with reflective lenses, or the extended gloved hand.

"Come on," the soldier said.

Mickey couldn't believe how calm the man was. He was standing back-to-back with his partner, who was scanning their rear for movement, and behind them, the golden shield remained in place, enduring a constant barrage of fiery missiles.

"We need to move to a more secure location," the soldier said, continuing on in that perfectly calm, even tone. "You're not safe here."

Julia kicked Mickey hard enough to get him going. He scrambled to his feet and was guided down the road by a gentle hand that pushed him forward. Julia caught up to him and stayed just ahead, the red light glowing. She was still filming.

The shorter soldier slowed down and stayed behind them. The other one stayed with them, keeping his gun trained and alert. He cleared the way ahead, even gestured when Mickey or Julia hesitated at the intersection.

Mickey remembered that he was on camera and they were filming. He cleared his throat and tried to make himself presentable. "You're them, aren't you? Part of the team that recovered Parliament?"

"No idea what you're talking about," the soldier said.

"Can I ask why you're wearing the masks?"

"Sure," the soldier said. "Can't promise I'll answer."

"I'll answer," the soldier behind them said. "Can't promise it'll be true."

Julia laughed. "I like him."

"Not now, darling. I'm on duty," the soldier behind them said. "But we could go for drinks later?"
Mickey didn't have to see the other soldier's face to know that he'd rolled his eyes. "Jesus. Could we focus?"

"Spoil my fun, why don't you?" the soldier behind them said, huffing.

They didn't walk more than ten more metres when a missile struck the building in front of them. The tall soldier whirled, but instead of raising his weapon, he threw out his arm. A golden shield absorbed one, two, and three more missiles hit, flashing bright light as the energy was absorbed.

Mickey didn't realize he was on the ground until he felt Julia grab his arm and drag him away. He watched, enraptured, as two men approached them from a narrow side road, several more running up the road after them.

"Well, there's your fun," the tall soldier said. The other one cackled.

"Friendlies converging on your location," Elyan said, but he sounded unhappy about it. "Can't break through to their comms guy to wave them off, and I've tried."

"'S fine," Merlin said, wondering how much longer he could distract the sorcerers. He wasn't concerned about being overwhelmed -- their opponents were undisciplined and had very obviously skipped the fundamentals when it came to using magic properly and effectively. Wells of magic might be easily accessible to the magically-inclined, but that didn't mean that the magically-inclined knew how to access it, never mind know what to do with it. They were expending their own energy as much as they were their own innate magic; the essence of it all around them was going unused. Their last few shots at Merlin's shields had barely lit them up.

"They're not responding to Command," Arthur said a moment later. The irritation dripped from his tone, and Merlin thought Arthur was ready to punch something. Instead, Arthur's voice became perfectly neutral, even flat, when he said, "Be advised. The unit has been identified. The commander is Captain Cedric Walsh."

A hollow vacuum roared in Merlin's ears, the ground faded beneath his feet, and a surge of uncontrolled power rose up to double the thickness and size of the shields.

Will turned around, completely forgetting the sorcerers on the other side of the shield. Merlin didn't need to know what he was about to say -- it was written in how he stood, gripping his gun with determination: I'm going to shoot him. Can I shoot him? We'll just say it was friendly fire. You'll back me up on that, right?

Merlin jabbed a finger at Will and very firmly said, "No."

If Merlin never saw Cedric Walsh again, it would still be too soon. The man had allowed his ego to get in the way of completing a dangerous mission, and, when their approach was overwhelmed, had refused to call a retreat. Merlin had done what he could to save his team while Walsh huddled in some sheltered spot somewhere, and had not only nearly died, he had also been put through a court martial because Walsh had blamed Merlin for the entire cock-up. If it hadn't been for a mysterious benefactor -- Mordred -- who had delivered both satellite telemetry and recorded radio communications, Merlin would have... He'd have lost everything.

Under any other circumstances, Merlin would take the gun out of Will's hand and swept an arm out
in invitation to go ahead and beat the bloody shite out of Walsh as long as he let Merlin get a few good shots in, too. But they were under attack and officially acting in their unofficial capacity, and Walsh could not, under any circumstance, be allowed to discover their identities. Their uniforms weren't flagged with their ranks and their patches were currently covered up beneath a Velcro flap, so they were safe, at least, from cursory identification. Still, there was a chance that Walsh might recognize their voices, and Merlin couldn't trust that Walsh would be able to keep their secret under his lid.

Will made a *but why not?* gesture, and rather than to explain out loud where it would get picked up by a microphone or overheard by the two news agents, Merlin raised his eyebrows and thumbed toward their video camera.

"Oh," Will said, sounding disappointed. "All right."

"Acknowledged," Merlin said into the radio.

"We'll deal with him later," Arthur promised.

There was a sharp edge to his words, and Merlin imagined that he could hear Arthur's knuckles crack.

"I know," Merlin said. He turned to Will, the reporter, and the cameraman. He was aware that someone might recognize his voice, but he hoped the red scarf around his face would muffle his voice enough to take care of that problem. "Let's keep moving. We can't pin them down here."

"You're going to capture them?" the reporter -- *Michael O'Reilly*, Merlin remembered, the introduction hasty and compounded by a yelp when he'd ducked the missile flying at his head -- said. He sounded incredulous. "How can you even contain them?"

"We have our ways," Merlin said simply. He paused to check direction and distance with Elyan before leading them off.

"After everything they've done? Property damage, scaring the bloody shite out of people, and who knows what else?"

Merlin glanced at the reporter before making sure that the shields would hold. They'd dissipate on their own, which ran the risk that the sorcerers would give up the chase. Merlin waited until they were out of direct line of sight before releasing the shields. The sorcerers would catch up, but they were tiring. "Property damage and scaring the shite out of people sounds exactly what happens after the home team loses a footie match. Do the coppers shoot them?"

"Well, no," O'Reilly said.

"At best they try to keep them in one spot, right? Minimize the damage. Let them burn themselves out, make a few arrests, slap on community service?" Merlin picked up the pace when he saw the sorcerers right behind them, and ducked around a corner, leading everyone into a series of narrower and narrower streets.

"Okay, I see your point. But coppers aren't equipped to stop them," O'Reilly said.

"No, they aren't. Not yet. And in the meantime," Merlin said, "we are."
"What do they even want? There's no footie match, I'm pretty sure rations are in a different part of town today, and I haven't been with a bir -- a lady in too bloody long, so I'm pretty sure I haven't been with any of theirs." Will said.

Merlin, in the background, snorted.

"You don't know?" O'Reilly asked.

If Elyan hadn't gotten to know Will well enough over the last few months, he would assume that the scoff was full of mockery. Instead, though, Will was hiding the fact that he didn't know.

Elyan shook his head and kept his eye on the satellite map. It was refreshing every five seconds, and from their position, he already knew that the video feed had definitely been three minutes behind when it had started. Now, it was almost in real-time. The producer had probably found a way around Elyan's measures and was clipping a few seconds here and there when nothing was going on, which was smart, because the website's hits were escalating.

Playing on the telly behind them, there was a time-delayed repeat of the online newscast as the big networks scrambled to catch up on what was the biggest news of the day.

"Of course I do," Will said, posturing a little. He twisted around to check their six but kept up with the group easily. "I'm just checking to see if we know the same things."

Bran slapped his hand on his face and shook his head. "He's so embarrassing."

Elyan chuckled but didn't answer. He confirmed Merlin's position check and passed on their ETA to Arthur as three minutes. He'd worked out a new route for Merlin taking them away from Cedric's team but, as Elyan watched, the other team was changing positions and would meet them at the largely-isolated throttle point.

He tapped the communications board. "Arthur, the other team is moving to intercept. There's no way they could know to take that route unless someone's keeping them updated."

"Acknowledged," Arthur said through clenched teeth. Elyan wondered if Arthur already had someone in mind.

"Are you getting this?" Merlin asked.

Elyan glanced first at the satellite image, but they were clear of any immediate threat. He tuned into the webcast, moving his earpiece so that he could hear better.

"... so they call themselves the NWO?" Will asked, trying -- and failing -- to sound as if he'd never heard of them before. "What's that, some sort of rock band?"

"Ah, no, actually. That's a song. And you're probably thinking of the band, New Order. From Manchester?" O'Reilly shook his head. "But actually it's this rising political group. The web didn't have a thing on them until after the muck-up at Parliament, and when you blokes took down Sigan, they started flooding message boards that they'd pick up the banner."

"We didn't have anything to do with that," Will said, too quickly.
"Yeah, pull my other one," a woman said off-camera.

"I got it," Elyan said. His quick web search came up with just over ten thousand message boards with posts alluding to exactly what O'Reilly was saying. He left it on the backburner for now, figuring that Merlin or Arthur would want him to track down IPs.

"I'd love to. Maybe later?" Will said.

"It's a date," the woman said, and this time, it was O'Reilly who slapped his own forehead.

"This is just a thought, but can we focus on the people trying to blow us up?" he asked.

"Yes, please, and thank you," Merlin said.

——

Elyan's ambush site was a tiny park wedged behind an industrial brick building that probably hadn't been in operation since the nineteen-fifties and had been partially converted into expensive lofts that no one in the neighbourhood could afford. By all appearances, they were unoccupied, but there were no guarantees and Merlin wanted to keep the damage to a minimum.

"Copy," Gwaine said over the radio, yawning.

Merlin didn't know where Gwaine had positioned himself, but Will, being Will, pointed him out easily enough after taking a quick look around. "It's where I'd go," Will said with a shrug.

"Who's with you?" Merlin asked, gesturing at Will to go and find another spot to perch.

Will trotted off, swinging himself up on a metal staircase, climbing up a couple of floors, and flattening himself out on the grating. He didn't exactly blend with the surroundings, but he wouldn't be attracting unwanted attention, either.

"Perce, Lamorak and Geraint," Gwaine answered easily. There was the sound of a palm slapping skin and a loud huff. "Orright. I'm awake for this. What are you going to do about the people with the cameras?"

Merlin turned around and looked at O'Reilly and Julia and found them staring back with varying levels of expectation. He wished he'd left them somewhere else, somewhere safer. There had been plenty of opportunities. But Arthur had said something about Morgana harping at him about making sure they had plenty of good PR exposure to keep the general population on their side, and ever since Elyan had made an off-hand comment about all the hits the live web feed was getting…

Merlin steeled himself to working to an audience. He approached them, but before he could say anything, O'Reilly said, "Don't send us away. This is important. You're important. You're the first ray of hope any of us have seen that things are going to be all right. People want to see this. People have to see this --"

Merlin put a hand on O'Reilly's shoulder and pulled him forward. He'd dug his heels into the ground, and the reporter stumbled, moving easily where Merlin pushed him.

"Don't be a numpty," Merlin said lightly. "You're important too. We can do our jobs better if they don't have anyone to use against us. What I'm going to need you both to do is to stay behind me --"
as far behind me as you can manage --"

"I won't get any good shots back there!" Julia complained.

"-- or you can head up to the roof where you won't get good video and you definitely won't pick up anything with that microphone," Merlin finished firmly.

"To the back it is," Julia said, following Merlin's direction. "Come on, Mickey!"

Merlin held O'Reilly in place, waiting for Julia to go out of earshot. Her camera was swinging and she was running, and the odds that she'd be able to pick up his next words were slim, but he kept his voice low anyway. "Do me a favour, Mickey."

"Yeah?"

"We've got backup heading our way. They'll mop up the situation. But whatever they tell you, don't let them tell you to piss off. You're safer with us. And more importantly, don't trust them to protect you."

O'Reilly's eyes widened, but a second later they narrowed in contemplation. "You're talking from experience?"

You have no idea, mate, Merlin nearly said. Instead, he shook his head and shoved O'Reilly to get him going. "They're not trained like we are."

O'Reilly shot him a disbelieving look, but he obeyed and went to join Julia. Merlin waited until he had confirmation on the ETA from Elyan before keying up his radio.

"All right, boys. This is how we're going to play it --"

The odds were even on which group would hit first, but Elyan didn't have the time to spare to watch the online newscast to find out. A buzz of activity over the comms was keeping him preoccupied, and he almost didn't notice Morgana right behind him until she shrugged out of her coat, dripping water everywhere.

"Oi! The equipment," he warned, rolling his seat to the side and hunching over the gear protectively.

She ignored him, as usual, and asked, "What's going on?"

Elyan flinched away from a crackle over the radio and flipped a switch on Merlin's communication board. Allan, Gaius and all the others might have drilled him until he was dizzy with all the military codes that he hadn't already learned through his extensive gaming experience, but he still had to concentrate when an entire bucket worth of alphabet soup was transmitted over the military's less secure lines. Elyan waved at Bran. "Debrief her."

There was a long pause -- a glance in the kid's direction showed him wide-eyed and gaping -- before he promptly got into it, giving Morgana all the highlights in verbal point-form.

Idly, Elyan decided that Kay would be proud of Bran, but that Will would roll his eyes in exasperation, because that's not how you tell a story. Come on, kid, let's take a walk, I'll show you
Elyan frowned at the communication between the mobile unit and the Central Command Centre and rolled his chair over to the other end of his table. He swatted Morgana away from the keyboard where she was checking to see if he was saving the video feed from the webcast and verified that the code being transmitted was not the current active code, and that Command was not aware of the conversation.

He hit the communications board again, broadcasting over the E channel. "Be advised that the incoming squad has received confirmation that there are no friendlies at their destination and they have received orders to get the situation under control before going radio silent. I repeat, the incoming squad has a go on a kill order and have gone radio silent --"

"I swear to God, the only reason I'm not going to put a hole through Walsh's fucking skull is because I want the privilege of shoving my boot so far up his arse that he'll be tasting shoe leather -_-"

Merlin tuned Will out. He didn't have time for Will's meltdown. More importantly, Merlin didn't need to be thinking about Walsh right now.

The shadows flickered at the open end of the quasi-cul-de-sac, and something triggered one of Merlin's alert wards. The sorcerers had arrived, and no doubt Walsh's men were spreading out and taking position at right that moment, too.

Merlin was only dimly aware that Arthur had disconnected audio -- he was listening to the team, but Merlin couldn't hear what was happening on his end of the wire. He'd mentioned having his eye on someone at the Command Centre, and he'd probably intended on following the person, later, to see what they'd be up to, but Elyan's announcement had forced Arthur's hand.

Merlin did not feel any sympathy for the pillock who had transmitted a kill order to Walsh's team, though he wished he was a fly on that wall, watching the evisceration as it was in progress.

The shadows lengthened, narrowed, shortened, and slowly, the group of sorcerers crept in, spreading out. They were in their late teens to early twenties, all of varying sizes and shapes, wearing anything and everything they could find in order to stay warm during the winter. Some appeared gaunt, with hollow cheeks and black circles under their eyes; others were impressively well-fed, their coats stretching over their chests and bellies. They weren't particularly impressive in appearance, and their magic, though not very powerful, wasn't anything to ignore, not when taken in combination with the group as a whole. Though they might know enough to work a way around Merlin's shield by attempting to find another route, it didn't seem as if any of them had any sort of strategic skill beyond smash through and quick, find another way around.

Still, they paused when they saw that Merlin was alone in the middle of the courtyard, accompanied by little else but the asphalt and gravel under his feet. Their expressions furrowed and they exchanged glances when they saw the reporter and the cameraman behind him some twenty, twenty-five metres away. One of the sorcerers lowered his arm, a little white light winking out as he closed his fist uncertainly.

That Merlin didn't have his weapon raised probably contributed to their overall confusion.
"You're him, aren't you? The one who took Sigan down," one of them asked.

The speaker was a slim woman with ratty brown hair tied back in a ponytail, her coat torn and her boots scuffed, half of her face obscured by a scarf wound around her neck against the cold. She could as easily be a student at uni as the barista at the coffee shop Merlin had stopped in ages ago, when things were still normal.

"I'm one of them, yeah," Merlin said.

"No, I mean, you're him," she said, taking a step closer. "You… you killed him."

"I can promise you that Neil Sigan's alive," Merlin said, staying calm despite the woman's obvious unrest. "But the entity that was possessing him has been destroyed."

Her mouth clenched before making a *tsking* sound, but she didn't speak.

"You're a fucking traitor, that's what you are," one of the youngest among them said, and the sorcerer who had been holding a white light in the palm of his hand raised his arm again, as if he intended to throw something.

"Walsh's boys are circling the building like buzzards," Geraint said. "Ingress in two minutes, maybe less. Himself is waiting behind them, waiting to strut in, I suppose. Bloody peacock, that one."

Merlin didn't acknowledge the comms, but he knew the others had eyes on him as much as they did on Walsh and the sorcerers.

"A traitor to who?" Merlin asked. "My Mum? The love of my life? My best mates? I don't know. I'd rather put my faith in the people who give a damn about me than in the NWO."

That gave them pause. "You know about them?"

"I don't just know about them," Merlin said. "I've been up close and personal with their recruitment tactics. I've heard their spiel. I mean, their vision's nice and all, but when they threatened my Mum… well."

Most of the group shuffled their feet and exchanged glances.

"There's better ways than the NWO," Merlin said. "It won't be easy, and it won't be pretty. But there'll be people who can help you with your magic, help you get you on your feet again. Hell, maybe you'll be one of those people someday, helping someone else, too. And I can tell you, in this scenario, no one's going to be threatening your Mums."

No one spoke.

Merlin heard a quiet countdown from Geraint before he announced that all of Walsh's men were in position, waiting for their go signal. Knowing Walsh, he'd wait until it looked as if Merlin had the situation under control before sweeping in just in time to take credit.

"I knew he was possessed. I just knew it. He was never right after… It doesn’t matter," said the woman who had spoken first. She took the arm of the man who was poised to fling a spell at Merlin and shook her head. He lowered his hand reluctantly, but the light in the palm of his hand didn't wink out.

"Look, I don't want any trouble," Merlin said. "You didn't hurt anyone. Maybe there's a bit of
property damage, but I'll let you go if you promise to clean it up."

A broad-shouldered man elbowed to the front of the group, his hair sticking up on one end, his clothes hanging loosely on his too-thin frame. "Bollocks."

"Let me be very clear here," Merlin said, slowly letting go of his rifle and letting it hang from the lanyard. He held up his hands in the universal *I mean no harm* gesture, though he didn't spread his arms too far away in case he needed to grab his weapon in a hurry. "*My team and I* don't want any trouble, and we're willing to let you go in exchange for a little community service. But there's another squad coming in, and *they* don't know that we have the situation under control. *They* don't know that you're kind of tired and don't really have the power to fight back anymore. *They're* going to come in, and they're going to subdue you, and if you so much as look at them cross-eyed…"

Merlin trailed off, letting the group come to their own conclusions. More than half of them looked over their shoulders anxiously, and most of the other half grabbed at someone else and made a sound that was a disturbing cross between muffled panic and frightened whimpers. The white light in that one sorcerer's hand was suddenly squashed, and he swallowed a gulp that made his prominent Adam's apple bobble.

"Well, damn. I knew you were a charmer," Gwaine said over the radio.

Merlin didn't think it had anything to do with charm and more to do with these young men and women understanding that Merlin was no different than they were.

Merlin tried very hard not to drown in the overwhelming sensation of relief and waved his hand to motion for the sorcerers to stand aside. "*I* need you to get out of the way. *Try* to look as non-threatening as possible. Get on your knees and put your hands behind your head. Don't make eye contact with anyone and don't move until I give the all-clear."

"This is a trick --"

"They're moving," Geraint announced.

"*I* need you to do as I said *right now,*" Merlin said, putting as much command into his voice as possible. The group complied -- some quickly, others more slowly. They were settled on their knees just as --

Merlin grabbed his rifle, and in one practiced motion, buttressed it against his shoulder and raised the muzzle, finger hovering just over the trigger.

Walsh's squadron emerged from the buildings all around them, slipping through dark openings and narrow alleyways. Walsh himself came into the courtyard through the same tunnel and road as the sorcerers, his weapon raised and ready, flanked by three other soldiers in a staggered diamond formation.

"Drop your weapon!"

Merlin didn't move. He glanced toward the group of sorcerers and saw that they had done as he'd instructed. They were showing varying degrees of fright, and some of them were even trembling.

Walsh's squad converged from every direction until they were surrounding Merlin and the sorcerers. Two soldiers broke away on Walsh's command and headed behind Merlin, probably to subvert the reporter and appropriate the camera. From the screams and sounds of struggle, it didn't sound as if they were very successful.
"Say hello to your mother, you bloody pillock. You're on air and we're live," Julia shouted.

"Put your weapon down! Put your weapon down!" Walsh shouted, stalking forward until he was barely ten metres away from Merlin. His body was braced and in a domineering line. He gestured aggressively with his rifle. "Put your weapon down! You're surrounded!"

"In position," Perceval said. "We move on three."

Merlin barely heard Perceval's broadcast. He was focused on Walsh -- his former Captain, the man who had abandoned his squad in the middle of a violent conflict, who had made poor command decisions, who had taken advantage of Merlin's injuries and leveled false accusations on him. Merlin hated this man. He hated everything that Walsh stood for -- a soldier put into a leadership position not because he was suited for it, but because he'd greased the right palms and rubbed his elbows with the right higher-ups. Walsh had gotten away from the disaster that had killed the majority of Merlin's old team. He'd been reassigned to what most people would consider a plum posting. And now, he was here, doing only the Gods knew how much damage.

It was Walsh who had directed his team into the House of Parliament to attack the terrorists under possessed-Sigan, and he had done so without explicit direction or command. It was Walsh who had turned off his team's communications so that they wouldn't know that another team was taking care of the situation. It was Walsh who was levelling his weapon against Merlin, his body language and fierce expression fixed in a promise: I will shoot you.

"You have five seconds to comply! Put your fucking weapon down!"

Merlin put his finger on the trigger instead.

"How about you put your weapon down? You have one second to comply," Perceval said, approaching at a slow stalk out of the corner of Merlin's eye.

Lamorak was mirroring Perceval's movements on Merlin's other side, though he stopped short while Perceval continued to advance toward Walsh.

"Who the fuck are you? What the fuck are you doing here? Put your fucking weapons down! I'm in command --"

"I'm sure that's what you'd like people to think," Perceval said, his voice low and soothing, as if placating a wild animal. Merlin knew that tone -- that was exactly what Perceval sounded like right before someone was getting hurt. Usually the other person.

"What's your unit number? Why the fuck are your patches covered?" Walsh shouted. "Who's your commander? I want to talk to him right the fuck now --"

Merlin kept his mouth shut.

"How about you turn on your radio," Perceval said pleasantly. "Or are you afraid you'll find out that you don't have the authority to be here?"

"Fuck you! Fuck you! I'm in charge here! Put your fucking weapons down! Stand down!"

"Sure. You first," Perceval said, and he moved. He lunged the last metre with snake-strike speed -- "Scield!" Merlin shouted, focusing on raising two shields. The first protected the sorcerers who had surrendered, the other wrapping around the reporters.
-- and wrenched the rifle out of Walsh's hands. The rifle was still attached to the lanyard around Walsh's throat, and the pull threw him off balance, and he fell, knocking himself out on the butt of his own gun.

"Oops," Perceval said, insincere. Then, straightening up to his full height, he did a slow turn. "Who's the second in command?"

The silence lasted all of five seconds before one of the soldiers stepped resolutely forward, his weapon at rest. "I am, sir."

"Have your comms guy call Central and confirm that we have lead on this situation. Get your medic, make sure this man is all right. Split the remaining men in two teams, have them go with him and him," Perceval pointed at Lamorak and Geraint, "and secure this location as a precaution. We don't need any glory hounds wandering in and escalating the situation when it's under control."

The man -- a fresh-faced sergeant who carried himself with more years than his apparent age -- glanced at Walsh, a small smirk just touching his lips, but he kept a straight face. He turned around and barked, "You heard him! Compton, see if you can resolve the connectivity issue with your Box and raise Central."

"I think I have it, sir. Looks like it was the on switch, it kind of sticks," Compton said, coming forward, kneeling down to fiddle unnecessarily with a few knobs to make it look as if he were doing something.

"Neal! Get your arse over to the Captain, make sure he didn't crack his skull. You have your smelling salts on you?"

A young woman came forward, already shrugging out of her pack. "No, sir. Sorry, sir. I'm pretty sure it fell out of my kit on the way out." She blinked owlishly, somehow maintaining a straight face.

"We'll talk about securing your kit properly when we get back," the sergeant said, his tone of voice implying that he intended to forget about it. "Hill! TJ! Grab your men and follow those two. Until you're released back to my command, you will do everything they tell you to do. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" two soldiers chorused. Almost at once, the rest of Walsh's team lowered weapons and aligned in perfect lines, splitting up to follow Lamorak and Geraint.

The sergeant turned to look at Perceval and Merlin before glancing over at the gold shimmer protecting the sorcerers. He gave them both a firm nod. "We're with you, sirs. What can I do to help?"

Merlin released the two shields and was only peripherally aware that the reporters surged toward them now that they weren't confined, coming closer. He made sure that Walsh was good and unconscious -- the medic, Neal, did the absolute minimum of checking Walsh's vitals and making sure he wasn't bleeding out -- before gesturing toward the sorcerers who were staring at them as if they had no idea what had just happened.

"Make sure they're all right," Merlin said. "You have spare ration chits?"

Soldiers on patrol were given ration chits that they were to pass out to the general population in an effort to ensure that everyone had access to food. From the eager way that the sergeant nodded, a small, bitter part of Merlin suspected that Walsh was hoarding those chits.

"Give them the chits. They're going to need them. Make sure they promise to clean up the damage
they've done in exchange, and let them go," Merlin said.

The sergeant's eyebrows raised. "That's it?"

"That's it," Merlin said, turning away from the video camera that was uncomfortably close. He looked at the sorcerers and caught one of the women looking at him, a teary-eyed, relieved look on her face as it slowly dawned on them all that Merlin had meant it about letting them go. "They're good people. They're hurting and hungry, just like everyone else."

"This has to have been the most amazing and anticlimactic confrontation between the armed forces and the magic users terrorizing London," the reporter said.

He filled the screen, but was positioned in such a way that the viewers could see the scene behind them. Reinforcements had arrived and the additional medic was helping to check out the sorcerers. The sergeant who had stepped up to the line was talking with the team leader of the second team, Will had joined Merlin to talk to the sorcerers, who were still staring as if they didn't believe that they were being treated humanely, and Perceval was out of the way, talking to one of the new soldiers.

Walsh, who had woken up at some point, was out of the way, glowering at everyone unhappily.

"Not only have there been zero casualties or injuries, but the medics are making sure that the magic-users are all right and have offered to escort them to a safe location. A situation that could easily have escalated out of control was quickly and calmly defused, proving that the men in red are more than they appear. Not only were they able to retake the House of Parliament and to subdue violent terrorists, they're proving themselves to be defenders and diplomats --"

"I like him," Morgana said. Gwen, who had arrived in time to see Walsh be taken down but not understanding why Will, Geraint and Gwaine had hissed, *Fuck, yeah!* any more than the rest of them, murmured her agreement. "Can you get contact information for… What was his name?"

"O'Reilly," Bran said.

"If our boys are going to go out again, I'd like him there. He's the only reporter putting a good spin on things," Morgana said.

"Easy," Gwen said. "But if you want his personal cell phone number, I'll need a couple of minutes."

"Take your time," Morgana said.

On the screen, Merlin and Will had broken away from the rest of the group and were approaching O'Reilly and the cameraman. O'Reilly broke off in mid-sentence and moved aside, glancing at the cameraman to make sure that they were all in frame.

"Sorry to interrupt. I'm just checking to make sure you're all right. You didn't get hurt in all that?" Merlin asked.

The camera squared in on Merlin, almost zooming in, changing angles once as if trying to get a good look at him. Elyan narrowed his eyes, his fingers hovering over the keyboard in case he
needed to mess with the transmission, but there were no visible identifying marks on his standard-issue uniform and equipment. His hair was tucked in under his hard lid, his eyes were completely hidden by his reflective-lenses goggles, and the handkerchief covered him from the nose down. Even his voice wouldn't be easy to recognize, not while it was muffled by the handkerchief around his face.

The image panned over to O'Reilly, who chuckled ruefully and ran his hand through his hair. "I'm all right, but there's a reason I'd never make it as a war correspondent."

Merlin's face was completely hidden, but somehow, Elyan could tell that he was grinning. "I don't know, mate. I think you did just fine." Merlin turned to the cameraman, and asked, "How about you?"

For a second, it seemed as if he were asking the audience. Morgana let out a tiny little gasp and laughed softly. "Oh my God. He's made for the camera, isn't he? When they decide to drop the bandit get-up, between Arthur and Merlin, the whole bloody world will be wrapped around their fingers."

Elyan chuckled.

The cameraman realized a little too late that Merlin was asking after them, because the camera bobbed up and down and a woman said, "I'd make it as a war correspondent."

Merlin's laugh was full of surprise, and he said, "I think so, too."

Merlin and Will made as if they were leaving, but O'Reilly stepped up. "Wait. Could I ask you a question?"

"Just one?" Merlin asked, good-naturedly.

"An important one. Everyone's wondering. Who are you? You, your team. Where did you come from?"

Merlin didn't answer. He lowered his head. He turned towards Will, who raised his hands as if to say, this is all you, mate. With a sigh that sounded like a shy little noise, Merlin turned to O'Reilly, ignoring the camera, and said, "We're... just a bunch of regular blokes trying to do the right thing in the service of our country. There's nothing special about us."

"Speak for yourself," Will said with a snort.

Merlin laughed mockingly, smacking Will on the arm lightly. Elyan understood what Morgana had meant when she said that Merlin would have his viewers eating out of his palm. He was honest, modest, real. If Elyan hadn't seen Merlin spluttering his way out of a cold, muddy swamp when he'd lost his balance during a training exercise, he'd swoon.

On the screen, Merlin backed away from the camera. He touched two gloved fingers to the rim of his hard lid, and saluted; the gesture turned into a flat-palm wave of his hand. He turned on his heel and walked away, Will right next to him as they left the regular troops to finish up on the scene.
"I haven't nothing," Gwaine said, falling into step with Arthur.

Arthur shot a concerned glance in Gwaine's direction. A muscle in Gwaine's jaw popped and Gwaine was scanning the area in search of something to shoot. There couldn't be anyone more frustrated by the lack of information surrounding Captain Walsh's continued active service than Arthur, and he didn't doubt that if he gave the word, any member of Excalibur would gleefully engage Walsh in a deadly game of friendly fire.

"Pretty sure he's sucking someone's cock," Gwaine added after a moment. "There's no other explanation."

"You'd be a General by now if that were the case," Arthur said, keeping his voice low. He nodded to a passing soldier and waited for the area to clear before he put a hand on Gwaine's arm to hold him back. He came in close and asked, "How's Merlin?"

"Distant," Gwaine said. "Stone cold professional. It's the first day greenie all over again, Lieutenant Emrys, sir!-levels of ice. Soldier-operational, but Will said it best. As long as Walsh's out of his line of sight, Merlin's half-looking over his shoulder expecting the bomb to drop."

Arthur thinned his lips. He gave Gwaine a resolute nod. "We need Walsh gone."

Gwaine's smile was mean. "Just give me the word."

"I need my men with me, not wasting away in the dank corner of whatever passes for a brig around here," Arthur said. He'd heard talk about deserters and arrests, at least in the beginning, though such restless dissent had abated since the "Men In Red" had made an appearance. "Have you charmed the paper pushers in the command tent yet?"

"Too busy getting Walsh's men to warm up to us," Gwaine said. The soldiers in Walsh's team were good sorts but didn't trust anyone. They might have trusted the "Men In Red" easily enough, but they'd closed ranks as soon as they'd returned to base, telling their side of the story and nothing more. "You'll want to talk to Lucan."

Arthur nodded, exhaling slowly. Lucan might not have the best way around people, but he was a dab hand at uncovering information. They would find out just how Walsh happened to be on the scene and who had sent him there soon enough. Arthur, personally, was hoping to find out why Walsh hadn't been drummed out of the armed forces entirely.

After a moment, he shook his head. "We can't be doing this."

Gwaine raised a brow.

"We have pressing matters, and Walsh shouldn't even rate," Arthur explained.

Gwaine poked Arthur in the head. "That's Captain Pendragon speaking. What about Arthur?"

"You know damn well what I want to do," Arthur said, his voice a low growl. "I know what you want to do. Will, Kay, even Leon. Everyone. But has anyone asked Merlin what he wants to do?"
"He's not talking," Gwaine said, sounding sullen.

"Then we wait until he's ready to talk. As much as we want to shoot the monsters, this is Merlin's nightmare," Arthur said. "It's his decision."

Gwaine broke eye contact. He squinted against the filtered sunlight, but Arthur knew Gwaine well enough to predict that he was considering turning in his commission just for the opportunity to blow a hole through Walsh's head. If Arthur were honest, he was thinking of doing exactly the same thing.

"Fine," Gwaine said. "I'll make sure the others understand that."

"Good," Arthur said, his nod grave. He stepped away from Gwaine, but Gwaine caught his arm.

"There's worse news."

Arthur's laugh was dry. "It can't be worse than what I'm about to do."

Arthur had been on his way to the war table when Gwaine had caught up with him. General Tachnathar had summoned him; Colonel Mandrake cited the importance of Arthur's presence. Sometime in-between the missive from Tachnathar and the conversation with Mandrake, he'd overheard the scuttlebutt that Colonel Pendragon had been restored to full active duty and that he was bringing in a team of specialists.

The speculation was that this other team were the "Men In Red". Arthur was happy to let everyone believe that -- the less focus on his men, the better. But the more he thought about it, the more the sick feeling in his stomach grew, and it was compounded by an early-morning phone call from Morgana who confirmed his worst fears.

A masked team Excalibur had only been in the field twice, but already, there was an outpouring of support. At majority, the soldiers spoke of them with awe, the low morale had received a boost, and the population at large seemed to regard them in a positive light, at least thus far. Morgana's new pet reporter helped a great deal in that regard.

As much as Arthur wondered after his father's motivations, Arthur knew, without proof, that Uther would take advantage of what Excalibur had done and use it for his own purposes. Arthur would not be surprised if Uther's so-called team of "specialists" would show up in the mess hall with red handkerchiefs wrapped around their throats, strutting about like egoistical pricks and claiming credit for Parliament, for the capture of soldiers, for…

For everything, really.

They could have the glory, but Arthur was not going to let them ruin what few good relations they had with a handful of soldiers. He intended to build on it, to convince all the unaffiliated sorcerers out there that humanity wasn't that bad, that just because they had magic, now, didn't mean that they had to be persecuted. He wanted the non-combatants, the civilians, to help turn the tide against the NWO, to cut the conflict short, to…

And to do that, Arthur was going to have to reveal to the Brass what only a handful of people had been privileged to know. Their secret wouldn't be a secret anymore. They would be at the mercy of the Brass' commands, and most likely forced to go rogue if they had any hope of staying the course in the war.

"It might be worse," Gwaine said.
Arthur sighed. He shook his head. "I'm going to be late. Doesn't look good if the Captains are there after the Generals."

"Worth it just to see their faces when you stomp in late," Gwaine said with a grin, but he matched Arthur stride for stride when Arthur continued on.

"Well?" Arthur asked. "What's the worse news?"

"Oh…" Gwaine blew out his breath and shrugged. "Well. You're the brains of this outfit. How much worse could it get if I happened to mention that Gilli's been sighted on the base?"

Arthur came to a dead stop and groaned. He stared heavenward, rubbing the back of his head in a fruitless attempt to ease the ache growing there.

In a way, Arthur half-expected Gilli to make an appearance. He'd hoped he was wrong. Gilli was on the Directory's roster of sorcerers, and it was a given that he would be around, somewhere, doing something. Probably antagonizing the team of communication specialists in the command centre, sabotaging the Boxes, taking forever to decode messages. The number of fuck-ups that a single incompetent person could cause, deliberate or otherwise, knowingly or not -- usually it wasn't a problem, but when it came to Gilli, it was almost epic.

Their odds were suddenly in a sharp decline.

Arthur looked at Gwaine only to find Gwaine waiting for him up the road, a sympathetic grimace on his face. He caught up and kept walking. "Bayard must be close. Wasn't he the one pulling Gilli's strings?"

"We all thought so," Gwaine said.

"Does Merlin know?" Arthur asked. At Gwaine's stiff nod, he asked, "How's he taking it?"

Gwaine snorted. "How do you think?"

Arthur pressed a finger to his throbbing temple and nodded. "Right. Stupid question. Tell Merlin to get out of Communications."


"Tell Leon about Gilli. Warn him about Bayard. We need to find out where they both are and what they're doing. If Bayard working with Nimueh at all, he needs to be taken in custody and interrogated. Have Leon call Olaf."

"On my way," Gwaine said, aborting his detour. "Anything else?"

"Coffee," Arthur said sincerely. "Find me some real fucking coffee."

The war table was in a wood-paneled room with red wallpaper, a painting of the Queen on one end and one of Winston Churchill on the other. Maps of the city covered maps of England, which
covered maps of the United Kingdom as a whole. All the paper made a thick cushion stack and an unstable platform for the computers that dotted nearly every seat.

No one gave Arthur a second look when he came in.

An aide pulled down a white screen while second one activated the smart board directly alongside. A systems analyst was bent over a laptop in the corner, opening up window after window, filling both screen and board. Someone went around the table, refilling everyone's cups, but it was nothing more than weak tea.

Arthur took a polite sip, dumped the rest in a potted plant that looked thirstier than he was, and glanced around the room.

General Tachnathar was at the head of the table, his head bowed as he listened to a young woman flipping through several file folders. He nodded every now and then, absorbing whatever information that she was giving him. Another General was nearby, in conversation with Colonel Mandrake. Colonel Locke was there, too, as were several other faces, male and female, in uniform or business suits that Arthur didn't immediately recognize.

He was too distracted by the fact that his father was in the room.

Someone had found Uther Pendragon a uniform -- or he had it all along, kept under vacuum seal to preserve it for such a time when it was necessary. It was tailored to fit him -- or he fit the uniform. Either way, it didn't matter how he came to be in possession of a British Army uniform, why he'd chosen to adorn it with the medals he's earned throughout his career, or why his hair was clipped short, as if it were a military buzz cut.

What mattered was that he was here, in the room, taking a seat as General Tachnathar called the meeting to order. Uther didn't seem to realize that Arthur was there, because he laughed at someone's joke, shook someone else's hand, and sat down without looking around.

All the seats at the table were taken. Arthur sat at the rear of the room, along the walls. A pretty aide, her hair tied back in a regulation bun, slid in the chair next to him, giving him a shy, awkward smile.

"I'm Tracy," she said.

"Arthur." He shook her hand.

"I'm with Colonel Miller," Tracy said, jutting her chin in the man's direction.

Colonel Miller had short brown hair that was more grey than brown, thick eyebrows, and sharp cheekbones over sunken cheeks. He was thin, painfully so, but there was a hardness in his expression that made Arthur think he had whipcord-solid muscle beneath a slightly-roomy uniform.

"His other aide was killed holding the line last week," Tracy said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Arthur said sincerely.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Tracy admitted. "I've never been an aide before. Give me a gun and point me at a target, and I'm okay. But here? I'm really nervous. Am I supposed to take notes?"

Arthur had never had an aide, either, though each of his team members -- himself included -- acted in a support role more than once. He only had his team to manage, not an entire bloody division,
though he couldn't imagine it was that much different. "Did he give you any instructions?"

"He told me to pay attention," Tracy said. "To be honest, there's so much Brass in here, I'm not sure where to look."

Arthur chuckled. "It's no different than with your C.O. in your unit. If he needs something, you get it for him. If you notice something amiss, you mention it for him. Just don't attract attention to yourself."

"I can do that. Good advice. Thanks." Tracy nodded her head. She exhaled with determination. After a moment, she leaned in a little and asked, "Who are you with?"

Before Arthur could answer, the meeting was called to order. Arthur was attentive as a summary of unit positions and enemy locations were posted at the front of the room, but there was nothing new. In fact, he could easily pick out more than half of the slides that were out of date by several hours, if not several days. He didn't, however, call attention to it because the conversation was more about the generalities of supply chains and civilian protection.

The administrative discussion was quickly and efficiently completed. A Colonel took the chair and went over the latest incursions into the city.

"We expected a surge of violence after the Parliament Debacle," the Colonel said. "We weren't disappointed. It wasn't as excessive as we'd expected. Teams from the 12th and the 14th were able to contain two of the largest flares of activity. There's property damage, but no civilian deaths and only minor injuries."

A low murmur of approval streamed through the room. "Any predictions for the next few days?"

"More of the same," the Colonel said. "Ebbs and flows. We should be alert for any surprises. There's no telling when someone might get riled up."

"I understand that several sorcerers were arrested by the bridge," Uther said, leaning forward.

The Colonel -- Haswell, Arthur remembered -- hesitated. He tapped a few keys on his laptop. "That's correct."

"Where are they being contained?" Uther asked.

"I don't have that information," Haswell admitted.

"Released with a warning," Mandrake put in.

There was a heavy silence.

Uther shifted in his seat and asked, "Sorry?"

"They were released on their own recognition with a warning to cease and desist," Mandrake said. "I believe there was also a trade of ration chips for a promise to repair the damage they caused."

"Hah." Uther's laugh of disbelief was accompanied with a forced smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Forgive me. It seems I am not entirely caught up on the latest regulations. Is the policy in regards to these... sorcerers... to throw back the shark and hope it doesn't return for another bite? Who authorized that?"

"The call was made on the ground," Colonel Mandrake said. "Ranking officer at the scene."
"Which would have been…" Colonel Haswell flipped through his notes. "Captain Walsh."

Arthur swallowed the bad taste in the back of his mouth and bit on his tongue to keep from saying something he knew he would regret.

"I'm afraid your information is incorrect," Mandrake said, sitting up straight from his casual slouch. "The Red Team was on the ground at the time. Captain Walsh was acting on a different set of orders that included radio silence. Command was unable to wave them off to another situation."

"Who gave those orders?" Colonel Miller asked. His voice was low and raspy, like metal scratching along concrete.

"We're looking into it," Mandrake said neutrally. There was a little smile in his tone, as if he had something up his sleeve. Arthur wouldn't put it past him. While he liked Colonel Mandrake just fine and respected him as a leader, Mandrake always struck him as the sort to pull all sorts of conniving, underhanded acts for the benefit of the greater good -- whatever that greater good was -- as long as he could get away with it. If he couldn't, he'd throw someone else under the lorry.

Arthur hadn't seen it happen himself, but he'd heard stories.

Uther's expression was sour, and he looked as if he wanted to say something else on the subject, but no one else at the table seemed to care. Bringing it up again would only annoy the men and women in the room.

Second-guessing the ground troops was usually considered to be poor form.

The next agenda items were secure transport routes, the protection of essential utilities, and the establishment of new base camps throughout the city, though that last was deferred to another time, when the situation was more stable.

"Recruitment," Locher said, bringing up the next topic for discussion. He paused and glanced around the room, waiting for a reaction.

"Isn't that a subject beneath the attention of the war table?" Colonel Haswell asked.

"I concur," Uther said, already flipping the page of the printout in front of him.

General Tachnathar leaned forward, an arm outstretched, a finger wagging. "Now hold on. I know what this is about, and I want you to hear this."

Uther forced a thin smile on his face and Haswell coughed.

"Sign-ups increased over the last few days, and it's safe to say that the Red Team gave us good PR," Locher said, his tone ironic. "What's on the table is the recruitment of magic users. Several groups arrived at a recruitment bureau asking about that. One of the officers in charge sent me a letter he received from one of them. I'll read it now."

He put on his glasses, pulled a folded piece of paper from his uniform, and glanced around the room. His eyes fell briefly on Arthur but flit away just as quickly.

"It was the first notion that I could be part of something good. You've got a couple of blokes like me in the army, and they're who I want to be. Anyone can carry a gun and shoot a person. A witch might hurt someone if they don't know what they're doing. But if I can be taught how to protect my family and my friends and my country without hurting anyone else, regardless of whether I have a gun in my hands or magic at my fingertips, then, I want that. They tell me I can't sign up because
Locher folded the slip of paper and put it in his pocket. No one said anything right away.

General Tachnathar looked around the room with raised eyebrows before spreading his hands and asking, "Opinions?"

"How long would they take to train?" Haswell asked.

"That's an excellent question," Locher said, flipping through a little notebook. A second later, his aide tapped him on the shoulder and passed him a different notebook, the lid already flipped, the contents open about midway. "And I have an answer for you. The Directory boys have a full contingency workup for exactly this kind of thing. How fast we can get them field-ready, what kind of unit structure would be best, equipment that they have on hand, equipment that they'll need, and their best estimate is --"

He flipped the page, holding the notebook out while squinting at it. He put his glasses on, the furrow in his brow deepening.

He closed the notebook with a dramatic flourish and said, "It depends."

"Add on the time to do a complete background check, which won't be fast in this climate," a woman from MI-5 said.

"That's the thing," Colonel Miller said, leaning on his elbows. "We have no facilities to train them. We have no staff to train them. The Directory sorcerers are all well and good, but they're useless in combat."

Arthur barely muffled a noise of agreement that was drowned out by Mandrake's snort. He covered it up with a cough.

"The only sorcerers I've seen who are halfway effective are the ones on the Red Team," Miller continued, as if he hadn't been interrupted. Arthur rolled his eyes, because Merlin and Mordred were more than halfway effective. "We're not pulling them out of the field to teach a bunch of kids who might turn around and use it against us."

"I concur," Uther said, jumping in. "There's too much danger involved. We cannot open up the armed forces to the use of magic without risking ourselves. We should not, under any circumstances, position these sorcerers in such a way that they will be able to use their powers against innocent civilians or against the government. In fact, that brings to mind the question. Who are the two sorcerers on the Red Team? Where do they come from? How do you know that they can be trusted?"

His question was met with a rumble of murmurs, most of them expressing the same concern. The noise only died down after General Tachnathar cleared his throat noisily and said, "Allow me to assure you that the members of the Red Team are above reproach."

Arthur startled, his eyebrows raising in surprise. Men in power -- particularly those at the General's level -- did not make any such declarations if they could help it. By making that claim, General Tachnathar was opening himself up to direct attack, blackmail, ridicule. He might even be court-martialed if any of their backgrounds ever came out. Few of the men on Excalibur possessed clean records -- but Mordred's history was the most stained of all.

"All of them?" Uther pressed.
"Every one," General Tachnathar said, keeping and maintaining eye contact. He didn't waver, not even a little.

"In that case, tell us. If they are trusted so implicitly, why are their identities hidden? Who are these men?" Uther asked.

There was another chorus around the room, most of them echoing Uther's request for a revelation. Some were merely expressing curiosity, while others were sitting at the edge of their seats, as if waiting for a scandalous revelation.

Arthur considered making use of the opportunity presented to him. He could announce it now. It was earlier than he'd liked, and the men and women in the room were not those that Arthur would have chosen to reveal the Red Team's identity. The situation was uncontrolled, and there were so many ways that it could go wrong.

His eyes slid toward Uther. Uther's jaw was clenched, jutted out in challenge, absolutely daring the General to keep this particular secret in what was, at the core, a power struggle. If Uther could rally the members of the war table to his side, they would most likely be able to wrench control of the war out of General Tachnathar hands.

Arthur couldn't allow that to happen. Uther's involvement in military action had to be minimized. He couldn't be given a command, he couldn't be allowed to have a security rating high enough to involve him in certain meetings where he could ply his influence.

Arthur shifted in his seat, his mouth dry.

Arthur caught Colonel Mandrake looking in his direction. Mandrake raised a meaningful eyebrow and shook his head minutely, firmly, adamantly.

Very calmly, General Tachnathar clasped his hands together on the table, looked around the room, and said, "Information about the Red Team is classified VRK under Her Royal Majesty's Special Intelligence seal. If Her Majesty is not privy to this information, no one else is."

Arthur relaxed in his seat. The smile faltered from Uther's face, but he nodded and very courteously said, "Of course."

"Back to the matter at hand. Do we enlist sorcerers?" General Tachnathar asked.

"We apparently already do," Colonel Miller muttered. No one paid him a great deal of attention except for Uther, who studied him for a moment before returning to his notes.

The discussion went around in circles, covering every positive and negative aspect of the endeavour but not bringing up anything that was a surprise to Arthur. A penny pincher in the group exaggerated the cost of creating a special program and someone else suggested segregation into an unique unit, which opened up a can of ugly worms. One of the Brass at the table -- Major Magdalene Oden, cleared her throat, and a slow lull fell around the room.

"The Directory's men are ineffective because they are not trained for combat situations," she said. "The sorcerers encountered thus far have a great deal of power, but they are not equipped for combat situations, any more than the Directory, and in the second incident involving the Red Team, it was clear that those sorcerers had no training in the use of their magic, either. Are we in agreement of this fact?"

Arthur wanted to kiss the Major for pointing out the obvious, but he refrained. He heard a great deal about this formidable woman, and that included her famous right hook.
When no one disagreed with her, she continued, "We no longer limit enrolment into the armed forces based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, but it was a battle in itself for each of those groups to be able to serve their countries the way they wanted to. Let's do this right. From the beginning. Magic users were not second class citizens before the Incident. They should not be second class citizens now. Treat them with respect, as equals, and we will receive the same treatment in kind. We have a team out there showing everyone what it could be like, how it should be done. Let's not miss this opportunity to bring them all to our side."

An older Major made a face and wisely kept silent. Arthur wanted to cheer, but no one else made a sound. Mandrake was smiling faintly. Uther's expression was clouded.

"We don't take men and women, give them a gun, drop them in a battlefield and hope for the best. They go through rigorous training regimen and endure thorough testing programs. We shouldn't turn away anyone who wants to enlist. We'll just make sure that we train them the way we want them trained," Oden said.

"We don't even know how we want them trained," Miller said.

"We've got until the first magic user to sign up makes their way through basic training to figure that out," Mandrake said.

It looked as if another heavy discussion was about to break out. General Tachnathar interrupted the chatter with a firm, "Anyone against that idea?"

There were a few hems and haws throughout the room.

"Anyone?" Tachnathar asked. The room fell silent. He nodded resolutely and turned to Locher. "Pass the word down the line. Regular enlistment, with option for a future special unit later. We'll figure out the logistics when we aren't to our necks in it."

Tachnathar looked pointedly in Arthur's direction, challenging him to say something. Arthur shrugged faintly and let it lie for now, not sure how well the room would take it if they learned that there were already logistics in place. It was in the packet Arthur had given the General.

"Very good," Locher said, scribbling in his notes.

With the main topics out of the way, the last few agenda items were addressed quickly and decisively. When the General reached the end of the list, he took a good, long look around the room and said, "If you're not cleared for Special Intelligence Project Return, get out of my war room."

The room emptied quickly.

"Coffee?" Tracy asked, giving Arthur an eager smile. "I know where they brew the good stuff."

Arthur was tempted. He was very tempted. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a good, steaming mug of strong coffee. Weeks or months, now. He regretted never savouring every moment. He'd been young and foolish, misguided by the belief that the coffee supply would last forever and that he would never go without.

It was with a great deal of personal disappointment that he shook his head and said, "Sorry."

"Are you sure?" Tracy's smile widened, almost flirtatious. "I also know a quiet, comfortable spot."

I'm sure you do, Arthur nearly said. He caught himself and sighed. "I would, but my significant other wouldn't appreciate it. I'll take a rain check on the coffee. You should go. The next part of
the meeting is about to start."

Disappointment flicked in Tracy's expression. It was quickly washed away when Tracy realized that Arthur was staying for the top-secret meeting. Her eyes went wide and her mouth formed a little, soundless "O". She nodded and hurried out of the room, and the officer holding the door shut it behind her.

There were a handful of people remaining. Tachnathar, Locher, Uther, Oden, Mandrake. The General's aide moved to the computer to handle the display, and there was a moment of quiet conversation before the door creaked open.

Major Kilgarrah stubbed out a cheap menthol cigarette in the door jamb, shut the door behind him, and blew out acrid smoke as he took a seat across from Locher. He greeted the others in a gruff but friendly tone; when he came to Uther, it was with a stiff, "Pendragon."

"Kilgarrah," Uther returned.

The door opened a second time to Olaf, who was wearing a shabby suit in dire need of an iron and a loose tie around the collar. He made eye contact with everyone at the table and sat down.

"So you're here," Olaf said, to no one in particular.

"You can't tell me you didn't know I was here as soon as I set foot in the building," Uther countered.

"The rat traps did go off," Olaf admitted, smiling widely. His tone was friendly and insouciant, but somehow simultaneously distant and detached.

"You haven't lost an ounce of your charm," Uther said. He turned to the General. "What is this about?"

"New information," General Tachnathar said, leaning back in his chair. He gestured to his aide, who pulled a picture of the staff on the screen. "Captain Pendragon --"

Arthur started to stand up when Uther said, with a laugh, "I haven't been a Captain in a long time. It's still Colonel, last I looked."

Tachnathar gave Uther an unimpressed look before turning away. "Captain Pendragon, if you'd join us at the table?"

"Of course," Arthur said, standing this time. He didn't sit down right away, instead offering a polite nod to everyone at the table. He ignored the rush of blood in his ears when he exchanged a glance with Uther. A small part of Arthur crowed at Uther's expression. He looked as if someone had slapped him.

"Why is he here?" Uther demanded. Arthur bit down his personal feelings. He wasn't sure if he should have expected better from his father.

There was a long, strained pause around the table. Locher bowed his head over his notes. Oden stared at Uther with a raised brow. Mandrake leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling as if he'd rather be anywhere but in the room -- but then again, he almost always looked like that.

Arthur wasn't surprised that Uther hadn't noticed him until now. He was the same way at Pendragon Consulting -- present at important meetings, barely acknowledging his own staff, dismissive of underlings. Arthur had never thought about it before, chalkling it up to Uther's army
training until he himself entered the army and learned that Uther's leadership style was not the norm.

"Because he needs to be here more than you," Olaf said, staring at the screen of his smartphone.

"I'm sure there's been some sort of error," Uther said, ignoring Olaf. Arthur was acutely aware of Uther's complete attention, and he recognized the tone of his voice. It was at once soothing and charming, polite and suave, but entirely underhanded and manipulative. "Arthur, you can go."

The apprehension Arthur had felt since seeing Uther in the war room slowly ebbed away. Uther might be his father, but ultimately, he was a man. And not merely that -- he was a man whom Arthur had respected, once, but could only be disappointed in, now.

"Actually, Colonel Pendragon, I really can't," Arthur said. He was surprised that his voice was steady, and even more so to realize that he was calm. "General Tachnathar called me to this meeting."

"I see," Uther said, smiling thinly. He offered the General an apologetic glance for overstepping, and feigned an expression of ignorance. "I wasn't aware that you had the appropriate security clearance."

"Need to know," Arthur said, his tone clipped. "And you didn't need to know."

Uther's expression darkened like the London sky under heavy rain and foul weather. He shifted in his seat, effectively ending the conversation the way one might cancel a video game when it was obvious that they wouldn't get past the first monster taking a particular approach.

"Does anyone care for tea?" Locher asked, breaking the strained silence with the scrape of his chair as he stood up. "I'm getting tea."

No one reacted to Locher. General Tachnathar leaned forward, elbows on the table, fingers steepled. He looked at everyone in the room before nodding to no one in particular, and immediately, an image popped up on the screen behind him as the General's aide took his cue.

The screen filled with a photograph of the missing staff with a coloured metre stick alongside it. The staff was just as ugly as Merlin described -- long, unadorned, scarred and pockmarked with various symbols at the top and the bottom and a gnarled head of twined branches forced into position. The shaft was textured, and if Merlin hadn't told him what he believed about the staff, Arthur would have assumed that the marked length of it was decoration and not an ongoing tally of the number of dead warriors collected by an acolyte of the Morrigan.

Mordred had paled considerably but had confirmed Merlin's best guess. Mordred admitted that he hadn't paid a great deal of attention to that part of his studies in his early years of training as a druid, but Gaius had been able to confirm. The druids at Camelot would help research the staff and the remainder of the missing artefacts in the hopes of staying ahead of the game.

"Several objects from different repositories around the world are confirmed missing," Tachnathar said without introduction or preamble. "While some disappearances cannot be tracked, many of the artefacts were removed from secure containment vaults over the last three to six months. This indicates a systematic retrieval by a very organized individual and spans several countries. The most significant of these items is a staff. Do any of you recognize it?"

No one answered. Kilgarrah was impassive. Mandrake looked mildly troubled. Locher kept his head down, generally unconcerned. Oden was the only one to study the screen intently, as if
committing it to memory.

Uther cleared his throat. "I may have inventoried that item. I'm afraid I don't recall the lore associated with it. I turned in all my notes after the project was closed."

"Sure you did," Olaf said. He cracked open his laptop.

"Well, allow me to enlighten you," General Tachnathar said. "This is a necromancer's staff, and it holds the power to raise the dead."

"Ah," Uther said after a moment. He feigned concern. "I do recall this item. I believe it was determined to be inert and was catalogued as a potential museum piece."

Arthur tried to interpret Uther's words, and decided that what he actually meant was either, "It's useless so I left it", or "It was too large for me to take it". Either way, the outcome was the same. Uther must have been aware of the staff's significance at the time of discovery, but couldn't contrive a safe way to reroute it to his own private repository.

"That's funny," Olaf said, looking at his computer screen. "That's not what you said in your notes."

"My research was accurate. Any errors to the transcription are not mine."

Olaf turned his monitor toward Uther. "I have scans."

Kilgarrah coughed, but it might have been a snort of amusement; Arthur wasn't sure.

Major Oden rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers and dropped her hand on the table with a loud thump. "How lovely to realize you two boys haven't changed one bit. Can someone please share the significance of this item?"

Mandrake looked at Kilgarrah. Kilgarrah looked at Locher. Locher's back was to them all; he was spending an extraordinarily excessive amount of time preparing his tea. No one spoke.

"Anyone?" Oden prompted, casting a severe glare around the room. Her gaze settled on Uther. "You were our researcher and archivist. What was the lore surrounding this… museum piece?"

"I went through a great deal of mythology and lore, Magdalene," Uther reproached, though it was clear that he was stalling. "It's been years, and I certainly didn't make it a hobby to maintain that knowledge after I left the military. Wouldn't someone from the Directory be of greater assistance?"

"Someone like Solomon Bayard?" Kilgarrah suggested. He clasped his hands on the table, fingers curling inward. Arthur thought he saw a hint of claws.

Locher sat down, his tea sluicing over the edge of the cup and into the saucer.

General Tachnathar made a disapproving sound. He leaned in his chair and made eye contact with his aide. The aide looked up from his computer, checked his phone, and shook his head in answer to the silent question asked.

"It seems," Tachnathar said dryly, "That Bayard is otherwise unavailable."

Locke snorted into his tea, but Mandrake was the one to keep a straight face. He said, "The Directory boys were lost without him. Bayard couldn't have come out of his hole at a better, more opportune time."

"For whom?" Kilgarrah asked gruffly.
Oden released a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes. She slapped a file folder closed and gave Tachnathar a significant look. "In that case, we should postpone this meeting until he deigns make an appearance. I have other duties to attend to."

"I concur," Uther said.

Olaf looked at Arthur pleadingly. Arthur could almost hear him beg, "Please tell me you have something, but it was Uther's dismissive, relieved tone that made Arthur speak up. "Begging your pardon, sir, I shouldn't postpone this meeting at all."

"And why is that?" Oden asked, arching a brow.

"I can't imagine," Uther cut in. "As far as I'm aware, my son has no information to contribute."

Arthur gave Uther a sharp look. Patronizing remarks were the norm at business meetings, but they had never been directed at Arthur before. Uther was making it sound as if this was a Take Your Child to Work day, his tone tantamount to "Let's not bother the adults, go play with your toys". He could only marvel at Morgana's restraint for having held back the urge to eviscerate Uther where he stood.

"As far as I'm aware, Colonel Pendragon still has not been granted the appropriate security clearance. Or has that changed while we've been sitting here?" Arthur asked, not bothering to mask the ice in his tone.

Kilgarrah claws disappeared and he placed his palms flat on the table. Olaf smirked and made no attempt to hide it. Locher glanced around the room, Oden tilted her head with interest, and Tachnathar spread his hands, giving Arthur the floor.

"My source reviewed the markings on a high-resolution photograph of the staff. He has identified it as a weapon called a fedelwyr, or, in English, a reaper," Arthur said. He paused, pleased with himself for not having mangled the name too much. At the identification, however, it seemed that most of the room woke up.

"Are you certain?" Locher asked slowly.

"I trust my source, and they are looking into absolute confirmation. There are some detractions from the lore. For example, mythology describes it as a spear with a glowing blade, not a gnarled staff, but there are enough similarities that it's an almost positive identification, short of having the staff in our possession," Arthur said.

"That can't possibly be correct," Uther began.

Oden held up a hand to silence him. "I'm sorry. What is the mythology behind the staff?"

Arthur waited to see if anyone else would speak up. Mandrake blanched; Kilgarrah was sitting up straight. Locher stared at the contents of his cup as if he expected it to reveal the answers to all of the questions in the universe.

"The staff, or the spear, belonged to the goddess Morrigan, who would walk across a battlefield and collect the souls of soldiers," Arthur said, choosing to share only the most important facts from the convoluted stories he'd been forced to listen to. Gaius was an excellent storyteller, but he could go on and on. "In Druidic lore, it's believed that the goddess held back those souls for her own personal army, which she sometimes loaned out to her favourites."

The sound of keyboards clicking filled the silence and came to an abrupt stop. Olaf looked up
expectantly, waiting for Arthur to continue. If it wasn't Arthur's imagination, Olaf seemed annoyed that Arthur hadn't come to him first.

"My God," Oden said quietly. "This artefact is a portable army?"

"Hardly," Uther said. "The lore spoke of souls. That's hardly a realistic threat."

"I see your memory is coming back to you," Olaf remarked uncharitably. Arthur had come to that conclusion, too.

"Unlike yours, my memory is keen enough to recall the extensive testing done on the staff. It was deemed completely, irredeemably inert. It's useless, except as a very ugly walking stick," Uther said.

"My source believes that the staff is incomplete. Lieutenant Camilleri, could you please draw the shape of a spear around the brambles at the top of the staff?" Arthur asked.

Lieutenant Camilleri glanced up at the mention of his name, looking around with surprise. He brightened when he saw Arthur, and nodded. "Yes, sir. One moment."

He went to the smart board and crudely drew lines around the end. All of the brambles were perfectly contained in a less-than-artistic spear-shape.

"Can you draw a circle in the middle without touching any of the brambles and colour it in?" Arthur asked.

The lieutenant did exactly that. When he was done, there was a black oval in the middle.

"Thank you," Arthur said. Camilleri sat down at the computer, and every pair of eyes in the room turned to look at Arthur, waiting for an explanation. "Based on the available information on the artefact, the dimensions of that circle approximate the dimensions of another artefact that was recently stolen from the CIA repository in London."

A muscle popped in Uther's jaw. Arthur had no doubt that Uther knew exactly what he was referring to.

The missing jewel, by all accounts, also matched the vague description that Neil Sigan had given them. Gaius had suggested that the jewel had been removed from the staff and had been used to contain a malevolent spirit, and that the malevolent spirit itself would have been sustained by the power in the jewel itself. No one seemed to know whether the jewel was now running on empty, magic-wise, but Gaius admitted that it might not take very long to recharge, if it needed charging at all. Arthur kept that piece of information to himself. Getting Sigan in more trouble was the last thing he wanted to do. As far as Arthur was concerned, Sigan had been a hapless pawn.

"My source suggested that the staff could be powered by the right object. The CIA repository records describe the missing jewel as a potential power source," Arthur said.

There was a long silence. Oden abruptly opened her file folder and jotted down a few notes. Olaf remembered himself and began to type, and Uther glanced off to the side.

However slim the chance, it was possible that Uther had put in a request for the jewel's delivery because he intended to keep it from Nimueh. There was an equal chance that the opposite had happened. Arthur tried to figure out what Uther was thinking right now, but he was difficult to read.

"All right," General Tachnathar said. He leaned forward. "What happens when the staff is active?"
"We can only speculate," Uther said sternly "There have been too many instances where the myth did not match up with reality. In this case, speculation could lose us everything."

"It's not speculation if we are using logical interpretations of the facts," Kilgarrah said, his voice raspy.

Arthur felt a tremble under his skin and shot the Major a warning glance. He wasn't sure what he was warning about, but a protective instinct had risen up. Kilgarrah wasn't looking in his direction, but somehow, he'd picked up on it and pulled himself together.

Arthur relaxed, but only just.

"What facts?" Uther shot a hot glare in Arthur's direction. "Who is this source of yours? What is their background? Can they be trusted?"

Arthur ignored Uther and turned to the General. "I've compiled a list of scenarios involving the use of an activated staff based on the lore. They range anywhere from granting the bearer the skill and strength of one of the warriors supposedly held prisoner by the staff, to being able to animate a soldier into continuing the fight long after they're dead."

Arthur paused. Olaf typed into his laptop. The clicking of keys fell to a stop.

Oden cleared her throat and said, "Continue."

"The staff itself contains more necromantic magic than any other weapon my source is aware of. It can do anything -- virtually anything that you can imagine. In the hands of a sorcerer trained in the art of war, it could be used to rob consciousness and sentience from an attacking army and to turn them against each other. The staff could summon a host of ghosts to wreck psychological damage on our troops and destroy morale. God knows that there are enough ghosts in London for that to be a plausible tactic."

Uther scoffed but otherwise didn't interrupt.

Arthur's eyes went to the photograph of the staff on the screen. The staff had a rough curve in in the middle of the bramble, shaped into an oval. At the scratchy length of it, which Arthur had thought to be only decoration or texture.

"Worst case scenario? Absolute worst?" Arthur spoke slowly, trying to find the right words to describe the horror that had grown in his head when he realized what could happen with the staff in the wrong hands. "If London has a lot of ghosts, it also has a lot of bodies. It's one thing for the sorcerer to raise the dead. It's another thing entirely when they have at their disposal the souls of the fallen brave, handpicked by the Morrigan herself, to put into those bodies."

Olaf stopped typing. "Oh, fuck."

Arthur looked around.

"If you thought it was bad before the army stepped in? Wait until our men have to fight against twenty thousand corpses in varying stages of decomposition. Twenty thousand of the nameless heroes of mythology, all under the control of the enemy."
"Arthur."

Arthur kept walking.

"Arthur!"

Hurried footsteps caught up to him. A heavy hand grabbed his arm and yanked him to a brutal stop. Arthur was wrenched around. It was only because Arthur knew where he was and who had touched him that he didn't react instinctively and lay the person flat on their arses.

At any other time, Uther Pendragon was a formidable man. He held himself with a stiff carriage, an impassive expression, a stoic demeanour. Anyone who wasn't accustomed to him would find him intimidating. Those who were accustomed to him found him terrifying.

Uther might have been gentler toward his children, but there was none of that gentleness now. "Just what do you think you're doing, Arthur?"

"Hello to you, too, Uther," Arthur said, his tone far from pleasant. "I see you made it through the initial stages of the NWO's attacks relatively unharmed. I wonder how you managed it. Did you have a bunker built under the house? Supplies stored up?"

A muscle clenched in Uther's jaw. A vein throbbed in his forehead. This close to him, Arthur realized that Uther was older than he remembered. There were more wrinkles around his eyes. The salt-and-pepper in his dark hair was more of a solid grey, his cheek was rough where he'd shaved it with an old blade, and the thin set of his mouth seemed to be a permanent, cutting line. Only one thing hadn't changed about him. His eyes. They were still cold and blue, rarely affected by emotion.

"It's funny," Arthur said. "All these years I've been in the army, you've never asked me what I've been up to. You always seemed to have some idea of the missions I've been on, what kind of work I've been doing, even down to the soldiers that I marched with. I thought it was because you respected me enough to be on my own and to deal with things my way."

"Arthur --"

"I've been fooling myself all along. I think I always knew that you were keeping an eye on me. On my team. It must have really gotten to you when we cut all ties with Bayard and reported directly to Kilgarrah. Suddenly, you didn't know what I was doing anymore. You had to get your information in other ways, didn't you? You had to get it from the enemy."

Arthur didn't realize the truth until the words were out of his mouth. It had lingered in the back of his mind, ignored and unacknowledged. The others were careful not to voice it in exactly those terms -- not in front of him. Leon had come the closest, clasping Arthur's arm one day, his mouth open as if he were about to say it, his courage failing him.

But he saw that truth in Uther's recoil, in the thunder storming in his eyes, in the twitch and pull of his mouth and lips as he held back a damning outrage. With steel in his voice when he said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right," Arthur said, scoffing. He walked a few steps and stopped, turning on his heel to look at Uther. "Gets to you, doesn't it? Not being in control. Morgana. Me. My team. The world. The future."

"I don't know what you think I'm --"
"You want to know what I'm doing?" Arthur asked bluntly. "Do you really want to know?"

"You're involved in things you don't understand. I didn't want you involved. I tried to get you --"

"I don't care," Arthur said. "Whatever you did, whatever you're going to do? That's on you. But me? I'm going to do what you should've been doing all along."

Uther glowered.

"I'm going to do the right thing."

Arthur stood at attention and saluted. It was formal, precise, and cold. He stared through Uther, his gaze unfocused, and snapped his arm out and down. His shoes squeaked on the stone floor when he turned, but his footfalls were silent as he walked away.


Duty.

Duty was the only reason he hadn't flipped the fuck out on Uther. The only reason why he hadn't torn the man apart. The only reason he shoved each and every single personal feeling he possessed toward the man as deep down as he could so that he could focus on the concern at hand.

He stared out of the window as the truck drove through the cleared city streets. The closer they came to the base, the more people Arthur saw. No doubt they were gathering where it was safest, like moths flitting around a flame, drawn out of the darkness and into the light. As heart-warming their presence was, Arthur couldn't help but worry that they were putting themselves in more danger by coming close to what they believed was safety.

"It's about this tall. That thick around. Let's call it an average eleven scratch marks per row. They're about this tall. That works out to a grand total of..." Will did a drum roll. "Twenty thousand, four hundred. Plus minus eleven."

"Fuck," Gwaine said. "Who had zombies?"

No one spoke up.

Gwaine looked around. "Really? We've worked our way through the worst horror movies ever, and no one called zombies for the next round? Fucking zombies."

"Not zombies," Mordred said, looking pale. Lucan looked from Mordred to the wastebasket tucked in the corner, and back again. He inched closer to the wastebasket, probably to put it in Mordred's hands if he were going to get sick. "Worse than zombies."

The truck jostled to a stop, pulling Arthur out of his own thoughts. The General hadn't liked to hear what Arthur had had to say, but with the sole exception of Uther, absolutely no one doubted the potential threat that the staff could bring once it was activated. Olaf muttered something about wanting Arthur's source, while Uther subtly mocked paranoia and fear.

Arthur climbed out of the truck with a nod of thanks to the private who had given him a lift and walked around to the checkpoint. The MP sergeant checked his identification wordlessly and gestured. "Go ahead, Captain."
Arthur shoved his ID in his pockets along with his trembling hands. He walked through the checkpoint and onto the temporary base, ducking under the half-raised barrier. Almost no one noticed his arrival, and well, they wouldn't, because Arthur was just another man in the war.

An itch between his shoulder blades made him aware that he was being followed, but whoever it was fell in step with him before he could act. A brush of contact -- arms touching, a light hip-check -- and Arthur relaxed.

"Owain doesn't really need me, you know. He pretends he's not already a genius at making things explode, but he's brilliant, actually. If I didn't have an unfair advantage over him, I'd be jealous," Merlin said easily.

"Captain's orders," Arthur said gruffly.

"Could do without the layer of subterfuge." Merlin nudged him. "All the same, I appreciate it. The comms tent is full of Locher's best, and they hardly need me. I was getting bored."

Arthur shot him a sidelong glance, a small smile finding its way to his lips. His voice was a low murmur when he said, "I could take care of that."

"I wish," Merlin said wistfully.

A crooked grin met Arthur's smile. They hadn't really had a moment alone since they arrived on base. Their bunks were miles apart in their assigned barracks, their non-active duties on the base too different, and whenever they had a quiet moment, the others joined them. It had happened only once when Merlin was too tired to walk to the end of the barracks to his cot, but Arthur was grateful that none of their friends and teammates said anything about the two of them cuddling on Arthur's bunk.

"But you're barely sleeping three hours at night. I'd rather you got some rest."

"We can rest when we're --"

"Don't," Merlin said, keeping his hand over Arthur's mouth until Arthur nodded understanding and agreement. With this much magic in the air, no one, not even Arthur, wanted to invite disaster.

"Sorry," Arthur said. He caught Merlin's hand and gave it a light squeeze before letting it go.

"No run-ins with Gilli?"

"None. Pellinor's been hanging around as close to Directory quarters as he dares, but doesn't recognize any of them. I don't think we're in any danger of being found out. Not yet, anyway," Merlin said. He eyed Arthur sidelong as they walked, and asked, "You didn't tell the Brass, did you?"

"Didn't get a chance. It's been classified VKR."

The gag order on their identities hadn't been a surprise, but an official top secret stamp was. It would have been nice to know that before Arthur attended the meeting with the intention of informing the war table of the team's capabilities.

Merlin made an impressive noise. "So does that mean that we'll get thrown in the dungeons if we accidentally reveal ourselves?"

"Probably." Arthur snorted. They were bound to be discovered at some point, and it was likely to happen more by accident than by deliberate happenstance. "But I'm sure everyone will be too busy
keeping the world in one piece to worry about arresting us."

"Good to know," Merlin said. "How was the meeting?"

"Fine," Arthur said stiffly. After a moment, he said, "Uther was there."

Merlin didn't answer, but when Arthur glanced at him, Merlin wore a stormy expression.

With a sigh, Arthur repeated, "It was fine. Really."

"Really?" Merlin asked. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I want to talk about it about as much as you want to talk about Walsh," Arthur said. He regretted mentioning the name as soon as he said it, because Merlin tensed, his shoulders climbing nearly to his ears. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Merlin said, his tone as stiff as Arthur's had been.

"Really?" Arthur asked.

Merlin shrugged. "Easier to deal with him from behind a mask. I nearly fucking froze, though."

Arthur ached to wrap Merlin in his arms, but it wouldn't be appropriate to do in public, not when they were both supposed to be elsewhere. Instead, he clasped a hand on Merlin's shoulder, squeezing tightly. He let his fingers linger over Merlin's collar for a moment too long before pulling away. "He'll be dealt with."

"I know," Merlin said, bumping into him again. "Like I said, I'm fine."

Arthur studied Merlin for a moment before nodding.

"How'd they take the news? The Brass, I mean. Are we a go?" Merlin asked.

"No," Arthur said.

Oden had pushed for the preparation of battle plans, but Uther had argued that until there was sufficient intelligence to indicate that an undead army under a sorcerer's control was the next threat that they'd face, the best course of action would be to maintain current positions and readiness levels. His only concession was to agree to increased patrols in the area.

Olaf had been unhappy, because that put the burden of proof on his department. Mandrake had grumbled about straining an already stressed patrol and not allowing his men to rest properly. Locher had been tasked by the General to assist Olaf however he could, but there was little that the cryptography and communications department could do except tap enemy transmissions.

Kilgarrah, on the other hand, had been oddly silent on the matter. He had also been the first to leave the room.

"Kilgarrah was there," Arthur said. He nodded when Merlin's head snapped around with raised eyebrows. "I didn't get to talk to him. Uther got in the way."

"Do you want me to find him?" Merlin asked. "He's got to be on base somewhere. One of them, anyway."

"If you can," Arthur said with a nod. They needed answers from Kilgarrah, and they most definitely needed Kilgarrah if the situation escalated.
"Do my best," Merlin said. He turned a little, placing a hand on Arthur's shoulder to slow him down. He looked past Arthur, nodding down the way. "In other news, take a look over there."

Arthur followed the gesture.

At the end of the road was a staging area with several transport vehicles. A few privates were unloading sleek black cases with gold lettering and coded serial numbers under direction. The men barking orders were in charcoal-grey uniforms and caps. There was nothing unusual about those men. They'd seen them all the time on the field, at army bases around the world. Consultants, private firms, men and women hired by the army to handle the less-important jobs so that soldiers could get on with the war.

It was strange to see them operating in London, but that wasn't the most troubling thing about them.

Pendragon was emblazoned across the cases being unpacked. And worse, each of the newcomers were wearing a red band around their left arm.

Exactly as Arthur had feared. He released a frustrated groan.

"This is just fuelling rumours," Arthur muttered. He didn't miss the off-duty soldiers lingering on the periphery -- too far to be recruited into helping, but close enough to watch and whisper amongst themselves.

"Sorry," Merlin said. After a moment's consideration, he said, "I could…"

He wriggled his fingers in the air.

"Mickey," Julia said.

Mickey tossed the crumpled sandwich wrap into a nearby street bin and wiped the crumbs from his mouth. "What?"

Julia gave him a deranged smile. She pointedly turned and struck a pose, holding her hands palm-up. She waggled her arms in the direction of several non-army issue SUV vehicles, all of them factory-fresh with tinted windows. They were driving out of the base.

"So?"

Julia's gestures became more emphatic.

Very slowly, Mickey became aware of the activity around them. Reporters were winding up their microphones. Camera operators were packing up their equipment. Technical people were heading toward network vehicles and getting ready to leave.

Mickey spotted a few CNN reporters and sighed longingly. What he wouldn't give to ride in their sleek black vans instead of having to rely on the Underground's beat-up My grandmother slept with a Beatle in this caravan hand-me-down. Not only did he struggle with keeping his overactive imagination from picturing that -- he'd met Bertrise's grandmother and could not picture her as a
young woman at all -- but he struggled with having to get inside the monstrosity in the first place.

There weren't even any seatbelts. He didn't know how it could possibly be street-legal.

Julia pinched his arm. Mickey yelped and pulled away. "Owww. What the Hell? What was that for?"

"The Men in Red! They're ours, Mickey. Are you just going to stand there and let the news syndicates have them?"

"Wait. What? No, it can't be them! They don't -- We've never --"

"You're wasting time. Shut your mouth and get in the goddamn van," Julia shouted.

Mickey stared after her, not sure if he should. Julia was a tempest when she was riled up, and things got beaten to smithereens and ripped to bits in bad storms. Staying out of her way was self-preservation, nothing more. She was very particular about how her equipment was packed and stored.

But then, her words sank in and, Hell, no, Mickey did not want to let the news syndicates scoop this story away. They had gotten the reputation of being the go-to reporters if anyone wanted a glimpse of the Men in Red. Granted, they'd only caught their arrival at base, and that single trip out in the field, but it was more than anyone else had gotten in the quiet weeks since the attack on Westminster Square.

Mickey climbed in the passenger seat and braced himself for the sputter-jerk of the van driving forward, but the engine barely sputtered. The igniter click-click-clicked uselessly.

Julia banged her way out of the driver's seat. "If those fucking idiots with the BBC messed with the spark plugs again, I'm going to have their balls," she roared. She stomped to the front of the van and pulled up the hood.

Mickey stayed where he was, half-paralyzed with a healthy fear of his partner, his stomach sinking with the realization that they're going to miss out on all the best shots. All the other news offices were going to be on-site before them.

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"Hey, guys! Guys! Anyone?" Bran looked over his shoulder and back to the telly. When no one immediately answered him, he raised his voice. "You've got to get your arses over here now!"

The door to the cottage opened and shut with a human shudder and a creaky click. Someone stomped their feet on the carpet.

"Hello! Is someone here? Because I'm not supposed to touch the radio, but I will if I have to!" Bran shouted.

Gaius came into the living room, looking somewhat worse for wear, given the weather. The temperatures had dipped to uncomfortable levels and the air was full of frost instead of the predicted rain or snow -- neither of which were particularly appreciated right now. Bran shuddered
and nested deeper into the blankets, glued to the news reports.

"What is all this commotion?" Gaius asked, shaking his hat out. Ice crystals hung from his hair and were already melting in globs on the collar of his coat.

Bran waved a hand at the screen. "That! That's all the commotion!"

Gaius peered at the television. On the screen, several soldiers in charcoal-grey uniforms piled out of a black SUV. It was difficult to identify them from this angle, but the glimpses of red around their faces was an immediate identifier. Gaius smiled sadly and patted Bran's shoulder. "I see the boys are out again. I hope they're careful."

"But that's it! It's not them," Bran exclaimed. "They're supposed to call in when they're out on the field!"

"Sometimes they don't immediately have the opportunity to do so," Gaius said.

"Except, they've been showing this on the Beeb for the last thirty minutes. The news vans have been tailing them since the base," Bran said. He watched a few minutes of footage, half-listened to the commentary from the reporters on the screen, and craned his neck around Gaius. "Morgana! Gwen! Elyan! If you're napping, by the Gods, I'm going to splash you with a bucket of --"

"Can't I have a bloody kip?" Elyan groused, stomping down the last few steps. He rubbed the side of his head and detoured toward the kitchen.

"Oh no, you don't!" Bran declared. He threw away his blankets, immediately regretting the loss of heat, but this was more important. He scrambled over the back of the sofa and caught Elyan before he crossed the threshold into the kitchen. "You've got to see this."

"At least let me get some tea," Elyan said, still holding his head. His eyes were half-closed and squinting, and deep lines creased his forehead. "My head is pounding."

"That's nothing. Wait until you see this," Bran said.

Elyan dragged his heels to the living room, and Bran was tempted to zap him to move faster, except Elyan would just ban him from the cottage if he did. Bran made sure Elyan was facing the right way, but when there was no reaction, he climbed up on the sofa took Elyan's face in his hands, and directed him to the television.

Elyan blinked several times, his brow furrowing.

"We have no word from the command centre, but it appears that the Red Team is embarking on some sort of pressing mission," the commentator was saying. "There's two six-man teams converging on the two-storey building. We're in Woolwich, a stone's throw from Bexley. If this is your neighbourhood, you may want to stay inside."

"Should we follow them?" someone asked, off-camera.

"Are you kidding? Of course we should," the correspondent said, his eyes bright with excitement. "It's a chance to see the Red Team in action."

Elyan twisted and stared, uncomprehending, at the inactive bank of computer monitors and a quiet radio band. He sat down in front of them, activating everything, pulling on his earpiece. "Gwen! Morgana!" he hollered. "Get down here!"
Arthur tapped his flickering desk lamp, wondering what it would take to get a new bulb without filling out a half-dozen requisition forms, when Merlin's Box buzzed in insistent beeps.

Merlin, who had declared his cot too far to walk and had promptly collapsed on Arthur's bed, rolled onto his back and snored softly.

Arthur rolled his eyes. He shifted his chair closer and kicked the bedframe, keeping clear of Merlin's inevitable reactive flail.

Merlin caught himself before falling out of bed, but it was a near thing. "Huh? Whazzat?"

"Box," Arthur said, pointing.

Merlin rubbed the butt of his palm into his eye and muttered darkly, " Couldn't any of you check it? I was having a kip."

"Nope," Leon said, chewing noisily on a bag of crisps. That the crisps were over a year old and recovered from the mouldy pantry of an abandoned house didn't seem to deter him.

Galahad replied with a mumbled noise and a waved hand in the air.

Perceval looked over the edge of the file folder he was reviewing. Gwaine, Will, Lucan and Mordred kept their heads down, refusing to look away from their ongoing card game in case one of the others cheated -- which was a certainty, given those four. Bohrs was holding something for Owain, and Owain was twining wire in double infinity loops around Bohrs' fingers.

"See if I give you any of my Mum's cookies next time," Merlin groused, getting up. He groaned, both hands at his hips, and cracked his back.

"You all right there, mate?" Lancelot asked, looking up at the sound.


"That should be the next recruitment slogan," Geraint remarked. "Come for the war, leave with chiropractic bills."

"Don't even joke," Pellinor said. The mattress of his cot was rolled up, and he was in the process of replacing a broken spring. "I'm going to have the spine of an old man before I'm forty."

"You're already an old man," Lamorak said.

Merlin hauled the Box from where he'd stashed it behind his cot, pressed the earpiece against his head, and flicked a switch. "Hullo. Merlin speaking. This better be an emergency. That, or Gwen's in labour."

Lance sat up straight. "What?"

Merlin held up a placating hand that stopped in mid-wave. He pressed that hand against his other ear, cupping it to block out the noise in the barracks. His brow furrowed. "What? Say again."
Arthur stood up, catching Lance before he started packing his things. "It's not Gwen, or he would've said."

Lance let his bag drop. The chatter around the room decreased in volume.

"No, that's not us, we're on our arses. What do you mean, it's live?" Merlin waved a hand. "Who's got the telly?"

"Kay," Will, Gwaine and Geraint said at once.

Perceval plucked the portable out of Kay's lap, wrenching out the earplugs in the process. Kay startled, reaching out for the small set. "Nooo! Corrie! I were watching that!"

"We'll get you the bloody box set," Leon said.

Kay immediately relented but asked, "All of them?"

"Do I look like I'm made of money?" Leon asked, scowling.

"What channel?" Perceval asked.

"Elyan says any of them," Merlin said, tossing an earpiece at Arthur. Arthur caught it without difficulty and put it in. "All the networks are playing it."

"Playing what?" Mordred asked. He started to get up from the card game, but paused and glared at the others. "I'm freezing my cards. I'll know if they move."

"Damn it," Gwaine muttered.

"He's full of bollocks," Will said, reaching for them. He yelped a second later, shaking out his hand. "Bloody fucking wanker. That's my gun hand."

"They're both your gun hands," Gwaine said, rolling his eyes.

"Didn't you grow up with Merlin? Shouldn't you know better?" Lucan asked, amused.

"I didn't say I were smart enough to learn my lesson," Will said.

"Clearly not," Gwaine said.

"Shut up," Will snapped.

"Shut up," Perceval said, planting the portable at the highest vantage point in the room. Everyone abandoned what they were doing to crowd around it.

The footage bounced dizzyingly as the cameraperson followed a reporter into a building. In the distance, barely visible until the camera adjusted for the change in lighting, were several armed figures. When the picture cleared up, Arthur recognized the charcoal-grey of Uther's "consultants".

Arthur couldn't make out the dialogue -- Perceval reached up and turned the volume up before he even had to ask.

An out-of-breath reporter said, "We're inside the building. From the blankets and pillows in the first few rooms we can see that several people have been squatting here recently. The soldiers are sweeping and securing the building. They don't seem to mind that we're here as long as we stay out of the way -- wait, did you get that? I can hear a commotion up ahead. What's going on?"
The reporter moved, effectively blocking the camera. A second later, there was a new obstruction in the form of a grey uniform with plain black Kevlar chest pieces and the standard assault rifle of the British Army. The man was wearing a red handkerchief around his face, hiding his mouth and his nose. A pair of reflective glasses, not unlike those that Excalibur wore, hid his eyes. His hair was tucked under a black cap.

He didn't move, but over the radio, they could hear disembodied shouting in the background.

Abruptly, the camera shifted. The image jerked now and again. The reporter and camera person were pushed outside into the street where other news agencies had gathered at a healthy distance. The reporters on the kerb across the way changed positions and --

Again, the camera shifted. The camera person was backing up away from the house. The reporter was talking. "We've been escorted from the building for our own safety. If you squint, you can see some movement going on inside. I can't make out what they're saying, but it sounds like --"

A thunderous tat-tat-tat of gunfire had both reporter and camera person ducking.

"What the Hell are they doing?" Leon muttered, brushing the shrimp seasoning from his fingers.

Arthur waved a hand in the air, half to plead for silence, half to dissipate Leon's horrible stale-crisps-shrimp breath.

"Those were shots fired. I saw the muzzle flashes. Did you get that?" the reporter asked. The video bobbed up and down with the camera's response. "It looks like they're escorting people outside. Come on, let's move out of the way. We'll see what the Red Team is up to."

"That's not the fucking Red Team," Will said.

"No shite, it isn't," Lucan said. "What gave it away?"

"Your face," Will said. "Your faaace."

"Will, grow the fuck up and pass me the team lappy," Merlin said. The shared, non-essential laptop was uncovered from under someone's pillow and passed over several heads before it reached Merlin. Merlin immediately opened it and started typing.

"Elyan, is Morgana's pet reporter on the site?" Arthur asked.

There was a momentary pause. "Yeah, the Underground's feed is active. They're there, ah, at the house's nine o'clock. Shite for video, some guy from CNN keeps popping into their camera. Mickey's not said much."

"Mission's not on the active list," Merlin said. Arthur nodded in acknowledgement. He hadn't expected that it would have been.

The base radio buzzed, then stopped. A second later, Arthur's cell phone rang. Arthur barely glanced at his mobile, instead shoving it into Leon's hands. On the telly, Uther's men were gathering all the inhabitants of the house and lining them on the road. Two middle-aged men. Four women roughly the same age. Six teenagers and two very young children. They were shoved to their knees, their hands forced behind their heads.

"It's Mandrake," Leon said, nudging the phone back into Arthur's hands. "He's pissed. He wants you at command."
Arthur took the phone, turning to watch what was happening on the screen. "Pendragon," he said.

Mandrake blew out a breath, barked a command that wasn't meant for Arthur, and came on the line. "Why aren't you walking into command right fucking now?"

"How about I'm off duty and this isn't my fucking problem?" Arthur snapped. On the telly, the camera panned from one end of the people on their knees and went all the way down the line. Arthur could barely see their expressions; the television was too small. Their body language, however, spoke loud and clear. They were terrified. "I warned you this would happen. You knew it was coming. You said there would be measures in place to keep them out from the field, to flag us if they walked out. What the Hell happened?"

Arthur didn't need to ask. He knew damn well what happened. Uther Pendragon's rank and authority had been restored, though there was still some question of how. Most importantly, the identity of the person to have signed the orders was unknown, the papers somehow, mysteriously, misfiled. Arthur wasn't in a position to question the situation. Special security clearances that exceeded Uther's was one thing, but rank was something else entirely.

"I'm more concerned with how do we stop this," Mandrake rumbled, his voice low. Arthur wondered if he was in danger of turning dragon right there in the command tent, squashing equipment and frightening people. Still, if he hadn't lost his grip in all his years in his position, Mandrake wouldn't lose it now. "Do you want to bring your team in?"

On the telly, several of the soldiers had semiautomatic rifles trained directly on their prisoners. One of them was actively threatening one of the older men, a handgun in his face. The man cowered, his body low, nearly flat to the ground, his hands up in the air.

Arthur grit his teeth. "That will only confuse the issue. We need to make it absolutely clear that Uther's men aren't us."

He turned and glanced at Leon. Leon was already on the phone.

"We've got that part handled," Arthur continued, though he wasn't entirely certain what Morgana would do. He had, however, every confidence that she could shred any change to public perception and get it right on track. "You need to get them under control. Establish authority. Where's Uther?"

"Not here," Mandrake said through clenched teeth.

"Kilgarrah?"

"Stormed out as soon as he saw the feed," Mandrake said. Then, wearily, he said, "Stay out of the east quad. He might set something on fire."

Arthur tried not to snort. He watched Merlin pull out his personal laptop and boot it up with the Merlinware partition. Kay dragged another piece of equipment out of a chest while Lamorak helped them both hook it up.

"Tachnathar?" Arthur asked.

"Being advised of the situation as we speak," Mandrake said.

"Any line on where Uther's directing this shite show from?" Arthur asked, glancing at Merlin. Merlin shook his head briefly, and Arthur didn't push for faster answers. He could see for himself that Merlin had only just set up his system and that he was working on it.
"Not from base, that much is clear," Mandrake said. For a moment, the background noises were muffled, and Arthur could just make out a series of orders. "We're sending out a few teams to the strike location, but it'll take some time getting them there."

Arthur glanced at the map Perceval had unfolded and nodded when he pointed the location. He wasn't familiar with the area, but he knew many of the roads in and out of some parts of London were newly blockaded by some of the fringe groups or by the NWO themselves, while others had only recently be cleared.

"Do you need me in Command?"

"What I need," Mandrake said, sounding as if he was biting through steel, "is to break through their comms and order them to stand the fuck down."

Merlin squinted at his laptop, his mouth set in a grim line. After a moment, he cracked his fingers and started typing.

Arthur turned away and told Mandrake, "Working on it."

___

"This isn't right," Mickey said under his breath. One of the members of the Red Team had one of the young boys by the scruff of his neck and was holding them down against the asphalt. A woman sobbed the boy's name, alternating between reaching out for him and covering her face when the muzzle of the rifle drifted in her direction.

There were twelve of them. Mickey counted them twice to make sure. Only twelve. He'd counted more men coming out of the vehicle when they'd first arrived. There were more men than this at Westminster Place. The general consensus was, special teams tended to go out together on missions. They didn't lose men. Sure, they might be temporarily reassigned to another unit to address a need, but it seemed strange to Mickey that the Red Team would be out here in this part of the city without all their members.

This part of the city was not one of Mickey's favourites. Not the worst one, either. The location wasn't the best, though it had been at one time, when everything was normal. A nice little suburb with a homey little shop on the corner, a pub across the way, several houses lined up in a row, and a young, thriving community.

Not anymore. If Mickey looked, he was sure he'd find that the real estate values had plummeted for this area just because two rival gangs were located on either end of the street. On one side of it were the magic users; on the other the usual punks who were under the impression that they could fix everything with the business end of their guns.

In the middle, which was where they were now, were regular folks just trying to get by.

Mickey felt like shouting that the team had broken into the wrong house and were interrogating the wrong people, but there were several reasons why he didn't.

The most important reason on his list was that the team was violent, almost brutal, in how they were treating civilians. He didn't want to stick his neck out. Or rather, he wanted to stick his neck out if there was some guarantee that it wouldn't be broken along with everyone else's.
The second most important reason on his list was that… "This isn't right. It's not them."

"Uhh," Julia said, nudging him with a foot. "Your microphone is live."

"I don't give a flying fuck if my microphone is live. It's not them."

A nearby reporter from a local station shot him a dark glare, gesturing toward his cameraman. The message was clear -- *shut the fuck up*. Mickey gave him a two-fingered salute.

"I mean, just watch them move. That's not how they took Westminster Place. They went in fast and they subdued quickly. They didn't point their guns at the sorcerers unless they planned on shooting people. And the other time? They absolutely never threatened the magic users. They made them promise community service, for God's sake," Mickey said.

His voice must have been a little loud, because several more reporters glanced his way curiously.

"It's not fucking them," Mickey said, putting a hand on Julia's camera, pushing it down. "Don't film this shite. I don't care who these guys are. They're not regular army, they're not the Red Team. They wouldn't do this. They *wouldn't*.

Julia raised her camera onto her shoulder after giving him a stern glare. "I'm still filming. We're bloody *live*. And if it's not them, do you want to be the only one without film clips of these pillocks getting their rocks off by toeing the Geneva convention line?"

Mickey gave her a dark look. "We're live, the microphone's on, she talks like that, and I'm the one that gets yelled at for swearing?"

"Shut up, Mickey. Our fans love us."

"It's the same fucking signal from Paris," Merlin said, slapping his laptop shut.

Lamorak took the laptop out of Merlin's hands to secure it in the warded case. Merlin wound the cable on his handheld Crackbox and shoved it in his pocket. He grabbed an earpiece for himself, tossed one at Leon, and pointed meaningfully at Will, who held his hands up in surrender. Merlin turned on his heels and stopped abruptly, colliding into Arthur anyway.

"Are you sure?" Arthur asked. He didn't doubt Merlin's evaluation. He didn't want more confirmation of how much of an arse Uther was.

"It doesn't mean he was behind it," Merlin said carefully.

Arthur clenched his jaw, though Merlin's hedged words had nothing to do with his increased frustration. If anything, Arthur was angry at the implication. The possibility that Uther was behind every failure they'd encountered on their mission was staggering, made worse by the knowledge that Arthur had nearly lost Morgana, Gwen, Kay…

Merlin.

"It doesn't mean he wasn't," Arthur said, taking Merlin's arm and guiding him to the door. "You're with me. Leon --"
"We'll be ready. We can meet you at the gate."

"Right," Arthur said, even though they all knew that it wouldn't matter what happened. Even if Arthur ordered the team to scramble, the roads being what they were, there was no chance that they would get to their destination before it was too late. Arthur wasn't sure how much use they would be on the scene, not when Mandrake already redirected two teams off their regular patrols. The other teams would arrive and intervene before Excalibur were even halfway there.

He left the barracks at a fast walk. The command centre wasn't far from their barracks.

"The signal in Paris. The one that jammed our communications when we got you away from Aredian," Arthur said. "Can we jam them?"

"We can do whatever we want," Merlin said darkly. "This is my goddamn tech. If I ever get my hands on Monmouth for stealing my research in uni, I'm going to sue his arse off."

"All right," Arthur said, jostling Merlin violently. "Forget about that. Can we hijack their signal? Are their radios coded?"

"Coded," Merlin confirmed. He patted his chest pocket. "But breakable. I just need a few minutes at the comm console."

"Good," Arthur said. He darted across the makeshift street ahead of a lorry, dragging Merlin with him. They reached the command centre and waited a tortuous minute while the MPs checked their IDs. Mandrake had cleared him to come in a long time ago, but Merlin wasn't on the approved list, even with his higher security clearance. "He's with me."

"Yes, sir," the MP said, gesturing them inside.

Adjusting to the sudden gloom of the command centre was countered by the artificial illumination all around the room. Every monitor was lit up, every screen active, and every keyboard was occupied by an analyst working at the console. Only a very small part of the tent was focused on the clusterfuck that Uther's men was in danger of causing. Arthur spotted Mandrake and worked his way over.

"Captain," Mandrake said, nodding. His mouth was in a thin line, but he didn't seem more stressed than he normally was.

"Colonel," Arthur said, returning the greeting in kind. He scanned the real-time satellite images. The two teams Mandrake had redirected to the location were on the screen, one approaching from the north, the other from the east. The closest one was still twenty minutes out, and that was without accounting for delays.

What caught his attention were the disorganized blobs moving their way to that location from the west.

"That's not a secure zone, is it?" Arthur asked.

"No, sir," the technician at the desk said, never taking his eyes from the screen. "It's been zoned orange for extreme caution. Gang wars, sir."

"Magic users?"

"Yes, sir," the technician said.
"My communications?" Mandrake asked.

"Still down, sir," another technician said. "I can't break through to them. Their frequency isn't even showing up on the panel. I'm not sure how to contact them."

"Can I try?" Merlin asked.

The technician hesitated, her eyes skimming down to Merlin's uniform before looking to the Colonel. At Mandrake's confirming nod, she pulled off her earpiece and climbed out of her chair. Merlin was already typing at the keyboard before she'd even left.

"We need to get those reporters out of there," Mandrake said, gesturing at the screen. "This is going to be a nightmare."

Arthur touched his earwig, activating the connection. He kept his voice low, but there was enough noise and distraction in the control centre that he was probably not going to be overheard. If it saved lives, he would take that risk. "Watchtower, are you there?"

"Present and accounted for," Elyan said without hesitation. "Are you seeing those bogeys to the east?"

"We are," Arthur said. He focused on the screen that was zoomed in on Uther's men. He could see the reporters and camera persons nearby. They were out of the way, but that didn't mean anything if things went bad and they ended up collateral damage. He doubted that half of them had ever been in a war zone. "We need the area cleared of civilians. Do you have a line on the ground?"

"Can do, and yes. The lady herself is making the call right now."

"Fuck," the reporter from CNN said, turning away from the scene.

The interrogation was getting out of hand. Already, the team leader had struck the oldest male in the group twice, and the second time it had been hard enough to cause a bloody spray. Right now, one of the other soldiers in the group was dragging a crying little girl away from her older brother, though for what reasons, Mickey didn't know. Actually, Mickey suspected he knew why.

These men weren't part of the Red Team. They couldn't be. They didn't move the same. Their weapons weren't the same. Their uniforms were the wrong colour. Their scarves weren't the right shade of red, either, and they definitely hadn't been frayed at the ends, as if someone had ripped up a tablecloth and called it good.

They were imposters, and the only reason these imposters would be present in any capacity, performing acts that would easily account as war crimes, was if they were working under the deliberate intention of making the Red Team look bad. They weren't even trying to clear away the reporters who were recording their every move. They had enough evidence on multiple cameras -- most of them broadcasting live -- to put the soldiers away indefinitely.

"I told you, it's not the Red Team," Mickey told the CNN reporter, who shook his head in disbelief.

"Who else would it be?"
"Arseholes, that's who," Julia said.

"We're still on the air," Mickey said, pained. He wanted to hit these idiots so badly. How could anyone watch the Red Team and not see what was in front of them?

"Meanwhile, we're showing graphic, uncensored image of unethical violence that is in clear violation of worldwide human rights," Julia said, nearly shouting toward the end. She continued in a more even tone, "What makes you think any of our viewers care about my bad language?"

Mickey rubbed his head, but it did little to dull the ache growing between his ears. His phone rang, and he moved away from the camera pickup to answer it. The screen flashed Unknown Caller at him, and the number was blocked. Warily, he accepted the call. "Hello?"

"Hello. Is this Michael Alexander O'Reilly?" The voice belonged to a woman, and it was sultry in its authoritativeness.

"Speaking," Mickey said, standing up straight. He smoothed his clothes down, wondering if he should salute.

"Very good. I will confirm. That is not the Red Team. In case that wasn't clear, you are correct. Those are not members of the Red Team. The Red Team is nowhere near your location," she said.

"What? Wait, no, I heard you. How can you confirm that? Who are you?" Mickey asked, looking around wildly. "How did you get this number?"

"Take my word for it. It's the best I can do." There was a pause, then an amused, "Your number is on the Underground's website."

"On the intranet, maybe. Definitely not on the main page," Mickey protested.

"Well, there's your answer, then," the woman said.

"Okay. Fine. Let's say I believe you. They're not the Red Team. Who are they?" Mickey asked. Julia glanced at him, though she kept the camera pointed at the interrogation scene.

