Desperate Measures
by Footloose

Summary

Excalibur lost a battle, their advantage, their loved ones, their heart and their soul.

A broken Captain, a shattered team, and no one to trust. Their mission has been full of secrets, the present is the broken past, and the only thing that's left to do is to enact desperate measures.

Notes

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

This is part eleven in the Loaded March series, and it has NOT been beta'ed. Any mistakes, however glaringly obvious, are solely my own.

A big thanks to Tygermine for the Afrikaans translations and to G. by way of Scotscookie for the Welsh!

Fair warning: this is a military fic, and there will be military violence. In this part? A lot of violence. There may be triggers in this part associated to this warning.
Arthur stared at the torrents of rain drowning the fields. Lightning flashed in a blinding blast and thunder rumbled loud enough to make the earth quake. The barn trembled, buffeted by strong winds and a nearby boom when a tree was split in two.

Arthur stared, but he didn't see.

Behind him, the team was as comfortable as they could make a damp barn. Those who were still mobile were checking the perimeters; Galahad was somewhere out there, under cover and wrapped in a slicker somewhere in the woods, keeping an eye on the open area. He refused to come in.

Someone else should take his shift. Arthur should order Galahad to take a rest.

He didn't.

He closed his eyes.

"I'm very sorry that we have to meet like this," Arthur said. He nearly broke when Major Emrys' mouth tightened, as she held herself stock-still, bracing for bad news. The knot in his throat made it hard to breathe. He didn't know how his voice didn't crack. "My name is Arthur Pendragon, and I'm…"

He paused, not sure what he wanted to say. I'm your son's husband? Lover? Partner? He didn't even know if he could say those words. Merely thinking them shot painful barbs through his heart.

"And I need you to tell me everything you know of a man named Balinor."

Major Emrys' reaction was not what Arthur expected. She glanced over his shoulder and must have known right away that Merlin was missing, but she didn't ask. Her wary expression became grief that became resolute determination. If Arthur could find it in him to smile, he would have; now, he knew where Merlin had gotten his strength.

Her body relaxed, but only marginally. The arm hidden behind her back came to hang at her side, and there was no missing the gun in her hand. Arthur glanced at it before tiredly meeting her eyes.

"There's surveillance on this location," Major Emrys said, her voice hushed.

"We know. Temporarily disabled," Arthur said. Major Emrys gave him a stiff nod, but he warned, "It won't last."

"How many injured?" Major Emrys asked. She didn't secure her gun, but she tucked it in the waistband of her trousers, keeping it ready in case of... just in case. She turned into the house and headed down the hallway.

"Five," Arthur said. Geraint's concussion was severe. Gwaine's leg injury was in danger of
infection. Lamorak had been shot in the arm. Leon had mild second-degree burns on his hands and arms that was aggravated by chaffing and foul conditions and he needed treatment. Owain's burns were worse, coating the back of his arms and legs where he hadn't been protected by the Kevlar. The rest of them were banged up and bruised. It was lucky that they hadn't suffered worse.

He tried not to think about Merlin and Kay, about Morgana and Gwen.

"Five," he said again, shaking his head. "Critical are burns, gunshot wound and a leg injury. We have someone with a concussion."

The Major disappeared in the back of the house without a word. Arthur didn't dare cross the threshold, unsure of his welcome. He stayed where he was, fighting the misery that had been hounding him since France.

She came back a moment later with a large medical kit. She left a second time, returning with a bunker box. Arthur took both. The kit was maybe thirty pounds, but the bunker box was at least twice that, and Major Emrys threw it around as if it weighed nothing. "You have a medical officer? Lance?"

Arthur nodded, suddenly numb. "Mer... Merlin told you?"

Major Emrys smiled, but it was hollow and worn. "Like you said, Captain, we don't have time. There's a barn one and a half kilometres south and west that way."

She gestured with a motion of her hand.

"It belongs to the Kendricks. It's secure, tucked close to the forest. One way in, one way out. I'll meet you there in two hours."