"They are hand-picked members of a consulting company that is in no way currently affiliated with the British Army," the woman said. "They are not operating under the direction, approval, or knowledge of the current command chain of the British Army."

There was something very precise in how she spoke. Though it was unnecessary repetition, she was firmly and unquestioningly underling that this current action was not authorized. Mickey's mouth was dry. He swallowed hard.

"Go on," Mickey said.

The line was silent. Mickey plugged in one ear and strained to hear; he thought he could make out people speaking in the background. He wondered if the woman was one of the members of the team. "If there was time, I might tell you more. But there isn't. You need to get out of there."

"Why?" Mickey craned his neck but the street seemed quiet. The skies were clear enough. He couldn't hear any helicopters or jets. He didn't think anyone was going to rain gunfire on them from above.

"Because if you don't grab the other reporters and move your arse right the fuck now, you're all going to die," the woman said.
"Jesus Christ," Mickey said, feeling pale and light-headed. Julia had the camera pointed at him, and some of the nearby reporters studied him carefully. He held the phone up as if in declaration before speaking to the camera, "My source confirms that these men are not the Red Team and that this action is not sanctioned by the army. Also, I've just been told to get the Hell out of here and to take everyone with me, because apparently, the shite's going to hit the proverbial fan."

"Language," Julia chided.

Mickey gave her -- and the camera -- an unimpressed look.

At any other time, Mickey was sure that his declaration would be met with derision, even laughter, but the reporters didn't need much encouragement. Enough video footage had been captured to last them however long, depending on how it was edited and spliced. Most of them looked somewhat green around the gills, unwilling to interfere with a military operation but also simultaneously sickened by what they were witnessing. One by one, they packed up, got into their vehicles, and turned around, heading south.

If the fake Red Team members noticed their actions, they gave no sign. The people they were currently harassing and brutalizing, however, were stricken with the realization that they were being abandoned, that no one was going to help them.

Mickey didn't want to leave. Julia didn't, either. There was one other reporter-camera person team nearby, similarly conflicted. Mickey glanced at their network logo, thinking that the Underground might want to expand their field teams with people who actually gave a damn.

"Head south. That's the safest route. Keep going and don't stop," the woman on the phone ordered.

"I can't. We can't go," Mickey said. "They're hurting these people. If we leave, I think they might even kill them. Would you leave?"

The woman was silent for a long time. "They're not leaving," she said distantly.

"I can see that," a man said in the background. "Tell them to find a secure spot out of sight. That's the best I can do. I don't see anywhere else for them to go. I don't think anyone will let them inside the houses, and, anyway, I'd stay away from the windows if it were me."

"You're not safe," the woman said, returning to the phone. "The Red Team won't make it. Do you understand? They are not able to arrive on the scene in time. They won't be there to protect you like they did last time. You need to move, and you need to move now."

"Yeah, all right. Let me just --" Mickey looked around. There weren't a lot of places where they could hide and still get the right video footage. Any of the houses would do if they could get to one of them in time, and without getting shot and killed for breaking and entering. Still, they said no windows, which meant that, whatever was about to happen, they would still be in the line of fire.

That was when he noticed a fire escape on one of the nearby buildings.

"I know where to go. Don't hang up," Mickey said.
"We're through," Merlin said, looking over his shoulder at Arthur. "Transmissions on your comm sets."

Mandrake snatched his set from around his neck and pulled them up to his ear, adjusting the microphone. Arthur took a spare set of headphones from a nearby hook and put a cup against his ear. A crackle of noise, like aluminium foil, crunched, flattened out, and crunched again.

"Can you clean this up?" Arthur asked.

"It's as clear as I can get it," Merlin said with a snort. "It's not us, either. The noise isn't on our end. I'm guessing their system's got too much power and not enough throttle, which explains Par-- what happened last time."

Arthur didn't have to strain to hear, but it wasn't easy to make out the dialogue, either. The noise also made it difficult to identify any one voice. If he weren't watching the events unfold over the satellite feed and the CCTV cameras that some of the nearby techs had hacked into, he would think that all the conversation was being had by the same individual -- with himself.

"The reporters are gone."

"Good. They were getting on my nerves."

"Didn't we need them?"

"Not for this part. Orders were clear."

"I don't get the point of this."

"Shut it. You're getting paid either way."

"Get the device."

"Now?"

"Cameras are gone."

"Where do I set up?"

The satellite images weren't very clear. Arthur could only make out random movement around the core group of prisoners. Two of the men went toward the SUV parked on the kerb, removing something from the back.

"What's that?" Mandrake leaned over the technician's shoulder, squinting at the screen.

"Can't get better resolution on that, sir," the technician said.

"Anything from the CCTVs?"

The fixed cameras only showed the sides of the black SUV. Another camera up the street was at the wrong angle to catch exactly what was going on in the boot of the truck.

"Anything at all?" Mandrake asked testily.

"Sir!" One of the analyst raised her hand.

Arthur moved out of Mandrake's way, but from where he stood, he could see the jerky footage of
the *Underground* web feed. The image stabilized for a few seconds before it was redirected.

The camera person had found a new vantage spot and it was one that Gwaine and Will would be proud of. They were on the east side of the road, facing west, positioned high off the ground. From the nearby rooftops as the camera panned around and zoomed in on the action, they were able to get an undisturbed view of the entire street. They weren't at an optimal position to see what was going on behind the SUV, but it was better than nothing.

Arthur tapped his earpiece. "Watchtower, get them to point the camera at the activity behind the SUV."

"On it," Elyan said.

The camera's vantage point shifted to the SUV. Mandrake made a pleased noise and clapped a hand on the analyst's shoulder. "Put that on the full screen."

The video took over the main screen in the middle of the bank of monitors on this side of the command tent. The change in imagery attracted some attention, but everyone immediately went back to their work, their focus largely unbroken.

On the screen, two men in charcoal uniforms, black hats, and red handkerchiefs deposited an unmarked black case on the ground. From the way they both struggled to carry it, the contents were too heavy for two people to carry easily. One man opened it while the other went to the back, pulling out some sort of a stand.

"Emrys."

Merlin's eyes were glued to the screen. His body turned toward Arthur, and he held up a finger while he studied the video.

The stand was set up. The second man helped the first haul the device onto the stand. They stumbled awkwardly over the open case and struggled to position it on the rest. The stand sagged under its weight, feet scratching on the asphalt of the road. Once everything was screwed into place, the two men stood on opposite sides of the device, grabbing the stand's base with both hands, and carried it closer to the other group.

Tactical knowledge filtered through Arthur's head as he watched. The device was partially mobile. It could be mounted. It required at least two men to set it up.

One of the two men jogged to the back of the SUV, reached in, and dragged out a package. The video made it difficult to determine accurate dimensions, but using the SUV as a reference, Arthur guessed that it was half a metre wide by half a metre deep by a metre long. The man hauled the object over his shoulder and a coil of cable dangled from the back.

"Battery," Merlin said thickly. Arthur drew his eyes from the video to study Merlin.

Merlin was facing away from him, but the finger he'd held up was drifting down, his hand trembling.

"Emrys," Arthur said. When Merlin didn't respond, he tried again. "Lieutenant Emrys."

Merlin's hand clenched into a fist.

Something had sucked out all the colour from Merlin's skin. His lips were pale except where he'd been biting a corner with growing anxiety. His eyes were wide and washed out, almost unfocused, and he was breathing slowly, shallowly, fighting for air and composure.

"They made it mobile," Merlin said, strained.

Arthur dropped the earmuff and went over to the communication console, squeezing Merlin's shoulder. He wanted to do more, but there was only so much that either of them could do while on duty. He crouched, catching Merlin's eyes, and asked quietly, "Do you want some air?"

Merlin swallowed. He shook his head. Without a word, he turned back to the screen.

"All right. It looks like a thing," Mickey said, waving a hand helplessly in front of him. The camera was pointed onto the road, so he didn't have to worry about embarrassing himself with flailing gestures, but looking like an idiot at the worst of times was sort of his specialty, anyway. "Is it a gun?"

Mickey didn't know where the other reporter and cameraman had gone, but Julia said she thought she saw them duck behind a dumpster in the alley next to the corner shop over on the west side of the street. Mickey didn't really care as long as they stayed out of sight and were safe. Hell, they were probably safer than Mickey and Julia. They were in the open, on the roof, in plain sight.

Mickey was seriously re-thinking his decision to climb a rooftop.

"It looks like one of those things that project Christmas lights," Julia remarked. "Except there's no pretty packaging."

"Coming to you from the latest military prototype and available for a low limited time offer of four installations of twenty-nine ninety-nine pounds, plus shipping and handling," Mickey intoned under his breath. He glanced at the camera and cursed when he realized it was close enough to have picked up his words for the video feed. "Is it a laser?"

"No," said the woman on the phone. Mickey startled, nearly dropping his mobile. He pressed it against his ear in time to hear her add, "It's something worse. Stay low, okay?"

"I am one with the roof," Mickey declared. "I am also really fucking terrified. What is that thing? This isn't a fucking sci-fi movie set, and that's where it belongs."

Julia reached over the camera and twapped him on the back of his head. "This isn't a fantasy movie set, either, but magic is fucking real."

"Shh," Mickey hissed. Into the phone, he said, "Why did you want a shot of Captain Kirk's stun gun? Who's watching the feed?"

"The Red Team," the woman said without hesitation. "And you're not far off. Do either of you have magic?"

"Best I can do on a good day is a card trick and a bird's phone number, but I need a few drinks in me for motivation," Mickey said honestly. He craned his neck over the camera. "What about you, Jules?"
"What about me, what?"

"Do you have magic?"

"Nothing that I'd talk about on a webcast," Julia said, shooting him a sly grin.

"Now she gets a sense of modesty," Mickey muttered. Then, louder, he said, "I'm serious. Do you have any magic at all?"

"Not that I know of," Julia said, frowning.

Mickey turned to the phone. "Why?"

The woman didn't answer.

---

Kilgarrah burst into the command tent, followed by a young corporal. The corporal bounced up from behind the Major and cheerily announced, "I found him!"

Considering how difficult it was to reach Kilgarrah when Excalibur was undercover, Arthur considered that to be quite a feat. From the expression of relief on Mandrake's face, he did, too.

"Where are we?" Major Kilgarrah asked, glancing from Mandrake to Arthur. "Why aren't you in the field?"

"We've cracked their communications and they can receive us, though we haven't tried to raise them yet. They just pulled out this device," Mandrake said, pointing at the screen. The two men were rigging up the battery box to the gun-like shape that was mounted on the stand. "One team is eight minutes out, the other one twelve. There are some civilians approaching from the west. Looks to be anywhere between sixteen to eighteen people. Their ETA is four minutes. And he's not in the field because he's here, obviously."

Merlin swiveled in his seat and raised an eyebrow at the interaction. He shook his head, made a half-hearted shrug, and went back to the console.

Kilgarrah, on the other hand, seemed to take Mandrake's annoyance in stride and approached the screen. "Has this been identified?"

Arthur refused to make eye contact, particularly when he saw Merlin's shoulders rise. "It appears to be a mobile version of a prototype that came out of a laboratory in France. From the looks of it, I'd say it's a generation two model. Maybe generation three, if they resolved the power problems."

Kilgarrah was silent for a moment. The silence stretched out. "Are we talking about the prototype?"

"Yes, sir," Arthur said quietly. He spared a glance of concern for Merlin, but Merlin had himself under control. The last thing anyone had expected was for the anti-magic weapon that had nearly killed Merlin's magic and facilitated his capture to make a reappearance. Worse, it had evolved, and there was no telling how much it had improved for real-world applications.

Kilgarrah swore. He picked up the hard-wired phone on the communication console, punching a number. Arthur heard him growl, "Where the Hell is Pendragon?" but didn't hear the outcome of
Mandrake shoved the headphones at him, and Arthur pressed one of the earpieces against his free ear.

"We have seven minutes to set up a distraction and complete the mission," one of the men was saying. "Set up the explosives."

Two teams of two split up from the core group and headed north and east. From the satellite imagery, Arthur could see that they were heading toward the ingress route for the two military squads heading their way. Besides him, Mandrake was barking orders to the two teams to change their approach.

"Three minutes to initial contact," someone said. "Is the device running?"

"Powering up now. Ready in thirty seconds," one of the fake team members was saying.

"Uhhh, shite," Elyan said, drawing Arthur's attention away from the chatter from Uther's men. When Elyan didn't follow up with anything else, Arthur frowned.


"Um. Fuck," Elyan said. "Sorry. I don't know what's going on. Morgana just went blank. Gwen is with her now. She's okay, but -- I can't make out what she's saying."

"Bloodbath," Bran's voice rang through, loud and clear, from the background. Then, more subdued, he said, "It's going to be a bloodbath."

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**Morgana. Gwen.**

Mickey had names, now, but they were useless without context. How many bloody Morganas and Gwens were there in England? He had a rat's chance in Hell in tracking them down, and that was only if they were using their real names.

He put that information away for later. What was more alarming was the quiet mutter in the background and a man's voice talking to... someone. And then the younger male voice announcing, "Bloodbath."

Mickey squirmed away from the ledge. Julia shot him a curious glance. "What are you doing?"

"Reconsidering my life choices," he said.

---

"What do you mean, you don't know where he is?" Kilgarrah roared, causing the entire command centre to go dead quiet. Not even the electronic panels dared beep for several seconds.

"Lieutenant Emrys," Colonel Mandrake said, never taking his eyes away from Arthur. Mandrake's eyes were wide and spooked, though Arthur couldn't tell if it was because he finally understood
what Kilgarrah had meant by the prototype or if it was because of the outcome that had been forecasted by Morgana's vision.

On the E-channel, Arthur could hear Leon talking quietly over the line, trying to bring Morgana out of it.

"Yes, sir?" Merlin said.

"Hijack their line. Get me voice control," Mandrake said.

"Yes, sir. One second," Merlin said.

"Broad spectrum or tight beam?" a soldier asked.

"Broad spectrum," the team leader of Uther's team ordered. "We've got one shot at this. Let's get them all."

Arthur clenched his teeth. He saw the effect that broad spectrum had caused, but now he wondered if "We've got one shot at this" meant that the problem with the power source hadn't been fixed, or because the military was converging on their location. Either way, he dreaded the outcome.

Merlin entered a few commands into the console and flipped a switch. "On four, sir. You're live."

Mandrake cleared his throat. In a cold, authoritative voice that sent a chill down Arthur's spine, he said, "To the team operating on the Woolwich location. This mission is not authorized. You are ordered to stand down. I repeat, you are ordered to stand down."

On the Underground's video feed, the soldiers paused and glanced at each other. Arthur heard, "What are you pillocks doing? Finish the job. Who the fuck are you? This is a private channel."

"This is an unauthorized mission. Stand down. Personnel are converging on your location to secure the area. Step away from the weapon," Mandrake said.

"This is a sanctioned operation. I don't take orders from you," the leader said.

The two explosives team returned to the site. "Charges set."

"Get the vehicles ready," the leader said.

One of the other soldiers shouted, "Incoming!"

"Is the charge ready?"

"Ten seconds, sir!"

"Step away from the weapon," Mandrake barked. "I will have you on court-martial charges, so help me --"

"Suck my dick," the leader said. Then, "Fire."

Mickey ducked as low as he could when he heard the command, even though he knew, logically,
that the weapon wasn't pointed in his direction. Besides him, Julia tensed.

Nothing happened.

No bright red laser death ray. No thunderous gunfire. The anticlimactic click of the switch on the side of the weapon had even been inaudible.

But two seconds and a million racing heartbeats passed, and the people approaching from just over the rise dropped where they stood and screamed.

---

"Be advised. Be advised. There are explosives on the north and east approaches," Arthur repeated. "Team One, reroute westbound. Team Two, drop down a block and arrive from the south. Both teams, you are entering a hostile area. Be on your guard. Additional assistance is heading your way, but they are at least six to twenty minutes behind you."

A chorus of "Acknowledged," rang in Arthur's ears. He glanced at Merlin, who was shaking but holding steady. Mandrake's jaw was clamped shut. Kilgarrah pounded a fist so hard on a table that he shattered a keyboard.

Everyone stared at the broken circuit board and the scattered plastic keys.

The analyst at that station cleared his throat audibly. He took a deep breath, dumped the broken keyboard in the rubbish bin, and dug out another keyboard from a nearby drawer without a word.

Arthur turned to the screen.

"Rerouted to that station," Merlin said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw the analyst scramble in the direction Merlin pointed, taking over that area.

Except for the group of people on their knees and flat on the ground at the furthest point in the image, absolutely nothing had changed. The soldiers dismantled the weapon from the stand and the battery. Three of them carried it to the SUV, where it was hastily re-packed and hauled into the back of the SUV. Four soldiers split from the main group and approached the civilians on the west end of the street, their weapons down.

"Goddamn it. No," Arthur said. He checked the satellite map. The first team was still too far away, but they were moving fast. Arthur couldn't tell if they were going to intercept in time --

The four soldiers opened fire. A second later, so did the other five.

---

Mickey stared.

He didn't feel a thing. The cold wash of shock numbed him.

He was a child of the new age. Of the generation that was supposed to be inured to everything and anything. The one that lacked empathy and altruism. He shouldn't care.

But he did.

His tears slid down his cheeks and into the crease of his fingers where he'd clasped his hands over his mouth to keep from screaming. He could hear Julia's strangled sob of horror and grief.

He lowered his hands. He wiped his face.

He turned to Julia to check on her but found the camera pointed at him instead. Julia must have jerked away when the soldiers started firing, and the camera had fallen facing him.

Mickey remembered that they were live. That the camera was transmitting everything, completely uncensored. If they had any viewers online right now, they had to know what Mickey was seeing. He had to put it in context.

"This isn't the Red Team. The Red Team cares. They protect people, magic users or not, from other soldiers. They stick their necks out for innocents. These men... These men, they're monsters. They're setting it up to make the Red Team look bad. To turn the rest of us against the Red Team and the good they're trying to do. These men... These bloody fucking pillocks that we saw dragging innocent people out of their own homes and into the street, that we just watched slaughter people coming their way?"

Mickey looked out at the scene. He immediately regretted it.

"They're going to hide behind we're just following orders and how were we to know they weren't magic users about to blast us into oblivion. Sure, I don't know the full story. There might be more to it. Maybe these people were involved in some evil plot. But what gives them the right to murder children?"

Julia straightened the camera and nodded at him to keep going.

"I don't know what that device did, but it hurt those people. If they were going to attack anyone, well, they were pretty fucking incapacitated from where I'm standing. There was no fucking need to execute them."

Mickey shook his head, trying to get a grip.

"This wasn't the Red Team. These were fuckers on an unsanctioned mission. Whoever gave them the order to do this is just as responsible as the men who pulled the goddamn trigger."

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye. The SUVs were pulling out, heading west.

"Look at them," he said, gesturing. Julia turned the camera away to catch them leaving. "They're running like the fucking cowards they are. If anyone's listening to me, please, God. Please stay safe. Stay out of their way. Don't start anything. Don't get revenge. You saw them. They know how to fight. They have superior firepower. They have something that can put people on their knees and leave them helpless. You don't have a chance."

Julia turned the camera on Mickey again.
"Stay safe," he repeated. "Protect yourselves."

He looked out at the street. At the bodies. At men and women and children who had died for nothing. It was a show of force meant to turn everyone against the Red Team.

He stared until his eyes burned and his cheeks were hot with tears. He wiped them away angrily.

"Let the Red Team take care of them. And they will. They will." He pushed Julia's camera out of his face. "They have to."

---

The command centre was as quiet as a tomb.

No one spoke. No one moved.

The men and women were soldiers, one and all. Most had seen combat before and had witnessed every possible kind of atrocity. They had been trained to observe and to move on.

But this was too much. This was on home ground. While wearing the semblance of a British Army uniform.

Arthur placed the headphones on the hook next to the console. His fingers lingered on the rubber before he reached out and put a steadying hand on Merlin's shoulder. It was as much for Merlin as it was for himself, and he didn't care who fucking saw and what bloody regulations he was breaking.

On the screen, the teams that Arthur had re-directed arrived on the scene. They cleared the area quickly and efficiently. Then, one by one, they stuttered to a stop, frozen by the carnage.

Mandrake vibrated with rage. Kilgarrah leaned over a console, his head bowed. Analysts and technicians averted their eyes from the video. Someone in the command tent choked back a strangled sob.

One by one, they pulled themselves together and went back to work.

"Have the MPs keep a lookout," Mandrake hissed to one of the guards at the tent entrance. "If they come back on base, I want them arrested and put in chains."

"Yes, sir!" the MP smartly saluted, his expression grim. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

"Someone had better have eyes on those vehicles," Mandrake barked.

"I do, sir!" someone announced. One of the large side-screens shifted to the satellite image. The SUVs drove in a caravan line, keeping close together, fender to bumper. They drove west for a kilometre before splitting up at an intersection. The technician tagged each vehicle on the screen to keep track of them.

Arthur had the sick feeling that they would lose them soon. He waited and watched, completely still in the growing activity around him. Two of the SUVs continued to head toward the base, both taking alternate routes, but the third turned into a tunnel and vanished.
"Are they still active on the comms?" Mandrake asked.

Merlin stirred. He turned his head from side to side as if he didn't really see the monitors in front of him and couldn't make sense of the information that was slowly scrolling up. Slowly, locked in a daze, Merlin tapped the keyboard, correcting mistakes every few letters.

"No, sir," he said finally.

"Damn it," Mandrake said.

The main screen blinked out suddenly as the cameraperson on the site turned off the feed. Arthur closed his eyes.

*Stay safe*, Mickey had said. *Protect yourselves.*

Arthur took a deep breath. He felt Merlin's hand squeeze his leg.

*Let the Red Team take care of them. And they will.*

Arthur looked down and met Merlin's eyes.

*They have to.*

Arthur ignored the foul taste in the back of his throat. He stared at the satellite image, where the two SUVs were making their way back to base. He remembered that his men were waiting for the order to head out.

He tapped his earwig.

"*Excalibur.*" He swallowed hard. "Stand down."

Chapter End Notes

Uncommon military slang is uncommon: VRK is an acronym for *Very Restricted Knowledge.*
"We're trending on Twitter," Will said, shoving his phone under Merlin's nose.

Merlin blinked repeatedly, trying to focus. The transition from the programming work on his laptop to the tiny font on Will's smartphone was jarring, but he could make out the very long stream of text, all of it underscored with hashtagged RedTeam.

"It's not all of it pleasant, but most of them are pro-us," Will said, pulling the phone back. "It's only been a few days, though. Public opinion could go either way."

There was a snort toward the rear of the barracks where Pellinor had the team laptop.

Lucan was tucked against him, leaning forward to read the screen. "You should see the meta on Tumblr. Someone's done one of those physical profile things based on video footage from the House. Did you know, on average, we're taller than the fake team by three inches?"

"Better-looking, too," Gwaine said, glancing up from a three-month-old sports magazine. "Wasn't there a study on our fantastic arses? Ours beat theirs by a country mile."

"I still don't get why Perceval had the best arse," Geraint complained.

Gwaine shrugged. "As disappointed as I am not to be the recipient of that high honour, believe me, he does have the best arse."

"You're an arse," Perceval said, putting a hand on Gwaine's head and shoving it lightly. Gwaine retaliated by smacking Perceval's behind as he walked away.

Merlin ran his hands through his hair, digging fingernails into his skull. When that didn't shake him out of the ever-present rage that was boiling under the surface, he pulled his hair sharply.

That didn't help, either.

Merlin loved his teammates. He really did. And he understood what they were doing. He would do the same thing if he were in their shoes. Except he wasn't in their shoes. He wasn't like them, watching Uther's men use a refined version of the magical EMP on innocent people from afar. He was with those magic users, unsuspecting of what would happen to them.

He couldn't get out of his own head. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the testing grounds in France. He felt the intensity of something tearing at him, ripping at his very soul. He remembered helpless detachment, incredible, burning pain, and the cold blankness of nothing.

He was angry. Obscenely, blindly furious. Uther's men had broken every rule of engagement by firing first. That the weapon didn't cause any visible physical damage didn't matter. They robbed the magic users of a part of themselves, removing their ability to protect and to defend.

On the news, among the soldiers and even among his own teammates -- nearly everyone believed that the real horror was in the summary execution of innocent men, women and children.

None of them knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of that weapon. They couldn't
understand what Merlin was feeling. They wouldn't understand if Merlin ever admitted that the execution of all those people was a fucking mercy.

Merlin had always had magic. Being cut off from it had been a nightmare eroding his will to live. He had no doubt that he would have welcomed a bullet to the head if Aredian had been inclined to do so. His driving force for survival was in ensuring that Will and Kay lived, too.

Those people, callously murdered -- Merlin couldn't know their minds. Had they always had a little magic before magic was released into the world? Would they have missed the power after it was gone, aching after a phantom limb, or would it have devastated them? Would they have been able to hold out for days and weeks for the faintest sign that their magic wasn't gone forever?

The weapon that had been used on Merlin had been a prototype. Prototypes were chunky, bulky, imperfect objects. Merlin had no way of knowing if the new generation of anti-magic pulse weaponry had overcome the defects of the former. It still required a sizeable power source -- the squads that had arrived too late on the scene had recovered a depleted nuclear battery estimated to have had sufficient energy to power half of London for five years. The weapon only had one shot before it needed to recharge with a different battery, which limited its use and potential.

But was the outcome permanent?

Merlin scratched his jaw. He caught Mordred looking at him speculatively. Of anyone on the team, Mordred was the only one who must know what was going through Merlin's head. He understood the implications. He feared them, too, but it wasn't the true fear of someone who had experienced it once and never wanted to go through that again.

Merlin saved his work, locked the screen, and secured his laptop in his bunk box. He grabbed his coat, his weapon, and walked out of the barracks.

"Hey! Merlin! Where are you --"

The door slammed on Will's question. He didn't stop or turn around when he heard the door creak open. "Merlin? Are you all right?"

"Fine," Merlin said. He shrugged his coat on against the winter's cold, holstering his gun. He should have also grabbed his rifle, but he didn't want to turn back to get it.

"Wait for me, I'll come with," Will said.

"I said I was fine," Merlin said sharply, raising his voice to make his point clear. A few soldiers walking past glanced in his direction but wisely stayed silent.

"If you're sure," Will shouted after him.

Merlin raised a hand in dismissal and didn't get an answer -- or, if there was one, he didn't hear it. He zipped up his coat, pulled the collar up, and shoved his hands in the deep pockets. He found a wool skullcap stuffed in the left pocket, tangled with a few bits and bobs, and distracted himself by taking them apart so that he could pull the hat over his head.

No one gave him a second glance. He was in standard uniform, blending in with everyone else. No hint of red anywhere near his person, no weapon or equipment out of the ordinary. His rank wasn't anything special, either, but he nodded back at a few soldiers who acknowledged him as he walked past.

Merlin didn't know where he was going. He wasn't on duty. He couldn't head into the
communications tent to distract himself with work. He couldn't join any of his teammates for a bit of hard labour or PT, either. Excalibur was officially off the books and without assignment until the clusterfuck could be cleared up, confined to their quarters until Arthur and Leon were released by the Brass.

Merlin didn't know what the fake team was doing, but he knew it couldn't be anything good, and his wild speculating was made worse with the knowledge that Uther's men had been released from custody and remanded back to active duty. They were somewhere on the base, and everyone was under strict orders to leave them the fuck alone.

The general discontent and high tensions on the temporary base made that order necessary. It was why Excalibur was confined to barracks. No one wanted an incident when the smug, arrogant sons-of-bitches strutted around as if they were superior to everyone else. Superior wasn't the word, though. Gwaine's sources had ferreted out that they were under Uther's direct command, and that Uther was General MacNeil's newest pet project.

Or vice versa, if the grim look on Arthur's face was anything to go by.

In any other situation, they wouldn't have been concerned. Excalibur was familiar with General Stephen MacNeil, though only from a distance. Arthur had had the opportunity to speak with him more than anyone else, and even those opportunities had been rare. The team had nearly always received their covert ops missions from Colonel Mandrake, but everyone knew that General MacNeil was the one rubber-stamping them.

Learning that General MacNeil was involved with Uther Pendragon? Their entire playbook needed to be rewritten.

Just how involved was Uther in all this? Who could the team trust among the Brass?

And, to make a complicated situation worse, the rumour brewing was that General MacNeil was mobilizing a completely different battalion to take over the situation and to end the war.

What little Arthur had said about the meetings he'd been pulled into over the last few days amounted to a pissing match between General Tachnathar and General MacNeil. Both men had the same rank. Both men were equally positioned on the promotion chain. Both men had overlapping circles of influence.

When Arthur didn't know he was being watched, Merlin saw the tension seeping into his shoulders. The despair trickling into Arthur's expression. Merlin was always left with the feeling that if something didn't change, and soon, they would be fighting a war on multiple fronts, and one of them was their own.

Merlin pulled at his cap, covering his ear. Someone fell in step beside him and nudged his arm, shoving Merlin's rifle into his hands.

Merlin gave it a quick once-over before shouldering it. He gave Kay a nod of thanks. Kay shrugged and stared straight ahead.

Neither one of them spoke. Merlin didn't feel like it, but he didn't know Kay's excuse. Kay was usually pretty quiet, but he'd been more so of late.

They did a circuit around their quarter of the base and circled back, the two of them unconsciously agreeing to keep going. The usual hubbub of activity around the base was chaotic and noisy, reassuring in a way that no civilian could understand. They paused to let lorries drive past. They
held up a hand in thanks when the drivers of smaller utility trucks waved them across. They mumbled greetings to familiar faces that were eaten up by the noise around them until they finally stopped pretending to give a fuck.

Merlin paused and doubled back when he realized that Kay wasn't with him anymore. He followed Kay's nod to a gap in-between the crude raised buildings and felt his heart stop.

It was *them*. Uther's men.

Their barracks were newer than anyone else's. Better. Made out of space-age material, marked with the Pendragon Consulting stamp, and blockaded off with black SUVs that appeared to have been driven clean off the sales lot. There wasn't a single speck of grime on them.

"How many do you figure there are?" Kay asked, breaking the silence.

Somehow, Merlin knew Kay wasn't talking about Uther's men. The team had already agreed that there must be more of them than had been spotted on base. Gwaine's contacts around town and in other posts confirmed that other teams with the Pendragon insignia were present at their locations.

Excalibur could deal with any number of Uther's hired men. That wasn't even a point of contention. No. Kay was asking after the anti-magic pulse weaponry.

"I don't even want to think about it," Merlin muttered.

They lingered, watching Uther's men surreptitiously. They weren't the only ones watching, either. A rotating squad of military police walked past Merlin and Kay's current position against a stack of supply cases, as much to keep an eye on the unwelcome presence on the base as to ensure that the peace was kept. The MPs were just as bent out of shape as the rest of them that the arrest order had been rescinded by authorities higher than Colonel Mandrake.

"They're not keeping the weapons on-site," Kay said when the MPs walked past.

"No," Merlin said, shaking his head.

The AMP gun had probably been part of their equipment when they'd first arrived, but it was gone now. Lucan and Galahad had performed an unofficial inspection in the pitch of night without Arthur or Leon's knowledge, though it wouldn't have mattered anyway. They'd received a tongue-lashing for breaking orders, anyway, even if their little expedition had given them answers to questions they'd all been wondering about.

"None of the other bases report seeing anything like that in their gear," Kay said.

Merlin gave him a sharp look and decided he really didn't want to know how far Gwaine's influence extended.

"You remember where they disappeared on satellite?" Kay asked.

"Yeah," Merlin said with a sharp nod. Two SUVs had veered in one direction while the third -- the one carrying the weapon -- kept on straight ahead, dipping below the surface through a short tunnel. They didn't emerge on either side.

Arthur had been unerringly quiet about that since they returned from the command centre on that day, and as long as Arthur remained mum, Merlin couldn't be sure if Arthur knew anything about it short of going there himself. He was willing to bet that there was some sort of connection between that tunnel and Pendragon Consulting. It wasn't much of a stretch to the imagination to think about
secret passages and James Bond bollocks, not when *their bloody lives* were the embodiment of spy thrillers.

"We could check it out," Kay suggested.

Merlin considered. Arthur would never approve the mission, so they would have to go without telling Arthur, Leon *and* Perceval, because Perceval would disapprove and find way to get word to Arthur. They'd have to leave a part of Excalibur on base so that it wouldn't look as if they were deserting, and those of them who headed for the tunnel would be on their own, without official support, when they found the entrance to whatever secret lair was beneath the city of London.

That secret lair would likely be filled with any number of additional "consultants" hired as part of Uther Pendragon's personal army and technicians in the understudy "Q" role, building weapons of mass destruction that could render a sorcerer powerless and helpless.

They would be fucked if they went in alone.

"No," Merlin said, shaking his head. He blew out his breath. "We shouldn't be here."

Neither one of them made any move to leave, not even when three of the men in the charcoal-grey uniforms broke from the area around the barracks and headed their way. Merlin glanced around, but the MPs hadn't come back this way yet.

"Is there a problem here, kids?" one of the men said. He was older than Merlin and Kay. Mid to late forties, dark brown hair was peppered with white and grey, a neatly-trimmed goatee shot through with brown and red and white. The Tumblr meta comparing the Red Team's physical characteristics with the fake team were spot-on, because all three of the men in front of them were shorter than Merlin by a few inches.

What they didn't have in height they made up for in heft. Their uniforms were tailored to their frames, fitting them like a well-worn glove. They were broad across the shoulders, barrel-chested with muscle, their waists trim but not small. Fit with boxers' builds, almost carbon-copy clones of the other, probably with the same physical training routines.

Merlin fancied himself a beanpole in comparison, while Kay was out of his weight class. Merlin wouldn't count either one of them out of a fight, even outnumbered three to two. Kay was scrappy and a dirty fighter, and Merlin was *fucking pissed* and was aching for an outlet for all of his rage.

Kay scratched his lip and glanced at Merlin. "Did he just call us *kids*?"

Merlin shrugged a shoulder. "I think he did."

"Go on, off to bed with you," another man said. This one was younger, with curly brown hair cropped close to his skull, a three-day old scruff on his jaw. A nasty smirk cut across his face, pulling at pockmarked skin. "It's past your curfew."

"Don't be an arse," the third man said, his tone mild and full of no-nonsense. He turned cold, steely eyes on Merlin and Kay. "This is a restricted area. You should go."

Merlin resisted the urge to point out his rank and to make a comment about security clearances, but that would get them nowhere fast. He also resisted the urge to punch one of them -- *all of them* -- in the face, which would feel satisfying, though only temporarily.

"Sorry, mate," Kay said, pleasant and easy-going in a way that made Merlin think of Will, right down to the complete lack of sincerity that only Merlin seemed able to hear. "Just… admiring your
setup. Must be warm in there. Better than our plywood lean-tos."

"Very warm," the pillock in the group said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Sucks to be you."

"That's a lot of gear you've got," Kay said, lifting his chin to gesture at the equipment between the barracks and the vehicles. "Looks new."

"I'll be sure to run that by our quartermaster," the pillock sneered. "Let him know we've got your stamp of approval. He'll be right pleased with himself, that one."

"There's no need to be a bloody cock," Kay said bluntly, flint edging his tone. "I'm just admiring what you've got. No harm in it, is there?"

"We're sick of you fucking fanboys sniffing around," the man snapped. He shrugged off the restraining hand on his shoulder; the third man rolled his eyes and blew out a sigh. "Let me make this clear. You can tell all the others, too. We're not looking to recruit cannon fodder greenies like you."

Merlin caught the first man sizing him up, eyes flicking down in search of insignia or rank chevrons. When he didn't find so much as a patch to flag rank, division, or regiment, his expression twisted into a fleeting grimace. He turned away from them, taking his friend's arm. "They're not greenies."

At the second man's look of consideration, Kay asked chirpily, "Are you still recruiting? Because, I've got to tell you, we really like your style."

Merlin forced himself not to stare at Kay with incredulity, instead nodding his head in agreement. He couldn't find his voice to play along with Kay's declaration, but it didn't seem as if he needed to.

"Is that right?"

Kay held up a hand and shrugged. "I'm just saying, mate. No need to get your hackles up. Sorry for bothering you."

Kay turned and walked away. Merlin stayed a moment longer. He forced a weak smile on his face. "You're doing good work. Keep it up. Wish our commander had the balls to give the order like the ones you got the other day."

The words were thick, and he felt as if he were going to throw up, but the men didn't notice. The oldest among them gave Merlin a curt nod, and Merlin could feel their gazes on him when he caught up to Kay. He could still feel it when they turned the corner and kept walking.

"I'm going to be sick," Merlin muttered. He slowed down, considering the best way to rid the contents of his stomach. Since he hadn't eaten since breakfast, there wasn't going to be much.

"I can't believe you said that with a straight face," Kay said, shooting Merlin a sidelong look. "What the fuck was that?"

"I should be asking you that. You're the one who started it," Merlin snapped. He closed the distance between them and hissed, "We don't do this shite anymore! No more undercover bollocks, no more trying to get on the bad guys' good side. Just this."

He pulled at his uniform, though it wasn't much more than combat dress that they all lived in at this point.
"No more fucking games."

Kay dropped a heavy hand on Merlin's shoulder, fingers clamping on tightly. Kay shook him roughly. "You're right. We're done with that bollocks. But here's the thing. There's no telling who's the bad guy anymore, so how are we supposed to get on their good side in the first place? The only thing I know for sure is that there's our side, and that's the side I want to be on. And that's the side where we make damn fucking certain that everyone we care about is safe."

Merlin closed his eyes and nodded. Right. That, he could agree with.

"I know you're scared," Kay said, his voice dropping low and soft. "I am, too. They've made it portable. I know you're thinking the same thing I am. I don't want it turned on the people I care about. Not on Morgana, not on Kathy, and sure as Hell not on Bran. Or Gaius. Or anyone. We both know what it feels like to be on the receiving end. So if we get a chance to destroy those things --"

Merlin grabbed Kay's jacket, his fist tightening. "Wait. What?"

"What?" Kay asked, frowned. He glanced around.

"You said --" Merlin untangled everything going through his mind and focused on the words. "You said we both know what it feels like to be on the receiving end."

Kay's brow furrowed deeper. He dropped his hand from Merlin's shoulder. "Yeah?"

Merlin blinked repeatedly, trying to sort it in his head. "The weapon. Them. They were in the line of fire. They didn't drop like a bloody bag of bricks like the magic users did. It only affects people with magic."

Kay drew back.

"Kay, you --"

A utility vehicle in dire need of a tune-up rumbled past, followed by several soldiers heading toward their barracks. The MPs from earlier had completed their circuit and were going around for another, not pausing in their stride as they glanced at Merlin and Kay with matching, judgmental looks.

Kay rubbed his temple with his thumb, staring at the ground. Then, after a moment, he tilted in head in consideration before shrugging. He raised his eyes. "Bayard tested me. As far as I know, it came to naught."

"Didn't do bollocks when he turned to me, either," Merlin reminded Kay. "I didn't want it to work, made sure nothing did. Goes to reason that if you didn't know you had magic and you didn't want to be pulled from the team if you did, your magic wouldn't have worked because you didn't want it to. That could be why you failed the test."

Kay made a quiet, humming sound.

"I slept like the dead during the storm after Freya --" Kay faltered and broke eye contact. Merlin knew exactly why.

"You didn't hide those sleeping pills all that well," Merlin said. "My fault for thinking you just couldn't sleep because of the strain."

Kay was quiet for a moment. "So, when the thing that was in Sigan came at me?"
"It was looking for another suitable host," Merlin said.

Kay nodded as if that settled the question. He shrugged and shook his head. "All right."

"All right?"

"Worry about it later, won't we?" Kay said, gesturing. He walked down the road, not saying anything more until Merlin caught up with him. "It's not as if I've got an urge to start pulling rabbits out of a hat or anything like that."

Merlin studied Kay, but Kay wasn't the sort to bury something down deep where he could ignore it. Kay's expression was distant, as if he was thinking, and Merlin really wanted to know what was going through his mind. Merlin didn't want to push, so he didn't. Instead, he said, "Well, if you figure out the trick of it, you should teach me."

Kay snorted. "Sure, right after you show me how to raise a bloody shield. That's more useful."

They shared a wan look. After a moment of silence, Merlin nodded.

"On one condition," Merlin said. "We never, ever tell Will that we can pull rabbits out of a hat. He's been on me to show him that one since we were kids. Never believed me that it wasn't possible. Tried to get me to do it to impress the birds in uni, too, after he caught me making butterflies."

Kay's laugh was a short, dry bark, but the amusement lingered in the curl of a smirk and the bright of his eyes as he considered the possibilities. "There's something wrong with that one."

"Oh, yeah," Merlin said, grinning. "There's definitely something wrong with that one."

They walked in subdued silence for a few more minutes, the tension leaching out of Merlin's shoulders the further they were from Uther's men. He couldn't help but to glance at Kay, but he wasn't subtle enough about it, because Kay elbowed him hard.

"I'm not going mad over it," Kay said mildly. "Quit worrying."

"If you're sure," Merlin said.

"I'm sure," Kay said. He shrugged a shoulder. "In any case, it'll be nice, being on even footing with Kathy for a change. And never mind all of Bran's pranks. I'll show him what real pranking could be like --"

Merlin grinned. "Will."

"Oh, yeah. Will. Let's not tell him, yeah? Actually, do we tell any of them?" Kay asked.

"Arthur will need to know," Merlin said. "I'm not keeping that from him."

"Eh," Kay said. "As long as you get him to promise not to say anything --"

He trailed off. Every trace of evil-doing faded behind a stoic mask. Merlin followed his gaze but didn't immediately see what had put Kay into guard dog mode until --

Gilli.

Gilli was very determinedly heading their way, on a very obvious route intended to intercept. He glanced over his shoulder twice as he cut the distance in half and then in quarters, and by the time
he reached them, the spine Merlin had seen in him vanished and was replaced by nerves. "Can I talk to you?"

"Oi," Kay said, moving in front of Merlin. "Might've slipped your notice, but none of us are interested."

"It's important," Gilli said. He lowered his voice despite not needing to -- the noisy square was full of people bustling about -- and added, "It's about the device."

Merlin fought not to let anything show. "What device?"

"Actually, it's about Bayard. And the device, but mostly about Bayard," Gilli said, glancing between the two. Gilli took several minutes to clue in on the fact that neither Kay nor Merlin were willing to give him any leeway, and when he understood that, he deflated. "Look, I know I messed up. I was following orders."

"That stopped being a legit excuse a long time ago," Kay said, though with the nasty smile pasted on his face, his words came out as a furious snarl. "I'd say right around the time you harassed one of ours until we were all ready to snap. Let's not mention all the bloody spying on us, either. I'm not so sure you weren't behind half the missions when shite went wrong and we were nearly killed. Or are you saying just because you were following orders, you're in the clear?"

Gilli grimaced. He shook his head. "No, that's not what I'm saying. I know this won't mean much, but I'm sorry, aren't I?"

Kay snorted. "It doesn't mean much at all."

"Fine," Gilli said with a grimace. He hung his head and spread his hands. "I deserve that."

Gilli was being uncharacteristically receptive to criticism, and there was just something about it that made Merlin consider him carefully. In the team's eyes, Gilli had done them a great disservice, but to the person whose orders Gilli had been following, Gilli had done his job to the letter. For Gilli to realize that he had fucked up -- not just from Excalibur's perspective, but his own -- that was a personal growth that Merlin wouldn't have thought him capable of before.

Merlin scratched his eyebrow with his thumb and dropped his hand with a sigh. "What do you want?"

"Merlin," Kay snapped.

Merlin held up a hand. "Let's just hear him out."

Kay growled, but nodded.

Gilli looked between the two of them with wide eyes, something like hope shining through. There was just a glimmer of it, and Merlin pointedly reminded himself of everything Gilli had ever done to them, to *him*, in case whatever Gilli was about to say would sway him.

"You've got our attention for one minute. Make it good," Merlin said.

Gilli ran his hands through his hair nervously. The gesture made the ring on his finger catch the light. "Here's the thing. The device everyone's talking about? Stay clear of it if you can. It's a magic-killer."

"All right," Merlin said neutrally.
Gilli's eyes narrowed, and he said, "You already know."

"Less than a minute, now," Merlin warned. "What else have you got?"

"You know more than I do about the weapon, don't you?" Gilli asked, glancing between them earnestly.

Kay grunted in response.

"Won't waste my time on that, then. What about Bayard?" Gilli asked.

"What about him?" Kay asked.

"He's here, for one," Gilli said, shoving his hands in his coat pockets. He twisted his head from side to side, looking around before continuing, "He's recalling the Directory."

Merlin exchanged a sharp glance with Kay. "Sorry? I don't think I heard you right. He's what? He's pulling your sorcerers out?"

"Yeah. Yeah," Gilli said, nodding.

"That's not going to happen," Kay said, frowning. "The Brass won't let it. I mean, they might be a bunch of numpties in combat, but they're the only magic users we've got, right? They're being useful. We can't gain any ground without them."

Kay was right. The magic users with the Directory, conscripted by General Tachnathar and under Mandrake's command in absence of its official director, were doing the army a lot of good. They might have mucked things up badly in the first few open conflicts against NWO proponents, but things had gotten better since Excalibur arrived on site. Merlin wasn't sure if it was because the sorcerers smartened up by trial and error, or for some other reason, but he'd been hearing less and less griping about them in the mess hall.

"So, what, then? They're recalled. The army's left without a crutch -- can Bayard even do that?" Merlin asked. The members of the Directory had likely not been given a choice in their conscription, but for some reason, be it force of Mandrake's will or innate national pride, the majority of those had stayed in the fight.

"I mean, Bayard's taking command again. As soon as everyone's back under him, he's either dismissing them from active service or reassigning them," Gilli said.

"How do you know that?" Kay asked.

"Because I'm fucking Directory and I know a girl in the administration tent," Gilli snarled. He caught himself and jutted a chin in Merlin's direction. "Also, he taught me how to decode."

"Oh, so you did learn something?" Merlin asked. "It wasn't all wasted time?"

"Not as dumb as I look," Gilli said, shrugging apologetically. "It were a bloody ruse, okay?"

"And this isn't?" Kay challenged.

"It's not, and you know it," Gilli said, almost desperate. "Look, I don't care about getting dismissed. I can just enlist and make it official. It's the reassignment I'm worried about."

"Why?"
Gilli laughed, but it came out forced and hysterical. "They're making us take weapons training. Every one of us, to a man. Insisting on it, actually. Bayard's orders. Wants us as far away from the bases as possible, doesn't want us fraternizing. Let it slip that he doesn't want us to get captured, was almost frantic about that. Some of us put two and two together and figured, if that weapon they've got blows out a battery on just one charge, what could it do if it's got one of us hooked up to one?"

Merlin glanced at Kay. Kay glanced back.

"Don't you get it? Bayard's been nosing about. He must have found out that those blokes want use us to power a device to help them murder our own kind."

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The barracks were deathly quiet when Merlin and Kay returned, though it was less because it was empty and more because the team members were standing around, arms crossed, expressions grim. Arthur and Leon were in the centre of it all.

Leon wore the same haunted look that he often had after one of Morgana's nightmares. His hair was tied back, his mouth thin, his eyes distant and far-away, as if he, too, were able to look at a Sight that none of them were able to see.

Besides him, hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped in defeat, was Arthur. Where Leon was pale, almost washed with fright, Arthur was flushed, his cheeks pink, his mouth in a red, angry line.

Merlin shut the door behind him and pushed Kay forward. Their intended announcement of we have news died in the face of so much despair.

The barracks were filled with a broad range of emotions that Merlin couldn't even begin to classify. Despair. Anger. Hopelessness. Desperation.

There could only be one thing that would draw this sort of reaction, and Merlin shuddered inwardly at the implication.

"That's it, then?" Kay asked. He wrapped his arms over the rifle hanging from his shoulder. "All this good we've done and it's for nothing?"

"Don't know," Lamorak said, his voice quiet. "We've been waiting for you to come back to hear it."

"Pretty sure you're right," Gwaine said, closing his eyes, shrugging. "It were a waste of our fucking time. We should pack up, sign out of here as deserters, and go the fuck home."

Lance, beside him, tilted his head and nodded.

Merlin pushed past Kay and went to stand in front of Arthur. Arthur raised his chin to look at him, dejection in his gaze. He nodded his head in apology, his mouth twisting into a line of regret. Merlin put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed; Arthur wavered under his touch.

"Tell us," Merlin whispered. "What happened?"

"We were right," Leon said slowly. "The worst that could happen. It's a war on two fronts, and we're on the losing side."
Someone behind Merlin sat down and the cot creaked under the weight. Arthur raised his chin and met Merlin's eyes. "We wondered what Uther was doing all this time. Well, we know now. The NWO might have been around longer, but Uther…"

He looked up, as if searching for answers. He either didn't find them, or couldn't see them through the glisten of tears in his eyes. Arthur shook his head.

"Looks like there has always been a faction working against the NWO. An exclusive clique of highly-ranked military officers and politicians who are very firmly anti-magic," Arthur said, every word coming out as if each one had to be yanked out with pliers. "They've outdone Nimueh on every front. She might have all the magic and all the artefacts, but he's got counters we didn't even know about. The gun we saw, that's just the tip of it."

Merlin pulled Arthur close. Arthur resisted at first, but closed the distance between them with a single step, and pressed his forehead against Merlin's. Merlin held him in place, holding him steady.

"So it's the worst that could happen," Merlin said. "Not what we were hoping for, but we can work with it, can't we? You've got a plan. I know you do, Arthur. What do we do? What's the situation?"

Arthur closed his eyes. He didn't make a sound. He didn't even breathe.

He pulled away slowly, tension seeping through his shoulder. His edges were frayed, but not as much as Merlin expected; it seemed as if they were knitting together in front of his eyes, mending all the open wounds that had been flayed to the bone since returning to London.

"We're backs against the wall, Arthur," Merlin said. He knew Arthur had to have a contingency plan that he hadn't shared with anyone else. There had to be something. The team always worked best when all the odds were against them. Those odds were so terrible that not even Gwaine would put a bet on it, regardless of the promised rewards, but whatever last-ditch plan Arthur had been holding back to stop a future full of persecution against magic users and magical creatures, it was the only one they had. "What do we do?"

Arthur met his gaze. Then, glumly, he looked away turned to the others.

"Uther's men suppressed nearly one dozen magic users with no military casualties on an official assignment to apprehend low-priority suspects. The mission was rated so low and was put in so late that it didn't flag anyone's attention." Arthur paused. Perceval exhaled a heavy sigh of frustration; the rest of the team made a variety of disapproving noises.

It wouldn't be the first time that someone used administrative measures to manipulate a situation in their favour. Walsh had done that to Merlin more than once; Uther had done it to bypass higher-ranked men and women who would have vetoed the mission. Merlin shook his head, putting his rifle away. He shrugged out of his coat and tossed it on his bed. He could feel Arthur's gaze on him even from across the room.

"In the eyes of the War Cabinet, Uther's men accomplished something that no one else was able to do -- disable an enemy who have weapons that can't be taken away."

Merlin snapped around, spreading his hands, the words *what about us, then?* on his lips, only to be drowned out by a chorus of outrage from the rest of the team.

Arthur waited for the echoing sentiments to die down, not even bothering to raise a placating hand like he normally would. The tightness at the corners of his mouth hinted that he wasn't impressed,
Leon cleared his throat and said, "You've got to remember, the War Cabinet's mostly made up of politicians and Brass. Magic frightens them more than anyone else because it's something they can't see. Uther's given them a weapon that they can hold on to that's effective against magic users."

Merlin saw Kay looking at him from across the barracks. Kay broke eye contact with a frustrated grunt.

"Fine, so they've got something to put over their fireplace instead of their granddaddy's old musket. Good for them. Fucking crutch is all that is, nothing more," Geraint said.

"Are they sanctioning the executions?" Lance asked quietly.

"They didn't. Not at first," Arthur said. He shoved his hands in his pockets to hide how tightly he was clenching his fists. "Uther convinced them that neutralizing the magic users with the weapon is a temporary measure at best, and that until they have some sort of holding facility that can imprison magic users, it's to no one's benefit throwing the sharks back into the pond."

Someone groaned. Merlin didn't know who it was.

"And they believed whatever he said, didn't they?" Pellinor asked.

"Numpties," Bohrs muttered. "I can't believe I voted for them."

Several pairs of eyes turned to Bohrs.

"You voted?" Bedivere asked.

"I voted," Bohrs said seriously. After a moment, he flinched and admitted, "I might've been drinking."

"Oh. Makes sense. Never mind, then," Bedivere said.

No one spoke for what seemed like an eternity.

"So. In essence, there is now a mandate to eliminate threats with extreme prejudice," Mordred said slowly. Arthur didn't meet his eyes, but he pressed his lips together and answered with a curt nod. Mordred pushed his way past Lucan to stand in the middle of the room in front of Arthur. "How is this any different than what the NWO has in mind for those who do not have magic?"

"It's exactly the same fucking thing," Arthur said, looking up finally. His tone was clipped, as if his own words hurt the very essence of what he was. "I want to make this clear to everyone in the room. If any one of us receives this order, we do not obey. We subdue if necessary. We stop it if we see it happening and are confident that we won't be in the line of fire ourselves."

"The order will come down, and believe me, we're not the only ones who are going to refuse," Leon said. "I spoke to some of the SAS team leaders afterward. They don't like this bollocks any more than we do."

"Does anyone have any issue with that?" Arthur asked. There should have been challenge in his tone, but he didn't expect anyone on the team to have a problem with his countermanded order. Merlin felt himself relax when everyone on the team snorted, shook their heads, and said, 'Course not. Do you even have to ask?
The tension around Mordred's shoulders eased.

Satisfied, Arthur said, "There's been a change in the chain of authority. General Tachnathar has been ordered to act in an auxiliary capacity to the war effort. Colonel Mandrake is being pulled under General MacNeil. Major Kilgarrah has been reassigned to general infantry. All special teams, including Excalibur, are on regimented stand-by."

"Sorry, what?" Merlin asked, stepping forward. "Kilgarrah's shifted to Infantry? And he let them?"

"Put in a token argument," Leon said, shrugging. He raised his eyebrows and huffed. He didn't understand why Kilgarrah would have accepted the demotion in position, even if it was only a lateral shift. Everyone knew that Kilgarrah had been responsible for all of the special teams for the last ten years.

"So we're in a hurry-up-and-wait situation?" Perceval asked. His arms were crossed over his chest, muscles twitching mightily.

"Yeah," Leon said. He rubbed his face with his hands, running them up over his forehead and through his hair. His hair came loose of the short ponytail at the nape of his skull.

"As it stands, the three people who know who the members of the Red Team really are have been put out of our reach. We no longer have a support system from the upper ranks. Any incidents will be overseen by an unfriendly command centre," Arthur said.

"Well, shite," Will said, giving the nearest object -- the leg of a cot -- a good, sound kick. "Does that mean we can't play dress-up anymore?"

"You don't look good in a dress anyway," Bohrs said.

"No, that's Merlin," Lucan said.

Will's little snort of amusement didn't last. Arthur said, "That's exactly what it means. Unless."

No one said anything. Merlin saw Gwaine and Perceval exchange glances out of the corner of his eye. Merlin shook his head at Arthur, because it really wasn't fair of him to leave the team hanging like that. "Unless what?" Merlin prompted.

Arthur's weak ruin my fun, why don't you smile was replaced with a stoic mask. "Unless we go at it another way. We don't rely on the Brass. We shouldn't have been, anyway. We get help from everyone else. The support crew in the command centre. The MPs on the base. The medics and emergency personnel."

There were enough on-base fans of the Red Team that Merlin could see them subtly bypassing their superiors to give the team an opportunity to work freely, without intrusion, and without fear of discovery. Arthur had set it up so that they could work independently of the command centre, but the hard part would always be in maintaining anonymity and in asking fellow soldiers to essentially commit treason by covering up for them.

Considering that Arthur had been intending to reveal them sooner rather than later, Merlin wondered why that wasn't an option now.

The quiet chatter in the barracks was full of brainstorming ideas to get people to help "the Red Team" without knowing that those asking for help were on that team, but Merlin didn't hear any of it. Instead, he asked, "Why don't we just come out of the closet?"
The discussion fell silent quickly. Obviously it was a question that was on all their minds.

"Well, too late for some," Will pointed out.

"Not for others," Gwaine said with a snort, giving Will a sidelong look.

"Fuck off," Will said. "I'll have you know --"

"Because of Uther," Leon said. He cast an apologetic glance at Arthur, but Arthur's little shrug was compounded by a head-shake and a fleeting lost look in his eyes. Leon stepped forward and said, "MacNeil's going to be giving an order that any soldier with magic are to report in --"


"-- with strict instructions that reassignment is mandatory," Leon said. "We're pretty sure that came from Uther. Since the last thing we want is for them to have an excuse to pull Merlin and Mordred out, we're going to ignore the mandatory part."

"Yes, let's do," Mordred said.

"Well, that fits with what we just learned," Kay said, thumbling toward the door behind them. "Ran into Gilli, didn't we? Before you get pissy, he came to us and he's given us intel. Bayard's recalling the Directory and whatever magic user he doesn't pull from the ranks are going to be force-remanded to weapons training. Gilli's pretty sure it's to fuel more anti-magic weapons."

Arthur's eyes snapped to Merlin's. "Is that possible? Magic to cancel magic?"

"In theory," Merlin said wearily. "If the NWO could super-charge Freya and however many other people to create a burrowing bomb to release magic into the world, I don't see why the magic users can't tap into that power to feed a weapon that's going to take the magic away from people, and --"

He sat down heavily on the floor, heaving for breath.

"I'm going to be sick. Fuck."

Someone bumped into his side and patted his head. He looked up to see Lucan. "If you're going to toss your tea, do it in Will's bunk."

"Oi!"

"I'm only being practical," Lucan said. "You were flatmates in uni. Will's got to be used to Merlin throwing up in his things."

Will opened his mouth to argue, but shook his head.

"He's not wrong. Doesn't mean it's open invitation, Merls."

Merlin rolled his eyes, but was grateful for the distraction. The nerves in his stomach settled, though not entirely.

"Here's a consideration," Arthur said, shooting a concerned look in Merlin's direction. Merlin held up his hand to indicate that he was fine. "We may be put on special assignments under General MacNeil as a team, but with Major Kilgarrah over with infantry, the odds are higher that we'll get broken up and pulled in to assist other squads. I wouldn't put it past him to have gone over there for exactly that reason."

Gareth groaned. Lamorak squeezed his shoulder. A few glances were shot his way in sympathy --
everyone knew Gareth's idiosyncrasies and had adapted for them, but he was the one who had worked least with other teams, and that was mostly because he was the sort to put down roots and never budge from his position.

"Well, this could be a good or a bad thing," Geraint said.

"I'm going with bad," Gwaine said, scratching his chin, a distant look in his eyes.

"If that is one of the more likely outcomes, I understand that it will be uncomfortable for all of us. We'll play it by ear. Leon and I have already worked out contingencies to get you reassigned if the situation is untenable. Remember to let us know if you're being pulled. Don't assume that whoever's being positioned to replace Kilgarrah will be going through the normal channels or that we'll even have grounds to challenge them. I ask that you keep a charged earwig with you so that you can call in if necessary. Is that clear?" Arthur looked around.

"I have a question," Mordred said, raising his arm.

Will elbowed him in the ribs, making Mordred double over. "This isn't school, you twat."

"What a stunning revelation. You certainly act like it is," Mordred retorted. He turned to Arthur and asked, "Am I on the official team list? Given that I haven't officially signed up for the army?"

Arthur smile was small, but it was there. "You're not, and you're exempt. At best they don't know you exist, not on paper. We'll see who gets pulled in to replace Kilgarrah and decide from there. We have options. At a push, we could send you to Olaf. If all else fails, you can join Sergeant Page to assist with our inventory or head back to Camelot."

"All right," Mordred said grudgingly.

After a long pause, Arthur said, "I'm sorry. I wish I had better news."

"If wishes were horses we'd all be bloody cavalry," Gwaine muttered, walking past Merlin to get to his bunk. He sat heavily, flopped onto his back, and covered his face with his eyes.

"All we can do right now is wait," Leon said. "We can't do anything until we know how the dice fall."

Mickey turned his mobile over. The screen remained blank.

"Hot date?" Julia asked, her tone unusually neutral. Her eyes were fixed on the thrice-used tea bag in her cup of steaming hot water. Mickey could tell that she missed the old days when there was a plentiful supply of affordable tea. Her black market contacts had gotten her a fresh box, but it had nearly wiped out her jewellery box.

Mickey wondered where he could find more tea. The corner shop prices were gouging -- might as well promise his firstborn at this rate -- but he'd pay the price if it would make Julia happy. Nothing was worse than watching her squeeze every last drop from a tea bag and suffering through a weak effusion.

"Mick?"
"Huh?"

"Hot date?" Julia asked, nodding toward his phone.

By instinct, Mickey turned his mobile over again. The blank screen stared at him tauntingly. "Actually, no."

He wasn't actually sure how to explain what he was doing, so he opted not to try. It was already all over the media and the web that Mickey had been in personal contact with someone associated with the Red Team, and Mickey pointedly refused to talk about it. He hid behind *trying to protect his anonymous sources,* when the truth was, he was trying to protect the Red Team. He didn't want to be the one who led the bad guys right to them.

Julia grunted. She continued to trawl the tea bag through the hot water, as if the movement would give her more leafy goodness. It was tragic to watch, so Mickey shifted in his seat and watched Bertrise work her web magic.

Since the execution, the *Underground*'s traffic had increased. The website hits spiralled out of control, the team expanded, and the advertisers had cautiously begun to knock on their doors. There was too much to keep up with, so Mickey didn't try. Instead, he forcibly put his mobile out of his mind and tapped the trackpad on his laptop, bringing up the brand new message board one of Bertrise's minions had slapped together.

The message board hadn't been up for very long. It was still in beta testing, but it had survived the server load and the first crash at the influx of registered users, and there were already thousands of posts spread out over a dozen categories and a half-dozen sub-categories. In theory, Mickey had been assigned to moderate one of the boards, but he was kind of pap at it.

If he'd had the choice, he wouldn't have asked to be in charge of *The Real Red Team.* The title alone courted disaster, and it had delivered. Every day -- Hell, every *hour* -- there was a flame war of some sort between the proponents for the Red Team and... well. Everyone else. Half the time, Mickey wanted to ban everyone. The other half? He vacillated between seething in anger at the troll posts and laughing his arse off at the idiots.

"You should probably get that under control," Julia said, suspending the well-used tea bag in the air. She squeezed the water out with dainty fingers.

"I don't even know how to start," Mickey said. "Honestly, I'd rather delete the forum and start over. Why did we even put one up?"

"Because we're the go-to for uncensored news on What The Fuck is Going On," Julia said dryly. "Look, if it's getting to you, just assign moderator status to someone. Let them corral all the trolls and keep things under control."

"Okay." Mickey said, glancing at his phone. He didn't turn it over to look, though. Instead, he cracked his fingers, wriggled them in the air, and took a deep breath. After a few seconds of scrolling through all the new messages he slumped in his seat and gave Julia his best puppy-eyed look. "Do you want to be a moderator?"

"Fuck, no," Julia said. When Mickey threw in a pouty lower lip, she rolled her eyes. "Just find someone who's level-headed. Someone who's informed. I don't know, a regular poster to your board? They've got to be visible so people know who to go to when the trolls make them cry."
Mickey sighed heavily. He forced himself to focus on the laptop screen.

The forum was divided into seven message boards, most of which had several subdivision. The Real Red Team took up an entire board by itself, and when it was posted a few days prior, there were only a few categories: Sightings, In the News, Letters. Now, a dozen main topics dominated the board.

It probably had not been a good idea to open up the forum to new categories. The place was out of control.

Mickey squinted in confusion when he saw Red Team Fans. He went in and clicked on one of the topics. He flushed red after reading several paragraphs and immediately backed out of the posting.

"Um," he said, clearing his throat. "Did you know there's Red Team fanfic?"

Julia shrugged. "Not surprised. I guess the fact that no one knows what they look like makes it more fun to write?"

"X-rated fanfic?"

Julia spluttered her tea and choked with laughter.

"Shut up," Mickey muttered. He went into the operator settings and locked that particular posting thread. The Underground didn't need any more calls about age-appropriate message boards.

He closed several subjects, deleted others outright, and tightened the settings. No new main topics, a new Suggestions header, and definitely no more X-rated fan fiction. Mickey shuddered at the thought that they might start up again.

After glancing over at Julia to make sure that she wasn't paying attention, Mickey checked his phone again. No new messages.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting. He hadn't heard from the woman who had called him from an unknown number several days ago. After a long period without response, someone hung up on the line, and all that Mickey had to go on was the woman's name.

**Morgana.**

He kept that name close to his chest. It felt like a secret that he couldn't share. Whoever Morgana was, she had trusted him enough to reach out to him and to help him out. It didn't matter if there were thousands of Morganas in London alone. He didn't want to get her in trouble.

Mickey rubbed his head and forced himself to focus. He skimmed through the entries, idly taking note of the usernames of the most level-headed and frequent commenters. Most of them shied away from the flame wars, but there were a few that stood out. He left the largest conversation thread for last, dreading the expected flame war.

Metalurz said: *Why is everyone going gaga? Who cares if they're the real deal or not. They got rid of the enemy. Isn't that the point?*

Soldierboy said: *I'm 100% ON BOARD. Shoot the fuckers. Shoot them all. Fuckin magic users waste of space*

AnnaLisa said: *You idiots are unbelievable. It doesn't matter who they were. The point is, they committed an illegal action. How dare the army sanction them? For the record, I don't think this*
was the Red Team. Not at all.

Soldierboy said: *Are you kidding me? Of course it's them. They're wearing red, aren't they? Plus they're fucking soldiers, lady. What do you think they do? Subdue the enemy with their mad quilting skillz?*

Bran-the-Man said: *Don't mock them, they might actually be able to quilt you into a corner. You'd give up in a heartbeat in the face of their amazeball pinwheel blocks.*

Soldierboy said: *Nobody asked you. Go back to your hole.*

Bran-the-Man said: *Nobody asked you, either, but they're all playing nice.*

Mickey sat back in his chair and rubbed his face with a frustrated sigh. This was far from the first conversation between Soldierboy and Bran-the-Man -- if anything, the two had struck up an instant dislike for each other on the forums. Where Soldierboy was a troll with a vindictive anti-magic bent, Bran-the-Man was a little shite who didn't put up with a great deal. As far as Mickey could tell, Bran-the-Man didn't take sides, either.

"F*ck this," Mickey said. He opened a private message window and sent one to Bran-the-Man. "I've got better things to do than babysit a forum. I should be out there reporting the news."

"Except there's no news," Julia said, staring mournfully at the bottom of her teacup.

"There's always news," Mickey said, typing, *Want to be a moderator of this forum?* quickly before hitting the send button. As soon as he said that, though, his phone went off.

Mickey snatched it as if his life depended on it. The screen lit up the name of one of his more reliable sources, and he couldn't help but squish a pang of disappointment that it wasn't Morgana.

"Hey, Sean, what's up?"

"What's up is this," Sean said. "I'm sending you video."

He hung up. Mickey stared at his phone, waiting for the notification, but it took a few minutes to arrive. He opened the video clip.

"Shite," he said, punching Julia's arm. "Come on, we've got to go."

"There's a mob at the gates!"

Merlin watched the soldier run toward the command centre and exchanged glances with Gwaine. A small grin stretched across his face, and Merlin said, "No, don't you dare."

Gwaine clamped a hand on Merlin's shoulder in what might have been an attempt at reassurance, but it drifted off as Gwaine backed in the direction of the gates. Merlin watched him go.

He pinched the bridge of his nose when Gwaine disappeared out of sight. He debated whether to follow. He was leaning toward no when he decided that Arthur did not need the additional aggravation of having to deal with Gwaine's antics on top of everything else.

Merlin found Gwaine a distance away from the gates themselves, his arms crossed, all traces of
mischief hidden by a furrowed brow.

The gates were lined with MPs and duty soldiers, as much of a psychological deterrent as the fence was a physical one. On the other side wasn't the mob that Merlin had expected. He'd pictured the usual group of reporters milling about, trying to get a news bite for the evening news, or a bunch of stragglers attempting to sneak.

Instead, there was a mob, at least twenty people deep and a hundred people wide, with half as many signs lofted over their heads, bobbing demandingly.

_Murderers!

_They were children!

_Justice for the Innocent!

The group thickened as more people joined the protest. Merlin winced at the sight. Trying to mobilize troops to defend the city from itself was going to be impossible.

"I don't like this," Gwaine said. "They'll have us surrounded in no time. We're trapped."

"You'll just slip civvies on and sneak out, if it comes to that," Merlin said, pushing Gwaine out of the way as additional troops went to bolster the line. As soon as they took position, the crowd's temper increased, the protests so loud that it drowned out an MP's megaphone.

"Lieutenant Emrys! Sir!" A young corporal ran over to join them. He skidded to a stop, panting for breath. "Sir! They need you in the communications tent. All the radios are down!"

Merlin frowned. He turned to Gwaine, holding up a finger and giving him a meaningful look that Gwaine waved away with an unconcerned hand, and followed the corporal. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure, sir. All the lines suddenly died. The hard lines are fine, but there's nothing going in or out," the corporal said. He gave Merlin an unsure look before standing aside to let Merlin into the tent.

It was chaos in small quarters, with technicians working over each other in an attempt to address a problem that they couldn't even identify. Colonel Locher lingered in the background, his expression strained, chiming in with suggestions that confused the matter more than resolved them.

"Sir," Merlin began, but stuttered to a stop when he saw a glimmer of magic clinging to Locher's skin.

The glimmer was a cloak, glittering like a sea of stars, blowing in an unfelt wind and shaping into dragon wings. The shape of it curled around a long body and a barbed tail, vibrating with energy that threatened to pull away from the body of the man, drawing strength from one to form the other.

"Sir," Merlin said again, more vehement; Locher's attention turned to him and _locked_, acknowledgment of an unspoken command mingling with recognition. The glimmer shuddered, as if chastised, retreating into itself until it was nearly gone, nothing more than a thin veneer on the surface of a human body.

Locher closed his eyes. His chin tipped back. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, visibly struggling for control, and when he dropped his head down to look at Merlin, it was with regret, apology, and gratefulness.
Merlin didn't understand. All this time that he'd known Locher, he'd never seen the dragon in him. He'd never known because he'd never looked for it. But if there was one thing that Merlin understood, it was that, without a doubt, the dragons in his life had always hidden themselves, keeping themselves under control. To see one of them lose control now --

Of all the people that Merlin and Arthur had surmised might be dragons, Locher had been the most questionable. Despite working closely with the Colonel as part of his training, Merlin could not remember a single instance when Locher might have given himself away. Kilgarrah had the nigh-perpetual smoke coming out of his nostrils, though he'd hidden it behind the sulphuric stink of cheap cigarettes and cigars. Mandrake was baby-faced and sanguine, with nothing giving him away beyond his sinuous, never-ending energy and serpentine mannerisms.

Locher was --

Paternal. Invested in the members of his team. Good humoured. Human.

Merlin had added Locher to the list of Possible Dragons mostly as a joke, but also as a compliment, because if anyone could be a dragon, it would be him. He hadn't expected to be right.

"Find a terminal," Locher said, though it was more of a suggestion than an order. He waved his hand uncertainly, with the kind of awkwardness of a young soldier addressing a superior officer, and Merlin… Merlin was weirded out. He watched Locher out of the corner of his eye as he headed to the nearest console, effectively kicking the technician out of the seat instead of finding an empty keyboard.

"Yes, sir," Merlin said, automatically resetting the screen. The first thing he did was to confirm what the corporal had told him -- that the hard lines were intact. Short of seeing it with his own eyes, he couldn't be certain that someone hadn't cut them or looped the lines onto themselves, but they were responding, even if signals of any type were disappearing uselessly into the ether.

He checked for interferences he cleared frequencies one by one. He ruled out every kind of jamming mode that he could think of, including the same kind of effect that had drowned out the E-channel in Paris. Absentmindedly, he picked up the hard line hooked to the side of the console, but didn't so much hear anything beyond dead silence.

"Anything?" Locher asked.

"Not yet, sir," Merlin said. He cradled the handpiece between his shoulder and his ear, idly checking his mobile. All the bars were lit up, but when he called Arthur's number, all he got was broken static in response.

Broken static and…

He put the hard line down on the console, covered up his ear with his free hand, and bowed his head to listen. It wasn't broken static. The electronic noise was a repeating, chaotic pattern, almost like --

Almost like a code.

Merlin pocketed his mobile. He picked up the hard line again, straining to hear something, anything at all, besides the dead silence. He hung up and switched to a different line, but this time, he routed the audio through a sound filtering and fingerprinting program. Every variation of balances and screening only gave him conflicting, multidimensional information that didn't provide him any more answers than he already had -- which was none.
"Sir!" A technician stood up, waving the Colonel over.

Merlin didn't know how much attention Locher had been giving him until Locher's attention was directed somewhere else. He tried a few more things that he normally wouldn't attempt, not when a superior officer was looking over his shoulder -- Arthur didn't count -- and gave it up as a waste of time.

"Put that on the main screens," Locher ordered. "That's a good job, finding that."

Merlin looked up in time to see the technician sitting up straight, shoulders back with pride. The main screen shifted abruptly from multi-paneled black wall of coded text to a different audio program than the one Merlin had been using. He didn't recognize it, but it definitely wasn't off-the-shelf software.

The top half of the screen was divided into multi-modal sound patterns; the bottom was bisected in two, with a three-dimensional reflectance of the sound on the bottom left, a control panel on the right. Merlin logged out of his terminal and went over for a better look, alternatingly squinting at the technician's monitors and craning his neck to make out the smaller screens.

Locher glanced at him. "Anything?"

Merlin shook his head. He rubbed his eyes and blinked several times, half-mesmerized by the repeating three-dimensional reproduction of the sound and half-lost in an attempt to see a pattern in the noise.

"There's a mask on this," the technician said, shaking his head. He flailed a hand in the air before returning to the keyboard, typing a few aborted commands before cancelling each one. He leaned back in his chair, snapping his fingers loudly. "Carol? Can you --"

"I'm already working on it, Vince," she snapped. Strands of blond hair fell out of her tightly-twisted bun, falling into her face, but she didn't seem to notice. All of her attention was bowed on her screen.

"It's code," Locher said unnecessarily.

"Yeah," Merlin said, crossing his arms. After a minute of staring at the three-dimensional pattern, he went back to the console he'd used earlier, logged in, and accessed a remote version of the program. He got rid of the audio screen, and maximized the three fluttering bars on his screen. He sat back, crossing his arms, and watched it move.

There was a rhythm to the pattern, even without sound to accompany it. A pattern inside the pattern, a repeating string of noise, over and over, invisible until it was separated into three dimensions.

Merlin typed in a few commands, eliminating the foreground and the background, isolating that string. Without the additional noise, the graphic reproduction of the sound had a cognizant frequency, made more distinguishable. Merlin chewed his lower lip, scowling at the screen. He took a nearby notebook, flipped to a blank page, and jotted down whatever came to mind.

The frequency of the pattern was sixty-six microseconds. Slowed down enough, Merlin could see six distinct patterns with six durations and a two microsecond pause in-between.

Merlin reproduced the pattern on paper. He eliminated Morse code as a possible transmission sequence. He eliminated base ten because none of the patterns fit the criteria. He also eliminated base eight and base six.
He ran his hand through his hair, only peripherally aware of Locher looking over his shoulder as he worked.

A combination of frequency and depth of the sound pattern could match up to an alphabet, but not one that Merlin knew. Anyone hiding a message in a code wanted it to be understood by someone who had the right decoding system, but would still want it in a format that could be picked up and translated. Merlin pulled up and systematically eliminated a long list of cypher keys that relied on sound patterns, because none of them produced anything other than gibberish.

Suddenly, the room filled up with the fragile notes of a young voice, crystal clear and tragic, like a child singing in a low voice, almost to themselves, alone and lonely.

"In sixteen hundred and forty-eight
When England suffered pains of state
The Roundheads laid siege to Colchester town
Where the King's men still fought for the crown."

Merlin's head snapped up. He glanced around the room to see if anyone else recognized the nursery rhyme.

"There one-eyed Thompson stood on the wall
A gunner with the deadliest aim of all
From St Mary's tower the cannon he fired
Humpty Dumpty was his name."

The child's voice was staticky, but by midway through the second stanza the background noise cleared up. Merlin glanced at the main monitors and saw that either Carol or Vince had eliminated the very same static that Merlin had kept on his screen.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again!"

All around the room, the technicians exchanged confused glances. "Humpty Dumpty? Really? What the fuck is this shite?"

"Well, they didn't massacre the nursery rhyme this time," someone else pointed out.

"They didn't have to," an analyst at the front of the room exclaimed, standing up. She held up a tablet, but the screen was too far away for Merlin to see. "Humpty Dumpty was the name of a cannon."

No one seemed to understand the significance, least of all Merlin. The analyst looked around helplessly, searching for someone to at least have an inkling, and threw up a hand in exasperation. "The best cannon the King had was brought down. It was destroyed to the point that they couldn't recoup their forces against the enemy. Whoever sent this message? They're targeting us!"

Merlin turned to look at Locher. Several different emotions flashed on his expression before settling on cold determination. "Command?"

"Can't raise them, we're still jammed or whatever the Hell this is," a technician said.

"Set up a runner queue," Locher said. "I want Command advised."
"The gates are blocked, sir," the guard at the entrance to the tent put in, somewhat hesitant. "We can't get out."

"Who are they attacking? There's bases everywhere in London," another analyst said. The first analyst to have spoken up shook her head and shrugged, indicating that she didn't know.

Merlin's eyes went down to his screen, to look at the six repeating patterns. The analyst was right -- there were bases everywhere in London, but there were six major forward operating bases set up at key strategic points. The smaller outposts used the FOBs for resupply and manpower, and all of the main command decisions and maneuvers were commanded from those posts.

Six repeating patterns.

Six coordinates.

"What's our coordinates?" Merlin asked, bowing his head over the keyboard. If he couldn't crack the code, he could reverse-engineer them from at least one coordinate -- assuming it fit.

A familiar voice rattled them off easily.

Merlin turned and saw Gwaine elbowing his way past the MP blocking the entrance to the tent, making room for a concerned Arthur.

Merlin nodded, typing in the coordinates, pulling up the central cryptography software. He entered the variables, using the base's coordinates to see if there were any patterns that repeated in the code, matching up the static of noise with similar numeric units.

"What are the coordinates of the other FOBs?" Merlin asked, because he needed more information to fill in the holes.

"Uh," a nearby technician said.

"Which one?" Gwaine asked, leaning over Merlin's shoulder. Merlin was peripherally aware of Colonel Locher giving Arthur the quick run-down on what was going on.

"Any of them," Merlin said, fingers hovering over the numeric keypad. He typed in the sequences that Gwaine listed, one after the other, without hesitation. He paused to give Gwaine a sidelong look. "You're a fucking freak."

"You'd be lost without me," Gwaine said with a grin.

"Yes," Merlin admitted grudgingly. He turned in his seat and continued to work. "Don't let it get to your head."

"Too late," Gwaine said cheerfully. He moved out of the way to let one of the technicians pass, and said, "Oh, hello."

"Hi," she answered, though there was so much suspicion in her tone that Merlin had to choke back a laugh.

"Losing your touch, aren't you?"

Gwaine snorted. "Absolutely not. I'm off the market, aren't I?"

Merlin gave Gwaine a doubtful look. "You have to ask? You don't know?"
Gwaine winced. "Fine. I'm off the market, full stop."

"Perceval will be happy to hear that," Arthur said, clapping Gwaine on the shoulder. "What's the time frame for the attack?"

"Hell if I know," Merlin said, watching the decryption key spit out long strings of data.

"Where are they attacking?" Arthur asked.

"Six locations, probably FOBs," Merlin said. "I'm running a reverse decryption based on our GPS coordinates right now."

The output came to an abrupt stop. An error popped up on the screen.

"I need another coordinate. Something with different numbers to the first one," Merlin said, keeping the first key and entering in another. Gwaine reached over Merlin's shoulder and typed it in. Merlin re-initiated the search.

"We have zero communication capabilities inside of the base and no contact with the other bases," Arthur said. Merlin shot him a dry look for stating the obvious.

"That's right," Merlin said, opening up a second screen and opening up the decryption code. He skimmed the programming until he found the section he was looking for. He entered a few refinements to make it go faster.

"Then why did I get this call?" Arthur asked, holding up his cell phone in front of Merlin's face. It took a minute for Merlin to focus, but by that time, the mobile's screen blanked out. Arthur pushed the activate button to show an ongoing timer for a connected call from Merlin's phone.

Merlin stared at it. Several seconds passed before he scrambled to get his phone out of his pocket and activated the screen. The call had connected. It wasn't some sort of trick. Not his imagination, either. Something clicked in his head and he rolled his chair over to a blackened terminal, running over Gwaine's foot in the process.

"Son of a --"

Merlin flicked the switch and activated the screen. "Did anyone ping the hard lines?"

"Yes, sir. No response to system pings," a technician said.

"Are you sure?" Merlin asked. He opened a programming window and entered a repeating ping attempt every fifty nanoseconds. There was no response on the screen, but in a second window, there was a scatter of background noise. Merlin switched to the signal tune and turned down the gain.

"Your decrypt's finished," Gwaine said.

"What does it say?" Merlin asked.

"Complete and processing," Gwaine said. Merlin saw Locher walk over, crowding next to Arthur to look at the computer screen. It was Locher who typed the command to bring up the results window.

"Coordinates," Locher said.

"Coordinates to all the main FOBs," Gwaine said.
"I want secondary verification," Locher said. "Focus your decryption on the noise bands that aren't associated with that fucking nursery rhyme. Someone turn the sound off on that, goddamn it."

Merlin had just managed to mute the electrical noise to a dull murmur, but a measurable electronic blip stood out, recurring at the same frequency as the system pings. "The hard lines haven't been cut. The wireless isn't being jammed. There's an interference cloud."

"Someone find that and shut it down," Locher barked.

Merlin glanced at Arthur and shook his head. Arthur's mouth formed a thin line when he understood. There was interference, and then there was interference, magical in origin, very much like the scatter-noise that Mordred was able to produce when travelling across the desert with Aredian's people. It was so long ago and in a different lifetime, and Merlin had nearly forgotten about it, but the effect they were experiencing now wasn't too dissimilar.

Merlin cancelled the ping. "Colonel, we could connect to the other FOBs and pulse electrical signals in Morse code. If anyone's paying attention to the noise we'll be able to get the message out about the incoming attack."

"Someone could jump the fence and see if someone else's mobile works," Gwaine said with a shrug.

"Doesn't mean theirs will work, too. The bases could be just as affected as ours," Merlin said.

Gwaine grunted.

"The point is fair, Colonel," Arthur said. "Mer-- Lieutenant Emrys' suggestion is the best chance we have right now to contact the other bases."

"And say what?" Locher asked.

Arthur's head was tilted to the side as he listened to the nursery rhyme being sung by an innocent child, the crackling signal cutting out abruptly when someone finally turned it off. His tone was flat when he said, "Evacuate."

"We're never going to get through all that," Julia said, shooting Mickey a sidelong glance. "We could try another base?"

"This is the third one," Mickey said sourly. Reporters from official news affiliates were already at each of the sites they'd visited, and there wasn't anything new that Mickey or Julia could pick up on. Bertrise was already streaming pirated video feed from those other newscasts or from their newest hires who had gotten lucky. "I don't think it's going to be much different anywhere."

His source told him that the riots were happening at each and every army installation, small or large. Getting on the air now to show exactly the same scenes that a dozen other outlets were already showing? That wasn't an attention grabber, and it would do well for the Underground to do more than merely maintain the following that they'd built up. They needed to find something new to attract a bigger viewership.

He tapped his mobile on his knee while Julia turned the van around. When he guesstimated they
were far enough from whatever strange interference was happening at each of the bases, he keyed his mobile and stared at the screen for several blank minutes, willing Morgana to give him a call with updates. Something was going on -- something big. It was likely big enough to draw out the real Red Team.

At least, he hoped it would. The message boards and Twitter feeds were positively hostile against them right now, and they needed to prove that they weren't the bad guys.

"Let's try for number four," Julia muttered, turning the wheel sharply. Mickey knocked his head against the glass, dropping his phone in the footwell. He panicked when he heard it ring, but when he brought it to his ear, it wasn't Morgana.

"Why is your feed black?" Bertrise asked testily.

"We're trying to get something no one else has," Mickey said. "Just splice in the feed from the new kids, we'll interrupt if we find something."

"You'd better find something soon," Bertrise said. "The sooner the better. I don't care if it's a bloody cat on fire. Our inbox is getting flooded -- everyone's wondering where you are."

"Working on it," Mickey said curtly, hanging up. He tapped the mobile against his forehead in silent prayer to the media Gods to get him something he could use. He held up his phone suddenly and announced, "The phone."

"Yes, it is," Julia said, glancing at him warily.

"The phone. Every time we get close to the bases, our phones cut out, the video feed dies. The other agencies are staying clear of the fences and can't get close, or they're recording filler for later, because they can't transmit," Mickey said. "There's a jammer on the bases. Are they blocking us or are they being blocked?"

"Ah, um," Julia said, frowning.

"They wouldn't do this to themselves, would they? And the riots? They came out of nowhere. Someone's riling them up or they wouldn't be out on the streets," Mickey said. "Why would anyone come out in support of a bunch of magic users, when they'd be branded sympathizers or magic users themselves? Why would they do that when the army's got a weapon that works against them and when they're willing to shoot to kill?"

Julia shot him a curious look but returned her attention to the road ahead. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know yet," Mickey admitted. "Just get us to the next one. I have an idea."

It didn't take long. When they got closer, Mickey turned on his phone's webFM, listening as it cut out and finally delivered nothing but a staticky crackle instead of the folk music he'd selected from one of his playlists. That was when he knew they'd crossed the invisible barrier and were well past the first line of reporters -- who were nowhere in sight. For that matter, there weren't any rioters, either.

"Are we going the right way?" Mickey asked.

"Back way," Julia said. "I figured it might be empty? Most of the mobs are at the gates. Besides, this is our lucky spot."

The closer they came, the more Mickey recognized it. This was the base where they'd gotten their
first footage of the Red Team as they'd arrived that first time, on the day they'd liberated the soldiers from Westminster Palace. Julia was taking them up along the fence that had been put up. Most of it was a solid wall of nothing, but here and there, there were chain link fences that they could see through.

In the glimpses caught as they drove by, soldiers were massing up, collecting and loading equipment. There seemed to be an air of urgency to their actions, though those actions were being directed. The rear gates were free from rioters and reporters, but that might not last for long. At every other base they'd gone to, every gate had been completely blocked.

"Maybe they don't know about this one," Julia commented, parking along a side road.

"Maybe," Mickey said, grabbing his equipment. The rear gate didn't look like a gate. The solid fence didn't look like it opened at all and the chain link fencing was lined up with equipment, blocking the view. If there was an opening anywhere near here, it wasn't visible, even though he'd seen the Red Team come through this way with his own eyes.

"Here, put these in your pockets," Julia said, shoving a few memory chip at him. "I'm recording; we'll transmit from the van when we get far enough."

"Bertrise will be thrilled," Mickey said dryly. "Live feed that's not live."

"Better than nothing," Julia said.

They walked along the fence, stopping to peer in where they could. Julia took a few minutes worth of video feed that would be used as filler, later, if it came to that, but mostly, she recorded the soldiers loading up trucks and running around.

"Looks like they're mobilizing," Mickey said when the camera swung his way. "They're packing up everything into big lorries and gearing up. It doesn't look like they're tearing anything down, so it's not like they're leaving."

Mickey glanced around. In the distance, even over the roar of engines driving by on the other side of the fence, he could hear the chanting and shouting from the crowd.

"They're protesting here, too, just like everywhere else. It's a very anti-military mentality out there right now. You don't want to be wearing an uniform and be out unarmed in this, trust me. If you're lucky, they might tear you apart and leave you for the rodents. If you're not -- well, I don't want to think about it," Mickey said.

Even Julia grimaced.

"We're at the far end of the base close to Westminster Palace, and we're not far from where the rioting is happening. The activity inside the base doesn't jibe with what's going on outside. I mean, it won't be the first time that there's an anti-military protest outside of a base, right? They've seen this kind of thing before. It doesn't phase them one bit. It's business as usual -- or at least, it should be. But what we're seeing inside, it's something else altogether."

Mickey stopped at one of the chain link partitions just as they were cleared of the supply boxes. Inside, forklifts were zipping along, loaded heavily with equipment. Soldiers were carrying boxes and shifting them from one side to another, obviously in preparation to add another load to a vehicle that hadn't shown up yet. There were three men in uniform walking past, and they stood out to Mickey only because they weren't caught up in the usual hustle and bustle.

"Hey!" Mickey shouted, trying to get their attention.
He succeeded, because all three men looked at him. Beside him, Julia wolf-whistled. "Wow, they're lookers."

"I suppose," Mickey said, giving the camera an odd look. "Try to get your hormones under control, we're working."

"Fine," Julia said.

The three soldiers were indeed attractive, each in their own way. The one that stood out the most to Mickey was the tall, solid blond who hung back, an impassive, stony expression on his face. Next to him was a wiry brunet with big blue eyes that Mickey could see even from fifty yards away. The third man had curly hair that was well out of a regulation haircut, cheeks in sore need of a shave, and a big, welcoming smile on his face.

"Hey, it's that guy," the third man said, breaking free of the other two men to waltz across the open space to join them. "You're the bloke from Underground, aren't you?"

Mickey turned to the camera. "I'm going to try to get some answers about what's going on in there."

By the time he looked into the base again, the third soldier lounged against the fence, smiling brightly for the camera. Mickey cast a suspicious glance at Julia when he heard a soft, dreamy sigh, but the camera held steady.

"Hi mom!" the soldier said.

"Hi, I'm Mickey from Underground," Mickey said, feeling stupid even though he'd already been identified. "Could you tell me what's going on?"

"Oh, sure, I could do that. There's a riot at the gates and sorcerers trying to take over the world. Same shite, different day," the man said cheerfully. Then, companionably, he asked, "Do you have a mobile on you?"

The blond and the brunet were closer, but they lingered out of range of the camera. Mickey glanced at them once and pulled out his phone. "Yeah, but --"

The soldier snatched the mobile and threw it across the clearing -- Mickey had a heart attack at thinking of all the lost contact information, but worse, if the phone was destroyed, Morgana wouldn't be able to reach him -- but the blond soldier caught it easily enough, handing it to the other one.

"I'd like it back," Mickey said.

"In a minute," the soldier flirting with the camera said.

"It's password protected," Mickey said.

"Not a problem," the soldier said, shrugging nonchalantly.

As Mickey watched, the brunet tapped the phone several times. Mickey didn't know how he'd gotten past the lock screen, but he did, and in no time at all, it seemed. He put the phone to his ear, listened, and shook his head. "It's the same."

"What's the same?" Mickey asked.

"Interference," the brunet said. "It's affecting all the wireless."
"Not everywhere," Julia said.

The brunet's expression turned sharp, and he approached the fence. "Not everywhere?"

"No," Julia said.

"Cuts out about half a kilometre out," Mickey said. "Video and radio transmissions get mangled within that distance, too. The reporters at the gates? Recording, not filming live. Mobile pictures and video? Cached, not making it to social media until they leave the area."

The brunet and the blond exchanged glances. Mickey thought the two of them were having a silent conversation that must have come to an agreeable conclusion, because they both came to the fence. The blond studied Mickey in contemplation, seemingly ignoring the camera, but Mickey had the feeling that he was far more aware of what was going on than he let on.

"Half a kilometre around the base?" the blond asked.

"Roughly," Mickey confirmed. "At least, that's about right for the other bases. Three other ones that we've been to, anyway. This is the fourth, we didn't exactly do the circuit."

"That's not live, then?" the scruffy man asked, pointing to the camera.

"Afraid not," Julia said. "Recording to onboard hard drive. We'll upload and stream as soon as we're back to the van."

"Oh," the soldier said, sounding grudging and disappointed. His smile returned, bright enough to blind the enemy, and he asked, "Will I make the cut?"

"Oh, trust me, Bertrise wouldn't miss the opportunity to put three hot men in uniform on the air," Julia said with a snort. "And if she didn't, I'd post stills to my feed."

A strange expression passed over the three men, and they traded glances. The blond raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward the camera; the brunet lowered his gaze, shrugged, and finally made a curt nod.

The entire exchange was bizarre and Mickey couldn't parse it out. Before he could wonder what that was about or even ask, the brunet said, "Five hundred metres, give or take. It's a window of opportunity."

"For whom, though?" the scruffy soldier asked.

The blond tapped the mobile that the brunet was holding in his hands. "Can you do something with that?"

"Maybe. Yeah," the brunet said, nodding. He looked at Mickey. "If he cooperates."

"Do it," the blond said. He stepped closer to the fence; the scruffy soldier got out of the way. Mickey felt as if he were being interrogated; the blond man's gaze was intense. "We need you to do something for us."

"Is it legal?" Julia asked, amused.

Mickey noticed that the brunet was tapping at his appropriated phone, but had no idea what he was doing with it. When the soldier took out a cell phone from his pocket and held the two together, he started to get alarmed. The two mobiles couldn't be more different from the other and there was no
way Mickey would mistake his own phone for someone else's, not with the crack in the corner and the noticeable dent on the side where it had fallen on a railing and somehow, miraculously, survived a twenty-foot drop, so he didn't think they were going to swap them around. He wished he could see what the soldier was doing, though.

"It's important," the blond said, so solemnly that Mickey felt as if he were being offered the Holy Grail and asked to hide it somewhere safe.

Julia must have been similarly affected by the weight of the man's words, because she fell silent for several, long seconds. Mickey couldn't even chide her for the waste of storage space with video full of empty air. She cleared her throat and cheekily asked, "What's in it for us?"

The man snorted. "What, helping us save the world isn't enough?"

"There are people who think you're doing the opposite," Mickey said, taking over the conversation before Julia ran it into the ground.

"So you want a token of good faith?" the man asked.

"It would help, yeah," Mickey said. A long pause stretched, and Mickey felt self-conscious by how Julia was panning the camera between him and the soldier. It was hard enough not to break eye contact without the knowledge that the entirety of the Underground's audience would be watching the video as soon as they could get it on the air.

"What do you want?" the blond asked.

Mickey felt giddy with relief. He hadn't expected the man to give in, which he hadn't, not exactly. But this was a rare opportunity, and he wasn't going to give it up. "Who are the members of the Red Team?"

The blond's eyebrow quirked. Behind him, the scruffy soldier grinned wide but kept his gaze averted. The brunet's fingers stopped tapping on Mickey's phone for a brief second; he tilted his head to his side in a little head-pop of "Yeah, all right," that made no sense at all.

"Confidential," the blond said.

"Are they still around?" Mickey pressed.

"They're around," the blond confirmed.

"Why haven't they done anything?" Julia asked.

"You think they haven't done anything?" the blond asked, his tone giving away nothing.

"I mean, about the --"

"I get it," Mickey said, interrupting Julia again. "Most of us do. They couldn't have done anything about the execution. They were too far away and couldn't get there in time. But the question is, would they have?"

"They damn well would," the scruffy soldier said, his smile gone, his arms crossed over his chest. "Don't even question that."

The line of questioning suddenly ran out of steam and Mickey stared at the three men. The brunet
didn't seem to be paying attention, the scruffy one was mortally offended, and the blond was completely unreadable.

Still, Mickey couldn't help it. "I want to interview them. An exclusive interview. Before anyone else."

The blond's mouth curled into an amused, almost mocking smirk, and there was a snort behind him from one -- or both -- of the soldiers. "What makes you think I have the power to arrange that?"

Mickey looked around. Behind the three men, the activity continued -- soldiers running roughshod in some cases, everyone loading up or clearing up. Superior officers had come by and yelled at a few of the men, hustling them along, but in all this time, none of them so much as cast a curious glance in their direction, and left them unmolested.

If the entire base was in similar states of activity, Mickey couldn't help but wonder why these three men had merely been walking around, not lifting a finger to help, otherwise lost in quiet conversation.

He met the blond's eyes and said, "Because whatever you're doing to my phone, you want me to make sure it gets done. And also, I've got a feeling."

The soldier crossed his arms. The scruffy one said, "I like him."

"You like everybody," the brunet said, never looking up from his phone.

The scruffy soldier opened his mouth to deliver a rejoinder but appeared to think better of it. After a moment, he shrugged companionably.

"Fine," the blond soldier said, after a glance at the brunet, who looked to be finished. "Exclusive interview."

"Interviews," Mickey said, suddenly greedy. "Every member of the team. And if you happen to come across a piece of information of where they'll be working, I want to know that, too."

"You're asking for an awful lot," the brunet said, coming closer.

"Wouldn't you?" Mickey asked.

The blond glowered, but he gave a sharp nod. "I'll see what I can do."

That seemed to be the signal that the brunet was waiting for, because he held up Mickey's phone. "Here's what you do. Absolutely nothing to this phone. Don't use it, don't make phone calls, not until it's done what it's supposed to do. Drive over the bridge, go past the Thames House. I've programmed it to activate as soon as the GPS detects your location. The screen will change. It's going to hack MI-5 and upload a file. Stay where you are until the file upload hits 100%. Got that?"

"Uh," Mickey said. He'd reached for the phone as soon as it was pushed through the triangle of the chain-link fence, but when he heard hacking MI-5, he had second thoughts. "Isn't that sort of illegal? Are we going to get arrested? What is it going to do?"

"Don't worry about that, we'll take care of it later," the blond said.

"It's going to trigger the air raid sirens. That's it," the brunet said.

"Air raid?" Julia barked a short laugh. "Honey, I hate to tell you, but they pulled down the system
back in the 90s. Tell us another one."

"Honey," the scruffy soldier said, leaning seductively against the fence, "I hate to tell you, but that's what the government wants everyone to think."

Mickey took the phone between two fingers, half-feeling as if it were now contaminated and that the government spooks would come crashing down on top of him with arrest warrants and a long string of charges that would lock him up in jail until he was old and grey and no longer remembered what beer tasted like.

"Do it right now," the blond ordered. "Get in your van and start driving."

"We'll do it as soon as we finish filming," Julia snapped. "You know, because we're doing our jobs."

"It's important. The sooner you do it, the better," the brunet said. He thumbed toward the blond. "Also, this one promised exclusives. Trust me. When he promises something, he delivers."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Julia said.

The blond snorted. He looked at the other two. "Let's go."

"I have more questions," Mickey said, half-heartedly. He didn't actually have anything more -- there was no footage they'd get at the gates that hadn't already been filmed, and the areas of the base that were visible through the chain link fence were cleared of any actual activity at this point.

Scruffy soldier waved as he walked away. The blond didn't look back. The brunet, with an explosive, "Oh, shite, I nearly forgot!" came running to the fence.

"What did you forget?" Mickey asked, holding his phone protectively to his chest. It didn't look as if the man had done anything to it, not as far as he could tell, but he didn't want to take the risk of subjecting it to anything more.

"Actually, just this." The soldier looked at the camera, his grin infectious, his eyes bright. He winked.

A flash of light blinded Mickey. He glanced up to see if the sun had broken through the cloud cover, but the skies were solidly overcast.

"Sorry about that," the soldier said, turning on his heels to catch up with the others. They disappeared around the corner of a pre-fab building.

Mickey exchanged a glance with Julia. "That was weird."

"That was very weird," Julia agreed. "Cute boys, though. I checked, but they weren't wearing insignias or name tags. Too bad. I wouldn't have minded a date with the flirty one."

"I thought blonds were more your type," Mickey said, ignoring the bad taste in his mouth as he said it.

Julia adjusted the heft of the camera on her shoulder and snorted. "Are you kidding me? He's as gay as they come. He didn't even check out my cleavage."

Mickey's gaze dropped down. He'd trained himself not to look -- he hated doing that on camera -- but when it was pointed out, it was hard not to. And, sure enough, Julia's jacket was open despite
the winter chill, her colourful scarf framing the low cut of her shirt. He didn't look up until she snapped her fingers in his face. "Sorry."

Julia rolled her eyes. "What do we do now? Want some B-roll for filler?"

"The others got plenty of that. Let's just..." Mickey held up his phone gingerly, half-expecting it to explode in his hand and take his fingers with it. "Let's see if this actually does what they said it's going to do."

He headed back the way they came, glancing over his shoulder at Julia when she lagged behind. "I don't know, I'm not a fan of getting arrested for hacking into the secret services."

Mickey snorted. "Look, I don't know a whole lot about computers. I mean, I can barely manage a message board! But I'm pretty sure you can't hack one of the most heavily guarded buildings in London over 4G. And definitely not with this phone. I can barely get it to open up email attachments as it is."

"You think they were making fun of us?" Julia asked.

Mickey shrugged. "Maybe. If they did, whatever. We've got footage of them doing it, and we can fucking ruin them."

Julia laughed. "I knew you had a mean streak."

Fifteen relatively uneventful minutes later, they were back at the Underground's van, picking off the rubbish someone had thrown at the windshield. Mickey kicked off the bin stuck on the fender while Julia climbed into the back.

"Why don't you drive? I'll setup to upload the video as soon as we're in a clear transmission zone. You know Bertrise's going to call asking for footage. May as well have something to tell her," Julia said. She tossed him the keys.

"Sure," Mickey said, climbing in behind the wheel. He waited for Julia to settle herself before pulling out, though, not wanting a repeat of the last time he'd driven and she'd nearly gotten knocked out when he'd had to swerve to avoid the kids running across the street.

They weren't even at the bridge, and Mickey had already heard Julia swear several dozen times, each more vehement than the last. He glanced in the rear view mirror and asked, "What's going on?"

"There's no video!" Julia screeched.

Mickey winced, rubbing his ear. He half-twisted in his seat to look at whatever she was pointing at when he remembered that he was driving. "What do you mean, there's no video? You remembered to hit the record button, right?"

"Fuck off!" Julia shouted. "Of fucking course I remembered the record button! Who the bloody fuck do you think I am, a cameraman for the Beeb? There's nothing on the hard drive! Nothing. It's fucking fried."

"Didn't you check it before we left?" Mickey regretted the questions nearly as soon as the words left his mouth, and with good reason. Julia's claws scratched on the old vinyl seat, and it was probably her last vestige of common sense -- never hit the driver of the van -- that kept her claws from his head. When he saw the foam spilling out, he was really glad that she'd aimed for the seat instead.
"I even checked the backup drive! The drive is... it's... it -- *Look at it!*" Julia thrust something in-between the seats. Mickey glanced at it once, twice, and a third time, trying to compute the melted piece of plastic with what was supposed to be a plug-and-play thumb drive.

"Are you kidding me? All that footage and there's nothing we can use?"

"Aren't you listening? There's no footage! There's absolutely fucking *nothing* --"

Mickey rubbed his temple, trying to ease the sudden throb. He couldn't understand how that would happen. Julia, like most videographers, was obsessive-compulsive when it came to her equipment. She checked everything before they went out. She inspected it when they came back. She babied it with expensive replacement batteries every three months, diagnostics of the on-board electronics on a weekly basis, and would probably *sleep* with the bloody thing if it meant getting good footage.

Every reporter knew that a good cameraperson was worth their weight in gold, and it was worth getting used to their eccentricities when the right match was found. Julia might drive Mickey mad on a good day, but she had never, never, fucked up before, and she probably never would.

But apparently, she had. Mickey would have had Bertrise ruthlessly edit the footage to protect his sources, keeping the majority of the information for themselves. It wasn't often that soldiers would speak so freely on camera. They were usually under orders to keep mum and to redirect questions to the appropriate media representative, and that was why Mickey didn't want these three particular soldiers to get in trouble. He wanted to talk to them again.

Like most soldiers, they'd been wary at first. They hadn't wanted to talk. Mickey could even pinpoint the moment when they relaxed -- when they'd realized that the cameras weren't transmitting live.

*The soldier winked. The blinding flash of light wasn't the reflection of the sun off some piece of metal inside the enclosure. It was --*

His eye.

Gold and bright.

Mickey slammed on the brakes. There was a corresponding screech of tyres behind him and an angry honk of horns as several cars swerved around him and drove past, but he ignored them and twisted in his seat. Julia must have gotten out of her seat at the operator's console, because she was sprawled flat on her arse, her back flat against the rear doors.

"What the Hell, Mickey?"

"It was them!"

"Who?"

"*Them!*"

Julia stared at him unblinkingly. Her expression cleared and she exclaimed, "It was them?"

"Yeah!"

"*Them* them?"

"Yes!"
"That's awesome! I can't believe it! It was them!"

"I can't believe it either!"

"Who the fuck is them?" Julia shouted.

Mickey was incredulous. How could she not have seen it? Granted, he hadn't put the pieces together until it was too late, but... "They were the Red Team!"

Julia's mouth opened and closed. "Bollocks!"

"I'm telling you, it was them!"

"They didn't have the scarves!" Julia protested. "Not a trace of red on them!"

"Right, because they parade around wearing bright red masks when they aren't on duty," Mickey snapped. "I swear by all that's holy, it was them! How do you explain --"

He huffed for breath, trying to get his thoughts sorted out.

"It was them," Mickey insisted, his tone calmer. "Everyone was loading equipment, but they weren't. A superior officer was around, but didn't yell at them to get to work. They acted like they knew more about the interferences than they told us. That one guy hacked my phone and they want us to go to MI-5 to trigger the air sirens. Who does that? Not the average soldier, I'm sure of that, at least. These blokes? They know what's going on, Jules. And how do you explain your camera dying? I saw a flash of light right at the end, but it couldn't have been the sun or anything like that - -"

"Okay," Julia said slowly. She reached for one of the small handheld cameras, and as Mickey watched, checked to make sure that it was working before she squeezed between the seats of the van. She plopped down into the passenger seat and turned the camera on. "Say all that again."

"Actually, hold on," Mickey said, looking around. Cars were still honking at them and veering around. Mickey took his foot off the brakes and kept driving as soon as there was a clear spot in front of him.

The Red Team had given him a job to do. He wasn't going to let them down. He had to get his phone out of the interference range so that it could do what it was set up for. If his foot was a little heavier on the gas, well, he'd deal with the speeding ticket later.

"Okay," Mickey said, glancing into the camera as he headed over the bridge. "You're not putting that on the air. Not yet. Whatever they're going to be doing, we have to give it a chance to work."

"I'm not transmitting," Julia said. "This is all you. I'll even do the edits."

She sounded a little shell-shocked, as if she were still processing the fact that they'd just met the Red Team and hadn't even known about it. If Mickey were in her shoes, he'd be kicking himself for not having had a back-up camera of some sort, some way of recording their image to identify them, later.

A well of protectiveness rose up within him. Mickey wasn't sure he wanted them identified, not yet. It was the superhero scenario he'd grown up with. They wore masks not because they were protecting themselves, but because they were protecting the ones they loved.

"All right," Mickey said. He cleared his throat and glanced at the camera again. "I think we just
met three members of the Red Team. Actually, I don't think. I know.

"They weren't wearing masks. They were regular soldiers in uniform. I wouldn't be able to pick them out of a crowd. --"

"I would," Julia said, her smile audible in her voice. "Their arses. Oh my God. They had fantastic arses."

"But Julia would, because I guess they were nice to look at? Sorry, boys, you just aren't my thing. Anyway, they weren't wearing their trademark red scarves, they didn't give me their names, and they didn't let on that they were Red Team. So how do I know I met them? In a sea of men and women in camouflage tactical gear, how did I happen to come across them?

"Luck. Sheer dumb luck. I didn't realize it was them, not right away. We got to talking about the media blackout around the bases -- turns out, it's not the army doing it. They don't have communications at all. I have the sick feeling that the enemy's doing this on purpose, to keep them from being able to act or to respond. Something's going to happen. Something bad."

Mickey had no idea if he was right or not. That was why Julia was taping it instead of broadcasting live. He didn't want to look like a goddamn idiot if it turned out that he was wrong.

The GPS beeped. Julia tilted the camera down to the cup holder where Mickey had left his phone and panned back to him. He pulled over to the side of the road, forcing his way into a parking spot at the kerb, and snatched the phone out of the cup holder.

The map app flashed as he looked at the screen and a black screen replaced it. His phone dialled itself, but the number didn't appear on the screen.

"They borrowed my phone. They did something to it and told me to drive here. We're in front of MI-5, just over the bridge and outside of the sphere of influence of whatever's blacking out transmissions and communications near the army bases. My phone is making a phone call on its own. I am not doing anything to it."

Mickey turned the screen to the camera. Julia focused on it before raising the camera to look at him again.

"If the army bases are being jammed -- and four of the big ones are, we checked -- someone doesn't want them to get word out and doesn't want them to get word in. Worse than that, there's a wall of human bodies at each of the army installations in the city, blocking the army's way out. I'm not a historian and I'm not a military scholar, but let me tell you, I've played enough video games to know that this is exactly the alarming sort of shite that screams out this is a fucking ambush."

He glanced at the phone. The screen had changed again. The word CONNECTED was in white text on a black backdrop, and there was a progress bar, currently at 11% and incrementing at a steady rate. He turned to show it to the camera.

"My phone's uploading something. I have no idea what. Like I said, it's working on its own. The army guy who fiddled with it must have completely reprogrammed it, because it normally takes ages to upload cat pictures to the Internet."

"You own a cat?" Julia asked.

"For some definition of owning a cat, I suppose," Mickey admitted. "Anyway, what if the army can't leave their base because there's a riot going on at their gates, and they can't get a word in or out, but they think something's going to happen? How do they get the word out to warn people?"
"I have no idea, actually. But this is how I know this is the Red Team. Because they figured it out. They came up with an idea I'm pretty sure none of us have ever thought of. I mean, we've hardly used air raid sirens since the Second World War, haven't we? They were officially decommissioned in the nineteen-nineties.

"The soldiers told me that this was going to trigger the air raid sirens. Yeah, I know what you're thinking. What air raid sirens? Apparently those that the government haven't taken down but kind of neglected to tell us about. I tell you what. I have a feeling we're going to be really fucking glad we still have them."

Mickey looked at his phone and held it up to the camera, tilting it so that he could watch it work. The progress bar was at one hundred percent. CONNECTED had been replaced by INITIATING. Abruptly, the screen went black.

"Here we go," Mickey said. After several seconds passed without anything happening, he released a nervous chuckle. "I really hope that this wasn't a joke--"

A blaring, whooping, dual-tone siren split the air. A few seconds later, the sound was amplified when another siren some distance away went off, too. One by one, the sirens went off, almost like the warning lights high on mountaintops in Lord of the Rings, and Mickey held his breath, half-expecting something to happen.

When nothing did, he turned to the camera. "I hope everyone's being safe. I don't know what's going to happen now."

He gestured across his throat. Julia cut the camera.

"How fast can you edit that?" Mickey asked.

"Pretty fast. I don't have much to do. You were spot-on. I liked the bit about the cat, I'm keeping that in. It'll get you some more fans," Julia said, already climbing into the back of the van.

Mickey took the car out of park, figuring out the best route to get back to where they were before. If something was going to happen and the Red Team was involved, he wanted to be there.

---

Gwaine looked up at the sound of the sirens with a grin. "Looks like I'm getting interviewed."

Arthur jabbed a finger in his face. "Not without my say so. And not for a long time."

"What, you don't trust me?"

The entire team stopped packing to turn to look at him. "No."

Merlin laughed at Gwaine's offended look and went back to checking on Mordred's gear. He tightened a strap, tugged at another, and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You're all right."

Mordred nodded, looking a little green around the edges. Merlin shoved him gently toward Lucan, who seemed to have a knack for calming Mordred down, and looked to see where Arthur had disappeared to.

Arthur was near one of their SUVs, putting in an earwig. The earwig was useless right now, what
with the E-channel just as affected as everything else, but they planned on being away from the base as soon as possible. The hard part was the waiting and the not-knowing. They had no idea what was going to happen, and they had no idea when.

The biggest psychological killer in war was the waiting. Countless hours in position in full combat gear, waiting for the signal that would give them the go-ahead or cancel the mission. Excalibur and the other SAS teams on the base were accustomed to living on that razor edge of madness, of rushing adrenaline and high tension, but the same couldn't be said of everyone.

The majority of the personnel were by the transports positioned all around the base, partially-hidden behind opaque fencing and blocky easy-raise buildings, ready to scatter to their next position when they received the command. The remainder were at the main gates, guarding that entrance under the pretence of defending against a rioting crowd, but Merlin had heard that the crowd had slowly dispersed under the uncertainty of the air raid sirens going on all over the city.

"Any word?" Arthur asked when Merlin came close enough.

"No sign of a device," Merlin said, shaking his head. "Honestly, it could be anywhere."

Arthur grunted. "What worries me isn't how they got a device on the compound that can kill transmissions. It's how they got it on six bases without getting noticed."

Five out of six bases had responded within a half hour of sending messages coded in electronic pings. The sixth hadn't responded, but one of the other bases had taken care of alerting them after sending a messenger disguised as a civilian. Shortly after that, there was an orchestrated effort to quietly pack up the bases for remobilization while simultaneously attempting to determine if the problem with their communications were originating on base.

Thus far, nothing had been found, and they'd begun to think that whatever was causing the effect wasn't on base. That had changed when the reporter told them that transmissions were down around four different bases to a distance up to a five hundred metres.

Will had dubbed the effect a Cone of Silence. Arthur hadn't been amused. Merlin less so, particularly when Will asked him why he hadn't fixed it yet.

Merlin leaned a shoulder against the bumper. "You think an inside job?"

"I don't know what to think anymore," Arthur said, but the clench of muscle at his jaw said, yes, yes, that's the problem. "The timing, though."

Merlin nodded. The timing was too fine to be coincidental. Kilgarrah's reassignment meant that he had to meet with several officers located off-base. Mandrake had to meet with the war council to determine the new course of military action under MacNeil's new direction. Tachnathar was off-base. Most of the Colonels remaining were administrators with no idea of what to do in combat situations, while the Majors wasted time in pissing matches trying to decide amongst themselves what to do. While there was always a clear chain of authority in the military, in this particular situation, there was no clear chain. No one really knew who was on base anymore and who was responsible for what.

Losing communications had thrown a lot of people out of their comfort zones.

Arthur didn't say -- or he didn't know -- but Merlin suspected that the lack of solid leadership at the head of the line wasn't only a problem at their location.

Colonel Locher had taken charge, though only after pulling several of his most trusted people
together and asking for advice from the SAS team leaders, who were trained to come up with contingencies on little information and to brainstorm solutions. Arthur had gone in, outlined a ready-made plan for evacuation -- because, *of course* he had one -- and after twenty minutes of fine-tuning it with the other team leaders, the plan was officially in effect.

The other bases were doing something similar, though Merlin doubted that their plans would be as efficient as Arthur's.

"Can't worry about that now," Merlin said, though he knew Arthur was worrying anyway.

Most of the military Brass was in one location. They probably hadn't clued in on what was going on until the air sirens had gone off, but even then, contacting the bases for information and deciding on what to do would take a while. As far as anyone was concerned, Locher's plan was still a go until they heard otherwise.

_Evacuate._

"Yeah," Arthur said, nodding gravely. He glanced over both shoulders before leaning in close enough for a kiss, though neither one of them gave in. Resisting the urge to sink into Arthur was hard, and Merlin huffed in frustration. Arthur pulled away with a weary sigh, and in a quiet voice, said, "Sorry, love."

"First fucking chance we get, I'm pulling you into a storage locker and having my way with you," Merlin grumbled.

"Aw, I didn't need to hear that," Will groaned. Merlin put his hand on Will's face and shoved him away.

"Wasn't for you," Merlin said.

"Thank fuck," Will said. He walked a few feet away to join Lamorak and Galahad.

Arthur's expression softened with faint amusement before hardening. He stood up straight and looked at a fixed point over Merlin's shoulder. As subtly as possible, Merlin shifted his position to see what was going on behind him.

For what was likely not the first time, the "consultants" operating under Colonel Uther Pendragon harassed the head of the waiting convoy. Merlin didn't recognize the man shouting, but he definitely could appreciate the cool and calm exuded by Colonel Locher's assistant. Major Alexandra McIntyre was a short woman with a slight stature, but she was smart as a whip with a tongue just as lashing. In all his time training with Locher, Merlin had never seen McIntyre lose her temper, but a few choice words in an edged tone was often enough to cut her opponent to their knees.

Right now, she stood impassive, on the receiving end of what Merlin could only describe as a soccer fan's complete _meltdown_, and not yielding a single inch.

"What do you suppose that's about?"

"Oh, I don't know," Arthur said, his amusement tinged with disapproval. "They're completely cut off from the man giving them orders. You heard them operate in the field. They didn't do anything without someone's say-so."

"Yeah. I don't get that," Merlin said, glancing over his shoulder. Arthur had closed the distance between them and Merlin could feel the warmth of Arthur's presence even through the layers of
equipment, camouflage, and body armour. "Uther's running them, yeah?"

"Or a second who works behind the scenes," Arthur said. Merlin also heard to give Uther plausible deniability, because that's how he operates in Arthur's voice, but he didn't comment on it.

"Why wouldn't he train them to work independently?" Merlin asked.

The silence stretched long enough that Merlin turned to look at Arthur, half-expecting to see Arthur's shrug. Instead, a dark glower filled his expression, thunderous and intimidating. Arthur didn't seem to realize that he was being watched, because he kept his attention trained on Uther's mercenaries. Finally, he tore away from watching the show and bit out, "Because if he's not in charge, it's not worth doing."

Merlin started to say something but thought better of it. He caught Arthur's hand and squeezed. Arthur didn't look at him, and after a long moment, Arthur squeezed back.

Arthur went to talk to Leon. Merlin glanced back at Major McIntyre, but she had everything well in hand, her head tilted to the side in her trademarked you're trying my patience, you fucking wanker gesture. Uther's man didn't know what that meant or what was waiting for him if he didn't shut his gob soon, and Merlin couldn't muster up an ounce of pity.

"I have a question," Galahad said, sliding easily in the gap Arthur had left behind.

"Of course you do," Merlin said.

"We've been talking, Geraint and me," Galahad said. "Worst case scenarios and all that."

"Okay," Merlin said, shoving his hands in his coat pockets to warm them. His fingertips were going numb from standing around in the cold and not doing much of anything. "Pretty sure Arthur's got this one covered, though, if that's what you're wondering."

"Well, it's seeing those pillocks over there throwing a tantrum that's making us wonder. Why are they in such a fucking hurry to get out of here? I mean, all the contractors we've ever worked with in the army? They hate having to pack up to leave. Those ones, they're pretty keen on getting out of here before anyone else, aren't they? Right to the point that Bedivere's spotted a few of them sniffing around, trying to find another way out."

Merlin glanced around, caught Geraint looking at them earnestly, and frowned. "Go on."

"It got us to thinking. You know. We used a scorecard to keep all the bad guys straight, but it got busy for a while there and haven't been maintaining it. So it's not up to date. We're thinking there's a group we didn't accounting for," Galahad said.

"So why are you telling me? Why not Arthur?"

"Because he's got enough on his plate, and it's more your cup of tea, in any case. We figure, if anyone could confirm it, it would be you. Or Mordred, but he looks like he's about to get sick over his own shoes, so, mostly you at this point," Galahad said, though he had the good grace of looking embarrassed. The team never bypassed Arthur, even when it was bad news or if it was an admission of their own screw-ups, and for Galahad to do it, well. Merlin wasn't sure what to think.

"All right. Go on," Merlin said.

Galahad grimaced. "Remember the testing fields in France?"
"Intimately," Merlin growled, his eyes narrowed.

"Okay, yeah," Galahad said, his hands up in apology. "I'm not talking about that. I'm thinking, well. MI-5 got their toes in. The CIA too, probably. Your da -- I mean, Balinor and the others. What about, um. Did anyone ever figure out where those giant fireball missiles came from? The first ones, anyway, before the airborne division got involved. Because the angle of attack and arc of the pitch? Couldn't have been them. Leastways, not that G and I can figure."

Merlin frowned. He had a vague recollection of the events at this point and only because he'd made them into vague recollections. They came back to him in flashes and broken images, in nightmares and fragmented memories, but largely, the sequence of events blurred together in his head.

But for some reason, Galahad's question made Merlin glance up and scan the skies.

"Yeah, good, so it's not just us, then," Galahad said.

"No, I think you're onto something." Merlin pushed Galahad toward Arthur. The base had sentries overlooking every blind spot around the fencing and runners to alert of impending attacks. There was no way that they could be attacked -- not by surprise. The only way it would happen is if it came from the one direction no one was looking -- above them.

"Ar -- Captain," Merlin corrected himself when he saw that the leader of another SAS team had joined Arthur and Leon in conversation. He clapped a hand on Galahad's shoulder. "Our man's got something you should hear --"

A runner burst out from between two buildings, barely getting caught in the narrow space, and ran straight for Locher. He skidded to a stop with a high-pitched, "Sir! Sir! They're coming from the east entrance!"

Merlin and Arthur exchanged glances, automatically moving to join the crowd gathering around the head of the convoy. Leon and the other SAS leader followed, keen to know what was going on.

A second runner broke through the gathering crowd at the front of the line, and said, "From the west, too, Sir. But they're just standing there, not doing anything."

Two more runners came from other directions, confirming the same observation. The soldier manning the sentry position at the top of the fencing abruptly climbed down. "They just showed up."

Arthur glanced at the other SAS Captain. They exchanged nods and shook hands. "Good luck, Evans," Arthur said.

"You too, Pendragon," Evans said, heading toward his own company.

"Get back up there," Major McIntyre said. "Keep an eye on them."

"What are they doing?" someone in the gathered crowd asked.

Locher looked at Arthur. Arthur crossed his arms over his chest. "They're waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Incoming!" someone shouted. It was echoed by several other men and women.

Merlin whipped around, trying to find the source -- he spotted the bright ball of orange light in the
sky, growing larger and ominous against the grey clouds. "Will!" he shouted.

"I need a second!" Will said, never taking his eye from the projectile.

"What the hell is it?" someone asked. The nervous question triggered nervous unsteadiness among the ranks.

Merlin saw Uther's men heading for the gates, abandoning their equipment and position in the convoy and dooming those behind them to be trapped.

"Hold the line," Locher roared, the rumble reverberating over the loud chatter and shouts of the crowd. The MPs at the gates raised their weapons when Uther's men didn't stop their advance.

"It's heading for the centre of the base," Will said. "Best guess, it's going to wreck the command centre and all our communications."

Merlin nodded, listening with half an ear as Arthur relayed the information to McIntyre, who went up to Locher and let him know of the missile inventory. Most of Merlin's concentration focused on the ball of fire in the sky, feeling out the shape and strength of it.

The damage on impact would be substantial, but it could be contained. He searched out and found Mordred, who was staring up at the sky with concentration written on his expression. He thought he saw a gleam of light in Mordred's eyes, and broke through the crowd, heading toward Excalibur's position in the convoy. Merlin grabbed Mordred's arm, and hissed, "Don't. The centre is clear of personnel. Let it fall. It's part of the plan, remember?"

"But --"

"The last thing we should do is tip our hand," Kay said suddenly.

"How far out is it coming from?" Perceval asked. Their job was to focus their effort on the magical heavyweights, but the problem was identifying and locating them.

"One point two, one point three?" Gwaine asked, squinting at the sky. He glanced at Will.

Will nodded. "About that, yeah. They've got one hell of a throwing arm."

"Galahad, Geraint, you're scouting ahead --"

Merlin was distracted from Gwaine's orders when Arthur put a hand on his shoulder. Merlin spotted the runners heading to their home positions, no doubt with the intention of letting the other divisions of the regimen know to attack as soon as the fireball landed. The other leads were already aware of the plan, but it didn't hurt to remind them.

The runner from the east gate had the farthest to go, because now he needed to run around the perimeter to stay clear of the impact site. Merlin turned to ask Will how long before impact, in case the soldier wouldn't have the time, but he'd barely said Will's name when --

"More incoming!" Lamorak shouted.

Merlin turned, scanning the skies. Another fireball was coming from what looked to be the same direction as the first, but two others were coming at them from different sides. Merlin cursed under his breath, because this could mean that they needed have to split up in different directions to deal with the problem.
"ETA. I want an ETA," McIntyre shouted.

"Thirty seconds on the first!" someone answered her.

"Twenty, maybe twenty-two," Will said, shaking his head. "That first one's not getting that much bigger. The second one's going to hit roughly the same area. The other ones --"

"They don't look right," Gwaine said.

"They don't. Looks like they're coming in fast, then they slow down --"

"Illusions," Mordred said. Merlin caught the tail end of his glowing eyes and glared at him. They were under strict instructions not to reveal their magic to anyone, and here Mordred was, flashing his eyes where anyone could see.

Lucan smacked Mordred on the arm, gesturing meaningfully, cheating Merlin out of the opportunity to give a reprimand.

Mordred ignored him and said, "They must not have enough people strong enough. The second one's real but it's weaker --"

"Brace!"

Everyone crouched and covered. Merlin kept an eye on Mordred to make sure that he didn't try to contain the damage. The enemy might sense any overt magic use, and there was no sense revealing themselves now.

The bright light of the fireball dropped over the rooftops and Merlin barely had a moment to close his eyes before the actual impact.


The heat from the first fireball shunted a massive wave of steamed air. A searing sensation pulsed, washing through Merlin as if someone had dumped a bucket of boiling hot water on his head. He slipped and stumbled. He heard Mordred moan.

No one else seemed to have felt it.

Magic.

The secondary wave had been the excess magical energy, spilling out uselessly and mostly ineffectual. Mordred grunted, getting to his feet with difficulty. Merlin didn't realize he was wavering until Lance caught and steadied him. A quick glance in Kay's direction, and Merlin saw the wince on his face, the way he grabbed onto Will.

"Go! Go! GO!"

Merlin didn't know who was shouting. Fire and magic rang in his ears. Lance pulled Merlin along, but Merlin shook him off as soon as his head cleared.

The crackle of flames behind them was loud, explosive, fizzling. The gunfire ahead was deafening. The convoy stopped dead as the first group -- Locher's men and solid, unflappable infantry soldiers -- buckled down at the gates and were firing weapons.

Merlin couldn't see what was going on outside the gates, but that didn't matter. He moved into
position just as Bedivere and Owain reached the fencing, triggering the miniature charges. The fence stuttered with concurrent *pop-pops* and stood freely before it fell away from the base.

Merlin knew the same thing was happening on the other side of the open gates, that other SAS teams had taken position to swarm out and suppress the enemy's attack. Their role wasn't to defend, but to eliminate.

Merlin brought his rifle to his shoulder. Neither he nor Mordred would be the first ones out. Perceval and Bedivere were in the lead, using heavier weaponry to lay down covering fire. A few distinctive shots rang out and a magical shield in the distance erupted in big, green-gold light, buckling with a magical hum that Merlin could feel in his bones.

A rush of bodies streamed out -- three SAS teams in two-man columns on either side of the open gate. Both moved to line the road, but there was no advance. Semi-automatic rifles fired in controlled bursts, but just enough to give the army the chance to maneuver physical barriers to protect the soldiers. Once they were in place, the SAS teams moved on through the side alleys, taking their assigned routes, silent and deadly.

As soon as Excalibur reached their designated position, Leon barked, "Mask up!"

Half of the team allowed their weapons to hang on their lanyards for the few seconds it would take them to put on their reflective eyewear and to tie the red handkerchief around their faces. The others did the same as soon as the first group was ready.

And just then --

*Movement.*

Merlin's rifle was on his shoulder, covering the rear, but his hand went out reflexively, magic bubbling to the surface. He stopped himself from reacting when he recognized another SAS team --

Evans' team, who were supposed to maneuver through the alley just past Excalibur's, to veer north to ensure that the multiple routes that the regiment was taking to move on were clear of obstacles and enemy.

They stumbled to a stop, their weapons at the ready, not recognizing what they were seeing at first, but Merlin saw Evans make the connection. Evans knew that Excalibur had been assigned the most westward alley route. That Excalibur wouldn't have passed through and missed anyone. That Excalibur was the Red Team.

Determination morphed into shock. Shock became understanding. Understanding fuelled a renewed determination.

"Riptide!" Evans shouted. "Guard the Red Team!"

As one, the other SAS team turned around, their weapons trained out of the alley, guarding their rear.

Evans lowered his weapon. He scanned all of them and nodded curtly.

"Go!"

Chapter End Notes
The words for the *Humpty Dumpty* nursery rhyme were sourced largely through Wikipedia, [here](#).

Although the common belief is that the nursery rhyme, *Humpty Dumpty* was based on actual events during a war in the late 1400s, the title referring to a famous type of cannon positioned on battlement walls, there is evidence that the nursery rhyme itself predates that battle by a large margin. Don't just trust Wiki's word for it -- this is supported by many other sources.
A flaming orange-red missile the size of a small truck careened across a backdrop of steel-grey skies and office buildings. The transmitted video was partially distorted through the glass of a nondescript van, and there was a nauseating roller coaster of movement as the cameraperson exited the vehicle to get a better view. The tail end of the fireball was an illusion of bright light against a dark sky, smokeless as it burned, disappearing behind several buildings on the other side of the bridge.

Nothing hinted at what was happening on the other side. Breathless seconds passed and --

The explosion was tremendous. The impact plume was an erupting volcano of flame, fuel, and debris, and it was a matter of seconds before the shockwave reached them.

The transmitted image jerked violently as the cameraperson fell backward, a grunt of pain overwhelmed by an echoing, rumbling roar.

"Julia! Jules!"

Mickey's face filled the video, eyes wide with alarm, concern, fear. Abruptly, the angle changed as Julia rose to her feet. She coughed several times. "I'm fine. I'm not sure about them."

The camera was pointed toward the location of the base, just over the bridge. Black and grey smoke filled the sky as the fires relentlessly spread.

"Look at that," Mickey said, and the camera was pointed up. Several more fireballs dotted the sky, both larger and smaller than the last.

"Jesus, Mickey," Julia said.

"My God," Mickey said, watching them cut across the sky. He didn't know what to say.

Elyan clicked the switches desperately. "Come in, Excalibur. Come in."

"Still nothing?" Gwen asked, her attention darting between Elyan's control console and the telly. Her heart was in her throat and she didn't know how she wasn't paralyzed with fear. That was Lance out there. The father of the child that still wouldn't bloody come out of her belly already. Those were her friends. Her family.

"Not a goddamn thing. All I'm getting is dead air," Elyan said, his voice strained. "But maybe if you stopped digging your fingernails in my shoulder, I'd have something."

Gwen wrenched her hand away. Elyan made a sound of relief and leaned forward.

"Hey! Listen to this!" Bran shouted.

Gwen shushed him -- the cottage wasn't so large that Bran needed to raise his voice, and Gwen didn't want to unduly alarm any of the residents of Camelot. It would serve no purpose for them to
be alarmed.

Gwen glanced at Morgana. Morgana was lost in a vision, staring out at a disembodied point in the distance. Gwen had managed to shepherd her to the overlarge chair, and at least she wasn't in danger of falling and hurting herself. Still, she was worried, because Morgana wasn't making a sound, and her eyes kept flashing gold.

On the telly, the news anchor, pale and distraught, said, "... happening. We are currently waiting for live footage from our correspondents, many of whom we have not heard from in more than an hour. Footage from the webcast, London Underground, indicates that there's a transmission issue close to the military bases --"

The small London Underground logo in the upper right corner of the screen maximized, and Mickey was on the air.

"There's a transmission-dead zone near the army installations. I know my fellow colleagues in the field are saying that the army is jamming them to keep their operations secret, but that's not true. The army is just as affected as anyone else. No transmissions can go in or out, and that extends to up to five hundred metres to nearly one kilometre from the gates around the temporary bases --"

A faint whoosh distracted Mickey. He looked up at the sky and the camera panned upward. Several more fireballs filled the sky, but they seemed smaller than the first one.

"We're going to try to get as close as we can," Mickey said. "There were a lot of people rioting at the entrance, a whole lot of reporters there, too. God. I hope they're okay."

The camera caught him rubbing his face, fingers pulling through his hair.

"You ready?" Mickey asked, though he was addressing the cameraperson.

"Not really," Julia said, but they both started moving.

Gwen didn't pay any attention when the news broadcast returned to the anchorperson. She put a worried hand on her belly and stood behind Elyan.

"They were being jammed, somehow. That's why we haven't heard from them yet. They're okay. They're fine. We just have to give them a little bit of time," Gwen said, sounding more confident than she felt.

The minutes trickled past slowly, every second a painful, corkscrew torture of anticipation.

Gwen held her breath when Elyan's hand abruptly went to touch his earphones, and she sat down in the chair next to him with a heavy sigh of relief when Elyan said, "Damn glad to hear from you. What do you need?"

Arthur was peripherally aware of Evans’ team following them, grateful for their presence. It freed up Excalibur to move forward faster, without needing to slow down and jackrabbit their advance if they were busy covering their tails. They hadn't encountered any real resistance, not yet, but he had
a feeling that it would come.

Arthur's earwig crackled noisily, and Merlin's voice came through the line. "Comms are back."

"Good. Notify Riptide's leader. Assign a channel to them. If they're going to dog us, we may as well use their expertise."

"Confirm order. Notify Riptide's leader, assign a channel, tell them to wait further orders," Merlin repeated.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder and saw Merlin slow down his advance, falling back to join Riptide. There was a good fifty metres between them to give both teams room to maneuver, and nearly as soon as Merlin dropped back, Arthur had a moment to regret having been caught. If it was anyone else but Evans' team, Arthur might have had more than a moment.

Evans was a good man, a solid leader, unflappable and dependable. That his first order when he'd registered the red scarves had been to call his men to protect Excalibur had gone a long way in reassuring Arthur's fears. There were too many soldiers who were against the Red Team, but Arthur was damn glad to know that Evans and his men weren't among them.

He tapped his earwig after a glance at Leon. "Watchtower, do you read?"

"Damn glad to hear from you. What do you need?" Elyan asked. His voice came through crystal clear, and Arthur thought he heard someone in the background muttering, Thank God.

"Coordinates on the base shooters," Arthur said. "Bird's eye of the location. What are we dealing with?"

An exasperated, "Where am I looking?"

Gwaine's voice came on the line, rattling off their current location, their direction, and estimated distance to their initial target. "Make it snappy. We're moving faster than we expected."

"Can do," Elyan said, sounding irritated. "I have the satellite now, but it's not rendering fast."

"What's the sit-rep on the base?" Leon asked. Arthur nodded, because he wondered that, too.

What they were doing was risky, but necessary. They were leaving behind the full regimental complement to deal with the aerial bombardment and the attack by the sorcerers. Colonel Locher and the rest of his men were trapped between a base that was quickly burning up and sorcerers who were pinning them down. The other SAS teams who had gone out would be flanking the sorcerers with the intent to disable, or at least distract, giving the regiment enough time to clear out to safety. The same thing was happening at other exit locations, and Arthur could only hope it was going well.

"I can either keep eyes on the base or scan ahead," Elyan said apologetically. "I'll keep the zoom out as long as I can, but visibility is almost nil. The smoke cover is too thick."

"Scan ahead," Arthur said. He couldn't worry about those Excalibur left behind. The other SAS teams were solid, just as highly-trained as any he'd ever fought with. They knew their jobs and they'd follow through or die trying.

It was the die trying part that Arthur worried about. He didn't want to lose any men.

There was a blip in his ear and Arthur changed channels, flagging that he was online with a
confirming *beep*.

"Cap -- err. Fair to say you're not wanting names on the line," Evans said. "What are your call signs?"

"Stick to standard," Arthur said. "Prefix *Red* with numerals. Command leaders are one, two and three."

"Acknowledged," Evans said on the line. "It's clear on our six. What are our orders?"

Arthur glanced at Leon. Leon hesitated, then shrugged. Like all of the SAS teams, Riptide was supposed to clear the alleyway as an escape route for the main bulk of soldiers, then double-time their way to the area where the sorcerers were attacking, flanking them. Instead, they were following the Red Team, leaving the other SAS to deal with the group of sorcerers without the benefit of additional support.

That was deserving of a reprimand, but it would be hypocritical of Arthur to point that out since, technically, Excalibur wasn't holding up their end of the bargain, either. Unlike Riptide, though, Excalibur had Locher's approval to proceed with their plans.

Instead of a reprimand, Arthur asked, "What happened back there?"

"Alley was blocked full of rubbish," Evans said. "We detoured your way, and, well, you know that part."

Relief made Arthur's decision easier. There had been another team flanking on their end, and even if their numbers were now curtailed, at least there was a fairly good chance that the sorcerers weren't going to be joined by additional support and that the SAS teams suppressing them wouldn't be surprised.

"We could do with their help," Leon said.

Arthur nodded his agreement. On the radio, he said, "The goal's to track down the heavy artillery and to eliminate them."

There was a long pause on Evans' side of the connection. Arthur glanced at Leon, who frowned, but it was difficult to tell his expression under the visors and the mask. He looked over his shoulder and saw Evans was walking in step with Merlin, the two of them engaged in conversation.

"Your bloke tells me it's not going to be pretty," Evans said.

"When is it ever?" Arthur said with a snort. "Look. You don't have to come with us. Follow through with your original orders. If the base is on the move, head to the rendezvous point and regroup. But if you come with us, you follow my orders, you don't get in our way, and --"

"Let me talk to my boys," Evans said easily. "But odds are, we're with you. Have to see how it's done, and done proper, don't we?"

He cut out, and Arthur saw him walking toward his men, leaving Merlin alone. Merlin shook his head and increased his pace to catch up, falling into formation without a word.

Elyan broke through the primary E-channel with an announcement. "You're going to have to double-time it if you expect to catch up to them. They're on the move. Change route north by northeast. I'll put you on a course to intercept. You're facing a small group of ten, maybe fifteen. I can tell you more in a minute, but they're on foot and moving fast."
Perceval was the one who whistled and barked the order to redirect. Excalibur broke into a run, and, behind them, so did Riptide.

"I have you on screen," Elyan said. "You've got eight blocks separating you. I'll slow you down a block away. Also, I confirm thirteen bodies, moving fast. Airborne artillery on FOB has ceased, by the way."

"What about the other bases?" Leon asked.

"Checking them now," Elyan said.

Arthur heard Gwaine in the background, offering a list of coordinates for the six bases Merlin believed were being attacked.

The blip of the secondary channel Merlin had set up rang, and Arthur switched to Riptide's connection.

"We're in," Evans said without preamble. "Don't try to talk us out of it, either. We're not letting you get all of the action. Wouldn't be right."

"Glad to have you with us, then. Stay in charge of your men. Red-Two and Red-Three will issue orders as soon as we have a clear picture of the sit-rep ahead of us," Arthur said.

"Roger that," Evans said. "We'll adopt the call sign sequence, but to eliminate confusion, we're going with Tide instead of Rip."

"Acknowledged," Arthur said. He slowed down to run next to Merlin. "Can you bring them into E?"

Despite the mask and the glasses, Arthur could tell that Merlin was rolling his eyes. "Yeah, I can splice the channel while we're double-time, easy fucking peasy."

Arthur ignored the sarcasm and said, "Good." He ran ahead to catch up to Leon.

Behind him, Merlin squawked, huffed, and clicked onto E-channel. Since the team's private channel had priority override on other active lines, Arthur heard what Merlin said to Elyan. "Change to strict mission protocol. I'm bringing in a second team. Our designations are Red, theirs are Tide. No names on the line."

"Acknowledged," Elyan said.

"And the rest of you lot, keep the unnecessary chatter to a minimum. I don't give a fuck if they already know who we are. They want to see how it's done, we're going to show them how it's done right," Leon barked.

"Acknowledged," almost everyone echoed.

"Gwaine? Will?" Leon pressed.

"Spoilsport," Will said. "But, yeah, I can be professional."

"Remains to be seen," Gwaine said.

"Can you shut up while I work?" Merlin grumbled.

Arthur didn't turn around to see what Merlin was doing or how he was managing to both run and
carry through with the change in communications, but he had no doubt that Merlin was well capable of it, even if he groused somewhat breathlessly.

Silence reigned on the line whenever Elyan wasn't redirecting their course, though Arthur was painfully aware of how close they were getting, given that the corrections were fewer and long in-between. At Elyan's, "It's a block, no more. You'll pass them if you keep going."

At Elyan's warning, Arthur gave the signal to slow down. He signalled for Geraint and Galahad to split up and scout ahead.

Merlin muttered, "Thank fuck." He crouched down, shrugging off his Box, and completed a few adjustments. He fell behind again but caught up easily enough, hitching his backpack on his shoulders. "Whenever you're ready."

Arthur held up a finger and said, "Watchtower, confirm that the target is together."

"Confirmed," Elyan said.

"Half-expected them to scatter when their job was done," Lucan said, steadying Mordred. Despite having trained with the team at Camelot, Mordred wasn't used to running with all of his equipment, and he heaved for breath. Arthur had to be pleased by how he'd stubbornly kept up.

"That's because the job isn't done," Elyan said. "I've had the satellite scanning the other bases, found similar groups there, too. Six teams, thirteen bodies, all of them heading away from the bases. Watchtower-two drew all over my monitor and it looks like they're congregating to the same spot."

"Which would be where?" Perceval asked, impatient.

"You're not going to like it," Elyan said.

"Well past that, mate," Gwaine said.

Elyan hesitated, then named the location. No one reacted, not even Arthur, even though an unexplainable chill darted down his spine.

"All right," Arthur said. He blew out his breath. He nodded at Merlin and said, "Bring the other team in."

"We shouldn't have left the van," Julia complained. Mickey turned and looked at her, incredulous. "You're the one who said to leave the van."

"I changed my mind," Julia said, hefting the camera on her shoulder. She'd since gotten rid of the burnt memory chip and resupplied with brand new ones, because there wasn't much that she could do about the hard drive, not with the equipment that they had in the company vehicle. It was running again, but just in case something happened, she had also brought along the smaller handheld. As it was, she was loaded down and not moving as fast as she normally did. "I didn't realize we'd be taking a fucking walking tour of London."

"Again, your idea," Mickey said. He knew better than to offer to carry some of her gear. Julia was
very protective of her cameras. She didn’t even let her mother touch one of her lenses, for instance. She had nearly bitten his head off for touching the strap. Besides, eventually her stubbornness would crumble and she’d give in.

"Are you going to stop throwing that in my face?"

From her annoyed tone, Mickey decided that she was on the precipice. "Are you going to stop whining and let me carry that damn bag?"

Julia’s expression thundered. Mickey could practically feel the electricity in the air. He knew he had exactly zero time to duck for cover and was about to throw up his hands to protect his face -- his face was his moneymaker, and he knew it -- when Julia huffed in frustration. She shrugged the bag off her shoulder and held it out to him with a steel-steady arm.

"If you treat that any less gently than your firstborn, if you break anything in there, I kill you dead."

"Is there any other kind of killing?" Mickey asked, gingerly taking the bag. It was heavy, loaded down with batteries, lens, and lights, full of scavenged I might be able to use this parts that Julia found in the van. He was actually surprised that she hadn’t found a way to stuff the van itself inside the goddamn bag. But he wouldn’t complain, because Julia had been carrying it for twenty blocks at a fast walk without so much as breathing hard, and it was a matter of pride that he be able to do the same.

"Oh, yeah, there is," Julia promised, a dark glint in her eye. Mickey grimaced, unable to repress the shiver of fear running down his spine.

"I’ll be careful. I swear to God. But if something breaks because we’re being shot or something equally unlikely, like, oh, attacked by a rampaging bull, I reserve the right to run away very fast," Mickey said.

"Fine," Julia said. She took the camera from her shoulder for a second, massaging it now that she was a load lighter. She adjusted her grip and glanced around. "Where are we going?"

"Funny story, actually," Mickey hedged. "I thought we were heading for the base, but…"

"But?" Julia asked.

"We saw that shadow, freaked out, and went left instead of right," Mickey admitted. "I don't actually know where we are."

Julia groaned. She palmed her phone and tapped the screen furiously. A second later, she shoved it in his face, his eyes attracted to the bright blinking blue pin on the map. "We're there."

She zoomed out with a pinch of her fingers.

"We want to be there," Julia said, tapping the screen where the base was located.

"Uh, yeah, I know that," Mickey said distractedly, his attention drawn to a flash of red and fast-moving bodies heading the other way. It was only a glimpse through the alley, but he’d trained himself to notice the slightest detail in the blink of an eye. Those flashes of red? They were scarves. He pointed in that direction and said, "I think we should go that way."

Julia pinched her nose. "Did you forget you're a reporter? You're supposed to run toward the action, not away."
"Trust me," Mickey said, already hurrying to catch up. "This is where the action is."

---

Arthur waited for Riptide to confirm that they were in position. He'd ordered them to take flanking position, sending Perceval, Bedivere and Bohrs with them. Their targets couldn't possibly miss the three imposing men with red scarves, and Arthur was gambling that they would be intimidated enough not to try to attack, and that they'd retreat instead.

Right where the rest of the team was waiting.

"Nearest cell tower is down," Elyan said.

Merlin had already verified the lack of active radio transmissions, which meant that any communication between group was being directed solely through mobile phones. Needing to communicate and orchestrate attacks against the government was probably one reason why the NWO hadn't made any additional attempts to eliminate humanity's reliance on technology. Arthur didn't want to think about that now, leaving it for later.

They continued to follow the sorcerers jumping from one block to the next, keeping them within sight and using the buildings as cover. As far as Arthur was able to tell, the enemy hadn't detected them, but it might just be a matter of time.

"Team Two in position," Elyan said. After a pause, he added, "Second cell tower is down. Waiting on Three --"

Cell towers operated on an overlap principle, guaranteeing that if one or two towers were overloaded or not functioning to capacity, a third tower would be in range to pick up the transmission and make a connecting call.

"Three is down," Elyan said.

Excalibur didn't wait for Arthur's command. They moved into position, approaching the sorcerers. The sorcerers didn't immediately react, which told something about their general mentality -- cocky and overconfident. But when they realized that armed soldiers wearing red scarves were heading their way, their first act was to swear --

"Shite!"

"Fuck!"

"Oh my god --"

-- and to turn tail and run.

Arthur allowed himself a moment of amusement. He believed that the majority of the sorcerers who were aligned with the NWO would also not be trained to use their magic in combat situations. He gambled that, despite all the months that had passed with the pervasiveness of magic around the world, using the magic that was suddenly at their disposal was still not first or second nature. Either that, or they were really, really young.

Using their magic to defend themselves was hopefully going to be their last resort, no different than
an animal lashing out to bite when it was well and truly cornered and had nothing else to lose. Arthur could only hope that they would have turned tail again before attacking. He didn't want Riptide to get the brunt of that.

Mordred was in position.

Merlin was, too.

The sorcerers shrieked and retreated away from Riptide and Perceval's team, re-emerging into the main road where Excalibur had blocked off every avenue of escape.

Arthur didn't want any unnecessary deaths. He also didn't want any member of the two SAS teams to be hurt.

When the sorcerers were grouped in a tight circle, their backs together, Arthur said, "Lay flat on the ground, arms outstretched, face down."

"Fuck you," someone said.

There were thirteen of them in all. A solid coven if they were witches, four feeder groups of three for a central focus if they were sorcerers. Witches, Merlin had explained to him once, were powerful in their own way, but didn't have the power or the training to lob giant fireballs through the air across vast distances. The sorcerers' setup was clear to Arthur -- he'd seen something similar among the Directory sorcerers when Excalibur was being trained before being sent on mission. The Directory sorcerers had explained that they had a finite amount of power and they could either swap-out with another to continue the fight, or to use the borrowed power of other sorcerers to keep going.

With three groups of four feeding a single sorcerer, that was enough combined power to cast and throw a few fireballs, each one smaller than the last as their power decreased. The illusions that had been sent in the interim had been for psychological purposes -- fear and distraction.

Arthur guessed that the sorcerer directing all that power would also be the strongest among them, perhaps even the leader. He guided his semiautomatic rifle, tracking the man who had spoken.

"Not going to repeat myself. You have ten seconds to comply."

Arthur waited.

"You're just a bunch of arseholes in red scarves," someone else -- a younger man -- said.

"Five seconds," Arthur said.

"Fuck you," the leader said. He threw out his hand, eyes glowing orange-bright.

There was a grunt besides Arthur as someone was swept aside. Before the sorcerer could cause more damage, he was tossed back, crashing into his companions with an outraged yelp.

Out of the corner of Arthur's eye, Mordred stood with his arm outstretched.

The team advanced, closing the circle. The sorcerers exchanged glances and slowly, one by one, they went to their knees. Two men -- the younger one who'd spoken, and the leader who had climbed to his feet -- remained standing.

No one spoke, though Arthur could hear a faint grumbling over the radio. It was probably Gwaine
or Will, either or both of them wanting to say something snappy.

Arthur didn't have time for a stand-off. "Hands on your heads."

The sorcerers already on the ground placed their hands on the backs of their heads. The two men sneered at them; the younger of the two was staring at Mordred.

"Traitor," he said.

To his credit, Mordred didn't reply.

"Easy way or hard way," Arthur said, his voice hard. "Lay down on the ground. Hands behind your heads."

"You're not going to shoot us," the younger man said. He raised his chin defiantly. "You're not those other guys, the ones who'll shoot at anything that moves. The worse you'll do is give us community service."

Elyan's voice crackled on the E-channel. "They're stalling. Those other groups are massing up."

"Whatever they're going to do, they must be able to do it without this lot," Merlin murmured, keeping his voice low. The microphone on the earwig picked up his words, anyway, and Arthur grit his teeth, because now, they really didn't have time.

"Hold them," Arthur ordered. Mordred raised his arm in the air, fingers closing in a fist. The leader and the younger man squawked in surprise, eyes wide, their limbs tight against their torso. "Bind them."

The others moved in quickly. Half of Excalibur kept their weapons trained on the group while the rest pulled their arms behind their backs and strapped on plastic zip ties.

The usual zip ties alone wouldn't do much to keep the sorcerers under control, but these ones were enchanted to act as temporary bindings, preventing them from breaking free using magical means or using magic to attack anyone. The effect would only last as long as the zip ties remained unbroken.

Lamorak and Galahad approached the remaining sorcerers. Mordred relaxed his hand, but only enough for the two to bind the sorcerers. Once bound, Mordred released them, and the sorcerers fell on their knees.

Merlin approached the leader in the group, hauling him up and away from the others. Arthur joined him, listening as Leon instructed Riptide to escort the sorcerers to one of the auxiliary bases, preferably one where Locher or Mandrake were holding court, and under no circumstances were they to cut off those zip ties.

"We're going to have us a chat, you and I," Merlin said, his tone dark. He pushed the leader to his knees. "We're going to start with where you were going, and what you and the others were planning on doing at the Islington Cemetery."

Mickey breathed heavily, feeling as if he'd just run a marathon.
He thought he was in decent shape. Julia definitely was, if she could keep up at a jog while carrying the heavy camera and transmitter. But there was no way, not in a million years, that he could maintain the hard pace the soldiers had managed over several blocks.

They'd managed to keep them in sight for a while. Guesswork and sheer luck had led them in the right direction, but they definitely needed to appropriate some sort of vehicle if they were going to keep up with the team.

By the time they arrived at the site, the Red Team had captured -- Mickey cleared his throat and said, "No, sorry, I didn't see the other blokes. Looks like a SAS team assisted them in the capture of thirteen sorcerers. Now, I don't know what these sorcerers have done or why they're being detained, but take a good, long look. If you're like me, you're thinking, Boy, what a contrast this is to how they dealt with those other sorcerers, innit? That's because this is the real Red Team. The ones who actually give a fuck about making sure everyone's okay. Even the bad guys."

He ignored the way Julia was texting and filming him, keeping what was going on down the street in the backdrop, and turned around. Two of the Red Team members had pulled one of the sorcerers aside and had him on his knees. One of the two was leaning down, as if talking to the sorcerer; the second soldier was alert, but he wasn't pointing his weapon at their prisoner.

Julia's phone buzzed, and she nodded in satisfaction.

"Hot date?" Mickey asked.

"Paul and Marty are going to drop off their van," Julia said.

"Damn it, no," Mickey exclaimed. "They're coming here? What are you doing, they'll steal our exclusive."

Julia gave him an unimpressed look. "I'm not stupid. They're leaving it a block over. I told them we had a flat tyre."

"It's Paul. He's a bloody shark. If he smells news, he's not going to leave us alone."

"Let me take care of that," Julia said, smiling so wide, she showed teeth.

"Watchtower," Arthur said, pressing a hand to his ear. Aware that Riptide was still spliced into E-channel, he chose his words carefully. "Ask our experts if this has anything to do with the staff."

Merlin turned to look at him, but his expression was unreadable behind the coated glasses and the scarf. The sorcerer was tight-lipped, although he'd gone pale at some of the leading questions Merlin had asked. It wasn't as good as actual confirmation, but it was all that they were going to get at this point, and it was the only thing that they had to go on.

Out of all of the worst case scenarios that Arthur had dreamed up, the potential reality that the necromantic staff brought into play was one of the few that genuinely frightened him. London was littered with bodies, from the relatively recently-dead in the city morgues to those in mortuaries and cemeteries. From military burials to ancient battlefields and unknown tombs of men and women buried deep below the ground.
"Asking now," Elyan said, his tone subdued. He was probably thinking the same thing.

If Arthur were the enemy, this would be the time when he would raise overwhelming forces to squash his opponents and end the siege. All the elements were in place. Distract the army's largest complement of troops. Destroy their ammunition stores and supplies. Cut them off from a solid leadership -- which wasn't solid at all, not since MacNeil fractured it.

Twenty thousand corpses animated by the souls of the warrior dead collected by the Goddess Morrigan would be more than enough to bring London to ruin. There were few places that could act as strongholds, and not enough space to shelter all of the citizens. The army was charged with protecting the country, even from itself, but that wouldn't be possible if they couldn't even protect themselves.

"Um. This is Watchtower, um. I guess I'd be number four?" Bran's voice came over E-channel. Arthur's head snapped up and he turned around to look at the others. Merlin's shoulders were shrugging as if he were laughing, and off in the distance, Kay and Will were looking at each other and spreading their hands questioningly. Arthur could almost hear the two of them talking:

_What? He's not my kid._

_He's your kid when he's in trouble._

With a sigh, Arthur said, "Go ahead, Watchtower-Four."

"You're on the telly. It's our favourite reporter," Bran said.

Merlin's body went rigid. The others froze momentarily. None of them turned around to search for Mickey O'Reilly or his camera person, not even Arthur.

"He's on your, ah, five o'clock?" Bran said.

"Acknowledged," Arthur said.

"Do you want us to --"

"Give me that --"

"Hey, I'm not done --"

"Sorry about that, Red-One," Elyan said, coming back on the line. "I'll get rid of him if you want."

"No, it's fine," Arthur said, not entirely sure if Elyan meant Bran or Mickey.

Either way, it wouldn't matter. Bran wouldn't leave the cottage and would find a way to get himself in the thick of it whether or not he was forbidden from doing so. The same went for the reporter. Excalibur wasn't going out of their way to shake them off, but in every account Arthur had heard of the man, he gave the impression of sticking to a story like a barnacle on the hull of a ship.

"Yes, sir," Elyan said. "Our sources aren't sure, but they agree that the conditions for its use might be approaching the apex."

"What conditions?" Mordred asked, cutting in.

"Phase of the moon, alignment of the stars, the way the bloody leaves fall in the cup. I don't know, they didn't say, and I wasn't going to stick around listening to mysterious mumbo jumbo when I'm pretty sure they don't know, either," Elyan said.
"Continue monitoring the congregating groups," Arthur said. "Give me an ETA before they're together."

"Acknowledged," Elyan said.

Arthur turned to Merlin. The sorcerer they'd captured looked no less defiant than before, colour returning to his cheeks. He didn't think Merlin was a threat, but he wasn't struggling against the zip-tie anymore, which either a sign of exhaustion or acceptance that he couldn't break the binding.

"Can we get anything else out of him?"

"Not with the time we've got," Merlin said, shaking his head. "They can still cause trouble, though, especially this one."

"Even with the binding?"

"If we get him to Locher, he'll know what to do," Merlin said, his tone neutral. He tilted his head and shrugged. "Plus, we sent what we've got of the Directory to the same base. If Locher can't deal with him, maybe Gilli can."

Arthur stared at the gleaming reflection of Merlin's coated glasses for a long second before asking, "How much did it hurt you to say that?"

"So much," Merlin admitted.

Arthur snorted.

"There's something else," Merlin said. "We're being hailed. Authorization codes are correct. It's coming from the War Room."

Arthur didn't need names to know that it was Uther. Merlin's flat tone of voice was enough. He nodded, swallowing the bad taste rising in the back of his throat, and said, "Let's take care of this lot first."

Arthur gave Evans orders to bring the sorcerers to the same base where the majority of Colonel Locher's men had relocated. "We're going to break connection with you in a few minutes. You'll be getting calls from the Brass. I want you to do me a favour, though."

"Ignore them?"

"As much as you can," Arthur said. "Your first priority is getting the prisoners to Locher. Under no circumstances are they to go to anyone else."

"Can do that," Evans said, folding his arms across his chest, letting his hands rest on the automatic rifle hanging from the lanyard. "Are you sure you don't need us?"


"We don't do what we do for glory," Evans said, his tone hard. "If you need us --"

"I need you to make sure everyone's safe. There's something worse than this coming our way, and I need our best men protecting everyone that they can. Go to Locher. Tell him I want you read in on Priority Red. He'll know what it means."

Evans shook his head. "So help me, if you're giving me a plush assignment, I'm going to track you down and beat your arse --"
"Guns and glory is what it is, and you'll be wishing you'd asked for his version of a plush assignment when it's done with," Leon said, interrupting Evans' rant. "Come on, let me give you the basics of special prisoner transport."

Evans glanced between Arthur and Leon before going along grudgingly. Arthur gave Leon a grateful nod and crooked a finger to draw Merlin away from the others.

"Cut the connection to Riptide," he said. He didn't say another word while Merlin pulled his Box to the side, reprogramming it quickly. A faint echo resounded in the channel, a pop of detachment that was more Arthur's imagination than actual sound.

"Done," Merlin said, his fingers hovering over the controls. "War Room?"

"War Room," Arthur confirmed.

"Private line?" Merlin asked, his head bowed over the control panel.

Arthur considered. He didn't want to leave the others in the dark, but at the same time, he didn't want to distract them. "Private, but listen in."

Merlin's head bobbed in acknowledgement, but he didn't look up. "Voice modification?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Arthur said. If Uther was now involved with the War Room, either at General MacNeil's invitation or through his own, unchallenged bustle, the last thing Arthur wanted to do was to let him know where they were, never mind giving them confirmation of their identities. Uther probably already knew, but he would deal with that later.

"Done," Merlin said, raising his head. He flipped the switch.

"… acknowledge. Cease and desist all activities and return to base --" the speaker was frantic, repeating the summons over and over. They didn't use call signs, which indicated that they had no idea that Riptide was involved, and they were referring to them as unauthorized non-military personnel interfering with military operations.

Arthur raised an eyebrow, affronted, and curtly said, "Your transmission is acknowledged. What do you want?"

There was a startled pause, and a second voice came on the line. "Identify."

"May as well call us Red Team. It'll do for now," Arthur said. He didn't bother asking for the new speaker to identify themselves; he recognized General MacNeil well enough, even from just one word.

"I'm told the Red Team operates under the British Army," MacNeil said.

"If that's what you were told, who am I to argue?"

Merlin snorted softly, but since he was only listening and not actively participating, the sound didn't make it through.

"Who's your C.O.?" MacNeil snarled. Arthur's vague response must have been enough to erode what little patience the General must have had.


"Classified?" MacNeil sputtered. "Do you know who I am? I'm --"
"All due respect, sir, but I know who you are and it's not going to make a damn bit of difference. Unless you tell me why you're broadcasting our location on an unsecured line and putting in jeopardy not only a military operation, but the lives of several good soldiers, shut the fuck up and get off the air."

Merlin's shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter. Arthur turned away before he started laughing, too. He'd never once talked back to a superior officer, and instead of the nervous flinch as he waited for the expected discipline, Arthur was feeling unusually giddy.

It fucking felt good, is what it was. MacNeil was obviously Uther's puppet. In a round-about way, Arthur was telling Uther exactly what he'd been avoiding telling him since returning to London.

MacNeil's furious intake of breath tempered his next words. "You are ordered to stand down and to report for detainment and debrief at FOB East."

A familiar ping notified him of an incoming transmission on E-channel, but Merlin's finger rolling in the air told him that the communication was suspended until they wrapped up the conversation with MacNeil. Arthur wanted to hear what Elyan had to say. To MacNeil, he said, "No, thanks. My orders are to complete our mission. Stay out of our way."

He signalled Merlin, who flicked a switch and ruthlessly cut the connection. "Nice. Elyan's waiting."

Arthur tapped his ear, opening E-channel. "Watchtower."

"Red-One," Elyan said. "A couple of the groups dropped off the radar. No idea where they went. Can't pick them up again. The other three remaining are estimated to intersect at the site in twenty-six minutes and counting. You could leg it or hitch a ride, but you won't beat them there."

Leon was still busy with Evans' team, but Perceval noticed Arthur flagging him and gestured that he would take care of getting transportation. Perceval pulled Bedivere and Pellinor with him and the three darted back the way they came to borrow the vehicles they'd seen parked at the kerb.

A few people wouldn't be happy to find out that their cars were missing.

"I zoomed in on the intersection site. There's already a small crowd there. Twenty, thirty people. I'm not sure, they're too close together and there's interference," Elyan said. "Probably of the magical variety, if you know what I mean."

"Whatever they're doing, it's already started," Merlin said. "We've got to move."

"We're going to need to raise the alert," Arthur said. "If they raise the dead before we can stop it --"

"Kilgarrah?" Merlin asked.

Arthur flinched. Merlin had tried to raise Colonel Mandrake as soon as they had broken out of the transmission dead zone around the base. There had been no response, which either meant something had happened to him, or he was in an unsecured and untrusted environment, unable to respond. The only other options were General Tachnathar or Major Kilgarrah. General Tachnathar was no doubt in the War Room, where he couldn't step up, and Arthur didn't want to have to raise Kilgarrah unless they absolutely needed to.

"At this point, he's probably our best bet," Arthur said, biting back "Our only bet". He wasn't sure which base Kilgarrah had been sent to, but he hoped it was at least one of the smaller ones, where they wouldn't be affected by the dead zones. As long as they could get word to the Major, they
would be able to get the infantry mobilized. They'd need to contain the area around the Islington Cemetery as quickly as possible.

"On it," Merlin confirmed.

Arthur went to join the main group. Evans' team were dragging the sorcerers to their feet and lining them up in two columns, ready to herd them to the secure location, but Evans intercepted Arthur before he could talk to Leon.

"Brass has been raising Hell," Evans said. "The order's out and they want us to arrest you."

"Are you going to do that?"

Evans gave him a disgusted look. "Hell, no, and I guarantee you, none of the other special teams will, either, and they'll get in the way of anyone who does. We'll keep you safe, and we'll keep you secret. I'll make sure of it."

Arthur released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, and he nodded gratefully. "Thank you."

Evans grinned. "You know something? We all figured it had to be one of ours. The Red Team moves like us, and no one else moves like we do. Should've guessed it would be Excalibur. You're a mad lot of nutters, all of you, and I'm damn fucking proud to know you."

Arthur stared at him, struggling to parse this approval with the swelling emotion hurting his chest.

Before he could say anything, Evans moved to join his men, pointing at Arthur as he retreated. "You get them, mate. Bring them down."

_________

"Where are they going?" Mickey asked, glancing at Julia.

He was in the driver's seat once again, squirming uncomfortably against the beaded seat cover -- *It's ergonomic, mate, shut up*, Paul had said -- and trying to keep up with the three vehicles the Red Team had… appropriated.

One was a delivery van that was a little larger than the company car Julia had acquired for them, the other was a cherry red SUV with a bobblehead Chihuahua stuck on a window, and the third…

Well, if Mickey hadn't seen it for himself, he wouldn't have believed it. The lorry had skidded to a stop just as the soldiers were leading the prisoners from the site, coming shy of hitting several members of the Red Team who hadn't been arsed to move out of the way. The driver had climbed out, and waved eagerly for the Red Team to take it.

"No idea," Julia said. The smaller camera was on the dash and recording the three vehicles driving ahead of them, and she had her mobile in her hand, scrolling a map around.

Mickey grunted in frustration, slamming a hand on the steering wheel.

"Look, if I had satellite access, or a military radio, maybe I'd be able to tell you," Julia snapped.

"What?" Mickey made a face at her. "No, it's not that. It's this…” He waved at the traffic in front of him. "This arse who just cut me off. We'll never catch up."
His phone rang.

It rang and rang.

Mickey snatched it out of the coffee cup holder, his finger hovering over the Ignore button. He didn't have time for any of Bertrise's admonitions. Yes, they could've gotten better footage. They could've gotten closer. Why didn't they follow the soldiers with the prisoners? Why did they palm that off to the other team? Why were they transmitting a driving tour of London?

**Unknown caller**

Mickey hit the Accept button instead, hardly caring that he was breaking any number of traffic laws, and brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

He was answered with a long silence.

"Hello?"

"Don't follow them," Morgana said. Mickey was flooded with relief -- she'd called back! -- but at the same time, couldn't help but to note how she sounded strained, even exhausted.

"Don't follow -- why not? What's going on?"

"You'll be killed if you do," Morgana said, brittle and thin. "Don't follow them."

Mickey wasn't sure if that was a threat or… or something else, but he shook his head. "No, you know what? I have to follow them. It's my job. You might not understand that, but --"

"Do you trust me?" Morgana asked.

"I don't know you," Mickey said. "For all I know, this is a prank call --"

"Turn left now," Morgana said.

Mickey turned without hesitation, cursing himself silently as soon as he did. Next to him, Julia made a disbelieving sound. "What are you doing? They're going the other way!"

Mickey shook his head and looked at her helplessly.

"I'm going to direct you to a safer location. You'll be able to film everything. I hope you have good lens," Morgana said, somewhat smugly.

Julia punched Mickey in the arm. "Turn around! We can still catch them!"

"Ow! Ow! Stop that!" Mickey held up his phone defensively. "I've got a hot tip. Does this piece of junk have any good lenses that you can use?"

"… and I'm telling you, none of you are going to survive if you go there right now," Morgana shouted.

Arthur tilted his head defensively, but there was no getting away from the earwig. Leon and Merlin
were in another vehicle, or else Arthur would have gone off-air and asked them their opinions. Instead, he elbowed Mordred, who looked like he was thinking about throwing the earwig out the window, and told Morgana, "Give me a second."

Mordred tapped his earwig at the same time Arthur did, and when Mordred turned in his seat, it was with a contrite expression. "I can't tell you much more than you already know. I didn't focus on visions and scrying in my early studies, and after that... I taught myself, and my experience cannot be considered universally applicable."

"You did enough of it to help Merlin out when he was in trouble," Arthur said. "How else did you know where to find the evidence to stop the court martial?"

As he always did at the reminder of past misdeeds, however positive the outcome, Mordred flinched visibly. His expression was hidden by the glasses and the scarf, but the body language was revealing, and Arthur told himself to have a talk with Mordred one day, to try to help him through the reconciliation of what evil deeds he had done before.

Mordred shook his head and said, "The circumstances were different. Most of the information was already available electronically and accessible if one knew where to look. Any esoteric method used to assist the search was focused on past events -- as fixed events in time, those were much, much easier to see. However, I do point out one thing. Morgana said, if we go there right now."

"Go on," Arthur said, ignoring the insistent pings across the E-channel demanding his attention. If he wasn't certain that it was Morgana about to start shrieking in his ear again, he'd answer right away.

"The future is mutable. One can only foresee events with accuracy as long as a specific set of conditions leading to a definite outcome are met. For example, if we were to take one route to our destination without deviation, we might reach a bridge just as it collapses under us."

"Cheery," Pellinor said from the driver's seat.

"Alternatively, if we encounter a fork in the road and at the last minute, elect to take the longer route, visit our relatives in a nearby village, and take a walk along the coast before continuing on to our original destination, we might --"

"Get detoured and arrive in one piece," Gwaine said from the front passenger seat. He tilted his head back to look at them.

"Yes," Mordred said. "Morgana is seeing a possible future. She was very explicit. If we continue on our current course. If we head there directly, without stopping. If we go right now."

"So we pull over, wait ten minutes, and keep going?" Pellinor asked.

"It may be that simple. Or it might not be," Mordred said. "It's difficult to be certain. It's possible ten minutes would mean our survival, but it is also equally likely that we would have to wait until this time tomorrow if we wanted any assurances that we would survive."

Morgana's vision had been broken and fragmented, like looking through broken glass. She couldn't identify their opponents, and she pointedly refused to tell Arthur how they died. All Arthur knew for certain was that Morgana was extremely agitated by what she'd Seen, and that the outcome had been terrible.

His earwig click-click-clicked insistently, and Arthur switched to the direct channel that connected him to Merlin. "Any luck?"
"Yeah," Merlin said. A loud background rattle and the sound of several objects clattering were joined by several angry cries. "Oi, you said you could drive this thing!"

"It looked simple enough on the telly," Bohrs retorted in the background.

"At least everything's off the shelves now, can't get hit by anything else," Will groused.

"Next time a delivery guy --"

"Sorry," Merlin said, returning his attention to the radio. "Made contact with Kilgarrah. He'll mobilize the infantry and wants us to wait for them."

"Will that be too late?" Arthur asked, glancing at Mordred. Mordred fidgeted, his fingers tap-tap-tapping on his knee, but Arthur wasn't sure if he was being naturally restless, or if there was something going on.

Mordred nodded at Arthur's question despite not knowing what Arthur was talking about. At the same time, Merlin said dryly, "Depends what it's too late for. We might not know what they're doing, exactly, but there's enough magic that there's no stopping it now, or there'll be blowback."

Arthur sighed. "Morgana had a vision."

"Yeah?"

"We all die," Arthur said.

"Huh," Merlin said, after a pause. "Well, that fits with what Kilgarrah said. Which, of course, made no sense. Something along the lines of, Tell that Captain of yours that he'll wait this time, and I'll be damned if I know what he's talking about. Do you?"

"Not the faintest, and frankly, I'd rather wait for reinforcements," Arthur said. "Tell him to give us an ETA, and we'll have a battle plan by then."

"Will do," Merlin said, clicking off.

Arthur took a steeling breath before he tapped his earwig again. E-channel was largely silent, except for random background chatter picked up from the microphones. Aware that Morgana was listening in -- and likely seething that Arthur had been ignoring her -- Arthur said, "No charging in on this one, gentlemen. Slow your speed and pull back. Watchtower, give us a sheltered location overlooking the best ingress point. Close, but not too close. We're going to move fast as soon as reinforcements arrive."

"Thank God," Morgana muttered, and she heaved a shaky sigh.

"On it," Elyan said. "I can give you options --"

"Watchtower," Arthur cut in, shaking his head. "All we've got are maps, and those only tell us so much. We don't have eyes on the ground. I'm relying on you to read me the situation and to give us the best place to set up position."

Elyan's thick swallow was audible. Then, without a trace of nervousness, he said, "Yes, sir."
"Heads, we find a place in one of these buildings to take footage from," Mickey said. He held up a coin. "Tails, we stay with the van."

Whenever Mickey and Julia couldn't meet eye to eye, they usually called in a third party to break the tie. Sometimes, it was Bertrise, though she was slightly rabid about getting the news story, even if it came at the cost of their health and longevity. Other times, it was a random bloke off the street who would do anything if it meant getting on camera for a couple of seconds. This time, Mickey and Julia didn't want to leave it to someone who wouldn't understand what was going on.

Hell, they weren't even sure they knew, themselves.

So, a coin toss it was.

Mickey couldn't forget the shaky note in Morgana's voice and feared the worst. He wanted to stay mobile. Julia, on the other hand, wanted to get closer, preferably on a rooftop somewhere. It had worked for them the last time.

"Okay," Julia said.

Mickey tossed the coin.

It went up, falling slowly, and didn't come down, simultaneously trembling like a leaf in a strong wind and vibrating like a plucked guitar string.

Mickey stared at it for a long time, paralyzed by the cold sensation running down his spine. He hoped the chill he felt had everything to do with stark terror, and wasn't because there was so much magic in the air, it was fucking with simple things like a bloody coin flip.

"Compromise," Julia said. "I'll mount some of the static cameras outside the van."

"Good idea," Mickey said. "I'll help."

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Elyan narrowed down their best options for an ingress point but couldn't pinpoint a good spot for the team to setup. Galahad was the first to call in with directions to a building that would suit their purposes.

Bedivere, Bohrs and Lamorak got rid of the vehicles. Two teams of two -- Will and Gwaine, Geraint and Galahad -- went out as close to the cemetery as they could to get the information on the site that Elyan couldn't provide. Pellinor and Gareth dragged in tables and chairs; Leon shook out his laminated map, while Perceval donated wax pencils to the cause.

Their temporary headquarters were in what seemed to be an abandoned garage. When they'd arrived, the radio was playing music, some of the equipment was still humming, and the car suspended on the lift was dripping oil. Several small metal objects -- steel washers, bolts, a slim Allen key -- floated in the air. The front door had been left open, the building was empty, and it was pretty clear that the workers had bugged out.

"Your Major is holding up his end," Elyan said. "I'm seeing several regiments mobilizing from the bases closest to the location. They're holding fast about three kilometres from the centre of activity. More reinforcements are coming from further out, but they're going to take longer to arrive."
"Copy," Arthur said. Leon drew small crosses on the map following Elyan's coordinates.

A three kilometre perimeter translated to a rough six kilometre diameter of uncontrolled area, the majority of which was populated by civilians.

"Evacuation?" Leon asked, because, of course, he was thinking the same thing.

Arthur shook his head. "It'll take too long and we'll run the risk of putting people in harm's way. We need the area clear for infantry."

"Can we hack the air raid sirens again?" Gareth asked.

Arthur looked up, frowning. He hadn't realized it, but he hadn't heard the sirens in a while. "What are you thinking?"

"My Gran used to live around these parts before Mum moved her to a home outside of the city. It's about half full of people who survived the Blitz. They'd recognize the signal, make sure everyone stays in their homes," Gareth said. "That should take care of a lot of it."

Arthur turned to Merlin, who pulled a rugged netbook out of his pack. "I'll check. Give me a few minutes."

"What about the others?" Perceval asked.

Arthur shook his head, gritting his teeth. They couldn't protect everyone and had to hope for the best.

"Radio," Lucan said. "Radio and telly. People have got to be glued to the news."

"I can do that," Mordred said. "The radio, at least."

"I'll take care of the news," Morgana said, breaking in on the conversation.

She sounded stronger, more herself, now. Arthur wasn't sure if she really had recovered from her vision or if she was bullying herself through everything with sheer determination, and he could tell from the deep pinch in Leon's brow that he was worried about the same thing.

"Good," Arthur said, nodding at Mordred. "Do that."

Mordred went over to Merlin, sharing a quiet word, before pulling a netbook out of his own pack.

Arthur turned to the map, evaluating their options. Taking the team and heading in directly had been vetoed by Morgana, and between the description from Elyan and confirmation of escalating magic from Merlin and Mordred, Arthur could agree that the odds of a successful frontal assault without adequate support would be very poor. He considered remobilizing the infantry for exactly that when Elyan shouted, "I'm blind!"

At the same time, Merlin and Mordred snapped up, bodies rigid, expressions pale.

"I've lost the satellite. Screen's whited out. All I saw was a bright light, and it went out. I'm trying other options now," Elyan said. After a pause and a low, growled owww, he muttered, "Gwen is trying other options now."

"Merlin?" Arthur asked, concerned.

"M fine," Merlin said thickly. He cleared his throat and nodded before glancing at Mordred.
"We're fine. That was just… a lot."

"Did they complete the ritual?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah," Merlin said, returning to his work.

Mordred needed another second to collect himself. Arthur watched them both for a moment more before turning to Leon and Perceval.

"Safe to say that twenty-thousand-odd elite warriors from history are now scratching their way out of the ground, if they're not already present in incorporeal form," Arthur said, remembering Gaius' description of the most probable outcome of releasing the souls contained in the staff. "By the time we arrive on the site with reinforcements, they'll be expecting us. A frontal assault is now out of the question, and we have to focus on containment."

"I concur," Leon murmured.

Perceval nodded and said, "Containment won't do much if they break through the line."

"No, it won't," Arthur said in agreement. "The Druids weren't sure what would happen. We have to expect the worse. The bodies animated by the Morrigan's spirit army might not die when we destroy the shell and might go on to possess other bodies. The corpses animated by the excess necromantic magic might not stop moving even if we chop them in half. Our best bet of stopping it is destroying the staff."

"Our only bet," Merlin muttered. He didn't look up from where he was working.

Arthur heaved a sigh and nodded.

"So, we split into teams," Leon asked, though it was more of a statement.

"Yes," Arthur said, looking at the map again. "Gwaine, position our shooters high, equip with as much ammunition as you can, split the special cartridges evenly. If any of you can get a clean shot on any of the sorcerers, I want you to take that shot. Don't wait for clearance. You have a go, but be damn sure of your kills."

Gwaine snorted, but he bowed his head, studying the map. Arthur could see his mind working out the best vantage points.

"Merlin, Mordred, you two are going in," Arthur said.

"We know," Mordred said quietly. He didn't look up from his work, either, but his fingers stopped typing, and Arthur could almost hear him swallow hard.

"You won't be alone. I'm going as well --"

"No," Merlin said firmly, looking up. "No. You're needed out here. Kilgarrah and Locher are going to get strung up, and you know it. You have the authorization codes to overrule MacNeil's command, and they're going to need you to intervene."

"He's right," Leon said. "I've been listening in on the comms. Kilgarrah's ignoring MacNeil, but it won't be long before MacNeil gets in touch with someone with enough rank who can order Kilgarrah to stand down. We might not even get the infantry in position before that happens. You'll have to radio in when they start turning back to make sure they get where they need to be."
"I'll give you the codes --"
"You're still needed on this side of the line to oversee the containment, and no one can do that when they're dodging magic and reanimated corpses," Perceval said. He held up his hands and said, "Maybe you can, but let's not test that."

"Lamorak will have my Box," Merlin said, jutting his chin in the man's direction.

Lamorak's eyes went wide, but whatever protest he was about to make died quickly, because he gave a determined nod.

Arthur grit his teeth. They were right. He could argue until he was blue in the face, he could even overrule them. But he couldn't, not in good conscience, make the decision to take himself out of the action just because, at heart, he wanted to make sure Merlin and Mordred were safe.

This was the part he hated the most. Having to send his men into a dangerous situation. It wasn't enough to be willing to go in himself. He had to let them go on his own and trust that they would come back, but it was difficult, so difficult when one of those men was Merlin.

"You're not going in alone."

"I'll do it," Kay said quickly.

Arthur stared at Kay, wanting to say no. Needing to say no. Lucan stepped forward. "Myself as well. Maybe between Kay and I, we'll make up one of you."

He couldn't shake the memory out of his head. The way Kay had flung himself on Merlin to protect him on the testing grounds in France. He knew, without a doubt, that Kay would do everything he could to protect Merlin and Mordred. Lucan would, too, though Arthur hated to place Lucan in a position where he'd have to put to use skills he'd long left behind him.

"You're both worth ten of me," Arthur said, accepting their volunteerism with a heavy feeling in his chest. "And you'd best make them feel it."

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"This is ridiculous," Julia said. "Stop. Stop. We're not going to get any footage from here. Park the van out of the way. I'll rig it to keep transmitting, and we'll find someplace high to see what's going on, all right?"

"I'm not going back there," Mickey said. His hands were still shaking. He glanced at Julia's hands, which were steady as rocks, but of course they would be. She could film during a bloody hurricane, barely able to keep her feet on the ground because the wind was blowing so hard, but her footage would be crisp, as if she'd put her camera on a tripod.

"I didn't mean going back there," Julia said, climbing in the back. "We're going to climb up. There's a few tall buildings in this area, maybe we can get someplace with a good bird's view. Pack those bags, grab all the batteries they've got. I'm grabbing the spare transmitter, in case something happens to the van."

Mickey exhaled heavily. Casting another long look up ahead, back the way they'd just come, he found his courage cowering deep down somewhere between his kidney and his colon. He set the parking brake, turned off the engine, and squeezed between the seats to get to the back of the van.
with a whole lot less grace than Julia had. He got to work without a word, following her directions, and when they left the van, loaded down with all the equipment that they could carry, it was with a terrible sense of uneasiness.

"This isn't a good idea."

"You have a better one?" Julia snapped. She held up her phone, using her thumb to move through the map until she found what she was looking for. "This way!"

"I'm trusting you with my life," Mickey said.

"Don't you always?" Julia said solemnly, raising an eyebrow at him. "Now move your arse, before I move it for you. I don't technically need a reporter, you know. I could grab somebody off the street. But for some reason people like your dumb face."

Julia led them two blocks closer to the area Mickey had dubbed in his head as the forbidden zone, changing direction until they were one block over. She paused, scanning the rooftops, and pointed at a particularly tall building. She changed her mind when they got there, pushing them even closer to the area they'd abandoned, and Mickey wondered how it was that she could ignore the icy trickle of warning: get the fuck out running down his spine.

The motion sensors at the entrance of a steel-and-glass building opened the front doors at their approach. Mickey made sure that the door shut behind him. He considered breaking the motion sensors and locking the doors, even dragging something in front of the entrance, but the entire first floor of the building was glass and there really wouldn't be any point.

He glanced around. There were a few potted plants. A couple of doors. A sign to the men's loo this way, the women's that way. A bank of four lifts were next to the front desk.

Julia was speaking to the pretty -- but severe -- receptionist. "What do you mean, no? This is --"

A security guard emerged from the back room. Mickey saw a bank of monitors, cameras positioned everywhere. Whoever owned this building took their security seriously, because the glimpse he'd caught reminded him of a science-fiction movie. Or something clean out of The Dark Knight. He couldn't decide.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the security guard said politely. "Is there a problem?"

"Of course there's a problem. I'm with the media," Julia said, flashing her identification badge, barely giving the man more than a cursory glimpse. They'd learned the hard way that the London Underground would never have the same reputation as the Beeb, CNN, or any other large media source, and it was usually better for them to skip over their actual affiliation. "I'm trying to get to the roof to get footage, but she's telling me that I can't access the roof."

"That's right, ma'am," the security guard said. "This is a restricted access building. Unless you have permission from the owners --?"

Mickey's phone rang. Unknown caller was enough to make him accept the call, hoping beyond hope that he'd reconnected to Morgana. "Hello?"

"Where are you? I don't see you on the satellite," Morgana said.

"We dumped the van. We're actually back in the zone, but in a high-rise building. Jules is trying to get us to the roof, but we're not having any luck," Mickey said.
"Which building?" Morgana asked.

"I don't know!" Mickey said, his voice bordering on the hysterics. He moved away from the front desk, feeling the curious stares of the receptionist and the security guard. He couldn't remember the street signs when they'd come this way. He looked for some sort of placard, because these sorts of buildings were obnoxious when it came to advertising. "Some mouse trap of a building with glass walls. The sort of place that's the last bloody place in the world anyone with half a brain would be when bullets start flying. They don't even have a name on the walls, just this logo of a, I don't know. I guess it's a dragon?"

"Oh, I know where you are." Morgana snorted. "You're actually in one of the safest buildings in the city. Don't move."

She hung up on him. Mickey stared at his phone in consternation.

Not ten seconds later, the phone at the receptionist desk rang. The receptionist picked up and in a smooth, velvety voice, said, "Good afternoon, you have reached Pendragon --"

She trailed off, her expression changing. She glanced at Julia and at Mickey. Mickey approached the desk, clutching his phone close to his chest, and watched as she passed the phone to the security guard. The man's placid, unruffled demeanour shifted, and Mickey could swear that he was snapping to attention. "Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am. Are you sure, ma'am? No, ma'am, I'll take them up myself."

Mickey exchanged glances with Julia.

The security guard returned the phone to the receptionist and took a ring of keys from his belt. He gestured at Julia and Mickey. "Please follow me."

The receptionist got out of her seat and walked to the front doors. Mickey watched her input a code and heard the click of locks falling into place.

The security guard led the way to the elevators. He pushed the button; the doors slid open. Julia stepped inside, Mickey followed after, and the security guard came along with them, using his key to override the controls and to direct them to the top floor.

"What the Hell just happened?" Julia asked, elbowing him.

Mickey shook his head. He stared at the sandblasted logo on the inside of the lift doors.

It was a dragon. Like the one he'd seen in the lobby. Rearing back on its hind legs, wings up, claws in the air, mouth ajar, a lick of tongue or flame dancing around its mouth.

Pendragon, the receptionist had said. This was the Pendragon building. As in Pendragon Consulting, one of the most avant-garde weapon manufacturers in the world, among the richest companies in England, and…

Mickey blinked when his brain made the connection.

Morgana.

Morgana Pendragon.

"Mickey?" Julia asked, nudging him when the lift came to a stop and the security guard climbed out, heading down the corridor as he flipped through the keys in his hand.
"Ah, nothing," Mickey said, letting Julia pull him out. "I just... I feel like we're in *Resident Evil*, that's all."

"Tell me about it," Julia said, flashing him a grin. Her smile faded and she blinked owlish eyes. "Oh, man. I sure hope there's going to be zombies."

Mickey tried to laugh, but it came out hoarse.

"Still don't have a clear view of the Islington Cemetery. It's all washed out. Every CCTV that might be trained on that area is full of white snow. Don't know if it's because they've been physically damaged or otherwise compromised," Elyan said.

"What's the status on the infantry?" Leon asked.

"Advance movement slowed down and holding," Elyan said. "You were right. I'm intercepting messages that someone's gone over Major Kilgarrah's head and are ordering the troops back to base."

"What's the chatter like now?" Leon asked.

"Confusion, mostly. If someone's going to step in, they should do, and soon," Elyan said.

Arthur tapped his earwig, turning it off. Leon and Elyan both probably believed they were being subtle, but they weren't. Arthur knew what he needed to be doing now if they were going to have a chance to hold the undead army back and protect the city. All he wanted were a few more minutes of peace and quiet with Merlin.

He closed his eyes when he felt Merlin's lips on his forehead. He tightened his grip around Merlin, trying to ignore all the equipment in the way. Merlin's arms were around him, too, holding just as tightly.

Neither of them spoke.

On the other side of the office door, Arthur could hear the others moving around. Perceval and Gareth were already gone. Gwaine, Will, Galahad and Geraint had radioed in to confirm their positions. Pellinor and Bohrs were on their way to their next location. Lance and Bedivere would be heading up the infantry at the easternmost end of the cemetery. Leon was waiting for Owain to finish rigging up the car they'd found in the lot, missing a starter, and they would be off, too. Lamorak had been fussing over Merlin's equipment, familiarizing himself with it, even though it wasn't the first time he'd worked as Merlin's backup.

"We have to get going," Merlin said, sounding subdued.

Arthur raised his head and kissed Merlin. He'd meant it to be hard and fast, a quick break like usual, but instead, the contact lingered, passion soothing into gentleness, leaving them breathless and panting. He leaned against Merlin, soaking up the contact, committing it to memory in case... Just in case.
"You come back in one piece," Arthur said, taking a step back.

"Same goes for you," Merlin said, raising an eyebrow. "Don't take any foolish risks. Don't come running after us. Do what you have to do to get the situation under control. We'll be fine. We have a plan."

"Merlin --"

"Arthur," Merlin said firmly. "We have a plan. Say it with me. We have a plan."

Arthur sighed. "We have a plan," he repeated.

"And that plan is, we get out of this, we get married, and you take me to wherever it is we're going on honeymoon," Merlin said. He frowned. "Where was that again?"

Arthur huffed a laugh. "Cheeky."

"I had to try," Merlin said, his grin lopsided. His smile faded. His fingers rubbed along Arthur's jaw. "You need a shave."

"So do you," Arthur said. His eyes trailed to Merlin's mouth and he let himself have one more kiss. "I love you."

"With everything," Merlin said, the words a promise. He looked away. "I've got to go. Captain Prat has us on a schedule. He gets cranky if we're a few seconds late. He tacks on extra hours of PT for every minute we're late. It's brutal."

"That pillock. I should have a few words with him," Arthur said.

Arthur nodded and stepped aside, letting Merlin go. Merlin paused at the door, pulling his scarf over his face, glancing over his shoulder at Arthur one more time before replacing his glasses.

Arthur stayed in the office for a few minutes more, waiting until he heard Merlin lead his team out of the garage. His scarf and glasses in place, he nodded at Leon and Owain before signalling to Lamorak to follow him.

He tapped his earwig. "All right, gentlemen. We are now strict mission protocol. Code names only. Chatter to a minimum. Radio silence over general channels. Good luck, and Godspeed."

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"I wonder what's going on out there," Mickey said, using the binoculars Julia had somehow managed to pack to look at the evil grey-green glow coming from the centre of Islington Cemetery.

"I wonder what's going on out there," Julia said.

Mickey turned around, nearly knocking into Julia with the binoculars and smacking himself in the jaw with them instead. He squinted but couldn't make out much more than a brighter-than-normal city glow a few blocks away. He raised the binoculars, but they weren't night-vision capable, and at the most, he could make out heavy-duty spotlights and increased activity.
They hadn't seen traffic come in or out of the area since the sun went down, but that was mostly due to the roadblocks that the army had put up. The security guard had been kind enough to give them a radio -- the fancy kind that Mickey had promptly called *dibs* on, beating Julia -- that was tuned in on the military channel. The only information they'd gotten from the latest notifications were *military exercises in this area, stay out, stay inside*, as if that weren't already obvious by the air raid sirens blipping the familiar duo-tone klaxon every ten minutes.

No one had been able to turn that off.

Mickey craned his neck to look over Julia's shoulder. Her camera had night vision. He caught a glimpse of military uniforms, of vehicles moving about, of a masked man standing toe-to-toe with someone with identifying brass bars on his shoulders. The uniform was agitated, shouting in the face of the masked man; by contrast, the masked man seemed to be completely unruffled, more concerned with his watch than anything else.

"Is that one of them?" Mickey asked.

"Oh, go away," Julia said, smacking his face with a hand. "You're fogging up the screen."

Mickey sat back with a grunt.

In some parts of the world, London's current cold temperatures would be celebrated as a *warm snap*, with Spring right around the corner. In London proper, the thermometer was a frustrating reminder of the cold, slushy weather that sank into the bones.

Mickey dressed for the weather. He'd been caught out in the field one too many times not to learn that being too warm was better than being too cold. But right now, he wasn't moving, and there was no body heat to keep the chill away, so he put the binoculars on the ledge and did a few jumping jacks to get the blood moving.

"Has there been anything from Bertrise?" Mickey asked.

Julia huffed. "You've been with me on the roof for the last couple of hours. Have I, at any time, answered my fucking mobile?"

She hadn't, actually.

"I don't know, you're sneaky that way," Mickey said instead.

They both startled when the door to the roof cracked open, but it was just the security guard again -- a nice bloke named Zachary Johnson who was a single father while his wife was on active deployment, who had made certain his kids were safe with their grandparents out in the country before coming back to town. They captured a brief interview with him, some filler for later, if it ever came up, though he'd never really answered the question why he'd decided to come back instead of staying where it was safe.

Well, relatively safer, actually.

Zack's flashlight was pointed down, illuminating the rooftop gravel. He came over with a tray of steaming hot coffee.

"I love you forever," Mickey blurted out.

Zack's expression turned embarrassed, and he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to have to let you down, but I'm married."
"Why are all the good ones taken?" Mickey complained. He took the second mug and offered it to Julia, who made a disturbing, if completely orgasmic, sound when she took her first sip. Mickey met Zack's eyes and they both took a step back.

Mickey half-expected the security guard to head back but instead, he lit up a cigarette, offering one to Mickey. "No, thanks. Hey, you might be able to answer this -- do you know what's going on out there?"

Mickey gestured toward the military line several blocks away, nearly knocking the binoculars off the ledge. He caught them at the last second, clutching both the binoculars and his coffee to his chest.

"Here, take a look," Mickey said.

Zack made sure to stay out of the camera's viewer when he approached the far ledge for a better look, bringing the binoculars to his face. After a second, he grunted, putting them down. "I've got some night vision goggles in my office, I'll bring them up next time."

"You're a rock star if you do, mate," Mickey said. "In the meantime, though. Any idea why they're just standing there?"

"Yeah," Zack said, sounding grim. "It's a containment line."
"Oh," Mickey said. "That sounds bad. Is that bad?"

"Only if you're on the wrong side of it," Zach said. "And we're on the wrong side."

Mickey felt sick. Julia made a gleeful sound and said something about getting good footage.

"Look, the boss said to make sure you're comfortable. There's bunks and a canteen downstairs. Tea's watered down, coffee's from the vice president's private stash -- mum's the word, by the way -- and the beds are at least more comfortable than the floor."

Mickey watched Zach head for the stairs and bit down his question.

Who's the vice president, again?

---

"Any problems?" Arthur asked.

"Waiting on you," Leon said mildly.

Arthur could make out the commanding officer's haranguing. Who do you think you are? and Any schmuck in army surplus and a red scarf were common refrains in the background.

"If you'd hurry up a bit? This bloke is a bit wearing on the nerves," Pellinor said.

"I don't understand the problem," Perceval said. "It's all quiet here. It's like they're intimidated by my size or something."

"Shut it. Smug doesn't look good on you," Bedivere said.
Arthur could make out someone shouting on Bedivere's end, but it was more likely that Lance was dealing with it and trying to defuse the situation before it got worse.

"Won't be long," Arthur walked up to Kilgarrah.

Somehow, the Major had managed to circumvent the temporary hold on the troop advance and had positioned them at the perimeter that Arthur had radioed in, which meant that Arthur hadn't needed to pull his emergency card, not yet. He was going to have to do so now, if he hoped to hold the army together when the attack came.

And it would come.

Merlin's team had gone radio silent for their approach, and thus far, all was silent. They would manage to issue a warning, at the very least, when things went south. If they were overrun, Gwaine's team, scattered at overwatch positions on compass points around the Islington Cemetery, would raise the alarm.

Kilgarrah turned at Arthur's approach and gave him a curt nod. "Your boys getting trouble?"

"Not for much longer," Arthur said.

The commanding officer with Kilgarrah was a burly man with a barrel chest and an outdated buzz cut that had never gotten the opportunity to grow out since his basic training. He gave Arthur a curious look but otherwise said nothing. Arthur turned to him and saluted.

The commander returned the salute after a moment of hesitation. Superior officers didn't salute their juniors, but without any physical indication of Arthur's rank and position, there was always some question and confusion. Particularly now. The salute turned into a handshake and the officer said, "Colonel Iain McMaster."

Arthur returned the handshake, but all he said by way of introduction was, "Sir."

"I take it I'm now reporting to you?" McMaster asked, his tone dubious.

"With your permission," Arthur said.

"I have a feeling that my permission isn't required," McMaster said, somewhat sourly. "Major Kilgarrah assures me that I'll be grateful to hand over the reins, but I don't know you. We've fought hordes of sorcerers keeping the city under control and gotten out of it all right. Is this really going to be that bad?"

"Worse," Arthur promised.

"Ah," McMaster said. He didn't look as if he believed Arthur, however. "Well, I'm sure I can handle whatever it is."

"I'm sure you can, too," Arthur said. "But I'm the one with the battle plans."

Arthur turned to Lamorak, who held up a finger, keyed the small computer strapped to his wrist, and nodded. Arthur tapped his ear, connecting to the unit's radio.

"Attention all section leads. Acknowledge command transfer to Red Team leaders."

He waited a heartbeat. The protests came in immediately, one after the other, mostly demanding names, credentials, and authorization codes.
"Central command at FOB is no longer in charge. The War Room CIC authorization has been superseded by Her Royal Majesty's order. Verify and confirm transfer of command."

If any of the commanders dragged their feet in confirming the authorization code, there would be a problem, Arthur knew. He was also fairly certain that the problem would disappear as soon as the enemy combatants arrived. There was only so much that even the bravest man could do given the threat about to come their way.

On the other hand, if the commanders did drag their feet getting that confirmation, the Red Team would have absolutely nothing standing in their way when they executed their orders.

There was an alerting ping ping ping. Arthur switched to the direct channel to Merlin. "Red-One, acknowledge."

"Hellburner-One," Merlin said, his voice a quiet whisper. "First wave is approaching containment line. At current rate of speed, ETA within twenty minutes. Over."

"Acknowledge," Arthur said. He waited for Merlin to cut the transmission on his end before opening a connection to his team through E-channel. "Be advised, ETA twenty minutes. Overwatch, begin the countdown."

"Confirm and acknowledge," Gwaine said. "Twenty minutes countdown on the north end."

"Red-Four acknowledge," Lance said. A moment later, Leon echoed the confirmation as Red-Two.

"Confirm and acknowledge eastbound approach," Galahad said. "Twenty minutes mark."

"Red-Five acknowledge," Pellinor said.

"Confirm and acknowledge westbound approach," Geraint said. "Twenty minutes as of… now."

"Red-Three Acknowledge," Perceval said.

"Adjust ETA, southbound," Will said. "Splitting off into three groups. Twenty-two and twenty-three minutes for grid two and six. Grid one ETA sixteen minutes. You've got uglies moving fast."

"Red-One acknowledge," Arthur said, turning to Kilgarrah and McMaster. He looked directly at McMaster. "Do you confirm transfer of command?"

The faintest pinch of a frown in McMaster's brow betrayed his curiosity. He'd obviously overheard Arthur's side of the conversation but had no idea what was going on. After a quick glance at Major Kilgarrah, whose expression was flat and stony, giving nothing away, McMaster gave Arthur a curt nod and keyed in his own radio.

"Command transferred to Red-One leader," McMaster said. "All squads acknowledge."

"Overwatch-Two, give me eyes," Arthur said, switching to his direct line to Will.

"Red-One, you've got a couple of heavies leading the charge, direct southbound, right into your lap. They've got momentum and lances to crash through your line with a small horde of ankle-biter on their heels. Grid two has no heavies, but there's a big guy at the lead of a couple hundred quick-movers. Grid six is two dozen bodies moving fast and staying to the shadows," Will said. After a belated moment, he added, "Sorry. Acknowledge."

"Acknowledged," Arthur said. He gestured at Major Kilgarrah. "Bring one of those lorries up,
move it lengthwise across the road. Move this section back, have them flank the walls. Have the westbound line brace for incoming, two hundred heads. Notify eastbound to watch for a guerrilla attack, two dozen or so."

"Tell them yourself," Kilgarrah grumbled, heading to direct one of the heavier transports where Arthur indicated.

Arthur rolled his eyes and was about to do that when he heard Lamorak relaying his orders to the men. He gave Lamorak an acknowledging nod and moved to the front, gesturing for McMaster to come with him.

"The first wave is going to hit hard. We let them through, block them with the truck, take them down. Have grenades ready. The second wave is going to be a few seconds behind them. We'll close ranks behind their first wave, pin the rest at the mouth," Arthur said.

"All right. What are we facing?" McMaster asked.

Arthur hesitated. He honestly had no idea how to describe them. With a mental shrug, he said, "Uglies and ankle biters."

Mickey muffled Julia's shriek several seconds too late. Luckily, they were both too high up to be heard. Julia's shout of surprise was mangled by the wind and distance and the loud rumble down below.

He looked at the camera screen.

"Fucking Christ!" he exclaimed.

Julia elbowed him hard, because his outburst had been far, far louder than hers. They exchanged wide-eyed glances and stared at the camera screen for several seconds, but luckily, there had been no harm done. Their presence hadn't been noticed.

"What are those things?" Julia whispered, even though there was no way that they could have heard her from down below.

Mickey shook his head, because he didn't know. He had no idea how to even begin to explain what he was seeing. The figures that had come on the camera were a variety of sizes and shapes, but mostly, they were humanoid. "Can you rewind that?"

"Better," Julia said, taking out one of the tablets in her bag. She accessed the transmission feed and drew her finger along the stream, rewinding in jerky movements, and shoved it into Mickey's hands. She huddled close to him, studying the image over her shoulder, her body shivering.

Mickey wasn't sure if she was cold or if those shivers were from fear. He opted for the only gentlemanly approach he knew worked with Julia, and that was to keep his damn mouth shut until she stopped being stubborn and told him how she was feeling.

Looking at the freeze-frame, Mickey wasn't so sure Julia was affected by the cold, or that the trembling against his body were entirely hers.
The video was from one of the fixed cameras on the van. They hadn't been thinking when they'd parked at the kerb, but they'd lucked out. A streetlight was far enough from the camera that it didn't cause a glare on the windshield, but close enough that the lack of nightvision didn't matter.

A shadow, deep and menacing, swarmed the far end of the street, just barely visible in the frame. Mickey played the video at half speed.

The shadow was a mob of people. Men and women. Tall and short, dressed in their Sunday best, but there was something off about them that Mickey couldn't place until the video advanced several seconds more.

The crowd moved at a limping shamble and even at half the actual speed, they approached the van at a fairly fast clip. The video was clear enough to tell that their clothing was filthy, as if they'd rolled around in the mud. Suits were torn and stained; beautiful dresses were muddied and ill-fitting. Many of them were missing both shoes, or only one, which explained the staggered hop-stride.

"Oh my God," Julia whispered. Mickey barely heard her.

The crowd was armed. With swords and shields, with lances, with axes. Some hefted hammers larger than any sledgehammer Mickey had ever seen, carrying them as if they weighed nothing at all.

They were close enough to jostle the van as they passed by. Mickey slowed the playback even more.

Sallow colouring. Sunken cheeks. Hollow eyes.


Stretched flesh. Torn muscle. Bone.

Bone.

Mickey covered his mouth in growing horror. The nightmares of his childhood had come to life. Forget 28 Days Later. Never mind Return of the Living Dead. Shaun of the Dead was a goddamn parody compared to the real thing.

The movies had it wrong. So fucking wrong. Mindless mobility. Inexplicable hunger for an organ that was considered a delicacy in only a few places in the world. Herd mentality. Listlessness replaced by a predator's drive only when suitable prey was in sight.

Zombies was too weak to explain what they were seeing. The dead had risen. They advanced with the single-mindedness of an army bearing down on their enemy.

"Jesus," Julia said. "Jesus."

Mickey didn't know how long they stared at the video feed of an empty street. The crowd had come and gone, leaving nothing in their wake.

Julia jostled him a few times. She grabbed his jacket sleeve and pulled, shaking him with increasing violence. "Mickey. Mickey! Snap out of it. You've got to say something. We've got to get this on air."

Mickey was still in a daze when Julia turned the camera on him. He barely blinked when she
positioned the few lights they'd borrowed from Zack and pointed them in his face. He nodded dully when Julia confirmed that Bertrise was waiting for his commentary.

He didn't know what to fucking say. All he could think of was, *How was the Red Team going to deal with an army of the undead?*

A hysterical giggle escaped his throat. Just one. He ignored the memory flashes of all those fantasy video games with cheap skeleton graphics that he used to play as a kid.