Bohrs took the big bunker box. Lance picked up the medical kit without a word. Arthur stood in the doorway, at a loss, before he took in the firm set of Major Emrys' shoulders, the knuckle-white grip on the open door. She was as afraid as he was, and he didn't know what to tell her about Merlin.

He found refuge behind the stoic cloak of duty, and straightened. He gave Major Emrys' a tight, curt nod. "Two hours, Major Emrys."

Arthur reacted without thinking and raised his gun when he saw the dark shapes coming toward the barn. The team took their cues from him and scattered, making themselves invisible, drawing their weapons. Even when Galahad confirmed over the radio that it was Major Emrys "... and some other guy", Arthur couldn't quite make himself put down his gun.

Neither could his men. They'd been living on the edge of exhaustion and paranoia for the last few days. Arthur wished that there hadn't been reason for it, that they were being ridiculous, but after Bohrs and Pellinor said they'd spotted suits with buzz cuts and weapon lumps circling around their location like buzzards back in France, he couldn't afford to take chances.

Major Emrys glanced at Arthur when she walked past him, shrugging off her coat. The man behind her did the same, and Arthur shot him his usual once-over: the older man had bowed shoulders but a strong back and broad chest, his hair a salt-and-pepper comb-back that had traces of a military style. He moved with a curt clip that screamed army, but so did the limp that peeked out every time he slipped in the mud. They were both covered in oversized rain slickers and carrying a second bunker box between them.
They got to work right away, wordless, efficient. The Major inspected Lance's work on Leon and Owain before examining Lamorak. Lance had removed the bullet at a veterinarian's clinic -- the sort that had the good stuff: horse tranquilizers, antibiotics, cow-sized analgesics -- but they'd been rushed and hadn't had the luxury of stitching him up properly.

The Major cut the jagged stitches open, stripped and debrided the wound, and stitched Lamorak up again, and dispensed some medication -- antibiotics, most likely. Lamorak complained that he was fine, Lance told him that he wasn't, the Major told him to get some rest. Arthur didn't pay that much attention.

Geraint took longer. She spoke quietly with Lance -- probably getting medical history, possibly also the symptoms that emerged in the hours and days after the cock-up at the testing grounds.

Gwaine was last. Arthur paid just enough attention to hear him say, "If there's brownies in your medical kit, that's all I need."

"Oh, so you're Gwaine," the Major said, and there was a tiny smile in her tone that Arthur was too heartsick to hear. He turned away.

The Major's friend went around the group, passing out sandwiches and thermoses of coffee. There had been blankets in that box, too, and more than one of the team was huddled beneath one, squirming out of wet clothes.

The Major's friend took care of that, and the warm air sent a cold chill down Arthur's spine. Rainwater dripped down his face when he stepped outside for a quick circuit around the barn, making certain that they hadn't been followed. When he came back in, he edged a shoulder against the door to brace, and scanned the open field and the forest and the rain.

"Geraint needs a scan, just to be on the safe side. He may have a hematoma," Major Emrys said, coming to stand beside him. Arthur startled; he hadn't heard her approach. "But you did well. Everyone's going to be fine."

Not everyone, Arthur didn't say. Instead, he nodded stiffly.

"I'm going to make some calls to get Geraint in to the hospital. There's a few people that we can trust," she said.

Arthur nodded again, but he managed a quiet, "Thank you."

"You should get out of your wet clothes. Allan brought some extra clothes and blankets. And there's hot tea."

"Later," Arthur said, shaking his head.

"Now," the Major said firmly, taking his arm. "Pellinor will take watch. Won't he?"

"Yes, Sir," Pellinor said. He was out of his wet clothes and into trousers that were a little too big for him, a shirt a little too small. He'd left his Kevlar vest out to dry, but he'd squeezed out his nylon belt and kept his weapons close. His hair was combed back, and he was almost presentable.

Arthur wondered when that happened.

He moved on automation, changing out of his damp clothing and accepting whatever Perceval
passed him. When he sat down, his feet clad in thick wool socks and a scratchy blanket around his shoulders, his guns set aside to dry out a bit before he cleaned them, his stomach grumbled and gurgled.