"Come on, Mickey. We're on the air. No one wants to watch your internal freak out," Julia said.

She kicked him in the shin.

Mickey winced and looked at her. At the camera with the glowing red light signalling a recording session. "I don't have a fucking clue what to say."

Julia heaved an annoyed sigh. "Okay. That's a good start. Anything else?"

Mickey stared at the camera. At the lens. *Through* the lens. At all the people he hoped were listening, and, for once, he hoped they were listening not for the sake of their webcast's ratings, but for their own safety. He wanted them to know -- no. He wanted them to understand how bad things were right now.

"We're at war," he said, and his voice was haunted to his own ears. He paused and stared at his hands before finally finding the words. He looked resolutely at the camera again. "I mean, we thought we were at war before. When magic became a thing that wasn't generated by CGI and fancy camera work. When the power went out and half the city decided to go all Mad Max on everyone else. There are people out there who know what it's like to be at war. For most of us, it's something happening far away. For others, it's memories of the Blitz and the bombings and all the bad shite that came during.

"But we're at war. At *war*, in the real sense of the word. In a fight for fucking survival."

Mickey swallowed hard. His eyes drifted off-camera and he looked at Julia, who stared back, pale and shell-shocked, her hands as steady as always.

"It's happening now."

A loud, rocking explosion erupted behind him, lighting up the sky in white and red and *bright*. Mickey whirled around in time to see the flames get swallowed up behind black smoke, unfurling like a living thing before it faded into the background of nightfall and clouds. A constant stream of gunfire increased in volume until it was all that Mickey could hear anymore.

Julia went to check the other camera, making sure it was pointed down the street at the sliver of space between buildings where the army had set out a containment line.

Mickey looked at the camera. "I'd make a joke about there being enough racket to wake the dead, except some fucking twisted pillock already did that. There's a horde of enemy combatants attacking this part of the city, trying to break through a containment *zone*. They're not people. Not anymore. I swear to God and my mother, I'm not on drugs, and I stopped playing *Dungeons and Dragons* a long, long time ago.

"Someone has raised the dead. This isn't a joke. *Someone has raised the goddamn dead*. They're running through the streets right now like crazed berserkers. These aren't your typical *Warm Bodies* cute zombies. They'll kill you. So don't get any crazy ideas about getting a chainsaw out of
the shed and running for the countryside. Stay where you are. Stay safe. Let the Red Team take care of it."

"Look!" Julia shouted. Mickey turned around.

At the other end of the street was a second wave, and they were moving fast.

"Oh my God."

There were two of them, and it was two too many, in Arthur’s opinion. The undead's charge was being led by creatures that were easily the size of a small lorry, with cloven hooves, a multitude of horns, and teeth that better belonged in the jaws of a shark. Arthur didn't know what to call them, but the name Elyan gave them was just as good as any.

Heavies.

Arthur wasn't sure what those two large heavies were, but they definitely weren't human and had never been. They stormed through the open road and straight into the lorry, never deviating from their course, not once. The two heavies hadn’t been neck-and-neck, and had struck the lorry in a two-punch strike. The first impact had been tremendous, forcing the oversized, steel-reinforced vehicle off its two side tyres while simultaneously destroying whatever the first heavy had been.

The second impact occurred just as the lorry was flipping over, and like the first, the heavy shattered on impact. The force must have penetrated the gas tank, because the truck, the fuel, and everything inside exploded in a ball of flames and smoke.

Brute force alone wouldn't have caused the explosion. A big enough spark, a small enough trickle of diesel --

They were fortunate that no one had been close enough to the lorry to be knocked off their feet or injured. No one except Major Kilgarrah. Arthur scanned the crowd and spotted Kilgarrah getting to his feet, a sour look on his face, a hand brushing off a lick of flame from his shoulder as if it were a speck of dirt.

 Fucking dragons.

Arthur didn't have time to think about the crash and what those two heavies had been. He didn't wait to see if something would emerge from the debris and the fire and the smoke. He left that to Major Kilgarrah and joined the other soldiers flanking both sides of the crossroad, hemming in the new arrivals.

"Fire!"

The first line fell under a barrage of gunfire. The one behind it stepped over fallen bodies and continued on. They fell, too, bodies jerking violently as each bullet hit. Several members of the third line grabbed hold of the bodies in front of them, using them as shields as they pushed forward.

Arthur reloaded. He continued firing.
The enemy kept moving, though they were slowed down by the bodies in front of them and the incessant barrage. It was steady fire that they couldn't maintain, not without changing lines or running out of ammunition. Arthur was going to have to step out soon --

The bodies on the ground began to move, crawling forward.

"They're still moving!" Arthur heard.

"Fucking zombies! Head shots! Head shots!" someone else shouted.

A few heads whipped back as several soldiers adjusted their aims. One crumpled but the other continued on. The body that had fallen caught itself, shook its head as if dazed, and continued the slow advance.

The possessed that were closest to the flanking soldiers raised weapons and attacked. Semiautomatic rifles set in burst mode did little to bodies that seemed impervious to a true death. Swords and spears cut through Kevlar armour like butter.

Arthur dropped his rifle and palmed his handgun. The bullets were charmed, but he didn't have enough. The special ammunition had been split evenly among all of Excalibur's members, and he didn't want to waste them if he absolutely didn't need to.

His hand moved to his knife belt. "Fix bayonets!"

The order was too late. He cursed as several more soldiers fell. Arthur moved forward, away from the line. His approach attracted the attention of the possessed corpses in the lead. The two bodies came at him without hesitation.

Arthur caught a short sword swinging down with the broadside of his rifle, shoving hard to deflect the blow. He ducked beneath the swipe from the second corpse, catching him from behind with the business end of his knife.

The body groaned. It was a muffled death cry, somehow it magnified, echoing across the road.

Everything froze in a moment of silence.

The body heaved a laugh. Its shoulders slackened.

Arthur stared down at the body at his feet for what felt like an eternity.

"Gods," the Knight to his left said. "They keep coming."

"They won't fucking die," a Bowman at his right said. At the Knight's cough, the Bowman looked over, saw Arthur, and paled. "My liege. My apologies --"

The King waved the Bowman's words away. He had no time for pretty words, not in dire times like these. He would be a hypocrite if he did. His love told him many, many times that he shouldn't chide the mouth on a common man or a soldier, not when Royal lips were the foulest ones of all.

"They remain?" the King asked.

"They live, they die, they... they come back," the Knight said. "The walls hold them for now. It becomes harder to keep their attention while keeping them away. We will run out of arrows, and they know it."

"They've been drawing our fire for days, now," the Bowman said hesitantly. He withered a little to
have the King's gaze on him but continued on, "We've been seeing a pattern. They drag the bodies out of our range and send them out at us again. Two turns of the hourglass and they come again."

The King began to speak, only to press his lips together.

The situation was untenable. The attack came before the harvest and their winter stores were too low and decreasing the longer the siege stretched out. As long as the villagers were sheltered behind the castle walls, the wealth of the earth would rot. The walls would hold fast -- the Consort had ensorcelled them, binding them to powers outside of the King's ken -- but they would not hold out the winter, not against an enemy that needed no food nor sleep, and waited only for a show of weakness.

The King considered allowing the undead horde to approach, luring them close enough to drop stone and flame. Experience had shown this to be a fruitless endeavour, for ruined husks could be replaced. No, they had to keep on. They had to hold out. The Consort and his First Knight were out in the field, having escaped the castle grounds unseen, the two of them determined to bring an end to this blight, risking their lives over the King's objections.

All to destroy a piece of wood with a glowing blue stone.

"Your Majesty?" the Knight asked. Sensing that the King hadn't heard him the first time, the Knight repeated, "What shall we do?"

"We wait. We hold fast," the King said. At the sight of the Knight's valiant attempt to hide the sag of his shoulders and the defeat creeping into his eyes, the King considered offering a word to bolster the man's courage, but all his words failed him. Instead, he clasped the man's shoulder and gave him a reassuring nod before returning inside.

He had barely headed down the corridors, heading toward the Libraries that were still only partially restored of their wealth of knowledge after the Purge that had followed the years of his birth, when he was accosted by the very man he had sought out.

"Your Majesty. Your Majesty!" The hollow under the Physician's eyes betrayed the hours spent at study and at search, trying to find the answers they needed to hold the line until the Consort and his First Knight succeeded in their task. His fine robes were wrinkled and unkempt, his white-blond hair knotted and askew. But his eyes were bright with a spark of hope that the King hadn't seen in days, and he clutched a book as if it were a lifeline most had already thought long lost.

"Have you found something?" the King asked.

"I have, I have, indeed. A pledge to the Old Religion, an oath to the Raven Queen. Here, here!" The Physician hustled into a nearby room, laying the book down upon the nearest table, drawing the curtains wide for better light. He turned the pages carefully, one after the other; the King found his patience sorely tried until the Physician announced, "This passage, your Majesty. Some of these words are repeated elsewhere, in books and scrolls older than I am. This is the first that I have seen in days, and he clutched a book as if it were a lifeline most had already thought long lost."

"Have you found something?" the King asked.

"I have, I have, indeed. A pledge to the Old Religion, an oath to the Raven Queen. Here, here!" The Physician traced a careful drawing taking up the full length of a page. A man on his knees, holding up a sword in offering to a tall, shadowed figure with a feminine shape, cloaked in shadows and black feathers. She grasped the sword in her palm, and blood trickled along the edge of the blade -- her own, perhaps, or the man's latest victim. The background was a battlefield of hundreds and thousands slain, the sky dark with ravens the last flutter of fallen standards.

The King turned to the text, skimming to the text the Physician pointed out. He read it slowly,
Bold and brave the Warrior slain,
He who catches Her eye,
To Live reborn as He has Died,
In blood and battlefield.
An Oath She takes, old Oaths forsworn,
When She calls to fight once more,
Bold and brave the Warrior slain
Shall die by Blade again."

"They can die, your Majesty," the Physician said, earnestness and regret colouring his tone. "But it must be on the battlefield."

The King nodded, refusing to let hope take root, but unwilling to cast aside the merest chance to turn the tide. "Then, we shall meet them on the battlefield."

Arthur blinked --

A flash of light in the corner of his eye was the reflection of a spotlight on the dull steel of a sword swinging for his head. He stumbled backward, tripping over a body on the ground, but the attacker kept on coming --

Badly-cut suit just the wrong side of navy blue. Quirky Doctor Who tie swinging wildly against a striped shirt that had been mostly white, once. Long, shaggy blond hair mud-plastered around a slightly-concave skull. A face that might have been young, once, except for decomposition and decay.

Teeth bared in a vicious grimace. Glazed eyes shining bright with an otherworldly light. Sword raised for a strike that Arthur couldn't block without dropping his knife.

His attacker froze in mid-strike, expression twisted into a grunt of surprise. The corpse reached to touch its chest, thin fingers wrapping around a bayonet.

The body fell, the light gone out of its eyes. Lamorak was nearly pitched forward, but he caught himself and pulled his rifle back, bayonet and all.

In that moment, Arthur saw the infantry's helpless retreat against an oncoming, never-ending horde. The warriors unleashed by the Morrigan's staff had inferior weaponry, but they had the psychological advantage. They couldn't die. They were fearsome to look at. From the first few shots, it was clear that the British Army would lose the battle.

Arthur refused. He did not lose. He cast his rifle aside. He took the sword out of the hand of the lifeless boy who had liked Doctor Who and was fated to eternity in a bad dress suit.

"On me! To arms!" Arthur shouted, barely conscious of the battle cry on his lips. He swung the sword in an arc and surged forward.

The roar of first contact had been met with tumultuous courage escalating into terrific reprisals, only to fade into nothingness.
Mickey had never thought that he'd be comforted by the sound of gunfire. Nearly fifteen minutes had passed since he'd heard one, and he had needed to strain to hear it.

A soft hiccup of fear startled him out of his daze. "Mickey?"

He turned and saw the watery gleam in Julia's eyes.

"Are we going to die?"

A lump formed in his throat. He swallowed hard, but he couldn't speak. Hell, he didn't even know what to say to that. Instead, he grabbed Julia's hand, ignoring her squawk of, "The camera's still filming!" and pulled her into his arms. He'd meant to comfort her, but he needed that comfort too.

"I don't know," he said finally. His eyes burned.

Only part of the second wave had reached the first; the remainder had vanished, disappearing in the maze of streets and alleys, vanishing from sight. Mickey dreaded the battles that had yet to come, and wondered how long the Pendragon stores would hold out.

Mickey held Julia tight. She wasn't a touchy-feely person unless violence was involved, and this was one of the few opportunities that he'd had to offer comfort. It was one of the few opportunities that he had to tell her --

"Mickey," Julia said, pulling away. "Mickey!"

The joyful exultation in her voice was a whiplash given the absolute despair mere moments ago. Mickey didn't understand why she was jumping up and down. He didn't understand why she was pulling on his arm and pointing excitedly at something off the roof. It didn't clue in that he should turn around and look, because he was so worried that Julia had gone nutters that --

"Oh my God. Look!" she said, dragging him to the edge. She promptly abandoned him there, running over to the equipment to retrieve one of the cameras.

Mickey turned and looked.

He wasn't sure what he was seeing. Not at first. The enemy -- the zombies, ghouls, revenants, whatever they were -- had been at a standstill, their advance bottlenecked by the containment line. For a while, the enemy had pushed forward, advancing slowly but steadily, a sure sign that they were breaking through the army's defences that was only confirmed when the first press had come to a full stop.

Mickey blinked, making sure it wasn't a hallucination. It wasn't. The enemy was moving.

In retreat.

There was confusion, movement, uncertainty. The enemy lingered, bobbing in place, trying to see over the heads of their compatriots. They weren't running away. The retreat was a slow shuffle as the front of the line --

Julia shoved a tablet in his hands and adjusted the camera position. The video feed wobbled all over the place nauseatingly, like a roller coaster ride while high on mushrooms, zooming in and out on full magnification before sweeping along shadows and shapes uselessly.

The swords and spears and war hammers that they'd seen in the first rush in the earlier footage from the van made sense, suddenly, because the zombies were using them. At first, Mickey
believed the medieval tools made for an unfair fight against modern weaponry, but he'd been wrong. It had seemed that they had broken the army's line, that bullets could do nothing against the zombies.

Someone must have figured that out, because despite any magical advantage they might have had, the zombies were being pushed back.

As soon as the video steadied, Mickey decided that carrying all those goddamn spare lenses had been worth it. The framed shot of the street one block over was as crisp as if they were within fifteen feet.

And square in the center of the screen were two men in full combat gear, their faces masked with glasses and scarves, cutting through the zombies as if the zombies weren't there.

Those weren't guns in their hands. One man had a sword and a Ka-bar knife, the other hefted an axe easily in both hands. They moved with a fluidity that spoke of long training and familiarity, not just with the weapons, but with each other.

A zombie moved in to strike the man with the sword. The soldier ducked beneath the sweep while moving forward, driving his weapon into the zombie's guts. He twisted on his heel, driving the knife down into the base of the zombie's neck and pulled his sword free, already turning to the next enemy. The other soldier swung his axe in a wide arc, striding in easily to close the distance, slashing in a cross motion that nearly decapitated his opponent.

Behind them followed the Infantry, armed with bayonets on their rifles and a mismatched array of whatever fallen weapons they were able to get their hands on.

"Are you seeing this?" Mickey asked. He looked up -- not at Julia, but at the camera that was pointed at him for commentary.

He let out a breathy giggle, feeling drunk and giddy as fuck, because down there, down below, those were his Dungeons and Dragons fantasies come to life. He must have said as much, because Julia snorted a laugh.

"And that's the Red Team leading the fight," Mickey said. "Our Red Team. I knew they were badass, but this is like… a completely different scale of badass. I'm sorry, I'm at a loss for words. This is just fucking beautiful to watch. Jules. Jules. We got to get down there."

"Already ahead of you," Julia said, hefting the camera to her shoulder.

"Oh, bugger all," Gwaine said over the radio. "Fine, fine. Okay. Overwatch, you've figured out by now that regular ammunition does absolutely bollocks. The walking dead just shrug it off. But the special ammunition? That'll do them. Makes them crumple like dust. Switch over, make the shots count, and remember, don't you fucking dare lose track of our boys, or I'll bloody kill you dead. You hear me?"

"Ten by ten," Galahad returned. Geraint confirmed a second later.

"Four?" Gwaine asked, his aggravation louder than the sound of a shot being fired. "Four?"
"Sorry, mate, busy killing zombies," Will answered. "Roger that last."

Zack refused to let them leave the Pendragon building without some sort of protection, and that was why he'd suited up in neutral colours, armed himself with a pair of gleaming guns that looked like they'd belonged to Dirty Harry, and led them out through an exit that didn't feed them into the street where the majority of the activity was taking place.

A feeling of safety came with knowing that there was someone watching their backs, even if Zack had had only one stipulation. "Don't put me on camera, my kids watch your show, I don't want them getting scared, and if my wife finds out, she'll kick my arse."

"Can't do anything about it if you pop into my shot," Julia warned him, but Zack shrugged it off. "As long as I'm not in the focus," Zack said, raising his finger to his lips before entering the security code to the door.

The side street was relatively quiet, and the chaos they hadn't been able to hear from several floors above the ground struck them in full force. There were no explosions, there was no steady stream of bullets. The noise was on a completely different level, somehow made more frightening because there was no frame of reference to identify them.


A single gunshot, a shout, a war cry.

"Jesus," Mickey said. That sounded awfully close.

They crept out into the open, though they stayed in the shadows, trusting Zack's judgment when it came to their safety. The enemy -- the bodies of the dead -- "Goddamn it, I wish I knew what to call them," Mickey said, acutely aware of the camera keeping him in the shot. "I'm just going to call them revenants, okay? Because they're not the cuddly zombies we know and love from the movie screen, and I'm about ninety-nine percent certain that somebody's grandmother never hefted a broadsword like that."

He stepped out of the way to let Julia zoom in on the sight. Dressed in a matronly gown that might have dated from twenty years ago was a fairly well-preserved woman with long white hair. She was barefoot, having lost her shoes somewhere, and raised a sword that was nearly as tall as she was with the ease of a seasoned Renaissance Fair champion.

"I wouldn't want to face them in a dark alley, that's for sure," Mickey said, pulling at Julia's sleeve. "Come over here."

He dragged her to the other side of the alley, wedging her next to several sturdy boxes of rubbish. She settled her weight against it, balancing the camera on the steady ledge, and continued filming.

From this angle, they were getting all the action as the British Army pushed the revenants back. The revenants might have somehow, magically, gained the ability to fight like seasoned veterans from the middle ages, but the Infantry were no slouches, either. The public might think that the primary weapon of the average soldier was the semiautomatic rifle they were equipped with, but they'd be wrong.
A soldier's first weapon was always themselves.

There might have been the occasional gunshot, but from where Mickey stood, he could tell it was more to startle or momentarily incapacitate the revenants before the soldiers moved in for the kill with bayonets or knives. The revenants came on strong, but the army, after overcoming the initial shock of fighting zombies, were even stronger.

"There!" Julia said, pointing.

In the thick of it were two members of the Red Team, skirting that spot where the streetlights didn't quite overlap. The swordsman had lost his knife but had picked up a plain shield --

"A buckler," Mickey said, because it couldn't be anything else. "It's a buckler, and fuck you if you're calling me a nerd right now --"

-- and blocked an overhang swing. The buckler took the brunt of the weight of a war hammer on it, shattering uselessly. The soldier wasn't fazed, not in the slightest, because he swung his sword up, holding it by the blade in one hand and the hilt in the other, and caught the second blow before it could come down.

He twisted in place, the maneuver tearing the war hammer out of the revenant's hands. And he wasn't done -- the soldier continued to turn, elbow smashing into the revenant's face, sword raised high and guided in an arc by the hand on the blade. The sword plunged into the revenant's chest.


"Your hard-on is showing," Julia said, amused.

"My -- what?" Mickey turned to face the camera. He made a face. "We're on the bloody air, Jules. Language."

"Bertrise will clean it up," Julia said.

"She never does --"

"Watch out!" Zack shouted, but he was too late and too far to do anything. He raised his gun and fired two useless shots at zombies spilling out of the proverbial woodworks.

The revenant kept on coming, weapon raised for an attack, bearing straight down on Mickey.

Flash-flash-flash.

It was a blinding flutter of reflected light, moving fast, like magic, across the road. It came to a sudden stop, impacting with the revenant, who took one more step and crumpled.

The handle of an axe stuck out of his head.

A quick search for their rescuer found the other Red Team soldier wrenching a bigger war-axe out of a revenant's hands with a smooth, practiced motion, and using it to split the revenant's arm.

"Oh, wow," Julia said, reverent. "Your hard-on is completely justified, Mickey, because that gave me a lady-boner."

"Jules!"
The army had trounced the battlefield. A loud hiss pierced the air and the revenants drew back in very obvious retreat. It was slow at first, magnifying with each departure, quickening when the infantry surged after them.

"Hold!" Mickey heard the order before he saw who had spoken -- the Red Team member holding the sword. He paused to finish off his opponent, turned toward the infantrymen chasing after the revenants, and bellowed, "Hold!"

Soldiers slowed down and skittered to a stop.

"They're drawing us off! They're going to flank! You!" the soldier pointed to a sergeant, who stood up straighter despite his heaving breath. "Take your team, head to Grid Four and offer support. They're breaking the line. Help them push back! The rest of you, with me!"

He walked forward, and Mickey wished he knew what the man had in mind, because there was no urgency to his movements. He said something else to the team, too quietly for Mickey to hear, but he was gesturing instructions, and the soldiers lined up the wall, forming an inverted V behind him, like a funnel.

The other Red Team member joined him, shouldering his new war-axe in a smooth, careless motion.

"Can we move up one more street?" Mickey asked, turning to Zack, who stared at the soldiers walking past, wide-eyed, mouth open in recognition.

Zack, the security guard for Pendragon Consulting, had recognized the man giving orders.

Mickey wanted to ask. He needed to ask. But he wouldn't reveal the identities of the Red Team, not on the air and certainly not when broadcasting live, and definitely not until he had his goddamn exclusives lined up. Instead, he grabbed Zack's arm, shaking him out of his daze. "Let's move!"

They stepped out of the shadow of the alley, movements slow and careful. Wary infantrymen watched them; one of them told them to get to safety.

And suddenly --

The night crackled white with lightning, bright bolts lashing down onto a single spot somewhere ahead of them, in the distance.
Kay dragged Merlin into the alley so fast, Merlin didn't know what they were hiding from. Merlin wasn't sure he needed to ask why because the answer would invariably be, *More zombies.*

They weren't zombies, though Merlin wasn't about to split hairs and explain that. It was enough that he could see the spirits riding the animated bodies, directing them to their will. Ghostly, ghastly, and tinged in green, the spirits were fragments of soldiers and warriors from times long past, their eyes empty of anything remotely human. To Merlin, it was as if the souls hadn't only been collected, but purified of anything that would taint the bloodlust of the battlefield.

Merlin tried not to stare. If he watched them too long, those spirits seemed to sense him, turning to search for him.

It was much the same for Mordred, who kept his gaze averted, though sometimes he was caught staring, wide-eyed and gaping. Merlin didn't blame him. Some of those spirits were... awe-inspiring, still seeming as they had been when they'd died, in kilts and braided hair and scarred skin. Others were unrecognizable, wearing armours from eras and places Merlin couldn't identify. A handful were frightening and fearsome, twisted and bent, as if the Morrigan had reached into Mag Mell, stealing the warriors from their paradise and corrupting them so that they would never return.

And then there were the *others* --

Others, like nothing Merlin had ever seen and hoped he would never need to face, because they weren't merely frightening or fearsome, but hair-raising in the way the monsters under the bed had been awe-inspiring, terrible and murderous.

Merlin nodded at Kay when he had his feet settled under him, and cautiously peered around the bend. Kay had grabbed him before one of those Others could see him, and this one was leading a pack of what looked like wild dogs. But weren't. *Couldn't be.* Not with that tainted essence in them, trailing a magical, purple aura behind them as they trotted after their leader.

This Other was a misshapen dog with a two-snouted face, about as long as a man's body was tall, easily a hundred pounds heavier than Perceval. Black fur was more bramble and thorn than hair and skin, creaking and bristling with every movement, hackles raised like the sharp end of a porcupine. It paced in a wide arc, claws scratching the asphalt every time it turned, ignoring the wild dogs snapping at its heels.

The wild dogs nipped, drawing blood, breaking away to fight amongst themselves. Merlin wasn't sure why. He wasn't entirely certain he wanted to know why.

Merlin turned away when the Other slowed down in its pacing, lowering its head, snuffling its two mighty snouts in the air. He pulled Kay flush against the wall, because while the spirits of the dead seemed to respond more to Mordred and Merlin, they weren't completely unaware of Kay's attention, either. The evidence was mounting, and mounting in a way that Merlin couldn't ignore. Kay had magic, even if he was completely unaware of it, and it was significant enough to draw the attention of the enemy.

The suspicion had turned into a near-affirmation, and this knowledge brought everything in sharp
relief. Bayard's insistence of testing the entire team, and showing frustration when he'd failed. Kay being as affected by the AMP prototype at the testing ground. Aredian keeping him alive when it would have been more efficient to eliminate him.

Merlin gestured, and Lucan crept up quietly, crouching down at the corner of the alley for a better look. Merlin didn't know if Kay had picked up on it, but Lucan was the only one among them who could study the enemy movements without being sensed or detected. That had more to do with Lucan being the least Magical of the four of them than it did Lucan's inherent ability to sneak up on someone.

"Don't know how we're going to get past this one," Lucan said, his voice low.

"Detour?" Mordred asked.

Kay glanced at his chronometer. "No time."

They'd all heard it over the team's E-channel. The first onslaught of the Morrigan's army. How it had sounded as if they were breaking through the containment line until Arthur had barked orders to abandon guns and to switch to bayonets.

Kay was the one to force Merlin to switch to the dedicated frequency for their ingress team. In a way, Merlin was grateful for Kay's intervention, or he would have sat and listened to the battle, undecided on whether he should turn back or to continue.

Merlin forcibly put all thoughts of Arthur and the rest of his team out of his mind. He couldn't afford to be distracted. Not when they were just that much closer to the epicentre and putting a stop to the onslaught. Twenty thousand spirits who couldn't die by modern weapons was an army against which they had little hope. Arthur might have put Excalibur through sword training, but there were many more men and women in the British Army who had only their bayonets, their hand-to-hand training, and their wits to rely on against spirits that had fought with swords and shields their entire lives before they were reaped by the Morrigan.

It wasn't a fair fight.

"Those aren't spirits, are they?" Lucan asked.

Mordred dared a quick look before moving back into the thick shadows of the alley. "No. Not by a long shot. This is... That is something else."

"I don't care what it's called," Lucan said. "How do we kill it?"

Merlin leaned his head back, banging it against the brick building. "You don't. We do."

"No," Kay said. "We've got orders, and that's to keep you hidden until you get to the main event. That's what we'll do."

He gestured at Lucan, who seemed to understand what Kay was talking about. Lucan stood up, adjusted his equipment, and --

Merlin grabbed Kay before they could leave the alley. "Don't you fucking dare," he hissed.

"We'll draw them off," Kay said. "Lure them away, let you through. We'll double-back, catch up --"

"And you think someone's not going to notice their pet running off for no reason?" Merlin snapped.
"Might as well send up the alert, slap a kick-me sign on our arses --"

"Do you have a better idea?" Kay asked.

Merlin opened his mouth and… snapped it shut. He actually didn't have any options. There was no making it through without either distracting or outright killing the Other. Neither option was feasible because of the attention that it would attract. Taking a detour would delay reaching their destination, and the longer they delayed, the longer Excalibur and their soldiers would be fighting the Morrigan's army.

"Through," Mordred said. Merlin turned to look at him, but it was difficult to make out what he was thinking with the reflective goggles and the red scarf hiding his face. After a pause, Mordred explained, "We go through. We have the special ammunition, don't we?"

Arthur had tried to force the bulk of the special ammunition on Merlin's team, but Merlin had promptly turned around and given it to the Overwatch. The snipers would need it more, and Gwaine had been grateful knowing that he'd at least be useful while high above. Merlin didn't have a single charmed bullet on him. Mordred had refused, too, on the grounds that he would rather rely on his magic than on a sigil-marked bullet to defend himself.

Merlin turned to look at Kay and Lucan, both of whom were exchanging glances and gesturing to each other. Lucan shifted his weapon from one arm to the other as he inspected his pockets. Kay patted a few pouches absentmindedly, rattling them with sure fingers.

They came up with four loose pieces between them, each of them carved with the sigil. Kay held them up in his palm and said, "We'd just need one shot. That'd be you, mate. You're keener than I am."

"I'll need a silencer," Lucan said. "Otherwise the pack's on us before I take a second shot."

"I'll do that," Mordred said. Merlin tried to protest, but Mordred shoved him out of the way. "Of the two of us, you're most capable of handling the energies we'll find beyond that gate. You'll need to be at your full strength."

"It's one spell."

"It's one spell less that you'll have to cast," Mordred said. "I'll stay with Lucan. You go on with Kay. We'll meet you on the roundabout, just shy of the entrance."

Merlin held up his hands in defeat, accepting the plan. Mordred was right. He'd made it clear from the very start that his druidic magic would not be strong enough to counteract necromantic magic, and that Merlin needed to be the one to destroy the Morrigan's staff. Gaius and the others had researched all that they could, but there was no telling how much Merlin would need to counter any explosive blowback.

Kay nodded after a moment of silence and grabbed Merlin's shoulder, gesturing that they take an alternate route. Merlin didn't need to be told what he was thinking -- that they'd act as a distraction if Lucan's first shot went wide.

They lingered at the entrance of another alley a few minutes later. "In position," Kay said.

"On my count," Lucan answered. "Three. Two --"

There was no sign nor sound of the bullet, but the Other grunted, tilted, and collapsed heavily on its side as if it had simply, uncomfortably, decided that, Yes, this is where I'll take a nap. Merlin
waited, and he waited some more; the Other didn't stir, and after a moment of confusion, the stray dogs shook off whatever glamour had captured them, suddenly less large than they had been before. One or two yipped before hurrying away, while the larger mongrels crept curiously toward the Other, sniffing loudly.

"Safe enough," Kay announced, leading the way.

Except for an overturned lorry and tiny Smart car with four flat tyres in the middle of the road, they were alone, their route to their destination unhindered and without any additional obstacles. Merlin imagined that the enemy sorcerers didn't anticipate for anyone to breach their defences this far. It had been a near thing, ducking and dodging the Morrigan's soldiers. If not for Elyan guiding their way, they would have been pinned down on more than one uncomfortable occasion.

They waited near the roundabout, using the overgrowth creeping along a stone wall as cover. Mordred and Lucan arrived at their location from another route entirely, and the four of them studied their target location for far too long before the silence was broken with Lucan's, "All right. We're here. Now what?"

Arthur's plans had only gone so far. He'd been aggrieved to admit that he didn't know what they would face and that he couldn't even suggest how best to deal with them. "I hate leaving you on your own like this," he'd said, shaking his head. "I should go with you."

"You'll keep your arse right where you are, and you'll hold the line," Merlin had told him. "Leave it to us. We have it under control."

Gods, he'd sounded far more confident than he'd felt. He was lucky Arthur had bought it.

Merlin stared at the enclosure, at the open gates. Firelight flickered in the distance, shadows danced in the light, but any noise beyond that was muffled by the dips and swells in the ground and the rising wind.

While the area had more than enough bodies to go around, Elyan's estimation of the enemy troops was nowhere near the estimated twenty thousand. Still, the infantry was outnumbered, and Merlin could only hope that whatever was being held in reserve wasn't just beyond the rise.

"We..." Mordred hesitated. He made a vague gesture. "We go in."


"I could've come up with that one," Kay muttered.

Merlin clicked his radio and called in. "Watchtower. We are at the location. Do you have eyes?"

"Still blind," Elyan said, apologetic. "Satellite diagnostics report a few cameras burned out, but otherwise everything's fine. Interference is on your end."

"No shite," Mordred muttered, shrugging his shoulder.

That gesture wasn't so much to adjust the weight of his equipment, but to shake off the creepy-crawlies of bad magic clinging to his skin. Merlin could feel it too, but it didn't seem to bother him half as much as it did Mordred. Kay seemed unaffected, but it was hard to tell.

Merlin heaved a heavy breath. They had absolutely no options. He didn't dare send Lucan or Kay out ahead to scout the area and report back. There was too much of a risk that they would be caught in a trap or captured, and they would lose the advantage of surprise. If they went in, they were
going all in, and damn the odds.

_I'm sorry, Arthur._

Merlin cleared his throat. "Confirm that we've completed the first stage. Start the countdown for the second stage. We are going radio black from this point on."

The silence on the radio was overwhelming and expansive. Merlin leaned against the wall, glad for the solidness of it and yet feeling as if he were losing his footing, the ground crumbling beneath him.


Merlin waited until he heard three solid clicks to indicate that the rest of the team had turned off their radios. "You know where our letters are if we don't."

He turned his Box off without waiting for an answer and squirmed out of his pack. He systematically shrugged out of his gear and jacket.

"Um. What's the plan?" Kay asked.

"No fucking clue," Merlin said, taking off his hard cap. He emptied his pack, taking out the plaid overcoat Arthur had tossed at him, _in case._ "We go in, I suppose. Lucan, you're going to stay here, find a high point with a clear retreat. You'll watch our six."

"Coming or going?" Lucan asked.

"Both, I'd hope," Merlin said.

"We're just walking in?" Mordred asked, eyes wide.

"Waltz right in like the bloody wankers we are," Merlin said, shaking his head. He checked his rifle before passing it to Lucan. "Never thought I'd take a page out of Will's playbook, but it's the only thing I've got."

Merlin put his nylon harness back on, holstering his gun, taking as much ammunition as he could carry. He pulled on the plaid jacket, his nose burning at the smell of old body odour and grease, allowing himself a small sigh of relief that it was at least thick enough to ward away the cold. The pockets were deep, too, so he took all the spare bits of crystals and charms with him.

"I'm not asking any of you to come with me --"

"Oh, the Hell with this, you're as mad as Will," Kay said. He shoved his hard cap into his pack, took off most of his nylon webbing, turned his coat inside-out, replaced his lanyard, put his coat on, and filled his pockets with as much ammunition as he had. The rifle was a tight fit under his jacket, but if no one looked too closely, he would be all right.

A moment later, Mordred did the same, shaking his head and muttering to himself too quietly to be understood, but he wrenched the hard cap off his head, shook himself out of his pack, and turned his coat inside-out, too. He emptied his pack of whatever he could, and Lucan silently compiled the remnants into one bag, making it easier for him to carry.

"You don't have to --"
"We're going," Mordred bit out.

Merlin tapped his glasses, switching off night vision. The goggles still had a yellow sheen to the lenses, using as much of the illumination in the surrounding area as it could soak up. It wouldn't do as well as the night-vision, but it was better than going in blind, or with hardware that was unmistakably military.

"Scarf," Kay said.

Merlin pulled it down, feeling naked and vulnerable without it. He shoved it inside his shirt as much as he could, lifting up the collar of his plaid jacket, and zipped up all the way. "Keep it close."

Kay huffed, and after a moment, went for the stylish headband look. Mordred shoved it in his pocket.

"Lucan?" Merlin asked.

"Yeah?" Lucan twisted around, already searching the area for a fair position.

"Be careful," Merlin said, because he didn't have anything else to say.

"Seems to me I should tell you that," Lucan said, his voice gruff. "Look, without transmitters, earwigs have limited range, don't they? I'll keep my radio on our channel, listen for you. If the shite hits the fan, I'll... I'll do something, all right?"

"You get yourself out, is what you'll be doing," Merlin said. "You get yourself out and you get to the others. Tell them what happened. Help them hold the line."

"Fine," Lucan said stiffly, and Merlin had the distinct impression that Lucan wasn't going to listen to him at all. Considering the man's sometimes very questionable approach to interpreting Arthur's orders, Merlin was pretty sure Lucan would do whatever he felt like doing while simultaneously doing as Merlin had asked.

Merlin nodded in acknowledgement and clasped a firm hand on Lucan's shoulder. Lucan stared at the three of them for a long moment, as if fixing them in memory, and headed off, slinking in the shadows.

Merlin watched him go until he couldn't see Lucan anymore, not even with the enhanced low-light vision. He turned to Mordred and Kay. "All right. Pretty obvious that they were all set to go even without the sorcerers back at the base. Stands to reason that the sorcerers were all heading here anyway because they didn't want to miss out on the show."

"Stands to reason," Kay said glumly. He scratched his jaw, obviously feeling vulnerable without the red scarf.

Mordred didn't seem to mind its absence, though. "Makes sense. There's enough power here to... well. To get drunk, I suppose."

"Like a hit from secondhand smoke?" Kay asked.

"Yes," Mordred said.

"Then why aren't you two giggling like loons?"
Merlin exchanged glances with Mordred. "It's not that kind of high. Whatever power we draw from here is tainted, and in turn, it'll taint us. We can't run the risk that whoever's behind this could use the magic to control us, too."

Kay's nose wrinkled, but he nodded.

"Ready?" Merlin asked.

"No," Mordred said, but he stood up straighter.

"All right, let's put some smug pillock in our walk," Kay said, exhaling heavily. Merlin wasn't sure if he was talking to himself, but Kay brushed himself off, did a second check to make sure that his rifle wasn't showing, and walked across the road with a cocksure swagger.

Mordred followed him with a more conservative walk, betraying his nerves a few times when he turned around to check his surroundings. Merlin took up the rear, nodding at Mordred encouragingly, and tried to channel every single ounce of overconfident Arthur and brash Will that was physically possible.

No magical wards greeted them as they crossed into the cemetery. No one was waiting for them. There were no traps, no sentries, no patrols.

A crow squawked, flapping its wings. The motion made its tree branch rattle, and set off an entire murder of its kin. The chitters and chirps and chatter was loud to Merlin, like firecrackers, and might as well be a glowing neon sign pointing down at them from above.

Merlin exchanged a glance with Kay. He shook his head and gestured for Kay to continue. Mordred's face was pasty white in the artificial low-light generated by Merlin's glasses, and he looked as if he were about to throw up. Merlin didn't have to ask why -- the deeper into the cemetery they went, the greater the taint.

The firelight glowed brightly just ahead of them, and this close, Merlin could make out individual voices. The wind was scattering the conversation, but he could tell that the tone was one of general excitement and pure glee.

"Glasses," Merlin said, pushing his goggles up to rest on his head. Kay did the same, resting them on the red headband, while Mordred took them off completely and stuffed them in the pocket of his coat. They took a few seconds to adjust to the change in light, and walked up the rise.

Never in a million years would Merlin be able to explain the sight that he was seeing. The cemetery had been turned half into a rager, complete with beer kegs and barrels of what might be harder liquor. The other half was an orgy, with any number of people rutting against each other on frozen mounds of freshly-turned earth.

"Um," he said.

Kay almost swallowed his own tongue trying to keep his surprise contained, but Mordred was largely expressionless and unaffected. "See a lot of orgies when you do druid stuff?" Kay asked.

Mordred gave him a dry look. "Parents tend to censor that sort of thing from their children. I was often told to stay home, and by the time I was old enough, I engaged in other pursuits."

"Are you telling me that you let that stop you? That you weren't enough of a little shite to find a way around the rules?" Kay asked.
"Oh, it didn't stop me," Mordred said with a little, sly grin, and with a little saunter, walked down the hill.

"I worry about him," Kay said, bumping Merlin's shoulder as they followed Mordred.

Merlin figured they might as well take their cue from Mordred, because he'd never had any personal experience with this kind of thing, but it was awfully difficult to keep from staring.

"Why's that?"

"Blushes like mad when Lucan teases him over the girls back home, but doesn't blink at... at this?" Kay asked, waving a hand. "Can't tell me you don't wonder."

Merlin shrugged. Mordred was far from innocent, but Merlin imagined that it was less the act and more the intimacy and the romance that made him shy. "How about we worry about Mordred's love life later, and look for the..."

He made a gesture that couldn't in any way be interpreted as the Morrigan's staff, but he didn't know how else to mention it without being blunt and obvious about it. Fortunately, Kay understood, because he nodded and looked around. Anyone watching him might think that he was staring at all the wanton fucking from the way his mouth had fallen open -- he probably was, a little bit -- but Merlin knew his mind was on the job.

They were well past the orgy and blending into the main gathering. The majority of the men and women were drinking out of beer cans and wine bottles, hooting and hollering as they did... something around a big fire pit. Someone shoved a big red plastic mug of frothing ale into Kay's hands, splattering beer everywhere, and danced off, laughing and giggling.

Kay sniffed the beer, pretending to drink, and dumped the contents behind a gravestone.

Mordred slowed down along the path, his movements strained. His breathing was harsh, and his eyes flashed yellow three times before he closed them tightly and fought for control. Merlin put a hand at the base of his neck, intending to help shield him, but Mordred pulled away violently. "I'll be fine. Just... The closer we get to the epicentre, the more... It's difficult to resist. I only need a moment."

"And we need you at a hundred percent, not flagging like a boxer gone six rounds," Merlin snapped. "This won't cost me anything. It's the sigil we used at the house, and it'll sustain itself. Do you have a marker?"

"Yes, here," Mordred said, patting his coat with increasing desperation. Kay produced a black Sharpie, glancing over his shoulder to make sure they were alone.

"Make it quick," Kay said.

Merlin yanked Mordred's jacket open, lifted his shirt, and gestured for Mordred to move the body armour aside. Merlin drew the sigil on his chest. He closed his eyes, muttered under his breath, and sent a pulse of power at the sigil, concentrating on more than merely shielding Mordred from the necromantic magic. He focused on protection, on shielding, and when he was done, Mordred didn't seem to realize that Merlin had added extra to the sigil's magic.

"Better?"

Mordred released a shuddering breath and nodded. "Yes. Thank you."
Merlin turned to Kay. "Your turn."

"I'm fine," Kay said.

"Can't hurt," Merlin said, careful not to insist. Pushing the issue would only make Kay shut down.

"Will it stop me from turning into one of them?" Kay asked, suspicious.

"It might," Merlin said, because he honestly didn't know. He was more concerned that Kay wasn't at all affected by the waves of magic. For all the hints that Kay did, in fact, possess some affinity for magic, he was surprisingly latent and inured to it.

"All right," Kay said, awkwardly pulling his jacket, his shirt, and the flexible Pendragon body armour up. Merlin sketched the sigil quickly along Kay's ribcage, careful not to cross over an old scar in case the broken tissue would weaken the protection, and repeated the pulse of magic.

"Let's go," Merlin said, hearing voices approach.

"But you haven't --" Mordred protested, cutting himself off when he noticed other people coming their way. It was a young couple barely out of their teens, hanging on to each other for dear life, groggy and drunk on more than just alcohol. Neither of them spared the three a second glance.

Merlin didn't want to risk running into someone sober and followed after the couple. The couple tottered off the path, disappearing into the dark between a few thin trees, and as soon as they were out of sight, Mordred snatched the marker out of Merlin's hand. "What --"

"It'll stop you from becoming a zombie," Mordred said, pulling up Merlin's multiple layers of sleeves. He scrawled a sloppy sigil on Merlin's forearm. "It's for the greater good. I can't imagine what it would be like if you were undead or possessed by one of the Morrigan's fallen, and still had access to your magic."

"You had to say that," Merlin said, slowing down to give Mordred a chance to cast the spell. A faint tremor ran over his skin, effectively muting the insistent itch, but it didn't do much about the incessant pressure of magic.

They walked for a while longer. The path was well-lit, though the positioning of the torches was random and mismatched, the circles of light rarely overlapping. Without the press of necromantic magic, Merlin was more acutely aware of the background noises -- birds chattering, branches clanging like bones. As they left the loud voices and orgy behind, a slow, indiscernible chant became more and more audible.

Merlin exchanged glances with Mordred.

This time, when they crossed over the rise, they found a large group of sorcerers who were far more sober -- and sombre. Conversations were quiet, barely above a faint murmur, yet audible over distant chanting. Some people held hands and faced forward, heads back, eyes closed as if willing their power and magic to be of assistance to the casters. Though they attracted curious glances, no one stopped them.

More than anywhere else they'd seen so far, the ground was broken through. These were no freshly-dug graves, or even sorcerous assistance to free the dead from the earth. No, some great power had crawled through, using body and bone and supernatural strength to tear their way out of a prison. Headstones were overturned, shattered, broken; scattered flowers -- plastic, mostly -- crushed to splinters.
Resurrected bodies stood among the sorcerers, stock still and stead, their faces -- where they had faces -- stoic and expressionless. Their clothing told a story of their more recent deaths, but there were older bodies, too, frail and skeleton-like, dressed in leisure suits that were crumbling as surely as the decayed flesh they were covering.

"There," Kay whispered. The three of them came to a stop.

Up on a raised platform made out of several stone coffins pushed together stood a figure in long, black robes. The figure's arms were open wide, and the staff -- the staff -- was in their hand, a blue jewel glowing bright. Merlin recognized it easily enough; the pictures the CIA had given them had been detailed.

Despite the voluminous hood over the figure's head, hiding their face, Merlin could tell from curve and stance that it was a woman. His instinct wanted to say Nimueh, but he didn't want to say it until he was certain.

Beside him, he felt Kay shift.

"Don't," Merlin murmured. Too many sorcerers surrounded them. A blatant act of assassination would be spotted and stopped before it came of any use. Merlin was prepared to give his life to stop this, but he wasn't ready -- he would never be ready -- to sacrifice Kay and Mordred along with him. He had to wait for the right moment. If there was anything he'd ever learned from Arthur, it was to always wait for the right moment.

On Merlin's right, Mordred stepped forward, casting a warning glance in Merlin's direction. Merlin followed his gaze to a small group across the way. There were two men and five women in the group, and though the women were enraptured by the figure chanting on the raised stone platform, the men were watching them with narrow-eyed interest.

"Ignore them," Merlin murmured, even as he felt a measure of dread. He couldn't be certain, but he thought they looked familiar. He couldn't place them. It seemed that they had the exact same thought, because they exchanged glances and spoke quietly, their expressions pinched in matching frowns.

They were both tall and broad-shouldered. Their hair was long and tied back in an informal ponytail at the base of their heads. Their clothing was plain and unassuming, but they were both wearing heavy leather jackets, though in vastly different cots. They could easily have been twins, dressed in the same clothes by a doting mother, except one was dark-skinned and the other was very fair. What made them stand out from the group wasn't that they were paying more attention to Merlin, Mordred and Kay. It was that they had swords in their hands, ready to use them.

Merlin looked away. At this distance, it was difficult to tell, but he thought those were the two missing swords from MI-5's depository.

"They're coming this way," Mordred said.

"Great." Kay shrugged his shoulder, appearing unconcerned.

"Don't start anything," Merlin said, concentrating on the soft chanting coming from the raised platform. The words were difficult to make out, washed out by the quiet background chatter and the louder, more enthusiastic chanting, which was not only not repetitive, but a complete counterpoint to the actual spellcasting going on. Merlin couldn't fathom what the woman was going to cast now. Surely, she had already divested the staff of all of the trapped souls. Obviously, she had also summoned creatures that shouldn't, technically, be on this physical plane. What else was
Merlin had a bad, bad feeling that it had to do with all of the untouched graves in the cemetery. For someone wielding a staff of necromancy, a cemetery as well-packed as this one promised a great deal of untold power and a wealth of bodies to use however they liked.

"Oi. We know you, don't we?" The speaker was the darker of the two, who also happened to be taller by a few centimetres.

"Might," Merlin said, looking them over before dismissing them to return his attention to the magic that was slowly weaving together.

"Where do we know you from?"

"Not a clue," Merlin said, shaking his head and shrugging. "I don't know you. Could be I've got one of those faces."

The shorter man snorted. His friend said, "Come on, Sean. We've got other things to do."

"No, I'm sure of it," Sean said, insistent and sounding mean. "It's not sitting well with me. I know I've seen him around, I just can't place him --"

"Picture him on his knees with his mouth around my cock," a new voice said, and Merlin froze.

Kay glanced at him sidelong, because he'd recognized it, too.

"If you've seen him, it were at my old club, yeah?" Tristan said. He pushed forward, putting himself between Merlin and Sean. "And if you fancy him, well, you know the rules."

"He's yours?" Sean sneered, obviously not thinking much of Tristan. Merlin couldn't blame him.

The last time they'd seen him, Tristan had been running away, terrified out of his skull. His club was in ruins, Freya was dead, and he'd just learned that he really wasn't the top dog in any definition of the phrase. And worse for him was the awareness that the people he'd practically worshipped had been willing to sacrifice him despite everything he'd ever done for them.

Now, he was worn and haggard, a raw beard on sunken cheeks, his once-stylish hair hacked into a crude cut. He'd lost weight, his clothes were coarse and hung from his frame, his coat patched one too many times. Outwardly, he looked terrible, having fallen far from grace, but he was healthy, and not without some measure of influence in the crowd, because Sean's friend had backed away.

"No," Tristan said. He half-shrugged. "Never was. He's his own, and he's your better. I'd mind my tongue, were I in your shoes."

Sean's frown deepened, his gaze raking over Merlin's body. A slow, mocking smirk stretched across his lips. "Doesn't look like much."

"Could say the same about you, mate," Kay said, his tone clear challenge that Sean didn't like. When Sean stepped forward, it was to bump into Mordred, who blocked his way. From where Merlin stood, he could see the yellow-bright flash of Mordred's eyes.

"Thought you'd never come," Tristan said to Merlin, already dismissing Sean and his friend, though those two lingered a moment longer before backing off, taking position a few metres away, bodies angled to keep them in view.
And in earshot.

"Took some doing getting here," Merlin said carefully. "I've been away."

"Hard going, I suppose," Tristan said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "At least the trains are running again."

Kay snorted. "If that's your definition of running, I'd like to see what you consider a problem. I thought you'd be glad they were all knocked out."

"Oh, that'll come," Tristan said, a strange tone to his voice. His expression was neutral, though. "Do you need a place to stay?"

The offer was made so casually that Merlin almost missed the quick, furtive glance Tristan shot in his direction. He made a small, noncommittal sound in answer, but it was enough to encourage Tristan to continue.

"I've got room, and I can get you settled. Introduce you to the right people, get you ranked, help you out," Tristan said, still keeping to that same tone.

Merlin glanced at him sideways. He scratched his head to cover how he exchanged a glance with Kay, who raised curious but confused eyebrows in answer. Mordred had wandered a few steps, positioning himself in such a way that Sean and his friend couldn't get a clear line of sight on Merlin and Tristan.

Merlin didn't know what Tristan's game was.

He'd half-expected Tristan to blow the whistle on them, to stand up on a soapbox screeching an alarm while pointing in their direction. For whatever reason, he'd chosen not to do that, instead coming to their rescue to defuse what was a relatively mild confrontation. Tristan's sudden altruistic generosity didn't mean that he hadn't already flagged them as the enemy, and was interfering only long enough for the power players on the scene to come over.

From Kay's subtle look around, he was thinking the same thing.

Merlin considered how to answer, but his silence must have dragged on too long. Tristan shifted his weight, rubbing the coarse hairs on his chin. "I mean, I understand if you'd rather not. I messed up last time --"

"Putting it mildly, mate," Kay said, playing along.

Tristan put his hands up in defeat. "I deserve that, I do. I was an arse. I shouldn't have done what I did. Hell. I shouldn't have done any of it. I just…"

He trailed off, lowering his chin. He turned to face Merlin, staring at the ground beneath them as if in penance.

"You just what? Realized how much you fucked up? That you want to set it right?" Merlin asked, aware of how harsh his tone was. He couldn't help it. Either he kept the anger out of his voice or he picked his words carefully, and the latter was the only option when he had Sean and his friend listening in.

Tristan nodded his head minutely but didn't look up. "If I could do anything to change what I've done, I would. I swear to you, I would. But I can't. I don't know how to fix it."
Merlin wasn't sure how much he believed, but Tristan had never been able to act worth shite. "Given our history, how can I believe that?"

Tristan shook his head. He raised his head and met Merlin's eyes. Merlin saw true fear in them. "You don't. I've got... I have nothing to offer. I don't know how I can make it up to you. To... to everyone."

A choked sob rattled deep in his chest and he shut down, closing his eyes and holding his breath. His shoulders shook a few times before he cleared his throat, pulling himself together. Abruptly, he darted in close, very close, and before either Merlin or Kay could react, he whispered something in Merlin's ear.

"They killed my son."

Merlin stared.

He didn't know that Tristan had a son. The file MI-5 had on him had been surprisingly thin. What hadn't been in the research, Merlin had supplemented with half-remembered memories of a big bully who used others to make sure he always got his way. He'd always had pretty girls on his arm, but he was the use-them-once, throw-them-away kind, never sticking with any of them for more than a few dates. He'd brag about his conquests, ruining the girls' reputations, making the situation worse when they tried to approach or confront him.

School. His business. His closest associates. No steady relationships. Estranged from his parents, and as far as Tristan's little brother was concerned, Tristan was dead. No other family, and certainly no children, if the medical reports were any evidence. He'd had a vasectomy when he turned twenty.

If that were true, Tristan's son would have to be at least fifteen years old. The file had been flimsy, but that had never been any surprise. Tristan always kept things close to his chest.

"They killed your son," Merlin repeated, his voice soft, still processing the information.

Tristan's eyes watered, he sniffled loudly, and he put on a brave face. He shrugged violently, shoving his hands in his coat pockets again, and said, "I were waiting for you to come back. I really was. I knew you'd come back. I didn't think you'd make me wait this long."

Merlin glanced at Sean. He'd moved away, his friend in his wake, probably bored at having to listen as Tristan tried to win back an old lover.

"When?" Merlin asked. When did they kill his son? When did he find out Merlin was back? When - - Merlin wasn't sure what he was asking.

It didn't seem to matter. Tristan realized they were out of earshot of any active listeners and leaned in again. "Days after. Days. He didn't know who I was. Didn't know I were watching them for years and years, waiting for the best time. For..."

Tristan shook his head guiltily.

"It went wrong. It went so wrong. They found out about him. I don't know how. Said it was punishment for fucking up. I nearly... I nearly told them about you. Gods." Tristan bounced on the balls of his feet, holding himself tight. He blinked repeatedly and sniffled loudly again. "They showed me his body. Bloody fucking burnt black. I didn't believe it were him. He were always running away. His Mum couldn't control him. I fucking prayed that he'd run away again. I went
over to his Mum's and her dead-beat live-in. Their flat was burned to the ground, and they were there, on the street corner, watching. Fucking laughing at me."

He wiped the tears from his face angrily. Merlin didn't know what to say. He was silent while he watched Tristan paste on the nastiest smile he'd ever seen.

"He were gifted," Tristan said, sounding proud. "Like me. Stronger than me, even. He would've gone far in this new world. Reminded me of you. Always hiding himself. Mouth bigger than his brains. Smartest fucking kid I knew. So, yeah. I want to help you. For him."

There was no universe in which Merlin could ever understand Tristan, to know how his mind worked, how he viewed the world. But he knew Tristan. Tristan was the leopard whose spots never changed. Who wanted everything in his world just so. And when things weren't the way he wanted them, he reacted, doing whatever he could to ensure a promising outcome.

Tristan hadn't changed one bit. Whether he wore glam and glitz or dirt and ill-fitting clothes, Tristan was still a goddamned bully who did everything he could, right down to punishing everything and everyone in his way, until he had exactly what he wanted. And right now, Tristan was a goddamned bully who had lost his son.

This was about revenge. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The NWO had killed his son. Had shown him the body. If they hadn't, Merlin imagined that Tristan would have given Merlin up at the first opportunity, but instead, he'd tucked away the ace in his hand, hiding it up his sleeve until the time that he could use it to make those people pay for what they'd done.

Mordred studied them out of the corner of his eye. He didn't know Tristan personally. He didn't know the history Merlin and Tristan shared. But Kay…

Kay's eyes were narrow with suspicion, his mouth set in a thin line of distrust, but he nodded in answer to Merlin's unspoken question.

Merlin turned to watch the woman on the raised stone platform. Her chants were louder, her gestures wilder, and she gesticulated wildly with her free hand. The power hadn't quite reached a crescendo -- it seemed to be slipping away from her -- but it was increasing with every thump of the staff on the stone.

"How long has she been doing this?" Merlin asked.

Tristan gave him a sidelong, sneering look. "What do you think?"

"I'm not fucking around here," Merlin snarled, keeping his voice low. "Specifics. How long has she been casting this particular spell?"

Unleashing the Morrigan's army could have occurred at any time. The distractions the sorcerers posed at the military bases might have been more to give the souls of forgotten warriors time to adjust to their new bodies and to understand their orders. They might have been merely waiting to attack, or they were recently-raised, Merlin didn't know which. And he needed to know.

The possession of the dead wasn't the only magic that had been cast that night. There were creatures that Merlin didn't recognize, that Mordred, who had had a more classical education when it came to magic, couldn't identify. Necromantic magic was similar to demonic magic in that both could open rifts into other planes of existence, and it was conceivable that such a rift had been created to allow monsters out into the world. How much magic had this one person cast? How
much more could they cast?

"Better part of an hour, I suppose," Tristan said, sounding chastised, even embarrassed. "I don't really know."

"Walk me through it, then. You've been here all along?" Something told Merlin that Tristan wouldn't have missed a minute of this, too keen to stay on top of things in case he had a chance for advancement by whatever means possible.

"Since the scratch of," Tristan said with a firm nod. "Started at dawn. Took a while to get the bodies out. Some of them couldn't crawl out on their own."

"The cuddly little monsters patrolling the streets?" Kay asked, tilting his head back in a random direction.

"That was someone else," Tristan said. He turned away, not subtle in how he looked around. "I don't see them. Think they left, they were only here a few hours."

"And that?" Merlin asked, jutting a chin toward the figure. The woman stabbed the stone slab with the staff, and a thunder-crack of lightning burst out from the base. More worrisome was the way that the blue jewel glowed from its centre, growing brighter with every passing minute. "Same person who raised the first army?"

Tristan paled. "Yeah."

Merlin exhaled heavily. They were surrounded in a crowd that was in excess of a hundred people. By appearance, most of them looked to be magic users. Those who weren’t -- like those two, Sean and his friend -- were very human guards who seemed to know how to handle the weapons they carried. Merlin hadn't seen any guns, but that didn't mean anything, not when most handguns were small enough to be easily concealed.

On the one hand, most of the magic users appeared to be in a trance-like state, either drunk on the tainted magic in the air or strung out from overload or overdose. The rest were an even split between too exhausted to move, leaning against each other for support, and bored beyond belief, like Tristan, who had enough low-grade magic to be aware of what was going on, but not enough to be affected.

Either way, whatever they were going to do, the chances of getting out of the cemetery were terribly slim. Merlin grit his teeth, not liking the situation. He'd hoped to have found the person controlling the Morrigan's army alone, maybe surrounded by a few guards. That would have been easy to handle.

"We're going to need a distraction," Merlin said. He turned to Tristan. "Can you do that?"

"What sort of distraction?"

"The sort that doesn't get us killed," Kay said, making vague gesture with his hand. "You know."

Merlin slapped a hand on Tristan's shoulder. Tristan startled, eyes wide as he stared at Merlin. "Look around you. Look carefully. Do you see us doing anything to stop this without this lot getting in our way? Your mate Sean's been keeping an eye on us. You don't think he'll do something if we try?"

"He's not my mate," Tristan groused.
"Not focusing on the right thing," Merlin said, squeezing, and Tristan winced under the tight grasp. Merlin lowered his voice. "You've been here for a while. You've been watching. Plenty of time to see them set up. Plenty of time to see what was going on. You've been thinking about this, Tristan. You've got some idea of how to muck up their plans. You just didn't have the balls to do it, and you want us to do it instead."

Tristan made a sound of denial.

"You want to make them pay for what they did to your son? Make them pay. I know you've already got some idea of what to do." Merlin let Tristan go with a shove.

Tristan stumbled a step, looking chastised. When he closed the distance between them again, it was with a bowed head of someone seeking forgiveness. "I could... Over at the north side. There's bodies in reserve, thousands of them. They're being held in a giant pentagram for now, I heard someone say they're going to be released later, when she's raised more of them."

"Okay," Merlin said, nodding encouragingly while simultaneously hiding how sick he felt at hearing that there were thousands of them. Will's estimate had been at a rough twenty-thousand count, and there was no telling how many soldiers were out on the streets right now. "And?"

"Bodies burn, don't they?" Tristan's grin was lopsided and wide.

"That they do," Merlin said carefully. Bones. Dried flesh. Embalming fluid. He tried to imagine any downsides, but failed. If the soldiers were being contained inside a pentagram, they likely wouldn't be able to cross the borders even if they were cast aflame. The NWO would react to the possible loss of that many "troops", drawing most of them away from the area. "Can you do it? Without being seen?"

"No," Tristan admitted. He shuffled his shoe on the ground, disturbing gravel. "But I've got friends."

_I doubt that_, Merlin nearly said. The strangled cough from Kay hinted that he had thought much the same. "Good. Do that. How long do you need?"

Tristan considered. "Ten? Fifteen minutes?"

"You've got ten." Merlin gestured. "Do it. Then get out of here."

A fleeting smile crossed Tristan's lips. Glee flashed in his eyes, but his mouth was set in firm determination. "You'll take her down?"

"I'll try," Merlin said, studying the figure on the raised platform. He wasn't sure what he could do against someone who already had so much necromantic energy around them, ready to be used.

"Promise me," Tristan said, grabbing Merlin's arm.

Merlin wrenched his arm free and crowded into Tristan's space. "I said, I'll try. Now go. I can't do shite if you don't do your part."

Tristan left without another word. Merlin watched him go for a few seconds before turning back to watch the show. Mordred drifted next to him, but it was Kay who spoke. "Do you think we can trust him?"

"Do we have any other choice?" Merlin asked.
"I could go," Mordred suggested.

"Or me," Kay said. "Shadow him, make sure he does as told."

"No," Merlin said, shaking his head. "We stay together. We stay together and we get out of here, the three of us, once we've done what we can. It might be enough if Tristan does what he said he'll do."

The bodies might end up destroyed beyond repair, rendered useless by flame and heat, but the captured souls would escape and seek replacements. The pause would be momentary, nothing more, but that pause might be enough to confuse the sorcerers milling around the ceremonial site. If they were lucky, it would also disrupt the current spellcasting -- the last thing anyone wanted was to have to face an army of reanimated dead on top of the Morrigan's army.

"Ten minutes," Kay muttered. He glanced at his watch. "I fucking hate waiting."

"Me too, mate," Merlin said. He asked Mordred, "Did you notice anything odd? Any weaknesses we can exploit?"

"No," Mordred said glumly. Then, struggling for some cheer, he added, "Not yet, anyway."

"In that case, we've got about ten minutes to spot one and come up with a plan," Merlin said, turning to Kay. "You've studied the maps. Walk around, see what's the most viable escape route. Don't attract attention, don't leave the main group, and get back here in eight."

Kay nodded. After a few seconds, he pretended to spot someone he knew and wandered off at a nonchalant, leisurely pace. Merlin wouldn't have sent him if he hadn't already seen others moving around. Now that he wasn't a stationary target, Kay was probably the safest amongst the three of them.

"Wish I'd studied more," Mordred said abruptly. "I don't understand this magic. It's... It feels alien, warped, wrong. I don't see how we can find a weak spot when there is no logic to this pattern."

Merlin elbowed him into silence. There was no point in attracting attention by talking about what they were planning to do. It was fortunate that no one was close enough to overhear -- if they were even listening in. Now that Merlin wasn't distracted by Tristan, he looked at the patterns that Mordred was talking about, at the faint aura of layers upon layers of magic.

In a large spell of significant purpose, spellwork was much like constructing or crafting a building or a piece of art. A foundation. Supports. Structures. Decoration. A good spell would collapse without foundation and support, and without structures and decoration to define its significance, the extraneous magic would dissipate uselessly in a complete waste of effort and energy. Foundation and support could take root in physical material while structure and decoration was formed by physical movement, verbal declaration, or sheer will.

Necromantic magic, Merlin saw, was not aligned along a structured path. At first glance, the magic was chaotic, wild and mad, with no coherent, understandable pattern. Decoration wove around structure, more magical artistry than formed out of purpose. Foundation rose up in loose spirals and fragile columns, so flimsy that they might break apart in a strong wind. Supports were non-existent, and where they were present, they were cleverly hidden within the foundation itself, interconnected only in that they appeared to be the same.

There would be no dismantling this spell. Not easily, not quickly, and not without attracting attention. They would fail before they even began.
It's impossible, Merlin wanted to say. The words were on the tip of his tongue. In the same way that the spell was impossible to break, it occurred to him that the spell shouldn't exist. But it was there, in front of him, all around him, in domed arcs and buckled ceilings, in broken pillars and columns rising up, in broken ground and stained stone and fanciful, symmetrical decorations and shattered mirrors and garish colours.

There was a pattern. Merlin was sure of it. Where most magic was based on creation and propagation, necromantic magic was rooted in destruction and decay. There was no unsettling the spell because it was already broken. The only constant, its only fuel, lay in the connection to the staff.

"The stone," Mordred whispered.

"Yeah," Merlin said, just as quietly.

The stone had been used to contain an evil spirit, only to be emptied. The original purpose of the blue stone had never been as a prison, but to tie all orders of chaos together in a single point. They had to wrench the staff away from the woman wielding it, to break her connection to the crystal. Merlin could only guess that she couldn't continue to add to the spell if she was no longer touching the staff. From there, the only way to break the spell might be to destroy the blue stone, and Merlin couldn't fathom how.

"Brute force?" Merlin asked.

Mordred inhaled sharply. On the exhale, he spread his hands. "Maybe. It worked for the entity that possessed Sigan."

Kay chose that moment to return, ambling over to shrug his shoulders in a bored gesture. "Exits to the west and south. Could manage the way back if we scatter them enough. If they're not blocked now, they won't be blocked later."

"We hope," Mordred said.

"Yeah," Kay admitted, nodding. "That's going to change soon. You're drawing attention. Don't ask me how or why, but you've been noticed. I hope Tristan follows through, or we're in the shite, trying to find Plan B."

Merlin frowned. He'd thought that they'd been largely inconspicuous. He resisted the urge to look around, but in glancing at Kay, he saw that a small group some distance behind him were studying them and speaking in low tones.

"We stay and we wait," Merlin said.

"All right. You've got a plan, then?"

"Destroy or defend?" Merlin asked Mordred.

A conflicted, pinched expression settled on Mordred's face, but he said, "Defend. I fear Druidic magic may be too easily counteracted. Yours, on the other hand..."

"All right," Merlin said. "Retrieve or destroy the staff, Arthur said. No fancy tricks, Arthur said. I'll take care of that. You two give me cover."

"Understood," Kay said.
Mordred nodded.

"If Tristan doesn't follow through, you two head north. Watch for an ambush. Do what he planned to do, work your way back to me. Either way, as soon as the bonfire starts, we get the staff and we head back. We're needed on the line ASAP. Is that clear?" Merlin asked.

"Clear," Mordred said.

Kay checked his watch. "He's late."

"Ten to fifteen," Merlin said. "Give him a chance."

"Tristan?" Kay snorted.

"What would you do if it were you in his shoes? If you'd lost Bran?" Merlin asked.

"Bran isn't my kid," Kay said. Then, softly, he added, "I'd have to fight Will over who gets to kill them all."

"Yeah," Merlin said, nodding. "That's the only reason I'm trusting him to follow through."

They waited. They waited some more. Merlin was painfully aware of the slow spread of attention throughout the crowd. More and more people noticed them. Some decided that they weren't worth a second glance, while others wavered between approaching and leaving them be.

"Do we mask up?" Mordred asked, clearly uncomfortable, too.

"When the crowd clears out, yeah," Merlin said. "On my command."

It was a subtle shift, at first. A weight in the air. Bit by bit, the sidelong glances turned away from them. People craned their necks to see over everyone else. The sky darkened with more than evil intent, heavy with brown and grey smoke.

"Oh, thank fuck," Kay murmured.

The wind changed direction.

Merlin recoiled from the smell -- everyone did. Roasted beef and fried bacon was a pleasant, but gruesome undertone to the acrid gas in the air. His eyes watered, the back of his throat burned. He reached for his goggles without thinking. He saw Kay do the same, while Mordred fumbled to pull his own out of his coat pocket.

He wanted to cover his mouth and nose so badly, but he waited, using the sleeve of his coat instead. They couldn't reveal who they were, not yet, not yet --

Relief came in the form of panicked shouts that were too distant to make out, but that passed through the crowd like buckets of water in a fire line. "The dead! They're burning! Help us!"

A faint reprieve came when the crowd broke loose, nearly every sorcerer heading toward the pentagram. They must have known that any hope of gaining an advantage, of winning their war, rested with the possessed bodies, and the near-stampede of people heading north mixed the air enough to send the smoke in another direction. Only a few dozen people remained -- a group of magic users chanted without stopping, oblivious to the uproar around them. Sean, his friend, and several other men took up position around the stone platform, where the air was somehow clear and crisp.
"Now," Merlin ordered, pulling the red handkerchief up around his face. It didn't do much for the stink, but he could breathe without coughing or suffocating. "Scatter."

Kay darted left, Mordred disappeared somewhere to the right. Merlin had the feeling that they weren't too far away, unwilling to stray out of direct line of sight in the thickening smoke. Merlin advanced, using the distraction to get as close as he could to the stone platform without being noticed. The woman hadn't ceased her chanting -- if anything, it was more fervent now, firm but with a frantic undertone. She spread her arms wide, and --

Sean spotted him and broke from around the stone platform. He pointed a finger in Merlin's direction and yelled, but Merlin didn't hear what he said over the tumult of the scattering crowd.

"Cuma $\mathcal{P}$," Merlin shouted, throwing out his hand.

The staff tore out of the woman's grasp and flew across the open space toward Merlin. Merlin caught it easily, the well-worn wood of the staff slapping into his palm.

Disorientation hit him in an up-ended wave, the ground turning into the sky and the sky tilting sideways. The magical patterns that Merlin had been able to make out earlier jumped out at him in stark relief, bright, ghastly lines against the pitch-black night, bleeding out like ink on cheap paper. All of the power contained within the staff, all of the magic that had been drawn in, twisted and corrupted for the purposes of raising the dead -- it was at Merlin's command, only --

"Get him!" someone shouted.

A pulse of magic from Mordred knocked Sean off his feet before he could take more than a few steps toward Merlin. There was no sign of Kay until a short burst of gunfire had Sean exchanging uncertain glances with the other men around the stone platform. Between Mordred and Kay, there was enough to make them wary, and they hunkered down, as if expecting the woman to protect them.

Only --

The magic coiled around him like a seductress, teasingly promising untold riches and unimaginable power. It dove through the fabric of his clothes and skirted his skin, never coming close enough to touch, kept at bay by the sigil that Mordred had drawn on Merlin's arm. Bile rose up in the back of Merlin's throat. He coughed and spat, understanding just how badly the necromantic magic affected Mordred.

The woman on the platform was slow to come out of her trance. Her chants ebbed to a stop on a confused and disjointed tone. One arm dropped to her side, while the other was drawn forward so that she could stare at it.

Merlin shook the staff, willing it to behave. The carefully-wrought spellwork remained, unaffected by the break in connection to its previous user, static, as if someone had left a puzzle piece behind. The magic embedded in the staff seemed to understand, much like an intangible, living thing, that it would get no further with Merlin, and it seemed to sigh with the impatience of a petulant child, drawing away from Merlin to wait.

The sorceress dropped her arm. She looked from side to side. The hood of her robe bobbed with the movement, tilting with alien jerkiness, and it slipped from her head to fall upon her shoulders.

Her hair was long and straight, fastened away from her face. She turned her head to look over her shoulder, the arch of her eyebrow high, the glint in her eye barely visible through narrowed
suspicion. When she shifted her stance to face Merlin, Merlin knew without a doubt who she was.

Round face. High cheekbones. Full, red lips. Beautiful, but cold.

Nimueh.

Merlin half-expected a villain's monologue. Some dramatic speech to accompany a deeply-intoned *Who dares interfere with the ritual*. What he did not expect was the way Nimueh's eyes widened with recognition despite his goggles and the scarf around his face. He did not expect the shriek of fury and horror and a woman spurned.

"You!" Nimueh shouted.

"You!" the Priestess shouted, breaking out of her startled pose on the makeshift altar. Her arm was still outstretched where it had held the staff, ready to be struck upon the stone one more time to finalize the spell. The very air around them vibrated with anticipation, the magic trembling with unnatural life, ready to pour into the waiting vessels.

All around them were the graves of thousands of soldiers from an ancient battlefield, their bodies buried by the ages where they had fallen. Ghostly banners wafted in the breeze, ready to be picked up and hefted high once more. Steeds with red eyes and steamy breath stomped hooves on the graves of their riders, attempting to make them rise all the faster. The ground shuddered, as if the Mother resisted releasing all those whom She had taken to her bosom but could not hold on any more.

The power of the staff was unnatural, sickly, filthy, foul. If not for the wards drawn upon his body by his apprentice, the Sorcerer would have succumbed to its evil lure, the taint seeping into his soul, corrupting him.

The Sorcerer would need to thank his apprentice, later, and reward him if he promised not to tell the King how foolish he very nearly had been.

He turned his attention from the staff to the Priestess on the stone altar.

"Yes. Me," the Sorcerer said. He offered a lopsided grin and waved.

"Yes, me," Merlin said, not realizing the words were out of his mouth until he added, "Again."

He didn't stop to think about why he had said what he did. He didn't have the time. Nimueh's shriek was ear-piercing and painful. She threw her head back, her arms out, fingers spread and clawing the air. A faint crackle was audible over the earwig until Merlin realized it wasn't coming from the radio at all.

The brown smoke cleared from overhead. Wind whipped furiously, causing branches to creak and snap off. People in the distance screamed, but Merlin didn't know why. He could only assume that the fire Tristan had set was spreading.

Lightning cracked. It was a baby tear in the sky, bright and white, barely worth notice.

"How have you masked yourself from us all this time? We have searched, and never found --"

A group of women had stayed behind, unbothered by the chaos around them. They had continued their spellcasting all this time, only to come to an abrupt end as the ground heaved from beneath their feet. A breaching chasm, sulphuric and black, split open, accepting their sacrifice without so much as a by-their-leave. Long talons clawed the earth, and a distended body, mottled grey with
patches of green, emerged, faceless and gruesome, its large maw full of needle-like teeth. It released a wet bellow, muffling whatever else Nimueh had said, and shook its body violently.

The loud clang of scales against scales was not unlike the temper of battle drums on a bloody field.

"Shite!" Sean shouted, scrambling away. The men with him panicked and went in different directions, the slowest one in the lot engulfed whole. The bones in his body broke and split on the way down the monster's throat.

Gunfire burst from somewhere on Merlin's left. The monster reared on its hind feet, surging ahead only to skitter back as the barrage of bullets didn't stop. Mordred was barely visible, standing somewhere just out of the corner of Merlin's eye, his hands up and glowing white, attracting the creature. It turned, jabbered noises full of spittle, and hunkered down like a predator on the hunt, its rear end taut with anticipated motion, and --

"Get it!" Merlin shouted.

"Watch yourself!" Kay shouted back.

Merlin turned in time to see Nimueh perched on the very edge of the stone pillar, her arms crooked like bent branches, her hands full of white light so bright it was blinding. It took a few seconds for Merlin's goggles to compensate, but it was too much, and all that Merlin could see was Nimueh, glowing like a goddess from another era, washed out by her own power, made pale and fearsome by her rage.

Merlin threw up his free hand, dragging all of his power with the movement, formless and ephemeral. He didn't know what to cast, he didn't know how to defend himself against this kind of magic. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen before --

_Storms bent to her will. The seas were hers to command, the skies helpless against her power. The earth -- the earth was not hers, and the Mother was vengeful and mournful for her losses. The ground rose up easily, answering the Sorcerer's plead for aid_ --

The lightning cracked. It split the sky in half. It sundered down, merciless and uncontrolled, and _thud_-crashed against the ground, malevolent, vicious.

-- and took the might of sea and sky, of wind and Hellfire and broke it up with mounts rising from the depths, with harrows from distant steppes, with the damp peat of bogs saturated with druidic power and sacrifice.

The light dissipated, leaving a boiling crater in its wake, gravestones upturned, demolished, vaporized. Thunder trembled across the horizon, as if fleeing the scene of the crime.

Merlin staggered back, shaking his head, trying to clear it of visions and blindness both.

"The same old tricks?" Merlin asked, because taunting the evil sorcereress seemed like the right thing to do. "You talk about _all this time_, and you haven't learned anything new? Well, I have --"

Nimueh's mouth twisted in a vile grimace. She flung her arm at him, but the white light she held in her hands didn't go anywhere. Instead, it felt like the universe had taken a deep, deep breath. The air around him was suddenly very hot, dry, suffocating. In the distance, Merlin heard a faint, tinny, "_Watch out!_" but didn't know if it was from Mordred or Kay, and --

Unexpected illumination made him look up, but there was nothing to see. His goggles were washed out with pure, blinding white before attempting to compensate. The hair on Merlin's arms rose up,
like hackles on a dog, shivering in a frisson of power, and --

Merlin threw the staff up. Lightning barrelled down, pounding burning heat and crackling electricity relentlessly. He was trapped, with nowhere to go and nowhere to dodge, desperate for a foxhole against enemy fire, and his only protection was the glowing orb at the top of the Morrigan's staff. It absorbed the sheer, undirected power like a dry sponge in water, swelling, swelling until the blue crystal was brighter than the epicentre of a lightning storm. The staff weighed heavily in Merlin's grasp, bowing under the weight, curving toward the ground.

And then, abruptly, it was over.

Merlin's goggles compensated for the sudden absence of light, but it took him several painful seconds before the spots in his vision faded enough to see. The area around him was empty, gravestones demolished, bodies missing. The ground was burnt, but it smelled like freshly-turned soil in springtime, with the faint sweet-zing of the sky after a good, cleansing rain. At his feet was a patch of natural stone, seared clean by the lightning. It glowed white, as if of its own light, reminding him of Stonehenge.

But that wasn't all. The staff's contained magic was magnified a hundredfold. The staff was tied to the chaotic spellwork of necromantic magic that was washed all around the cemetery. The framework and structures, the decorations and stages, however mismatched they had been before, were even more so now, glowing so visibly that one hardly needed to be a mage to see it.

A sick feeling settled in Merlin's stomach.

Before, Nimueh had been summoning magic to awaken all of the dead who were laying in the cemetery. Now, Merlin dreaded what Nimueh could summon now.

Nimueh stood, wretched and haggard, on the stone platform. Pride and defiance were the only thing holding her upright. Her arms were listless by her side, her cheeks sunken from the energy she had divested in an attempt to destroy Merlin. And yet, a small smile curled at her blood-red lips. She raised a haughty chin. She knew well what she had done, and she knew the consequences -- probably far better than Merlin ever would.

"You don't get to win this time," the Sorcerer said.

Nimueh's eyes widened, and that was when Merlin wearily realized that he had said those words out loud. "No --"

Merlin brought the staff's head down, hard.

A goddess' staff should be unbreakable. Crafted from ironwood and the heartstone of the earth. That wasn't true. The tendrils caging the orb splintered like dry wood, and the crystal shattered like cheap glass. The impact vibrated up the long shaft, trembling in Merlin's hand.

Somewhere, Merlin was sure, the Morrigan was howling.

Almost at once, a loud clacking filled the battered clearing. It sounded like scornful laughter. The clacking grew louder, spreading out from all around them, drawing even Nimueh's attention away from Merlin.

Hundreds, no, thousands of crows spread wings and took to the sky, blackening a night bleached white by lightning. They swarmed like locusts before falling into formation, arcing up and away. In their wake they left behind a haunting cackle that Merlin would hear in his dreams to the end of his days.
"You fool," Nimueh said.

Merlin ignored her. He turned, still half-blind from the lightning, but he wasn't so sure that it was his vision or the goggles. A blur smeared across his glasses, and it was clear for almost a second. He saw a shape running toward him from his right, another one from his left. "Get clear! Get clear!"

The shapes ran at him. One of them grabbed his arm and pulled him away. Merlin couldn't see clearly enough to make out who it was, but as he turned back, Nimueh went flying off the stone platform in mid-spell, Mordred's arm thrown out as if he were casting her away.


The earth under his feet didn't cooperate. Slippery, at first. Then soft. So soft. He tripped over something hard. He snatched his glasses from his face, and for an instant, he was blind. But he adjusted to the patches of light streaming in -- from the city just beyond the cemetery to the stray fires scattered all around -- and scrambled for his footing, finally finding the ground.


Merlin didn't know which way to go, completely disoriented by the changed landscape around him. There were holes in the ground, burnt grass and gravel, trees toppled over. Graves hollowed out by the raised dead or dug open had caved in, and the trail that led back the way they came was jaggedly cut in two.

Merlin looked back as he ran. Mordred was right behind him. The stone platform was empty, but Nimueh was on the ground, backing away with a menacing sashay, as if the entire scenario was some sort of dark horror musical on the stage of the Globe.

And it was -- a horror that Merlin couldn't fathom. The necromancy hung in the air like those fragile glass balls decorating the Christmas tree, ready to shatter at the slightest rustle. It was a spell undone, a spell near completion, and from the way Nimueh raised her hands, her expression savage and determined, Merlin knew, he just knew, that she was going to finish the rite and cast the spell whether or not she had the staff in hand.

She didn't need it. The staff was holding the spell stable, for now, though the spell was quickly disintegrating. Merlin slowed down, stumbling over a memory plaque sticking out of the ground. He couldn't let her finish the spell. There were thousands of bodies in this cemetery. Freshly-buried, perfectly-preserved, rotting and decaying, or in scattered skeletons.

They'd never survive that.

"Come on!" Kay shouted.

Merlin stared at the staff in his hand. At the tendrils of magic unravelling from its splintering length. At the smooth grip where had once been scratched scores and scores of marks, a tally of valiant warriors collected by a goddess of myth and legend.

He couldn't touch the necromantic magic without tainting his own. But he could --

He didn't know what he could do. He had no fucking clue. Gaius hadn't found anything. The Druids didn't know. The staff was from a time before recorded memory, a time when magic ruled the world.

Merlin acted on instinct. He held out the staff, raising it high in offering.
"Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! Hear me!" Merlin let his magic loose, willing himself to be heard. His voice echoed in a deep, profound baritone, echoing like the very heartbeat of the earth itself. "Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! This warrior summons and stirs thee! Come and be welcome in this holy place of endless rest and eternal sleep!"

Nimueh raged, seeing what he was doing and understanding what he was doing even as he didn't, fumbling blindly through muscle memory of a ritual he had never performed before. The ground lurched beneath his feet and a monument statue toppled over, creaking and crumbling, falling toward him. Dust fell on top of him, the stone groaned, and it was pushed aside with Mordred's intent grunt, his magic bright next to Merlin's own.

"Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! Hear me!" Mordred repeated. "Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! This warrior summons and stirs thee! I bow my knee before you in this time of war!"

There was a clatter in the distance, mangled shouts and approaching footfalls.

"They're coming," Kay said. "We've got to go."

"Not yet," Merlin said. "We've got to finish this. You've got to pitch in. Like we did with Sigan. It's the number three -- Morrigan's a triune goddess, but she's a goddess of war. I have a feeling she'll be more on our side than Nimueh's."

"Jesus," Kay breathed. "Okay, fuck. Kathy had better not hear about this, or she'll make me help her at every ceremony. What do you need me to do?"

*I don't know*, Merlin nearly said. Mordred saved him from having to admit it, and said, "Whatever feels right."

There was a painfully long silence before Kay took a deep breath and said, "Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! Hear me! Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! This warrior summons and stirs thee! I plead for your aid and your protection!"

Nothing.

In the distance, Nimueh cackled.

The air pulsed. The temperature dropped. Magic trembled, barely held together by the strength of Nimueh's will. Nimueh cried out as if in pain, shouting as she pulled in all that was being drawn away from her. Her determination was strong, intent as steel, as she struggled to maintain one spell while she tried to cast another to demolish them.

Merlin glanced at Kay. He turned to Mordred. He hefted the staff higher.

"Great Queen! Mother of the Dead! Chooser of the Slain! Hear us! Your Blessing has been tainted! Your Chosen Brave woken from their rightful rest! Take them back!"

Merlin didn't *see* anything. He felt it. A weight on the staff. A faint pressure. A pull.

It was drawn away from him with the gentlest touch, and as he let go, the staff crumbled to ashes.

The ashes floated in the wind, glittering like silver, beautiful like blossoms in the spring.

As the staff withered, the last connections keeping the necromantic spell stable snapped, twanging in a low, shuddering murmur. The structures and the foundations, the decorations on the spellwork
-- they trembled, flickering in and out before becoming so bright that Merlin had to look away.

"I think we should run now," Mordred said.

Merlin didn't hear Mordred, not at first. A rush of power made him tremble as his magic return to him. It settled on his skin with urgency even as Merlin slowly realized how much power he had used in the calling. The instinct to *get the fuck out* warred with a bone-deep exhaustion. He wanted to sag to the ground, to sink onto the soft earth, to have a bloody nap, but then…

Wild, uncontrolled necromantic magic escaped the careful craftwork Nimueh had laid down, lashing out with the ferocity of a whip. Stone crypts were sliced in two as if by a sharp knife, others crumbled to dust. The ground rose up and heaved as caskets were drawn to the air, only to come crashing down gruesomely.

"I concur," Merlin said. He looked around grimly for any signs of Nimueh, but either she had been snatched by the Morrigan for punishment or had taken the opportunity to flee. There was no sign of her.

Merlin forced himself to move. They couldn't stay.

Kay didn't say anything. He was already running.

They reached the entrance without seeing anyone, but no sooner had they crossed the threshold than the magic captured within the confines of the resurrection spell finally burst free, shaking loose of its coils like a leviathan from the deep. It was tremendous, formless, vicious like the funnel of a tornado, spiralling up and into the sky before striking some sort of ceiling, where it erupted in a brilliant wash of green and yellow, beautiful now when its power could have been used for so much evil. The magic washed down in tsunami wave, causing the earth to rumble and shift for several long seconds as it returned to its source. The residual rippled on the ground like the ocean lapping at the shore, and Merlin backed away instinctively, not wanting his boots wet.

"Look," Kay said, pointing.

At the highest rise of the cemetery, backlit by an eerie, purple-white light, was the shape of a woman holding a staff, the gnarled web at the head restored, a simple white gem in the center glowing bright.

Slowly, the night returned, the light fading. The woman walked away, but with every step, she seemed to change, like shadows shifting on a forest floor as the sun creased the horizon. As darkness fell fully, Merlin heard the flutter of feathers and a quiet murmur.

*Strong are the Knights of Albion. Long may they live to fight on the battlefield. Bright is their glory, strong is their honour. My Blessing upon them and upon their kin.*

Merlin shook his head, not sure if he'd heard those breathless words or if it was something from one of those strange waking dreams. He glanced at Mordred and at Kay, but they seemed unaffected, as if they hadn't heard anything at all. Merlin shook it off and walked away, tapping his ear to activate the radio. "We're back."

"I see that," Lucan said, huffing. He juggled the equipment he was carrying and returned everyone's equipment. Merlin felt better, suddenly, to have his rifle in his hands. "I feel like I missed out on the fun."

"Trust me, mate, it weren't hardly that," Kay said shakily, glancing over his shoulder. "What about Nimueh?"
Merlin looked back. The graveyard was silent, though dust and dirt still streamed in the air, and distant smoke rose over the treeline. There was no sign of anyone, which was something of a relief. "We'll deal with her later," Merlin said grimly. He tapped the radio again, opening a channel. "Watchtower. Task completed. We need a sit rep on the others."

Elyan's voice crackled over the radio. "Saw the last half of it on the satellite. Jesus. There's a giant sinkhole in the cemetery -- what did you do? No, never mind, details later, after I've had a stiff drink. All the bodies stopped moving about two minutes ago, just dropped dead -- ah, sorry, that was insensitive. But it's over, except for some monster-types that are being corralled."

"The team?" Merlin asked, nodding to Lucan as they joined up. He had no idea where Lucan had hidden, but he looked just as scuffed as the rest of them, hinting that he'd had a few scuffles of his own. He gestured at a scrape on Lucan's cheek with a frown, but Lucan only shook his head and shrugged, indicating he was fine.

"None the worse for wear. Minor injuries, only," Elyan said. "Chime in. Situation's changed, and they're going to need everyone."

Merlin glanced at Kay. Kay frowned, but he shook his head, unsure. "What's going on?"

"We've got incoming," Elyan said. Merlin could almost hear the casual shrug of his shoulders from the way everything went silent in the background.

"Seriously?" Bran said in the background. "Just bloody well tell him."

Elyan sighed, and there was the sound of a hand slapping a hard surface. Elyan's "Ow, goddamn it, Gwen," was overwhelmed by Morgana's clipped, "You've got a pest problem."

There was a struggle on the other line, and Bran's voice came on crisp and clear. "Dragons. Just fucking say it. There's dragons, and we checked. They're not any of ours."

Merlin stared at the sky, grateful for the dim streetlights that washed out the clouds and the stars. He sighed heavily, decided against wishing for a few nights of peace, and said, "Acknowledged. Are the main teams clear for comms?"

"About to jump down my throat if you don't switch over," Elyan said.

Merlin glanced at the others and nodded; they all tapped into the main channel.

"... can't believe I'm referencing Dragons of Pern. Confirm visuals. Infrared's got a wing of them heading this way, bound southwest from about, oh, fuck it, I give them ten minutes before they're past me," Galahad said. "They're not moving fast, but they're spreading."

"Overwatch teams to stay on position," Arthur said, sounding strained.

A knot unfurled in Merlin's chest to hear Arthur's voice. He felt a nudge at his shoulder and looked up to see Kay, who nodded and pointed toward a few people emerging from nearby buildings, probably to see what the commotion was at the cemetery.

Arthur's voice came over the line again after a pause of breath. "I want trajectories and a close-up view. How many of them? Are they carrying anything?"

Merlin gestured for the team to start walking.

"I'm too bloody far to be of use, you sure you want me to stay here?" Geraint asked. He was on the
westernmost point of the overwatch position, and probably the one positioned in the worst spot to help if the dragons came down early.

"Stay where you are," a new voice said. There was a rustle of movement before Balinor spoke again. "They'll need to circle to slow down enough to land, if that's what they're meaning to do."

"What else could they do?" Arthur asked.

"Oh, breathe fire, burn most of London, take away virgin sacrifices, steal all our gold?" Lamorak suggested.

Balinor snorted. "First and second for certain. You'll be able to tell by their flight patterns. If they start to slow down and circle, they're landing. If they keep on course and maintain speed, they're passing over. They'll raze if they drop altitude, stay on straight, and slow down."

"ETA nine minutes," Galahad said.

"I need a quick way of telling what they're about to do," Arthur snapped.

"I don't have one to give," Balinor said. His tone was flat, but Merlin thought he heard a note of apology in it.

"Coordinates," Will said suddenly. "Give me sighting coordinates. Estimate of flight speed. Any change of trajectory, I want to know. I can give you a best guess."

"I'll handle coordinates," Gwaine piped in.

"Speed," Galahad said.

"I'll just sit here," Geraint said, and Merlin could hear him roll his eyes.

"Worst case," Arthur said. "Why would they be coming here?"

"Nothing good," Perceval said.

"They won't be working with the NWO, would they?" Leon asked, sounding tired, almost strained. "Not if our last encounter with them is any indication. They'll be trying to get us with our pants down."

"I concur," Balinor said.

"Wiping us off the face of the earth it is, then," Kay said, though not over the channel. He blew out his breath and gestured toward a group of people loitering around a pub, their anxious chatter increasing in volume. "I'll see if any of that lot will volunteer a car."

"What can we do against dragon fire?" Merlin asked.

There was a sharp intake and a breath of relief over the line, but Arthur overtook the chatter and asked, "Are you --"

"We're all fine. Tired," Merlin said. He paused and glanced at Mordred, who stared back questioninglly before realizing what Merlin was silently asking, and he shook his head. "Don't ask us to do anything stupid like shield the city. I don't think we have it in us, even if we had the time to run the circuit around town first."

"Our air force?" Bohrs suggested. Then, he added, "I'm actually rather keen on that, given that I'm
in the line of fire if they decide to let loose early."

"We've got fire hydrants," Pellinor said, after a pause. "Apply enough pressure, could probably use it as a single-shot measure."


"If horror movies have taught us anything, and I'm thinking of Mothra, specifically, our RAF's probably not got much of a chance in the air against dragons. I'm not knocking our blokes. They're a mad lot, them, but. Dragons. They're more maneuverable, I'd imagine," Lance said.

"Not our call," Arthur cut in. "If they come, they come. The Brass has our recommendations in case of aerial assault -- let them deal with it. We're ground forces, and we'll contain on the ground."

"Where do you want us?" Merlin asked.

There was a long pause. "Here," Arthur said. "North, with Red-One. The two of you can't contain everything, but do the best you can."

Merlin glanced at Lucan, who nodded and went to join Kay, where he was negotiating with the people outside the pub. They were going to need two vehicles if they were going to get to their positions in time.

"What about --" Merlin began, and cursed under his breath when he couldn't remember the code name they'd given Kilgarrah.

It wasn't needed, because Arthur knew immediately what he was talking about. "He's around, but he's not answering his bloody radio."

Before Merlin could say, Of course he's not, Balinor said, "I'd like to talk to, uh. Hellburner-One on private channel."

"Four bogeys," Galahad announced. "Big ones. Wings and tails and everything. You know, I liked dragons more when they were in video games or in the movies. ETA unchanged."

"Not now," Merlin said, glancing at Mordred and tilting his head toward Kay and Lucan when they flagged.

The small crowd hung back cautiously, but more than a few inched forward, more curious than anything. The four of them were still masked, but there wasn't much that Kay, Merlin or Mordred could do about their missing hats, or the fact that Merlin didn't have workable goggles anymore. A couple of women spoke behind cupped hands; a young man stared at them with wide eyes.

"These fine gentlemen are loaning us their vehicles," Lucan said, gesturing to a balding older man with steel-grey hair and a nearly-white moustache and a younger, thinner man who had the same warm brown eyes. "They promise that they're in good condition, full petrol."

"Appreciate it," Merlin said with a nod. He started to follow Kay toward the red pick-up truck with the dented fender when the older man stopped in his path.

His brown eyes flashed a faint yellow, and next to him, the other man's eyes did the same. "Can we help?"

Merlin hesitated. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mordred climb into the passenger seat of a
two-door hatchback, the vehicle backing out of the parking lot before the door even shut. He
turned to the older man, put a hand on his shoulder, and looked to the man next to him -- obviously
his son.

"Get the word out. Call everyone you can. Tell them to take care of themselves. To watch out for
others. Don't take unnecessary risks. Listen to the army broadcasts and follow any instructions they
give." As Merlin spoke, the air raid sirens started up all around the city. He paused, and said, "It's
the Blitz. All over again."

The older man took a sharp intake of breath. He nodded. "I understand."

Merlin went to the truck, climbing in. He heard, "Be careful!" from one of the women in the crowd
when Kay turned the key in the ignition.

"South?" Kay asked, though less for confirmation as for something to say in the truck. Merlin
reached over and turned off the radio.

"Yeah, get us to Arthur's position, or as near as you can. Do the rest on foot, if we have to." Merlin
couldn't help it; he glanced up at the sky where the buildings didn't block the view. He knew the
dragons were nowhere close by, not yet, and that he wouldn't be able to see them anyway.

"Your glasses?" Kay asked.

"Busted. Seared. Don't know. Don't have time to look at them," Merlin said. He tapped his ear.
"Red-One, confirm. Hellburner-Two and Four are heading north to Red-Two. Remainder heading
your way. Our ETA's closer to ten minutes, depending on the traffic."

Kay snorted. The streets were empty. There were bodies, here and there, but Merlin didn't try to
look too closely at them.

"Confirmed," Arthur said. He sounded distracted, so Merlin didn't ask any questions or bother him
any further.

"Can we talk now?" Balinor asked. There was a meaningful weight in his voice, and Merlin
groaned inwardly. No, he wanted to say. He never wanted to talk to Balinor. Especially not now.

Kay nudged Merlin's chest. Merlin looked down and saw a spare pair of goggles in his hand. He
took them with a grateful nod, putting them on.

Almost immediately, his vision cleared and it was as if it were daylight. It did a lot to ease Merlin's
tension. "Yes, fine, you've got me for four minutes. Get Watchtower to switch you over."

There was a click-click on the line. Merlin sighed inwardly and glanced at Kay. "Keep an ear out
for me."

"Yes, sir," Kay said, keeping his eyes on the road.

Merlin switched over.

"Merlin --"

"No, stop. I'm going to make this clear, yeah? If this is some attempt at a heartfelt father-son
moment, I'm really not in the fucking mood. Unless what you're going to tell me is pertinent to the
current situation, I don't want to hear it," Merlin snapped.
There was a short pause. Then, calmly, Balinor said, "It's pertinent."

"Good. You'll have some way for us to deal with the dragons, then?" Merlin asked. "Something along the lines of bringing your little dragonlord squad over here to do some fancy flying to take them out?"

"Yes," Balinor said, suddenly clipped. "But calling them here and flying my team over will take too long."

"Carlisle and his lot? Are they closer?" Merlin asked.

"No, and damn you for saying his name. I'm talking about you, Merlin," Balinor said. "You can stop them."

Merlin growled under his breath. "I don't know if you got the memo, but I'm drained. I've got enough for a few good shots, but no more than that. We've got four --"

Kay held up five fingers.

"-- five bloody dragons coming our way. If you've got practical ideas about heat-seeking missiles and aerial combat, or something, you're best off talking to Arthur," Merlin said.

"I'll give you the most practical thing I can think of. That I know of. And that's you, Merlin. Not your magic. Not your weapons. You. You're born of my line. You have dragonkin in your blood. You have the power to call them and to put them under your control. You --"

_You are the Dragonlord._

Merlin glanced at Kay, but Kay didn't look to have spoken. He shook his head to clear it, wondering if Nimueh's lightning had done something to him, and snapped, "So you say. I'll have you know that power is one thing, knowing how to use it is something else. I'm not pointing fingers or anything --"

He definitely, _definitely_ was.

"-- but someone wasn't around to teach me these things growing up, and look where we're at now?"

"If you'd only have allowed me to train you when you were here --"

"Oh, sure, put the blame square on someone else's shoulders, never mind that they had their hands full with other responsibilities, because that's how you do things, isn't it?" Merlin said, catching Kay side-eyeing him. He forced a deep breath, and in the silence that fell over the channel, he added, more calmly, "And besides, putting them under my control? What the Hell is this, Balinor? You want me to impose my will on someone else? Anyone else? I don't care if they're dragons. They're annoying as fuck, but they don't deserve that. That would make us no better than the same people who turned a weapon on innocents and stripped them of their magic before executing them."

"Harsh," Kay murmured. He tilted his head. "But true."

Balinor didn't respond, but Merlin could hear him breathing. A strained exhalation of breath was followed by a careful, "Would you rather they burn London to the ground?"

"Ugh," Merlin said, pushing his goggles up and rubbing his eyes. He ended up pulling at his hair and cracking his neck to ease the building tension. "Honestly? I'd rather this were over, nothing bad
“Yeah,” Kay echoed, a small smile on his lips. His expression was suddenly serious, and he ducked down to look up at the sky through the windshield. Merlin gathered that they didn’t have much time left.

“Look, you said, I can call them. Does that mean they’ll listen to me?” Merlin asked, replacing his goggles.

“They’ll come if you call,” Balinor confirmed, his tone unusually neutral. “I can’t guarantee that they’ll listen.”

“That’s fine,” Merlin said. He didn’t care if the dragons listened as long as he could draw them away from the more heavily populated areas of London. Away from London proper would be ideal, but Merlin would settle for keeping Arthur and his team safe. He weighed his options, and -- caught a flash of orange-red light overhead. A fleeting glimpse of dragonfire lighting up the sky gave him the idea to ask for a full missile strike. If he could withstand however much destructive electrical power from Nimueh’s lightning, he might be able to manage a shield strong enough to protect him against a minor nuclear strike. Arthur wasn’t going to like it, but -- “Look, I’ve got to go.”

“Merlin --” Balinor’s flat tone spiked, suddenly alarmed, but Merlin closed the connection before he could say any more.

“How far are we?” Merlin asked, switching to the main channel. A jumble of frantic voices speaking over each other hit him suddenly, though a second later the barrage eased and the information was delivered in a more controlled manner. It was difficult to sort it all out, but mainly, Merlin was listening for Arthur’s voice.

It helped.

“Not much further. The Pendragon building is just ahead,” Kay said, gesturing. Merlin could see the stainless steel in the distance, looking foreboding with all its windows dark. The truck slowed down, and Kay pulled over, gesturing ahead. “We’ll have to take the rest of this on foot.”

The road was blocked off with a pile of bodies that was very obviously the second wave that they’d been warned about. Motionless and still, collapsed in heaps of decomposed flesh and bones, the sight was made all the more eerie when he spotted several bodies that hadn’t toppled over, but that were just standing there, frozen.

“You know, our next movie night? I’m going to beg off the horror movies,” Kay said, turning off the engine and climbing out of the truck.

“Yeah, me too. A nice rom-com will do me about now.” Merlin followed, rounding the front at a quick jog to intercept Kay. “Keys.”

“Oh, no, no. Absolutely not. I promised the old man I’d get his truck back in one piece,” Kay said, shaking his head.

“Fine, I don’t need the keys,” Merlin said, brushing past Kay. He opened the driver’s side door and climbed in, trying to figure out how the truck was wired and how best to go about jump-starting it. “I want you to get back to Arthur. Help him evacuate or whatever it is he’s doing now --”

He looked up from where he had his arms wedged under the steering wheel to see Kay’s revolver pointed at him.
"The fuck do you think you're doing?" Kay asked.

"Taking care of the dragons," Merlin said. He registered the radio chatter, Will's announcement that two dragons looked to be on a razing trajectory along a coordinate path, the rest of them banking sharply, probably to take a perpendicular approach, and, Red-One, looks like you're about to get hit with the brunt of it. For the love of God, duck and cover. "Get that out of my face."

Realization dawned, because Kay shook his head. "Oh, no. No, you don't. Have you forgotten the team rule book already? We're only allowed one idiot move per mission and one attempt at self-sacrifice in our entire lives, all right? You've already gone and used up both. Now get the fuck out of the truck."

"Kay --"

Kay shifted his grip and his aim, finger sliding onto the trigger. "You don't need your legs to cast magic, right? I'll try to keep from blowing your kneecap off."

"This is the only way," Merlin insisted. "We've got a chance if I draw them off, but only if I draw them off --"

"Find another way, because I'd rather walk down a dragon's gullet than have to explain to Arthur what you're thinking of doing. Don't you fucking dare make me tell my Captain that the great love of his life is about to commit suicide."

"It's not --"

"Get out of the truck," Kay said. "You've got four blocks to come up with another way to deal with these giant flying reptiles. Preferably one that doesn't get you killed. Arthur needs you. Fuck. The entire goddamn team needs you."

Merlin didn't resist when Kay dragged him out, then pointedly locked the truck.

"Move," Kay said, giving him a harsh shove.

Merlin started moving, though not without casting glances in Kay's direction, not sure where Kay's head was at right now. Kay holstered his weapon and took hold of his rifle, keeping behind Merlin as if he half-expected Merlin to run off.

"What the fuck would I even tell Will? He'll fight Arthur for firsts in line to kill me if I let you go. And Bran. Don't you think we've lost enough?" Kay snapped, out of the blue.

Merlin looked over his shoulder, mouth dropping open, suddenly at a loss for words. He hadn't thought about it, actually. He hadn't been thinking at all. Merlin was hearing about a threat -- a threat that he could feel, now, as if the dragons were right behind him, breathing heavily down the back of his neck -- and all he'd been able to focus on was how to get rid of them. How to keep the city safe. How to make sure they never got to Arthur.

Knucker and Scylles' threats toward Arthur had made it very clear that they would be happier if they wiped out every Pendragon from the face of the planet. Merlin didn't understand why, and he didn't think he ever would. It didn't matter. He'd just wanted to protect everyone.

And he'd been about to act on his impulse without thinking of how everyone would react. Arthur. Will. His Mum. Gods. His Mum would drag his arse out of Hell itself just to give him the biggest guilt trip a mother could give their sons.
"I don't know if there's any other option," Merlin admitted quietly.

"Killing yourself to solve one problem isn't a long-term solution," Kay said, sounding a little sharp. Merlin winced inwardly, wondering if Kay had ever thought about it, and if someone had intervened on his behalf. Or worse, if he'd been on the other side, helpless, while someone slipped through his fingers. "There's always going to be the next problem, and it'll be one you can fix, and where the fuck will we be then if you're not around?"

"Sorry," Merlin said, shaking his head.

Kay bumped Merlin's shoulder in silent acceptance, but he didn't say anything more.

Merlin blew out his breath, side-eyed Kay, and winced. He had to know. "You're not going to tell Arthur about this, are you?"

"Oh, I'm going to hold this over your head for the rest of your bloody life, you goddamn numpty. You're going to make sure I never buy myself a pint ever again, if you know what's good for you," Kay threatened, but the anger had gone out of his voice, and he sounded sad.

Merlin snorted, but he nodded. "Great, now I'm more worried about bankrolling your impeding alcoholism than figuring out how we're going to deal with our --"

He felt the lash of heat before it hit, reacting on instinct. He pushed Kay out of the way and dove, a shield raising almost on instinct, protecting them both. The flames were sweltering, like the depth of a dry bellows, sticking to everything it touched until it burned out all the fuel and made doubly-certain to do so. The line of dragonfire swept over them, scalding the pavement, clinging to the shield like Greek fire, and continuing on toward the doubly-vacated bodies. The bodies caught fire like tinder, and --

"Oh, God. That's worse than the cemetery," Kay said, coughing despite the red handkerchief covering his nose and mouth. He rolled to his feet, testing the shield, and waved his hand. "We'd better hurry."

"Yeah," Merlin said, waving a hand to dispatch the shield, clinging flames and all, and toe-stepped his way through the burning patches.

Over the radio, Will announced, "Pass number three approaching. Duck and cover, Team-One."

Merlin and Kay veered into an alley, avoiding a second pass that missed the street level and mostly hit the building. They broke into a run, keeping an eye out for enemy activity as they moved, but the possessed bodies -- no longer possessed now, it seemed -- didn't move from where they were.

"Shite. Shite," Will said, frantic. "Looks like our resident dragon expert is bloody fucking wrong. One of them's just done a banking move that would have our famous dog-fighters crying at the beauty of it. You lot, not so much, because its heading is right for your position. These are not friendlies. Scatter, goddamn you."

"Can't! We're evacuating the flats!" Lamorak shouted.

"Fuck!" Will said. "At least -- fuck. At least tell me you've got ground-to-air missiles. The magic bullets don't do shite, and armour-piercers aren't effective at this range. I'm going to move closer."

"Stay where you are, Overwatch," Arthur snapped. Then, in the same breath, he said, "Move. Move. Come on, let's go." There was a pause, a faint grunt, and the sound of a window or a door crashing open. "This way! Let me help you, ma'am -- all teams, stay at your locations, don't worry
about us. Just do what you can. Evacuate anyone in your affected areas. Overwatch, keep an eye on their movements."

"Stay, go, make up your fucking mind!" Will growled.

"I've got confirmation of jets inbound," Lamorak said.

"Let them deal with the airborne," Arthur said.

Merlin could hear a loud thump in the background, picked up by someone's microphone and echoed by the buildings around them.

"We'll take care of this one," Arthur said grimly.

A great roar, audible even without the radio, resonated of death and murder and war.

Merlin ran faster.

____

Mickey was getting whiplash.

He could accept zombies. Movies, telly, graphic novels, books, even rock bands proved that zombies were such a cultural phenomenon that it might happen. Science could do some really fucked up things, there were stories about voodoo priests using secret neurotoxin compounds to "bring” people back from the dead, and wasn't there something on the Internets about a creepy insect or spider that was classified as a genuine zombie?

Zombies could happen. Magic made anything possible. Zombies became more plausible because science was a thing, and magic was, too.

That they all collapsed when Mickey least expected it? Mickey really wished it had happened immediately before one of them had come at them with some sort of cleaved, rusty axe hefted high in mid-swing. He could definitely live without the feeling that he'd soiled his pants or the knowledge that he'd revealed to the Underground's faithful viewers that he could scream in a higher register than Julia.

But. Dragons. Fucking dragons.

Dragons belonged in roleplaying games. In fantasy novels. In artistic renditions that took the breath away. In fucking movies, acting like adorable kittens one second, blasting the bad guys the next, and saving Hiccup the third.

They should not exist in real life, but there they were, somewhere in the dark skies, raining fire and destruction on them. It was the cult classic, Reign of Fire, made manifest.

"Where even have these things been?" Julia asked, panning the skies, trying to catch a glimpse of one. "Did someone try to build a subway station and broke into a cave or something? Who pissed off the dragon?"

"Oh, good, I'm glad I'm not the only one who saw that movie," Mickey said.

He looked around. They'd lost their bodyguard shortly after the zombies dropped to the ground like
puppets whose strings had been cut. There had been five minutes of blessed peace when one of the members of the Red Team suddenly started barking orders to evacuate the area. Zack had gone to help the soldiers.

Mickey wasn't clear on why, and the few soldiers they'd managed to stop for answers didn't seem to know, either. He figured that the only person with answers would be one of the two men from the Red Team. They'd lost sight of them, though, and he felt as if he'd missed his chance for that promised exclusive interview when --

"There they are," Mickey said, relieved. The leader between the two was ahead of everyone else, gesturing at the people to come out of the building quickly and pointing at where to go. He strode purposefully, the sword he'd been using during the battle tucked in his belt as if it belonged there, pausing every now and then to press a hand to his ear and to… Mickey wasn't sure, exactly, what he was doing. Probably talking to the others, getting information, commanding everyone else about. He certainly had the air of someone who was accustomed of being in charge, of taking care of everyone.

A loud crack-swoop followed an inexplicable rush of hot air. The sky brightened for several long seconds. Mickey looked up with everyone else, seeing the long line of fire coming down at them.

He knew, intellectually, that there was a dragon on the other end of that line, that he should take a look for himself and see what Londoners would be facing next. Instead, he ducked for cover, grabbing Julia by the waist, and dragged her in the nearest alley to huddle against a giant rubbish bin.

"Self-preservation!" he shouted over the roar of the flames.

"What about it?" Julia shouted back.

"Get some!"

He covered his face when the heat increased, half-expecting a fireball to blow into the alley and char them to ashes where they stood. When he opened his eyes, it was to the surprised realization that he was still alive, that he was warm but not on fire, that the cross road definitely was, and that panicked people were running from burning buildings.

"Jesus," Mickey said. He saw the Red Team leader run past, his partner behind him, several shell-shocked but functioning soldiers following. "Let's stay on them."

"I feel like I should've asked for more danger pay when we started following this story," Julia said.

"You didn't?" Mickey said, feeling smug, for once, because if he survived, he was going to take that danger pay and go on vacation somewhere where there weren't any fucking dragons. Maybe Ibiza.

"Shut up, I was distracted by the promise of a shiny new camera," Julia said, scowling.

They followed the soldiers at a healthy distance, making sure that they weren't seen. There was no need to take any unnecessary chances, not when the camera could zoom in and had excellent resolution. The feed might be broadcasted live, but Bertrise would work her magic on the edits, and the clips added to their permanent archives would be as clear as day, as if they'd been right next to the soldiers in the middle of combat.

Swoop-whooop.
Mickey glanced up, wary and uncertain. Julia slowed down and hung back, moving toward the wall of a nearby building and sliding for the recessed doorstep.

*Swoop-whoop-whoop.*

The soldiers ahead slowed down. They were already scattered across the road, but now they were even more so, none of them wanting to be bunched up close. They scanned the skies, the area around them, holding their semi-automatic weapons at the ready.

*Swoo-whoo-whoo-whoo--*

A great, serpentine body with burnished bronze skin descended so fast that it was nothing more than a large, undefined shape, at first. It landed daintily, but its heft and size made dainty into a loud, resonating thump. Tremendous wings stretched out awkwardly in the too-narrow four-lane street. The dragon tossed its head back and roared.

The roar was a sonic boom in the wide space, shattering the windows that were closest. The big bellow of breath forced several soldiers back, deafened by the sonorous, deep bass.

Mickey clutched the nearest solid surface, his fingers digging into the sharp edges of brick. The building trembled from the residual vibration as the roar died out. He coughed, because he'd swallowed his tongue. "Jesus fucking --"

"Language," Julia said, and in the same breath, tacked on a muttered, "Motherfucker."

The dragon's wings flapped once, twice, claws catching onto nearby buildings and knocking through them as if they were made out of Balsam wood. Wings folded, held close to the body, and the dragon landed all four limbs on the ground.

Gunfire broke out. The dragon didn't seem to notice.

"It's as long as three of those bloody tourist buses," Mickey said, swallowing hard. "About ten storeys high. And the tail --"

The tail danced in tight coils before lashing out, the barbed ends catching on a lorry parked at the side of the street, lifting it up and flinging it forward like a ball. The metal crumpled against the side of a building, through a corner, taking someone's sofa and the sign to a small pub with it.

People poured out of the nearby buildings in a panic.

"The Red Team members look unfazed, like they've seen this kind of thing before. The regular personnel? Not so much. I can't tell if they want to shite bricks or if they want to run. And I don't -- I really don't blame them. I don't care how much war they've seen. Absolutely nothing could prepare you for this kind of encounter. It's pretty tremendous. Awe-inspiring, even. But here's a pro tip: make sure you empty your bladder before you meet one," Mickey said, running a trembling hand through his hair. "I kind of wonder what the Red Team went through if they're not the least bit bothered. I'm not sure I want to know."

The initial trickle of people running from their flats had become a swarm as a wave of residents from several buildings collided in the middle of the streets in panic. At first, they ran in the wrong direction, only to turn straight for the soldiers, getting in their line of fire.

Mickey didn't have a clear picture of what was happening, losing track when several people crashed into him. Julia was better at crowd avoidance, and she kept filming, largely left unbothered where she was rooted in the recessed doorway of a shop. Mickey steadied himself to look around,
noting that the streets were clearer, now, with everyone pointed the right way. Some soldiers were with them, though more to guide and protect their retreat. The two Red Team members were last, lingering as long as they could with a dragon advancing.

Mickey saw the leader between the two pick up a fallen shield next to one of the zombie bodies. *Renntartsche*, his teenage nerd brain supplied, gleeful. He was impressed by how easily the man hefted it up -- it was large enough to protect his entire body and probably weighted as much as he did, if not more. He said as much at the camera.

"Your man-crush is showing," Julia said, amused.

"Be quiet, you," Mickey said, getting out of her way as she swept the camera toward the dragon. He wondered if he was still in frame.

The dragon *shook*, its rear end swiveling and trembling, its large, reptilian eyes fixed on its target.

"Reminds me of a goddamn cat," Mickey said, refusing to admit that he spoke from experience. "Right before they're going to pounce on something shiny."

"Maybe we should go," Julia suggested. "I'm carrying plenty of shiny things. Don't dragons have hoards?"

"I think we're okay for a few more minutes," Mickey said. They were well behind the Red Team members, and he figured, if those two soldiers started running, that was a sign to pack up, too. "Get ready, just in case."

Instead of a deadly pounce, the dragon took a slow, pounding step forward. It stopped, lowered its head, and gagged -- Mickey was reminded of a kitten coughing up a hairball, though nowhere near as cute. As it coughed, little, fiery globs of saliva and sputum came up, sticking to asphalt and burning like gigantic bonfires.

Right at that moment, two teenage girls and several kids in their pajamas ran out of a building, only to catch sight of the dragon who was at least a hundred meters away and closing in. They froze in terror.

"This way! *This way!*" the Red Team leader shouted. It took a few more tries to attract the teenagers' attention, but they started moving. The leader met them halfway, moving to stand between them and the dragon. He hustled them on,retreating at a slower pace.

The dragon watched them run like a predator hungry for prey. Any time its gaze diverted from the children, the soldier moved closer to the dragon, attracting its attention.

"Jesus, he's got a death wish," Julia said.

"It's called being brave. And having cast-iron balls," Mickey said.

The second Red Team soldier waved them on, urging them to go faster. One of the teenagers in the lead ran past him, but the children trailed behind, half toddling along because following the others was all they knew to do, half stopping and looking awed at the big dragon. The second teenager stayed with the slowest of them, making sure they kept moving, but there were so many of the kids that it was easy to lose track, especially in the panic. The smallest of the children fell, and was left behind.

He started crying.
Loudly. It was a high-pitched, heartbreaking howl of abandonment and despair that was somehow louder than the crinkling of the dragons' scales as it moved.

The Red Team leader looked over his shoulder sharply. He moved toward the child.

The dragon raised its head, tucking its chin against its long neck, and --

"Oh, shite," Mickey said. He saw what was coming. He did. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but the second soldier beat him to it.

"Captain! Watch out!"

The Captain turned, saw the dragon, put two and two together as the dragon leaned back on its hind legs and opened its maw. Inexplicably, he ran toward the child, grabbed the toddler, and planted the shield.

The dragon hissed, falling forward with snake-quick movement, and breathed --

A long, steady stream of flame spat out in a steady arc at the Captain and the boy. It was like watching a flamethrower on full spray, except magnified a thousand times. It struck the shield, parting and curling back harmlessly on contact, but it was relentless, and the shield began to glow red-hot, even catching on fire.

"Oh shite. Oh. Fuck. No. No. No," Mickey said, grabbing Julia. He could feel the heat from here, they were too close, they had to move. He grabbed her belt and guided her away, shooting worried glances toward the Captain. They were nearly at a crossroad, the air growing progressively cooler, when two more Red Team members shot out of there, running at full speed.

One of them skidded to a stop. The other stumbled, caught himself, and ran toward the flames.

He raised his arm, but he didn't have a weapon in his hand. Mickey could hear him shouting, but it was unintelligible. He couldn't make it out. Suddenly, the ground shook. A fire hydrant burst from the pavement, the water pressure suddenly veering at a sharp angle, soaking the dragon. The dragon faltered when he took a direct hit of water pressure in the face, but he didn't stop hissing fire until the eruption of water was diverted, spraying right at him.

The ground tore open in the same moment, and a water main burst, spraying everywhere in an uncontrolled arc. A wave splashed the Captain's shield. It burst into steam on contact, the flames doused. It took a few seconds to see clearly through that cloud of hot water mist, but Mickey saw that the Captain and the little boy were all right. The Captain sagged, as if exhausted, freeing his arm from the strap of the shield and shaking it out.

The water pressure dipped, more of an annoyance now than anything else.

The newcomer ran toward the Captain just as the dragon heaved for a second go. He stopped, throwing out both hands, and shouted a… shouted something. It was starting to sound like a different language to Mickey, though he was damned if he knew which one.

The flames out of the dragon's mouth were of a deeper, darker orange, edges blackened with smoke, and it struck --

Air

-- some sort of shield that glittered bright and golden in the air, completely screening the street. The flames blew back onto the dragon, who reared back in surprise, its maw clamping shut.
Everything stopped for a moment. No fire. No movement.

Mickey could see how heavily the newcomer was breathing. The casual way in which the Captain eased his tight hold on the child, seemingly unconcerned now that this particular Red Team soldier had reached them. The other two Red Team soldiers hung back, keeping an eye on the retreating crowd, barking orders at the infantrymen to get the civilians out of the way.

It seemed surreal. The Red Team didn't seem to care at all that it was a bloody fucking dragon that they had to deal with.

"What was it you said? Cast-iron balls?" Julia asked.

Mickey realized after a moment that he'd spoken out loud, and he turned to the camera, offering up a sheepish grin. "Fireproof ones, at least."

He got out of the shot and watched the dragon. Smoke came out of its nostrils. It tilted its head in something Mickey might call stupefaction, if it had been on a person. Then, abruptly, it stood up on its hind legs, tail swinging, crashing into whatever was in reach and wreaking destruction in the process. It grabbed the corner of a building, claws easily cutting through the roof, and --

"Don't you dare," the soldier roared.

His voice was reverberating, a baritone bass so deep that it defied classification, full of absolute authority and command, and yet, he had spoken as if he were chastising a child.

Mickey exhaled. He glanced at the camera, making sure it wasn't on him, and discreetly adjusted himself in his pants. He knew that fear boners were a thing for him or he wouldn't love his job so much. Absolute dominion and control? He hadn't known that it was a turn on for him until this moment.

The dragon let go of the roof almost immediately, its every movement stilling. It was almost as if the man's voice had had an effect on him even greater than the one it had had on Mickey, and it was even more surprised by that than it had been of his fire-breath hitting an invisible shield. It seemed that the dragon was processing what had just happened, and had come to some sort of conclusion, because it dropped down to all fours again, head low on the ground, nudging the edge of the shield and making it flare up with golden light.

"Do you think you can stop me, human? Me?" it asked, its voice soft despite the rumble that made its words audible even from where Mickey stood. "With magic tricks and spells learned from a book full of false love charms and unguents to soothe a child's broken heart? Do you not know my power? You should quail under my might."

The man reached back and scratched his head. He shrugged. If he said something, Mickey didn't hear it. He was too busy gaping at the talking dragon. The dragon tilted his head to the side, like a dog cocking its ear as it listened to its master, twitching now and again when it recognized a word or a phrase. Then, abruptly, the dragon snapped back, as if slapped. It stared at the soldier for several long, stupefied seconds before recovering. It snarled, and bit out, "I could snap you like a --"

"Go on, then," the man shouted. "Give it a try."

The Captain stood up, looking over the shield. He kept the little boy behind it, holding the toddler close. His other arm draped over the top of the shield, casual as he pleased, completely unbothered by the challenge.
The dragon surged forward without warning, mouth open, teeth glistening, and --

Crashed into the shield.

It didn't budge. The soldier crossed his arms.

The dragon collected himself for another go. A tremendous roar rocked the sky and the earth, shattering windows, shaking buildings. Mickey slapped his hands over his ears even as the sound forced him to his knees. The roar went on and on, endless and eternal, and every time Mickey thought that respite was mere seconds away, he would be battered again with a new wave of sheer terror.

Mickey looked up in time to see the dragon rear back once more, taking another deep breath. All he could think of was, *Please, no more*. His eardrums felt as if they were burst, his head was rattling, and --

A steady stream of fire spat out of the dragon's maw. The water mains blasted with fresh vigour, water spraying everywhere -- the Captain with the shield in the middle of the road, the flames licking at the buildings, the burning embers of asphalt. The fire was quenched wherever it touched, the magical shield holding most of it back. The shield seemed to pulse, vibrating under the impact.

The soldier-sorcerer raised his other arm, his body leaning forward as if pushing against something with all of his strength. An invisible force pushed him back; he went sliding along the asphalt.

It went on for forever.

The dragon's jaw snapped shut. The spew of fire stopped. Flames stuck to the sides of buildings, lampposts, parked cars.

*Fww-woop fww-woop*

Mickey looked up, but all he saw was a big grey blur coming down at speed. It collided with the dragon with a terrific thunder-crack. It took a few seconds to parse what he was seeing. One tremendous grey-brown dragon was on top of the first, broad wings spread wide and threatening, and its maw was open threateningly, showing teeth.

The first dragon seemed to quake, collapsing onto itself in something like fear, quailing a terrible sound of pain. The great dragon's claws had dug deep into the first, cutting through scale and skin and bone as easily as if it were wet paper.

Then, with a roar, the great dragon flapped its wings -- one, two, three. Each downswing was stronger than the last, blowing away cars as if it were so much rubbish in a storm. Even the soldier-sorcerer lost his footing, and the Captain had crouched down behind the shield, holding the little boy.

The great dragon and the attacker disappeared in the dark of night.

Mickey took a breath and it burned.

"Holy God," he said.
Chapter 7

The replay of the live video capture flashed on the large-screen overhead monitor, the audience in the dim room observing with rapt, silent attention. The raw feed didn't appear to have been modified, though the analysts indicated that it had been run through an editing program to adjust brightness and contrast, effectively killing speculation that the events had been anything other than a theatrical sham.

On the screen, the teenagers were paralyzed by the monster lurking on their doorstep, and that monster had just noticed them. Those infantrymen who were close enough had opened fire to distract the dragon, giving the girls and their charges a chance to get away. There was a dizzying shift in perspective as the camera followed them, as Arthur and Lamorak stood between the girls and the dragon, as Lamorak helped them away -- the camera image cut sharply to the little boy who had fallen.

He couldn't have been more than five or six. Worn fleece blankets, pink bunny slippers missing an ear, no jacket against the winter cold. He held up his skinned hands, his face twisted as he bawled.

Arthur barely remembered moving forward, picking up the child, and planting them both behind a shield that shouldn't have been able to take the full impact of the dragon's breath. That blast barely lasted ten, maybe twenty seconds, but it had felt like an eternity.

Arthur opened and closed his hand. He'd held onto the straps of the shield with a death grip, even despite the heat searing through his arm. His uniform, his body armour -- he had escaped from that incident with first degree heat-contact burns on his back, his shoulder, and wherever his arm had been in contact with the shield.

"You'll survive," Lance said, looking haggard. "I'll see if I can grab some of that anesthetic burn gel from the infirmary."

"Later," Arthur said. The crisis was over, but the aftermath was not. Excalibur stayed in their uniforms, red scarves and all, and continued to operate in positions of authority, points of contact and coordination to organize the troops and put out the fires that raged across London. Emergency crews were working diligently to rescue the survivors among the civilians, soldiers with basic first aid training did what they could with minor injuries and triage, and the medics were overwhelmed with treating any number of blunt force injuries and gaping wounds. Everyone had their work cut out for them. These weren't the types of injuries they'd see on a day-to-day basis.

"No, as soon as I can," Lance said, insisting.

Arthur caught Lance before he slipped. Excalibur couldn't go to the medic tent without revealing themselves, so it was up to Lance to treat their injuries. Perceval had a long scrape on his back where he'd squat-raised the entire weight of a fallen rooftop to free a young family. Lucan had deep tissue damage in his thigh where a war hammer had caught him. Bohrs had a big black eye and pieces of glass in his jaw, Pellinor was limping but refused to admit it, and Leon had to stop to catch his breath every few minutes.

"Yourself, first," Arthur said sternly, because Lance had a cut over an eyebrow that hadn't stopped bleeding in some time. "Everyone else, then me. I got off lightly."

"Maybe," Lance said, "But I'll get the gel anyway."
Arthur looked up in time to see Merlin's arrival on the scene to cast that big, brilliant, beautiful shield. He allowed himself a small smile to see the stupefaction on the dragon's face. He'd missed it the first time.

Arthur exhaled heavily. He was tired. Six hours of sleep was all that he'd managed to get, and that was with the team diverting everyone who had come to find him. He'd had to peel an unconscious Merlin from his side when Leon shook him gently, because he couldn't delay the Brass any longer.

At least Merlin would get some rest. Of anyone, he needed it. Mordred wouldn't stop looking at Merlin with some sort of awe, and from what Arthur had gathered in the debrief, damn right, Merlin should be regarded with marvel. It wasn't every day that someone summoned a Goddess to come to their aid, and in the process saved countless of lives when the Morrigan acceded to Merlin's request and took back all the souls of her precious soldiers.

On the screen, the dragon taunted Merlin. "Do you think you can stop me, human? With magic tricks and spells learned from a book full of false love charms and unguents to soothe a child's broken heart? Do you not know my power? You should quake under my might."

Merlin scratched the back of his head, shrugging with an air of irritation. The dragon reared back, reptilian eyes wide, mouth open.

"What did he say there?" a Colonel asked. "Does anyone know?"

Arthur rubbed a cut over his left eye, feeling the scab pulling at his skin. The gesture was more to smirk in amusement when he remembered how he'd asked Merlin that same question.

"I wish it were something heroic, you know, but honestly? I wasn't thinking straight. I think I said something along the lines of being really fucking done with Evil Overlord posturing bollocks and that I've heard better threats from my Mum."

The team stared at Merlin for a long time. It was Will who broke the silence when he fell off his bunk, laughing.

"No, sir," the technician at the computer said. "We've tried, but there's too much background noise. I'd need a few days, at the most, to get a clear sound clip --"

Someone at the head of the room waved a hand to silence him.

Arthur leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He rested his head in the palm of his hand and let his eyes drift shut.

A sharp nudge in his side -- in his burned side -- woke him up with a flash of pain. "You're not watching this?" Tracy, Colonel Miller's aide, hissed.

"I've seen it," Arthur muttered, trying to make himself comfortable again. After a minute, he gave up and sat up straight, blinking at the screen. He could smell coffee somewhere in the room and wondered where they'd found coffee in London and why they weren't sharing.

On the screen, Arthur was a right pillock, leaning against the shield as he watched Merlin take on the dragon. He was sure that everyone watching wondered why he hadn't taken the opportunity to get the little boy to safety, and that he was demonstrating a great deal of confidence in Merlin's ability to protect them from the dragon. The latter was true -- he did trust Merlin, with his life. But if he were being honest, he wouldn't have been able to get the little boy to safety in the first place. The force of the dragon's breath had been tremendous, and it had taken everything he had to hold it up. When he'd managed to stand up again, the shield had been a weight to lean against while he
recovered his strength.

It certainly looked better on screen than in reality, though, and the reporter was making him sound far more badass than he'd really been.

If it wasn't for Merlin --

He leaned back in his chair, forcing himself to sit up. Tracy grabbed his forearm and squeezed tightly, her nails digging as deep as they would if this was a horror movie at the theatre. He followed her gaze to the video and watched as the dragon shook himself. He'd crashed into Merlin's shield, and this -- this next bit --

Arthur shook his arm loose from Tracy's grasp and covered his ears. Tracy looked at him strangely, but he simply shrugged, unwilling to explain.

At full volume, the dragon's roar wasn't half as powerful as it was in person, but it was loud, pushing the decibel output of the speakers around the room. The table shook, several people were taken back, and the residual ringing in Arthur's ears struck up an orchestral peel in harmony.

He grimaced.

The dragon's roar became a steaming hiss, a deep intake of breath, and a second blast of fire spat out of its great maw. Arthur glanced at the clock on the wall, counting the seconds trickling by. Ten seconds, twelve -- right about now was when Merlin had broken the water mains and saved Arthur from turning into an extra-crispy soldier butt -- twenty seconds, twenty eight --

Merlin's shield trembled. He'd thrown out one arm, then the other, as if supporting the invisible wall. Arthur hadn't noticed at the time, too awed by the great wall of flame that was so thick to blur out the dragon's body, but on the video he could clearly see Merlin slipping across the pavement, his boots digging in, scratching grooves.

Quiet chatter struck up around the main table of the War Room, excited and nervous both. Arthur didn't blame them. Arthur had been pretty impressed by Merlin's strength, too.

It was almost a minute before the dragon stopped breathing fire. On the other side of the shield, the air shimmered like a heat mirage. The buildings around the dragon licked with flames that had caught onto the brick from the blowback, sticking like Napalm or Greek Fire. At that instant, Arthur had thought that the dragon had exhausted himself. The signs were there -- the hollow ribs, the low head, the listless hang of its wings.

And then --

_Fwoop-fwoop_

The video couldn't pull back in time. Couldn't get all of Kilgarrah's body into the frame. Compared to the dragon terrorizing the city streets, Kilgarrah was monstrous, large, almost as big as... Twice as big as the other dragon, at least, given the angle and the optical illusion from the shield's shimmer and the heat haze. Arthur knew Kilgarrah wasn't nearly that large, but his hind claws had dug into the other dragon's shoulder and dragged him into the air with one mighty downsweep of wings. The sudden rush of air flattened several cars and sent even Merlin to the ground, simultaneously blowing out the flames burning the city block.

There wasn't much after that. Soldiers came in and secured the streets. Civilians were checked for injuries, soldiers moved forward to clear the area. It was a testament to the professionalism of all the British soldiers that they shook themselves out of their shock and their fear and continued on,
doing their jobs.

The camera caught all that, but in a sweep it also caught Merlin stumbling backward. Arthur had let go of the little boy, who was already running toward his minders, and had moved forward on jellied legs to catch Merlin before he collapsed.

"Are you with me?" Arthur asked, resisting the urge to drag the goggles and the red handkerchief off so that he could see for himself. There were too many people, and he couldn't risk it.

Merlin's hand came up to clasp Arthur's arm. There was a weak laugh. "Yeah. Just. Just let me catch my breath."

Arthur huffed, half in suppressed relief, half in disbelief, and had bowed his head, touching his forehead to Merlin's.

"All right," Merlin said. "Help me up, yeah?"

On the video, there was a moment of silence. Not even the reporter said anything. It was as if there was a collective held breath until Arthur pulled Merlin to his feet, the motion looking far more graceful than it had been. The video caught nothing more than a companionable hug between two soldiers who broke apart a few seconds later, getting themselves sorted out to deal with the current situation.

"Don't do that to me again," Arthur said, catching Merlin before his knees buckled under him. Merlin grunted, but caught his footing, walking a little steadier with every step.

"Me? You're the prat who thought he could hold off a dragon with a bloody shield and a sword from, what, the 14th century?"

Arthur shrugged. "It works in video games."

"News flash," Merlin said dryly. "This isn't a video game, and you became your own bloody damsel in distress. Good thing I came by to save your arse, yeah?"

"Knew you would," Arthur said, squeezing Merlin's hand briefly before walking away.

"Turn it off," General MacNeil snapped. He jabbed a finger at the table. "I want a report on the situation, and I want it now."

No one answered right away. MacNeil's glower increased, and when Olaf broke the silence with a half-chuckle, that didn't help matters either. "I don't know what you want. There were zombies. Then there were dragons. Now they're both gone, and our current sit-rep is normal, with a side of fucked up."

"Not helping yourself here," Colonel Locke said, his voice low.

"I'm not trying to help anyone, here," Olaf said.

"And that's self-evident," Uther said.

"Shut it, you," Olaf snapped, turning on Uther. "You had the information you needed to make strategic decisions. What did you do? You sat back on your arses and twiddled your goddamn thumbs until it was too late to prepare. If it weren't for Operation Round Table, half the bloody city would be burnt to cinders, and the rest of it would be ambling around like extras from the latest zombie movie --"
"I'm not familiar with that Operation," Colonel Miller said.

"Above your pay grade," Olaf groused.

"But not yours, apparently," Uther challenged. "Why don't you share --"

"Gentlemen," Major Oden said in a steely voice, "The Dick Measuring Room is down the hall."

Uther withered. So did the remainder of the room.

Oden turned to MacNeil and said, "The situation has been contained. The original source of the reanimated bodies was traced and there's a large black hole where the cemetery used to be. There are crews collecting the remains for proper disposal. We don't need some sort of plague on top of everything else."

Another Major spoke up. Arthur didn't catch his name. "There's no trace of the… ah. The dragons, I suppose that's what we're calling them? They took off shortly after they were attacked by the… well, the large one that we just saw on the video there. The RAF says they were on the radar one minute, gone the next, and visuals turned up nothing."

"Were the dragons an isolated sighting?" Miller asked.

The same unknown Major spoke up. "We can confirm that there are reports of dragon sightings elsewhere in Europe and the Americas, but reports from other countries are sporadic at best. I'm going with no on that one. Sir."

"Any losses?" MacNeil asked.

An analyst spoke up. "Still trying to compile the data, sir. Civilian death toll is estimated in the several thousands. Hospitals are being slammed with injuries. Emergency services are working around the clock to control the fires and they're grateful for our help."

"I don't care about the bloody civilians," MacNeil snapped, turning angry eyes on the analyst. The woman withered, only to sit up straighter, her lips in a thin, defiant line.

"Clearly not," General Tachnathar said scathingly. MacNeil turned on him, furious, but Tachnathar only held up his hands.

"We lost two squadrons to the initial attacks," Miller said, accepting a file folder from Tracy. Tracy returned to her seat next to Arthur. "All of our FOBs are destroyed. We're fortunate that the message was sent out when it was, or our losses would have been greater. Unfortunately, with all of our men scattered across temporary bases, we now have limited mobility and presence."

"Was the original cause for the communication issues identified?" Uther asked.

"Very powerful jamming devices that seem to have been planted, undetected, within the bases themselves," Colonel Locher said. "How they got there, never mind how they work and whether we can keep it from happening again? I can't answer that. We don't have a working example of the device."

"How did the warning break through?" Miller asked.

"Someone hacked the air raid sirens at MI-5," Olaf said. "That was the first alert."

"Secondary warning came by Morse code using our existing hard lines," Locher said. He was
grinning, and well he should, considering his team was responsible for making sure contact had been sent out. "It was rather ingenious."

MacNeil pointed at Locher. "Your team was responsible for the warning sent out to the bases. Who hacked MI-5?"

"They've made the recruitment list, trust me," Olaf said. His non-answer left MacNeil floating in the wind, and the General grunted unhappily.

"Let's move on," MacNeil said. "The zombies. Are we convinced that the NWO won't be raising any additional armies any time soon?"

"Very," Olaf said, but didn't supply any additional information. At the long, trailing silence, he shrugged and gestured around the room. "Above their pay grade."

"Fine," MacNeil said. "Someone explain to me why regular ammunition didn't work on them."

"Again, above their pay grade," Olaf said.

"Is there anything that isn't above their bloody pay grade?" MacNeil snapped. Olaf shrugged. "I want to know who gave the order to mobilize the infantry."

Major Kilgarrah scratched his ear and inspected his fingernail.

MacNeil pounded a fist on the table. "I gave a direct order to remain in position. My order was ignored. That tells me that either we've got a traitor in our midst or that someone circumvented my order." He turned narrow eyes to General Tachnathar and said, "I'm banking on the latter."

"Well," General Tachnathar began, only to be interrupted by Kilgarrah.

"Above your pay grade, General. Sir." Kilgarrah exhaled a breath that filled the room with sulfur, and Arthur chuckled. He wasn't effective in muffling the sound, because he caught MacNeil glaring at him.

"Something funny, Captain?" MacNeil snapped.

"Actually, yeah," Arthur said, rubbing the side of his face wearily. He pushed himself to his feet to stand, ignoring Tracy's attempts to make him sit back down. "You're wasting time."

"What do you mean?" Major Oden asked.

"The zombies," Arthur said, pausing to glance around the room to see if anyone would interrupt. MacNeil looked as if he were thinking about it, but he stayed silent. "They were the NWO's one shot. There's no other way that they could raise an army large enough to directly challenge the British Army on our own ground. That doesn't mean that they're not planning something else to take advantage of the fact that we're currently divided and scattered."

"What are we supposed to do? They've got dragons," the nameless Major said.

"No, they don't," Arthur said, waverering a little on his feet. "In my opinion, the dragons attacking London operated on their own. Not as a group, but as individuals. You saw for yourselves."

He paused, glancing around the room. He made sure not to let his gaze linger any longer on Kilgarrah, Mandrake, Locher, or Tachnathar -- he might not have proof that they were all dragons, but the way they all acknowledged Arthur's words with subtle nods was evidence enough.
"What did we see, exactly?" Oden asked, her eyes narrow.

"A completely different dragon arrived on that particular scene and attacked the one terrorizing civilians," Arthur said patiently. "I wouldn't paint them with the same brush."

"Do you know any personally?" someone asked -- Arthur didn't see who and didn't recognize the voice, but the speaker's tone was full of mockery. Since the question wasn't coming from the main table, Arthur ignored it.

He turned toward the unknown Major and said, "As to what we're supposed to do? We do what we always do. We evolve. The battlefield is not static. It never has been, and it never will be. Our technology counts for very little against opponents who have natural defences against them. It doesn't mean that we're powerless. It means we need different approaches. Tactics that might have worked in the past will not work now."

Arthur looked at Uther. Uther curled a lip and very deliberately placed his pen on top of his papers. Arthur had found out, quite by unhappy happenstance, that Uther's contractors had dodged Colonel Locher, splitting up from the main group migrating toward a more secure location. They'd been heading somewhere to the west end of town when one of the enemy dragons came down.

The contractors had, at some point, stopped in their pilgrimage to pick up the not-quite-a-prototype, and when they were attacked, had stopped to set up the weapon. It had discharged, striking the dragon with full force, only to have no noticeable effect -- if it had done anything at all. The dragon had retaliated by burning down several buildings, and since they were in the way…

The weapon was destroyed, but that didn't mean there weren't other generations or models that could be whipped out at a moment's notice. Still, the knowledge that at least one of the weapons was no longer in play had cheered Arthur a great deal.

Uther, however, took Arthur's slight with a stormy expression. "You don't know what you're --"

"All due respect, Colonel," Arthur said, cutting him off. "You've been retired from active service for nearly thirty years. I remember clearly when the last time you were on a battlefield, because that was your version of a child's bedtime story. It was all very mighty and glorious. I'll never forget the story. Thank you."

Locher snorted. Oden raised a brow.

Arthur pressed on, "The enemy has changed -- but if I can put it as simply as possible, there is no enemy. There are misguided people out there who don't know any better and who are regretting their life choices. They keep on doing what they've been doing because they don't know that they have any other options. We need to give them that other option."

"I would expect that sort of touchy-feely ideology from a bureaucrat with no idea of the dangers, not from my own son," Uther said. He sounded horrified.

"At least I've learned from your mistakes!" Arthur snapped. Uther blinked as if struck; the entire table had gone silent. Tracy stopped tugging the hem of his jacket. "I want to be very clear here. This is not a war --"

"Thank you for your esteemed opinion," General MacNeil said, his voice cold. "You may sit down."

"Actually, I'd like to hear what he has to say," General Tachnathar said. "Go on, Captain Pendragon."
"Sit down, Captain," MacNeil repeated firmly, ignoring Tachnathar.

Arthur stared at the table. It was easy to see where the division was. MacNeil was firmly in Uther's camp, and Uther was stinging from the failure of his weapon and the losses of his men. There were a great many grey-haired members of the Brass who were Uther's allies and friends more out of ancient loyalties and forgotten debts, and some of them were sitting at the table. In the other camp were the younger generation of leaders who had grown up hearing stories about Colonel Uther Pendragon's exploits, and who, while eyeing him with some sort of awe, had enough spine to think for themselves. And, finally, there were the dragons, who seemed to side with no one at all, not even each other, but who were working toward a common goal.

All Arthur wanted was for the war to end. He wanted the high cost of human life to stop bleeding through their fingers. He wanted the unity that civilization had been fighting for over hundreds of years, but which had been set back more than a thousand years by the addition of magic-users to the prejudice against race, faith, and creed. He wanted the balance that the dragons wanted, except his definition of balance was something else, altogether.

Arthur wasn't going to lose a chance to make things right, even if it meant insubordination charges and losing a place on the War Council.

He took a step toward the large table and looked around the room.

"The battlefield has changed. The battlefield will keep changing. Right now, we're defending against an organization that is completely unaware of the real goal of a megalomaniac leader who seems to be Hell-bent on using the current state of the world to their advantage."

"I concur," Olaf said. MacNeil eyed Olaf warily, but it appeared that Olaf's evaluation of any given situation carried weight with every other member of the War Council except Uther.

Emboldened, Arthur continued, "Now that magic exists, more people like this one are going to appear. They've got more power than they know what to do with and even less sense to use it for any other reason than their own means and gains. Once you take them out of the equation, what do you think we're left with?"

"War, what else? It's still going to be us against them," someone in the back of the room said. Arthur turned, because that was the same voice that had mocked Arthur for knowing dragons. Behind two uniformed soldiers who looked like they'd hardly seen a day in combat was Captain Cedric Walsh.

Arthur scowled, because he couldn't figure out how or why Walsh was at the War Room. Someone must have invited him in a misguided attempt to bring the best minds together. For Walsh to be there? After everything he had ever done? To Merlin, to his own team? To others?

Something dark and angry clenched tight in Arthur's chest, but he forced himself to stay calm. "Us against them. Really? Who do you think they are, exactly? The grandmother who lives in the flat next door, who knits you socks every Christmas and brings over cookies once a week? The mechanic at the shop who gives you a break because you don't have enough this pay cycle to cover the repairs? Your little sister, who's worried about what she's going to wear on her date with the cute boy from her class? Your mother, who wouldn't harm a fly? Your father, who breaks his back every damn day to get a honest wage to put you through uni?"

Arthur turned to look at Uther. The words were out of his mouth before he knew he'd spoken.
"Your little girl, who always did her best to prove herself worthy of being part of the family, and who's terrified that she's going to be rejected by the only father she's ever known just because she's turned into someone who has this power that you're so scared of, that you hate so much?"

Uther paled in slow realization. His eyes widened. He sat up straighter in his seat, shaking his head minutely in denial. His shoulders slumped, and he suddenly looked his age.

He wasn't the only one who was uncomfortable. Arthur turned to look at Walsh again. The man's mouth was set in a smirk, and he was leaning forward in his chair, rolling his eyes.

"If the Red Team hadn't stopped you, would you have fired upon that group of sorcerers? Would you have executed them?"

Walsh's mocking expression fell away. He stared at Arthur in surprise.

"How would you have felt if, later, you realized one of them was your little brother? Your son? Your best mate?"

Arthur saw the way Walsh's mouth tightened and decided the man was a lost cause. Arthur studied the members at the table and fixed his gaze on General MacNeil.

"This isn't a war. It's a fight for survival, but it doesn't need to be. Instead of trying to punish people for having magic, how about you fight those who are using it for evil?"

MacNeil leaned back in his seat. No one spoke. The General's expression was detached, placid, unreadable. Arthur endured the General's unblinking stare, not the least bit intimidated. It was difficult to be intimidated after having survived a battle against the resurrected spirits of the Morrigan's favoured warriors possessing the bodies of the more recently-dead, but it was impossible to even flinch after being on the receiving end of dragonfire.

Slowly, very slowly, MacNeil leaned forward. He rapped a knuckle on the table before clasping his hands over several sheets of paper scattered in front of him.

"You said something's coming," MacNeil said quietly. His eyes were narrow as he clasped his hands on the table. "Was that a threat? Because you seem rather defensive about all these people who are trying to kill us all. Whose side are you really on, Captain Pendragon?"

"He's my son --" Uther said, cut off in mid-sentence by MacNeil's raised hand. A look of horror came across Uther's face, as if he'd only just realized what Arthur had privately suspected -- that MacNeil might have gone along with Uther, but that he'd never been under Uther's thumb. He had his own agenda.

A flush of heat coursed down Arthur's spine, half baffled by the accusation, mostly incensed by it. He could feel his cheeks reddening and a bubble of angry protests growing in his chest, but he pressed his lips together tightly to stop himself from saying something that he would regret.

"I certainly hope you're going to back that accusation with evidence," Tachnathar hissed, his voice grumbling and low.

MacNeil ignored him, too. He raised an eyebrow. "Well, Captain?"

Off to the side, Olaf snorted. The snort became a chortle. With a clatter of cell phone and portable computer on the table, Olaf stood up, his chair scraping on the carpet. "If you're accusing him of being a traitor, you're accusing me, too."
MacNeil glanced at Olaf, his expression cracking.

Major Kilgarrah stood up next. Colonel Mandrake and Colonel Locher pushed their chairs back at the same time. Arthur could hear scrapes and creaks behind him as several more people rose to their feet. General Tachnathar eyes twinkled, but he sat back in his chair instead, a small, amused smile on his lips as if he'd won a prize.

A tight clench in Arthur's chest loosened, but he still wasn't breathing easily.

"For reasons that you, you, and you, too," Olaf said, pointing around the room at key personnel, "are never going to know, because it's so outside your pay grade you'd weep, Captain Arthur Pendragon is the only person in this room that I have absolute, complete confidence in."

"Olaf," Uther murmured.

"No, shut it. You and I have been friends for years, but I can't bloody well believe you're not standing up for your own son. I'm ashamed of you, Uther. You know what kind of man you raised, and you know he's a better person than you could ever hope to be." Uther shot Olaf a dark look, but Olaf had already turned away, gesturing at his aide. "Give me those files."

"Uh."

"You brought them, didn't you?" Olaf asked.

"Uh, yes. Um. But. Sir. Are you sure you want to do this now?" The aide glanced around the room.

"Do I look like I give a fuck?" Olaf asked, snatching the file folder out of the aide's hands. "While you're at it, put that picture up on the screen. You know the one."

"Sir --" At Olaf's glare, the aide clammed up and squeezed his way around the chairs that were pushed back, heading for the front of the room.

Arthur had the feeling that he was missing something important, but he was glad to be here for the show.

Olaf raised a file folder in the air, letting the thick fan of pages curl toward the table, and loudly slammed it down. "General, you should know that I've personally performed a thorough background check on you --"


"Her Royal Majesty, the Queen," Olaf said primly. "And, although my information was acquired independently, the investigation was prompted by Solomon Bayard."

Arthur glanced at Uther. Uther's brows were furrowed, but there was some sort of realization in his eyes, as if he was slowly coming to an understanding of what this was about.

"You should strongly consider giving the order to clear the room," Olaf said, and from his tone, Arthur could tell that this was the only nicety that Olaf would give him.

Several people exchanged glances. The men and women behind Arthur -- soldiers, the aides to the high-ranking members of Parliament -- stood up anyway, clearly uncomfortable and determined to get out of there as quickly as they could. Whatever tension they could feel in the room, more than anything, there was no missing the smug, I've got you now, you arse, settling in for the long haul.
"And while you're at it, have them send my men in," Olaf said cheerfully.

MacNeil could have laughed. He could have dismissed Olaf's bollocks. He could order the soldiers in the room to take Olaf into custody and to escort him elsewhere. Instead, he snarled, "Get out."

Arthur headed for the door with the others.


"Yes, sir?"

"Wait in the corridor, please," he said.

Arthur nodded and streamed out, slowing down at the end of the corridor to find a place to wait. Someone brushed past him on their way to the War Room, and when Arthur glanced up, it was to Bayard's cocksure smirk. Bayard squeezed his shoulder companionably before disappearing inside, and if Arthur had been able to react faster, he would have punched his so-called uncle in the face for having deserted his team.

He didn't get a chance to act. A light touch at his arm drew him around, and Tracy gave him a concerned look when he twitched away, the skin under his uniform still too tender. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you," Arthur said firmly, not interested in questions or having to explain himself. Tracy seemed to understand, because she accepted his tone with grace, but the furrow in her brow remained.

"What you said in there --"

"Stays in there," Arthur warned. It was understood that anything overheard during the meeting was completely confidential, and none of them were to discuss what went on in the War Room.

"I know that," Tracy said, stopping short of rolling her eyes. She bit her lower lip. "It's just. Did you mean it? What you said?"

Arthur saw Colonel Miller lingering some distance away, hands clasped behind his back, staring up at a painting hanging on the wall. The painting was a nondescript landscape, most likely a print disguised as a heirloom or an artistic valuable. There was nothing about it that would attract anyone's complete, rapt attention the way the forest scene had captured Miller's.

And yet --

There was something in the way that he stood. Stiff-backed and proud, shoulders straight but slumped, chin up but tense mouth, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Every word," Arthur said, looking straight at Miller.

Miller's chin raised, and he didn't quite turn his head to look at Arthur, though it was a near thing. His lips pressed into a thin line, and he nodded, once, acknowledging both Arthur's answer and that he'd been caught listening. Tracy wasn't as subtle, however, because she shifted to look between the two of them. "And the… the Operation? How does someone get in on that? So that they can help out?"

Arthur considered denying any knowledge or involvement, but Olaf had pulled the cat out of the bag, holding it up high as it shrieked protest. There was no way that Arthur could lie about his
clearance, not now. He didn't know Miller all that well. He was a responsible man, taking too many things to heart, as conservative in his approach as Uther. Arthur had been surprised when he found out that Miller had been one of the few against the use of Uther's EMP.

"I know a guy," Arthur said casually. "But it'll only happen if the Colonel really means it. There are no half-measures."

Tracy wasn't quick to grasp what he meant, but when she caught on, she nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, he does. He does. Thank you, Arthur."

Arthur watched her join Colonel Miller and exchange a few quiet words. Miller looked at Arthur, and nodded solemnly, as if he were swearing an oath on his life.

He probably was.

A fairly indiscreet cough came from behind Arthur, but Arthur waited until Miller and Tracy were gone before turning around.

Captain Cedric Walsh stood a few metres away, watching Arthur with undisguised disdain, a slanted smirk across his face. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but Arthur interrupted him with a cold, "You have absolutely nothing to say to me."

Walsh blinked repeatedly. He gaped like a fish before shaking himself out of it. His tone was hard when he asked, "Have we met?"

"No," Arthur said. "And if I have my way, we never will. Your reputation precedes you --"

A smug set to Walsh's expression put Arthur even more on edge.

"-- and believe me, it's not the sort of reputation I'd want following me about."

Walsh's brow deepened in a confused frown, but slow understanding came over his features. He scoffed and said mockingly, "Do you know what they say about you?"

"I really don't care," Arthur said, brushing past Walsh. There was a bench seat at the other end of the corridor, and he had a feeling that it would be a long wait before he was called into the War Room again.

"The great Arthur Pendragon, Captain of Excalibur," Walsh said, meandering behind him. "How we'd all be best off following him. He knows his shite, doesn't blink no matter how fucked up things are, and if we follow his lead, we'll get out of this mess in one piece."

Arthur ignored him.

"It's all I'm fucking hearing," Walsh said, his voice dropping down to an annoyed hiss. He shut up for a few seconds as a small group of aides dissipated, heading in different directions. "Like you're the goddamn messiah, or something. Having met you, I'm not impressed. Knowing who's on your team? I just know that everyone's tune will change when they hear you're harbouring a traitor --"

Arthur stopped and turned around. Walsh didn't react nearly fast enough and almost crashed into Arthur. Arthur stared at him impassively and waited for him to continue.

Walsh seemed to have lost his momentum, because he faltered, never finishing his sentence.

"Well?" Arthur invited dangerously. "Go on."
Walsh's jaw worked around unspoken words for several seconds before he finally settled on, "The others can lick your bloody boots all they want, but not me, and not my men. They don't know you like I do. You're riding on your daddy's coattails, spending your trust fund like it's the end of the world, and selling weapons to criminals to get cash when you run out of your monthly allowance. But when they find out how Emrys nearly got my entire team killed, and that you're a petty criminal, they'll put two and two together and figure out that you're behind all this --"

Arthur stared at Walsh in disbelief. He couldn't help it. He laughed. There was something genuinely wrong with this man. The bollocks coming out of Walsh's mouth was unbelievable. Arthur had always known that the cover story that Bayard and Olaf had put together would stand up to scrutiny, but he hadn't considered that it would be an issue now, well after the fact. He made a mental note to remind Olaf to clear those profiles.

Walsh was studying him warily, taking an uncertain step back as if he couldn't decide whether Arthur had suddenly gone nutters. The barely-hidden fear in his eyes set off another hysterical round that was probably fuelled by the weight of weeks of stress, strain, and exhaustion, and by the time Arthur pulled himself together, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, Walsh was completely apprehensive.

Arthur took several heavy breaths, all amusement fading, replaced with cold rage. He took a step into Walsh's space. Walsh retreated, and Arthur closed the distance between them. It was easy, so, so easy to fall back into the role Walsh believed he filled naturally.

"So, what is this, then? A threat? You're going to tell them what I've been involved in? You're going to ruin my career, my life, if I don't do what you want?" Arthur didn't give Walsh a chance to answer. "What is it that you want, then? A job at Pendragon Consulting with nothing to do but sit on your arse collecting your paycheck? Or do you want a payoff? It's a payoff, yeah? How much do you want?"

Walsh's smirk returned, but Arthur didn't let it linger long.

"You're not getting a fucking pence from me. And here's why. There are only a few ways you'd have gotten my file, all of them illegal. I don't think you're smart enough to hack MI-5. You're not charming enough to con someone into giving you a look-see. The only people who would even know these things about me are the very people we're at war with. I wonder, who have you been having lovely chats over tea and crumpets with?"

Arthur tilted his head. He waited for the last vestiges of the smirk to fade.

"So go right ahead," Arthur said, his voice cold. "Tell the Director of MI-5 who I really am. Unveil me as the villain, if that means you'll finally be able to rally troops to your banner the way you've always wanted. Tell them that Captain Arthur Pendragon of Excalibur is a goddamn traitor.

"I promise you, your fifteen minutes of fame are going to be fifteen hours under the hot lights when MI-5 gets very, very interested in hearing how you happen to have come across this extremely confidential information."

Arthur looked him up and down and grunted, unimpressed. "Stay away from my team. Don't you so much look at Lieutenant Emrys or mention his name. You haven't that right. And more importantly, get out of my face and don't cross my path again. If you so much as try anything…"

Arthur trailed off. He spread his hands.

"Use your imagination."
Walsh took another, uncomfortable step back. He paled several shades. Arthur heard him clear his throat, and it looked to be painful.

Walsh didn't linger. He broke eye contact and walked away without another word, head held high in an attempt to retain some sort of dignity.

Arthur relaxed when he heard distant elevator doors open and close.

Walsh had gotten off easy. Arthur firmly believed that he deserved worse. A clubbing. A riotous hazing. A beating. His career demolished. He was a waste of space, as far as Arthur was concerned. As much as he wanted to hurt the man for what he'd done to Merlin, getting laid up with assault charges was not going to help anyone now or in the future. He refused to let Walsh use Arthur or Excalibur as a stepping stool on the ladder, even if the end result would have been egg on the man's face.

Arthur wanted nothing to do with him. Let the man dig his own grave all on his own.

Still --

Arthur sent Olaf two texts.

*If you haven't already taken care of it, getting rid of our cover stories should be on your to-do list.*

The second one was less veiled. *Walsh was kind enough to let me know mine was still floating around.*

Olaf would know what that meant. Arthur sat down on the bench. The bench was as uncomfortable as it had looked, but Arthur didn't mind. Compared to being on the receiving end of dragonfire, parking his arse on a painful surface that made his army cot feel like the plush mattress at a five-star hotel wasn't a hardship.

He didn't expect Olaf to answer him right away, given what must be going on inside the War Room. Arthur had no idea what Olaf was up to or what MacNeil was involved in, but it must have been important -- important enough that Bayard would show up.

Arthur rubbed his face. He was too tired to figure that one out. Almost as an afterthought, he sent Olaf another text. *Who invited Walsh, anyway?*

After a few more minutes of skimming through his emails and checking his text messages from the team -- someone had sent him a picture of Merlin. Merlin was half-buried under Arthur's pillow, his hair mussed up, his dog tags outside of his shirt.

*I didn't know Sleeping Beauty snored,* Gwaine sent him.

Arthur snorted, putting his phone away and leaned against the wall. He cracked his neck and let himself doze -- at least as much as he could manage while keeping his eyes open. This area required strict security clearance and there were few people moving about, but still, it wouldn't do if someone caught him sleeping. The eyes-open kip was something he'd learned by necessity, and it had served him well on more than one occasion.

He snapped awake when he heard a door open, blinking repeatedly. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out. The arms on the wall-mounted clock at the end of the corridor hadn't moved since he'd first sat down, but it must have been some time, because the pain in his head had abated somewhat, and the person leaving the War Room was Uther.
Arthur didn't move, least he attract Uther's attention, but he wasn't that lucky. He sat up straighter when he noticed Uther coming his way, but remained seated with the hopes that Uther would continue walking.

Uther stopped near the bench, hesitating, and closed the distance, sitting down without invitation. Arthur grudgingly shifted, making room.

Neither of them spoke. Uther broke first, wrenching his hands nervously, crossing and uncrossing his legs. He said, "Terrible furniture."

Arthur didn't want to enjoin him in a conversation. He wanted Uther to go away. This was neither the time nor the place for the discussion the two of them needed to have, and he wasn't going to let Uther decide for him when he'd be ready to have it. But he knew how his father worked. Uther was just as stubborn as Arthur. There would be no letting something go once his mind was set on something. That was the only reason Arthur said, "The interior decorator should be fired."

Uther snorted. He didn't speak again for the longest time. When he did, it wasn't what Arthur expected. "Morgana?"

Arthur wasn't going to take anything away from his sister. If she wanted to involve Uther in her life, that was her choice, but Arthur wasn't going to give him anything other than a very flat, "Safe."

Uther nodded. The fidgeting stopped, at least for the moment, some of the tension easing out of him.

"I haven't --"

"Don't," Arthur said, cutting him off. "I'm angry. I can't… You're not…"

He faltered, but not because he was struggling for words. He had them. He had too many of them, and they all wanted to be said at once. But not like this, and not under these conditions.

"Olaf is right. I should have stood up for you in there," Uther said.

"I'm rather glad you didn't," Arthur snapped. A door down the corridor opened and closed; a middle-aged woman in crisp business-casual headed down the other way, barely sparing them a glance. Arthur was grateful for the interruption she'd caused, because it allowed him a chance to rein in his temper. "Considering everything that I've learned about you, everything you've done, everything you didn't do --"

Not so much as a phone call when Morgana and Gwen were kidnapped. Not so much as any kind of sign that he was concerned when Arthur took his team underground and vanished from the face of the earth. And when they resurfaced, practically building a town to protect and shelter family and friends, not even bothering to connect to Arthur or anyone else.

Uther was highly ranked, even when retired. He had connections coming out of his ears. People owed him favours. Others wanted to owe him favours. If Uther really cared, he would have at least tried to find out what had happened to his children. And maybe he had, but he'd never done anything about it when they most needed the help.

"I don't care what your motivations are. There's no justification for anything you've done. I've tried to understand. I really have. You saw this coming a long time ago, and out of all of the possible ways to handle it, you stole artefacts from government tomb raiders, stockpiled weapons, and spent decades reverse-engineered magical devices to counter their effect or imitate them. You prepared
for war instead of working with others to stop it from happening at all." Arthur's voice was low, barely over a hissed whisper, but from the way Uther flinched, Arthur might as well have been yelling at him.

Arthur paused for breath, half surprised that Uther didn't take advantage of it.

"I tried. But I don't understand you. I can't decide if it's fear, or anger, or jealousy. In the end, it doesn't matter. You created a weapon that would rob people of a part of themselves and let your contractors --" The way Arthur spat the word, he might as well have said mercenaries, "-- slaughter them as if they were war criminals."

"That was a mistake," Uther said hotly. "I didn't give that order --"

"Who did?" Arthur shook his head and immediately held up his hand. "Actually, I don't care. *It doesn't matter.* You were there, you heard the command, and you did absolutely nothing to stop them."

A strange sound escaped Uther's throat. On anyone else, Arthur would say it was a sign of guilt and shame. On Uther? He wasn't sure.

"I don't need your support, Colonel Pendragon," Arthur said calmly. "Not when your ideals aren't my own. Not when good people are dying for no reason. Not when there are men and women out there risking their lives to try to make things right. If you're not with us, you're against us, and you should get out of the damn way."

"Arthur --"

Arthur exhaled a heavy breath and shook his head faintly, staring at the motionless arms of the clock at the end of the hallway.

Uther faltered. His hands clenched into white-knuckled fists on his thighs. Arthur refused to turn around to look at him, and he was too stubborn to leave first. He'd gotten to this bench first; Uther could go find his own damn spot to commiserate.

He didn't move, and Arthur thought that was a bad sign. In business, in war, even at home, Uther never backed down. There was no evidence to hint that he might on this particular occasion. The silence was an indication that he was rallying the troops, digging through all of his tactics to see how he might best gain the upper hand. Arthur shifted in his seat, fully prepared to get up and walk away for some reprieve. It wouldn't be a retreat, he told himself. It was strategic repositioning.

"I'm proud of you."

Arthur blinked. He wasn't sure if he was too shocked to react, or if he was too busy trying to decide if it was just another one of Uther's tactics to manipulate Arthur. It definitely wasn't one he'd used before, though, and Arthur mulishly gave him credit for the unique approach.

It didn't stop there. The awkward silence stretched, and Uther cleared his throat. "I saw… the earlier feed. Before the… ah, the dragon. You… fought well. I see you remembered your old lessons."

A summer well-spent, Arthur thought sourly. He hadn't merely *remembered*, but had put his team through the motions, so that they would be prepared if worse came to worse. They'd hated him for every single minute of that special training, even though some of them had had a flair for it. Gwaine, who had stayed up late at night watching YouTube video of special tricks; Perceval, who demonstrated unsurprising grace for his size that coupled well with his strength; Will, who broke
all the rules of Western Martial Combat styles and strategies and still managed to come out on top.

He glanced sideways, wondering how Uther could have seen him on the video feed,

"I was… impressed. I hadn't realized you would progress that much over the course of a summer," Uther said awkwardly. He sat up straighter and unclenched his tight fists, brushing his palms on the fabric of his trousers. "But you were… That's not why…"

Uther cleared his throat.

"I saw a leader on that screen. Taking on the biggest threats and neutralizing them. Rallying frightened soldiers at a loss against an enemy they've never seen before and didn't know how to fight. They got their courage from you," Uther said in a thick voice, as if it hurt him physically to say the words. "Barricading the area, trapping them, sending in your men to take care of the source…"

He trailed off. He raised his chin and rolled his shoulders back, as if bracing for a blow. And a blow it was, because he struck at his own pride.

"The weapon did nothing against them. They were… ineffective. Completely. Attempts to neutralize them failed disastrously."

The admission didn't come without a curt nod of acceptance that Uther hadn't been able to meet his own standard of excellence.

"The containment plan was risky, reckless, and a flagrant show of disrespect for the chain of command," Uther said. "But it was flawlessly executed, flexible and adaptive, and extremely successful, with minimum loss of life among both combatants and non-coms, given the lack of support and the untenable situation."

Arthur exhaled slowly, desperate to ignore the warm flush at the compliments and the flattery while simultaneously soaking up far more praise than he had ever received in the whole of his entire life. As manipulative tactics went, this was an excellent one, and one that Uther must have held in reserve for years on the off-chance that he would need to pull out all the stops.

Arthur exhaled slowly. He knew acknowledging anything that Uther had said would reveal his identity as a member of the Red Team. He might have been prepared to unveil himself and his team some time ago, but he wasn't, not now that they'd shown how effective they could be.

So, instead of crumbling the way Uther probably expected him to, Arthur shook his head in a faint, flat attempt at denial. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I wasn't anywhere near the scene."

Uther smiled wanly. He nodded as if understanding the need for the lie. He fell silent, then, and said no more.

At first, Arthur thought Uther was merely waiting him out. It was a tactic Uther had used many, many years ago, when Arthur was still young and hadn't learned how to recognize the signs. He hadn't fallen for it, not once, since hitting his teens, and he didn't understand why Uther would try it now.

Except it wasn't a tactic, Arthur realized. Uther's expression was unreadable because it was showing emotion that Arthur didn't recognize, not on him. It almost seemed to be… guilt?

Shame?
Past him, down the other corridor, the door to the War Room remained closed, without any noise escaping the soundproof and eavesdrop-proof area. The uniformed guard stationed on either side of the door stared straight ahead, unblinking but aware of their surroundings. There had been no activity from that area since Uther left the room.

Arthur glanced at Uther, taking in his stoic expression, the slump of his shoulders.

"What happened in there?" Arthur asked, even though he could guess based on the little information that he had.

Uther's brows pinched and he made a faint moue of dismissal. "Oh. Nothing to be concerned about."

"MacNeil?" Arthur pressed.

Uther made a face and shook his head. Arthur took that to mean that the War Council had agreed as a group that MacNeil's authority over the British Army would be revoked. It wouldn't be that simple and would require a great deal of red tape and several weeks, if not months, to work through, but it was a fait accompli. MacNeil would remain General in name only, his position backfilled by someone else.

"And you?" Arthur asked, dreading the answer.

Uther's affiliation with MacNeil was well-known, but there were so many ways that the extent of Uther's involvement would be spun. If Olaf brought to light all that Arthur had uncovered -- but had never shared -- the outcome would be grave for Uther.

In a way, he shouldn't care. But he did. Despite everything, Uther was his father, and Arthur couldn't bring himself to wish the worst for him.

The door to the War Room abruptly opened. Uther gazed down the corridor, a sad look falling on his face, before turning to Arthur. "I'll be fine."

Arthur didn't think he sounded fine.

They watched in silence as General MacNeil was escorted out by two of MI-5's agents and several other high-ranked men in uniform that Arthur knew by reputation, but had never met. MacNeil walked out with his head held high, chin up, shoulders back, his body an entire line of furious. They headed the other way, toward the elevators. Other officials emerged from the room, lingering at the other end of the corridor to exchange quietly-spoken words, while Olaf and his aide broke away from the group to head toward Arthur and Uther.

Uther stood up, brushing a hand down his uniform. "Olaf."

"Are you ready?" Olaf asked.

"Yes, of course," Uther said, sounding dazed.

Arthur stood up. Father? was on the tip of his tongue, but he caught himself and said, "Colonel?" instead. Neither Olaf nor Uther turned to talk to him.

"Why don't you go with Jacob?" Olaf suggested, gesturing to the aide. Jacob was a slim man a good foot shorter than Uther, with silver-rimmed glasses and combed-back hair. He didn't look like much, but if he worked for Olaf, he was probably a field agent.
"Certainly," Uther said graciously, as if it were his idea.

"I won't be long," Olaf said. "Remember what you promised."

Uther's smile was thin and tight, but he nodded in answer and followed Jacob down the corridor toward the elevators without looking back at Arthur.

"He'll be fine," Olaf said reassuringly, his voice low. "MacNeil admitted that he manipulated Uther into applying the weapon for active use and that he was the one to make the decision in the end. Bayard spoke in his favour and that went a long way to shift the balance. He's technically a civilian and hasn't… actively done anything of grave concern on a national level --"

Arthur closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe, recognizing Olaf's skirting attempts to say treasonous acts without actually using the words.

"He agreed to cooperate," Olaf said, shrugging. "He'll be fine. We'll take care of him."

Arthur exhaled heavily. He nodded stiffly. He opened his eyes and saw Olaf's small smile and endured the reassuring squeeze of his shoulder.

"We need you back inside," Olaf said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Arthur said, because it wouldn't matter if he was or not. It would be better if he didn't show his nerves.

Olaf led the way inside. A few more people followed after them, but the remainder dissipated, craning their necks as if they wanted to see who had authorization to remain. There were no surprises around the table except for Bayard, who sat at the head next to General Tachnathar. Arthur started to sit down when his name was called.

"Sir?" Arthur asked curiously.

"Why don't you join us at the table, Captain Pendragon?" General Tachnathar said, stretching a hand out in invitation. Arthur did as invited, fully aware of everyone's eyes on him.

"Since I'm sure you are all wondering who he is, since we didn't introduce him earlier, I'm going to begin with introducing Solomon Bayard. Tachnathar gestured toward Bayard, and continued, "He is the Archivist of the Directory and the current Speaker of the Dee Advisory Seat in matters of science and magic, counselling Her Royal Majesty directly in all esoteric affairs."

Arthur had never heard of that position, and from the looks around the room, it seemed no one else had, either.

"It was at his recommendation many years ago that an investigation be launched on the NWO, that we enlist the use of a team of highly trained soldiers to attempt to infiltrate them undercover, and, most recently, that the Directory sorcerers who have been assisting us in matters of magic be disbanded to draw out the enemy. Our latest success can, in part, be attributed to Bayard's engineering, and his absence at previous meetings was unfortunately owing to his own infiltration of the enemy's inner ranks."

Olaf snorted.

Arthur leaned forward, frowning. If Bayard had been undercover, it explained his disappearance. Arthur wasn't clear on Bayard's role, but he had a feeling that he might never know.
"I'd like to point out that it was not a solo operation," Bayard said, glancing at Olaf. "Even though there was no clear exchange of information between agencies, every organization worked in tandem to work against the enemy."

"Played us like a fucking game of checkers, you mean," Olaf said, rolling his eyes.

"Not quite," Bayard said. He turned to Arthur and gave him an approving grin. "I had help. After being presented with theoretical situations based on very real events, Captain Pendragon was able to project enemy actions and events. Of course, he was under the impression that they were training exercises, but the application of his work was very valid. If not for Captain Pendragon's superb tactics and insight, we would not be where we are now.

"He was able to foresee the enemy's actions and to put in place contingency plans that we applied as stopgap and preventive measures. In fact, for the most part, my agency's work has been largely reactionary, working in accordance with those plans and extrapolating based on Captain Pendragon's initial analysis."

Arthur sat up straight at the revelation, barely swallowing his outrage. He remembered the project plans that he'd been given during the training done at the Directory, how he, Leon and Perceval had worked out the enemy's most likely moves, and how he had managed to send early plans to Bayard before his trust deteriorated and communications were lost. Bayard might be working from old plans that didn't have all the information, and if he were about to implement orders based on those --

Arthur wanted to ask, but he didn't have to, because Bayard spread his hands apologetically. "I'm afraid the situation has changed to such an extent that my analysts and I are unable to predict the enemy's next move. We did not account for the attack on Parliament by Sigan's group, the theft of artefacts from multiple agencies around the world, including the Directory, or the use of one of those items in the most recent attack. If not for Captain Pendragon's foresight, London would have been overrun."

"I think we all agree that the situation was poorly handled from the start," Major Oden said. "We are out of our depths. But to place so much credit on one man --"

"Maggie," Bayard said, his voice saccharine sweet, "I place so much credit on one man because it's well deserved. They were hand-picked for a mission that was originally intended to distract the NWO so that other undercover agents would be able to operate unhindered. They did not know that we expected them to fail their assignment. Instead, they completely destabilized several factions, nearly took out one of the most wanted mercenaries, and uncovered a plot of which we were previously unaware."

"Luck," Oden said, her expression hard.

"Skill. Intelligence. Training," Bayard said, looking straight at Arthur. "Captain Pendragon, I understand that you expect the NWO to attack again. I've recently come into information that supports that claim. MI-5 has been evaluating the data and --"

"Concurs," Olaf said.

"How do you believe their next attack will --"

"You can't seriously be asking his opinion," one of the Ministers scoffed. "He's only a Captain --"

"He's too young," the Count said, smashing his fist on the table. "I refuse to commit men to his
command. He's reckless, foolhardy, and doesn't understand the responsibility of command."

"Watch your tongue. You speak of our King," one of the court's Advisors said, baring his teeth in a deadly smile. The man was a Lord in his own right, the ruler of a large domain only in name. He'd left the running of his land to his much wiser wife and his hard-working sons, in exchange for a well-earned position. Always the first to criticize, it was strange to see him coming to the King's defence.

"A King-in-waiting, only, and one still wet behind his ears, guarded and cajoled by his men," the Count said. "Would that his father had not fallen ill in these trying times. It is his cold guidance that we need now, and not the naïve hand of a boy who has only seen war in the form of sugared lances and blunt swords."

"He is the champion of seven realms --" someone else cut in.

"Only because there are many who would not risk the King's favour by giving a spoilt brat the trouncing he deserves," the Count snapped. "I refuse to put my faith in a child whose only experience in war is the play-fighting of the tourney field."

A small smile passed across the Prince's lips as he remembered similar words that had been spoken to him, once, when he truly had been the spoilt brat the Count believed him to be. He raised his chin to look across the room, meeting his manservant's eyes, and knew that he was not the only one to cherish the memory of their first meeting.

It had been years since that day. Years of secrets and years of deceit. Years of adventure and of battle and of reawakened terrors from dark times. And in those years, the Prince could only hope that he had grown where he had been lacking, that he had attained something of the wisdom experience could give, that he had learned to defer to those who would be best suited to lead.

He waited for a pause in the argument that had spilled out across the table and stood up. The movement silenced the members of the Council table, who slowly sat down, looking at him expectantly.

Until he showed them otherwise, his advisors and lords would only see him as they had known him -- that very same spoilt, entitled brat who had never known anything but the tourney field. And yet, he felt no need to prove himself.

"We are at war, gentlemen. That much is clear. I should hope that we are not at war with each other, because that serves no purpose."

He waited, and though a few looked away, shame-faced, the angry Count did not ease his glare.

"We have two choices, and one is to hide all our people in our homes and pray that this wave of malice passes through. But prayer is a poor weapon when the new gods are deafened by the wrath of the old. I choose to fight, to trust in the sharp edge of my blade and in the strength of my men."

A few people shifted, but he knew that he had not won them yet. He didn't think he ever would.

"I will not order any of you in this. I ask. You are within your rights to refuse. But if you allow me one thing, it is to remind you that the King you followed before me was also once a spoilt brat whose only experience was on the tourney field."

He gestured at the marked map on the table.

"This is my battle plan. If you can do better, then, please, go ahead. In the meantime, I have a war
He turned and walked out, his courage bolstered when first his manservant, then his knights, fell in step beside him.

Arthur stood up slowly, shaking his head to clear it. He looked around the table as the conversation reached a crescendo. He had no idea what he had missed in the last several minutes, but from the tension in the air, he imagined that it was more of the same.

"-- think you know better than the people who are actually fighting --"

"-- could've waited to lay the charges. MacNeil might be a judgmental egomaniacal prick, but --"

"-- how do we even know any of this is real and not a trick? I've seen better CGI at the movies --"

Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out a red thumb drive. He tapped it thoughtfully against his wrist as he listened to the arguments.

He tossed it in the middle of the table. Somehow, that faint clink was enough to silence every conversation in the War Room.

No one spoke for a long time. Finally, General Tachnathar cleared his throat and asked, "What is that, Captain Pendragon?"

"Battle plans," Arthur said.

Bayard leaned back in his chair and grinned in triumph. Olaf snorted and shook his head, but it was more in amusement than anything else. The Ministers exchanged rude comments, and Major Oden stared at the thumb drive as if it were a live grenade.

"You're a pretentious little prick if you think --"

"He has more time under fire than you've ever seen," Major Kilgarrah said, a low rumble in his breath.

Bright yellow eyes burned like burnished gold. A blood-stained fang gleamed in the firelight. A huff of sulphurous breath dissipating in the cold night wind. And then -- a bowed head. The King knew it was the only acknowledgement of leadership he would ever get, that the dragon's loyalties were another's to command, but he would take it.

Arthur blinked and looked at Kilgarrah only to discover that the old dragon was watching him. "More time under fire than any of you will ever know. You are in no position to judge him or to question him."

"Let them. I don't care. The more time we waste sitting here, the more time the enemy has to get into position," Arthur said. "If you'll excuse me. I have a war to fight. I only need confirmation. Is Operation Round Table a go?"

A small little smirk curled at the corner of General Tachnathar mouth. He nodded sharply. "It's a go."
"Everyone's in," Leon said.

Arthur grunted, glad, and shut the door behind him.

Arthur didn't know how General Tachnathar managed it, but over the last few weeks, the army had been remobilized and repositioned according to the plans Arthur had given him. Several platoons were split in half and scattered, sent elsewhere to defend other critical areas, and there was a fair bit of reshuffling when isolated incidents sprung up, requiring attention.

Fortunately, those were mostly accidental incidents, where young children lost control of magic they never really had control of, anyway, and military interference leaned more toward keeping the peace and making certain that there were no repercussions against the child.

The Red Team was never required, which meant that Excalibur was able to maintain their cover, deal with their in-camp assignments, and catch up on needed rest time. Most of the team hadn't quite recovered from their injuries in the aftermath of the battle -- Leon still favoured his left arm, the burn marks along Arthur's shoulder were persistent in refusing to heal, and Perceval's limp had returned.

Arthur glanced down the barracks. "By my count, we're missing three."

"Kay's got Will trapped under one of the cots. I think he fell asleep," Leon said, looking up from the paperwork he'd taken over ever since Arthur began consulting with the Brass. Leon scratched the back of his head with his pen, grunting when it got tangled in his curly hair. "Lucan's between Lamorak and Gareth -- don't ask, you had to be here."

Leon frowned and looked around, counting.

"And number three is you, so if you don't mind, lock up behind you, yeah?"

Arthur snorted. "I'm half-afraid if I do, someone will knock and cancel the leave."

"Well, if you don't, sod's law is that someone'll barge in and tell us to gear up. Trust me when I say we're happy to nest right now."

Arthur had pulled every favour he had to get everyone twelve solid hours of rest, and the team were bunking down in their new quarters. There was a draft -- Mordred took care of that. The beds creaked, but at least the cots were marginally better. It wasn't as large as their last barracks, with barely enough room to slide between the beds, but no one gave a shite, anyway.

Gwaine, and curiously, Will, too, was obnoxiously pleased by their new quarters. Arthur thought that it had something to do with having to deal with so many teammates out of sight during their last active mission.

Arthur pointedly locked the door. He let go of the latch and waited.


Arthur shrugged out of his pack and dumped it at the foot of his bed, nudging it out of the way. His heavy coat followed, the nylon webbing, his equipment. He checked and stored his rifle, kicked off his boots, and promptly peeled out of a double-pair of socks that would need to be burned if there was hope to save mankind from a reckless weapon of mass destruction.

He turned up his nose to his empty bed, looked around blearily, and trudged to the far corner of the barracks. Merlin's cot was cramped between the wall and someone else's cot -- Will's or Gwaine's,
Arthur wasn't sure anymore -- and Merlin was on top of the blankets, out cold, his smartphone on his chest.

Arthur gingerly pulled the phone out of Merlin's fingers and placed it on the floor next to Merlin's laptop. He nudged Merlin's legs apart and crawled in-between them, shamelessly flopping down heavily on top of Merlin's chest.

"Oof," Merlin said. He grumbled unhappily when Arthur wouldn't let him get comfortable, finally settling with a tired sigh and a hand running through Arthur's hair. Sleepily, he mumbled, "Gwaine, you can't keep doing this. Arthur will find out --"

Arthur pinched Merlin's side. "You know it's me."

"Missed you," Merlin said softly. Arthur could hear the smile in his voice.

"Missed you too," Arthur closed his eyes, letting himself be lulled by the gentle stroke of Merlin's fingers through his hair.

"I can smell your feet," Merlin muttered.


"We can all smell your feet," Bohrs complained.

"Not that sorry," Arthur said into Merlin's collarbone.

A heavy blanket fell on top of them. An instant later, it was smoothed out and wedged around Arthur's feet. Whoever it was also took the care to tuck the blanket under his chin. "There. That should contain the biohazard."

Galahad, then; he was always a kind soul. Arthur would have to give him a raise.

"You don't pay me now," Galahad snorted, and Arthur wondered how anyone could possibly have understood him talking into Merlin's chest. "But, you know, if you wanted to give me a leg up when we're done saving the world and start working for you, there won't be any complaints from me."

"Noted," Arthur said.

"As long as I get a job where all I have to do is sit on my arse to write my tell-all autobiography, I'll be happy," Galahad continued.


"I want to be the test shooter," Gwaine said. Somewhere in the barracks, muffled by several cots shoved together, Will snored a protest.


"Vice president, with a pretty secretary I can bend over my desk and later marry so that she can have all my babies," Pellinor said.

"That's… specific," Geraint said.

"You can have the secretary, but I'm vice-president," Leon said. "Called dibs on that ages ago."
"Damn it," Pellinor said.

"Can I be in charge of something destructive?" Owain asked.

"You're always in charge of something destructive," Perceval said.

"I want an official title, though," Owain said.

"You already have an official title, O," Geraint said.

"Something I can put on a business card and impress the girls, I mean," Owain said.

"You already --"

Arthur yawned, tuning out the conversation. Merlin's fingers through his hair felt nice. "You're putting me in charge of R&D, aren't you?" Merlin asked.

"Gwen," Arthur mumbled. He winced when Merlin pulled his hair. "Want you as my P.A. Have fantasies of you sucking me off under my desk."

"Did not need to hear that," Lance said. Will snored in agreement.

"Shut up," Arthur mumbled. He freed his arm and waved at the room. "Go away."

"I had fantasies of you sucking me off under my desk," Merlin said.

"We can take turns," Arthur said.

"Not if I'm your bloody P.A., we're not," Merlin said sullenly.

"We both know you're going to open your own company. You're going to steal half my men. Have an exclusive contract with mine for everything from communications to drones to AIs," Arthur muttered. He shifted his position, letting Merlin get more comfortable under him, and laid down again. "Contract negotiations might get… involved."

Merlin hummed to himself. His fingers continued to run through Arthur's hair, and Arthur took it as a good sign. "All right," Merlin said finally. "As long as you're my arm candy when I accept all the innovations awards at the BIS."

"Deal," Arthur murmured.

He heard the sounds of people settling in for the night, the click of lights turning off, Leon's exultant, "Finally done!" and the happy slap of a file folder on the rickety desk.

"Shouldn't we get Will out from under there?" Mordred asked.

"Nah. He's fine. I gave him a pillow," Kay said.


The chatter died down to a few isolated conversations and Merlin's fingers stopped drifting through Arthur's hair.

"Arthur?" Perceval asked.

"Yeah?" Arthur asked, already half-asleep and barely taking anything in.
"Is there anything we should know before you nod off?" Perceval asked. "Asking because there's some chatter around the camp."

Arthur groaned and started to sit up, but Merlin's leg curled around his calf and Merlin's arms tightened around him. Arthur gave up the fight and sighed. "What kind of chatter?"

"Ah," Perceval said, hesitating the way he always did before revealing news that he knew Arthur wouldn't like, and hating to be the messenger.

"Just tell him," Gwaine groused, from somewhere near Perceval.

"I'm regretting losing that coin toss," Perceval said.

Merlin sighed heavily. "They're saying the Red Team's going to be unveiled this week."

"They what?" Arthur asked, struggling to sit up. Merlin held him firm.

"Unless you want the boys to see what we get to when we have our turn in the closet, you'd best stop squirming," Merlin warned, sounding more awake.

Arthur flushed, aware of his own low-grade arousal, and desperately willing it down. The last time they'd been caught, they'd gotten cold water dumped on them. Their only saving grace was that they hadn't been the first to break the unspoken rule -- that distinction went to Gareth and Lamorak.

"Right. Sorry," Arthur said, settling back down. He felt lips on his forehead and hands down his back. "What exactly was said?"


"Our Gwaine's bound to reap the pot," Geraint said.

"I would never use insider information for my own gains," Gwaine said solemnly.

Kay snorted.

"This isn't from you, then? Some fancy you forgot to tell us about?" Perceval asked.

"Of course not," Arthur said. "I wouldn't do anything without consulting you lot. You were in the know the first time I considered it, but the situation's changed. I'd have asked again."

"We know," Lance said. "Leastways, I do. Now, could you hush? Some of us are trying to sleep."

"Like me," Merlin murmured. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Arthur raised his head enough to look at Merlin suspiciously. "Why are you so calm?"

"Because I know something these blokes don't, which is that it's Walsh stirring things up. Gilli told me he was seen raiding a shop where he weren't supposed to be, collecting a bunch of women's scarves. Now will you go to sleep?"

"Bloody menace," Arthur muttered. Olaf had taken care of the Major who had invited Walsh along to the high-level meeting, but he obviously hadn't gone far enough to take care of Walsh himself. "He'll claim to be a Red, won't he?"

"If it'll get him the spotlight? Yeah," Merlin said, raising a hand to rub his face wearily. "Can't
imagine how that'll work out, given he's been caught on camera stomping his big boots where they
didn't belong, making a right arse of himself. I just hope he's not lining up other saps to go along
with him on this, they're bound to get hurt like the idiots they are."

"You're far too calm about this," Arthur said again, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Merlin weathered every encounter with Cedric Walsh with unusual aplomb, even holding Will
back on one of the more memorable occasions. But _aplomb_ didn't mean that Walsh's presence
didn't bring back bad memories, or that it didn't stir up an ugly mix of emotions. Someone who
didn't know Merlin well wouldn't have noticed the way Merlin tensed whenever Walsh was near.
The false civility in his voice. The forced smile whenever Walsh made a joke -- usually at
someone's expense.

crotch, and not in a good way."

They rearranged themselves on the cot until Arthur found himself pressed against the wall, Merlin
wedged tight against him. The blanket was tangled up in their legs, not providing much by way of
warmth, but with so many people in a small space and magic to buffer them against the foul
weather outside, they didn't need the blanket.

"So what you're saying is we stay out of whatever you've done?" Arthur asked.

"That's right," Merlin mumbled, drifting off to sleep.

Arthur raised a brow at the admission of guilt, knowing full well that Merlin would never have
said anything if he didn't want it known, but likewise aware that Merlin guarded his sleep jealously
when they were on active duty, and that he'd probably only said that to distract Arthur into leaving
him alone.

He caught Gwaine watching them with a raised brow -- Perceval was sitting one cot over, and
between them, they had matched expressions.

"I've a feeling I never want to be on Merlin's bad side," Gwaine said. "He's never really pranked
any of us, do you know that?"

"Mean streak a mile wide," Will said, his voice muffled. There was a faint _thump_, followed by a
mournful **owww**. "Hey, what gives? Kay, goddamn it, let me out from under here --"

"Mean streak," Gwaine repeated, his mouth splitting into a broad grin, as if he were a proud papa
who'd just realized how much his little boy had grown up into the splitting image of his father.
"This I've got to see."

---

It was nearly tea by the time the team struggled out of bed and left the barracks, still pulling on
their clothes and equipment. Bohrs scratched his belly and yawned noisily. Gwaine was only
upright and walking because Perceval doted on him. Will and Kay were bickering half-heartedly,
but everyone knew that would change as soon as they had hot liquid in them, even if it was a
watered-down version of otherwise strong tea.

"I'd kill for coffee," Leon muttered. "I think Morgana might have left a stash of it in her office."
Arthur eyed him sidelong. "Don't tease me like that."

"If you're mounting a mission for retrieval, I'm in," Galahad said.

"Me too," Geraint said.

"Hell, I'll go on a S&R for used coffee grounds at this rate," Pellinor said. He grunted and groused, shooting daggers at Lucan. "Why are you so chirpy this morning?"

"Because I slept, you numpty. Unlike you lesser mortals, I don't need coffee," Lucan said.

"Lies," Mordred accused. He leaned in and sniffed the air around Lucan. "I think I smell coffee."

Merlin snorted, bumping shoulders with Arthur. "You know, I could probably save us the hunt and summon some fresh beans."

Arthur considered. He truly did. There was a long list of pros that outweighed the cons, but in the end, he decided to be the better man. "Save your strength. Forget about this lot, one good strong cup for me should be enough."

"Oi, learn to share," Owain complained.

They rounded the corner, a pair of soldiers nearly crashing into them. There was a series of half-hearted apologies all around, but before they could separate and go on their way, a familiar voice said, "Bloody Hell, it's you lot. We were just coming to get you."

"Evans," Arthur said. They shook hands in greeting. Arthur noted the particular tight grip that kept him from pulling away too soon, the tightness around Evan's eyes and the wariness in the other man with him. "What is it?"

"Just heard they're about to unveil the identities of the Red Team," Evans said. "Something about it didn't sound right, thought I'd come and check in on you, see if you knew about it."

"We do," Arthur said, glancing at Merlin. Merlin shrugged his shoulders, as unconcerned now as he was the night before. For all their whinging about coffee, the full night's sleep had done the team good -- more energy, more colour in their faces. Perceval didn't limp as much anymore, Lance looked less haunted, and Merlin was his usual self, only a little subdued. "Nothing to worry about, innit?"

Evans' eyes narrowed. "If you're sure."

"Not particularly, but it's got nothing to do with us, believe me," Arthur said. "Just some bloke wanting his fifteen minutes."

Evans gave Arthur a look like he'd sucked on a lemon and hadn't particularly enjoyed it, but was willing to tolerate it on principle. "There will be a grand unveiling, won't there?"

Arthur glanced at Merlin and past him, to Leon. Though they both pretended they weren't, Arthur knew they were listening. At Merlin's faint nod and Leon's absent-minded shrug, Arthur said, "Eventually."

"With our luck, it won't happen of our own volition," Leon said. "Triied that, didn't work out."

"Not so much, no," Merlin agreed.

"It won't be in the mess hall, then," Evans said.
Arthur shook his head. "No. Most likely it'll be under official circumstances or accidental unveilings out in the field. All the bloody pomp. It'll be annoying."

Evans chuckled.

"Not a fucking cry for attention," Merlin said, and that tone, Arthur knew well. It was how he'd expected Merlin to react to anything Walsh did, these days.

"Let's just see what happens," Arthur said.

They filed into the mess tent, half of the team splitting up to get their trays while the other half went to secure a table, and it was on the second round when Arthur queued up behind Merlin that he noticed stilted, awkward behaviour. He followed exchanged looks, identifying the perpetrators, and recognized none of them. Most were regular army, with patches from different divisions; there were a couple who were notably SAS if only because of their complete lack of patches.

It was easy to see what had set them off -- Walsh and his latest crew of minions had entered the tent. Arthur was pleased to see that none of them were from Walsh's original team, which meant they'd either swapped out or Walsh had been reassigned. At the same time, he was disappointed. Whoever made up the members of Walsh's hanger-ons, they were obviously misguided or terrible gullible.

Walsh walked into the mess tent with the swagger of a man who ruled the roost -- or of someone who didn't realize they weren't as high on the food chain as they believed they were. A couple of men stayed stubbornly behind him while others veered off, and those men glanced around nervously, as if they were afraid of missing their marks.

Arthur touched Merlin's elbow. Merlin made a questioning noise, and turned, following Arthur's nod. Instead of the expected stormcloud, Merlin's expression turned mean and dangerous, his mouth tugging into a smirk. It was simultaneously frightening to see and a worrisome turn-on for Arthur.

The grand unveiling was painfully staged. A fumble of movement, a too-loud, "What is that in your pocket, Walsh?" and mock horror as the patch of red was yanked out of Walsh's pocket.

Walsh couldn't be bothered to appear concerned, because the faint grin on his face belied his poor attempts to wrench it back.

"Well, well, well," the instigator said, waving what looked to be a silky red scarf in the air. "You did a good job making people believe it weren't you, but I knew, didn't I? You're Red Team, and you've been all along --"

Merlin hummed to himself, holding out his tray for a heaping helping of watery potato mash.

The red scarf unfolded as it was shook out, turning into a lacy woman's baby-doll nightgown, the stomach area made out of sheer material, the remainder as silky and satiny as it had first appeared. It looked to be in Walsh's size.

Walsh's expression went from barely-modest in completely feeble attempts at denial of his "true" identity to complete, irascible shock in 0.03 seconds flat.

It was priceless.

The mess tent broke into laughter and catcalls, the volume only increasing when the same thing happened to the other men who had accompanied Walsh into the mess tent.
Arthur had to put down his tray. He was shaking so much with suppressed laughter that he nearly dropped his ration. Merlin, on the other hand, hummed obliviously, nodding his thanks as he received a dripping dollop of stew with more sauce than meat.

"Mean streak," Will said, solemnly, his eyes wide. "Take it from me. Never, ever get on his bad side. Grovel if you have to, because he'll lie in wait like a bloody scorpion. It won't be one sting, either. It'll be a slow, steady mauling until you're a bloated, bloody pulp. And just you wait. This is only the start of it."

"Olaf," Arthur greeted flatly, not even looking at the screen of his phone.

Although there had been many exchanged emails and text messages, they hadn't spoken since Olaf's men led Uther away for questioning. The official line that had come down from on-high was that General MacNeil had been reassigned to another branch, which everyone knew was political bollocks for forced early retirement. The underlying message was less clear for Colonel Pendragon, who was supposedly using his expertise in the field to counsel MI-5 in determining the next most plausible attack.

Arthur didn't know what that meant, and could only guess, since he hadn't had the courage to ask Olaf directly.

"Arthur," Olaf greeted, his tone more animated. "I need you to come in."

The door to the barracks opened and closed; Merlin came in, looking tired. Gwaine bustled in after him, grabbing a bottle of water out of Geraint's hand as he walked down the narrow space between beds to get to his bunk.

Arthur put the cell phone on speaker and went back to filling out the requisition paperwork that Leon had generously left for him to finish while he went out on assignment. "I'll have to fill out a form and request permission to leave the base. Shouldn't take more than a few hours, if we're lucky, but if Mandrake is in a foul mood, it could take a week or so."

They were under strict restrictions to stay on base, leaving only in a minimum prescribed number for mandated patrols. Technically, the instructions came from Arthur, but it was General Tachnathar who was giving the orders.

"That's bollocks and you know it. You'll get a pat on the head and a wave through. I don't even have to call in to request you. Just --"

"There's a reason we're on restrictions," Arthur said calmly. He signed a form with an elaborate flourish, and went over it with feigned concern. "You know it, and you agreed to it."

The army was completely remobilized now. The rearrangement thinned out their ranks and positioned them throughout London proper, equipping teams with a good comms technician and solid leadership. Each team answered to a section leader, each section leader reported to a quadrant commander, and each commander received orders from the division leads. Currently, the division leads were responsible in reporting in to other division leads and to the FOB -- which was now, in effect, the War Council -- but in times of high alert, the members of Excalibur would step in as the Red Team, receiving orders from division leads and distributing information between them. The FOB would be listening in as a matter of course, but would give their input to Arthur, who would
give the actual orders.

It was heady to think that Arthur was the unofficial commander of all the British Armed forces should an all-out attack break out again, and he'd accepted that offer from General Tachnathar only on the grounds that he could not be removed from the field, and that the War Council would take over where required.

On the phone, Olaf huffed. "I agreed to nothing. Now get your arse over here. There's something you need to hear."

"We've got incoming," Arthur said meanly. "I've got to get the new people up to speed."

"They're here," Merlin said, moving past Arthur to sit on Arthur's largely unused cot. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and ran his hand through his hair, looking tired.

Arthur nodded acknowledgement, favouring Merlin with a look of concern. He'd called in Balinor, his men, and the dragons they could trust on the off chance that other dragons, who disagreed with the principle of balance, might attack again in a moment of distraction. Aerial support would be required at that point. In theory, they'd flown in at night, landed outside of London, and had been picked up, but from the tone of Merlin's voice, something had either not gone according to plan, or he was already burned out from having to deal with his father.

"You've got people to get your people up to speed," Olaf snapped.

Before Olaf could continue, Arthur asked, "How's Uther?"

"He's fine," Olaf said, his tone terse. Arthur could almost hear him grit his teeth. "He's been... helpful. He believes he knows how the next attack will take place, but he doesn't have all the information, and your lot might help."

"Call Bayard. I'm sure he has resources --"

"Oh, like I'd trust that bloody fucking snake any further than I can throw him," Olaf said. He took a deep breath, and, more quietly, admitted, "Also, he said he wants to see you."

Arthur took the phone off speaker and placed it against his ear. He waited for the thickness in his throat to ebb, and asked, "Given everything, what makes you think I want to see him?"

Merlin touched his knee, but didn't say anything. Arthur was grateful for the comfort and the support offered.

"Fine. Appealing to your sense of filial responsibility is a bust. You never responded well to direct orders --"

"You don't give orders, Olaf," Arthur said wearily. He leaned on his desk, scratching the side of his head. "You manipulate, you bribe, you threaten, you coerce. And more than anything else, you bark. No fucking wonder Vivian doesn't want to come to London when she doesn't have to deal with you anymore, not where she is now."

Olaf was silent for several seconds. "That was a low blow."

"No lower than bringing Uther into this," Arthur said. "I'm not playing your games anymore -- not yours, not Bayard's. So you call Bayard, because you're supposed to be working together. And if you need me to come in, you tell me what it's about, and I'll decide if it's important enough to leave my post."
A faint tapping sound -- like someone drumming a surface with fingertips -- was audible in the background. It filled a silence that stretched for nearly a minute before Olaf broke and said, "I told you. Uther suspects how the next attack will take place, but he doesn't have the information to work out the logistics and the timing."

"I gave a thorough battleplan with contingencies for every possible offence," Arthur said. "Of course Uther suspects how the next attack will take place. I gave you a fucking list."

"This isn't on your list," Olaf said, and he almost sounded smug.

Arthur glanced at Merlin. Merlin's brow was furrowed. Gwaine had wandered over, drawn to the conversation, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Go on," Arthur said.

"Not over an unsecure line," Olaf said.

"For fuck's sake," Arthur muttered under his breath. "My line is as secure as it gets, and you damn well know it --"

"Please hold," Olaf said primly, effectively cutting Arthur off.

Arthur gaped, exchanging looks with Merlin, and spread his hands. "Unbelievable."

Merlin patted his knee. "I'll come with you. At the very least, I can make him slip on a banana peel, if it'll make you feel better."

Arthur snorted. Gwaine, on the other hand, made a mournful sound. "I miss bananas."

There was a faint shuffle over the line, a muffled background conversation Arthur couldn't make out. He shook his head, half in disgust, mostly in annoyance, and finished up the last of the paperwork. He could at least make sure Leon didn't have to do much more than have them brought to the administration tent and ensure that the supplies they were requisitioning came through.

Given how strictly rationed everything was, they might never see the majority of those supplies.

Olaf came back on the line with a huff. "As I understand it, those new people you're talking about are support troops. Airborne support troops. Recently arrived?"

Arthur stared at the phone and wished he had a little bit of magic so that he could make it blow up.

"Uther said that Balinor might have the answer," Olaf said cheerfully. "Bring him along."

Merlin's sour expression matched exactly how Arthur felt right now.

Balinor and his men -- Arthur recognized a few of them from Paris -- unloaded equipment from the trucks that had gone out of London to pick them up. Bohrs and Bedivere were helping with the heavier boxes, but Arthur didn't need to look to know that some of that "equipment" was non-standard.

He wasn't sure which of them were the dragons, but he could safely discount the three who were with Mandrake on the other side of the truck, speaking with the kind of enthusiastic animation
shared between friends. Balinor had warned Arthur that he might not be able to convince the entire team to come in, but from the looks of things, Balinor's men were all on board with the plan.

Man and dragon both were grizzled veterans, sharp military habits having slipped and faded after years undercover in the field and in hiding. There was a level of wariness that Arthur couldn't fault -- they'd been declared MIA, and later, KIA, but here they were, alive and well. Reclaiming their identities would come with any number of problems that Arthur would do his best to minimize, and he'd have to remember to speak to someone about getting their back pay now that they were in a position to return to military service.

"Balinor," Arthur said, tilting his head to gesture toward a more private corner.

Merlin hung back with Gwaine, out of the way, refusing to make eye contact with his father and barely smiling when Gwaine mocked Bedivere for nearly dropping a container.

Arthur caught the wistful look Balinor cast Merlin and ignored it. At one point, he might have pushed Merlin into reconciliation with Balinor, but he'd be a hypocrite, given that he didn't want to talk to Uther any more than Merlin wanted to speak with his father.

"You're wanted at MI-5," Arthur said, skipping over pleasant courtesies. He didn't care how the flight in was; whether they'd been seen, or even if they'd found the drive into London tedious and slow. This was business, and nothing more.

"I don't know anyone there, not anymore," Balinor said, shaking his head. "Haven't the desire to visit again."

"Olaf's there. I'm sure you remember him," Arthur said. A contemplative look came over Balinor's expression, as if he were trying to decide what game Arthur was playing. Arthur ignored it and barrelled on, "Bayard will be there."

"Lovely." Balinor said, his tone making it clear that he had little love for Bayard. Arthur doubted that anyone liked Bayard, anyway.

"It's Uther who said you have information that we could use in defending against the next attack," Arthur said.