Allan passed him a ham sandwich with too much mustard and black tea so strong that it practically stood up in the metal cup and slapped Arthur across the jaw.

Arthur ate, but the strong flavours were bland and tasteless. The tea went down his throat, but didn't warm him one bit. He spared a glance for his men, avoiding eye contact, and studied the bottom of his cup. Outside of orders, Arthur hadn't spoken to any of them since the night before they found a boat willing to take them across the Channel.

"The ship's captain thinks we're a bunch of nutters, but he'll do it. It'll cost, but --" Leon hesitated. He held his breath the way he sometimes did when he wasn't sure if he should continue, or if it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.

The sleeping dogs won.

The team had been walking on eggshells around Arthur, and Arthur had noticed. What the team didn't seem to realize was that Arthur was walking on eggshells, too.

He'd fucked up. He'd fucked up so royally, he should be crowned King.

"But what?" Arthur said. Leon met his eyes with a watery gaze and promptly looked away. Arthur knew Leon well enough to deduce what Leon wasn't saying, and he rubbed his head in frustration. "You think we should stay here."

"Yes." The word was sharp, but it hadn't come from Leon. Lance came up behind them, worn and wearied from sleepless nights fretting over Geraint and Lamorak.

And Gwen.

His head was down, now; his brow was furrowed. Lance's shoulders were tense and he looked like a charging bull searching for a china shop to destroy.

"Gw -- they're here, Arthur. Gwen and Morgana. Our Merlin and Kay. We should be looking for them."

"We have looked," Arthur said quietly.

"You call all the skulking we've done looking?" Lance snapped. "More like we're running with our tails between our legs, Arthur. We're bloody well hiding. I don't call that looking --"

"We have no resources here," Arthur said. "No contacts. No idea where they are. Nothing. If you've got any new ideas, I'm listening, but everything we've tried so far? It's not working. They've disappeared."

Lance turned on his heel, raised his arms, and covered his head as if bracing for impact. He was shaking his head. He didn't want to hear it.

Arthur understood. He didn't want to hear it, either. He wanted to be able to hate someone for losing their loved ones, but he couldn't blame anyone else. It all fell on him.
"I don't see... I don't see how going back to London is going to help," Leon said, looking down at his bandaged hands. They were partially mummified; he'd refused to let Lance treat the burns properly because he wouldn't be able to put his hand around a gun otherwise.

"We're not going to London," Arthur said.

Arthur jerked out of his daze when he felt someone brush against him. Major Emrys pulled her coat around herself and sat down; her expression was drawn and remote. It reminded him of Merlin. Merlin did the same thing when he couldn't avoid hearing the bad news.

"Allan will bring Geraint to the hospital tomorrow morning while I'm on shift. We have a cover story prepared for him. I'd take him myself, but it's too risky. They've planted a spy at the hospital. She's always there when I am, so it's best if I continue my regular duties."

Arthur sat there for a long time before the words sank in. "Wait. They're spying on you? Who?"

"Oh. I'm not sure. The Directory. MI5. MI6. The CIA," Major Emrys said, shrugging a shoulder. There was a dismissive tone to her voice. "They seem to rotate. It was exciting in the beginning, but the attention does get tiresome."

Arthur snorted humourlessly. He sipped the last of his tea but found that it had gone cold. He drank it anyway, because he didn't know the next time any of them would be able to sit and rest and eat.

The team was operating on a sleep deficit, but it wouldn't be the first time. There had been at least one mission where they'd only been able to catch sleep in ten minute intervals -- sometimes less -- while evading the enemy. Sleeping standing up with their eyes open was a habit they'd all cultivated, but the longer they went without, the harder it was to concentrate. There were teams who used stimulants -- on the sly, of course -- but Excalibur wasn't one of those teams. Stimulants might keep the body moving, but it screwed with reaction times and reflexes and visual cues, and decisions made under the influence were even worse than those made under sleep deprivation alone.

It was very hard to think.

Arthur rubbed his forehead. He'd been trying to pull together all the loose ends in his head and it wasn't working. He was missing too much information.