Balinor snorted. "Of course he'd say that. He's being burned at the stake, isn't he? He'll want to gloat while he still can, and he wants me to hear it --"

Arthur crowded into Balinor's space, his voice dropping dangerously. "I don't want to hear it. From you, from him. Whatever you've done to each other, deal with it another time. You're coming, and I can't make this more clear. I am not Uther. Your son is not you. Focus on the job. Is that clear?"

Balinor didn't quite take a step back, but he did raise his chin defiantly. His lips pursed in a tight line, and he gave a curt nod. "Crystal. Sir."

Arthur waited to see if Balinor had anything else to say, but when he remained obstinately silent, he gestured. "Let's go."

Balinor left a word with Phillip that he would be away for a while and to take over, catching up to Arthur. Arthur followed Gwaine and Merlin -- letting them go first for no other reason beyond putting space between Merlin and Balinor -- to the gates. They signed out one of the vehicles from the pool while Arthur cleared their departure with the MPs.

The trip to MI-5 took the better part of an hour, but when they arrived, an analyst led them straight
to Olaf. Olaf, Uther, and several other analysts and technicians were in a workspace in one of the underground bunkers, papers and books covering every spare square millimetre and piled high enough to be a crushing hazard to a hapless passer-by should they collapse. Boxes had been opened, packaging had been strewn around the floor, and artefacts were partially uncovered in what seemed to have been a search for a particular object.

Arthur couldn't tell if the search had been successful or not.

Olaf looked up and his mouth split into a smile more reminiscent of a cat who had caught the canary. "Arthur. Good, good. You brought him."

Uther straightened from his crouch next to a box, pushing his glasses up as he stood. He turned to Arthur as if he wanted to say something, but his expression splintered, becoming impassive, when he laid eyes on Balinor.

"Uther," Balinor said flatly.

"Balinor," Uther acknowledged.

The two men stared at each other for several strained seconds before Balinor broke the silence with a toneless, "Hard times?"

"Yes," Uther said, and magnanimously added, "Though I imagine you would know more of that than I."

"What do you want?" Balinor said, a frustrated sigh escaping his lips. "I don't know anything about any attacks, much less how to stop one."

"Actually, you do," Uther said, holding up his hand when Balinor started to protest. "We talked about it once, didn't we? Only I didn't know what you were saying at the time."

Balinor's eyes narrowed. Arthur crossed his arms and watched the two of them. Merlin walked away, though not out of earshot, and Gwaine was poking through an open box, inspecting the contents. The only other person remotely interested in the conversation was Olaf, who seemed disappointed that there hadn't been any more fireworks.

"I believed you were spouting pseudo-archaeology, much like the neo-pagans who trespass on Stonehenge to perform so-called ancient rituals. But that was your intent all along, wasn't it?" Uther scowled. "I was not the only one to dismiss your claims. In my defence, I had no idea you were any sort of magic user--"

"I have no idea what you're on about," Balinor said, exasperated. "We never spoke, you and I. After I caught you redirecting those artefacts, I wanted nothing to do with you."

Uther glanced at Olaf. Olaf was unsurprised by Balinor's accusation. Arthur wasn't, either, given that he'd already come to that conclusion himself. Over at the nearby table, Gwaine wrenched his hand out of the box, shaking it out with a startled yelp and bringing his finger to his mouth.

"It was after the mission in Malta," Uther said slowly. "When we recovered a trident from the underwater cave. The trident turned out to have been useless, of course, and we were presented with a list of other potentially-recoverable artefacts of mythological and anthropological importance."

"I'm assuming you're speaking in the royal we, because I don't remember you anywhere near the boat, never mind the scuba equipment," Balinor said. There was something in his tone, though, that
hinted he remembered the conversation in question.

"Can we get to the point?" Arthur asked, breaking the stalemate.

"We were trying to decide on the next viable mission," Uther said. "The Americans had a list of places they wanted us to try --"

"Which they tried, and ahead of us, letting us think the artefacts were lost when they were already on their way to the CIA repository," Olaf said, crossing his arms.

"At the time, we didn't have much of a list to go on. All of the initial sites had been examined. The research team and I didn't have enough time to go through the literature to come up with new locations and new artefacts," Uther said. "The conversation turned away from the American artefacts to the lesser known mythologies in the British Kingdom. Your team was quite a font of knowledge in that regard."

"I wonder why," Merlin said flatly. He didn't look up from where he was skimming through a book, turning the pages of the giant tome carefully.

"Yes, quite," Uther said. "If I had realized that your team was composed mostly of druids, my response to their list would have been quite different. I would have investigated --"

"The point," Arthur repeated impatiently.

Uther turned to Arthur, pointing to Balinor. "While one of his men told us of a valuable artefact that could only be uncovered at a specific time, he did his best to exaggerate the story until we believed that it was nothing more than a fairy tale. After that conversation, we had a substantial number of artefacts to begin researching. That one artefact did not make the list, but I never forgot about it."

"You went searching for it anyway," Balinor said.

"So did you, it seems," Uther said. "Didn't you take leave shortly afterward?"

"No, I --"

"I wouldn't deny it," Olaf said. He looked at both men. "Either of you."

Neither Balinor nor Uther spoke. They stared unblinking, the stalemate ratcheting up the tension until the analysts in the room slowed in their work, affected by the sudden chill.

"You took leave two weeks after that conversation," Balinor bit out. "You found it, didn't you?"

"I found mention of the legend," Uther admitted. "I had no idea what I was looking for. I still don't."

"You bloody idiot," Balinor said, furious. "Were you alone? When you looked for it, were you alone?"

Uther scoffed. "Of course not. I couldn't very well hike Snowden by myself without attracting suspicion, could I? I took Ygraine --"

He trailed off.

Balinor turned to look at Arthur first. Uther was next, his eyes wide, his mouth agape.
"I should have fucking known," Balinor snarled, glancing at Merlin. Merlin was watching them with a deep frown that only eased when… when he came to the same sort of understanding that Uther seemed to have reached.

Arthur was momentarily lost. The sound of rushing waves roared in his ears. Every detail he'd ever gathered, everything he'd been told, every story -- finally, it fit. The artefact everyone seemed to be looking for, desperate to get their hands on it. The belief that it was a living artefact that could be wielded as a weapon or as a shield. War and peace, strife and calm, hate and love, all in balance.

Snowden was where Balinor had taken Hunith, where Hunith had conceived Merlin. They had both lived in fear that Merlin was that artefact --

But Arthur was older than Merlin, Ygraine had died giving birth to Arthur, and everyone, from the doctors to family friends to even Uther himself, claimed that Arthur was her miracle baby, because she had been diagnosed infertile after years of being unable to conceive.

Now, Arthur understood why Kilgarrah had felt the need to explain a forgotten history, that he had been nearly desperate for Arthur to understand the need for a balance.

War raged in a chaotic tremor of violence. Only moments had passed, but the King couldn't hear the sound of swords clashing all around them, not anymore. The bright red banner had unfurled, falling flat against the staff, drained of colour.

He fell to his knees. He pressed a hand against the ache in his side and stared at the blood on his palm in confusion.

Dizzy, he tried to stand.

He fell to his side instead. He saw nothing but the ground quickening toward him, and --

Caught. He was caught. Strong arms held him. He still sank down, but slower now, and blinked several times before he realized that he was cradled in someone's arms.

He knew those eyes. Bright and blue. Full of love and exasperated fondness, always with a glint of sparkling gold. He didn't understand why they were so sad now, watery with tears.

The King touched his Sorcerer's cheek.

"Finish it," he whispered. His hand dropped down; he was too weak. He wanted his strength for one last kiss.

"No. No. No," the Sorcerer said. "No. You can't leave me. You promised. You said -- you said that you were mine and that I was yours and that not even death would keep us apart -- you can't. You can't leave me. You can't die --"

The King didn't know what to say. He had done the one thing he had sworn to never do. He had made his Beloved cry. "I'm sorry. I love you."

"No. You stupid cabbagehead. You're not -- you can't --" The Sorcerer bowed his head and sobbed.

The King thought he heard his name shouted in the distance, a fragile murmur across the veil. He didn't turn his head to see who had spoken, because whoever it was, they couldn't possibly be more important to him than his Beloved.

"Don't cry," the King said. "Fight for me. End this."
"You think I care about this fucking war? That I’m fighting to win? I’m fighting for you, you bloody prat. I’m fighting for your dream."

There was a determined look in the Sorcerer’s eyes. It was one that the King had seen before. He hadn’t liked it the first time. He liked it even less, now, because after all these years together, he had an idea of just how far the Sorcerer would go for him.

His eyes were bright. Blinding white. Not a trace of gold. Not a trace of blue. He was fucking beautiful, and the King was terrified for him.

"Don’t," the King said. "Save yourself. Save everyone."

"Don’t you understand? There’s no saving anyone without you."

The mountains shook. The ground shivered. The earth slid like a blanket being pulled away. The distant voice calling his name was drowned out by thunder and the sky churned like deep, angry seas.

The numbness raging through the King’s body ebbed, only to be replaced by the warmth of the Sorcerer’s arms around him.

White stones rose from the ground, surrounding them in a circle. Cairn stones, the King knew. The Sorcerer was marking his grave.

Their grave.

"No. Please," the King begged. His Sorcerer, his beautiful, foolish Beloved. "Please --"

"I promised, too," the Sorcerer whispered, his voice solemn. The King felt something wet and hot fall on his cheek and knew that it was the Sorcerer's tears. "I'm not leaving you."

Arthur took a bewildered step away from the table, shaking the vision from his mind.

It wasn't Merlin. It was Arthur.

Arthur met Merlin's eyes. He wanted to say that he understood, now, what it felt like to be thought of as nothing more than a thing, a tool, or an object for others to use to achieve their own ends, their own goals. He couldn't, because in that moment, he realized that he had always felt that way. That he had always fought against being under anyone's control.

He remembered when he met an enigmatic army recruiter during to his years in university. He'd always intended on signing up, but after that meeting, it had been a certainty. His training, his assignments, his slow climb through the ranks -- except for a few rare instances, Arthur had never been denied anything. He'd always thought it was because the Brass had respected his father, that Colonel Uther Pendragon's long shadow would follow him through his career. Looking back, Arthur wasn't so certain. All of his indirect or direct superiors had always, in some way, reported to Major Kilgarrah, Colonel Mandrake, or General Tachnathan.

How many Captains in the SAS were given the privilege of selecting the members of their own teams? How many were allowed as many command opportunities as Arthur? How many…

Arthur's stomach soured.

He knew that he deserved his position. That he was good at what he did. The knowledge that he'd been helped along…
Just so that he could be positioned like a chess piece?

Arthur swallowed thickly. His voice was the hammer resounding on tempered metal when he said, "Again, can we get to the point? Colonel Pendragon, I was told that you knew how the next attack would occur, and that you wanted Balinor here to assist you."

The anger that had crossed Balinor's expression at the realization that Uther had beaten him to the prize had been replaced by something like relief. Merlin was no longer the "artefact" that could be used in times of war. He was no longer a target, no longer in danger. Arthur felt the same sort of relief, too, because Merlin would be safe from whatever would have been required of him as the artefact that was meant to bring about the balance Kilgarrah had been talking about.

Everything made sense, suddenly. Bayard must have done his own research on the subject, and had somehow accepted Uther's explanation of new fertilization techniques to explain Ygraine's pregnancy over any other, turning his suspicion to Balinor. Bayard's interest in Merlin, sending one of his own men to harass Merlin -- it made sense only if he suspected Merlin to be the artefact.

But Merlin wasn't. It was Arthur. And Uther had known it all along. Had engineered it. All those training courses Arthur had been sent on. Survival camps, martial arts, leadership conferences, even tourney practices.

Arthur thought he saw a flash of pain in Uther's eyes, but he couldn't be sure because he turned away.

"You know how. Both of you do. Keep it to yourselves. I don't want you talking about it, and I don't want to hear about it. All I want you to tell me is where and when," Arthur said. Even to his own ears, he was unnaturally calm, detached, wooden.

Merlin made a choked-off sound.

"I don't understand," Gwaine said.

"Neither do I." Olaf's gaze passed between Uther, Balinor, and Arthur. "You both need to clue me in."

"Do not," Arthur said firmly. He'd meant to keep the foregone conclusion a secret from Merlin, wanting to protect him, but Merlin was shaking his head, his cheeks red with suppressed fury, his mouth in a thin line. He had figured it out, and… Arthur didn't want to deal with it. It was the wrong time -- there were other, more urgent matters. It was enough that his entire life was a bloody fucking lie, because all he had ever been in Uther's eyes was a weapon to be forged, tempered, and sharpened before it was used, broken, and disposed. "Because it doesn't matter. When you have that information, send it to me, and we'll come up with a plan to defend against the attack."

"Arthur," Balinor said, sadness creeping into his expression.

"Just do it," Arthur said. He turned to Merlin and Gwaine. "You two, with me."

Arthur waved away an analyst who offered to lead them out. There was no need, since he had been there often enough. He led Merlin and Gwaine through the corridors almost on automatic, his mind still reeling from the information. It wasn't until they left the building, signing out at the security desk, that he realized Merlin had been calling his name for some time.

"Not now," Arthur said, heading toward the truck.

"Now," Merlin snarled, using his magic to snatch the keys out of Arthur's hand. He threw them at
Gwaine and ordered, "You're driving. And you, get in the back."

Merlin didn't give Arthur any choice, bodily forcing him into the back seat. He climbed in after Arthur and waited exactly as long as it took for Gwaine to get inside before he said anything.

And when he did, he cut right to the throat, his voice cracking.

"We're supposed to get married."

Arthur closed his eyes, forcing himself to take a deep breath. He felt the truck's engine roar to life, the vehicle rumbling as Gwaine pulled out of park and headed for the open road. "Yeah," he said weakly, unable to look Merlin in the eye. He looked straight ahead instead, but that was as much of a mistake as anything, because he saw Gwaine looking at him in the rearview mirror.

"We're getting married," Merlin said. The words were firm, solemn, a promise.

Arthur swallowed thickly and nodded. "We're getting married."

Suddenly, the truck lurched to a stop, tyres screeching along the pavement. Arthur caught himself from being thrown forward, but Merlin slipped, crashing into the seat in front of him. Several cars following behind them swerved out of the way, horns honking.

Gwaine shoved the truck into park and twisted in his seat to glare at them. "Someone tell me what the fuck's going on, or so help me, God, I'm going to shove my rifle up someone's arse, and it won't be enjoyable --"

"It's Arthur," Merlin said, pushing back onto the seat and never looking away from Arthur. "Arthur's the artefact everyone's been looking for. The one the dragons say will bring the balance."

"If he dies, we lose the war."
Merlin was fit to tear through the base, and everyone knew it. Soldiers scattered out of his path, officers stepped off the kerb as he walked by, and senior personnel didn't so much as harrumph when he passed them with a snarl.

Will kept up with him, though he was smart enough to stay out of arms' reach.

"You're kind of prickly," Will said. In demonstration, he veered closer, put a hand on Merlin's arm, and they both jerked at the electric shock.

"Don't care," Merlin said, shaking it off. Will wobbled behind him before the stun wore off, catching up in a few quick strides.

They walked for a while in silence. Merlin had made the circuit of the base camp twice before he realized what he was doing.

"Do you really think you should --"

Merlin stopped dead and turned to glare at Will. "Don't you fucking second-guess me."

Will held up his hands. "I'm just saying. The psycho murder approach might not be the best way to go about this."

Merlin deflated, but only a little. He grit his teeth and looked away.

Will stepped closer, patting the air as if expecting to run into something invisible, solid, and painful, and said in a low voice, "Look. You've got Arthur luck-charmed and jinx-proofed within an inch of his life. He's not suicidal. Nobody's telling him, but everyone's going to throw themselves in front of a bloody bullet if it comes to that. Outside of Excalibur, less than five people know what's going on.

"None of us are talking. Honestly, don't think Olaf's going to open his gob given that he stands to lose out if this war flushes down the loo. Balinor's already deep on your shite list, he's not going to want to fall off of it entirely. I've a feeling he likes being on your radar, because it means you still know he's around, yeah? And Uther --"

Will grimaced. He stood up straighter, rolling his shoulders back.

"I get that he's probably the biggest arse on the bloody planet, but he's still Arthur's father. I don't think he's going to place his firstborn son on the sacrificial altar --"

He must have seen something of what Merlin was thinking in Merlin's expression, because he faltered.

"You think he would?" Will asked, horror lining his tone.

Merlin didn't meet Will's eyes. He looked past him. Soldiers milled about, pausing to chat, taking a moment for themselves before hustling on to their duty. Off-duty men and women lingered for a smoke outside the dispensary, drinking orange soda from the corner shop down the street, a stone's throw from the base gates. He watched their movements, drowning in the overwhelming buzz in his head, wondering how the fuck they could carry on as normal, as if it were just any other day of the week.
"I don't know," Merlin said. The doubt, the speculation, the fear -- it was on the tip of his tongue, words aching to be formed. He swallowed hard. "All I know is, some thirty-odd years ago, two soldiers involved in a special project to recover magical artefacts decided to follow up on a prophecy and went out of their way to plan a camping trip with their significant others with the specific intention of breeding weapons off of them."

He tore his attention away from the dispensary and met Will's concerned eyes.

"You tell me."

Will took a deep breath, ran both hands through his hair, and exhaled, shaking his head. He didn't say anything. He couldn't. Because the reality was, it didn't matter what feelings Balinor and Uther had toward Merlin and Arthur. Everything they'd done in the beginning had been premeditated, right down to the moment of conception. Balinor had gone into hiding to draw attention away from Merlin on the off-chance someone would identify him as the artefact. Uther had continued to carry on his nefarious plots -- whatever those were -- while simultaneously ensuring that Arthur had every opportunity to expand his skill base.

"My head's done in," Merlin admitted.

Balinor's motives might have been to prevent the artefact from getting into the wrong hands, but he had still gone through with it because he wanted a thing in his possession. Uther's intentions were even less pure, but the outcome was the same.


In Balinor's mind, in Uther's, their sons hadn't been children who adored their fathers. They hadn't wanted to procreate. They'd wanted to arm themselves against the inevitable.

Merlin blinked burning tears out of his eyes. A hoarse laugh broke out of his chest. "I'm a bloody numpty. I... I was starting to come around to having my dad... to having him back. I should've known better."

"I ask again," Will said, his voice surprisingly gentle considering he didn't do subtle or tactful even on his best day. "Do you really want to be doing this right now?"

Merlin shook his head. "Fuck, no. I don't want to. But I need to. I need to."

He couldn't explain. It was one thing for the team to accept that Morgana's power gave her visions of the future, giving them a chance to avoid and prevent catastrophes. It was something else altogether to admit that he was haunted with dreams and flashbacks of images that he'd dismissed as flights of fancies, but couldn't. Not anymore.

It's you, Nimueh had said.

It's me, Merlin had answered. In that moment, with those words, Merlin had known them to be true.

Except he didn't know who he was. Who he was supposed to be. He'd thought Nimueh had recognized him as the artefact, but...

"For Arthur," Merlin said. "I have to know the truth. For him. Because we keep getting blindsided, and I'd like to be a step ahead for a change."

Arthur knew about Merlin's visions. Merlin knew about Arthur's. If he thought about it -- and he
had, long and late into the night, kept awake by the slow realization that their combined visions were part of the same story -- he had the sick feeling of history repeating itself, except he didn't know what that story was.

Visions of the future were well and good. But if the past was repeating themselves, if Merlin wasn't the artefact, if it was Arthur, then he needed to know the story that started it all.

Will made a clicking sound with his tongue. He took Merlin's arm in a firm hand and turned Merlin around, ignoring Merlin's protest. "All right. I don't know what this is about, what's going on in that head of yours, and I've a feeling that if you told me, I'd be hiding under my bed and sucking on my thumb, crying for my Mum. So, come on."

"But --"

"We passed Balinor's tent ages ago. Twice, actually. You need to talk to him, fine. I don't think you're in a state for it, but if that's what you want, I'm coming with you, yeah?"

Merlin relaxed, letting Will guide him through the base, grateful and relieved on levels he couldn't explain.

Balinor's tent -- the barracks assigned to him and his men, most of whom were dragons in human form in the interest of maintaining secrecy and minimizing space requirements -- was no different than any of the other standard-issue barracks on the base. The walls were largely made out of flimsy material, built more as windbreaks and temporary shelter, but the roof was of sturdier stuff - lightweight polymer that could support weight without breaking, and wouldn't fly off when it was windy.

There was no one outside and no indication that there was anyone inside, beyond the unlocked padlock that hung listlessly from the hook outside the door. Safety precautions resulting from the jammer incident against intruders warranted locking barracks on the outside when it wasn't in use. Safety precautions from pranks required that the padlock be brought inside when someone was in.

Merlin's started to second-guess himself as they approached, but Will didn't give him much of a chance. He rapped sharply on the plywood door and announced himself as he walked in.

"Oi! Where's Balinor?"

Multiple eyes turned to him. Several were a reptilian green-yellow in the low light of the barracks giving a veritable sensation of doom and gloom through the faint, smoky haze inside. The menace faded away when they noticed Merlin.

Then, all at once, the dragons in the barracks bowed. Those who were seated on the bunks lowered their heads, a hand pressed to their chests. Those standing imitated the same pose, though they were bent at the waist.

"Huh," Will said. He was silent for a long time. None of the dragons moved. It was as if they were waiting for something. Will elbowed Merlin in the ribs and leaned against him. In a low voice, he said, "You know, I weren't kidding about wanting all the awards and the medals. Rightful recognition for my awesomeness. But this is a bit much, even for me."

"It's not for you," someone said from further into the room. Merlin never met the man, but he recognized Phillip from Arthur's descriptions. He was one of Balinor's men, one among many who had abandoned their families to go into hiding, all because they were supposedly protecting Merlin's identity. Phillip was exactly as Arthur had described him, though his demeanour was less severe, now, and almost chill, as if he were high or stoned.
Given the amount of magic in the narrow space, all of it originating from the dragons themselves, Merlin wouldn't be surprised if the Dragonlords and the Druids in Balinor's squad survived in a state of semi-permanent magical rush.

Phillip motioned toward Merlin. "It's for him."

Will snorted. "Then you lot don't understand proper greatness."

"Or perhaps you overestimate yourself, as most humans do," someone said. The speaker was physically a young man with light blond hair in a brindled-brown shade. Baby fat still rounded cheeks that were bare of scruff. He didn't look old enough to be in the army proper, but the dragon Merlin could see in the haze behind the human form was ancient, scales grey and nearly white, covered with a liberal coating of scars. The slow, gravely tone of the human voice better matched the dragon that he truly was, and Merlin wondered how old he was, if he was even as old as Kilgarrah.

"'Course we do," Will said with a scoff. "Where would you be if we weren't? Anyways, you can stand up like proper men and all. Can't you see you're making Merlin uncomfortable?"

No one listened to him, and for some reason, Merlin's throat was dry. His voice cracked when he tried to tell them to get up.

Will, thankfully, was completely unfazed. "Well, I'm getting a bloody crick in my neck just looking at you, but it's on you for breaking your backs if you stay like that for long. Besides, we're not here for you. Where's Balinor?"

"Out," Phillip said.

"Fine, then, we'll leave you to it," Will said, turning and taking Merlin's arms. He muttered, "This is fucking creepy, just so you know."

"You can wait here," the old dragon invited.

"Oh yeah, sitting in a smoky room with you lumps staring at me for only God knows how long? Appealing, but we'll have to pass," Will said.

"I'll stay," Merlin said, the words out of his mouth before he realized it. Will shot him a betrayed look.

"I've… I'll wait."

"Right-o," Will said, leading the way across the threshold as if it weren't some sort of lion's den full of hungry beasts. "Someone scamper off, we're in need of a comfortable seat. Is it going to be much of a wait?"

"He went with Olaf this morning. Said he'd be back by tea. Something along the lines of not being able to stomach Uther for more than eight hours at a go," Phillip said, turning to sit down on a cot.

A young dragon moved off from one of the nearest beds, sweeping an invitation for Will and Merlin, but he didn't go far. Will plopped down and made himself completely obnoxious, as usual, but Merlin could tell that Will's nerves were on edge.

Merlin found that he couldn't move from where he stood, so he couldn't mock Will.

"So, which are you are dragons and which of you are --"

"You could do us the courtesy of closing the door before you start blathering on loud enough for
anyone to hear," said someone, coming in behind Merlin. Merlin got out of the way, his vision
blurring at the faint, overwhelming shadow on the ground overlapping the human one. The door
clicked shut, blocking out the natural light, and the disorientation faded.

Will pointed at him. "Dragon."

The man made a face, baring teeth that were too sharp and too numerous for a human mouth.
" Didn't anyone ever tell you to mind your manners in the dragon's den, else it'll eat you up like the
tasty morsel that you are?"

"Ethan," the old dragon warned.

Ethan ignored him and advanced on Will, who moved slowly, creeping off the cot as if he were
about to bolt. "You're a little scrawny for my tastes, and I'll need to floss after, I think, when your
bones get stuck in my teeth. I can smell the eggy toast you had for breakfast -- did you skip lunch?
A pity, because I like my snacks good and fat --"

"Merlin, make him stop," Will said, under his breath. He didn't sound scared, but his hand drifted
closer to his gun, and Merlin wouldn't be surprised if Will's request was more because he didn't
want to have to fire his weapon unless he absolutely had to.

"You're as bad as Knucker," Merlin said, wondering where the comparison had come from. But
he'd made it, and he turned to watch Ethan, wanting to see what he'd do.

More than one head snapped up to look at Merlin. He had the distinct impression that he'd made a
grave social slip for uttering the name, but instead of cowering and apologizing as he felt he should
do, he stood straighter, his hands at his side.

Ethan moved like a leviathan, slow and ponderous, as if affected by the constrained physical
dimensions of the room. He seemed to uncoil, scales rippling in the ether of his aura, clink-clink-
clinking like chains, and somehow, in the space of this eternity, he crossed the space between them
to stand in front of Merlin.

"Knucker?" Will asked, confused.

"Batman," Merlin supplied.

"Ohh. Adam West. All that and a bag of dicks. Him and that other one. Barely bearable," Will said,
eyebrows raised. He clapped his hands together, shaking his head in cruel amusement. "Scions of
your race, I'm sure, but I wouldn't put them up as diplomats, if it ever comes to that. Just a
thought."

"What other one?" the old dragon asked.

"Scylles," Merlin said.

The silence weighed heavily in the room. Phillip shared a look with someone toward the rear of the
barracks; the dragons cast glances between themselves. It seemed hours passed before any of them
moved, never mind spoke, but it was only a few seconds.

"You've met them?" the old dragon asked, his tone careful.

"They wanted to kill Arthur," Merlin said. He pressed his lips together and frowned, not sure why
he was volunteering information. He didn't know these men -- these dragons. They worked with
Balinor, they Balinor's friends. Merlin wasn't sure if he could trust them any more than he could
trust Balinor. For all he knew, they might've encouraged Balinor to carry through with his plan to do whatever he needed to do in order to claim the…

Artefact.

A bitter taste settled on Merlin's tongue, and he continued to speak. "Some sins of the father bollocks. Felt like they wanted to blame Uther for everything, said they'd kill Arthur in revenge. Didn't make a whole lot of sense."

A small, panicked part of Merlin wondered if Knucker and Scylles had known about Arthur, that he was the true artefact in all this, the pivot point that would ensure the balance that everyone wanted but couldn't attain, too focussed on tilting the seesaw in their favour. Merlin swallowed, uneasy.

"Obviously, they didn't succeed in their attempt," Phillip murmured. "How did you stop them?"

"Asked them to bugger off, but nicely, 'course, because his Mum raised him right. How else?" Will snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. He seemed torn, as if he wanted to climb back onto the bed to sprawl out -- a more strategic position than hiding behind the young dragon who had given it up earlier.

Everyone in the barracks looked at Merlin again. He forced an uncomfortable smile on his lips, wanting them to leave him alone.

"Who are they?" Merlin asked.

"Not every dragon craves balance," the old dragon said slowly, as if measuring his words. "The balance can only tip one of two ways. And once it does, it is very difficult to make it swing back."

Merlin watched the dragon for a long time; the dragon stared back, unperturbed.

"And you? Where do you stand on this?"

"Where we should," the old dragon said.

Merlin rubbed his thumb and forefinger on the bridge of his nose, because, of course, he'd get as cryptic an answer as he'd get from Kilgarrah. He dropped his hand.

The dragons had straightened from their bows slowly. They retreated to the walls of the barracks, curled up as far up the metal headboards of their cots as possible. Their positions gave the impression of a semicircle, surrounding Merlin, keeping him in the middle.

"Why --" Merlin cut himself off. He looked at them again, but their expressions were inscrutable, unreadable. "Why do you act like you know me?"

No one spoke. Phillip gave him a pitying look. Anyone making eye contact would turn their heads and allow their gazes to slide elsewhere.

"She said she knew me," Merlin said. It was only distantly that he heard the door creak open behind him, too lost in his own thoughts at the memory. That night at the graveyard, it had been cold, dark, foggy, full of smoke. There was no way he could have made out her expression in the pitch-black, but she'd known him. He was sure of it. He frowned. "No. That's not quite right. Nimueh looked at me and… she recognized me. I don't know how. I've never seen her before --"

"She what?" Balinor exclaimed.
Balinor's tone had no right to elicit the reaction it had. He hadn't been a father to Merlin for almost three decades. And yet, Merlin flinched, shoulders rising to his ears, and he ducked his head as if he expected a swat.

He remembered a few seconds too late that Balinor hadn't been there the time Merlin borrowed the car without asking, installing an AI in the onboard computer, which promptly betrayed him and rear-ended into a tree. Balinor hadn't been there the time Merlin accidentally fried the house's fuse box, or when he repeated the process with an entire city block. His Mum had been. She was the one to scold him, to give him a stern glare, to punish him -- though the punishment usually came down to a simple but firm Fix it, while she tried to hide her smile.

Merlin forced himself to stand up straight. To round his shoulders and to turn around. To meet his father's eyes. He didn't expect the surprise in them, the fear.

"Long story," Will said wearily, waving a hand in the air. "Involved zombies, a crazy necromancer, and a sacrificial altar. This gorgeous Evil Overlord type -- you know the one -- looked at him, pointed a finger, and shouted, *You!*"

He compounded it with a shrill pitch and a rude gesture.

"Except, you know, more angry and horrified," Will said.

Balinor's mouth was a thin, gritted line. He glanced at the door behind him, but instead of shutting it, he said quietly, "I need the room."

No one moved.

Balinor's tone rumbled, sharp with a visceral edge. "Did you not hear me?"

"We heard you," the old dragon said. He gestured at Merlin. "The boy has questions."

A long-suffering sigh accompanied a curt gesture. "I'll be the one to answer them, not you."

One by one, the dragons stood up and filed out, grabbing coats and lids, muttering under their breath about *where do we go, anyway?* while the rest grumbled quietly. Ethan bumped into Merlin, though it was a gentle nudge, an offer of solidarity that Merlin wouldn't have expected from him otherwise. Phillip put a light hand on Merlin's shoulder as he walked past, but paused next to Balinor.

"Not a word," Balinor said.

"I've said all that I've got to say about this. You know as well as I do that it's time," Phillip said. "You're doing no one any good --"

A muscle clenched in Balinor's jaw. It was enough to make Phillip harrumph. He stomped out, standing on the doorstep, fixing his lid firmly on his head before he left.

"Nid," Balinor said.

The old dragon in the young human body snorted. He shifted on his cot, planting both feet on the ground, and made a gesture with his hand. "I'm staying."

"Don't make me force you," Balinor warned.

"I was old when the day was young," Nid said, shrugging. He turned to look at Merlin. "There was
a time when your kind treated us with the respect due those who once watched the land rise and the seas settle over the Great Mother's heart, but that time is long lost to us all."

Merlin couldn't help the amused smile creeping onto his lips, because this was so familiar, somehow. "You're not that old, Nidwiggen."

*Stop whining. It doesn't become you.* Merlin bit his tongue, but didn't finish the thought out loud.

Nid's smile was as wide as Merlin's frown was deep. Merlin shook his head, confused how he knew the dragon's name, wondering how it had come as easily to him as Zachariah Knucker's had. "I'm staying," Nid said again.

Balinor turned to Will, who held his hands up. "Nope. And you definitely can't order me around, either. Could try, but? Odds of success? Not so good for you. But, sure, be a punter and take the risk if you like."

Balinor wordlessly turned around and shut the door. "Bar the hut."

"Are you asking me?" Merlin crossed his arms. At Balinor's baleful look, Merlin locked the barracks down as tightly as he could without grounding wards. He stared at Balinor, Balinor stared back, and in the background, Will sat down on a cot and noisily bounced around on his arse, making himself comfortable.

"Why does she know me?" Merlin asked. He glanced at Nid. "For that matter, why do the dragons recognize me? Have they been watching me all along? Was this entire farce -- your running off and all -- was it a complete waste of time --"

"It's not what you think," Balinor said wearily.

Merlin scoffed.

"It's not you," Nid clarified helpfully.

"Nid," Balinor said warningly.

"It's the essence of you," Nid said, ignoring Balinor.

"I can't order you to leave, but I bloody well can throw you out, you hairless rat," Balinor snapped.

Nid fell silent. He raised his arched brows when Balinor didn't fill the silence. It stretched even longer, and Nid sighed. "Not all history has been written. What was never writ in stone needs not be repeated, and the story does not need to be passed down for the mistakes to be remembered."

Merlin frowned. "I don't understand."

Nid stood up slowly. He moved with the cumbersome movement of a man well into his years, ponderous and heavy. He took his coat from the bed bunk and shrugged it on, clawed fingers clicking on the buttons. "You're not them."

"I'm tired of riddles. Can't you speak plainly for a change?"

_The dragon huffed. A fresh scar neatly bisected his eye, but luck, rather than skill, had saved his sight. It was yet another scar among many, battle-wrought and won, and there were times the dragon acted as if this was his fate, to suffer war and endure whatever else was thrown his way. I was born at the breaking of the universe, boy, the dragon would say, I watched the stars blink to_
life.

It was all very dramatic. *The others in the Roost had promised the Sorcerer that the old dragon hadn't gone mad.*

*Not yet.*

"You want answers that I cannot give. I cannot give them because there are no answers. Is that plain enough, boy?"

A heavy weight on Merlin's shoulder had him blinking down at Nid, who was shorter than Merlin in his human form by half a hand.

"Nimueh does not know you. We don't know you," Nid said. He squeezed Merlin's shoulder. "Ask the right question."

"That sounds familiar," Merlin said, trying to pull away.

Nid snorted. He nodded knowingly, and turned to look at Balinor. Solemnly, he said, "Tell him."

"Right. Yeah. Tell me," Merlin said, glancing over Nid's shoulder at Will. Will snorted and made a gesture with his hand, drawing loopy circles next to his temple.

Nid patted Merlin's cheek. He drew away and brushed past Balinor, standing still in front of the door as if waiting for something. It took a minute for Merlin to remember that the barracks were still warded, and it took a moment to drop them, and another to raise them again when he was gone.

"Crazy old coot," Will said, watching him leave.

Balinor broke the silence with a strained, "He's right."

Merlin turned to look at him. "I suppose years on the run with the likes of him, you can make sense of what he's said?"

"This once," Balinor admitted. "This once, he makes sense. Telling you about the past won't help the present. Or the future."

"I see it's your turn to become cryptic and nutters," Will said, rolling his eyes. "Do I get a go, too?"

Merlin ignored Will. "I'll be wasting my breath, then? I finally come to you like you want, but you won't tell me anything?"

Balinor opened his mouth. He closed it after an instant, lost. Merlin almost felt sorry for him, but coldness replaced goodwill and guilt when he spoke. "I don't know how to be a father."

Merlin thought about his Mum, how she'd taken on both parental roles to raise him when it was just the two of them. How her hair was greyer than most women her age, the laugh lines around her mouth more pronounced. She had been -- she was -- his mother and his father both, his moral compass, his guiding light. Balinor was someone lost to childhood memories and faded hero worship of an exaggerated ideal, who had played with him, who told him childhood stories, and who had held his hand to cross the street.

"Well. Considering how and why you went about becoming one, I'm not surprised," Merlin said. "Never really looked at me as if I were your kid, did you? An object, maybe. An artefact."

Balinor flinched, but he didn't deny it. Any claim that everything he had ever done had been for his
protection and safety went unsaid. It was just as well. They would've been hollow, now, meaningless, and Merlin was tired of the blunt spoon carving out his heart.


"Jesus," Will said, his whisper loud in the silence.

"It's all changed around now, hasn't it?" Merlin asked, bitter and hateful and cold. "You had it all wrong. I'm not the artefact. You didn't need to run away to keep from getting too attached in case you had to sacrifice me for the greater good. You could've stayed. You could've been my dad."

Balinor closed his eyes.

"I don't know how to be a son to you," Merlin said. "I'm not sure I ever want to be your son, to be honest. But for whatever reason, Mum still loves you. She sacrificed everything for me when you left. So I'm doing this for her. I'm going to give you a chance."

He tamped down the anger blooming when he saw the relief, the gratefulness in Balinor's eyes.

"You can start making it up to me by telling me everything that you know about the artefact."

If Merlin hadn't been looking for it, he would have missed the flinch.

"There's nothing to say," Balinor said regretfully, turning away. "Nothing useful."

Merlin wanted to shake him. He wanted to roar, *Tell me how to save Arthur*. He forced himself to wait.

"Oh, bollocks," Will said, his patience thinner than Merlin's. "There's something, or you wouldn't have gone off on a wild goose chase in the beginning."

"It's not what you think," Balinor said. He put his hands over his mouth, muffling a sigh. "You have to understand. I don't know what the truth is, not anymore. Back then, my men -- my men would talk, sometimes. Tell the stories that were passed down from their fathers and grandfathers. It took me a long time to realize that they were all the same story, but none of them the same."

"You're owing a Hell of a lot of bedtime stories. Start paying back that debt with interest now," Will said.

Balinor stared at Will, unimpressed.

"Yes, I'm still that brat you couldn't get rid of at dinner," Will said. He made an elaborate gesture with his hand. "Please begin the story-telling. You know I won't relent."

Merlin allowed himself a faint, grateful smile. Trust Will to alleviate the tension with sheer mockery.

Balinor snorted. He fell into silence. He drifted toward the commanding officer's desk near the door. It was covered in messy paperwork, broken pencils, equipment that needed cleaning, a chipped tea cup.

"They were stories, at first. Myths. I was taught that's all they were. It was the way of druids. They would sit and recite the edicts and the old litanies. Nothing was ever written down, so that's how they remembered their lessons, their history."

"I never really paid attention. I wasn't much for druidic magic."

Balinor picked up the teacup and
ran his thumb over the chip. "I don't even remember when I heard the old stories for the first time. From Gaius. Before the army. Maybe my father told it to me. It doesn't matter. It came up again during Operation Albion --"

He put the cup down carefully; ceramic tinkled in the silence. He seemed lost in a memory, and Merlin exchanged glances with Will.

"Just a myth," Balinor repeated. "A stray mention in an obscure old book, transcribed from faded notes, whitewashed on a scroll. Uther brought it to the table one day, and half of us could only stare at him, because…"

He trailed off.

Merlin understood. Druidic histories were closely guarded, and he knew that Gaius spoke, with a great deal of annoyance, of the more militant sects who went out of their way to destroy any written rite or ritual in order to protect them.

"It spoke of a… crucible. It was described as a vessel-like object that could act as a tipping point in times of great unrest and upheaval. Uther believed it might be an useful weapon."

Balinor hesitated.

"We all believed it was one," he admitted.

Merlin said nothing. He wanted to feel gratified that his suspicions were correct, that this was absolute justification to cut Balinor out of his life for the rest of eternity, but he only felt sick.

"There wasn't enough information to chase after it. The Brass dismissed the crucible from the list. It was never spoken of again. I should have known that Uther wouldn't have let it go."

"The druids on my team didn't. They started talking about it, late at night. Never when I was around. They knew I was raised in the Traditions, but I didn't practice, so they left me out of it, at first, until they couldn't anymore. Because --"

He waved a hand.

"Dragons?" Will supplied.

"Dragons," Balinor confirmed. "Druids, Dragonlords, Dragons. There's an inherent relationship between the three groups, one more influential than the others."

"Cryptic riddles and allusions and blanket invitations for wild speculation. To be honest, I never thought the crucible would be a person. Not until you were conceived," Balinor said, glancing at Merlin. For whatever reason, he couldn't maintain eye contact and looked away. "Hunith had trouble. We gave up on the idea of having children. We thought we'd adopt after I completed the current tour --"

He trailed off.

"You have to understand, Merlin. I never thought we would have a child. But when you were born, things changed. We were blessed, it was a miracle. Gaius' foul tinctures worked, for a change. A Goddess gave us her Blessing, maybe. We lucked out on some sort of astral alignment or something like that. But when your magic manifested nearly as soon as we brought you home --"

He hesitated.
"You're my son. I was... terrified. The crucible wasn't an object. It was a person. My blood. My child."

It was Merlin's turn to look away, struggling to keep from giving in. He felt the cracks in the coldness around his heart and stared at Will, who raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward Balinor meaningfully. Merlin ignored him.

"Everything made sense, suddenly. The old stories. The quaint footnote that Uther had uncovered when he'd first made his presentation. The crucible wasn't a vessel. It was... It was a mistranslation. A misinterpretation. A misunderstanding. I don't know. Myth and legend. Old manuscripts in one ancient language translating a throwaway document in a different language even older than the first. The crucible is a trial."

Merlin raised his chin and found Balinor looking at him, anguish visible in his eyes.

"Those born under the proper sign," Balinor said softly, sounding as if he were quoting from memory, "Were to endure a severe test, a great trial. The choice made at that crucible would have weighed the rhythm of the Great Mother's heart and brought balance to the world."

The question was on Merlin's lips, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. It resonated in his head with the voice of a child, wide-eyed and awed, hanging onto his father's every word. What happened in the story? Did the hero win?

He closed his eyes. He couldn't ask. He knew.

He remembered.

"You told me this story before," Merlin said quietly. "I know how it ends."

He took a deep breath and nodded firmly, steadying himself.

"Come on, Will. We need to find Arthur."

Merlin dismissed the wards with the wave of a careless hand and walked toward the door on unsteady legs. Balinor caught him before he reached the latch and earnestly said, "Nid is right. You are not them. You're not the crucible. The choice doesn't rest on you. You could leave, you could --"

"Don't," Merlin snarled. The word was bitten out in a low, reverberating growl that raked claws inside his chest, the gouges so deep that it would leave scars once they'd healed. "If you even try to tell me to put myself before Arthur, before my team, then you're definitely not my father, and I'm my mother's son."

Merlin shook him off. Balinor still wouldn't let go. Will dragged them both apart as the air crackled around them, full of resentment.

Merlin walked out without a backward glance.

The mood in the barracks was sombre, the air thick with a quality Merlin didn't want to examine too closely, but which no doubt mirrored the sinking feeling he'd felt ever since leaving the
dragon's barracks.

A bed creaked under someone's weight as they shifted into a more comfortable position. No one so much as exchanged glances. Merlin wasn't sure if anyone was breathing.


"*You're not them,*" Will confirmed. "Heard it clear as day."

Someone handed him a canteen of water. Will unscrewed the cap, brought the opening to his mouth, and tipped the canteen back. He scowled, holding it upside down in the air, but no water came out.

"Really, boys?"

Mordred wordlessly passed him another canteen. Will sloshed it around first before nodding, satisfied, and taking a drink.

"Does it mean anything to you?" Merlin asked.

"Not a bloody thing," Bedivere admitted. He studied the wall behind Merlin with narrow eyes before shaking his head sharply and returning his attention to Merlin and Arthur. "But it's a weird turn of phrase, isn't it?"

"Gender-neutral term," Lance said. "Maybe the people in the myths were female."

"True," Bedivere said, holding up a finger. "But it's also the plural. As in, more than one. Of course, *You* can be plural, too. But if Nid said it to you, specifically, as if you are not more than one --"

"Yes, thank you, I was sorely missing my grammar classes. Bloody heck, I would've hated you if you were my English teacher, nitpicking the fucking commas. Can we focus on the bigger issue? The one where we don't know what the test is and what choice Arthur's going to have to make?" Will asked.

"No," Leon said quietly, nodding at Bedivere. "He has a point. Even Balinor said it, didn't he? *Them.* And you two…"

He shifted in his seat, fixing Merlin and Arthur with a steady, unwavering stare.

"Putting aside the fact that, perhaps, it would have been nice if you'd told us that you've been having similar dreams and visions, they've been focused on two people, haven't they?" Leon asked.

"The King and the Sorcerer," Mordred murmured. He scratched his jaw, his gaze distant.

"That ring any bells?" Lucan asked him.

Mordred didn't answer. His brow furrowed faintly. One corner of his mouth dipped in an unhappy downturn, and he leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

Arthur's hand had been a faint pressure on Merlin's thigh throughout the telling, but now it squeezed, as if reassuring or seeking reassurance. Merlin put his hand on top of Arthur's; Arthur turned his palm up and their fingers twined together.

"That," Bedivere said suddenly, pointing at them.
Or rather, at their joined hands.

Bohrs gave Bedivere a judgmental look. Very slowly, he said, "I'm not sure how to break it to you, mate, but that's been happening for a while."

"That's not what I meant --"

"They were inseparable," Mordred said quietly. So quietly, in fact, that no one should have been able to hear him. A faint undertone of wonder and wistfulness had drawn everyone's attention, cutting off Bedivere's protest.

When Mordred didn't continue, Lucan prodded, "Who weren't?"

"The King. His Sorcerer," Mordred said, a little cross.

"There's a story, then?" Kay asked, shoving Will's feet off the cot to make more room for him.

"Oh, there are always stories," Mordred said. "That's the fate of every poor child growing up in a druidic home. Everything has a story. Mordred, don't hold your soup spoon that way, you'll grow up with gnarled limbs. Don't you remember the story of -- or even, Mordred, don't dally, and put that pout away. Don't you remember what happens if you stick your lip out like that? A bird will swoop down and tear it off, just like it did to Donny O'Donnal --"

"Mordred, stop masturbating so much, you'll grow hair on your palms, just like the story of the boy who came to town with hairy hands and no one wanted to shake them," Gwaine mocked.

Perceval snorted, then quickly schooled his expression to stern seriousness, elbowing Gwaine in the ribs. "That wasn't nice."

"You laughed!"

"I coughed," Perceval corrected, lying blatantly.

"I admit that I don't know the one of the crucible, though I might have been too young to have been immersed in that particular mystery," Mordred said. "But I loved the stories of the King and the Sorcerer."

"Stories?" Leon asked.

"There were a few of them," Mordred said. "They weren't the usual lesson-in-a-story stories, either. My Grandmum would tell them to me at bedtime. They were the only thing guaranteed to get me to bed without a fuss. I did like my telly, back then. I always thought they were myths."

"What were they about?" Bedivere asked.

"Heroic deeds," Mordred said, sounding wistful. "The druidic version of the knight in shining armour with a hapless sidekick, saving the maiden from the dragons, except there was no maiden, the dragon was a cantankerous old bastard who never gave them a straight answer, and the knight was a King who was always accompanied by his best friend, a Sorcerer of great renown."

Every pair of eye in the barracks turned to Arthur and Merlin. Gwaine's eyes narrowed. "Certainly didn't sound as if the King and the Sorcerer were best friends in those dreams or visions of yours."

Arthur cleared his throat noisily. Merlin felt his cheeks heat up.

"Ah, yes, it's entirely possible that my Grandmum cleaned up the stories a little. I was only five
years old at the time. Perhaps six," Mordred said. He chuckled to himself, shaking his head. His expression became more serious, and he frowned deeply before looking at Arthur and Merlin. "It seems… they weren't only stories. Perhaps I could contact the druids in Camelot, and ask if there was any relationship between the King and the Sorcerer, and the crucible."

"That's not a bad idea," Pellinor said. "Maybe we'll get some more information out of it."

"Give us a chance to prepare, look at it from every angle, make sure the outcome's the right one?" Galahad suggested.

"I'm not against it," Geraint said.

Gareth sniffed and shrugged, as if it didn't matter to him either way.

"The more information we have on this test you're supposed to take, the better," Leon said. "I'll talk to Morgana, ask if she has any better luck focusing her visions. Maybe she could see what it'll be."

Arthur squeezed Merlin's hand. Merlin squeezed back. He turned his head to find Arthur looking at him, a too-calm expression on his face. Tension had drained from Arthur's body, and though exhaustion still lingered in his features, he seemed content, as if a weight had been taken from his shoulders. Merlin didn't understand how or why, but it was clear that Arthur had come to some sort of decision, and it had been an easy one to make.

Merlin nodded, trusting him. Deep in his heart, down in his soul, where the two of them were bound, he would always trust Arthur.

"No," Arthur said, finally. He turned to the others. "Leave it alone. If this is what Nid meant, then, he's right."

He looked at Merlin again.

"We are not them. Everything that we have done, everything that we will do -- that's on us, not some twist of fate, not some bloody sort of destiny. We made the choice. We weren't following some sort of script. We know our own minds."

Merlin nodded, swallowing thickly. He hadn't known that was something he'd worried about until Arthur mentioned it, but there that fear was, festering in the back of his mind.

Arthur turned to the others. "I know you're thinking this is reincarnation. That this is the cycle of time repeating itself. Stop. It's not reincarnation. I've never felt in any way whatsoever that I was the King."

"I've never felt as if I were the Sorcerer, actually," Merlin said.

"You're one, though," Will pointed out.

"We're not them," Arthur said firmly. "And whatever trial that's ahead of us, it won't help us at all to know what it is. If it'll give you peace of mind, by all means, ask questions, but keep the answers to yourselves. As far as I'm concerned, we have other things to worry about than the stories someone's Grandmum told them when they were kids, or half-remembered legends passed on from parent to child for only God knows how long and twisted to fit whatever life lesson they wanted to teach."

He looked around. No one spoke.
"Is that clear?' Arthur asked, his tone soft. "Or do we need to talk about it some more? It doesn't have to be now. You can come talk to me or Leon or anyone else anytime."

"What if I wanted to talk to Merlin?' Kay asked. "No offence."

"Then you talk to Merlin, and none taken,' Arthur said.

Will affected a hurt look. "What about me, boo? I thought we had a connection --"

Kay hit him in the face with a pillow.

Agreement was slow in coming -- it was clear to Merlin that everyone needed to mull over what they'd learned on their own or between themselves before they would be able to move on like Arthur requested. He had a feeling that they would be all right, because, as far as anyone was concerned, the situation hadn't really changed.

Someone on the team was the mysterious artefact that every group involved in the war had been trying to get their hands on for what seemed like decades. That it turned out to have been Arthur -- everyone's backs might have gone up, fearlessly determined to protect him at all costs just as they would have if this austere position remained Merlin's -- made little difference in how their plans would unfold.

Using the so-called artefact as a weapon was still on the table as long as those groups were involved, since most of them didn't seem to realize that it wasn't an object, but a person. And, should that change, the risk to Arthur and Merlin would be small, because few people would even know where to look.

The artefact wasn't a weapon. It was a tipping point in human form. And that tipping point would face an undefined event or many events over time that would weigh heavily on the outcome. Who was to say that Arthur hadn't already passed the first few hurdles? That he'd made the right decision or the wrong decision? Arthur might have plans within plans, preparations for every possible logical and illogical contingency, and as much as he might regret the outcome of a decision made on too little information, he rarely, if ever, second-guessed himself.

Merlin hoped that he wouldn't start now. The way Arthur was -- calm, even a little resigned -- spoke of acceptance in regards to a situation that was out of his control, and that he would do what he could with what little that he had. At whatever the cost.

Merlin squeezed Arthur's hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed Arthur's knuckles. The weight of Arthur's body against him was comforting, but the gentle kiss he pressed to Merlin's temple was more so.

"What am I going to do with you?" the King asked, running gentle fingers across a bruised cheek, pressing a soft kiss on his brow.

"Whatever you like?" the Sorcerer asked cheekily, but winced when he shifted into a better position suited for a demonstration.

"You're an idiot," the King said fondly, guiding the Sorcerer down onto the bed and tucking him in so tightly that the Sorcerer couldn't get out, not without resorting to nefarious magical tricks. "Haven't you learned by now? You leave the stupid stunts to me. I have an excellent survival rate."

"That's because I'm making sure you do," the Sorcerer retorted meanly. The truth was, his King was a force in his own right. He might occasionally doubt himself, but once a decision was made, his resolution was unshakable, and would allow few to stand in his way of getting the outcome he
"It's because I make sure you're there to make sure I survive, love," the King said, pouring the contents of a vial into a cup. "Why do you think I always ask you to come along?"

"I remember a certain prat once told me it was for the entertainment value," the Sorcerer groused, wriggling his shoulders to see if he could loosen the blankets enough to breathe. It didn't work.

"It still is," the King said, his bright smile distracting from the way the light in his eyes was clouded with concern. He made a face and held the cup out. "Now drink this foul mixture the Physician sent up. I'm told it's meant to help you recover, but from the smell, I'm not so sure."

Merlin snorted. A smirk pulled at Arthur's mouth. They met each other's eyes, and Merlin knew that they'd both had another vision. Probably the same one, if the smug expression on Arthur's face was any indication.

Arthur was right. Whatever the significance and origin of their shared dreams and visions, Merlin and Arthur were Merlin and Arthur, not characters in a fairytale storybook, and even though there might be evil witches and dragons and magical weapons, there weren't any talking teapots.

Yet.

Arthur's smile faded, replaced by concern. "Are you all right?"

Something in Arthur's tone hinted that he wasn't talking about the great reveal, but Merlin shrugged a shoulder and said, "Sure."

"I know you are," Arthur said, lightly chastising. "I meant about the other thing. The part you glossed over. The real reason you went to see Balinor."

Kay glanced their way, but turned around and pretended he wasn't listening in.

"Oh, I got the confirmation I was looking for that he's a giant arse and I'm best done with him," Merlin said with a sigh. "Could've spared myself the misery."

Arthur hummed, but otherwise said nothing.

"What about you? What with Uther and all?"

Leon lingered, casually motioning for Lamorak to fetch his coat while staying close enough to overhear. Arthur glanced at him, but Merlin saw only disapproval that Leon wasn't more subtle in his attempt.

"It'll take a damn long time before I can see past the tangle of deceit and remember that he was a good dad. Once. Long ago," Arthur admitted. "By then, I'm sure I'll be willing to let him babysit the kids."

Merlin gave him a sidelong glance. "Kids, huh?"

Arthur shrugged. "There'll be a lot of orphans before the war is done. They'll need homes. Already started with the collection, didn't we?"

"Oi, I've dibs on Bran," Kay said. He froze, realized he wasn't supposed to be part of the conversation, and muttered under his breath, fussing at his cot.

"I don't know how we went from talking about artefacts and crucibles, and myths and legends, and
bedtime stories to kids," Merlin muttered.

Arthur grinned, as if he'd planned on bringing up the topic all along. Merlin sighed, let go of Arthur's hand, and stretched out on his bed, nudging Arthur out of his way. "Yes, fine. I want kids. Clearly you do, too. I think adoption is a brilliant idea. Let's wait until the situation is more stable. There. Conversation over. Now go to bed."

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A shrill *beeeeeep* from the Box jerked Merlin out of a deep sleep. He reached out blindly for the radio, hampered by the weight of Arthur's body half-smothering him on the narrow cot -- the prat hadn't fallen asleep in his own bed, *again*, but at least they'd mastered the art of sleeping together on a narrow space -- and clicked on the audio.

"'lo?"

Arthur smacked sleepily in his ear. Merlin shoved at Arthur until he stirred, his body moving by muscle memory to slide off the end of the bed, blearily pulling on his boots. He wasn't the only one -- Kay was sleep-dressing in reflexive response to the alert, Gwaine was already mostly-dressed, and Will…

Will pulled his pillow over his head, rolled onto his side, and blindly swatted the empty air between the cots, as if trying to turn off the alarm.

"Oh, don't you *dare* tell me you've been sleeping," Morgana snarled. Merlin's eyes blinked wide open. He pushed himself into a sitting position. "What -- what's going on?"

"It's Gwen. *She's having her baby,*" Morgana hissed.

"Oh, shite. Shite. Shite --" Merlin bounced up, the short hard cord to the earpiece snapping it out of his hand. He stumbled, trying to catch it before it rolled under the cot. He ended up on his hands and knees, hastily putting the piece to his ear. "Morgana, what? Is she --"

There was a calm, heavy sigh on the other end of the line. Merlin's Mum said, "Gwen is fine. She just started labour. She has hours yet. Morgana is…"

Merlin deflated, sagging against the cot. "Freaking out?"

"If that's what they call it now, then, yes," Hunith said. Her voice was reassuring in ways Merlin couldn't even begin to explain. It wasn't until he'd huffed a breath of relief that he realized the rest of the team was watching him expectantly.

Except for Will, whose loud, complaining snore was audible even through the pillow on his head. Merlin held up a shaky thumbs-up to signal the all-clear.

"Gwen would like to speak to Lance. Is he available?" Hunith asked.

"Lance? You up?" Merlin yelled.

Lance was bleary-eyed, his hair sticking up on one side of his head, his flak jacket hanging off one shoulder, his belt badly buckled. He knuckled the sleep out and yawned noisily, seeming to fold in
onto himself now that the spike of adrenaline had nowhere to go but down. Merlin shoved the earpiece into his hand.

"It's Gwen," Merlin said. When Lance mumbled incoherently, Merlin shook him and said, "She's having the baby."

The team -- those who were conscious, at least, whooped with excitement. The announcement, coupled with the loud exclamation, snapped Lance completely awake, and he shoved Merlin out of his way to get closer to the Box. "Gwen? Gwen? Are you all right? Oh my God. You're having our baby!"

Arthur held out his hand. Merlin took it and got to his feet, grumpy at having been unceremoniously tossed to the floor. He brushed his hands over his sides, cleaning himself off.

"Leon?" Arthur asked.

"Emergency leave paperwork's ready. Mandrake's signature and all. Just need to date it and bring it over to the administration office," Leon said. He was bowed-head over the desk, flipping through a thick fan-folder. He came up for air a few seconds later with the right form, finding a pen to fill in the blank entries.

"I'll run it over," Geraint said, snatching the papers out of Leon's hand. "Wake up the bloody clerk if I have to, make sure it gets recorded ASAP."

"What about transport?" Pellinor asked. "Did we clear that?"

"Might not be so easy to liberate a truck," Owain said. "All the trucks are on standby reserve. We're under readiness."

"Besides, it'll take him hours to get there, and Gwen will never forgive us if we don't get him back before the baby's born," Lamorak said, wringing his hands. He chewed his lower lip. "I've got a mate a couple of bases over, he's got a heli we might be able to borrow."

"No one's 'borrowing' anything," Arthur said, curling his fingers around the word. "What are the fastest transport options?"

Perceval scratched his head. "Civilian vehicle."

"Are the trains running?" Galahad asked.

Gwaine smacked him in the back of the head. "He said the fastest."

"There's a flight out that will land nearby, but that's three hours sitting in an airport, an hour in the air, and a two hour drive to Camelot," Gareth said, looking up from his smartphone.

"Helicopter," Lamorak said again.

"Dragon," Merlin blurted out. He fell silent at Arthur's startled stare, but when Arthur raised an interested eyebrow, Merlin expanded on the idea. "Dragon. We've got a few at our disposal, haven't we? They won't mind, I don't think. Not if we ask nicely."

"That's a brilliant idea," Lamorak said, almost hysterical. "Put him on a dragon's back. Explain to Gwennie why he didn't make it in time because he doesn't know how to ride a dragon and plunged to his death."
“Someone calm him down,” Leon said.

“Sit down. Come on. Sit down here with me. Here, I've got a picture of Gwen and her big belly on my phone,” Gareth said, pulling Lamorak to sit on the cot next to him.

Arthur turned to Merlin. “Can you --”

“I'll go ask,” Merlin said, already looking for his boots. He found them easily enough -- on Arthur’s feet. “Those are my boots.”

“Explains why they're so narrow across the girth,” Arthur said, kicking them off. Merlin followed his distracted stare to Lance, who was doing breathing exercises over the radio with Gwen. Gwen didn't need them yet, and Lance was so enthused about them that he was a little red in the face.

“Someone get Lance's shite together,” Arthur ordered.

“-------

"It's too fucking quiet," Mickey complained. In dismay, he stared at the message board. It had, somehow, transformed into an unruly beast rampaging unchecked across the Internet. In the complete absence of any actual active military action or enemy attacks, the trolls came out of the woodwork and were now systematically attacking anyone who were Red Team proponents.

A tiny, suspicious part of him couldn't help wondering if the very pointed comments discrediting everything that the Red Team had ever done were coming from the enemy. If Mickey were some sort of computer genius, he'd track down the IPs and turn them over to the authorities. He wasn't, but he certainly hoped that someone was keeping an eye on the situation.

"You know, most people would be happy -- no news means good news and all that," Julia said. She held up a camera lens in the air, which had the effect of absurdly elongating her eye until there was nothing other than eyebrows and eyelashes.

"Not me," Bertrise complained. In the quiet weeks since the Last Event, coined the Zombie Apocalypse and Dragon Invasion on the forums, Bertrise had worked her way through all of the video footage, creating clips for the website. In many cases, she pulled Mickey in to deliver fresh commentary; in others, she dubbed in whatever expert testimony she could obtain from whoever was willing. Mostly, though, she linked directly to the best fan-made meta picking apart everything the team had done, good and bad. It was thanks to the members of the forum and the fans on other sites that they now knew how many members there were, which one was the leader, and which ones were the magic users.

There was even a checklist with an elaborate flowchart to help identify the members of the team, though right now they were mostly marked off as "Badass Number 8" or a similarly unhelpful tag. Their dedication was impressive, actually.

"Why don't you go find me some new footage? I'm running out of film," Bertrise said. The tone of her voice bordered between completely vexed and industrially annoyed -- at any minute now, she would get up to scrounge around to see if there was any coffee left, and when she realized who had taken the last dregs, there would be Hell to pay.

Mickey leaned back, amused. He couldn't wait to see who would get their arses handed to them.
Julia nearly wrenched him backward out of his seat in her haste to get out of there, her camera bag over her shoulder. "Sure thing! Whatever you say!"

Mickey stumbled, barely managing to catch himself from crashing in whatever was in his way, but it took until they were outside the building before he stopped connecting with random obstacles. "Jesus, Jules," he said, brushing himself down and straightening his jacket. "Did you take the last cup of coffee or something?"

Julia's eyes were wide with terror.

"You poor sucker," Mickey said, shaking his head. He couldn't muster up any sympathy. When he'd tried to make a getaway, Julia had deliberately tripped him, and there had been no way for him to escape Bertrise's rampage.

"Don't you dare say anything," Julia warned.

"What's in it for me?"

"I won't film your bad side."

Mickey snorted. "After everything we've been through lately, I'm pretty sure everyone's already seen my bad side. In many exceedingly unflattering lights, every configuration possible, and in tight close-ups that show every blemish and nostril hair. Appeals to my vanity no longer work. My dignity is a worthless bargaining chip."

"Damn it," Julia muttered. "Fine. I'll buy you a bacon butty."

"Done," Mickey agreed. He would never turn down food, and if Julia could sniff out bacon in times of restricted rations, it was more than adequate payment for keeping his damn mouth shut.

She led the way down multiple blocks and into an open square, her camera in hand and ready to record should she come across anything interesting to catch on film. Mickey was contemplating doing street-side interviews and thought he saw an older couple who looked like they would have something interesting to say when --

A distant, persistent flapping sound drew their attention to the sky. Julia, already conditioned to film whatever was out of the ordinary, lifted her camera, pointing it in every direction until she came across the right one --

A dragon filled the sky.

One very large, silvery-grey-green dragon, wings outstretched. He was flying at low altitude and quickly gaining more.

People screamed and scattered.

Mickey stared, his heart pounding.

"Is that someone on its back?" Julia asked.

Mickey squinted and realized that she was right. "He's riding a bloody dragon? How --"

That was when he saw the bright red banner unfurling in the air from where it was clenched in the dragon's rear hind foot.

*Storks deliver babies. Dragons deliver Knights.*
"What the Hell --"

The dragon flew up and away, the message now too small to read.

Mickey burst out laughing. He held his head in disbelief. "Red banner! The Dragon's not attacking! That's the Red Team! That was a Red Team member on his back! Holy Shit."

And realization sank in when he put the message together.

"He's a dad. He's a new dad," he said into Julia's camera. "The Red Team, people? Let's give them their proper name, yeah? They're our Knights. And one of them is a brand new dad. Congratulations, whoever you are."

Merlin wasn't sure if he should laugh or groan in dismay. Since Arthur was smiling bemusedly, he decided to go with the former.

"Where did you even have the time to make that banner?" Merlin asked.

"Well," Gwaine began, only to be elbowed out of the way by an eager Geraint.

"Had it for a while, actually."

"We figured Arthur would call a heli for Lance, thought we'd sneak on the tarmac, tie it to the rails --"

"Like a bunch of numpties," Will put in, silencing Galahad. "As if that wouldn't get sucked into the updraft and bring them down for a hard landing."

"So, yeah, never mind on that one," Galahad said, scratching the side of his head.

"But then Merlin said dragon, and Gwaine had a can of paint --"

"And somehow you lot convinced Nid to carry it," Merlin said, shaking his head.

"Weren't much by way of convincing, actually," Geraint said, beaming brightly. "He was all for it. Thought it was the most fun he was going to have in centuries."

"Were his idea what to write, too," Gwaine said. He snorted. "It was better than what I had in mind."

"Something crass, no doubt," Owain said.

"No comment," Gwaine said.

"Arthur? You're okay with this?" Merlin looked at Arthur. Arthur was staring at the sky, his hands in his jacket pockets, the wind blowing on his face. The dark clouds parted and the morning sun streamed through, crowning him in a halo of light.

Dark smoke streamed from the pyre, the bright red flames sinking down to embers. The crowd had stayed until after the ceremony, soldiers remaining until the fire died down, but the Knights remained where they were, rooted to the spot, grieving for the loss of their own.
The Sorcerer was numb. He couldn't see clearly through his tears. If not for the King's steady presence next to him, he had no doubt that he would collapse under the weight of the loss. He didn't know how the King was able to endure the sorrow and to still support the weight of the Knight's lady, who had been his one and greatest love.

The grief was greater knowing that the Knight had taken the King's place as sacrifice, a place the Sorcerer had tried to take --

The vision jarred to a sudden stop. Merlin blinked, shaking his head to clear it. The world doubled, as if an overlapping pattern no longer matched. The air vibrated, evanescent with a rainbow shimmer before everything set to rights.

Arthur, Merlin saw, was similarly affected. The smile was gone from his lips, his brow furrowed in a frown. He stared down at the ground, distant, a muscle clenching in his jaw.

"'Course he's all right with this," Leon chimed in, as if no time at all had passed between the vision and its breaking. The team seemed unaware that anything had happened, scattered around the biggest open area they could manage to find to send Lance off to Gwen by dragonback. "Red marks Nid as a friendly. It's one of the protocols, remember?"

"Plus, think of the popularity points we're winning. Who doesn't love dragons?" Will asked.

"Said someone who's never been looked at as if he were a tasty snack," Pellinor groused.

Merlin thought he'd heard all the stories from the zombie apocalypse and the dragon fight, but apparently not, if Pellinor was still upset about it.

"We were getting sick of being called Red Team, weren't we?" Gwaine asked, looking around. Everyone echoed their agreement. "I think Knights has a ring to it."

"I could live with it," Bohrs agreed.

"It's not terrible," Lucan said.

"Sounds like a posh football team, actually. Do you think we'll get signed on?" Lamorak asked.

Arthur stepped forward, and something in the way he moved signalled an end to the amusement and festivities. "Back to work. We're still active. Leon, get in touch with Mandrake, make sure he passed on the command about red friendlies. Everyone else, you've got your assignments."

"Yes, sir," Perceval said. Gwaine mock-saluted, only to be shoved off his feet in order to get him moving.

"Merlin, stay back a second," Arthur said.


"Or maybe he just wants a snog," Kay said.

"Ew. Thanks. Thanks so much. I needed my day ruined a bit more," Will said, following Kay.

Merlin watched them go. When they were alone, he turned to Arthur.

"Did you see --"

"What was that --"
They both stopped. Arthur nodded curtly, more to himself, as if he had received confirmation of a change in battle tactics and that his counter had been successful. "What was it like, for you?"

"That was the first time it didn't carry through to the end," Merlin said slowly, measuring his impressions. "Fragmented and flipping, like watching an old news reel, the light so hot that the film's melting at the edges before it snaps completely."

"Same," Arthur said.

"Felt like I were seeing double when I snapped out of it. Everything off-kilter, not in its proper place," Merlin said. At Arthur's nod, Merlin barked a sharp laugh and stared up at the sky. "Did we break something?"

"You tell me," Arthur said, looking just as lost as Merlin felt. "You're the expert."

"Not that much of an expert, actually. All I do is wriggle my fingers and hope for the best," Merlin said.

Arthur snorted.

They stared at each other in silence. Merlin didn't realize he'd spoken out loud until Arthur nodded in answer. "We're not them."

"No, we're not," Arthur said.

---

"Hullo, anyone on the line?"

Merlin glanced up sharply and around, making sure no one else in the communications tent noticed how he'd startled on hearing the E-channel go from dead silence to live and loud. Everyone on the team had decided that it was worth the risk of being found out and had gone ahead and worn their earwigs on their assignments around the base. They'd be damned if they weren't the first to hear about Gwen's baby.

There was static on the line, the distant sound of a door opening, and --

"Pendragon speaking," Arthur said, his voice on the line. His tone was exaggerated with authority, which meant that he was most likely not in polite company quite yet. A few moments passed, and in a much calmer tone, he added, "Go."

"Mum and baby are doing well," Elyan said, sounding tired but happy. "Not so sure about the dad. If he's lucky, she didn't break his fingers, though I'm pretty sure he's had a shock from having been threatened with losing his balls if he ever does this to her again. I'm fairly sure he'll pull through and that she'll reconsider if we give it a few more hours."

A sharp guffaw came on the line. Merlin wasn't sure who it was, but he had a hard time keeping a straight, serious face as he pretended to be decrypting a few low-priority reports. If he felt like this, he couldn't imagine the others weren't similarly affected.

"Eight pounds, four ounces," Elyan said. "Bouncing baby girl. Has her Mum's lungs and her dad's eyebrows."
"Poor thing, getting saddled with those eyebrows," Lamorak said, his voice a whisper. He immediately clicked off, probably to keep from being caught out from his assignment supervisor.

"No word on the name, yet. I'll wait until Gwen's gotten some rest before breaking out their presents. They're going to love it," Elyan assured them.

While they were in Camelot, the team conspired on a present for Gwen. None of them were good craftsmen, but they'd enlisted the help of those who were, and after a few rather disastrous attempts, had managed to build a complete bedroom set for the new addition to the Dulac family. A crib, a bassinet, a dresser, a rocking chair -- Bohrs, of all people, had knitted a blanket. Merlin didn't know how he'd found the time.

Merlin was particularly proud of his own contribution to the package: a dragon mobile for the baby's crib.

Keeping it secret from Gwen hadn't been difficult. Morgana took care of that. Lance, on the other hand, required a great deal of distraction in the form of extra PT Arthur had assigned him.

Merlin knew the entire team wished they could be there to see their faces, but just knowing that everyone was doing well was just as good.

"Appreciate the update," Arthur said formally -- once again, he wasn't in polite company. "Keep us updated if anything changes."

"Will do," Elyan confirmed.

A few seconds passed, and Gwaine said, "So, I know a girl --"

"Of course, you do," Galahad said. He sounded out of breath, as if he were running. He probably was; he and Geraint were training some of the greener privates on scouting techniques. As Merlin understood it, their approach involved a lot of moving fast and hiding.

"-- and she promises me we'll have some cake waiting for us at the barracks, ready for pickup as soon as we're off shift," Gwaine finished, as if he hadn't been interrupted. "She's got a soft spot for babies. I promised her pictures as soon as we get them."

Merlin glanced at the clock. Only three more hours before he was finished. He sighed, forcing himself to focus.

Half an hour before shift change, Merlin secured his terminal, got up, and nodded a good-bye to Lieutenant Diana Lide, one of Locher's aides. She wasn't his direct superior and couldn't order him back in his seat, not when he finished his assignments and was determined not to be the last one at the barracks.

The promise of cake was a rare one in times of ration. Sugar was practically impossible to get hands on, though Merlin didn't miss it too much, not since he hadn't had a decent cup of coffee in ages. Finding enough and sparing it for an indulgence like cake was something he absolutely could not pass up.

Knowing his luck, the others would have finished it off before he got there. Bloody pigs, the lot of
It was raining when he left the communications tent, and cold enough to make it miserable and borderline sleet. The wind was biting, cutting through all of his layers. Merlin kept his head down to protect his eyes.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" Bayard waltzed along as if he didn't have a care in the world, falling in step next to Merlin.

Merlin startled, turning to glare at him, blaming both the weather and his shite luck for an interruption he could have done without. He spotted Gilli trailing behind him, contrite and apologetic, his feet shuffling along the gravel.

"I suppose so. If you like this sort of thing," Merlin said. He noticed how the rain didn't touch Bayard, deflecting around him as if he were shielded with a windbreak. Merlin couldn't sense any active magic on Bayard, but there was magic there, somewhere, old and faint, buried under his shirt and coat.

"It's horrid, actually," Bayard said, a smarmy tone slipping into his voice. Merlin veered away from Bayard under the pretence of ducking a puddle, but Bayard closed the distance between them anyway. "I understand that you're now off-duty."

"Son of a bitch," Merlin muttered under his breath. He knew it. He knew. Fucking baked goods on the horizon with sugary icing, and of course he wouldn't get to fucking enjoy it. He cast a glare at Gilli, almost certain that this was somehow his fault. His suspicion was confirmed when Gilli's shoulders rounded in and he lowered his head, cowed.

"I'm sorry, what?" Bayard asked.

"Sorry, I got something caught in my throat," Merlin said, forcing a companionable nod. "I'm not sure where you heard that. I'm active duty. I'm --"

"Off duty," Bayard said firmly, as if he hadn't heard anything Merlin had said at all.

"Something wrong with your hearing?" Merlin snapped, ducking his head down to brace against a blast of wind. He used the wind as an excuse to shove his hands into his coat pockets. His fingers curled around his phone.

"I didn't catch that," Bayard said.

"It's the wind. Fucking wind," Merlin said, but he didn't repeat himself. "If we could harness the weather and use it as a weapon, well, I think we could turn our enemies a bit more miserable than usual."

Bayard laughed as if that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. The grating tone in his voice set Merlin on edge, gritting his teeth in aggravation. Bayard leaned in and said, "I know where we can go to get out of the wind."

"I'm flattered, but I've got a thing," Merlin said firmly. He took a hard left turn, only to be stopped short when Bayard grabbed his arm. Any amusement, feigned or otherwise, faded from his features. His mouth was in a flat line and his eyes were cold, scheming. Any future attempt to dupe Merlin was washed away.

"You're coming with me," Bayard said seriously. "By order of Her Majesty the Queen."
Merlin wrenched his arm away. He straightened his clothes and scowled at Bayard. "All due respects to the Queen, I'm not going anywhere until --"

Bayard whipped out a folded piece of paper from his inner coat pocket and held it up at Merlin's eye level.

Merlin took it slowly, suspiciously, and didn't take his eyes off Bayard until he had the sheet open. The royal crest was front and center on top of the page, and a familiar signature was scrawled at the bottom of the page. It looked genuine, too: handwritten, and not a stamp like Merlin had half-expected, quick and easy to forge.

Merlin scanned the contents. He read them again. On the third go, he took his mobile out of his pocket and called Arthur.

"Merlin?" Arthur asked. He sounded breathless, the wind howling around him, no doubt heading to the barracks early for the same reason as Merlin. Arthur's sweet tooth was legendary, though it would never be as bad as Gwaine's. "If you're asking me to hide a piece for you, you're asking for a lot --"

"I have new orders," Merlin said, keeping his eyes on Bayard. A sly smirk pulled at Merlin's mouth. "Starting with, I'm officially off duty. Someone's gone over everyone's head. I'm compromised. Bayard knows who I am. Apparently, by order of the Queen."

A hissing sound came over the line. Merlin heard Arthur's bitten-off swears.

"Before you ask, I don't know what he told her to get the clearance, but from the paper I'm holding, sounds like he only got clearance for the lead Hellburner."

Merlin sourly imagined Bayard playing cards with Her Majesty in a safe bunker, somewhere secret, having tea and crumpets on fine china. *If I tell you who I think they are, will you confirm it?* Bayard might have asked, cheeky as fuck, and the Queen, for whatever reason, would have agreed only if he could back it up with a legitimate reason why he needed to know.

As annoyed as Merlin was to have been found out, and to have been found out by Bayard, of all people, he was pretty sure the Queen wouldn't have hung him out to dry without good reason.

Bayard tilted his head, snottily proud of himself, and said, "It wasn't much of a puzzle to figure out. Balinor Emrys returning from the dead? On active duty with the majority of his old squad? A dragon lifting off this morning and orders from on-high not to shoot? I always had my suspicions about your father. I'm pleased that they were borne out."

"He's flapping his mouth about it, too. No bloody sense of self-preservation, or the subtleties of secrecy," Merlin said, looking around. Bad luck was balanced out with good, because he spotted Evans coming out of the mess tent with some of his men. Merlin whistled sharply, waving Evans over urgently.

Bayard's expression clouded over, but he remained silent when Evans arrived, glancing between them with narrowed eyes. "Everything all right, Merlin?"

"Everything's fine. Need you to deliver this," Merlin said. He tilted his head to keep the mobile against his ear, finding a pencil in his pocket. He folded the note and wrote, "Red-1". Evans eyebrows shot up sharply when he saw.

"No problem," Evans said, glancing sourly at Bayard, folding the sheet of paper one more time to hide what Merlin had written. "Are you sure you're all right?"
"Fine, so far," Merlin said, more worried by the lack of response on the other end of the line. He sincerely hoped Arthur hadn't dropped everything and wasn't on his way to rescue him, or some other similar, stupidly heroic thing.

Evans nodded, gestured to his boys that he'd join them later, and headed off in the other direction -- cleverly, he'd chosen not to go in the same direction as Excalibur's barracks. The confusion was plain as day on Bayard's face, but he quickly returned his attention to Merlin.

"How long is this going to take?" Merlin asked.

"As long as it takes," Bayard said smoothly.

"Did you hear that?" Merlin asked Arthur.

"I did," Arthur bit out.

"You know how to find me," Merlin said. He was already thinking about activating the GPS on his mobile. If the phone transmission was jammed or if it was destroyed under someone's boot, well, there was a reason why he'd implanted trackers in the earwigs and the protective charms that Kathy had cast for the team. If everything else failed for whatever reason…

Well, there was one last thing that would work.

"Be careful," Arthur said.

"Understood," Merlin said, hanging up without another word.

The only saving grace of the entire situation was that the SUV Bayard had somehow procured as transportation had a working heater. Gilli was driving, Merlin was in the front passenger seat, and Bayard was in the rear, immediately behind Merlin. Merlin couldn't help feeling as if there was a gun wedged in the back of his seat, ready to go off should he move the wrong way.

The silence in the car was compounded by the few directions Bayard gave Gilli. Merlin could feel the rumble of the engine and the constant *swish-swish* of the windshield wipers trying to keep up with the steady stream of sticky sleet; the distant noise hardly distracted from the underlying anxiety in the small space. Merlin ignored the pleading, apologetic glances Gilli shot his way whenever they stopped at red lights. He was uninterested in Gilli's explanations, particularly here, in an enclosed space where Bayard could hear.

For his part, Bayard seemed content in keeping his own counsel, because once he'd acquired Merlin, he'd pasted a smug smile on his face. Merlin was grateful, if for no other reason that he wouldn't have to listen to him talk anymore.

Merlin quietly took stock of the situation. The SUV wasn't from the army's inventory -- it was too sleek for that. It was also *hella* expensive, one of those high-class models with the fancy logo that came with a price tag in the hundreds of pounds, and that was without the additional modifications that he couldn't see, but could feel. Ordinary passenger vehicles would have trouble on the slick roads, but the SUV was heavier, loaded with plate armour, bulletproof glass, and reinforced tires. Gilli drove through the icy slush easily. Bayard must have taken it from the Queen's own fleet.
Merlin wondered if one of her famous hats was in the boot, forgotten.

Gilli was wearing a ring on his finger. Merlin could feel the charm woven into the design, but it was so innocuous as to be dismissed. The last time Merlin had seen Gilli with a ring, it was in the desert on regular active duty. Arthur had relieved him of the ring and never returned it; Merlin idly wondered where it had ended up. Probably under lock and key somewhere, deep in the Pendragon archives, where it would never see the light of day again. A second glance confirmed that it wasn't the same one.

He didn't have anything else on his person for Merlin to worry about. Gilli was in army greens -- the standard uniform of an enlisted who wasn't on the assignment roster -- without any visible insignia, but his affiliation could be patched on his shoulder, hidden under his coat. He wore the standard-issue gun, the standard-issue boots, the standard-issue everything, and Merlin mentally categorized everything he knew came with the standard uniform, in case he should need a bit or a bolt later, for whatever reason.

Figuring out Bayard was a different matter. Outwardly dressed in business casual, the man wouldn't have been out of place in London's financial district, buying and selling stocks with cutthroat finesse and panache. The clothes told Merlin nothing beyond well-connected and probably dirty as fuck, but he'd guessed as much of the former because of the vehicle and the letter with the Queen's signature, and known the latter because Bayard was just that much of an arsehole.

The amulets he was wearing, on the other hand, were of particular interest. Merlin had sensed one, earlier; but given enough time and proximity, he'd been able to pick out at least three additional objects on Bayard's person, with maybe one or two others that were currently inactive, held in reserve. Merlin didn't know exactly what the amulets did beyond general protection and defence, but he was sure that he'd find out if he attacked Bayard.

Still, Bayard's reliance on the objects might be a problem. For him, not for Merlin. Part of the difficulty in figuring out what the amulets were capable of came with how old they were. Ancient. The magic in them was faded, even with the release of magic in the world, as if holding a residual charge. In essence, they were worthless until they were re-loaded, like one of those pay-as-you-play cards, and they hadn't been reloaded in hundreds of years.

Maybe more.

"We're here," Bayard announced.

*Here* was a posh building behind wrought-iron gates, the sort that, as a natural-born citizen of the United Kingdom, Merlin felt he should know on sight but didn't recognize. He studied it in case he needed to come back here for one reason or another, and was frustrated when his attempts to focus simply… slid off. The effect vanished as soon as Gilli drove through the front gates, which clattered shut behind them.

Sensing -- or anticipating -- Merlin's bewilderment, Bayard said, "It's passive magic, folded into the building's foundation. The building itself was constructed to John Dee's specifications, though he was unfortunate in that he was not able to see its completion. His successor oversaw the final implementation. It's a wonderful place, quite enigmatic, as if it has a life of its own, really."

Merlin glanced at him over his shoulder, his brow furrowed.

"The grounds are protected against arcane attack. The protection wards themselves are virtually undetectable, I'm told. Part of that is ensuring that no one is aware of the building. As far as anyone knows, there's a lovely little house here, but it fades from memory quickly. It's impossible to photograph and it's not present on any maps --"
"I get it," Merlin said impatiently. Now that he knew what was happening, he changed his focus and was able to detect low level magic -- active, but it was no more palpable than natural low-level radiation, and passive, working without really working. "Why are we here?"

"Order of the Queen," Bayard said breezily, exiting the car as soon as Gilli brought it to a stop. Merlin followed him. "Oh, you shan't meet her. As safe as this place is, her security detail is particularly paranoid, and the building requirements don't pass muster. Apparently running water is a requirement. Did I mention how difficult it is to hire contractors to renovate the place and bring it into the modern age?"

"Did I mention how much I don't care?" Merlin asked.

Bayard snorted. Behind him, Gilli coughed, hiding a smirk behind his fist.

Merlin spread his hands. "Just tell me what you want and let's get this over with. If you give me any more Order of the Queen bollocks --"

Bayard crowded into Merlin's space. His demeanour had changed. The smooth charm and unflappable attitude was gone, replaced with cold, hard steel. It was so unlike Bayard -- in every possible incarnation that Merlin had seen, from the concerned uncle to the harsh taskmaster -- that Merlin's jaw clicked shut.

"What I want," Bayard said, his voice a low, dangerous snarl, "is to serve my Queen. I serve her however that I am able, and I do whatever I must. If she wants what is best for her country, I will go to whatever lengths necessary to ensure that I deliver."

"And what does that have to do with me?" Merlin asked, his hands clenching into tight fists. He didn't know what Bayard was about to do, but surely even Bayard would realize that the Hellburner of the Red Team was far, far stronger than any sorcerer they've gone against thus far. Merlin didn't care if it was his ego talking, but he didn't care how many valuable old artifacts Bayard happened to have on his person or had access to. He didn't have a chance against Merlin.

Something shifted in Bayard's expression. Sorrow, or dismay, or plain old human compassion. His voice gentled, and he said, "You'll see. Come with me."

He walked up the steps and into the building.

From Bayard's earlier mention of the lack of running water, Merlin expected that there wouldn't be any electricity, either. Surprisingly enough, there was power, though the wiring was stapled to the wall and the power limited to the front hall. Further on, the rooms were dark, illuminated as if through light diffused by dirty old glass. Small mage lights trapped in lanterns brightened and diminished as they passed.

The décor didn't seem to have changed since John Dee's day. The furniture alone, if sold at auction, would easily pay the entire team's military salary for the year. There were more modern incarnations, dust liberally covering everything and taking no favourites. A laptop lay closed on a desk, unused and running on external battery power. A tablet flashing on with a timer. A percolating coffee maker hooked up to a small generator.

Merlin checked. The coffee maker didn't look to have been used for some time, which probably meant there wasn't any coffee, either.

There were rooms and rooms of books. Walls covered in shelves, shelves crammed full. Ceiling to floor, overlapping over the windows, stacked one on top of another in a precarious pyramid,
holding up one corner of a sofa that was missing a leg.

The deeper in they went, the more magic Merlin could sense. The building was on a ley line, and that ley line had been feeding magic into the building in a feedback loop since it had been built. There was strong magic beneath the ground, clean, pristine, uncorrupted, and it responded to Merlin's touch as if welcoming him home.

The mage lights brightened under the contact. Bayard looked over his shoulder at Merlin, his expression impassive, but turned and continued to lead the way without reprimand. Instead, he said, "You shouldn't have hidden your magic from me."

"Wasn't personal," Merlin said, even though it had been. He might have been hiding his magic from everyone at the time, but he had had an instinctive urge to protect himself from Bayard, in particular.

"We could have avoided a great deal of aggravation," Bayard said.

"I kind of doubt that," Merlin said, glancing through an open door. The building was clearly old; there were doors for every room, fireplaces in nearly every quarter. Inside the room were two people, one older than the other, and clearly, one was teaching the other. Surprisingly, it was the younger woman teaching the older man.

"If I'd known, you would have received proper instruction in how to use your magic," Bayard said. "Instead of whatever it is that you call what you're doing in the field during your little missions with the Red Team, you could be far more effective and decisive --"

"Stop right there," Merlin said. Bayard did stop to turn around, but Merlin walked right up to him, crowding into his space. Bayard was caught off-balance, because he backed up a few steps. Merlin obligingly filled the space until Bayard stopped his surprised retreat and held his ground. "What I'm doing? It's minimizing damage. It's diverting wild magic so that innocents don't get hurt. It's stopping people who really don't know what they're doing from doing something stupid. I'm doing my job."

Bayard's lips pursed. His mouth moved as if he wanted to say something but couldn't decide what to say. "Someone with your training and abilities --"

"I'm not a weapon," Merlin said flatly.

Bayard's expression shuttered, as if he hadn't expected Merlin to see straight through him. A muscle clenched in his jaw. He met Merlin's eyes without flinching. Merlin stared at him, cold and hard, until Bayard looked away.

"Thought so. Show me whatever it is you want to show me, and I'll be on my way," Merlin said.

Bayard glanced over Merlin's shoulder -- presumably at Gilli -- before turning away.

Bayard led them through a convoluted series of corridors before they approached at what Merlin could feel to be the very centre of the ley line. It was not only the middle, but it was the nexus point, where several other ley lines were born, branching off in thin little slivers. The other ley lines were young, fragile, growing in power.

A heavy weight settled in Merlin's gut and his stomach roiled with a strange sort of anticipation. Something in him recognized what was behind the two thick oak doors covered with warded symbols and barricaded by a wide, wooden block. Bayard stared at the doors for a long time before gesturing Merlin toward it.
"If you'll do the honours," Bayard said.

It took a second for Merlin to understand what he meant. The wood bar across the doors was heavy enough that it was a two man job to lift, but the wards burned into the barricade and the doors themselves were a locking mechanism. Feeling spiteful, Merlin asked, "Can't do it yourself?"

Gilli choked back a laugh.

"Of course I can," Bayard said, sounding annoyed.

"In that case, if this is a test, you can shove it right where you keep your levitating pencil," Merlin said. He crossed his arms over his chest. "You realize, so far, I've done exactly what the Queen wanted me to do, which was to come with you. Nothing in the letter said how long I had to stick around or that I even had to play along. I can turn around and walk back to my base. That's how much I don't care about your bollocks."

"You'll care about this," Bayard said.

"So far, still not," Merlin said. He nodded toward the doors and mockingly said, "If you'll do the honours."

Bayard growled something under his breath. He spoke an incantation in guttural language that sounded like Latin to Merlin, but he'd studied under Gaius and knew that it wasn't, not quite. What was more interesting to Merlin was how Bayard used the magic. He didn't have any innate, inherent ability; no magic of his own. He used it through invocation, entreating its use through sheer will alone, and he wasn't nice about it.

Click. Click-click-click.

The series of magical locks turned with a bass musical note, but there was almost a whisper of a word that Merlin could recognize. The heavy wooden slab slid across the door and disappeared into the wall. The doors released, bulging outward as if in an exhalation.

"This is… This is the reason why the Directory exists. Why I am in the position that I am," Bayard said, almost reverent. He turned to Merlin. "We've been searching for ancient artefacts for a long, long time."

He pushed the doors open. It was pitch black inside. The magical lights in the corridor were too dim to have any real effect against the darkness, which seemed to swallow every glowing particle whole.

"Gilli?"

"Yeah, I know. Stay here," Gilli said, sounding resigned. "I just wish you'd stop pretending that I've got a choice."

At Merlin's questioning look, Bayard said, "Access to this room is strictly limited. My predecessor keyed the wards in a particular way. Only those of royal blood may see it, and only when they attain the throne. Only the advisor to the throne has access, though that permission is immediately withdrawn if the individual has ever betrayed his role."

Something niggled at Merlin's memory. "Nimueh?"

Bayard narrowed his eyes. He bowed his head. "She has stolen artefacts from every repository, including the Directory's own and the Queen's Reserves. She has been here. I've seen her stand in
the very spot where you're standing now, looking in as if the answers she sought laid therein."

"Do they?"

"I asked her, once," Bayard said. He didn't continue, falling silent with a thoughtful frown.

"What did she say?"

"Threatened to snap my neck and to take my position," Bayard said. A small, sly smile pulled at his mouth. "I laughed at her. She stormed out."

There was more to the story. Merlin was sure of it. But the bare bones certainly sounded true enough, and Bayard didn't appear to be lying. On the other hand, Bayard and the truth had a rocky relationship fraught with, *Let's see other people* and plasters over the wedding ring, and Merlin didn't know that he could trust anything that Bayard said.

"What's inside?" Merlin asked.

Bayard didn't answer right away. He swaggered toward the entrance, backing up toward it. He stopped, heels along the line of the doorway where the wood floors met that perfect straight cut of pure blackness.

"There's a story," Bayard said. "Told to me by the man who held the John Dee Seat before me. He was told it by his mentor, who had heard it from his mentor. The story comes from the poor sod who took over the role as the Queen's Advisor in all things occult. I'm reasonably certain it's true. If you want to know what's inside, follow me in."

Bayard stepped back and was promptly swallowed by the darkness.

"If you can. Oh, and mind that first step," he said, his voice distorted. It didn't even sound like him anymore.

Merlin stared at the darkness. He scoffed and shook his head. "I said I was done with your bollocks."

He turned around and walked away. He brushed past Gilli, who was leaning against the wall, staring at his hands. Merlin was halfway down the corridor before he slowed down, heaved a deep breath, and stared up at the ceiling.

"You've really never been in there?" Merlin asked.

"It's a rite of passage, you know," Gilli said, distant, detached, almost bored. If Merlin thought about it, Gilli actually sounded cross, for some reason. "Just to try. Complete your training, pick out one of the artefacts from the approved pile, try to walk through the door."

"What happens?"

"Well, it's not like any of us have got any illusions that we'll make it through. I certainly didn't, but I thought I'd give it a go. Got a good running start, ran at it." Gilli paused. "I'm told I bounced off about ten feet back. Broke some sort of a record on how far I went. Not that I got to enjoy sitting on my laurels. Didn't wake up from it for about four days."

Merlin turned around, but he didn't look at Gilli. He stared at the gaping black hole where the two doors were spread wide open. He couldn't sense any magic inside, any wards, any spells. It was all on the outside of the wall, around it, carved into the oak, burned in.
But nothing beyond.

There were dead zones and there were Dead Zones. Merlin had been on the receiving side of both types. One of them made him feel as if he were slowly suffocating; the other was a press against his consciousness, slowly cutting off his air. In either case, he could always feel it coming. He couldn't feel it now.

"Fuck it," Merlin said, caving in to curiosity. He stormed at the door, not giving himself any time to think about it.

He went through, without resistance --

Everything went black. He thought at first that he was in Gilli's story, waking up days later, but then the ground gave out from under him and he stumbled forward, barely catching himself as he was blinded by lantern light and nearly braining himself on a low ceiling. He fell down several steps, threw out his hands instinctively and caught a railing, and made it down into the dank and damp basement without breaking his neck.

"Son of a bitch," Merlin muttered. He glanced back and saw Gilli looking in, clear as day, as if there weren't an illusion of complete blackness in the way. Gilli's mouth was agape, as if he couldn't believe it. He held out his arm and poked at thin air, only to draw his hand away sharply, as if stung.

"It's this way," Bayard said crossing the threshold and joining Merlin, his smile bright and genuine, like a child marvelling at a sight he'd never seen before, completely enraptured.

"What is?" Merlin asked for what felt like the millionth time. He was tired of asking questions and not getting an answers.

"It's not far," Bayard said, disappearing down the corridor.

Merlin stayed close, on Bayard's heels, the dim light in the basement brightened more and more until --

There were no actual lights, Merlin realized. The walls were glowing. And, more than that, there were no actual walls. They were underground. Surrounded by stone. Roof and sides and floor, mouldy and damp, the surface so smooth it couldn't have been done by human hands and mechanical tools, but by time and by Nature.

The ground sloped beneath Merlin's feet. It felt as if they were moving into a spiral, ever descending, because they kept to the right, and... somehow, simultaneously, it felt as if they were walking in a straight line.

Merlin slowed down, taking stock. They were definitely below ground. He could feel the ley line distinctly, now. It was strongest here. And here, this close, he could also sense that all the cracks and eddies were centred around this point, creating an unnatural nexus. It didn't feel wrong. There was no corruption and no taint. It was a side-effect of --

Merlin caught up to Bayard at what was the mouth of a narrow, domed cavern. Inside the cavern…

There was a sword.

"Are you having me on?" Merlin asked, staring in disbelief.

The sword floated in the air, motionless, shining of its own light. It was simple, but beautiful in its
simplicity -- a solid crosspiece, a polished silver edge, a central strip of gold --

The lines were scratches from a dragon's claws, like footprints in soft sand, immortalized in the hot metal before it was tempered. The gold was soft to the touch, but dangerous to swipe across, dragontongue just as deadly in metal as it was to be sung, just as cutting along the edges as the blade of the sword.

"It's mine?" the King asked, his hands hovering over the blade.

"It's yours," the Sorcerer said, smiling indulgently.

They'd met when they were young: an arrogant Prince who believed he wanted for nothing and acted like it, and a wide-eyed newcomer who had had the misfortune of not watching where he was going, too bedazzled by the white castle and the bustling city. And yet, for all their clashes, they'd grown close in a very short time, the Prince quickly ridding himself of false friends who would lead him astray, and inexplicably drawing the Sorcerer along at every opportunity.

"Why?"

It was hard not to be offended by the question, to not feel as if he possessed ulterior motives. But the Sorcerer understood. In all his time with the King, he had never seen the man receive a gift for his birth days, for festivals, for his coronation, if the giver didn't want something in return.

The sword was not the Sorcerer's to give, however. The Sorcerer was only the messenger. He ached at seeing how mistrustful the man he loved was of gifts, how undeserving he seemed to feel he was to receive them.

"I'm told that it's time. That you'll understand what it means."

The Sorcerer couldn't take it anymore. The sword was a cacophony of magic, a tremble and a tremor that numbed his arms and made his teeth rattle. He shoved the sword in the King's hands, careful not to cut him. The King was a master swordsman, the best among thousands upon thousands, and he easily caught the long sword before it slipped to the ground.

Heartstone, tears of the Gods, blood of the Mother, folded in dragonfire, marked in dragontongue, quenched in gold.

The Sorcerer could not grasp the work that had gone into its making. How long it must have taken. No mere forge had wrought this symbol, no mere Man.

"What does it mean?" the King asked, his voice soft. The suspicion had leeched out of him, replaced by rapture, as if he knew who was giving the gift and understood the weight of it.

The Sorcerer sang the words in dragontongue before running his fingers in the air above the scratches in the middle of the blade. "Take me up," the Sorcerer said. He gestured; the King turned it over. "Cast me away."

"This is how it began," Bayard said. "I'm told that some worker stumbled across it during an excavation to clear the grounds nearly four hundred years ago. The Queen at the time wanted another house, or some such thing. John Dee recognized it for what it was, of course. An artefact of great magical importance. He had the Queen's ear at the time, and somehow, he convinced her that it should be protected at all costs. All those who knew of the sword, even if only from stories or rumours, were assassinated."

Merlin glanced at him sharply.
"He didn't understand its significance. I'm not sure that I do. But it's thanks to this that the Directory exists, that --"

"That we've got this clusterfuck, because your lot and you couldn't leave well enough alone," Merlin said.

Bayard fell silent. He didn't quite nod; his head tilted in assent, as if admitting the truth, but not culpability. "Whatever events were set in motion at its discovery, we all have our roles to play."

"And what's mine?" Merlin asked. He still wasn't clear what Bayard wanted from him.

"You tell me," Bayard said with an indulgent smile. "For as long as we've been keeping watch over this sword, it has done nothing but hang in the air. But today… You come across the barrier that Dee linked to the sword as if it were nothing, and the entire basement lights up as if it has been waiting for you all along."

"Not for me," Merlin said without thinking.

Bayard snorted. "It wouldn't react to you if --"

"I'm not who you think I am," Merlin said slowly, carefully, as if speaking to a very small child. "Whatever you think my father's involvement in this is, you're wrong. The dragons are here because they've always been here, hiding in plain sight. I'm not… I'm just not."

_We're not them._

Merlin heaved a heavy breath and shook his head. "I'm not your guy."

"But --"

"Nope," Merlin said. "Whatever you think you're thinking, you're wrong."

"Then what --"

Merlin said nothing, watching Bayard come to his own conclusions. He didn't know what was going on in the man's mind, how the wheels were turning, if they were turning at all. Uther had figured it out through his research. Balinor learned about it through druidic lore and legend. The dragons who were old enough to have lived through it also remembered it, though it was so long ago it seemed that they were remembering wrong.

Bayard's expression clouded over. The consternation in his expression belonged to a man confounded at having made a mistake. Whatever games Bayard played in the background, whatever long-con he had been performing, it had always been on the Queen's behalf, all in service to the Crown. It seemed to Merlin that Bayard had had never known what he had been doing all along.

Just another puppet, pushed and pulled into places he needed to be in by forces he didn't know or understand. The sword, the Mother, the Balance -- whatever it was, it had laid a compulsion on Bayard to perform a task.

"Why me?" the Sorcerer asked, but the Great Dragon didn't answer. Instead, he turned around and walked away, long tail swishing a destructive swath in its wake, and left the Sorcerer to stare at the sword.

"Because it is time," he heard. He looked around, and though he searched every way he knew how,
he saw no one in the cavern except for the blade. "Take of me and bring to him."

Merlin rocked on his heels. The memory was a compulsion that shook him to his bones and pulled at his soul, lingering vainly before fading.

"You can't not be," Bayard said. "You made it down here. You have to be."

"I don't have to be shite," Merlin said.

Bayard's expression fell for a fraction of an instant before he recouped his forces. He narrowed his eyes. "Humour me, then. Take the sword."

Merlin countered with, "What happens when you try?"

Bayard's mouth went thin-lipped and angry, but he didn't answer.

"I thought so," Merlin said. He leaned in, his stance threatening. "Didn't you stop to think for a minute that maybe it's not for you? That maybe there's a reason for that? That whatever it is --"

The King grasped the sword in a firm hand. He held it aloft, and it seemed to shine. The Sorcerer closed his eyes, fighting a smile. He could hear the Mother's earthy murmur, the Heavens' whistling dragonsong.

"-- it can't be used the way you want to use it? That the person who is meant to carry that sword --"

The King lowered the blade and held out his hand in a gesture of friendship and peace. The giant slashed the air, pressing an attack. The King avoided it gracefully, his expression flickering with disappointment that he couldn't avoid this war.

"-- they'd never allow themselves to be used the way you'd use them --"

The plot was unravelled, the truth revealed, the mastermind undone. The King stared at the proof laid out before him, his mouth in an unhappy downturn. His eyes hardened, his expression turned grim, and ordered the capture of the man who had led him astray.

"-- and that they'd rather sacrifice themselves for peace than live in a time of war?"

The King crumbled, holding his wound. All around him, the battle raged, but the Sorcerer could only see his love fall, defeated, and he was too far to help him.

Merlin blinked back tears, overwhelmed by emotion that wasn't his own. Or perhaps the rage he felt belonged to him, as angry and as furious as the Sorcerer would be that someone would try to manipulate their greatest love into doing anything that wasn't what they felt was right, and that they would be killed for it for their defiance.

"Is this your duty to the Queen? Is this what she wants? Or have you been twisting her orders in your head so that the wards think you're still fulfilling your duty to the throne?"

"What do you know of duty?" Bayard snarled, pushing against Merlin. "What do you know of sacrifice? What lengths would you go to --"

"You have no idea," Merlin said softly. A small laugh escaped him. "You've no idea at all."

He walked away from Bayard. From the sword. A tiny, almost inaudible note rang in the air, mournful and sad to be left behind.
Merlin was nearly to the stairs when he heard Gilli's anxious shout. "Hello, down there? Hello? Can you hear me? There's something going on the telly. Hello?"

Merlin ran up the stairs two at a time, startling Gilli with his sudden appearance through the ward's illusion. "What is it?"

Gilli shoved his mobile into Merlin's hands. There was jerky video from London's Underground playing, and from the stamp it was playing live. "This, and I've no idea what it is."

"There's reports of... whatever these bloody things are. Ghouls? Wraiths? Ghosts? I don't know, I'm seeing this with my own eyes, and, bloody Hell. I think I just pissed myself --"

Mickey O'Reilly's voice was shaky, breathless and gasping. Merlin couldn't tell anything on the video. The feed was jarring and disorienting, but it steadied long enough for him to see people screaming and running away. Merlin thought he saw an intangible grey flash dart across the screen but dismissed it at first as a trick of the light.

And one by one, the people running away from the scene fell to their knees before collapsing entirely, not even trying to catch themselves before slamming onto the ground.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Jules? Let's get out of here. What, no, put that away. I'm pretty fucking sure pepper spray doesn't do shite to ghosts --"

The video suddenly tumbled over. It bounced on the ground. The camera focused on the body of one of the victims, their faces pale and grey, all colour washed out of them. Merlin felt a chill of unexplainable familiarity run down his spine.

"Julia! JULES!"

"I'm okay. I'm okay --"

The camera lurched again. The cameraperson -- Julia -- was jerked to her feet. There was a quick shot of her boots, the kerb, the wall. A flailing view of panic in a crowd, ghastly wraiths with fragmented human shapes blindly but purposefully attacking people.

Necromancy.

Nimueh.

Merlin shoved his hands through his pockets in search of his mobile. There were two text messages that he'd missed while below ground, distracted by Bayard and by the sword. A third one came in while he was unlocking his screen, but he skipped past reading them to call Arthur.

"Hellburner-One," Merlin said when Arthur answered.

It was only peripherally that Merlin was aware of Bayard slinking out of the warded doorway, of assessing the tension in the room, of approaching Gilli to see for himself what he'd missed. Merlin focused on the stuttered breath of relief that was audible over the line, well and fully conscious that he'd made the exact same sound.

"What's your status?" Arthur asked.

Merlin glanced around. There was no sign of ghostly tendrils in the air. "Seems clear."

"The grounds are warded to some extent. The building is protected against supernatural incursion.
"We're safe here," Bayard said.

"Did you hear that?" Merlin asked Arthur.

"Copy," Arthur said.

"The team?" Merlin asked, moving away from the others.

"Checked in," Arthur said. There was a little admonishment in his voice when he added, "You're the last."

"Been busy," Merlin said, shooting a glare in Bayard's direction. A long pause trickled over the line, compounded by muffled conversation and background noises. "You're mobilizing."

A weary, strained tone filled Arthur's voice. "It's everywhere, Merlin. Not just here in London. Australia, Siberia, in America. They've been spotted outside of Camelot. The only thing keeping them safe are the wards."

"I could --"

"And kill yourself in the process?" Arthur asked. His voice was hard. "Not an option. If you --"

Gunfire in the background interrupted him. Merlin knew, logically, that the gunfire had come from a distant point from Arthur's location, but he fretted anyway.

"Bloody fucking idiots! Bullets don't do anything! Put down your goddamn guns before someone gets shot!"

Merlin pulled the phone away from his ear, wincing. Gwaine must have been standing next to Arthur for his shout to come through so loudly.

"I have Elyan looking for the source of this. Gaius and the druids are researching. The dragons are in an uproar. Mandrake nearly got taken out by one of those things, and I'm pretty sure Kilgarrah was ready to transform in the middle of the base and breathe fire on them when they went after him. He cowed behind me, Merlin. When have you ever heard of him not keeping a cool head?"

"Never," Merlin admitted. Whatever these were, they belonged to a category of *Fuck This Shite* if they could scare even the mightiest dragon. "What do you want me to do?"

Arthur hesitated. From the way the background noise changed, Merlin knew that Arthur was on the move. Probably had the entire team with him, too.

"Weapons. We need weapons. You heard Gwaine. Bullets are worthless. We're running too low on the charmed ones, and no time to make more. Gaius is looking for ways to defend ourselves, but it can't help to have more eyes on the books. Bayard --"

"One second. He's right here," Merlin said. He lowered the mobile and snapped his fingers. Bayard's head snapped up from where his eyes were glued to Gilli's mobile. "Do you know what these things are and how to stop them?"

"Of course not," Bayard said, scoffing.

"How about doing something productive and getting me some answers?" Merlin snapped. "Don't think I haven't seen the books holding the roof up, or that I don't know you didn't really dismiss the sorcerers from service like the rumours say."
"What makes you think I would --"

"Why don't we have a chat with Her Majesty about how well you're upholding your oath in service to the Crown?"

Bayard glowered, but after a moment, he stalked up the corridor, his mobile in his hand.

"Done," Merlin said into his phone, watching Bayard go. "Anything else?"

"Weapons," Arthur said. "We need weapons that can do something against these things. The phantoms haven't gone near our barracks, but that can't be a coincidence. They might make dragons quake in their skins, but something about magic makes them veer away at the last minute."

"Has Mordred --"

"Direct attacks don't work. Passive magic, on the other hand -- he dropped post on top of one of them, and it blew apart like mist," Arthur said. "Took it a bit to pull itself together, but it got us enough time to clear out the mess tent."

"MI-5 will have some," Merlin said, remembering the vaults.

"Uther might do, as well," Arthur said. "I'll call them shortly. Does the Directory have anything?"

Merlin looked at Gilli, who was pale-faced and jittery as he watched more of the streaming video on his mobile. Gilli's ring was a gaudy thing with a red stone in the centre, too big for his hand. The sorcerer said something about being allowed to select an artefact when he completed his training, which might mean that there were other magical artefacts that would fit the bill.

"Gilli?"

Gilli's eyes were round when he looked up. "Yeah?"

"Weapons," Merlin said. "Does the Directory have any?"

"Uh," Gilli said, falling silent. Merlin wasn't sure if it was because Gilli was trying to process Merlin's question, if he were trying to think of an answer, or if he were trying to decide whether to tell Merlin the truth or not. "Yeah. Yeah, I know where they are. There's an armoury not far from here."

"Can you take me there?"

Gilli looked around, and, possibly because he didn't see Bayard anywhere, broke into a grin. "Nobody's stopping me, are they?"

"No, no one is," Merlin said, grinning back. He told Arthur, "I'll salvage whatever they've got."

"Good," Arthur said. "I've got your equipment. Keep your phone on. And bloody well answer it on the first go. I could do without the heart attack."

"Aw, I knew you liked me, you big softy," Merlin said, barking a short laugh when Arthur hung up on him after a bitten out, "That's debatable."

Gilli put his mobile away and fished out the keys to the SUV. "Now?"

"Now. How far did you say it was?" Merlin asked.
"A few minutes, unless there's plonkers on the road. Or those wraiths," Gilli said, heading down the corridor.

Merlin started to follow, but once again he stopped halfway down the corridor to look over his shoulders. The warded double-doors were wide open in invitation, though no one would actually be able to get past the sword's protection. He felt as if he should close them.

Instead, he walked through the doorway again, this time ready for the blinding, disorienting sensation and catching himself before he stumbled down the stairs. He hurried down the maze of cavern corridors and stopped just outside of the sword's little den.

The sword was as he'd last seen it mere minutes ago. Suspended in mid-air, pointed toward the ground. It was the focus point of the ley line, the father and the mother of the birth of a growing nexus, and its glow shimmered in the air as if snowflakes were falling from the sky, catching the drifting sunlight on fragile ice crystals. The cavern brightened as Merlin advanced, and he stared at the sword for what felt for an eternity.

"You aren't for me," he told the sword. "And we are not them, whoever they are."

The sword had no answer for him. But when Merlin grasped the hilt and drew the sword from its airy sheath, it felt right that he had done so.
"Fire," Gaius said.

Arthur tapped his earwig, but he didn't stop advancing. His team had been assigned to provide some sort of cover against the phantoms that were haunting the street, petrifying people both figuratively and literally. His frustration lay in not knowing what he could do to protect the non-combatants of London, never mind how to direct them to a safe place. With phantoms appearing at random whim, be it in the middle of the command centre or a bomb shelter in someone's basement, it seemed that there was no safe place.

Arthur tilted his head in confusion. "Explain."

It was broad daylight with heavy cloud cover and dark alleyways and sheltered streets. Those were the most dangerous areas. The phantoms were transparent and grey, like ephemeral shade, difficult to see even from five metres away. Arthur had directed his team to stay in the lightest areas possible, to avoid the shadows if they could help it, and they, in turn, made certain that the civilians under escort didn't stray.

"An observation, nothing more," Gaius said, frustratingly slow at getting to the point as usual. "Some of our young druids were caught outside the wards in the early hours of the morning. They carried a torch, which kept the wraiths at bay long enough for them to return to safety."

"The wards?" Arthur asked.

"They're holding," Gaius confirmed, simultaneously easing Arthur's greatest fear. If he didn't know how much it had taken out of Merlin and Mordred to construct the protective and secretive ward around Camelot, Arthur would have asked them to repeat the feat around London. As it was, London was vastly larger than Camelot, and there would still be the problem of being trapped with the phantoms.

From every report Arthur had heard before he'd geared up and joined his team, the phantoms -- creatures Gaius and the Druids referred to as wraiths -- were everywhere. In Wales, in Ireland, in Scotland. Across the Channel, in France, across Europe, Asia, the Pacific. Someone had shut off the telly before Arthur could see how extensive the spread was, but it wasn't a hard go to gather that the phantoms were out in the Americas, too.

"If artificial light will do, why did you say fire?" Arthur asked, glancing at Leon. Leon's brow was furrowed, as if he had been about to ask that same question.

"From every account, the batteries in their torches were at full charge when they left Camelot," Gaius said sagely. "They should have lasted at least eight hours. I found no sign of damage to the equipment, but the batteries were almost out of charge."

"Great," Will said from somewhere at the back, where he was taking up the rear with Lucan. "So they don't just suck souls, they suck power, too."

"Zip it," Perceval snapped, making it clear that he was going to reinforce rank discipline if he had to shove it down Will's throat. Inciting panic wouldn't help anyone, least of all the citizens who were walking fearfully inside the circle the team made around them.
"Fire," Arthur repeated. "Will that work?"

"We suspect that it's a power source the wraiths cannot directly access," Gaius said.

"So, to clarify, you're not sure," Arthur said.

"Not at all," Gaius said, sounding apologetic.

Rumour was, no one was dealing with them effectively. It seemed that the only way to eradicate the bloody pests was to take care of them at the source. Arthur certainly hoped that someone was working on finding that source, and that it would be as easy to deal with as the walking dead had been. If he were honest, that hadn't exactly been a walk in the park for anyone involved, but at least the team had made it out of that situation in one relative piece.

"All right," Arthur said, hating how resigned he was. "Keep looking."

Gaius signed off. Arthur looked toward Leon. Leon shook his head, his mouth in a grim line.

"Flares?" Arthur suggested.


"The phantoms do stay away from light sources," Gwaine provided over the E-channel. He was near the back of the group, too, his voice low enough that Arthur doubted the civilians with them would have heard. "We can confirm that much."

"Have them turn on all the light, push the power plants to maximum?" Pellinor said. He was at Arthur's shoulder, keeping close. Gareth was on Leon's other side. Next to the scouts and snipers in the team, those two had the keenest eyes, and it came from years of experience working underwater, where it was dark and dim and murky.

"That'll work until the plant blows up, and where will we be, then?" Geraint asked.

"Making sure they're good and gone before that happens," Galahad said. He paused. "I hear movement ahead of us."

"Ready arms," Arthur said, though he knew it was a waste of time. Bullets didn't hurt phantoms, but they also didn't make a whole lot of noise. Whatever Galahad had heard, the odds were high that they were simply more people running away from a phantom bloom. "Stay in the light. Don't fire unless there's a clear threat."

"Not our first rodeo," Will muttered. There was a soft thud from the back of the group. Will made a pained noise, and after a moan of protest, grudgingly said, "Yes, sir."

"Group of six people," Galahad said. "They look harmless. There's that reporter and his camera with them. I'm sending them back to you."

"Copy," Arthur said.

A few seconds passed before he made out the sound of running footsteps, of gasped breaths and pants. Someone sobbed in relief when they saw the group, and Bohrs caught a young man whose legs collapsed under him.

Mickey O'Reilly doubled over in front of Arthur, hands on his thighs, gulping in air. Julia, his cameraperson, was in slightly better state, despite having to carry that heavy camera with her.
Arthur wondered why she hadn't dumped her equipment, and belatedly turned his head away when he saw that the red light was on, recording and transmitting live. With an inward sigh, Arthur gave up any pretence. No one on the team was wearing their red scarves, but any future anonymity they might've hoped for was down the loo now that they were joined by the most persistent team in the media.

"How many with you?" Arthur asked.

"We got split up," said a severe woman in her late thirties. Her business suit was askew, torn in one shoulder and the side. She wore sensible flats that had served her well thus far, if she'd been running all this time.

"They went for the coppers," the young man Bohrs caught said, still tottering on unsteady feet, but managing to stand on his own. "We would've gone that way, but those... things, they cut us off. What the fuck are they?"

"Your guess is as good as ours, mate," Gwaine said, coming up from the rear. At any other time, Arthur would have scowled at Gwaine until he returned to his position, but Gwaine, like Geraint and Galahad, worked best when he was always on the move, constantly re-evaluating the condition of the team and the threat level. He was also the most personable when it came to meeting frantic strangers. "Why don't we get you with the others? We're moving to a safer location."

"Don't mind if I do," the young man said.

The businesswoman was right behind him, muttering something about keeping a pair of runners in her office if this magics bollocks kept up. The two other office workers joined them, pale-faced and jittery.

"Here," Lamorak said. They didn't have an assigned medic to their team during Lance's absence, but everyone had basic medical training. It was clear to see that the two office workers were in a stage of shock. "Do you have any injuries?"

They shook their head. The businesswoman grunted. "Just blisters."

Arthur tapped his earwig. "How does the route look?"

"Clear, if we stay out of the shadows, which, for the record, is really weird for us, okay?" Geraint said.

"Really weird," Galahad confirmed. "Also, there's smoke a couple of blocks up. I'm not a fan. We'll take a detour, but it'll add a few klicks to our full route."

"Copy," Arthur said. "We're in no rush. Slow and steady. Let's get these people to safety."

He looked over his shoulder to see how much more time he would have to give Lamorak to tend to the new civilians, but it didn't seem as if he needed to. The few minutes were enough to let them catch their breath, and the newcomers had been welcomed into the main group they were escorting, everyone looking after each other. When he turned back, Arthur found the camera in his face, Mickey measuring him strangely.

"I know you," Mickey said.

Arthur resisted the urge to grimace and scratch his forehead. "Pretty sure you don't. But I'm familiar with you, Mr. O'Reilley. My men are big fans of your show, and they'd hate it if something happened to you and you had to go off the air for a while. If you let us, we'll take you to
"Yeah, no, *safe* and *stagnant* aren't conductive in my line of business. I'm a combat reporter, ah..."

Mickey made a show of looking at Arthur's uniform, searching in the obvious places for names and insignias. He wouldn't find any identifiers on any of the members of Excalibur, though, and Arthur didn't need any trouble. The civilians wouldn't know what the lack of identification meant, and the entire point was to keep them safe and calm, not fleeing for their lives because they couldn't trust Excalibur.

"Captain Arthur Pendragon," Arthur said, carefully keeping his weapon away from Mickey to shake the reporter's offered hand. Arthur pointedly ignored Leon's smirk in favour of noticing how Mickey wasn't surprised in the least. Recognition lit up in the reporter's eyes, and Arthur felt a small measure of dread.

"If you don't mind, we'll tag along with you," Mickey said.

"Sure," Arthur said, biting back a sigh. He just knew that his attempt to dissuade the reporter were going to be for naught, but he thought he'd try again, at least. "We're escorting anyone who needs it to a safe location. You're welcome to join us until we get there."

"Actually, we were thinking of sticking with you. See how the Army's handling the situation, yeah? It'll go a long way to reassure the people of London that their ladies and gents in uniform are working hard to get the latest blow-out under control," Mickey said.

He raised both eyebrows meaningfully, and there was no missing the cheek in his tone. The reporter knew full well who Arthur was -- probably recognized him from that chat they had through the fence some time ago, and had looked him up after that. It didn't mean that Mickey knew Arthur and Excalibur were the Red Team --

"Who knows, we might get a glimpse or two of the Red Team in action while we're out in the field," Mickey said, his voice completely neutral, without inflection. He shrugged. "Seems the sort of thing they'd be taking care of."

Arthur deflated. The reporter knew exactly who they were. He glanced over Mickey's shoulder at Leon, who, in turn, looked at the others and tilted his head. "We can handle it," Leon said cryptically.

"Fine," Arthur said, both to Leon and to Mickey, who let out an undignified squeak. Julia, behind the camera, punched him and cackled in delight. "We'll escort you to the safe location. Anything after that depends on our assignments and whether our CO approves the tagalong."

"I'll call it in," Leon said.

Arthur nodded and turned to the others. He tapped his earwig. "All right. Scouts, we're moving ahead. Get us a safe route."

He listened with half an ear as Geraint and Galahad confirmed their orders, reported their coordinates and destination. They would call in again when they'd reached it, giving them new coordinates. As the only person who didn't have to continuously input numbers in a GPS or struggle with a paper map and compass, it was Gwaine's responsibility to report on their route and to keep track of his scouts.

If it were at all possible to rely on Elyan's constant satellite surveillance, Arthur wouldn't have split up his team in any fashion. As it was, the phantoms weren't showing up on any spectrum --
infrared, ultraviolet, visual, radio or microwave. The only thing that Elyan could track were areas of increasing darkness, coupled with cloud movements, and come up with some probability that the phantoms were lurking around the corner. He was wrong more often than not, much to his frustration, and both Elyan and Bran were working together to come up with something more useful.

Arthur hoped that would happen before the sun set, because he had no idea how the army was going to protect an entire city from intangibles.

"Move out," Arthur barked, leading the way.

They hadn't gone a couple of blocks before Arthur caught Leon branching out, making space for Mickey and Julia. Mickey moved up next to Arthur while Julia ran up ahead, turning the camera on them as she walked backward. Gareth, ever the gentleman, moved up, too, both to be their eyes ahead, to protect Julia if something happened, and to guide her around obstacles.

Leon, smirking like the bastard he was, trotted up to join Gareth.

Mickey didn't say anything until Julia gave him the thumbs-up. "Hi, everybody. If you've been following the live feed, you know that a lot of people, including Julia and I, had a few narrow escapes. We got split up a few blocks over, but the group we were with got lucky and we stumbled into a team leading other people just like us to a safe location. I'm with Captain Pendragon and his men from -- I'm terribly sorry, I didn't catch your regiment --"

"Does it matter?" Arthur asked, not wanting to answer that question. Bad enough that he was on the air right now in what was an impromptu interview. He was going to get so much ribbing when they returned to base, never mind the dressing-down he was going to get from the Brass if he accidentally revealed something that he shouldn't have over the air. Every active duty soldier was under strict no-interview orders, and Arthur had a card burning in his pocket with the name and numbers of the person dealing with the press. He felt as if he should be whipping it out and handing it to the reporter.

"No, I suppose not, but I figured you might want to say hi to your fellow brothers- and sisters-in-arms," Mickey said.

That was such a peculiar way to refer to the other soldiers in his division that Arthur turned to glance at Mickey, fully expecting -- and receiving -- a big, too-innocent grin.

"Hello," Arthur said cautiously. He didn't release his weapon, but he did wriggle his fingers and nod at the camera.

Mickey made a disappointed sound, as if he'd expected more from Arthur, but he recovered quickly and said, "We met two of your men up the road when we came this way, but it seems to me that you're a couple of men short. Is that normal?"

Arthur glanced heavenward, pleading for divine assistance, and suppressed his sigh when he belatedly remembered that he was on camera. He did his best to make it look as if he were checking out the environment, making sure there wasn't anything coming at them from above.

"I'd like to know how you know how many men I should have on my team," Arthur said, forcing himself to sound neutral.

"I've got my sources," Mickey said. He was too cheerful for Arthur's tastes, knowing that he'd cornered Arthur in a tough spot. "Are they around?"
"One of them is on assignment," Arthur said. He was tempted to tap his earwig as if he'd received a signal, and to move away from the camera for a private conversation. Instead, he stayed where he was. "He'll catch up to us."

Just then, background chatter filled the earwig over the general line, and he listened passively as he received updates.

Balinor's team, it seemed, had encountered creatures very similar to these phantoms before they went MIA decades ago. His squad had lost several men, they had had no idea of their origins, and even less luck with fighting them. The team had called for an extraction from the location and abandoned their mission without completing it. At the moment, he and some of his druids were with Uther and Olaf at MI-5, going through the archive to see if they could find something that Gaius and the druids at Camelot could not.

Somewhere along the line, Merlin showed up to collect any magical weapon in the archive. He had a fair few objects from the Directory, but it wasn't enough to outfit the team, never mind anyone else, and had moved on. Olaf had given Merlin what he had, Merlin picked out anything that was useful, and now, he was diving through the Pendragon Consulting warehouses at Uther's suggestion with Master Sergeant Jackson Page to see if they could come up with anything else.

Arthur knew that he could rely on Mordred for magical defences, but a part of him would feel much better when Merlin were here.

"And your other man?" Mickey asked.

"He's on leave," Arthur said grudgingly.

"Huh," Mickey said. "I didn't think they gave those out in times of war."

"Special circumstance," Arthur said.

"Oh yeah? What's that?" Mickey asked.

Arthur stared at the camera. He sighed, shook his head, and huffed a small laugh. He raised his eyebrows at the camera and said, "Telling his wife that he loves her, I hope, and giving his new baby girl all the love he promised to give her from the team."

As if his words were a signal, Gwaine popped up behind him and waved to the camera. "Hi, sweetheart. Your uncles are going to bloody spoil you rotten, and your Mum's got no say in it."

"That's a roger on that," Lamorak said from somewhere behind Gwaine. "Also, be nice to have your arse with us again. I still can't put a plaster on straight."

"As long as you shoot straight, that's all that matters," Gwaine said, retreating toward the back.

Arthur ignored how Mickey was giving him sidelong glances. He wondered how long it would take for Mickey to ask the question -- if he would even ask. And, sure enough, he did.

"That's funny. Earlier today, we saw a soldier on a dragon flying out of London with a bright red banner trailing behind it. Something about babies and storks, knights and dragons. How did that go again?" Mickey mused, then quoted, "Storks deliver babies. Dragons deliver Knights."

"I heard something about that," Arthur said.

"Quite a coincidence, your man having a baby girl and a dragon announcing just that," Mickey
Arthur nodded amiably. "Imagine that. It's like babies are born every minute."

"Actually, the statistics are closer to one point one four babies born every minute in the UK if you count Wales," Will said.

"I do," Mordred said.

The camera shifted to catch who was talking. Arthur shot Will a nasty glance until Perceval hauled him back into the line. Mordred smirked, lowering his head, shrugging his shoulders.

Mickey grinned in delight at the banter. He turned to Arthur. "Do you mind if I talk to your team?"

*I have a feeling I'd have to shoot you to stop you,* Arthur didn't say. He shrugged and said, "If they want to talk to you, by all means. If something goes wrong, though, you do exactly what my men say."

"Course," Mickey said distractedly, as if he couldn't decide which member of the team to talk to first.

Arthur lengthened his stride, leaving Mickey and Julia, catching up to Leon. Under his breath, he muttered, "I regret all of my life choices. All of them."

He sighed.

After a pause, he corrected himself. "Except Merlin."

Leon snorted.

Arthur evaded his new tagalong and retreated to a quiet spot in the makeshift army base. The sun was setting, but the gloomy overcast had stretched the moment for hours beforehand, giving everyone a taste of what was in store when the pitch of night would reach them.

The army had lost more men to the phantoms, even despite switching to flares or makeshift torches to keep them at bay. Word had been spread throughout the city by way of MI-5 to stay close to every stable light source or fireplace, to stay in large groups of people, but there was currently no telling how many citizens had been affected by the attacks.

Every central city block had a bonfire burning bright to help people find their way home and to offer refuge in their passage. It wouldn't last, not through the night, but it was better than nothing. Already, the news reported that the power plants were being over-taxed by the need to keep everything illuminated.

Arthur ducked into the command tent and was immediately blinded. The light flashed in his face was immediately removed with an apologetic, "Sorry, sir," from the MP.

Arthur couldn't find it in him to be even a little bit annoyed. They were all on edge. He put a reassuring hand on the MP's shoulder, moving deeper into the tent. There was a fair crowd of ranked men in the small area, most of them dithering over the equipment when there was no need, and it took some doing to get to Colonel Mandrake and General Tachnathar. The two men -- the
two dragons -- stood close to each other, speaking quietly. They both stopped when Arthur arrived, welcoming him with a nod, and turned just as Major Kilgarrah joined them.

"We need a private space," Kilgarrah said. He looked around the tent, obviously torn between roaring at everyone to get out and leaving the area.

"Until this is done with, I don't think any place is private," Tachnathar said.

"Except the loo," someone behind the General said.

The General shifted his weight to peer over his shoulder; a red-faced lieutenant abruptly ducked his head, rounding his shoulders, and tried to make himself very, very small and not worth anyone's notice.

"Has there been anything?" Mandrake asked Arthur.

"No," Arthur said. "You know what I know. The druids haven't found mention of these things in the lore, and the only thing that's worked to keep them at bay is a strong light source, but even that is hit or miss. Some types of light don't have any effect at all."

"And MI-5?" Kilgarrah asked.

Arthur turned to the Major, noting the tight mouth and the strained expression. "I'm not sure why you're asking me that, sir, considering you've got as much access to them as I do. But if you mean, has Uther uncovered anything? Then, no, I don't know."

They still weren't exactly on speaking terms, but the few snatches of conversations Arthur had been able to have with his father since he was stripped of his executive power in the army had been… surprisingly neutral. Arthur could tell that Uther regretted a great many things, and he did appear to be trying. On the surface, at least.

Kilgarrah grunted as if he didn't quite believe that. Arthur narrowed his eyes and asked, "What about you?"

"Beg pardon?" Kilgarrah asked, turning to Arthur.

"You heard me, sir. What about you?" Arthur asked again. He made sure to include Mandrake and Tachnathar. Choosing his words very carefully because he didn't want to out the dragons before they were ready, Arthur said, "You've proven that you have a long memory. Surely this sort of thing has happened before."

None of the dragons spoke. They exchanged glances. Kilgarrah squinted at Arthur and asked, "How old do you think we are?"

"Old enough," Arthur said. "Old enough to recognize them before anyone else and know to be afraid."

Kilgarrah growled low in his chest. Mandrake stepped between them. A small, nervous smile pulled on Mandrake's mouth and he said, "Not that old, and the blood memories of our ancestors are… unreliable."

"Maybe Nid," Tachnathar mused. "He's the oldest. His memories might be more clear."

"He's not here," Arthur said. "And he'll stay where he is. I'll call --"
His phone buzzed. He pulled his mobile out of his pocket nearly at the same time as Mandrake and Tachnathar, Kilgarrah looking on with curiosity.

"Olaf," Arthur said.

"Hold on, I'm conferencing with Mandrake and Tachnathar --"

"They're with me," Arthur said. Mandrake and Tachnathar brought their phones to their ears and greeted Olaf flatly.

"We're all here, then? Yes. I have bad news and worse news. Which would you like first?" Olaf asked. "No, never mind, I'll just start. The bad news is, we still haven't found anything. The worse news is, the NWO's been flooding our switchboard, begging for help in exchange for information."

"How is that worse news?" Mandrake asked.

"Because they're not behind this," Arthur said, continuing when he heard a noise of confirmation from Olaf. He looked at Kilgarrah, whose head was down. He didn't have a phone, but he was obviously paying attention. Arthur wondered how sensitive the dragon's hearing was, and if he could make out whatever Olaf was saying over the phone. "If they're not behind this, it means we're either seeing a last ditch attempt to tilt the tables in their favour, or their end game. Or both."

Olaf was silent over the phone. After a moment, he asked, "Are you sure you don't want to work for me when all this is over?"

"You couldn't afford me," Arthur said. Olaf tut-tutted, but before he could launch into a recruitment spiel or whatever it was that he'd been about to say, Arthur interrupted with, "What did you find out from the NWO?"

"Mostly a lot of nothing useful," Olaf said. "The analysts are sifting through the data as we speak. What's important is that we've heard from our undercover agents. Everyone's closing up shop and going underground. Some of the NWO offshoots have vanished. The main cells have cut communication with the smaller groups. Your favourite mercenary is on the move."

Arthur took a deep breath, acutely aware of the General's eyes on him. Colonel Mandrake shook his head. Kilgarrah stared up at the ceiling. They all knew what those signs meant, but none of them were prepared to voice it out loud.

Olaf took care of that when he added, "We're estimating that whatever it is that's going to happen, it's going to hit critical mass anytime between now and the next forty-eight hours."

Arthur grit his teeth. He looked past the people pretending they weren't trying very hard to eavesdrop on the conversation to the raised monitors. There were multiple split-screens with CCTV feed from all over London. As the streets darkened with the oncoming night, the presence of phantoms increased. Arthur could see them flit past, most of them not even bothering to dodge the light coming from the streetlamps.

"We don't have forty-eight hours," Arthur said. "Where is this main event supposed to happen?"

Olaf didn't answer right away. When he did, it was with the weight of exhaustion. "We don't know."

"Find out," Arthur said, hanging up. He started to dial Lance's number in the hopes that he could find Gaius or Nid when his phone rang in his hand. Leon's code appeared on the screen, and Arthur immediately answered, "Pendragon. Is everything all right?"
"Get to the barracks. We've got a visitor."

The man was tall, scraggly-looking, and wearing ill-fitting clothes that might have been tailored to his exact measurements, once, before hard times hit the entire world. His brown hair was in knots and in desperate need of a cut, but his beard was in slightly better straits. Even with the facial hair, Arthur could tell that the man's cheeks were sunken with hunger and that he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in a long time.

Arthur couldn't tell much else, because Mordred was in the way. The two men were in the desperate embrace of those who hadn't seen each other in a long time and had thought they would never see the other again. The stranger's head was bowed, the expression in his eyes full of sadness but also full of bittersweet joy. Mordred's shoulders were shaking, his sobs quiet and muffled.

Off to the side, Mickey put a hand on Julia's camera, forcing it down. Julia lowered it with a disgruntled look, but at Mickey's stern glare, Julia moved away.

Arthur nodded in thanks. Mickey offered him a small smile.

"Came to the gates an hour ago, give or take," Leon said quietly. "He was passed through with the rest of the civilians looking for shelter. He asked after Merlin, someone gave him directions this way. Next thing I know…"

Leon gestured at Mordred.

"Family, maybe?" Leon suggested.

Arthur shook his head, not entirely sure about that. The way the two men were holding onto each other spoke of something more, but he didn't want to make any assumptions or judgment.

No one spoke. After a few minutes of standing around awkwardly, most of the team slipped off to their cots to grab some shut-eye while they still could. Arthur started to take a step closer when he thought Mordred and the stranger were about to break apart, but neither of them seemed ready to let go just yet.

"This sort of thing happen often?" Mickey asked.

Arthur shot him a look. "You tell me. World's gone to Hell. Traveling to the next block, never mind outside of town or to the next country? That's about the most dangerous thing anyone can do these days. If anyone's got loved ones they haven't seen in a while, never mind talked to…"

He trailed off and gestured.

Mickey looked thoughtful and asked, "Would you mind saying all that again for the camera?"

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Not everything's a sound bite."

"With you lot?" Mickey scoffed. "You've got to be having me on. Everything you say and do? That's a sound bite."

"I don't know who you think we are --"
"Right," Mickey said, shaking his head. "Let's not do this, yeah? I'm a reporter. This is what I do. I find out the things no one else finds out, or at least, I try to get my hands on it before everybody else. We both know I know who you really are. The Red Team, the Knights, whatever you call yourselves --"

Nearby, Leon heaved a small sigh. His shrug was minuscule and unworried. Pellinor clamped his hands on Arthur's shoulders and said, "Hate to break it to you, but the scarf's getting kind of scratchy."

"Maybe if you washed it every once in a while," Arthur retorted.

"Maybe if we had time to wash our undies," Pellinor snorted, moving away.

"Not doing my laundry ever again, you're not," Bedivere called from the back. "My pants are still pink from last time."

"Makes you a hit with the ladies," Lucan said.

"Nah, that's not it," Bedivere said, grinning. "It's my charm."

"It's your bloody glasses and your nose in a bloody book, you big bloody bookworm," Lamorak said.

Mickey stared at Arthur with wide eyes. As if he'd known all along but hadn't quite known, not for sure. Gratification shone in his eyes, but so did a fair bit of awe, and it made Arthur uncomfortable. He was acutely aware that Julia had pointed the camera on them -- that she probably had it on them all along, surreptitiously filming the entire exchange.

Arthur sighed. It had been bound to happen sooner or later. His only gratification was the knowledge that they weren't actively transmitting the footage. He hoped that their editor would at least make the team look good in the final cut, removing all talk about people pants and at least bleeping out all the swearing.

Arthur held out his hand to Mickey. Mickey took it -- his fingers trembled, his palm shook -- and Arthur gave it a steadying squeeze.

"We call ourselves Excalibur," Arthur said.

Mickey was at a loss for words.

"I'm Captain Arthur Pendragon," he said, introducing himself to the camera. He gestured toward the others. "This is Lieutenant-Commander Leon Cross, my second in command. We've been best friends since we were children, and he's recently become my brother-in-law."

"Morgana, right?" Mickey asked, seeming to come to himself. Arthur blinked at him in surprise, but he nodded. Mickey's smile was bright when he turned to Leon, shaking his hand. "I'd love to meet her one day. Be nice to put a person with the voice over the phone. She's very frightening, do you know that?"

Leon barked a laugh. "Not to me."

"Newlywed, He doesn't know any better yet," Gwaine said, putting his hand on Leon's face and pushing him out of the way. He leaned to look right into the camera. "Don't kill me, Morgana."

"This is Lieutenant Gwaine Taggart. We've been friends almost as long as I've known Leon, and
some days, I regret every minute of it," Arthur said. Gwaine's grin didn't falter; if anything, it got bigger. "He's our lead scout and our best sniper."

"That's debatable," Will said from the middle of the barracks.

"Lieutenant Will Kendricks, one of our most recent acquisitions. He's also one of our snipers, and at last count, he was trailing Gwaine by two in their latest competition on which one of them is better in the field," Arthur said.

"He cheated last time," Will said sullenly. He waved a hand at the camera.

"You cheated the time before that, so don't act so put out," Kay said, elbowing Will as he sat down on the cot next to him.

"Sergeant Kay Lawhead, close-combat specialist. Another one of my oldest friends. He's the bloke you want at your back if it comes down to nothing but your bare hands," Arthur said.

"Definitely the one I want with me if I've gotten myself pissed at the pub," Perceval said.

"Lieutenant Perceval Dane, advance mobility specialist," Arthur said. "After Leon, he's next in command. If you can't tell from his size, he does most of the heavy work. What he doesn't handle, Sergeant Bohrs Hellswenge and Sergeant Daniel Bedivere take care of."

Bohrs and Bedivere nodded to the camera.

Arthur pointed at the others and named them all in turn. "Sergeant Gaël Lucan, combat specialist. Sergeant James Galahad, search and rescue specialist. Sergeant Aidan Pellinor and Sergeant Gareth Mallory, both combat specialists. Sergeant Owain Yates, demolitions. Sergeant Geraint Keynes, search and rescue specialist. Sergeant Julian Lamorak, combat specialist. Elyan Smith runs our operations from our command centre."

"Lieutenant Lance Dulac is with his wife, Gwen, and their baby right now," Arthur said when the camera turned to him again. "He's our medic, but right now he's in charge of keeping everyone at home safe. Do you hear me, Lance?"

Mickey laughed softly.

Arthur leaned into the camera, raised his eyebrows, and pointed meaningfully. He couldn't help it. The situation was so ridiculous. He dropped his severe glare and smiled.

He noticed that Mordred had pulled away from the newcomer, that the newcomer had crept into the shadows, away from the camera. Solemnly, seriously, Arthur waved Mordred forward. Mordred wiped his tear-stained cheek with his fingers, but he came forward, offering up an uncertain smile. His eyes were red-rimmed, but he was happy, not sad, and it showed.

"This is Mordred ap Aneurin," Arthur said, putting an arm around Mordred's shoulders and squeezing him reassuringly. "He's not a soldier, but he fought the war before we even knew there was a war to fight, and he's become one of ours since then. An ally. A friend."

"Hi," Mordred said shyly, waving awkwardly at the camera.

In the shadows, the stranger snorted.

"Shut up," Mordred said, embarrassed and without heat.
"Is that everyone on the team?" Mickey asked after a long silence. "Except for the new dad, I mean. There's another soldier, isn't there?"

"I thought he'd be here by now, actually," Arthur admitted, pulling out his mobile. He sent Merlin a text. *You're late.*

A reply pinged back almost immediately.

*Do you know how many bloody warehouses your company has?*


*Well, half of them have secret passages. Bet you didn't know that. At the last one, on our way to you now. ETA 30 minutes, depending.*

Arthur stared at the message with an unhappy frown. He didn't want to imagine Merlin out there by himself, even if he had Master Sergeant Jackson Page and his men as back-up. The warehouses could operate on generator power but had limited light, which relied on motion sensors down different corridors. Arthur worried that those lights would be about as useful as the streetlamps -- barely bothersome to phantoms who seemed to grow stronger every hour.

*Be careful,* he texted back. Remembering that the camera was running, Arthur held up his mobile without showing the screen, and said, "That's him checking in. He's running late."

"Should we get him?" Will asked. Kay was already putting his coat on.

Arthur hesitated. He shook his head reluctantly. "He's fine. He's on his way."

Will gave Arthur a sour look. "I don't like him out by himself. You saw how those things went after Mordred. What do you think they'll do if they get close to Merlin?"

"Merlin?" Mickey asked.

Arthur glanced at the reporter. "Lieutenant Merlin Emrys. He's... he's our communications specialist."

"Not just that to you, I take it," Mickey said. His tone was apologetic. "Hard not to see the look in your eyes when you said his name."

Arthur felt a knot form in his throat and nodded. "Yeah," he managed to squeak out.

"This bloke waxed poetic at my wedding. Could've gone on and on if he wanted," Leon said, coming closer. "Give him a minute, and he'll talk your ear off about Merlin."

"I've known Merlin since we were this wee," Will said, holding his hand roughly a metre from the ground. "So, for the love of all that's holy, don't let him do that. There's only so much I want to hear about my best mate."

Julia snorted.

"Will's right, though," Leon said, turning away from the camera. The camera was still on them, though, and when Leon continued, he choose his words carefully. "The phantoms nearly got Mordred. They singled him out. That can't have been a coincidence."

Arthur glanced at Kay, remembering how two phantoms had circled Kay several times, trying to separate him from the rest of the team. Kay kept his head despite being as frightened as the rest of
them, and the phantoms all congregated on Mordred instead, managing to cull him from the rest. If not for the protective pendants Kathy had made for them, Arthur thought that Mordred would have been taken. The pendant had been enough to give Mordred a few precious seconds before he created a bright light in his hands.

The people they escorted had been too panicked to notice that Mordred had used magic, and not a flare, to scatter the phantoms. Julia's camera had been pointed in another direction. Mickey had been knocked off his feet and hadn't seen Mordred unveil himself as a magic user.

But Mickey was smart enough to figure out the meaning in their words, because he asked, "Mordred has magic, doesn't he?"

"I do," Mordred said, firmly and without hesitation.

In a time when Mordred could just as easily be ostracized for the admission, Arthur was pleased to hear the confidence and the strength in Mordred's voice. From the fleeting smile he saw on the face of the man shadowed in the corner, Arthur knew he wasn't the only one to have noticed this change in Mordred.

"And Merlin?" Mickey asked. When the mood shifted in the barracks and no one answered Mickey, he very carefully asked, "Did I cross a line?"

"Nah. Let's just wait for him to get here," Will said. He glanced at the stranger in the room and nodded at Mordred. "While we're doing introductions, who's the bloke?"

Mordred glanced at the corner of the room. With a soft sigh, the man came out into the light, though he looked no better now that he wasn't in the shadows. He needed a shave, a haircut, a long shower, and, at the very least, a hearty meal.

"He's been fighting the war longer than I have," Mordred said quietly. "This is Cennydd."

Arthur whirled around so fast, he nearly lost his balance. Now that he was looking for it, he could see the traits that Merlin had described. A cleverness in his eyes, the shape of his face, his build when he wasn't undernourished and underfed.

There was something missing in him, as if he'd been stripped raw. Young scars on his chin, half-hidden by the beard. A cut over his eye and down his cheek. Stooped shoulders that had once been described as solid, lacking the military set but just as annoying. Arthur knew the look of him, particularly now that Cennydd wasn't hidden behind Mordred, or retreating to the shadows defensively.

It was the weight of a man with the world on his shoulders, and that world had nearly crushed him to paste. It was the shade that followed him, as if he'd seen death and come so close that the Reaper would always follow him. The haunt of war, of having seen too much, of never being able to unsee it -- it had nearly replaced the conniving, all-knowing glint in his eyes.

Mordred wasn't wrong. Cennydd had fought a long war, and the war had left its claws in him. He was a soldier as much as any of them, a veteran of horrors that Arthur and his men would never know or understand. They wouldn't stay with him as merely bad memories, but as part of him, ground down in sinew and bone, scar tissue growing on top of scar tissue, zealously guarding what was left of his soul.

Cennydd was not the enemy, but he might as well be. Arthur didn't know how long Cennydd had been in the field, but he knew what changes had been wrought upon this man by mere months
The sort of disconnection Cennydd had had to endure living a lifetime never trusting anyone but himself wasn't something that he would easily recover from.

"Merlin's going to be happy to see he didn't kill you," Arthur heard himself say.

A fleeting smile appeared on Cennydd's lips. "I did hope he was a fair shot. If he hadn't done it, Aredian's men would have done me in. How is Merlin?"

"Alive," Arthur said solemnly. He gave Cennydd a nod of thanks, unable to express how grateful he was for Cennydd's intervention toward the end, for the sacrifice he made for Merlin's escape.

Cennydd smiled wanly, putting a hand over his heart, and bowed his head.

"I never worked against you, my liege," the druid pleaded. "It's not the way of my people. But I could not refrain from acting when I heard of the crimes perpetrated against innocents merely because of whom and what they are. I infiltrated his ranks, I spent nearly a decade among them, gaining his trust. I meant to betray my oaths and to take a life -- his life -- so that he couldn't take any more."

"But someone else beat you to it," the King said, glancing at the Sorcerer. The Sorcerer's eyes softened, and he nodded faintly, as if confirming that the druid spoke only the truth.

"Yes," the druid said, regret and relief mixing in his tone.

The King took a deep breath. It was an easy decision to make. "You and I are of the same mind. All we want is what is best for our people. We will go to whatever lengths we need in order to ensure their safety. We will sacrifice ourselves and our ideals, if it comes to that. I am glad that you were never pushed that far."

The druid looked up, his eyes bright with surprise.

"I do not agree with your tactics or your techniques. But I cannot fault you for not coming to the Crown for assistance in the very beginning. Your entreaties would not have been well-received and you would not have received any help." The King glanced at the Sorcerer with old sorrow, and returned his gaze to the druid. "That will change."

"My Liege?" the druid asked, trailing off, unsure.

The King addressed the court, raising his voice to be heard. "The evidence presented against this man is irrefutable. The letter of the law marks him a traitor to the kingdom. But the letter of the law does not see the heart or the soul, and cannot understand the purity of intent and the sacrifice associated with him. In my eyes, this man is not a traitor. I absolve him of any crimes against the Kingdom and the Crown. This man may go free to return to his people or to go where he will, and I wish him a long life of peace and service to the land."

The druid sagged on his knees, disbelief colouring his features. The chains clanked around his shackles. He put a hand on his heart and bowed his head. It wasn't an oath of fealty, but the King was humbled all the same.

Arthur blinked, shaking his head. He frowned, because the visions were happening more and more. He couldn't afford to have them happening in the middle of a firefight.

"Seems they came close to doing away with you," Lamorak said, pushing his way forward. "You all right? Do you need a doctor? I'm not Lance, but I can do a fair once-over."
"Oh," Cennydd said, his tone self-deprecating, "This wasn't Aredian's doing. It's months getting back after one of his own men turned against him."

"The one with the scars?" Mordred asked, gesturing to his face. "Kincaid?"

"That would have been him, yeah," Cennydd said. He looked almost wistful. "Nice bloke, actually, if you get to know him. Gave me fair warning, said I could stay long enough to witness the coup, but that's it."

"Aredian's dead?" Mordred asked, his voice hollow and faint, echoing what Arthur felt. Mordred only spoke little about his time in Aredian's employ, but Arthur could only assume that Mordred had wanted to hurt Aredian as much as Arthur did.

Cennydd put a hand on Mordred's shoulder and very softly said, "He got what was coming to him, believe me."

Mordred's shoulders sagged.

Cennydd murmured something in Welsh that Arthur couldn't understand. He turned to look at Will, but Will only frowned, his mouth in an unhappy downturn, and stared at the ground.

"How'd you find us?" Lucan asked.

A faint grimace passed over Cennydd's expression. "If I'm being honest? I wasn't. Planned on looking for Mordred after it was all said and done, but getting home was my first priority. The wraiths caused me a fair bit of problem. I thought I'd kept going, but…"

He glanced at Mordred and nodded at Will.

"You're right. They're drawn to magic users. Or magic, as it were. They've swarmed every ley line in the city. I thought they were feeding off of them, but it doesn't look like it. They're stronger after feeding on people, though." Cennydd glanced at the camera, hesitating. Then, as if making a decision, he said, "Obviously, I'm not immune to them."

"Obviously," Leon said slowly, suspicious. "They've come after you?"

"They have," Cennydd confirmed. A faint smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth, as if he knew how the conversation would play out. Arthur crossed his arms and watched the exchange.

"Gotten cornered?" Leon asked.

"Certainly," Cennydd said.

"Fought them off?" Leon asked.

"Physical weapons don't have any impact on them, as I'm sure you've discovered," Cennydd said.

"Used your magic on them?" Leon asked.

"Hm," Cennydd said, tilting his head. He made a small face. "Mixed success."

Mordred perked up at that, and although he appeared to want to ask about it, he kept silent for now.

"How'd you escape them?" Leon asked.
"Distraction, mostly," Cennydd said. He turned to Mordred. "They're attracted to mage lights. Not so bright that it scatters them, holding on to enough magic to lure them away. Wards work, too, but they need to be static, and affixed to a ley line that is protected within the boundary."

There was a familiar, instructional tone in how Cennydd spoke to Mordred, and Arthur once again wondered about their relationship. At the very least, Arthur could attribute a great deal of Mordred's magical training to Cennydd, if the way Mordred was nodding with rapt attention was any indication.

"You said mostly," Kay pointed out.

"Normal weapons don't work against them. Neither does magic, not directly," Cennydd said. "It was a bit of a last-ditch attempt in uncomfortably close quarters, but it seems that blending the two together is rather effective. The wraith completely disintegrated and did not re-form."

"Huh," Gwaine said. He vanished toward the rear of the barracks. Arthur saw him rummaging through his equipment.

"In that case, good thinking to have Merlin raid the pantry. I take back everything I said about you," Will said to Arthur.

Arthur snorted.


"I hope he brings back something good," Geraint said, sighing heavily as he sat down.

An echo of agreement rippled around the room, but it was Leon who brought them back on track by giving Cennydd a pointed look. "You were about to say how you found us?"

"Luck," Cennydd said. He shrugged. "Joined up with a group looking for shelter. Some army guys crossed our path, told us to follow them, and here we are. I was in the mess getting a cup of coffee --"

Arthur's head snapped up. "There was coffee?"

"Last dregs of it, I'm afraid," Cennydd said apologetically. Arthur sighed inwardly, cursing his luck. "Watery and disgusting, worse than that tea I left behind in Paris."

Arthur could see that Mickey was following the conversation, but he didn't quite know what they were talking about. He took a deep breath -- one day, and one day, soon, he would get his hands on decent coffee and get good and caffeinated -- and rubbed the side of his face. "It's fine."

Cennydd raised an eyebrow as if he could tell that it was anything but, and shrugged. "In any case, I overheard someone about Pendragon and his team picking up a national treasure and bringing them to camp, and where would we be without decent news around here --"

"I'm a national treasure?" Mickey asked. His cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

"Pretty sure they're talking about me," Julia said, moving the camera from Mickey to Cennydd again.

"So I came over," Cennydd said, not missing a beat. "Took some asking around, and a grumpy old dra -- bloke," he corrected himself, glancing at the camera, "sent me down this way. I certainly wasn't expecting to see Mordred, but I'm glad. I'd only come to see if you had a direct line to MI-5. My old codes don't work anymore. I'm not sure if it's for safety reasons or if they think I've gone
rogue --"

Arthur stared at him. After a long silence settled in the barracks, he said, "Of course, you work for Olaf. That explains so much."

"You know Olaf?" Cennydd asked, brightening.

"You work for MI-5? You're a bloody spy? You never told me!" Mordred exclaimed, wide-eyed and aghast.

"It never came up! It's not like I'm going to go around telling people I was recruited straight out of school when I'm prancing around with ruthless, murdering psychopaths Hell-bent on taking over the world, one fancy weapon prototype at a time," Cennydd said.

Mordred's horrified expression softened and he snickered. "You've never pranced a day in your life."

"I could prance. I think I'd be rather good at it," Cennydd said, appearing offended. The two of them kept a straight face for less than two seconds before they both burst out laughing. Arthur stared at them -- the entire team stared at them -- and decided that if that exchange was down to an inside joke, he really didn't want to know what it was about.

Arthur turned to Leon. "Call Mandrake. Let him know that we've got a way to deal with the phantoms, but no actual resources yet. We're out of bullets --"

"I've got a box!" Gwaine shouted, triumphant. He held his arm up over everyone's head, clutching a small cardboard ammunition box.

"...almost out of bullets," Arthur amended, "And no way of making more, not right now, anyway. Split those up among the shooters, and use them sparingly. Gwaine, give Will his fair share, or he doesn't have a chance to even the score with you."

"Maybe I don't want to give him a chance," Gwaine muttered, but he gave Will a good measure of bullets.

"Let Mandrake know that we're getting enchanted weapons brought in, if Merlin makes it in time. We don't know what we're getting though," Arthur said.

Leon nodded and stepped away from the camera, his mobile already in hand.

"Mordred, can you do something about our knives? We don't want the phantoms close enough to touch us, and our best bet are bayonets."

"I can do that. Not sure how long the spell will last if we get mobbed," Mordred said uncertainly. "Are we going out again?"

"I have a bad feeling," Arthur said, looking straight at Cennydd. "Whoever's been in with the NWO have been calling MI-5 to give up everything they know in exchange for sanctuary, and something's bound to happen in the next forty-eight hours --"

"Less," Cennydd said quietly. "A lot less."

"I figured," Arthur said, already tapping numbers on his smartphone to get in touch with Olaf. "You wouldn't be that keen on getting hold of the man if you didn't have something to report in."
It took three rings to get through to Olaf. "For fuck's sake, Arthur, I told you I'd call if we have anything more," Olaf said.

"Well, I've got something, but if you're too busy, I can wait until next week, and we'll chat over overpriced tea," Arthur said.

"What? No. What do you have?" Olaf asked.

"A way to stop the phantoms," Arthur said. "Enchanted weapons."

"I figured as much when you sent your boy here to plunder our treasures," Olaf said, sounding bitter. "However, it seems most of our acquisitions are absolute bollocks. Useless duds. Now we've got to figure out if Nimueh cleaned us all out, or if they were fake all along."

"That'll have to wait. We have confirmation that enchanted weapons work. One of your men took care of one that way," Arthur said.

"Oh? Good, good," Olaf said distractedly. Arthur could hear him relay the information to someone else. When Olaf returned to the phone, he said, "Wait. One of my men?"

"Goes by Cennydd. You might remember him," Arthur said. "He needs new security codes so he can report in."

"Let me talk to --"

Arthur handed the phone over to Cennydd before adding his bayonet knife to the pile growing in front of Mordred. He turned to Mickey, who was wide-eyed and awed, at a loss for words. "I'm sorry. When we go out, you should stay here, where it's safe."

"I don't know what conversation you've been listening to," Mickey said, shaking himself out of whatever he was thinking and sitting up straighter against the small desk shoved in the far corner of the barracks, "But what I heard was that the safest place for Jules and me? It's with you and your men."

Arthur shook his head. "I can't guarantee --"

"We'll take care of ourselves. We'll stay out of the way. You don't have to watch out for us. We're signing on fully aware of what might happen. Those things might get us. We might die. Or tomorrow some numpty on the road forgets how to drive on the proper side and runs us over. I'm not talking for Julia, but there's no other way I'd want to go than standing with your team," Mickey said, absolutely unshakable.

"I'm with you, too," Julia said. "Though my ulterior motives are absolutely less pure. We haven't gotten to the part in the interview where we ask if any of your boys are single. Inquiring minds are going to want to know."

Mickey rolled his eyes. He turned to glare at her. "I was trying for heartfelt and, you know, brave, but you've just turned us into bloody fluff telly."

Julia laughed, unrepentant.

Mickey leaned into the camera, put on a serious face, and in a mock talk-show host voice, said, "Good evening, ladies and gents. Today, we have for your titillation the hunks of team Excalibur. Alas, some of them are quite taken, but if you ask nicely, they might flex their muscles for you --"

Bedivere and Pellinor elbowed each other to get to the front, striking a pose. There really wasn't
much to be seen, given that they were still in full uniform and gear, but Julia laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

Perceval stood in front of the camera, glaring at Bedivere and Pellinor until they stopped their antics. They lowered their arms, guilt written all over their expressions, and slunk away. Perceval turned to the camera, smiled brightly, and flexed a biceps.

"You'll want to zoom in on that," Gwaine said, avoiding the crowd in the aisle between the cots by walking on top of the cots themselves to reach Perceval. He hopped down behind Perceval and pointed at his shoulder. "Here, in particular. Note how the seams are fit for bursting. It's very swoon-worthy."

"Oh, shut it," Perceval said, blushing. He lowered his arm and shoved Gwaine away lightly, but Gwaine cackled.

Arthur smiled, shaking his head. A part of him was grateful for the levity. Since leaving Camelot, none of them had had much chance to unwind, never mind be themselves.

Another part of him wished Merlin would hurry up and get here.

"You're just normal blokes, aren't you?" Mickey said, looking around the room while Julia scanned the barracks with the camera before aiming it at Arthur.

"Just regular blokes," Arthur confirmed. "No different than any other soldier."

"Except you do shite no one else does," Mickey said. "You liberate Parliament from terrorists and capture an evil sorcerer. When magic users blow shite up, you calm them down. When zombies straight out of someone's worst nightmare start attacking us, what do you do when bullets don't do shite? You pick up a sword and keep fighting. When a dragon goes berserk, you save a kid's life and nearly get charbroiled --"

"Nearly?" Lamorak scoffed. "Oh, he got charbroiled. Ask him to show you the burn scars, someday."

Mickey trailed off, staring at Lamorak before turning to Arthur.

Arthur snorted and shook his head. "I thought you weren't bloody fluff telly."

"Bite your tongue," Julia said.

"I wasn't going to ask," Mickey said. "I'm in awe. Me, I'm jelly-legged just thinking about it. I have to ask. Why is it you? Why wasn't it another team?"

Arthur glanced at Leon. Leon shrugged. Arthur sighed, shook his head, and ran a hand over the back of his head. "It doesn't have to be us. It could be anyone. Any other soldier. Civilians protecting each other. Anyone who does their best, really. We're just the ones people see on camera," he said.

They startled at a loud pounding on the barracks door. "Let us in!"

Arthur's gun was in his hand before he consciously made a decision to draw. The shuffling behind him were his men doing the same. Leon's weapon was out, too, and since he was closest to the door, he opened it.

Three soldiers spilled inside, expressions of stark terror on their faces. The first fell to the ground,
the second stumbled over his friend's back, and the third pushed them all inside. "They're coming!"

No one asked who they were.

"Mordred! The knives!" Arthur shouted.

"He's working on it!" Cennydd shouted back.

Arthur lunged forward. He grabbed the soldier on the floor, pulling him up. The second soldier slipped forward, stumbling in the corner and somehow still managing to be in the way.

A phantom crept into the barracks, moving slowly. Tentacle-like protrusions reached out as if feeling the air in front of it, testing the light source. It drifted in more and more.

The third soldier tripped over his own feet but managed to stay upright. He stumbled, mesmerized by the phantom coming toward him. He backed up, trying to stay out of its reach.

"Down!" Kay barked.

Leon tackled the soldier.

A knife flew through the air, went clean through the phantom, and thunked in the wall immediately behind the phantom. The phantom crumpled, dissolving into ephemeral wisps before vanishing completely.

Arthur waited a moment. Outside, soldiers ran past, some of them shouting, a few of them screaming. None of them came toward the light of the open door, most likely because an open door indicated that the area was compromised. He walked over and peered out, gritting his teeth when he saw the phantoms darting in and out of the base, staying close to the few shadowed areas. From the way they darted closer and closer to the lit areas, Arthur knew they were getting stronger and braver.

"We don't have much longer," Arthur said, shutting the door.

In one corner, Lamorak was checking the three soldiers. Two of them were shaken up; the third was dazed. They were slumped against the wall, knees tucked into their chests, shaking from adrenaline. They were not greenies. They had a couple of years under their belts, and yet, they were scared out of their skins.

If this was the effect the phantoms could have over trained men and women, Arthur was sick to his stomach to think what non-combatants were going through.

"Gear up," Arthur said, reaching for his equipment. Like most of the others, he had still been in full gear, needing only to grab his hard cap, spare nylon webbing with additional ammunition, and his rifle. He reached into a small pocket by reflex, saw Leon watching him. With a determined nod, he pulled the red handkerchief out of the pocket, shook it out, and tied it around his neck.

The red cloak swung around the King's shoulders before settling, its length pulled by the wind. It was a beacon --

The vision disintegrated satisfyingly, leaving Arthur with the feeling that whatever he was doing now, it was the right thing.

He dropped his arms to his side and turned to his team, intending to let them know that this was their choice, that he wasn't going to make it for them. He'd barely formulated the speech in his
mind when, as one, the team removed their handkerchiefs from their pockets and tucked the fabric around their throats the way they used to on the field, with no intention of masking their faces.

Arthur gave them all a firm nod, unable to squash the feeling of pride in his men. Solid, strong, honourable -- he would never ask for better at his back.

"Fix bayonets. Keep the phantoms at distance. Let them come to you, don't chase after them. If you see someone break from the group, you stay with them. No one goes out alone."

Nearly every hand dipped into the pot of knives in front of Mordred at the same time. Kay went to retrieve the one he'd tossed, grunting as he wrenched it out of the wood. Arthur gave him a nod of appreciation for his quick action, but as always, Kay shrugged it off as if it were just another day of the week.

"Good job, Mordred," Arthur said. He clapped a hand on Mordred's shoulder, ignoring Mordred's shudder.

"You'd think I'd do better under pressure," Mordred said. He ran his hand through his hair and offered a weak smile.

"You're doing fine," Arthur said. He turned to Cennydd and asked, "Are you with us?"

Cennydd glanced at Mordred and nodded. "I'll need a gun. Not that it'll do much against them, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

"Lucan, Galahad, take Cennydd to the equipment tent. Get him outfitted. Meet us at the west gate in ten," Arthur said. "Owain, Bedivere, we need transportation. There's paperwork ..."

"We've got it handled," Owain said, tilting his head to Bedivere.

Bedivere had a small smirk on his face that Arthur didn't like, because it had something to do with handled and Owain. He let it go, because they needed a lorry in a hurry and there was no time to go through the usual proper channels.

The five of them went out the door after clearing the area, shutting it carefully behind them.

Arthur turned to Mickey and Julia, both of whom looked shell-shocked. The camera was pointed at him and Julia had been filming all along, but Mickey seemed to be the sort who desperately wished he hadn't made the decision he had. Arthur gave him another chance.

"You can stay here. Mordred can ward the barracks, make sure you're safe," Arthur said. He turned to Mordred, who nodded.

"There's no safe as long as this is going on," Mickey said. "Also, I see what you're doing. I'm not having any of it. We're with you."

"Bidding for a bloody reporting award?" Gwaine asked.

Mickey's shoulders slumped. "Maybe when all this started. That's not why we're doing this, though." He looked at Julia -- at the camera -- and back at them. "We're doing this because the world needs to know that there are heroes in the world."
"Do you hear that?" Perceval asked.

Lamorak exchanged glances with Gareth. Gwaine parted the rear flaps and looked out warily before grumpily shoving the canvas over his shoulder for a better view. Will adjusted his night-vision goggles and repositioned himself on the bench seat. His rifle was up and against his shoulder, but for all that they'd easily spotted a good dozen phantoms, none of them had come close enough to be more than hackle-rising annoyances.

"I don't hear anything," Leon said.

"Is someone's radio on?" Lucan asked.

Arthur gestured. Perceval banged on the wall next to the cabin window. Owain leaned back and asked, "Yeah?"

"You've got the radio on?"

"Sure, listening to Army F.M. Very titillating," Owain said.

"Stop the transport," Perceval said.

The transport came to a slow, easy stop, but it was enough to lurch everyone to the side. No one said anything for several long minutes. Arthur bowed his head in concentration, Leon tilted his head to the side, Geraint practically leaned out of the transport to listen.

The low rumble of the lorry engine. Distant sirens. Dead quiet.

Arthur started to shake his head when he heard it. Faint, as if from far away, distorted by distance.

Music.

Singing.

"I hear it," Julia said. Mickey nodded in agreement, but mostly, he was carsick. The two were in the most secure location in the rear of the transport, where the phantoms would have to go through most of the team to get to them. "I can't make it out."

Arthur tapped his earwig. "Merlin? Where are you?"

"Same route, no detours," Merlin said, concern lacing his voice. "Changing our meet-up again? It's the phantoms, isn't it? They're leaving us alone, strangely enough, but I could try to draw them off - - ."

"Steady on," Arthur said, nodding to Perceval. He banged on the cabin wall again and the transport started up again. "We'll be a minute late. Calling in to ask if you hear anything."

"Umm," Merlin said. "Hear anything like -- like what, exactly?"

"Music," Arthur said. "It's distorted, but it's audible. Could be nothing, but --"

"But every time something completely disastrous happens, it comes with a bloody nursery rhyme," Will cut in.

"Right," Arthur said, raising an eyebrow at Will, tilting his head to the side.

Will and Gwaine were on watch duty and were supposed to be keeping their eyes out on the road.
Will grunted but turned around.

"I don't hear much," Merlin admitted a few seconds later. "I might be further from the source than you are."

Arthur glanced at Leon. Leon shook his head, putting a hand against his ear. "Elyan is scanning the channels."

"All right," Arthur said. There wasn't much that they could do until they pinpointed where the music was coming from, and their first priority was to meet up with Merlin and the Master Sergeant. If they were going to be effective in any way, shape, or form, they needed to be properly equipped.

Mordred and Cennydd were doing what they could in the transport, but every time they charmed a set of bullets, they were swarmed with phantoms.

"Continue as planned. ETA three minutes," Arthur said.

"Copy," Merlin said.

No one spoke over the sound of the engine. Pellinor leaned back against the canvas arch, his eyes fixed on a point in the roof. Geraint and Galahad were sitting across from each other, rifles resting on the ground, hands wrapped around the barrels, heads down as if in prayer.

Kay's eyes were closed, his head lolling with the motion of the transport, his mouth open in a faint snore.

"Excalibur," Uther's voice came over the line, terse and strained. "Respond."

Arthur glanced at Leon, brows raised in surprise. While Uther technically retained his rank and his authority, he was no longer in any command capacity. He would still have access to military reports, and he was only peripherally consulted on matters of tactics. As long as Olaf kept an eye on him, Uther also had the advantage of being in contact with everyone while staying on top of things.

A small, nasty, petty part of Arthur contemplated ignoring Uther, but considering that Uther hadn't reached out to Arthur unless Arthur made the first move, Arthur decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.


"Every base currently infested by the airborne threat. Units segregated in bunkers and barracks. All patrols recalled for quadrant defences. Directory subordinates applied shielding wards to critical operations, but the longevity of those shields are rapidly decreasing as airborne threats continue contact," Uther said. "Roger so far."

"It's like we've seen," Mordred said quietly. "They'll sacrifice themselves to get others through."

Arthur nodded in agreement. He idly wondered where Olaf was. Either Olaf had given him radio access, or Uther was giving Arthur the situational update without authority. Knowing Olaf, he had probably manoeuvred Uther into thinking he was doing something illicit in order to get the information to Arthur. "Copy. Go ahead."

"Medical centres overloaded. Secure sites are full. Several blocks in the lower quadrants and in central near the bridge have gone dark. Satellite telemetry confirms that we're losing more ground
every half hour. Estimate drastic losses all across the United Kingdom by first light. Roger so far."

"Fuck," Perceval murmured under his breath.

Mickey, Julia, and Cennydd looked confused. They were the only ones without radio and didn't know how dire the situation was becoming. Mordred said something to Cennydd in Welsh. Cennydd's mouth thinned and he looked sick.


"Central command demands immediate resolution of the situation. Air support has been called in," Uther said.

"For what?" Leon asked. "There's no target."

Uther continued as if he hadn't heard Leon's outburst. "Central command has requested identification of locations of areas reporting high populations of airborne threats."

Arthur clicked himself off voice response and growled. "They're going to bomb London."

"What?" Mickey startled. Julia made a small, anguished sound from behind her camera.

"It's the only thing they know that they can do," Arthur said. It wasn't the smartest thing the military could do, but it was often the last resort when the odds were so completely against them that they didn't know how else to proceed. As far as Arthur knew, it was a tactic that was used by nearly every military defence in the world -- burn out affected areas in order to protect those who were left.

He listened with half an ear as Uther continued. "Additional teams are being sent into the field --"

Arthur closed his eyes.

In essence, Central Command was ordering troops out into the city not for the purpose of patrolling and rescuing anyone who needed to be led to a safe location, but sending out more people so that they could paint areas slated for destruction for the incoming air strikes. Any civilians, alive or dead, or in that strange state of paralysis and suspension, would be hurt or killed from measures that weren't guaranteed to do anything against the phantoms in the first place.

"Roger so far," Uther said. From the elbow digging in Arthur's side, Arthur realized that it wasn't the first time that Uther had asked for confirmation.

"We're here," Owain said from the front. The lorry slowed down and came to a stop under a streetlight.

"Copy that last," Arthur said finally. Then, instead of seeing if there was further information, he said firmly, "Wait."

A box truck -- commercial, painted black, with the Pendragon Consulting logo completely blotted out -- pulled up, reversing so that the rear of both vehicles were facing each other and were tented by the light. The team disembarked, clearing the area and scanning for phantoms. The lorry emptied, doors opening and closing, and Arthur was relieved to see Merlin.

"Captain," the Master Sergeant said, coming around from the driver's side before Arthur could reach Merlin. He offered Arthur his hand.
"I can't tell you how much we appreciate this," Arthur said.

"It's our jobs, sir," Sergeant Page said. "And it's always a privilege."

Arthur nodded, not sure how to answer.

Page reached up and unlocked the rear doors, throwing them open. Bright lights shone from inside, and four men Arthur recognized as former army and long-term employees climbed out. "Boys, unload the crates and get the lids off."

Arthur left them to it and moved over to Merlin. Merlin smiled at his approach, but the smile faded when he looked over Arthur's shoulder and noticed the camera on them. "That's going to be strange."

Will walked by, punching Merlin on the shoulder. Kay brushed past and murmured something to Merlin that was too low for Arthur to hear. Merlin saw Cennydd come out of the transport and grinned wide, raising his hand in a greeting that was returned in kind.

"Pretend they're not there," Arthur said, fishing Merlin's scarf from the inside of his flak jacket. He resisted the urge to tie it around Merlin's neck and handed it to him instead. Merlin's small smirk hinted that Arthur wasn't being as subtle as he thought he was. "Did you hear Uther's transmission?"

All sense of humour left Merlin in an instant. "Hard not to. Do you have my kit?"

"Everything's in the Vector," Arthur said, turning to watch as the crates were unloaded. "What are our options?"

Merlin raised a brow. "You're asking me?"

"No, I'm asking the other bloke I'm sleeping with, the one who actually has some idea of what's going on," Arthur retorted. He caught himself and shook his head. "Sorry."

"As long as you know I'm going to hunt down this other bloke and get rid of him, yeah? I don't particularly like sharing," Merlin said, the threat without any real heat. "It's fine, Captain Prat."

Arthur smiled a little at the insult, but he bowed his head when he felt Merlin's hand on his shoulder. Merlin flicked another glance toward the camera before pulling Arthur away, out of its line of sight. "Help yourself to whatever," he told the others, stopping at the passenger side of the Pendragon lorry.

Without a word, he wrapped his arms around Arthur's shoulders and hugged tightly. Arthur took a deep breath, ready to tell him that he was fine, to not do this in public, but…

He sagged.

He wrapped his arms around Merlin's waist and butted his head in the crook of Merlin's neck. He let Merlin take his weight for a second -- two. Digging deep, he found the last vestiges of his strength and his courage right where he left it, next to his heart, behind the essence that was Merlin, where it would always be kept safe.

"All right?" Merlin asked, his voice soft.

"All right," Arthur confirmed. He pulled himself together, letting go of Merlin slowly, and, impulsively, kissed Merlin on the lips. "I needed that."
"Me too," Merlin said, leaning in. Their foreheads brushed together, and Arthur closed his eyes when he felt Merlin's fingers drift through his hair. After a second, Merlin said, "So. Options. The Brass are panicking, if they think bombing London is their last resort. Granted, there's no contingency for the phantoms, official or otherwise. You didn't give them one because you didn't know what might move their hand over the big red button, but don't tell me you don't have a plan."

"Not for this particular scenario, no," Arthur said with a scoff. He pulled away reluctantly, hands on his hips, and took a deep breath. "First problem. The phantoms. You know as much as we do -- how do we deal with them?"

Merlin bowed his head, exhaling in a quiet sigh. After a long moment, he said, "Fire."

There was an echo of memory, but this one far more recent than one of those ridiculous visions that had been plaguing Arthur more and more of late. "You sound like Gaius."

"Because he was on the right track. Fire," Merlin said again. "It works to a point, doesn't it? What about magical fire? Dragon fire?"

"A magical physical weapon," Arthur said after some consideration. He nodded, already formulating a plan of action. "Set the city streets on fire, use the magic in it to draw the phantoms out and let them burn themselves up. That should be enough to last us until morning, if not get rid of the phantoms entirely."

"Send a broadcast out, have sorcerers cast their own magical fire, if they can," Merlin said, glancing over Arthur's shoulder. He nodded at Leon, shifting his stance to make room for him. "We're going to need authority to call off the air raid."

"Could call in Priority Red," Leon said. "Not sure how far our clearance goes, but it might work."

"And if it doesn't?" Arthur asked.

The three of them exchanged glances. "Dragons," Merlin said. "Get them in the air. They should be in the air anyway. After the zombie attack, it's pretty clear dragon fire sticks to everything and burns hotter than napalm. If we're going to light up the streets, they're the ones to do it. Might serve as a distraction for the air force while they're at it."

Arthur nodded his agreement. "Except for the problem of dragons being like elephants around mice where the phantoms are concerned. I could pull rank, but you see how well they've been listening to me."

"They'll listen to me," Merlin said softly, still uncomfortable with the mantle of Dragonlord. Arthur squeezed his arm reassuringly, but ultimately, there was little that Arthur could do to make it better. It was something that Merlin would have to come to terms with on his own. "I'll talk to Balinor, get him on this. If I can't do it, he'll know how."

"Good," Arthur said. "That leaves us to deal with whatever triggered this in the first place. Any word from Elyan?"

"Not yet --"

Leon was interrupted by a buzzing sound over the team's private radio channel. The three of them switched over simultaneously.

"Excalibur-One" Arthur said. "Go ahead."
Oh, ho, going back to your roots, I see. Is this an official change, because I've got the call signs ready to go,” Elyan said.

Arthur glanced down the length of the lorry and saw Mickey and Julia standing off to the side, filming B-roll. Mickey was rocking on his heels as if he had every intention of inching closer to them.

"Let's make it official," Arthur said. "What do you have for us?"

"First, you know how they say that radio broadcasts from Earth will eventually be picked up by alien races millions of light-years away from earth?" Elyan asked.

"Not the time for an astronomy lesson," Arthur said.

"Well, this is exactly the same thing," Elyan said. "There's nothing on the usual channels. I had to go deep into the microwave region to find it, but it's Gwen that resolved the transmission. Do you want me to play it?"

The team stopped fishing through the crates of artefacts and turned toward Arthur, as if waiting for his call. They wanted to hear what was waiting for them as much as Arthur did.

"Go," Arthur said.

"All right, one second. I'll splice you in. Fair warning. It's the fucking creepiest, ever. Also, how's your French? Oh, here we go," Elyan said, and there was a click on the line.

"Alouette, gentille alouette,
Alouette, je te plumerai.

"Je te plumerai les yeux.
Je te plumerai les yeux.
Et les yeux!
Et les yeux!
Et le bec!
Et le bec!
Et la tête!
Et la tête!
Alouette! Alouette!
A-a-a-ah --"

The child-like voice was low and sweet, but this time, the high pitch was heavy with a low, low rumble that reverberated in Arthur's bones. Elyan was right, it was creepy, but only because with each repetition, the singer grew angrier and angrier, and the cry at the end was a cry of despair, as if near tears.

"Jesus," Leon said. The rest of the team exchanged disturbed glances.

Arthur winced as he tuned in again.

"A-a-a-ahh --

"Alouette, gentille alouette,
Alouette, je te plumerai.

"Je te plumerai la queue
"Fucking Hell," Leon said. "At the end, she sounds like she's in pain, and the singing gets worse after, each time."

"Yeah," Arthur said. He wasn't familiar with the French nursery rhyme, but he'd heard the English version often enough to be chilled by it. The most uncomfortable part of the song was how it didn't fit the tune that it was meant for, as if the singer didn't know how it was supposed to be sung and made it up as she went along. The combination of her ethereal voice, the content matter of the song, and the scream at the end of it only added to the eeriness. Addressing Elyan, he asked, "That's enough. Can you track where it's coming from?"

The music abruptly cut off. "We're working on it now. It's not like the signal's from a broadcast source, and it's not bouncing off cellular towers. Gwen's crunching the numbers, but I can't tell how close she's getting. Here, Lance wants to talk to you --"

"Elyan, can you shunt the audio to my private line?" Merlin asked.

"Sure thing. One second... and it's all yours. And here's Lance --"

Arthur glanced at Merlin, who lowered his head and closed his eyes, hands over both ears to muffle the ambient sound. His brows pinched in concentration. Arthur wondered what it was that he'd heard.

"Arthur," Lance said, sounding out of breath. "The druids came up with something. Not sure if it's going to be useful. They said it's an old story, something to do with the Morrigan."

"Go on," Arthur said, glancing at Leon.

"Remember how Gaius talked about the Old Religion? How it comes in threes? Turns out, the mythology of the Morrigan comes in threes, too. Except she's a Goddess with three representations.

Arthur flinched. "Why am I only hearing this now?"

"They assumed we knew," Lance said, sounding annoyed. "Don't worry, I've given them a talking-to about that, they'll have learned their lessons. But here's the thing.

"The three representations? They're called the *Morrígna*, and they take different names depending
on their form. I asked around and everyone more or less agrees that when she used the staff, Nimueh was invoking Nemain. It's possible that, for the phantoms, she called Badb. If it goes according to the Old Religion, you're going to be facing Macha, soon, but what that means, I have no idea. Neither do the druids." Lance said.

Arthur stared at Merlin, wishing that he was part of this conversation. Or Mordred. Arthur had no idea about all of these names or the mythologies associated with them. He had a feeling that Merlin, Mordred, or even Cennydd would understand how everything fit together far better than the druids, given the context.

"All right," Arthur said. "I'll tell the others. Is there anything else?"

There was a pause and background conversation. "Gaius is here, he says he's sorry that he doesn't have more. He could navel-gaze -- sorry, Gaius -- until the bloody cows come home, but all he'd be doing is throwing darts in the dark. I'm not sure if that's any help."

"It might be," Arthur said, mulling it over. "If we know there's a third round, we could be better prepared."

"I had the same thought. There's legends and about a half-dozen different names and it's making me dizzy, trying to keep it all straight. Gaius drew me a chart. Seems to me that it doesn't matter what they're called, that it comes down to the same thing Gaius told us in the beginning. The maiden, the mother, the --"

"The crone," Leon said, taking a deep breath.

Arthur chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry it's not more, and that it's bloody cryptic and useless," Lance said. "Wish I were there with you. Nid took off fifteen minutes ago, or I'd be there already."

Any thought of reassurance -- to let Lance know that they were doing all right without him, that they were happier knowing that one of theirs were keeping an eye on Camelot -- vanished when the last few words sank in. "Wait. Repeat that last. Something about Nid?"

"Nid left," Lance said slowly, enunciating each word. "No warning. There one second, pleasant as you please, and in the next, he looked like he'd seen a ghost. He didn't say anything, just turned around, turned dragon, and flew off."

Arthur exhaled in frustration. "If he comes back --"

He trailed off when he saw Merlin crawl into the passenger side of the lorry, coming out with a clipboard with form sheets on it. He flipped one of the pages over and started writing.

"-- if Nid comes back, you'll be the first one to know," Lance said, finishing Arthur's thought. There was a soft cry in the background. "Got to go. Gwen's still working, so it's my turn to change the dirty nappy."

He disconnected before Arthur could get another word in, but it didn't matter. He was more interested in seeing what Merlin was writing down.

Perceval joined them with a spiked mace on his shoulder, the weapon appearing fragile in his grasp. "Not much left, you might want to take a look before it's all gone. Page said there's nothing else in the warehouse that Merlin picked out, so what we've got is what we've got."
Arthur thumbed at Leon. "You go."

Leon left them with a grunt. Perceval gestured toward Merlin with the mace. "What's he doing?"

"Something about the song," Arthur said. "He didn't say. Is the area still clear?"

"Looks like," Perceval said. "The G's and Will scattered to give us a perimeter. Cennydd's helping Mordred with the rest of the weapons. Mostly swords, knives, bows and at least one crossbow that Will and Gwaine had a coin toss over."

Arthur peered over, watching his men. Most were checking the edges of the weapons they selected or were hefting them for weight, but none of them were breaking out into sword fighting in the middle of the street. Arthur was grateful he'd taught the team how to properly hold a sword -- at least they weren't making fools of themselves in front of the camera. He nodded toward Mickey and Julia. "And them?"

"Anxious, but they're fine," Perceval said. He shifted his weight, leaning against the lorry, and said, "Kilgarrah's been pinging for the last ten minutes."

"I told him to wait," Arthur said, turning to watch Merlin.

"Ten minutes is a long time," Perceval said. "More than enough to wind up a jet and get it in the air."

Arthur stiffened at the reminder.

"Do we have a plan?" Perceval asked.

Arthur started to answer when Merlin surged forward, papers in his hand. "Arthur! We have a problem."

"Stating the obvious, mate," Perceval said good-naturedly, but he frowned, moving forward to look at the clipboard. "What's this, then?"

Merlin's handwriting wasn't the best, not even when he tried. His block lettering was a chicken scrawl and his cursive was the equivalent of a spider dragging its muddy feet across a page. What he'd sketched out on the backside of a Pendragon Consulting shipping form was the exact opposite of what Arthur had been expecting.

Circles. Crosses. Squiggly lines. Checkmarks. At first glance they looked like runes. At an angle it looked like all the disconnected lines might match up to form a word. And yet, all the symbols were grouped so close together that Arthur almost felt that he'd be able to see the hidden picture if only he went cross-eyed.

"Dragon," Merlin said. He spread his hands helplessly, as if to demonstrate how confused he was that he even knew the language in the first place. "It's encrypted code. In the dragon language."

Arthur's eyebrows shot up, but he decided that all of his questions could wait. He settled on the most important one. "What does it say?"

Merlin's expression hardened. His jaw tensed. He cleared his throat as if the translation was too difficult to say out loud, but he would bully through anyway.

"It says, Help me. Please."
Arthur stared at Merlin for a long time. A phantom could have ghosted past, and he wouldn't have noticed. A fog formed at the edges of his vision, as if he were about to experience yet another one of those strange waking dreams, but it never came.

He was distantly aware of Leon rejoining them. Of a crackle over the line. Elyan warning that Morgana was having a vision. Of screaming in the background.

*Little dragon, sweet little dragon,*
*Sweet little dragon, I'll pluck your scales off*

*I'll pluck the scales off your head*
*I'll pluck the scales off your head*
*Off your head!*
*Off your head!*
*Little dragon, little dragon!*
*O-o-o-ohhh*

An echo from the past, the present, the future. Everything colliding together at once. His own voice ringing in his ears.

*Help me. Please.*

He snapped out of it so quickly that he felt he should be in a daze, but he'd never had such clarity of thought before. Everything was sharp even in the darkness, as crystal clear as it would be in the bright of day, and he knew. He just knew.

This was what Merlin heard when Elyan played the song over their radio channel. Nid must have heard it, even from as far away as Camelot. Then there was…

**Uther.**

Colonel Mandrake was Exalibur's commander. Everything that Uther had told Arthur -- Arthur should have heard it from Mandrake.

"Raise Mandrake," Arthur ordered, his voice sharp. "If you can't get him --"

"Kilgarrah, Locher, Tachnathar. Any of them, yeah," Merlin agreed, already moving toward the transport.

Arthur turned to Perceval. "Pull the men back. We're leaving as soon as we have a location."

Perceval left without a word.

"Leon --"

"Is this another one of those things you can't explain?" Leon asked.

"Oh, I can explain it, but it'll take too much time," Arthur said. "Get Elyan on the line. I want him running a radar scan. If Gwen hasn't pinpointed the source of the singing yet, the dragons will help point the way."

Leon looked at Arthur as if he were crazy, but also must have remembered the situation they were in, because he shook his head, nodded firmly, and tapped his earpiece.

Arthur approached Sergeant Page, noting that the empty crates had been loaded into the back of
The Master Sergeant snorted. "There's nowhere safe. If it's all the same, if we can provide support, this is where we'd like to stay."

"I can't ask that of you --"

"You're not asking, and we're not offering, Captain. We're doing. We didn't just come out to haul this equipment to you. We also came loaded for bear," he said, gesturing toward the inside of the lorry.

The crew was organizing the load with the efficiency of men who were long accustomed to rearranging things on a nearly hourly basis. The empty crates were shoved toward the back while ammunition and weapon cases were pulled to the front.

"There's more where that comes from, and more men waiting to take arms," Page said. "They're waiting for your command."

Arthur was at momentary loss for words. He knew that there would be no dissuading Page. He didn't have the energy to try, not when he needed men he could trust at his back.

"Good men?" Arthur asked.

"Great men," Page said. He glanced at the red scarf at Arthur's throat. "We've known all along that it was you."

The significance of what Page said didn't go unnoticed. If he and his men had known who the Red Team were all this time, but never said a word, they could be trusted with more than a secret. They could be trusted with Excalibur's lives. Arthur shook the man's hand firmly and nodded. "Thank you."

"A pleasure," Page said. He touched his forehead as if saluting, even though he wasn't active duty anymore. "Captain."

Perceval had brought the team in closer to the transport and the lorry. The lorry was loaded and ready to go, the last few pieces tucked into the transport for Arthur to look at later. Leon came up to Arthur, shaking his head.

"Elyan found Nid on radar, heading to London. That's not all he found. There are other clusters coming this way too, and they don't look like fighter jets. He saw a few flashes over London proper, but he thinks the dragons are staying under radar deliberately."

"Beautiful," Arthur said, because it wasn't.

He went to the transport. Merlin met him halfway, already climbing out. He must have found his kit, because he was wearing his gear.

"Nothing from anyone," Merlin said, shaking his head. He glanced at Mickey and Julia, who didn't look to be filming at the moment, but who were close enough to overhear. Arthur shook his head -- too late for secrets now. Merlin exhaled and said, "Yeah, all right. Balinor's crew is gone, too. Up and gone without a word. They wouldn't answer him. They ignored him when he Called."
There was an inflection in the way Merlin said the last word, and Arthur understood that some sort of magic had been involved in the attempt.

"I told him about the message in the song. He had no idea. He can't hear it," Merlin said. "They're going after the baby dragon. I can't think where else they're going."

"Wonderful," Arthur said, closing his eyes in the hopes of staving off a growing headache. "If he can't get his bloody dragons to listen to him, where does that leave us?"

A peculiar glint of misery and grudging acceptance flicked in Merlin's eyes. Arthur didn't know why his stomach fell -- maybe because he never wanted Merlin to be forced to do something he didn't want to do, maybe it was because the entire universe seemed to be forcing them into a role they didn't want to fill.

"Me," Merlin said, a flicker of doubt in his eyes. "It leaves me. He thinks I could do it."

Arthur put a hand on Merlin's shoulder, fingers curling into the nylon netting of a shoulder strap and pulled him close. He kept his voice quiet, his words for Merlin's ears alone, and said, "So do I. Everything you do amazes me, Merlin. If it comes down to pulling those bloody dragons out of the sky to get them to stop flying into a trap, you can do it. But you have to remember one thing. For me."

"What's that?" Merlin pressed his forehead against Arthur's. He took a deep breath.

"We're not them," Arthur said. "Whoever they were. They made their choices. It's our turn to make ours. Do what feels right."

Merlin was quiet for a moment. He huffed a small laugh. "Like this?"

He raised his chin, a small smile on his lips, mischief sparkling in his eyes. Before Arthur could react, Merlin kissed him.

It was warm and soft and over too quick; Arthur chased after Merlin's lips to return it with a kiss of his own before they broke apart.

"Talk to Elyan. When they get close enough that we've got a location, call them back," Arthur said.

"Yes, sir," Merlin said, turning away. He froze.

Arthur followed his gaze toward Mickey and Julia, and saw that the camera was on them, red light blinking. He sighed inwardly, half wondering if he would be discharged for inappropriate conduct while on duty, or, worse, having a relationship with someone who was his junior in rank. He decided he didn't fucking care.

"We've got incoming," Geraint said, trotting over to them. "Not fast, though. It's like they don't know we're here, but they're heading our way."

"Get in the transport," Arthur ordered, shoving Merlin in that direction. "Master Sergeant?"

"We'll be right behind you," Page said.

"Good. Mr. O'Reilley, Ms --" Arthur trailed off, watching Merlin detour toward the lorry. "Please get in the transport. We're leaving shortly."

"Right," Mickey said, pulling Julia along. Bohrs helped Julia into the transport and gave Mickey a
Merlin returned a minute later, carrying a gnarled, but otherwise unadorned staff in one hand. He had something long and awkward wrapped in a rough canvas cloth. "Elyan said the dragons are circling. Gwen's narrowing down on a location. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

"Good," Arthur said. He lingered, making sure they hadn't left anything or anyone behind, and climbed into the transport. He climbed over Will's sprawling legs and sat down; Perceval banged on the wall to get Owain driving again.

When he looked up, it was to find the camera pointed in his face and Mickey giving him a pointed look. "So. I guess we can figure out why you've been keeping the mysterious Lieutenant Merlin Emrys a secret."

A mortified look passed over Merlin's expression. Arthur glanced at him before turning to look at Mickey. "Lieutenant Emrys is a lot of things, but one thing he's definitely not, it's a secret. As soon as things calm down and our tours of duty are up, we're getting married."

Julia's squeal nearly took out Arthur's eardrum, but Merlin's smile was worth it.

This was gold. Mickey couldn't ask for better footage or more incredible spontaneous material. He hadn't taken Julia seriously when she hinted that there was something going on between the Captain and the Lieutenant when they'd ducked behind the lorry for what Mickey assumed had been private military matters.

He'd quickly revised his opinion the more he watched the two of them together, working as if they were a single unit. They moved in tandem, mirroring and complementing the other with the sort of natural reflex that spoke of years together, if not more.

They'd kissed. On camera. Completely candidly, in the spur of the moment. Mickey wasn't into that sort of thing, but even he had to admit that Arthur had had nothing but complete, utter affection for Merlin in his expression, and Merlin... Well. That they were in love wasn't a question. Whatever relationship the two of them had, it must have been going on for a while, because absolutely no one, not even the Master Sergeant and his small crew of seven men, looked the least bit surprised.

But those stolen moments were just that. Stolen. Once Arthur gave the order to move, it was business as usual. Arthur took his seat in the transport; the rest of the team made room for Merlin further down the row, where he could sprawl his equipment out a bit more without getting in anyone's way. Lamorak had pieces of equipment in his lap, Gareth picked up a few small tools to keep them from rolling away, and Mordred was studying the staff Merlin had brought in with an impressed hmm.

Mickey glanced at Arthur. The Captain was on the radio with someone he didn't sound to like very much.

"Look. Where's Olaf? If he's unavailable, that makes you the next likely person to handle this. So, handle this, Colonel, Sir," Arthur said, the contempt in his tone dripping acid on the floor. "You may not have the authority to stop the air strikes, but you know who does. At least, stall them long enough for us to get General Tachnathar on the line. Yes, I realize no one knows where he is --"
Mickey followed Arthur's glance down the row to Merlin, who was packing up his equipment. Whatever Merlin's task had been, it was done, and he was speaking in low tones at no one in particular.

Mickey desperately wished he had a bloody earwig so that he could know what was going on. He knew this ride along was a privilege and that he should be grateful for what little he had, but he was a greedy bastard and he wanted more.

He glanced at Julia and tilted his head toward Merlin. She nodded, hefted her camera up, and adjusted the settings for the lower light inside the transport.

Mickey got up, using the handholds over his head to make his stoop-shouldered walk down where Merlin was sitting. Gareth saw him coming and elbowed Pellinor, who glanced up and shifted over, making room for Mickey.

Mickey glanced at Julia to make sure he was in frame. At her thumbs-up, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and said, "So, you're Lieutenant Merlin Emrys."

Big blue eyes snapped up to look at Mickey. A quirk of a smile touched Merlin's mouth before flattening into concentration as he took a small square box, much like a Nintendo DS, from Lamorak and tucked it into the side pocket of his pack. "That's what everyone tells me."

"You weren't with the team earlier. Your Captain wouldn't say anything about you when you weren't here," Mickey said.

Merlin glanced toward the front of the transport, but he wasn't searching out Arthur, Mickey saw. His eyes narrowed when he spotted Julia filming their conversation. Another small smile twitched its way onto his lips, but it didn't meet his eyes. "That's probably because there's not much to tell."

Down the row, near the rear doors, Will snorted. Merlin ignored him. Mickey, on the other hand, scanned the faces of the men around them, taking note of how they were shaking their heads in response to what Merlin said. "Somehow, I doubt that," Mickey said.

Something dark crossed Merlin's expression. He stared at the floor for a long time. He rubbed his hands together, stopping only when Gareth handed him his gloves.

Mickey waited. Despite reports to the contrary, he could be a patient man, though usually only when he knew that the subject of his interview was about to tell him something important but was trying to choose the right words.

Merlin scratched his chin with a finger. He took a deep breath and sat back, shoulders squared. After what was a considering moment, Merlin leaned forward, elbows on his knees, mimicking Mickey's pose.

"The camera shouldn't be on me," Merlin said, his voice soft. He gestured toward Arthur, who was finished with his conversation but pretending he wasn't listening to this one. "It should be on him. He's the reason we're all here. The reason we're doing what we're doing now."

Several nearby teammates nodded agreement, though they stayed silent.

"People are going to want to know about everyone on the team," Mickey said, pressing his case. "If you've heard anything about your fans, you'd know they have pretty wild theories about everyone. Don't you want to set them straight?"

Merlin tilted his head, looking sad. He sighed and spread his hands. "You've got my name now. It
won't be hard for anyone to look me up, if they really want to find out about me. They probably shouldn't. They'll be pretty disappointed."

"Bollocks," Will said, glaring at Merlin from his post at the rear doors. "And I'll fight every damn one of them if they are."

"Don't be an idiot," Merlin said.

"He's right," Mickey said quickly, trying to keep the momentum going in case the conversation stopped before it began. "Bollocks. After everything the team has done together, I don't see how anyone would be disappointed by your background."

That darkness filled Merlin's eyes again, and Merlin forced a fake smile that Mickey didn't like.

"I can tell there's something out there about you that casts you in a bad light. I also get the feeling that it's not the real story," Mickey said.

"It's not," Mordred said.

"Don't," Merlin warned.

"Don't you want to set the record straight? Tell the story from your side?"

"Tell him, Merlin," Will said.

"It's not worth it," Merlin said.

"Isn't it?" Will asked, his voice hard. "You nearly died trying to save your team. Soon as you got well enough, the Brass raked you over hot coals and hung you out to dry. They were going to let you waste away doing admin rubbish until you got bored and left the service or they could discharge you without your making a fuss about it."

"Telling the story isn't going to change anything," Merlin said wearily, as if this was a conversation he had had many times before.

Mickey was at a loss. The finality in Merlin's tone was undeniable. Will clenched his jaw to keep from saying whatever was on his mind, though why, Mickey wasn't sure, since Will was the completely inappropriate sort of bloke, not too dissimilar from Julia. He was about to ask if anyone else knew the story, but everyone gave him a stony stare.

"I have a story," Mordred said.

"No, Mordred," Merlin said, his tone pleading.

"It's my story to tell," Mordred said firmly. He said something in Welsh so quietly that Mickey wasn't sure that the camera would pick it up from where Julia was sitting, but whatever it was, it silenced Merlin's protests.

"I know this one. It's good. Tragic and uplifting," Cennydd said. He leaned back against the transport wall, stretching out his legs. "The best part is that it's one hundred percent true."

Mickey glanced between the three of them. Merlin broke eye contact, shaking his head, and stared at his hands.

"A lifetime ago, I was a teenage plonker who thought he could save the world," Mordred said. Mickey was chilled by the cold, detached look in Mordred's eyes -- it was so different from the shy
warmth that had been there mere moments ago. "I wanted to save my family and my friends. I knew something was coming, so I thought I'd do something about it. I went and became a villain."

Mickey frowned, settling back to listen.

"All with good intentions, of course. I meant to sabotage the NWO from the beginning, but I ended up sabotaging myself. I ended up in the employ of a mercenary known as the Witchfinder. I was a loan from the NWO, you understand. They needed the Witchfinder to obtain certain objects for them, to set up the military faction, and to do their general dirty work. I was sent to supervise while simultaneously assisting him in performing those tasks."

Mordred paused, his gaze distant for a moment.

"On one particular day, several years ago, we were in the process of acquiring one of those so-called objects when we were intercepted by a military team who, coincidentally, happened to be in the area. At first, we thought they were after us, but later discovered that it was pure happenstance. To protect our assets --"

"His arse, more like," Cennydd scoffed, crossing his arms.

"-- the Witchfinder ordered a missile strike and an all-out attack," Mordred said, glancing balefully at Cennydd. He turned to Mickey and continued, "He decimated the team and left any survivors to die."

Mordred swallowed, glancing at his hands. He made a quiet sound before steeling himself for the rest.

"I wasn't involved in the attack. I tried to stop it. I offered alternatives -- promises that the military team would never know we were there, for example. The Witchfinder refused, though I couldn't tell you why. In retrospect, he wasn't surprised by the team's arrival. It seemed almost as if he had been waiting for them. In any case, I tried to corrupt the satellite feed, to disrupt the missile coordinates, but…"

"Instead, I watched the team scatter when they were fired upon. The team split up. One half of them nearly caught up to the Witchfinder's men. The others were nearby but not in a position to return the attack. But one person? He fled. Ran from the site like a coward. I couldn't see who it was, but it was clear he had no interest in being in a firefight."

Mickey glanced at Merlin. He saw a muscle jump in Merlin's jaw, but there was no shame, no guilt. Only anger. Mickey decided that the person Mordred was talking about hadn't been Merlin.

"The incident stayed with me," Mordred said. "It was one of my first excursions with the Witchfinder. Some time later, I was told to perform certain services for the NWO, and took the opportunity to find out what happened to that team."

I hacked military and government computers for the NWO, Mickey heard, even though Mordred didn't say it out loud.

"I found out that there were a tiny handful of survivors. The Captain and one of the lieutenants among them. The lieutenant was up on charges -- misconduct, dereliction of duty, cowardice. It was a long list of accusations, and they were ridiculous considering that the Captain was rescued without injuries, and the lieutenant nearly died of wounds incurred during his firefight."

Will made a noise. Arthur, who was listening, lowered his head. Mordred had fallen silent and was watching Mickey pointedly, as if he were waiting for Mickey to come up with the obvious
"It didn't match up with what you saw on satellite," Mickey said.

"Not at all," Mordred said. "To my shame, I did nothing. I convinced myself that it was not my problem. That the situation would sort itself out -- I mean, surely, the military would have access to the same satellite telemetry that I did. The lieutenant would be exonerated."

"I know this story, too," Will said, bitter. Merlin stared at his hands.

Mickey glanced between them, unsure. He opted not to say anything, not yet.

"There was no reason to think that he wouldn't be," Mordred said. "The lieutenant had an excellent record. Successful missions, recommendations from his superior officers, secondments for specialist training. More than that, he was brilliant. He held several patents that would easily innovate the way we communicate, if not for industrial monopoly."

His expression turned wistful.

"I sometimes think that he and I might have been friends as children, if only…"

Merlin bowed his head and rubbed his face with his hand.

"I can only imagine what he went through," Mordred said softly. "I don't know. I was… otherwise detained for a time. I forgot about it, if I'm being honest. Some weeks later, I was placed in a situation that reminded me of the lieutenant, and I was eventually able to check up on him.

"It turns out that the military lost the satellite telemetry. More accurately, the file was corrupted. In addition, they had also lost the mission logs. I didn't have much time. It was all that I could do to restore the mission logs and to send copies to those who would put them to good use. I hoped that, this once, I could do some good to undo all the evil I had done while trying to foil the NWO's plans."

Mordred trailed off. Cennydd nudged his foot. Merlin whispered, "You did."

"What happened then?" Mickey asked, mostly for the camera.

"Oh, the lieutenant was cleared of charges. Inexplicably, the Captain's actions did not fall under any scrutiny and he was reassigned to a different division. As for the lieutenant…" Mordred glanced at Merlin. "As I understand it, he's alive and well and continues to serve in the British Army."

Mickey didn't say anything for the longest time. He looked from Mordred to Merlin, from Merlin to Will.

And he got it. A glimpse of the complete picture. A glimmer of understanding. He knew the essence that made these men who they were, but was unable to put it in words.

"That's a good story," Mickey said. He nodded at Merlin and turned to Mordred. "You're a good man. All of you are. I have a question, though. I'm hoping you can help me. That Captain… he sounds like a right blunder. What was his name?"

Everyone grinned, mean and dark, mouths in a slanted line, eyes glittering with mischief.

But none of them said a word.
It was Merlin who eventually looked up, his brows pinched in a thoughtful frown, his eyes dark. He nodded as if he'd come to a decision.

"Cedric Walsh."

Mickey saw the dark glint in Merlin's eyes. The permission in them. The trust he placed in Mickey to do the right thing with the story and with the name.

And Mickey? He met Merlin's eyes with a resolute nod. He was going to bring that bloody pillock Walsh down.

"Gwen's got the coordinates," Leon said. Perceval banged on the wall to let Owain know to pull over, but they were already coming to a slow stop, hinting that they'd arrived at their destination.

Arthur tapped his earwig and caught the tail-end of the coordinates as Gwen repeated herself. As soon as she was done, Elyan cut in. "For the record, I didn't know there were that many dragons. The radar is coated. I'm counting in the hundreds. I hope you've got a plan."

Arthur glanced at Merlin. Where the others were already filing out of the transport, keeping an eye out for phantoms, Merlin stayed sitting where he was, his head back, his eyes fixed to the ceiling. "Not yet," he told Elyan, and waited for the rest of the team and the reporter to get out before sliding over to Merlin.

Merlin reached for Arthur and clasped his hand. Arthur didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

But they were running short on time, and after a few minutes, Arthur nudged Merlin's arm. "Ready?"

"Not in the least," Merlin said, sitting up straight, eyebrows raising as he scoffed and shook his head. He let go of Arthur's hand and picked up the staff he'd found while raiding everybody's repositories. Arthur started to stand up when Merlin said, "Wait."

Merlin pushed a long object wrapped in canvas.

"This is yours."

From the heft and shape of it, Arthur could tell that it was a sword. "I've already picked from the pile."

"I know. Doesn't change the fact that this is still yours," Merlin said. He nodded his head toward the bundle. "Take a look."

Arthur grunted and pulled the sword free from the wrapping. Despite his gloves, a heady warmth spread into his palm and up his arm --

"It's mine?" he asked.

"It's yours," the Sorcerer said.
The King narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

He knew at once his mistake in asking the question. There would be no undoing the hurt that flickered in the Sorcerer's eyes, only a lifetime of apologies that he would think, for even a moment, that the Sorcerer could be like everyone else, trying to bribe their way into the King's favour.

"I'm told that it's time. That you'll understand what it means."

The Sorcerer shoved the sword into the King's hands as if he couldn't wait to be rid of it, but the way his touch lingered, the King realized it was quite the opposite. The sword was perfectly balanced, as fine a blade as any he'd ever seen before despite being unremarkable and unadorned. He held it to the light, and it seemed to him that the edge could cut even that, because a reflection of rainbows scattered into the room.

The King noted lines scratched into the blade, but it took some doing before he recognized them as words. He ran his fingers over them, expecting the curves of every line to be raised, but he found them smooth and worn down, as if they had been there all along.

He did understand. He didn't think that he would. But the warmth of the blade, the welcome it gave, how right it was for him to have this sword --

It was a gift. A blessing.

The sword appeared simple, unimpressive, plain. It wasn't. Dragonfire burned under its surface, the heart of the Mother beating in its core, a message cast in gold in the centre, immortalized until the end of time.

"What does it mean?" the King asked, because he had never learned the dragontongue.

The Sorcerer sang the words in dragontongue before running his fingers in the air above the scratches in the middle of the blade. "Take me up," the Sorcerer said. He gestured; the King turned it over. "Cast me away."

-- it was right for Arthur to have this sword. He tore his eyes away from it to meet Merlin's knowing gaze.

"We're not them," Arthur found himself saying.

"We're not," Merlin agreed.

Merlin glanced at the open door, pulling his coat closed against the cold winter chill of the lingering night. "I suppose I should go and call them down, shouldn't I?"

"Would be best, yeah," Arthur said, lowering the sword.

A quirk of a smile pulled at Merlin's lips, and he glanced at the sword still in Arthur's lap. "You should come. I'm pretty sure they'll listen to you, now."

Chapter End Notes

The song lyrics are from the French song, Alouette (listed in its original language and
in translation, [here, on Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Here_on_Wikipedia), which, if you think of it, is really morbid for a children's song.
According to team Excalibur, there were dragons circling above them. Mickey had no choice but to take them to their word, because in the early morning hours, the sky was pitch black, and for all he knew, the movements he could detect were clouds breezing by.

When Merlin stepped into the middle of the road, surrounded by his teammates, Mickey didn't think too much of it. He half-expected the man to pull out a megaphone from somewhere, to light a flare into the sky, or to do some sort of magic that would attract the dragon's attention.

Nothing and no-one could have prepared him for how Merlin took a deep breath, tilted his head back, and **roared**.

The sound was low, guttural, reverberating. It rang across several registers audible to the human ear and quite possibly some that weren't. Mickey felt it settle under his skin and rattle his bones. The roar clawed into his soul and threatened to tear it out.

It was a summoning so powerful that Mickey felt compelled to step forward. He wasn't the only one. Each member of Excalibur swayed forward as if they couldn't help themselves. Julia took several steps closer before catching herself. The only person that seemed unaffected was Arthur, and that was probably because he was right where he wanted to be regardless of the summoning.

The roar faded into the night air, no doubt echoing as it traveled and no doubt as potent several kilometres away as it had been at the source.

Mickey glanced at Julia, completely shaken. He lowered his hands, only belatedly aware that he'd brought them up to press against his chest in a startle reflex, and wondered if the camera's microphone had been able to pick up the power in Merlin's roar.

Strained minutes passed by in silence.

The bare trees clicked against each other in the faint winter breeze. Lights turned on in the windows of the nearby suite of homes lining the street on the other side of the park. Curtains rustled, people looked out. Several doorways opened and men and women stood there, huddled in their housecoats and slippers, exhausted from vigilance against phantoms and bearing looks of resignation that demanded, *what now?*

Merlin made a small, frustrated, *affronted* sound. He took a deep breath and shouted, "*Drakontas!*"

The word echoed into the night.

"*Drakontas! Aperkrina!*" Merlin threw his head back and roared.

Mickey shuddered.

He didn't know how it was possible, but this time, the effect of Merlin's roar grabbed something deep in Mickey's soul and dragged him forward. He was peripherally aware that Julia was coming closer, too, that the looky-loos outside their houses had approached, that more and more homes turned on the lights and emerged into the street.
The air cracked like a bullwhip. A surge of wind heaved in a breath of air, warm despite the winter.

*Fww-fwa-aap*

*Fww-fwoosh*

Thunder crashed.

A heave, a shudder, and one by one, dragons descended. A great grey-brown dragon the same size as the one who stopped a different dragon's rampage during the zombie attack. A golden-red dragon with battle scars and a slim, snake-like build. Green with blue undertones, with scales flared out like a lion's mane around its head. Black and mostly teeth, ducking beneath the bigger dragons' wings.

So many. So many of them.

Mickey swallowed.

"Holy shite," Julia whispered.

The lion-like dragon stepped forward. The great grey-brown dragon kept pace; the first one demurred and allowed the other to take the lead, almost as if it had forgotten its place. The great dragon moved like nothing Mickey had ever seen. A creature its size should make the ground tremble, and yet barely a blade of glass broke under its passage. Abruptly, the slow, lazy walk burst into a long stride, wings spreading out as if the dragon fully intended on taking flight.

"Kilgarrah!" Merlin roared, commanding, *chastising*.

The dragon faltered. It fell on all fours and approached Merlin and Arthur. Despite being a good distance away, Mickey felt himself take several steps away from the dragon's menacing stride. Mickey was shamed to a standstill when he saw that Merlin and Arthur held their ground, that none of the men of team Excalibur so much as raised weapons.

The dragon stopped in front of the two, lowering its head. It surveyed them with a cold, jade-gold gaze before it opened its maw and spoke: "What do you want, young warlock? Why do you call upon us in this gravest of times? Our lost Queen has been found, and She is in danger. All Dragonkind are at risk; all Dragonkind may die. We must answer Her call --"

"Right into a trap, just like they want. You know what they'll do in the end. They'll put a yoke around your throats. They'll call you to heel like dogs," Arthur said, his tone sledgehammer-hard. "After everything you've done? Every game you've played, ever life you've twisted to get to where you are? What of everything you've put us through? This is what it comes to? You would break oaths made an Age ago, and you would turn traitor like the rest?"

Kilgarrah reared back, as if slapped. The dragon tilted its big head to the side, and those green-yellow eyes narrowed to slits. It crept down once again, coming so close that the snuffles of breath rustled Merlin's and Arthur's clothes.

Curiosity -- if such a trait could be attributed to unearthly creatures -- drew the other dragons forward. They curved around Merlin and Arthur, and Julia moved to a better spot to keep filming.

One of those scary little black dragons snapped around to watch them move and Mickey gulped.

"What do you know of such oaths, young Pendragon?"
Arthur shifted. He unfurled scrap material from around an object he'd held close to his side, where Mickey hadn't noticed it. The fabric dropped to the ground. Arthur raised a sword.

He held it up not as if he were about to attack the dragon, but as if he were offering a gift: a palm under the blade, the other beneath the hilt.

The dragons stilled. A silence stretched. A missing puzzle piece clicked into place.

Mickey wished he could get far enough back to see the complete picture, but he had a feeling that no one would ever know everything. He had to satisfy himself with knowing that whatever was happening, it was important.

So important, apparently, that the dragons slowly rose up and bowed in allegiance.

One by one, the dragons sprang into the sky until there were only the three most majestic remaining. The great dragon crowded closer to Arthur and Merlin, bowing its head; the leonine dragon crouched down like a cat, while the serpentine bronze dragon curled around them, the length of its body nearly enough to encircle them all.

Mickey strained to hear what they were talking about, but either they were speaking too low for him to hear, or they were doing some sort of magic to keep it a secret. Julia shook her head -- she couldn't hear them either.

"Do you think we should get closer?" Julia whispered.

Mickey hesitated. He waved a gentlemanly hand in invitation and said, "Be my guest."

Neither of them moved until the dragons took to the sky several minutes later, a terrible war cry in their wake.

"You can admit it," Merlin said, leaning into Arthur.

Luck, more than any kind of certain confidence, had dragged the dragons down from the sky, though Merlin had no real idea how or why it had worked. The fact remained that it had, indeed, worked, and they'd moved to stage two of their plan.

Arthur and Merlin had played the con game completely off-the-cuff, relying on vaguely-remembered details of their waking visions and dreams and a paintbrush interpretation of the story Kilgarrah had told Arthur to give credence to the illusion that Arthur and Merlin were, indeed, the very same people that Kilgarrah believed them to be. Merlin still had a bad taste in his mouth at having had to do it, but he was very grateful that Arthur had done most of the talking.

That Kilgarrah, Mandrake and Tachnathar obeyed, without a shadow of doubt…

It left questions that Merlin wasn't so sure he wanted answered.

But it had worked. And it had been easy. There had been none of the anticipated argument, none of the resistance. All those months when Arthur couldn't get Kilgarrah on the phone to get clarification, information, or assistance seemed to never have happened, because after Kilgarrah saw Arthur with the sword, his entire demeanour had changed. Arthur wasn't sure he would ever
know why, but it was enough that, for the moment, everything was in their favour.

"Admit what?" Arthur asked, climbing in the back of the transport. He sat down toward the front of the driver's side bench seat, his usual spot, and Merlin settled between Pellinor and Lucan.

"Secretly, you wanted to be a theatre major in uni," Merlin said, glancing at the reporters.

Mickey and the cameraperson, Julia, were talking between themselves and reviewing the footage on the tiny viewscreen. They didn't appear to be listening in, but Merlin figured this was as harmless a conversation as they could have, particularly since the camera's red recording light was no longer on.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Arthur said, frowning in mock confusion. Leon snorted and Gwaine laughed outright.

"I won't tell them about the time you auditioned for the lead in --"

"You'll sit down and zip that lip if you don't want me to tell Morgana all about it," Arthur retorted.

Leon paled, pressed his lips together in wide-eyed alarm, and made a key-lock motion over his mouth.

Merlin leaned down toward Gwaine. "You'll tell me, right?"

Gwaine winked and made a thumbs-up sign before turning his attention to the rear windows.

Arthur made a winding motion toward his ear and Merlin keyed up the Box to the usual channels. "Who do you want first?"

Arthur frowned in consideration, and released a held breath. "Uther."

"Uther it is, then. You sure you don't want Olaf first?" Merlin asked, making the connection.

"Not until Tachnathar returns to his post," Arthur said. Merlin caught his dark look and followed it to the reporters. Arthur's tone was flat, but polite, when he asked, "Mr O'Reilley, I'm going to have to ask you not to film for the next twenty minutes."

"You can ask --"

"And we can leave you kerb-side in the darkest side of London with phantoms floating about," Perceval said, smiling with too many teeth.

Mickey leaned back, quickly considered his options, and nodded sagely. "Sure. Whatever you say. No filming for the next twenty minutes."

"Battery," Kay said, holding out his hand.

It wasn't a request. Julia popped the battery pack out of the camera and unhooked the external.

"Man, you guys mean business," she complained when Geraint fished a backup camera out of her pocket and Galahad filched a different battery pack from somewhere else.

Merlin left the others to it and focused on finding Uther. It didn't take long. He nodded at Arthur and gestured with four fingers for the proper channel.

Arthur connected and said, "Excalibur actual, requesting status update on last."
"Acknowledged," Uther said, but there was a long pause and a heavy sigh before he continued, "I'm out of stalling tactics. The birds are in the air. You have twenty minutes before they reach the outer markers. You have less than that before the War Council pulls O'Neill into resuming his leadership role."

"Stall them," Arthur said.

Uther snorted. "I'm not sure if you've heard, but I'm not their favourite person at the moment. Olaf's preoccupied with calls from NWO defectors wanting safe harbour in exchange for information. He's like a dragon who just found a big pile of gold and doesn't know where to start."

Merlin choked back a snicker at the comparison.

"Tell them that Operation Round Table is now in effect. Tactical authority now rests with the leader of the Red Team. When General Tachnathar arrives, he will confirm," Arthur said. He sidled a glance in Merlin's direction.

Merlin checked his watch. As the dragon flies, General Tachnathar should have arrived at his post by now. Merlin met Arthur's eyes and nodded.

"Which would be lovely if he could be found," Uther said, his tone tart.

"He'll be there," Arthur said, signing off. He gestured to Merlin. "Get me Watchtower."

Merlin switched the channel, received a response, and passed Elyan on to Arthur.

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"Are we clear on the plan?" Arthur asked.

Gwaine took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He opened his mouth to speak. He tried again. He exhaled. "I don't like the plan."

A map of central London, folded up to centralize the Tower Bridge, had been passed around so many times that Merlin had lost track of who had the map now. The map itself wasn't marked -- they knew better than to write down what the enemy might pick up -- but between all of the members of the team, they had something of a working plan of attack.

Thanks to Gwen and Elyan, Excalibur now had the location of the singing child. The original plan was to recover whoever it was and to bring them to safety, but Uther had told them that Olaf was getting reports of sorcerers congregating in the city, somewhere, along with something of a human army. Where they'd gotten the army was a question that a very frustrated Olaf couldn't answer.

The last piece of information, surprisingly, came from Mickey and Julia, who heard from their website administrator. The message board Mickey moderated had crashed from overload, but from what she had been able to recover and from what Bran had confirmed, since he was apparently on the forum 24/7 protecting the Red Team's virtue against trolls, the phantoms had disappeared specific areas after the heads of household received a cryptic phone call trading favours for safety.

Those favours were being cashed in, it seemed, at sunrise.

The message was passed on to Olaf and to Command, who, after several strained minutes
searching and cross-referencing information, agreed that the "army" gathering was made out of civilians who probably thought they had no other choice.

"Or they're under gaeas," Cennydd said darkly. "It's a tactic they've used before. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if they used it again."

Mordred was very pale. "It could be as simple as having a human wall to protect against weapons. Or worse."

Merlin hadn't needed to know what the or worse could be. Gaeas were nasty things that could rob someone of their very sense of self. If anyone thought the zombies were bad -- dead spirits in dead bodies -- they only had to imagine the opposite. Living bodies with no control over their own actions.

The only good news in all this was that the threat of a missile strike in London had been averted, at least temporarily. With General Tachnathar back at the helm where he belonged, yelling at the right people, the RAF had downgraded their readiness status. The birds were still in the air, but the orders were now to hold steady, patrolling outside of London.

It wasn't as if they could get past all the dragons, anyway.

"Nothing wrong with the plan. They're not going to expect the Spanish Inquisition," Will said. "In this case, Merlin."

"He's going alone," Gwaine snapped. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"Oh, yeah, believe me, it bothers me. But if you think I'm going to position myself up here uselessly when the rest of you have all the lines of sight covered, you've got another thing coming," Will said, waving a finger over the map. He glanced at Arthur. "Someone plug his ears. Don't tell them, but I'm going with Merlin whether they like it or not."

"No, you're not," Arthur said, but there was absolutely no vehemence in his tone.

Merlin half-suspected that Will had been manipulated into doing exactly what Arthur wanted him to do in the first place. Will must have come to that same conclusion, because his eyes narrowed.

"You can't make me, I'm not even officially on your team," Will tried, like a kid poking a sleeping monster.

"Actually, you are," Leon said. He gestured at Arthur. "Himself had me file the papers before we went into the Commons."

Will made a gobsmacked noise. "What -- you --"

Arthur pointed at Will's throat. "You don't think I hand those out to just anyone, do you?"

Will's mouth opened and closed like a catfish gasping for air on land. Merlin lowered his head to hide his chuckle. Indignant, Will said, "Well, I'm still going to shadow Merlin, make sure he gets back in one piece and all."

"If you feel you must," Arthur said magnanimously. "I'm not one to second-guess my men's decisions in the field."

"Good," Will said, leaning back. His satisfaction faded into a discomfited squirm. He lunged forward and nudged Merlin desperately. "Help me. I'm doing what the Captain wants. On
Merlin tried for sympathy and failed. He spread his hands and said, "Welcome to the team."

A low chorus of chuckles spread around the group, the joke not completely understood but still appreciated by Mickey and Julia, who stood off to the side, watching as the team planned out their next moves. It was strange not to see Julia with a camera blocking half her face.

"We're almost at the location," Owain said from the front seat. "I'm slowing down in about five, and you'd best be off before I take the first turn if you don't want to break your necks."

"Let us know at the minute mark," Arthur said, looking at Merlin.

The weight in his gaze was strange. Heavy with words left unsaid. Merlin could feel emotion swell in his heart, making it difficult to breathe. He lowered his head but didn't break eye contact. "I know," he mouthed.

It had been Merlin's idea, and he had hated even suggesting it. As the only dragonlord on the team, he was the best choice to go after the dragonet who was kept prisoner, who called for help. As the strongest magic user between the three -- four, if he counted Kay -- he was also the only one who had a chance against the phantoms, and in getting back to the team in time.

The dragons were counting on Excalibur to rescue their kidnapped Queen, and Merlin would need to do so and to bring her to a safe location before anything else happened. If Nimueh -- if it was Nimueh who was behind all this, though it was hard not to see her as the villain anymore -- continued the way that she was, the team was bound to fight another battle, but this one would be against the very same citizens that they were sworn to protect.

As long as the enemy had the dragon Queen, the dragons would be used against them, too.

It wouldn't matter if they had an army of their own at their back if the dragons rained fire down on the world. Between the phantoms and the gaeas that were being cast everywhere, it was…

It was Morgana's worst visions made manifest. The team dead. Paris in flames. London burned to the ground. The land scoured of all life except that which the new Queen -- Nimueh -- permitted to thrive.

The New World Order.

Everything else until this moment had been a distraction while Nimueh gained power and stalled for time until she had every resource in place to ensure that this final battle would tilt in her favour. And Merlin… Merlin had to do everything that he could to prevent it from happening while Arthur went against her head-on with the intent of stopping her from calling the human horde to heel and from pulling the dragons down.

"I've got good news and bad news," Elyan said, his voice crackling over the line. He sounded subdued, out of breath, as if he'd been sucker-punched. "And I've got worse news. Which do you want first?"

"You're assuming I want to hear anything past good news," Arthur said, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Rip the plaster off."

"Good news, then," Elyan said. He sounded upbeat, but it was forced, not quite like him, which didn't bode well for the rest of the information he was about to pass on. "News headlines from countries to the East of us are reporting that the phantoms vanished with the sunrise, but no word
yet if they're gone for good."

That boded well for the timing of the team's attack -- one less threat to worry about. Merlin relaxed, because that was a threat they had no real protection against, not yet.

"I would imagine they will not be returning," Mordred said, leaning forward on his bench seat to look at them. "Summoning that many of them all over the world would've come at a cost."

Arthur nodded. He adjusted his gloves and asked Elyan, "And the rest?"

"We've pinpointed the strike location and forwarded the coordinates to Command. They're mobilizing their troops and the first wave should meet up with you soon. I'll update the ETA when I have it," Lance said, more sure and businesslike than Elyan had been.

Elyan hadn't seen war, not like this. He wasn't a soldier. Merlin wondered if everything they had demanded of him had been too much.

"The coordinates aren't fixed and we're recalculating vectors every five minutes, but we're getting close. Captain, we've got masses, absolute masses of people heading toward the Bridge. Any bridge, really. They'll be over the river in less than an hour," Elyan said.

The short silence that followed might as well have lasted an eternity, echoing with the sounds of sinking morale and motivation. "Well, that answers the you and what army question," Bedivere said.

"Where are they going?" Arthur asked.

"No idea yet. I'll know more once they're past the river. Captain, the only reason we're seeing the movement on satellite now --"

Arthur made the connection faster than anyone else and swore loudly before Lance could even finish.

"-- the dragons. They've split up."

"And that's the worse news," Elyan said.

Arthur leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped into fists. He covered his mouth and took a deep breath. If he could feel the team's eyes on him, he gave no sign. His brow was pinched in concentration, as if he were going through all the possible options and outcomes.

An itch burst under Merlin's skin, but he ignored it. No one else on the team moved, either, except for Owain, who was in the front of the transport and driving.

"We're one minute out," Owain said. The words were quietly spoken, but in the silence, he might has well have bellowed it at the top of his lungs.

Merlin stood up, ducking to avoid hitting his head, and balanced himself with a hand on the roof. Mordred offered Merlin the staff he'd claimed as his own and Merlin took it with a nod of thanks. He met Arthur's eyes, and Arthur answered his unspoken question with a nod.

The plans were unchanged. Merlin's mission was still a go.

Merlin didn't know what he had expected. Maybe he'd hoped that Arthur would come up with a last minute possibility that would change everything. The odds would be terrible, but Excalibur
wouldn't be the team that they were if they didn't have a reputation for taking those odds, crumpling them up, and tossing them in the rubbish bin. At the very least, Merlin thought that Arthur would send a different team to retrieve the dragon Queen, holding him back so that he could sort out the situation going on overhead.

"What's going on?" Mickey asked, looking between every member of the team anxiously. "What does it mean that the dragons split up? Isn't that part of the plan?"

"Twenty seconds," Owain said.

"It means that what we're doing had better work," Arthur said, glancing at Merlin with a nod. Merlin's chest was tight with anticipation as he moved to the rear doors to stand next to Will.

"Merlin --"

Arthur trailed off.

Merlin turned to look at him. The rear door opened. "You too, Captain Prat."

A small, sad smile tugged at the corners of Arthur's lips.

"See you soon."

It wasn't until Merlin had followed Will out of the transport that he realized that Arthur hadn't said anything back. He stopped dead in the middle of the road, half-turning with a frown, when another thought occurred to him.

Had Arthur sent him on this mission because he was trying to save Merlin from --

Angry tears stung his eyes. He broke into a run toward the corner. The transport might have vanished around the bend, but there was still a chance, however small, that he could catch them. He'd force Arthur to come up with another plan. A better plan --

He didn't hear the footsteps running toward him until it was too late. He collided with a hard body, reaching out to catch the person before they both fell to the ground. Whoever it was, they were wearing body armour, nylon netting, equipment --

Arthur --

"Warn a guy," Kay gasped plaintively, breaking free of Merlin's grasp. "I've already had a hard roll. I don't need more bruises to add to the collection."

Merlin stared down the way Kay had come, taking a few steps as if drawn by a magnet, but the transport was long gone.

"Merlin -- Merls -- what the --" Will skidded to a stop as he rounded the corner, annoyance creeping into his tone. "What, his Majesty doesn't think I'm good enough to handle this job myself?"

"He didn't tell me to jump out. I'm here to help you get this done sooner, you thick numpty. Or am I the only one who picked up on what Arthur didn't say?" Kay asked.

"Uh," Will said intelligently. "What didn't he say?"

Kay glanced at Merlin and tilted his head in a voiceless gesture that spoke volumes -- "You want to tell him, or should I?" Merlin sighed and said, "The dragons split."
"Elyan said that," Will corrected.

"Why would they split?" Kay asked, but Merlin could tell that Kay was having a tough time trying to be patient, given the circumstances. "Because one hand didn't like what the other hand was doing and they've gone off to do their own thing."

"Oh, crud," Will said, catching on.

Merlin knew that Will wasn't slow. He just didn't consider things the way others did, and it was one reason that he was never tapped for leadership roles. Well, that and his propensity for pulling lone-wolf bollocks.

"Yeah," Kay said. "What our Captain didn't say is that the only time we've got to get this done will depend on whether the dragons who are still on our side are going to stop the dragons who aren't. If they don't, we're as good as dead."

The three of them looked up when the night turned red and orange before darkening in a blast of smoke, leaving behind a silhouette of two dragons charging at each other. A challenging roar thundered in a sky that was stormy with flames.

Merlin's stomach turned sour from the thought of what was happening above.

"That's one question answered," Merlin said quietly. He grabbed a gaping Will and pushed him. "Let's go."

---

"I'm filming this," Mickey said.

"Okay," Perceval agreed, frustratingly amiable.

Mickey growled under his breath and hurried to catch up. Perceval was a good foot taller than he was, and one of his strides easily equalled two of Mickey's. Mickey hurried to keep up.

Julia, in the back, groaned, and didn't bother trying to keep up. The soldiers' march was clipped and fast, not quite at double-time, but not far from it. Mickey had a feeling that Excalibur was keeping to this pace so that he and Julia didn't get left behind, but he couldn't help but grouse because it was a hard march all the same. They'd left behind a perfectly good transport. He didn't understand why they were moving on foot.

"I'm broadcasting live," Mickey threatened.

"That's okay, too," Perceval said, glancing at him.

"Just make sure you get my good side," Lucan said from up ahead.

"Hate to break it to you, but you don't have a good side," Mordred said.

"Lies. Lies and slander," Lucan said easily, but his tone was distracted, the response given on automatic.

Perceval snorted, but the amusement was half-hearted and it was fairly obvious that everyone was on high alert.
Mickey gave up trying to provoke someone into interacting and fell silent. After a few minutes, he parsed something that he'd overheard earlier. "We're safe from the phantoms as long as we last until dawn, aren't we?"

"That's the working theory," Gareth said from behind. Julia, sensing something worth filming, suddenly appeared in front of Mickey, walking backward to record the conversation. The two columns of men ahead of them lost their tight formation, automatically spreading wider to buffer Julia and Mickey. Mickey wondered about that. He hadn't heard an order being issued.

"Can you elaborate on that?" Mickey asked.

"Not really, no," Gareth said, inexplicably close-mouthed.

Mickey refused to scream. He didn't know how the team could go from being chatty and friendly to completely closed-off in less than a fraction of a second, but they had. This was not making for a good webcast. Worse, it wasn't helping the Red Team's image.

Fuck it, he decided.

He turned to the camera. He nodded at Julia to flip the switch and start the live broadcast. As soon as she held her thumb up, he said, "Good morning, everyone. It's just past six o'clock on this fine, frigid Wednesday. I'm --"

Julia cleared her throat.

"Julia and I are on the city streets in full defiance of the military curfew -- and worse, we're ignoring the advisories to stay inside near bright lights or radiant heat sources. Before you start wondering if this is going to be a conspiracy theory reveal of fake government warnings intended to control the population, let me tell you the truth."

Mickey paused dramatically.

"For the love of God, stay inside. Light source, heat source, I don't care. Hold your loved ones close and pray for dawn. Pray for sunshine, for a change, even though that might be asking for much. The phantoms are real, but they're not the only danger out there. There's more on the way."

"In case you're wondering why Jules and I are outside, first, check out our new wardrobe. Military issue Kevlar vests, heavy coats, even a hard cap. We are adroitly accessorized with our very own escort. The fashionistas have got to be burning with envy."

Mickey waited for Julia to pan the camera up and down the line of Team Excalibur. None of them looked directly into the camera. They stared resolutely ahead, stoic and professional.

"But they're not just any escort," Mickey said when the camera was on him again. "I bet you noticed that they're wearing red scarves. Would you believe these soldiers are the men behind the mysterious Red Team who have been going around London defusing high-pressure, very-hostile situations? Well, I believe it, because we unmasked them --"

"Did not," someone said behind Mickey. Mickey thought it might've been Galahad, but the tone was too low and petulant to be sure.

"Right. We didn't unmask them, exactly. They saved our arses and it went downhill from there, but we were our usual persistent barnacles and now they're stuck with us. I have exclusive interviews with each member of the team that we'll show you later, but for now, here's the basics."
"One: they don't call themselves the Red Team, and they don't call themselves Knights. Their official squad name is *Excalibur*. It's got a lovely sound to it, doesn't it? Something you'd shout in a fight, if nothing else.

"Two: We got the number of team members right, except we've got an extra bloke in the crew today. We've been asked not to reveal his identity until he's been properly debriefed, because he's been working undercover against the enemy.

"Three: They're brilliant, they really are. You'll see for yourselves when you hear their interviews.

"We are..." Mickey hesitated. "Somewhere in London. I won't say where. I will say this, though. If you're one of the bad guys, if you're thinking of going out to cause trouble, don't. Seriously, don't. *Excalibur* is ridiculously hardcore. I don't care how badass you think you are. These men *will* take you down.

"And if you're not one of the bad guys, but someone's coercing you to leave the house to fight the battle that's going to happen soon... please. If you can, please find a way to stay home. Tie yourself up. Have your family lock you somewhere you can't break out of easily. This isn't your war. *You don't have to fight.*"

Mickey trailed off, falling silent. He didn't know what else he could say. He might not have been privileged enough to hear both sides of the conversation when the team was talking on the radio, but he knew how to put two and two together to come up with *catastrophic*. He understood that there was very little, if anything, that the team could do to break the gaeas. The fight they were facing wouldn't be only against the enemy. It would be against innocents.

It was with that frightening realization that Mickey understood the detached single-mindedness that had gripped the team on the march. They weren't doing it because they were pillocks. They'd slipped into the headspace that only soldiers could achieve in the midst of a war they knew they had to fight but couldn't possibly win. They cut themselves off from the emotion of it, because the people they would have to kill might be their friends and family.

"Jesus," Mickey said, unable to help himself. He looked at the camera. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Julia said. "It's fucked up is what it is."

They marched for a while longer. They reached a slight rise in the road. When Mickey caught up to the others, he stopped dead when he saw what laid ahead of them.

He could see the London Bridge. The Towers gleaming in the artificial lights that shone upon the stone. It was quiet, eerily so, but the roads weren't empty. Not hardly at all.

There were no vehicles. No lorries. No cars.

Only people.

Hundreds and thousands of them.

Their shapes were outlined by the glow of streetlights, shadows stretching on the ground to make them appear legion. Made anonymous by distance, present for no other purpose than one that wasn't their own, seemingly motionless while rippling like a wave as they approached, they were...

Terrifying.
A cold chill ran down Mickey's spine. He swallowed hard. The zombies were bad enough -- at least, with a lifetime of watching every possible grade of horror movies, he'd been prepared for a zombie invasion. He'd had a plan.

This… This wasn't right. It wasn't sane. Mickey couldn't fathom the evil that would make a person think it was a good idea to threaten others with fearsome magical creatures, using them to force a gaeas to control the will of the unwilling. More than that, he couldn't parse knowing that his own countrymen were now fighting for the enemy. For a way of life none of them had ever wanted. For…

Fuck.

Mickey didn't know what for.

"Come on," Gwaine said gently, clasping a hand on Mickey's shoulder, pushing him forward. "Stay with us, yeah? There are still phantoms around."

Mickey let himself be moved. He panicked when he felt the hand leave him, but Gwaine was still there, if walking a few steps behind, scanning their surroundings. "How do you… How?"

Gwaine didn't look at him right away. He completed his visual check of their environment and stared straight ahead at his team. His gaze darted down, a muscle clenched in his jaw, and a tiny, fake grin made its way onto his face.

He didn't answer.

"First team, go," Arthur said from the head of the line, his voice soft and subdued. Mickey felt as if he were hearing the order through a thick fog.

Geraint and Galahad both split off from the main group, heading in different directions, walking at a casual, unhurried pace, as if they had all the time in the world.

"I'm never going to forgive him," Lance said, wringing his hands. He paced the length of the living room, even though there wasn't much space for it. The original Pendragon cottage had been turned into an actual command centre. "Not for a second. I can't believe you want him to be the godfather to our baby."

Despite taking advantage of Gwen's superior knowledge of the systems they were using and screening out the masses of dragons in the air by subtracting their infrared signature from the satellite images, Excalibur's personal command centre couldn't get a very clear image of what was going on. There was, however, a gap between the two groups of dragons that only seemed to be crossed when one side or the other went in for an attack, and in that gap, Lance could see the challenge that his team faced.

He knew, intellectually, that one more person on the field wouldn't make much of a difference, not when the numbers were clearly against them. But knowing meant little when he was on the receiving end of a roller-coaster of emotions. Guilt was at the forefront: he wasn't there, with his team, and he damn well should be.

Under that guilt was relief. That he was here, far away from battle. That he was permitted to be
home, with his wife and child. That he was able to see his daughter when he had quietly accepted that he might never get a chance to meet her.

That relief brought more guilt, because that was his team out there. His friends. His family. He should be there, watching their backs. He needed to be there to patch them up so that they could keep going. He --

He didn't know how anyone would be able to go on if they were gone.

Gwen rocked their sleeping baby in her arms and leaned her head against his shoulder. She didn't say anything, but she didn't need to. She knew what was going through his head. She always did.

"I need to shoot something," Lance muttered.

"You and me both," Morgana said. She was ashen-faced and shaky after her vision. Gaius had cautioned her to rest but knew when to retreat in the face of a formidable opponent, and hadn't pressed the issue.

"We've got movement," Elyan said, tapping the monitor in front of him. Lance shifted his position, careful not to dislodge Gwen and the baby, and squinted at the screen.

"Our boys?"

"Every single available member of the armed forces," Elyan confirmed. "They're moving in position."

Lance tapped his ear, grateful for something to do. Something that would help. He waited until Arthur acknowledged and gave him the news. "Captain, you've got the backup you've asked for. ETA eight minutes."

"Copy," Arthur said, his tone flat, emotionless.

A few tense minutes later, General Tachnathar voice came through the regular channels. It was directed to all the squad and platoon leaders in the field.

There was the usual directive -- who was in command of what, what troops were to be in which quadrant, and a short speech that both calmed nerves and bolstered spirits. Lance closed his eyes, letting himself be reassured by the familiarity of the routine, but he shot to full alertness when General Tachnathar added something more.

"You have your orders. Follow them to your best judgement. More importantly, do what you believe is right. Finally, until I return from fighting with my brothers and sisters in the air, I am transferring full authority of the British Armed forces to Captain Arthur Pendragon.

"May the Mother guard your souls."

"Well?"

Merlin rubbed his hand across his face in frustration. He crouched down, eyes narrowed, and
focused.

"Merlin, come on --"

"Shut up, Will," Kay said, his voice low. "Give him a minute."

"It's Merlin. It never takes him a minute. We should've been in and out by now."

"Those high expectations, do you put them on you, too, or do you just demand it from everyone else?" Kay snapped.

"Could name you a certain someone who's fucking failing at meeting my minimum standards," Will retorted. Kay made a rude gesture that Will ignored. "Hurry up, Merlin."

Merlin glared. "Will you shut the fuck up?"

Will's jaw clamped shut.

Merlin closed his eyes for a second and forced himself to focus. Will was a big boy and could deal with a bit of hurt feelings. In any case, he should know better. They might be of equal rank, but Merlin had the lead on this mission.

"Look," Will said, his voice soft, almost apologetic. "I know you're under a lot of pressure. Save a dragon, save the world. What I'm trying to get at is that you've got this handled. We've scouted the area. It's mostly clear. Kay and me, we can handle the strays. All you've got to do is get the kid."

"But first, I have to take down the ricketiest wards I've ever seen without attracting phantoms, or triggering an alarm, or setting something else off," Merlin said. "It would be a piece of cake except it's all done up in dragon language and encrypted, and I'm trying to concentrate."

A small, subdued silence came from Will's direction, but it didn't last. "Why don't you just knock on the door?"

Merlin side-eyed Will.

"I mean, it doesn't have to be Spy 101 where we sneak around, take pictures of secret documents with a pen knife, and call headquarters with a shoe," Will said. "We literally don't care if they catch us going through their underwear drawer because we have guns to shoot whoever's coming at us. Why can't it be simple? Like, oh, kicking down the door? I like kicking down the doors. I don't get to do it enough. I'm always half a kilometre back, watching the show go down through a scope."

Merlin turned his head and made eye contact with Kay, who was frowning in consideration.

"They might hurt the kid," Kay said cautiously.

"They literally have the dragons in the palms of their hands as long as the kid is alive," Will said. "Hurting the kid? Not going to keep the flying lizards on their good side. That's the last thing those plonkers inside are going to do. Plus, don't you have, I don't know. Magic?"

Merlin looked at Will.

"We don't know what they have," Kay said.

"Well, we have guns, three highly-trained SAS soldiers -- of whom one is considered to be the best sniper in the world, another is a hand-to-hand combat specialist, and the third can call fucking
dragons out of the fucking sky like calling a dog to heel," Will snapped.

As if to compound the point, a blast of fire lit up the city above them. An unearthly scream drowned out a sound that reminded Merlin far too much of a flock of birds struggling to stay aloft in a terrible storm.

"Okay. Let's go in. Nothing to lose. I'll go through the front. Kay, Will, go on, see if there's a rear entrance," Merlin said.

"Can I kick the door in?" Will asked.

"You can kick the door in," Kay said with a heavy, capitulatory sigh.

Merlin stayed where he was, waiting with no small amount of impatience.

"There's a rear entrance, covered in rubbish. Bloody wankers, don't pick up after themselves," Will said.

"All right. This is what we're going to do. I'm going to go in through the front, nice and quiet. You'll give me a ten-count and come in through the rear," Merlin said. He rose from his crouch, walked around the fence, down the block, and up the few steps to what was an otherwise unremarkable block house. He took a note of the name glued over the mail slot in the doorway: J. Borden.

He tried the doorknob.

It was locked.

Forcing it would trigger the wired alarm. Using magic to unlock the door would activate the wards and set off a different sort of alarm altogether. Kicking the door in -- all those options defeated the purpose of nice and quiet. Merlin wished he'd paid more attention when Owain tried to teach him how to pick locks and wondered what he could do with the few tools he had on his person until he realized that picking locks would take more time than they had.

He rang the doorbell.

"Coming!" a man's voice said from inside, distracted.

Merlin tilted an ear to listen and heard the sound of the telly and approaching footsteps. He tapped his radio. "Start the count."

The door unlocked. Deadbolt, security bolt, chain, peephole, doorknob --

Merlin raised his weapon.

The door opened. He forced his way in, the man stumbling backward until Merlin had him shoved against the side wall. The man froze, his hands spread on either side of him. Merlin did a quick search but found no obvious weapons, though his magic tingled in response to the magic that the man had contained in an amulet around his throat.

The man was of medium height and defined appearance, with high cheekbones and an angular jaw. His eyes were hooded, his hair was short and curly, and there was dark scruff on his jaw.

Terror bled out of the man's every pore. Somehow, no matter how frightened he was, the man reminded Merlin of Tristan -- squirrely and untrustworthy, as if he were running some sort of a
scam. Merlin had a feeling that he would take the first opportunity to get the fuck out. "How many in the house?"

"Uh. Uh!"

"How many people are in the house?" Merlin repeated, tightening his grip.

"Just me!"

Merlin raised a brow.

"Me and the girl! No one else!"

"Where?" Merlin asked, pulling the man -- J. Borden, most likely -- from the wall and guiding him inside. Somewhere to the rear of the house, he could hear a door slam open. The man jerked at the sound, crying out in surprise. He held his arms up even higher, and he was trembling like a leaf.

When the man stopped dead, Merlin shoved him again.

"Where is she?"

"Down there," the man pointed with a shaky hand. "Last door, the one before the kitchen."

Merlin didn't let go of the man as they made their way down the corridor. Most of the rooms were wide open and empty, the curtains closed, every light on. Will and Kay emerged from the kitchen, heading up the stairs. It didn't take long -- less than a minute -- before they came downstairs.

"Clear," Kay said.

"Basement?" Will asked, getting into Borden's face. "Where's the basement?"

"Kitchen! It's just a cellar!"

"We've been in there. It's full of rubbish," Will said, meeting Merlin's eyes. "There's a kid in the first room we saw. You go, I'll take him."

Merlin waited until Will had a hand free and handed him over. Will wasn't any gentler with the man than Merlin had been, forcing Borden to follow Merlin down the corridor.

Right before the kitchen was the living room that looked bigger than it really was. Two sofas were shoved next to each other against the wall, three armchairs were scattered -- one against the window, the other two on the other side. The coffee table had been moved closer to the window and had a lamp in the middle, the shade on the floor, the bare bulb giving the entire room weird, heavily-lit shadows. A flat-screen telly hung from the wall on the opposite side of the two sofas.

A little girl was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room. She stared up at the telly, tears streaming down her face, completely unconcerned to the fact that their house had been broken into. Around her knees were colouring books and broken crayons.

"You're not supposed to stop singing," Borden said.

"You're not supposed to be talking." Will tightened his grip around Borden and the man gasped with pain.

Someone had done a half-assed job of brushing the little girl's fine white-blond hair. She wore a black T-shirt that was several sizes too large for her frame and made her porcelain skin seem all the
more pale. Light blue eyes were rimmed red with tears, her cheeks were blotchy with emotion, and she clutched the crayons tightly in white-knuckled hands.

Now that Merlin knew that he was able to do it, he looked, and saw a fragile overlay on the little girl's aura. It was a tiny dragon just a bit bigger than she was. Its scales were alabaster with a shimmering blue undertone. Its wings bowed at awkward angles as if it didn't know how to spread them wide -- or as if it couldn't spread them at all.

Merlin exchanged a glance with Kay. Kay gave a little head-shake.

Pushing his weapon off to the side and covering it with his arms to minimize any trauma on the girl, Merlin approached her slowly, careful not to spook her. He didn't have to bother. She was transfixed to whatever was playing on the telly.

Merlin glanced at the screen. It was shaky footage of the skies over London, the sunrise visible as a slight sliver of light over the distant horizon behind two tall buildings. But directly overhead were the dragons, bathing each other in flames. The jerky image changed to two dragons in an aerial tussle, claws slashing at wings, teeth biting down on scaly flesh.

He crouched down in front of the little girl, blocking her view. She stared through him as if he wasn't there.

The angry wave of magic to push the stone to the pit out of the way. The Sorcerer leaned in, trying to see inside. He reached down the edges, fingers slipping over gouges in the stone. They felt like the desperate claw marks of someone or something trying to escape.

He cast a light so that he could see. As soon as the white witch-light illuminated the stone, he wished that he didn't have to see.

The little white dragon was half-dead. She barely lifted her head to look at him. She made a small, mournful sound through teeth that were jagged and broken from trying to bite her way out of the ground. Wings were draped with a gossamer skin too thin to support the dragon's weight in flight even if the delicate bones hadn't been broken and broken again.

Her body was twined in chains, deformed by having to grow in this terrible, restricted space.

Hours -- no. Days. It took days and two dozen Knights to get the dragon out of its prison. She seemed to come to itself now that it was in the open air, and the Sorcerer had hope that he could help the Queen heal, to restore her to her rightful draconic grace.

Darkness, confined space, isolation and starvation weren't hazards to only afflict the flesh, because as soon as she was free, she lashed out at all of them, killing many of her rescuers, and fled.

Merlin blinked the vision out of his eyes, his heart aching as if he himself had been there, looking down upon the miserable creature, frantic to get her to health and safety.

The little girl shifted a little to the right and craned her neck to watch the telly.

"Hi," Merlin said. When she didn't so much as blink, Merlin added, "What's your name?"

Borden snickered. The laughter stopped when Will cuffed him on the head.

"I have friends who would really like to see you again. I know one of them has been looking for you for a long time. I could take you to him," Merlin said. "Would you like to come with me?"
"She won't," Borden sneered.

Merlin glanced at Will; Will lowered his hand with a glare, obviously keen on beating the man.

"Why not?"

"Because she's bonded to me," Borden said, smug. "I'm the one who found her egg --"

"Of course there's an egg. Bloody dragons," Will said, more incredulous than anything.

"... I was there when it cracked," Borden continued, ignoring Will. "She's mine. She does what I say."

"Because you're a fucking arse, is why she does what you say," Kay snapped. "She's a child."

"She's a monster," Borden snapped.

Merlin kneeled in front of the Queen. He glanced around for the remote for the telly, spotting it across the room. Getting up to turn the telly off, or at least mute the volume from the reporter -- "... did you see that? Oh my God. That was close --" -- seemed it would shatter a fragile moment if he moved away.

"I hope they kill each other, I really do. I thought things were bad enough with those bloody witches doing whatever they want and never getting told off for it, but what are we going to do with dragons? Next thing we know they'll be demanding access to the NHS," a bystander said on the telly, spiteful and venomous.

Merlin's magic lashed out, furious and indignant, shattering the television and cutting the remnants in two.

Borden abruptly stopped talking.

The little girl looked at Merlin.

Though tears still stained her cheeks, she tilted her head with a flicker of curiosity.

Maybe it was Merlin's magic. Maybe it was the resulting golden glow of his eyes. He didn't know. But if magic could attract her attention, then it was magic that she would get.

Merlin let his magic flow freely, without direction. It flooded the room, scrubbing the aura of menace until the air shimmered.

The little girl took a slow breath. She wiped the tears from her face with rough fingers. Her small frame shuddered under a sob that she tried vainly to suppress. She leaned away from him even as she reached for him, too scarred to trust, but wanting to.

Her fingertips touched Merlin's cheek.

"Drakontas anir," she said, her voice tiny, gentle and sweet around the hard syllables.

Merlin blinked at her. He frowned, not sure if he'd heard right, but when she leaned toward him, her hand reaching out, he didn't pull away. Pudgy, clumsy fingers smeared with crayon wax poked his cheek, the contact point tingling, and a surge of power welled up within him, reaching up as if in greeting.

*He held the egg in his hand, marveling at its brilliance. The shell was alabaster-white, shimmering*
like those rare shell-stones women of wealth wore at court, but far more vibrant, as if the egg pulsed of its own light. Still too young to be born, but --

The vision fizzled out of its own accord, as if it were collapsing onto itself. Arthur had told Merlin he believed it was an incongruity between what had been done before and what Merlin and Arthur were doing now. Merlin wondered if there was something to the theory, because the little girl stared at him expectantly, as if she was waiting for him to do or say something.

"Drakontas anir," she repeated insistently, her eyebrows pinching in the middle. She looked like she was about to burst into tears again.

Merlin held out his arms.

"Yes. That's me. Drakontas anir," Merlin said. "You don't need to tell me your name. It's okay. I know it already, don't I?"

The little girl's eyes widened with anticipation. Her hands opened and closed, grasping at something that wasn't there.

"Hello, Aithusa. I'm Merlin."

At the sound of her name, the little girl brightened as if she were seeing the sun for the first time. She threw herself into his arms.

Merlin might have gone deaf in one ear from her happy squeal.

---

Mickey was a lost.

That wasn't strictly true. He knew exactly where he was. He was on the road overlooking the Tower Bridge in the middle of London and in what appeared to be a standoff. Team Excalibur was nearby, standing stoic and unmoving, stretching across the road and preventing anyone from getting past them.

Not that anyone was trying, actually.

Mickey was lost in that he had no idea what was going on. He didn't understand why the people on the other side of the river were just standing there, motionless, with no obvious intent of advancing. He didn't understand why the army on his side of things were mirroring the other. Surely, there should be some sort of action plan in place to win the war to their advantage.

A thick lump settled in his chest and he couldn't breathe around it. He knew, logically, that it didn't matter which side won the battle, because the war would already be won by the enemy, who had maneuvered the army into facing civilians on the battlefield. Viscerally, however, he wanted to win. He wanted Excalibur to put down the enemy like the dogs they were. He wanted the war to end.

The air burst into flames. Mickey flinched but didn't move away. A downdraft of heat heralded a dragon's passage overhead.
He'd learned that the dragons wouldn't be flying low enough to do direct harm at the street level. They couldn't. There were too many buildings in the way to allow for enough room for them to perform aerial tricks that the best dogfighter would envy. The bursts of dragonflame were snuffed out before they reached the ground, and Mickey was uncomfortably hot in his winter clothing and Kevlar vest.

It was winter. It shouldn't feel like it was summer.

And yet --

The sun rose with a bright yellow light forecasting a pleasant day, free of haze and frost. It chased the clouds across the horizon, sending them to the perigee; and no sooner had the sun climbed high enough to flare over the tops of the nearby buildings did the sky clear.

It was a rare winter day with no clouds in sight. The air should be cold, but it was warm, as if Spring was around the corner. Where there was still snow on the ground, there was muddy slush.

Mickey thought he saw a few birds -- finches, out of season -- but that might've been his imagination. All appearances to the contrary, they were in the middle of a war with mythical beasts battling it out overhead, and the unseasonably good weather felt too much as if the schoolyard bully was rubbing Mickey's face in how they might never have a nice day like this again.

"Lamorak," Arthur said, breaking the silence.

"Sir," Lamorak said, advancing to the front.

"Protocol A, please," Arthur said, sounding resigned and sad. "Let's talk to the men."

"Yes, sir," Lamorak said. He fiddled with a box of some sort -- Mickey half-expected a radio, but it didn't look like any he'd ever seen. "On your go."

Arthur didn't give the order right away. He closed his eyes instead. The sun shone on his face and the wind rustled the red scarf around his throat. A muscle worked in his jaw, and he swallowed hard.

Mickey almost missed Arthur's nod.

"Captain Arthur Pendragon of team Excalibur, assuming command. Confirm."

He was silent for a moment. Mickey could only guess that he was listening to the responses over the line. Arthur exchanged glances with Lamorak, who nodded.

"Open broadcasts to your squads and your teams," Arthur ordered.

Again, there was a pause. Lamorak opened a panel on the box and tapped a few spots on the screen. He raised a thumbs-up sign.

Arthur opened his mouth to speak, only to close it. He took a tiny, steadying breath, and tried again. "Men and women of the British Army, my name is Captain Arthur Pendragon of SAS Team Excalibur. Some of you may know me by reputation, and others may know me because we fought together. But everyone will know me because I am the man who leads the Red Team.

"I am also the man who will give you the order to stand your ground. More than that, I am asking you to stand down."
"The people on the other side of the river are not the enemy. They are our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers, our friends. You may think that they are fighting the war against us, but we've uncovered evidence that they've been placed under a compulsion. Everything that they are doing right now is not of their own free will."

Arthur paused to let that sink in.

"There's a battle raging overhead. Most of the dragons are on our side. They're doing their best to stop their own kin from obeying the enemy's command to attack us. As long as they're in the air, as long as they are not attacking you directly on the ground, do not engage. I repeat: do not engage."

Mickey glanced up just as a dragon tumbled tits over arse in the air. It caught itself on the ledge of a building, which crumpled under impact; soldiers scattered out of the way as brick and mortar tumbled down. The dragon shook itself and pushed up, re-joining the battle.

"I'm asking for a lot. I know. I understand. I'm not asking more of you than I myself am prepared to do." Arthur turned to look at his own men, a solemn expression on his face. "That my men are prepared to do."

He trailed off, seeming to have lost steam. His shoulders rounded, his back straightened, and he nodded to himself, as if coming to a decision.

"It's a privilege to be standing alongside you. Commanders, return to private channel. I will transmit your instructions."

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"You called it," Merlin said after a few minutes. He couldn't keep trying -- he was losing time, and, at this rate, his throat was going to be mangled raw. Every attempt he made at summoning the dragons failed miserably. He wasn't the least bit surprised. Over the battering of wings against air, the clash of bodies, the roaring flames, it was a miracle if he could make himself heard at all. He glanced at Kay. "They're not answering."

Kay glanced up at the sky. "I was afraid of that."

Merlin exhaled heavily. He looked up and down the deserted road. He could see movement in one of the windows on the topmost floor, but most of the windows facing the street were closed. There was one car on the side of the road, but it looked beat-up and run-down, the windshield cracked, the hood of the engine severely dented.

He considered returning into the house where they left Borden zip-tied to a chair and gagged, with a note in Will's handwriting, Hold for pickup, and getting the man's car. But they didn't have time for that.

Merlin shouldered his rifle and crouched down in front of Aithusa. He brushed down her second-hand winter coat and made sure the wool hat was firmly on her head. "Are you ready, my Queen?"

Aithusa pulled up mittens that were to big for her and raised her arms. Merlin picked her up, grimacing at how light she was, and balanced her against her hip. He thought that his Box weighed more than she did.

"Will."
"Already have our route plotted," Will said. "Double-time?"

"Double-time. At least until we find a car," Merlin said, already moving to follow Will. He turned to Kay, about to gesture for him to go ahead, but Kay shook his head.

"I've got the rear," Kay said.

"Hold on, sweetheart," Merlin said, and started running. He didn't know how much time they had, but he had a bad feeling that it wasn't much at all.

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The British Army lined the river on one side. The civilians had advanced and were lined up along the other. Dragons soared overhead, skirmishing in blasts of flame and physical collisions, never seeming to tire.

And through it all, Mickey couldn't breathe. Someone had taken all the air in London in a great inhale, waiting to see what would happen next.

Mickey rubbed his jaw, aware that the camera was on him, but he was at a complete loss for words. He turned to watch the Captain, but found him staring resolutely at the bridge.

Cars were abandoned on the bridge. A lorry laid on its side and blocked incoming traffic with vehicles that had long been abandoned. Mickey couldn't imagine how or when it had happened, but he could only guess it had happened sometime in the last twelve hours, right at about the time when the phantoms first started showing up. Except for a faint trace here and there, the phantoms wispy and weak were as good as gone.

"What's that?" Julia asked.

Mickey squinted. He couldn't see what Julia was talking about. She was the one with the telephoto lens. He thought he saw movement, and the longer he looked, the more he --

There were people coming over the bridge.

Mickey turned, looking in the distance, searching to see if the same activity was happening on the other bridges. There wasn't. In fact, they were holding fast right where they were, all along the ridge, blocking the way.

He turned back to the group heading their way. Thirty -- maybe forty men and women, it was hard to tell -- trailed behind a woman. She was too far away to make her out at this distance, but she was slim, of average height, with brown hair and a long, dark coat that flapped around her legs as she walked.

Just as suddenly as they appeared, the group came to a stop halfway on the bridge. The woman continued with only a few more steps before stopping, her hands on her hips.

A flag rose in the background, unfurling in the wind.

Mickey half-expected a white flag of truce, of peace, but instead, it was a sickly yellow, patterned with faint plaid, and must have been the best that they could have found.

"It's a trap," Leon said. Next to him, Arthur nodded.
"Of course it is," Arthur said. He bowed his head and checked his watch. "Any word on Merlin and the others?"

"They've got her," Lamorak said. "They're on their way. Blue sedan, ETA fifteen minutes if the roads stay clear."

"He'll make it in ten. Let's give them those ten minutes," Arthur said. "Radio down the line. Make sure they're let through."

"Yes, sir," Lamorak said, moving aside.

"Do we have something for a banner?" Arthur asked.

"I'll find something," Owain said. Arthur nodded at him and Owain left.

Leon moved in closer. Mickey couldn't help it; the two men, Arthur in particular, was a magnetic force, and he was drawn in, too. "What's the plan?" Leon asked.

"Stall however we can," Arthur said. "If talking fails, we fight. Get the team together."

Leon nodded firmly and went to talk to Perceval. Arthur glanced at Mickey.

"Anything I can do, Captain?" Mickey asked.

Arthur took a deep breath, and, looking ahead, shook his head. "Keep filming."

Mickey turned to Julia, who blindly palmed her pack and felt for extra battery packs and memory. She held up her thumb. He didn't have to tell her to make sure that she changed out everything for fresh before they followed Excalibur onto the bridge.

It took far less time than Mickey had anticipated for Owain to return with a bolt of white, coarse material. Arthur studied it for a moment before giving his approval; a moment later, Cennydd ran his hands over it, murmured something sorcerous, and transformed the fabric into something light and lush, vibrant and blood-red, in the same shade as their scarves.

"Seems fitting," he said.

"Red's better," Bohrs said.

"I like the red. Let's go with the red," Pellinor said.

Arthur frowned, but the small twitch at the corners of his mouth hinted at how hard it was for him to keep a straight face. With a gruff voice, he said, "It'll have to do."

Finding a pole long enough to serve as a bannermast took some doing, and by the time they had something fashioned, Merlin, Kay and Will arrived, the army parting for them as they approached, leaving the dark blue sedan a block over.

"Oh, Jesus, just tear my bloody heart out, won't you?" Julia said, hurriedly swapping out the battery pack and hefting the camera to her shoulder.

Mickey turned around and saw just what had gotten to Julia. Merlin was holding on to a little girl whose arms were around his neck. Her purple winter jacket stood out against the dark military uniform, and her neon-pink scarf drifted in the wind.

The little girl was staring up at the sky, her mouth open not in awe, not in fear, but in grief, tears
streaming down her face. Mickey wasn't a bleeding heart, but his heart broke to see her like that, and he agreed, in sentiment only, when Julia awww'ed as Merlin pulled the little girl even closer, and she buried her face against his neck.

"That's the dragon Queen?" Mickey asked, not sure what he'd expected. A stately woman in a flowing dress made out of rubies, maybe. An actual dragon, golden and bright, so much different than the motley mess of colours flying overhead. Definitely not a little girl that wasn't any older than four or five, with white-blond hair, pale skin, and big blue eyes.

Arthur looked up at the question, glancing first at Mickey and toward Merlin. He gave Perceval a few instructions before moving to meet Merlin halfway.

"Any trouble?" Arthur asked.

"Less than we expected," Merlin said. "They only had one guy on her."

There was something in Merlin's tone that spoke volumes of something else that Mickey couldn't decipher, but this once, for a change, he held his tongue.

"Is she all right?" Arthur asked, concern in his expression.

Merlin turned his head, but the little girl remained firmly entrenched against his neck. "She's worried. It's hurting her to see them fight."

Arthur took a big breath and nodded. He tilted his head as if trying to catch the girl's eyes. "We'll do everything that we can to make them stop."

The little girl shifted at the sound of Arthur's voice, squirming in Merlin's arms. She watched Arthur with red-rimmed eyes and cheeks streaked clean with tears. Her arm reached out for him, hand swaddled in a ridiculously over-large mitten, and said, "Pendraken."

Arthur glanced at Merlin with surprise. Merlin looked from the little girl to his Captain with a small smile and a half-shrug. He inched closer to Arthur and asked, "Do you want to go to Arthur, Aithusa?"

Aithusa let go of Merlin without hesitation, trusting both men to catch her if she should fall, and the fierce protectiveness in Arthur's eyes when he took her into his arms was more than Mickey could bear and he turned away.

"I think my ovaries exploded," Julia muttered.

"Mine, too," Mickey said, spreading his hands. "And I don't even have any!"

"Are we clear on the plan?" Arthur asked.

It was really hard to listen to Arthur while he carried Aithusa in his arms. They'd since cut down a flak jacket to her size and tucked it under her winter coat, which she'd complained against. The only time she was quiet, even despite the battle that seemed to be slackening off overhead, was when she was tucked against Merlin or -- or like now, when she was hanging from Arthur's neck as if she were a spider monkey, held in place by an arm under her bum.
Despite the situation, it was too bloody adorable for words.

Instead, Merlin stared out at the bridge. He could feel Nimueh's magic.

Her group hadn't moved an inch since they'd arrived. There was no further movement on the other side. The dragons continued to fight, but the skirmishes were fewer and bloodier each time. There was at least one report of an aerial battle continuing on the ground, decimating a Tesco's, half of an empty chips shop, and several dozen cars parked in the lot of a rental place. If there were any dragon casualties, Merlin hadn't heard of any.

"About as clear as mud," Gwaine said, scratching the scruff of his jaw. Arthur had called the snipers down because there would be no point in having them taking out Nimueh from afar, not with the shields that were in place. Looking at the shields now, Merlin suspected that Gwaine would have a better chance at Nimueh with the crossbow casually hanging over his shoulder.

"Just one question," Owain asked. He tilted his head toward the makeshift banner, red flag twisted around the base. "Who's carrying the flag?"

"I'll do it," someone said from just behind Bedivere. Bedivere moved out of the way, and Evans, the SAS Captain that had stood with Excalibur before they'd officially revealed themselves, was right behind him. Evan's team, Riptide, was nearby, too, and Merlin wondered how long they'd been there. It seemed that most of the soldiers who were guarding this side of the bridge, and this bridge in particular, were positioned close to Excalibur.

Merlin wasn't sure if that was deliberate on anyone's part or if it was lucky happenstance. He could tell that Arthur was relieved by the offer, but that he also had reservations about putting anyone else in the line of fire.

"Evans," Arthur began.

"Seems to me that your boys need their hands free," Evans said, shrugging in a way that brokered absolutely no argument. "And don't argue. It's any little bit that we can do. Your team has done enough."

Arthur exchanged glances with Leon and Perceval to see if they had any objections. When they didn't, he turned to Evans. "Fine. But you stay behind us."

"Nowhere else I'd rather be," Evans said, taking hold of the flag when Owain passed it on to him.

Arthur shifted Aithusa's weight from one arm to the other and said, "We need to let the dragons know that you're safe. Do you know how we can do that?"

"Merlin tried," Aithusa said, a small smile on her lips, her cheeks pink from something other than the cold, her gaze down as she fiddled with Arthur's collar.

"Then we're going to have to be brilliant about this," Arthur said, nodding at Merlin. "Really get their attention."

"Tall order," Merlin said.

"You're the one who called down a bloody Goddess," Mordred reminded him.

Merlin shuddered, still feeling the otherworldly presence. Being under a Goddess' scrutiny really wasn't the way he wanted to endure a day.
"That were the three of us," Merlin said, gesturing to Mordred and Kay. "And I'm not sure that's going to work on dragons."

"I thought about that. I figure they might be able to help if we need them." Arthur was momentarily distracted when Aithusa squirmed in his arms.

Arthur put her down as she requested, and they both watched her run toward the soldiers behind Excalibur. Evans' team moved out of her way, and Merlin realized what Arthur had meant when Balinor and his men came into sight. His team was trimmed down, the dragons among them no doubt fighting the battle overhead. Aithusa stopped in front of them, standing straighter, and one by one, the Dragonlords took a knee, hands over their hearts, heads bowed.

The moment was so solemn that, for an instant, Merlin couldn't hear the battle overhead, the dragon roars muted and distant. The bottom of the bridge was a poor Queen's court with cracked pavement and muddy slush puddles, but it somehow was grander than any castle's court.

Aithusa shifted from foot to foot, wringing her hands. She ran back to Excalibur. To Merlin.

He caught her without a second's thought, bringing her easily to his hip, smiling a little when she laughed softly and buried her head in his neck. "I think she's shy," he said when Balinor came closer.

"No," Balinor said, his eyes glistening. "She's found her Dragonlord."

Merlin stared at Balinor, eyes wide. He started to say something in protest, only to find himself at complete loss for words while being simultaneously flooded with them. He wasn't a Dragonlord; he wasn't trained for this. He didn't know what he was doing; he couldn't possibly take responsibility for a dragon, never mind a dragon Queen. How was he going to teach her to fly? How was he supposed to teach her the rules of dragon culture when he didn't know them himself? What was he going to do when it was time for her to go to school -- because the Social Care Council would probably hang him if he didn't see to her education --

Aithusa's hand twined around his neck and pulled at his hair through her mittens, and she laid her head on his shoulder as if she were perfectly content to stay there, and Merlin suddenly couldn't remember why he was about to protest in the first place. Any question that he wouldn't keep Aithusa safe fell away when he felt a hand on his other shoulder, and he looked up to see Arthur right there with him.

"I thought we'd wait a few years before we adopted, but, um…" Merlin shrugged helplessly.

Arthur cuffed Merlin's head lightly and said, "Just another reason to get out of our tours as soon as we can, yeah?"

"Yeah," Merlin agreed slowly, too dumbfounded to do anything else.

Arthur looked as if he wanted to say something more, his eyes drifting down to see where Aithusa was sucking her thumb against Merlin's chest. He shook his head and turned to Balinor. "Ready?"

Balinor's eyes narrowed. The tension between them was almost more than Merlin could bear. He felt as if he were in the battlefield, about to throw himself on top of the mine to protect Arthur, but Aithusa was in his arms, and he didn't dare risk her.

He found that he didn't need to, because Balinor's back straightened, his shoulders rounded, and he saluted Arthur. "Yes, Captain."
Without another word, Balinor turned on his heels, faced his men, and bellowed for them to come forward.

Arthur's eyes were as wide and as round as Merlin's. Arthur's mouth snapped shut and he pressed his lips together, shrugging in a gesture that Merlin interpreted as, *I'll take it.*

It took Merlin a little longer to blink the surprise out of his eyes, and that was only because Aithusa kicked his hip in a squirm to get more comfortable.

Arthur turned to face the others. "All right. We're moving forward."

He turned to Merlin.

"Stay behind me," Arthur said, pointing a finger at him.

Merlin rolled his eyes.

In the army, there was a whole lot of hurry up and wait. Of orders being passed down the line. Of clarification and questions raised and amendments made. Of restructured squads, of priorities, of contingencies. When it was all said and done, the better part of an hour had passed before the red banner was unfurled and Excalibur marched on the bridge.

The air crackled with magic -- drifting down from above as the dragons flew overhead; wafting from the other side of the bridge, slowly growing in strength; rising from deep below as the earth unfurled its power like a flower blooming in the Spring.

No one spoke.

They walked past the abandoned cars. Around the flipped-over lorry. They fanned out across the lanes, Cennydd with Evans, the red banner catching the wind. The reporter and the cameraperson kept pace, continuing to film. The Dragonlords took up the rear, and far behind them were Evans' men and other infantrymen who weren't dissuaded from following to the battlefield.

Arthur stopped fifty metres away from the crowd behind Nimueh. He glanced over his shoulder, waiting for everyone to come to a halt, before he stepped forward, matching Nimueh in position.

Nimueh was no different than the photographs they'd seen from the security videos at the American repository in London. From the ones taken off the video feed at MI-5. She was exactly the same as she had been that night that she'd raised the dead, using the Morrigan's staff and army of warriors for her cause.

Rugged winter boots. Dark clothes beneath the long coat that was open at the front. A red scarf loose around her throat. Her brown hair tied in a smart braid against the wind. Gloves on her hands.

This close, Merlin thought that she looked the worse for wear. There were dark circles under her eyes that no amount of clever makeup could completely cover up. Strain was present in the lines around her mouth. The colour in her cheeks had been raised by the wind, and couldn't be mistaken as a blush of health.

She couldn't keep fighting, not like this, and not for long. This was her last stand. If she knew that, it was well-hidden behind a smug smile lined in heavy red lipstick and bravado that didn't meet her eyes.

"Come to surrender?" Nimueh asked.
"I was just about to ask you the same," Arthur said.

Nimueh's smile quirked. "You can't win this war."

"I was about to say that, too," Arthur said.

From where he was standing, Merlin couldn't see Arthur's face. But he could see the courage growing in him from the way Arthur's shoulders evened out. Merlin wondered if Arthur had figured out how little Nimueh had left. She certainly didn't have that much support at her back. At most, there were twelve sorcerers, all of questionable strength, looking worse off than Nimueh. With them were thirty solid, stout men, broad shouldered and barrel-chested, armed for bear. They all appeared to have come because someone had promised them a fight, but now that they were faced with one, their hard expressions were frayed with a measure of doubt.

Nimueh glanced upward with a small, little laugh. "Your allies won't overcome my minions. They're losing, you know."

Merlin glanced up, unable to help himself. The shadowy passes had diminished since the first engagement hours ago, but that didn't mean that they had stopped fighting. If anything, the clearer skies indicated that Kilgarrah, Mandrake and Tachnathar had succeeded in drawing the fighting further afield, away from civilians. Merlin could hear the distant roaring and feel the clashes down in the marrow of his bones, neither side giving way.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Arthur said. His voice was quiet, calm, unruffled. Merlin could feel the chill in his tone, and clearly, Nimueh could, too.

"You are going to die," Nimueh said slowly, clearly.

"Not today," Arthur said.

They stared at each other, wordless, taking the enemy's measure. The silence stretched for an eternity, uncomfortable in the icy cold of the morning that was slowly thawing as the sun rose higher in the sky. Aithusa wriggled in Merlin's arm and he obligingly put her down, shaking out the pins and needles from holding her for so long. She put her hand in Merlin's, her bright pink mitten odd against the olive green and black of Merlin's uniform.

Nimueh's gaze was dark, conspiring; her chin dipped down and her mouth parted as if she were about to cast a spell. She looked past Arthur and saw Merlin --

"You," she snarled.

Merlin rolled his eyes and sighed. "Yeah. It's me. Again. We've done this dance before, can we skip to the point?"

Arthur shifted; Merlin took his cue. He shook his hand to free it, but Aithusa wouldn't let go, and her grasp was so tight that his bones ground together. He gave up and reluctantly brought Aithusa with him as he took position next to Arthur. Aithusa pulled at Merlin until they were closer to Arthur, and she wrapped her other arm around Arthur's knee.

Arthur's expression flickered in the faintest betrayal of his surprise, but he didn't glance down. Instead, he put a hand on top of Aithusa's head, adjusting her wool hat.

Nimueh's venomous glare drew away from Merlin to stare at Aithusa, her jaw dropping. The people standing behind her exchanged dubious glances, as if they realized that their plans for conquest and domination were in cinders.
"There's no need for this war," Arthur said, raising his voice so that he could be heard by the people standing beyond Nimueh. "The world changed. The world needs changing. But nothing will change as long as we're on opposite sides. It definitely won't if we trade the way we did things before for a way of life where even fewer people are in charge --"

Merlin was watching for it. Magic crackled around his free hand.

He knew there was a chance that Nimueh would break. Arthur counted on it. No one believed that the NWO could carry on the way it did when the so-called promised rewards weren't being paid out. The NWO's manifesto promised kingdoms and unspoken riches for the reaping, and those promises were empty as long as everyone was suffering the same. Nimueh would lose control of her people soon, if she hadn't already, and she couldn't risk losing what little power that she had now.

And break Nimueh did, because she lashed out with a roar of outrage. A white crackle of light blasted toward them --

-- and collided without effect against the shield Merlin raised all around the bridge. The shield held fast, glittering gold.

"Will you shut the fuck up?" she shouted. "You and your bloody words! You talk about fairness and equality, of an united Albion --"

She threw a barrage of white bolts at the shield. Merlin didn't waver, but he could feel every blow, solid and stout like a juggernaut. Arthur held his ground, but Aithusa's grasp around Merlin's fingers was all the tighter, grinding bones.

"It won't happen as long as I'm alive! Magic will rule! Magic will --" Nimueh raised her arms to her side, her head thrown back to the sky. "-- ruuuule --"

The bridge groaned, rumbled, shook. Pavement split and cracked. Mortar and bricks crumbled. At least one wire snapped, and --

Amidst the panicked chaos and frantic screaming, a stampede of civilians and NWO headed in the opposite direction, away from the threat of plummeting down into the icy waters below and closer to the safety of the shore. They were nearly at the other end before they realized that the bridge had stopped shaking.

On either side of the bridge were Cennydd and Mordred, arms outstretched, their palms up, their eyes glowing gold.

Dust drifted down with one last creak, a groan, and then -- silence.

"As Evil Overlord tantrums go," Will mused, his voice carrying in the quiet, "I rate this one a four out of ten. Maybe a four-point-five. Sorry to say, but you'll never make the finals at this rate."

The statement was so absurd -- and absolutely true -- that Merlin snorted. He wasn't the only one. Leon covered his mouth in an attempt to hide his smile. Perceval coughed, but his chest bounced with suppressed laughter. Gwaine grinned, not the least bit annoyed that he hadn't made the crack himself.

The humour spread, touching the soldiers behind Excalibur. The civilians and clear members of the NWO who had heard were exchanging questioning glances, and Merlin noted that those who had run off weren't coming back, either, clearly done with the entire situation.
"This is your one and only chance, Nimueh," Arthur said firmly.

Merlin didn't know what prompted him to do it, but Arthur drew the sword that he'd taken to carrying in a makeshift sheath across his back. Nimueh tracked the movement with an angry, haughty glare. Her eyes fixed on the sword. Recognition dawned on her features, and all the life seemed to drain out of her.

"Surrender. Surrender, and no harm will come to you. You'll be given a fair trial. All of you," Arthur said.

A dull clatter of metal struck the ground. Weapons slipped out of the hands of the civilians who had stayed with Nimueh. A confused expression crossed their faces when they took stock of the situation they were in, and they raised their hands with alarm. The members of the NWO lowered their guns and their makeshift weapons, but kept them in hand, as if they didn't trust that it could be over so easily.

Some of them didn't appear to want it to be over at all.

Nimueh was more difficult to read. She lowered her chin and hooded her eyes. Her stance relaxed, shoulders drooping, her arms hanging listlessly at her sides.

Merlin shifted at the same time Arthur did, both of them moving to stand in front of Aithusa.

It wasn't anything out of the ordinary. There weren't any tell-tale flags. No magic flared to give warning.

The seconds trickled by.

Pristine, pure magic tingled under Merlin's skin, swelling and magnifying like the rising tide of the sea, directionless, without malice, untainted and pure. It was urgent, insistent, pushing and pulling like a child keen on going somewhere else, anywhere else. The situation already had Merlin on an adrenaline-sharpened edge without his magic making him twitchy on top of everything.

Nimueh looked up, her eyes dark and full of menace, a mad smile broadening. She shifted her weight on her heels, raised her arms --

_Plightning crackled._

Merlin reacted on instinct, moving forward so that the spell would fall on _him_ should his shield fail, but no sooner had the lightning struck his shield that there was _gunfire._

Nimueh's body juddered from the impact of multiple bullets. Four shots, in all, the last of the reserve bullets enchanted with wards, and still she stood, though on weakening legs. Her eyes dulled, but there was one last flash of magic --

A fifth gunshot fired, loud and reverberating. Nimueh's head jerked forward and…

Crumpled.

Behind Nimueh, a man -- one of her own men -- lowered his gun. A grim, unrepentant expression was in his eyes when he looked from the body to Merlin, to Arthur. He held up his free hand to show that he meant no harm, and slowly moved to put the gun on the ground before stepping away.

More people put down their weapons and held up their hands. Out along the riverside, the citizens of London forcibly conscripted to Nimueh's cause staggered, confused in their sudden freedom,
and began to slowly scatter.

It shouldn't have been that easy --

*Lightning crackled under darkened skies, illuminating ancient ruins and a stone altar long stained black with blood. The Sorcerer could hear the witch's cackle over the deafening sound, pinned helplessly in place as he watched his mentor crumple and fall --*

*She had been his friend, once, a regal lady of fine pedigree and impeccable manner, sought after by all noble born men across the lands. But ever since they sent the druid boy away to safety, something had changed --*

*Black smoke stung the Sorcerer's eyes, but he had no more tears to shed as the flames burned the pyre of one of his dearest friends --*

*The world tilted on its axis, the ground becoming the sky, and he felt himself limp and weightless as he was carried --*

*The Sorcerer shouted a curse upon the world, expressing in rage what he could not in grief. He watched the boat float away with his beloved King, tears streaking down his face, and once he had breath again, he could barely whisper the words to cast the reed aflame, to nudge his King's remains toward Avalon --*

-- but it was. One by one, the visions crumbled as they failed to exist in a modern corollary. Merlin felt as if he were watching his life -- no, someone else's life -- flash before his eyes, an eternity lived and ended in the blink of an eye. When he turned around to look at Arthur, he found that Arthur was just as dazed, probably for the same reason.

"Well," Merlin said, clearing his throat. He moved closer, glad that Arthur had wedged Aithusa behind him so that she wouldn't have seen Nimueh's death. "That was anticlimactic."

"Anticlimactic feels pretty good right now," Arthur said. He managed a wry, still-stunned smile, looking down only when Aithusa tugged at his trouser leg. He picked her up when she held out her arms, holding her easily against him.

Excalibur swarmed around them, touching their shoulders as they walked past to secure the prisoners remaining on the bridge. Leon gave orders over the radio for the army to cross the bridge but to allow the people to peacefully disperse and to contain any localized violence. Mordred crouched next to Nimueh's body, not quite touching her, and it wasn't until Lucan joined him that they confirmed that she was dead.

Aithusa's bright blue eyes met Merlin's, and he felt himself pinned in place by the wisdom behind her gaze, half-hidden by the child that she still was. "Is it time yet?"

Merlin glanced up at the sky. The dragons were far afield, no doubt still fighting, unaware of the happenstances that would free them completely from Nimueh's threats. Merlin looked at Aithusa and nodded. "Yes, Aithusa. It's time."

She smiled, her cheeks dimpling. With a too-serious moment of concentration, Aithusa took a deep breath, raised her chin, and roared.

Arthur jerked his head away from the sound, wincing in pain but never letting Aithusa go. For such a little girl, she had the voice of a Queen, stately and grand, asking without demanding, mothering without being smothering, caring, firm and unwavering. Merlin felt something primal in him rise up in answer.
He joined Aithusa in calling the dragons back from the precipice of war, and after a moment, so did the other Dragonlords.

"So," Mickey began, staring into the camera. He laughed a little, hung his head, and spread his hands in apology. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to sitting in studio. It feels like I should be running toward the action. Or away from it, I guess."

Julia was on a well-deserved vacation, which roughly translated to, *Fuck that, I'm a field person, you couldn't pay me enough to stand behind a static camera.* Mickey envied her, because he had never liked being in a suit, and it took everything he had to stop fidgeting and to keep himself from touching his tie.

*London Underground* had always been an on-demand news outlet on the web, subsiding mostly on the generosity of wonky videos being submitted by their faithful followers. Throughout the war, they gained more and more followers until they had no choice but to lose viewers or expanded. In the aftermath of the last big blow-out, which had been more of a near-miss, the company had become a living entity in its own right and the people in charge were currently negotiating rights to get their own channel on the telly.

Web-based field-run newscasts meant that *London Underground* had never really made use of the anchorperson desk in the studio and had been using it for long-term, temporary storage. Out of the corner of his eye, Mickey could see boxes of someone's rubbish tucked away, plush toys left over from the toy drive over Christmas two months ago, and the sign off the top of a pub. It had probably been nicked a while back and hidden here.

The producer made a desperate hand-rolling motion, reminding Mickey that they were broadcasting live without feed delays, and long, awkward pauses didn't work when Bertrise wasn't able to cut them out.

He cleared his throat. "It's been weeks since the incident on the bridge. I suspect that we have all been holding our breath since then, but I'm pretty sure that it's safe to relax, now. Although there have been a few skirmishes throughout the city, the local police has been taking care of those situations, and the military presence is slowly pulling out. It's not just London, either. Reports from all over the United Kingdom support the surreal possibility that we are currently at peace, and that it's going to remain that way for a while. No one wants to commit to a political promise, but it's looking really good."

Mickey winced. He knocked on the table. "I hope I didn't jinx us.

"I wish I could say that this was a worldwide effect, but it's not. Some countries have seen a dramatic decrease in incidents, but in others, the presence of the NWO has either increased or other similar cults have spun off from it. I will be reporting on that later. But first, I want to thank everyone for their support and for all the messages on the website.

"There were a lot of questions that I haven't gotten around to answering yet, but I will. There's one question that keeps coming up again and again, though, and it's, *where's Excalibur?*"

Mickey paused for effect. He spread his hands on the surface of what was a rather cheap and flimsy anchorperson desk that someone had miraculously turned into something presentable.
"To answer that question, I'd like to introduce you to our guest, who is joining us on Skype," Mickey said. "Morgana Pendragon-Cross is the acting president of Pendragon Consulting and has graciously agreed to join us today. Morgana, can you hear me?"

"I can," Morgana said. "It's nice to see you again, Mickey. How have you been?"

"I've been well," Mickey said, smiling. He wished he could see her, but he'd been expressly told by the producer to keep his attention on the camera. He had already spoken to her on more than one occasion and had even met up with her in person when she came to London one week to work when she signed the paperwork to take over the company on what was likely to become a permanent basis. At the moment, she had returned to Camelot, and he'd promised not to mention her current location. "And yourself?

"As well as can be expected," Morgana said neutrally.

Mickey had given her a long list of questions that he wanted to ask her on the air. The list had come back to him heavily truncated, with an addendum full of subjects that he hadn't thought of asking. The result was an interview that was heavily bent toward putting Excalibur in a favourable light, something that Mickey was wholeheartedly behind, but the reporter in him wanted to get to the hard-hitting facts.

The only reason he didn't push for certain questions to make it to the list was because… Well.

Mickey was a little terrified of Morgana, to be honest.

Marauding looters, zombies raised from the dead, evil sorcerers, dragons -- nothing terrified him more than Morgana when she was fully intent on protecting those she loved.

"In case someone in the audience missed it, I'd like to confirm that you weren't hearing things, and that caption on the bottom of your television screen is correct. Morgana, would you please define your relationship to team Excalibur?"

"Captain Arthur Pendragon is my brother," Morgana said, a clear note of pride in her voice. "Lieutenant Leon Cross is my husband."

"I've contacted the British Army offices asking for information about Excalibur. No one has seen them in several weeks. You'd think that their PR department would take advantage of their popularity and trot them out as part of a recruitment drive," Mickey said.

"You'd think!" Morgana said with a laugh. "They're camera-friendly, aren't they?"

"Well, the people leaving comments on the forums certainly think so," Mickey said with a grin. He ignored the producer's dour look. Mickey and Julia's on-air banter was apparently part of the viewer attraction and the reason they had solidly-increasing ratings; he wasn't going to change his approach now. More seriously, he added, "Speaking of the forums, the most popular question that we're getting is, Where are they? Would you be able to shed some light on that?"

"If the military is giving you the roundabout, what makes you think I'd have any better luck?" Morgana asked.

"The recent government contracts awarded to Pendragon Consulting for equipment that the team used on their mission, which I understand were borrowed by Captain Pendragon, maybe?" Mickey suggested.

"The company gets government contracts all the time," Morgana said with amusement. "Try
"Because you strike me as the sort of person people don't normally say no to and survive to their next birthday?" Mickey tried.

He was rewarded with a bark of a surprised laugh, not just from Morgana, but somewhere in the background of wherever it was that Morgana was Skyping in from. "While true, believe me when I say that sometimes it's better for the loved ones of our soldiers do not know where they are. We might worry more, but it's also safer for them. It's something I've become very familiar with in the last year. I am sorry, but even if I did know, I wouldn't tell you."

"Are they safe?" Mickey asked.

"As safe as they can be," Morgana said simply.

"Do you know if they're still working together?" Mickey asked. It was a curious question that someone asked on the forum, but one that made sense when he understood that sometimes, teams were broken up to work in different divisions. Soldiers with special skills were in particularly high demand, and it wasn't unusual.

"Absolutely no one will like my answer, least of all myself." A slight hesitation preceded Morgana's next words. "The answer to that question is not right now. Every member of team Excalibur will always remain a member of the team, but they have very unique abilities, knowledge, and training. It's important for the military to learn these new techniques and tactics so that they can adapt to the changes that are happening in our world right now. Every member of team Excalibur is currently leading a team of their own and continue to operate under Arthur's command."

"They've been promoted, haven't they?" Mickey asked.

"Again, if I knew that, I wouldn't be able to tell you," Morgana said. Mickey could hear the smile in her voice.

"One thing I did find out was that the members of Excalibur were supposed to have completed their tours of duty a long time ago. Were they forced to re-enlist?"

A long silence followed, and it was interrupted by a heavy sigh.

"I'll make this very clear. As clear as I possibly can. I can only speak for the members of team Excalibur, because I know most of them as if they are as much my brothers as Arthur is. In their minds, their service to their country doesn't end because there was an end date on the piece of paper when they signed up. I imagine that this sentiment is much the same for every soldier.

"Every single man in Excalibur had the opportunity not to return to duty. Every one of them, to a man, volunteered without hesitation to return, even the one who left a brand new baby girl behind."

There was another pause, and Mickey really wished that he could see Morgana's expression.

"They are good men. Honourable men. They're not perfect. If you strip away the weapons and the armour and put a pint in their hands, they're just like any other bloke on the street. They didn't do anything different that the rest of us wouldn't have done."

"I wouldn't say that --" Mickey said.

"If it came right down to it, if you were pushed past your point of no return, you can't tell me that
you wouldn't do everything that you can to protect those you love."

Mickey thought about Julia, about all the crazy things that she had done to get the perfect shot. How many times he'd gotten in the way or changed his mind because there was a chance that she would get hurt. He thought about his mother, who was safe in the country. Of his brother, who died on a distant battlefield before magic came alive in the world again. Of complete strangers who went out of their way to save their neighbours.

"They'll say that they're not heroes. And they aren't, not any more than all the brave men and women who stand their ground for what they believe is right," Morgana said. "You know they'll tell you the same thing when it's their turn to sit in your interview chair."

Mickey grinned. "They're keeping that promise?"

"Of course," Morgana said. "As soon as they come home."

The producer stood up straight, eyes wide with surprise, mouth open. Conflicting emotions crossed his expression, as if he couldn't decide which major network to approach first for the broadcast rights.

"You know," Morgana said, her tone turning sly. "The team has a question for you. Actually, it's coming from Gwaine. He needs you to settle a bet."

"Sure," Mickey said. Out of anyone, he thought Gwaine would be one of the most fun people to interview. If he could garnish some goodwill in advance, he'd do it. "How can I help?"

"Have you asked Julia out, yet?"

"This is the latest," Lance said, grinning. He shoved his mobile into Merlin's hand.

The screen was full of baby, and Merlin grinned. At this age, it was hard to tell which parent Laure Margaret Dulac most looked like, but it was clear that she would grow up beautiful. In a way, Merlin was glad that he hadn't seen the baby when she was born, because he wouldn't have been able to contain his first reaction of how bloody ugly babies were in the beginning.

Merlin indulged Lance's proud papa gushing as he flipped through the photo album for Merlin -- *This is her first laugh, Gwen says she's just burping, though, and isn't this just the cutest bubble any baby's ever made?* -- before he nudged Lance gently and said, "Should put the phone away."

Personal communication devices weren't permitted on base, and there was no need to give soldiers the wrong idea. Because of the amount of modification and tech that were on the team's smartphones, the Brass had grudgingly approved their use and were even looking to get similar devices in the hands of all of their field commanders. Since the operating system and apps was proprietary Merlinware based on patents obtained before Merlin ever signed up, the army would have to wait until Merlin had the infrastructure in place to mass-produce them for military use. Morgana and Gwen were helping him with that, but running his own business had become less and less appealing the more he went cross-eyed staring at business paperwork and legalities.

He planned on asking Arthur and Morgana about expanding the communication division of Pendragon Consulting, but later, when they weren't so bloody busy on assignments that took them
all over the world. Usually on opposite sides, much to their frustration, but it would have been worse without the phones.

"Just one more," Lance insisted, scrolling through the album at lightning speed and stopping on a picture of Bran holding Laure in his lap, a smiling Aithusa offering the wide-eyed baby the fluffy dragon Merlin had found at a shop in Australia during one of his round-the-world layovers.

His heart melted. He stopped walking and adjusted the strap of his go-bag on his shoulder, never taking his eyes from the photograph.

They'd had so little time together before being shipped out again, and in that short period, Aithusa had firmly wedged herself under Merlin's heart. Surprisingly, it was Arthur who was wrapped around her little finger, indulging her in everything and anything, spoiling her worse than Hunith and Balinor. Merlin swallowed the lump in his throat. He missed Aithusa. He missed Arthur. Hell. He missed everyone.

Abruptly, the phone was snatched out of his hands. Lance shrugged sheepishly and tilted his head toward a group of soldiers. "They're eyeing us as if they plan on burgling us of our pants just to call home."

"Shouldn't have taken it out, then," Merlin said, his voice rough. "We'll see them all again in a few more months, yeah?"

Lance shoved his mobile in his pocket and grunted. "I'm finding it hard to believe they'll let us go that easily."

Merlin grunted in agreement. He had had fond memories of looking forward to completing the last remaining months of his original term of enlistment, and once the day came, it passed over unnoticed because they'd been too busy running training drills in Camelot in anticipation of returning to duty when the Brass called them down.

"I'm sure Arthur has an exit plan with contingencies for absolutely everything," he said.

Lance made a noncommittal sound and thumbed over his shoulder. "Ready to meet my crew? We're just waiting on you before we head out."

Merlin barely suppressed a sigh. He was tired. He wanted a cot -- he didn't even care if the cot was horizontal -- and a solid eight hours of sleep. He hadn't been able to sleep in a plane since the rebel faction of the dragons, led by none other than Knuckner and his sidekick, Scylles, had buzzed the bomber transporting him to his next base. When setting it aflame had failed, they'd tried to force it down. They hadn't expected a Dragonlord to be aboard, and despite successfully chasing them off, Merlin would have nightmares of plummeting to his death, his mobile's battery too depleted to talk to Arthur one last time.

The darkness under Lance's eyes hinted that he hadn't had an easy time sleeping, if he had had the opportunity for sleep at all. As the only member whose mug hadn't made it to the telly for public consumption, Lance was still relatively unknown, made more so these days since he was operating under Gwen's maiden name. The army took advantage of that in every way possible, and Merlin knew that Lance's team had no idea who he really was.

Merlin shoved down every vestige of exhaustion and forced himself on to a second wind. "Sure. Ready as I'll ever be, I suppose."

"All right," Lance said, clapping Merlin on the shoulder. "Sooner we head out, sooner we can get
"The sooner it's all over, the sooner we can sleep in until noon, yeah?" Merlin said wistfully.

"If Laure doesn't let me sleep in, I'm sure Aithusa won't let you, either," Lance warned. "Thick as thieves, those two, even though Laure's still a baby. With Bran as their ringleader, I'm not sure any of us have much of a chance."

Merlin took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He huffed a small laugh before shrugging. "Somehow, I don't think I'll mind too much."

Lance's grin was blinding, as always, but it faded quickly. "You haven't been to this base before, right? I'll give you a quick tour. Mess tent is over that way, Command is in that half-collapsed tent -- don't ask, barracks down this row. Communications is the one with the red flag on top, and I know, I've tried to talk them out of it because it's as clear a shoot-me sign as anything, but the Lieutenant who runs it is a big Excalibur fan, and he refuses."

"I'll steer clear of there, then," Merlin said.

"Probably wise, but he's the one who told me you were on the way, bouncing like a schoolboy with an autograph book at the arena waiting for his favourite footie star the entire time, and I'm pretty sure he's going to call in a favour owed, wanting an introduction," Lance said.

"Do that, and I'll tell him who you really are," Merlin threatened.

Lance shrugged. "He's seen my phone. I'm pretty sure he already knows, but is smart enough to keep his mouth shut."

Merlin groaned. "I've had to spend two weeks with Gilli. Have pity on me."

"I'll think about it."

Merlin gaped. "You've changed, mate. You've changed. You used to be sweet and compassionate, throwing yourself in danger to save the rest of us --"

"I've got a baby to think about now," Lance said, completely serious. "Also, Gwen will kill me if I pull that shite again. Anyway, that's the MASH tent over there. I saw Owain last month. His team was passing through."

"How is he?" Merlin asked.

Lance waved a hand in the air. "Physically? He'll be fine. Shrapnel scars on his face, but he says the ladies will love them. His knee's wonky, but I had some of Gaius' salve left, so it should be mostly healed by now. But in his head?"

Lance grimaced.

"He lost half his team in the blast. He's taking it hard." Lance didn't say anything for a few seconds and glanced at Merlin. "It might help if you give him a call."

"I was going to when I heard. I didn't get a chance," Merlin said. "I'll call right now -- no. We're off in a few, aren't we? Remind me when I get back."

"Will do," Lance said.

They chatted on the way to the transport -- expressing concern for Lucan, who went off-comms
with Mordred, their only contacts Arthur and Cennydd at MI-5; having no sympathy whatsoever for Galahad, who for some inexplicable reason, volunteered to referee the continuing competition between Gwaine and Will; and wondering if Gareth and Lamorak had figured out their relationship yet or if it was on hold considering that Gareth and his men were at sea with Pellinor's team, while Lamorak was ground-pounding it in the backwoods somewhere, hunting down a crew of mercenaries who had stolen dragon eggs.

Lamorak really liked dragons.

Bedivere was in England, recuperating at a base outside of London from injuries that were, fortunately, no longer life-threatening, and was expected to return to duty within the next few weeks. Bohrs had been put in charge of Bedivere's team until then, grousing every few minutes about not being cut out for leadership, but every report signalled he'd be up for a promotion soon.

Last Merlin had heard, Leon and Perceval were in France with two SAS teams -- one of them Evans' bunch, hunting down a splinter cell of NWO members purported to be led by Morgause Gorlois. They called themselves the Daughters of the Old Religion, and for every intent and purpose, MI-5 believed them to be a new cult to be watched. Arthur, Merlin, and everyone else knew better, because they were using the same symbol that had been found on the girl who had infiltrated and had attempted to destroy Camelot.

Everyone was busy, keeping in touch when they could, and there were already plans in place to meet up in London when their tours were up.

They were almost at the transport when Merlin heard a familiar voice shout, "Major!"

Merlin turned in time to see Kay cutting across the road. He was in field camouflage, weighed down with equipment, and his arms were spread as wide as his smile when he greeted Merlin with a big, brutal hug. "You made it!"

"When the Captain says hup, I'll find a way," Kay said, nodding to Lance. Kay had been promoted to Staff Sergeant and had his own crew, but Merlin had heard that everyone, including the Brass on the bases he went to, often deferred to him in combat situations. It was a nice change from how things had been for Kay before he joined Excalibur, but well warranted. Kay had a particular knack for being *awfully lucky* in the field, but Merlin knew it had as much to do with Kay's latent magic as the blessed pendants Kathy and Bran kept sending him. "My men are a bit cranky about the rush, but they'll be over in ten, after they've aired out their feet a bit."

"They should keep those feet holstered. We could use a secret weapon if this turns bad," Lance said.

Kay made a rude gesture that would have gotten him in the stockade once upon a time, but Lance only rolled his eyes. "So, what's the mission, exactly?"

"Don't look at me. I just go where I'm told," Merlin said, holding up his hands. He might have been drastically -- and *ridiculously* -- promoted to Major, but everyone had insisted, citing that he needed to be able to move freely between departments, overrule the local command, and have the independence to completely rewrite the plan on the ground to fit any given situation. Technically, the new rank came with the creation and command of a squad of magic users, some of whom had once worked for the Directory, like Gilli, but most who were civilians with newfound ability who had joined up *because* of it.

Mordred usually handled the day-to-day, Cennydd coordinated with MI-5, and Bayard reluctantly assisted, though there were rumours that he would be forced into retirement soon.
Merlin didn't want the new rank. He didn't want the responsibility. The only reason that he'd accepted was that it meant no longer falling under Arthur's direct command, which meant less of a scandal over having a relationship with a superior officer.

"The mission's eyes-only," Lance said, leading them the rest of the way to the transport where a solid-looking team was gathered.

"Of course it is," Kay said with a snort.

"We'll find out the details when we're en route," Lance said.

"Who's our commander?" Kay asked.

Lance hesitated. Merlin glanced at him, frowning at the grimace. He put down his duffel bag and nodded at the Corporal who offered to put it on the transport.


"Mission's time sensitive," Lance said with a resigned sigh. "I thought if I told you when we got on the road, we had a chance of making it on time."

Merlin's jaw dropped. He spluttered. He wasn't that bad when it came to finding every possible chance of meeting up with Arthur. If anything, Arthur was worse. "I'm... I'm offended. Outraged. How dare you imply that --"

"Actually, sir," a nearby Corporal said, "We're already delayed. Spike -- Susan, I mean, she's having trouble with her Box. She went to the Quartermaster to get a replacement. I was hoping she'd be back before you were, but there's been no sign of her."

"I did give my boys ten minutes," Kay said. "Might as well leave together, instead of playing catch up."

Lance sighed, rubbing his face. After a moment, he nodded.

"If it's an issue with the Box, I could fix it," Merlin said, seizing the opportunity. "Where's the Quartermaster? I'll take a quick look, see if it's something easy, otherwise, I can make sure we get a decent Box --"

"It's the big tent on the other end of the transport ground," the Corporal said helpfully.

"No, Merlin," Lance said firmly.

"You said it yourself, Captain," Merlin said cheekily, already moving away. "We're pressed for time."

"Merlin!"

"I'd hate if your comms officer got disciplined for delaying a mission. I might as well use my rank for something useful," Merlin said, turning around to trot off. He was sure he heard Kay smother his laughter into Lance's shoulder.

"Don't you bloody dare take a detour to the command tent! Do you hear me? So help me, God, if you're not back in fifteen --"
Merlin waved a hand over his shoulder and kept going. He was tempted to pretend he hadn't heard the order, and to take that detour, after all, but Lance was right. If Arthur was running the mission, then it was indeed time-sensitive, and not just something a superior officer had said because they were throwing their weight around.

The other end of the transport ground was half a kilometre away, and Merlin was hardly out of breath when he ducked under the tent flap and paused, adjusting to the change in lighting. He followed the sound of voices past several stacks of boxes and a row of shelves until he could make out the words.

"… is this the sorry state of equipment that we consider acceptable these days? Any quartermaster worth their salt would know how absolutely critical it is that our soldiers know they can rely on their gear. I should have you reported for this. It's a complete dereliction of duty."

"Erm," a woman cut in. "It's not really that bad, sir. If I could just get a new Box, I could be on my way --"

"I'm new," a young man said desperately. Hopefully, his voice was squeaky out of sheer fear and not because he hadn't hit puberty yet. When Merlin walked around the corner, he burst into a big smile when he saw Arthur.

Of course it would be Arthur.

"I only started two days ago. I'm just assisting! I don't even know where the Boxes are. I actually think we're out --"

"I know where the Boxes are. I could show you --"

"And just where is the Quartermaster right now?" Arthur growled.

Merlin could have laughed at how protective Arthur sounded.

"He's off duty. I'm --" The assistant Quartermaster turned pale, stammering through his next words unsuccessfully.

Merlin put on a straight face and stepped forward, into the light.

"Oh, just let the Corporal show the man where the Boxes are kept. There's a time-sensitive critical mission, and you're holding up the works," Merlin said, his voice flat.

"I am perfectly aware of the urgency --" Arthur turned around, obviously too distracted to recognize Merlin's voice. He stopped dead when he saw him, his eyes lighting up.

"Go on," Merlin gestured.

"Thank you," the Corporal mouthed at him from behind Arthur. She walked around the Quartermaster's counter, pulled the assistant with her.

Merlin fought to keep the smile from spreading across his face, crossing his arms over his chest instead. Arthur's eyes narrowed, but his mouth twitched.

"There's no need to berate the guy. Didn't you hear him? He's only been on the job two days," Merlin said, struggling to keep his tone serious.

Arthur took two lazy steps closer, tilting his head. "In two days, he should have working
knowledge of standard stock practices. It's really not that hard to read an inventory sheet and locate current inventory."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Merlin said, closing the distance between them with two steps of his own. "It's a busy base. The Quartermaster likely didn't have the time to give the private a tour. Really, if anything, someone should give him more staff, and you're yelling at the wrong person, just like every other Brass who thinks they know more than the rest of us."

"You can't talk to me like that," Arthur said darkly, but his mouth was pulling into a smile. "Do you even know who I am?"

"Oh," Merlin looked him over, eyes glancing at the patches on Arthur's uniform but lingering everywhere else. He was fit, there was no question of that, but he looked like he'd lost a little weight since the last time they'd seen each other. Merlin definitely did not approve, but he imagined that Arthur was probably thinking the same thing about him. "I don't know. Lieutenant-Colonel Cabbagehead? I really don't care, actually."

Corporal Spike -- Susan -- made a small meeping sound, as if she wanted to save Merlin from himself but didn't know how to do it without throwing herself on top of an Arthur-sized grenade and taking herself out along with it.

The noise was enough to attract Merlin's attention, and he told her, "Why don't you tell Captain Smith that I'll be along as soon as I tell this pompous twat how it really works in this army?"

Arthur spluttered. To someone who didn't know him, it might seem as if he were about to have a complete meltdown, but Merlin knew Arthur was having a hard time covering up his laugh.

"Yes, sir," Susan said, and got out of there before she became a target, too.

Merlin spared one long glance for the Quartermaster's assistant, but from the tent flap flying open at the rear of the tent, Merlin figured that he was long gone, having taken the first opportunity to get the fuck out. Merlin used a little magic to double-check that they were indeed alone and to secure the tent.

Arthur must have seen the flash of magic in Merlin's eyes, because he sobered quickly, his gaze darkening. He looked exactly the way Merlin felt -- hungry for physical contact. Skype was nice, but it had been too long, and they both needed something more.

"Clear," Merlin said.

"Good," Arthur said.

They crashed together without another moment's hesitation. Their teeth clacked together, their noses smashed at an odd angle, their arms tangled until they quickly adjusted. The kiss went from bruising to passionate, and in no time at all, Merlin felt a pull at his shirt as he loosened Arthur's belt.

"Fuck, I missed you," Merlin said.

"I don't know how I'm going to last a few more months," Arthur said. "I'm really fucking sick of phone sex."

"I know how to solve that," Merlin said, undoing Arthur's trousers. He was distracted when Arthur pulled him in for another kiss, and he completely lost track of what he was doing. The kiss was tender, gentle, loving, and it stole Merlin's breath away, making a moment last an eternity far better
than his own magic ever could.

Arthur broke the kiss, leaning back enough to ask, "Lieutenant-Colonel Cabbagehead? Really? That's the best you could come up with?"

"I know, it doesn't have the same ring to it as Captain Prat," Merlin said with a grin. "Now, shut up, and pay attention to the hand down your trousers. Lance only gave me fifteen minutes, and you know he'll come looking if I'm late."

Chapter End Notes

The dragontongue is based on ancient Greek. Any errors are my own. The translations are:

Drakontas: Dragon
Aperkrina: Answer
Anir: Man or Lord

An epilogue will follow shortly.

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