The NWO wanted the prototype and they wanted Merlin. They had Merlin. They also had Kay and Morgana and Gwen -- plenty of bargaining material if they were inclined to make a trade. That was one reason why the team had dropped off the radar. If the NWO would try to use Kay and Morgana and Gwen against Arthur and his team, they would. Playing dead was one way to stop them from doing exactly that.

The longer they stayed out of sight, the longer they ran the risk of the NWO deciding to cut out the dead weight slowing them down. But there was an equal chance that the NWO would get in touch with Uther and ransom them.

Morgana and Gwen for certain -- Morgana because she was Uther's daughter, Gwen because she was one of Pendragon Consulting's most valuable scientists.

Arthur knew that meant Kay was in greater danger than the rest because he wasn't worth anything as far as the NWO was concerned, but he didn't understand. If the NWO had been targeting specific people, why would they have taken Kay at all?
It didn't make sense. Arthur knew he was too tired… too worried to make it make sense.

The Directory wanted the NWO, and in the aftermath of the battle, they had shite-fuck-all. Arthur wasn't even certain if any of them had even survived, because they weren't built for combat, and they'd proven it when Excalibur had gone to their facility for training. If any of them had walked out alive, they were somewhere, licking their wounds.

MI-5 -- Olaf -- had obviously wanted the prototype., but they'd failed and lost a SAS team in the process. Arthur hadn't looked at the bodies when they'd worked their way out --

"-- keep moving, don't stop," Galahad said, breaking cover to take some of Owain's weight from Arthur's shoulder. "There's all sorts coming this way. La gendarmerie, some grunts from l'armée militaire. The sooner we're out of here, the better."

Arthur stumbled. He glanced down and saw he'd tripped over someone's arm. There were no patches to identify the man's affiliation, but Arthur knew SAS gear when he saw it. There wasn't anything different in the gear compared to regular troops. It was in the way they wore it.

When he looked up, he saw Galahad looking at him, a flinty glint in his eyes, a grim set to his mouth. "Mind the bodies."

-- but he figured that Olaf had a hand in this entire mess. Who else could pull a SAS team into action on such short notice?

That wasn't to ignore the others who had attacked the testing grounds. Owain thought that at least one group had been full of Americans. No one knew what had happened to them, but it was a sure bet that they'd escaped, and without the treasure they'd come to claim.

The fourth group? It was anyone's guess who they were. No one had said anything about the dragons, and no one was going to -- how certain were any of them that they had seen dragons, that it wasn't the combat stress getting to them? Arthur wasn't the only one who had broken a late-night silence with a short, hysterical laugh, quickly smothered to keep from giving away their position.

It was still fucking incredible. Dragons.

Dragons.

Arthur didn't know how he had made the leap from dragons to Balinor Emrys, and maybe later, when he was less tired, he would be able to connect the logic between the two data points. Still, however instinctive, it didn't make his leap of faith wrong. He couldn't be wrong. Not when his gut told him that he was on the right path.

He startled when he felt a hand on his shoulder and went for his gun --

Major Emrys disarmed him with a quick, smooth movement before he'd even raised it.

Arthur blinked at her owlishly and stared down at his gun, ridiculously oversized in Major Emrys' small hand. She calmly thumbed the safety before handing it back to him.

He wasn't sure he should have a weapon in his condition. He was chilled to know that the Major thought he should have one.

He slid the gun from her hand. He checked it by matter of course, operating on muscle memory, and holstered it. "Sorry," he said, the apology making his voice creak.
"You're in shock," Major Emrys said. "You all are. The team has been exposed to severe trauma conditions and have been operating without a handler for the last seventy-two hours, maybe more."

Arthur checked his watch. He saw the seconds sweep the hour but couldn't work out the time. "More," he said finally, because if he was this bad off, it had to have been more.

"You've led your men admirably considering the circumstances. The team has held together because of you, but they won't last for much longer if you're unable to continue. Captain Pendragon, you need to rest. You need to regain your strength."

Arthur made a strangled sound; it was an aborted scoff. "I can't. There's too much that needs to be done --"

"It can wait a few hours." Arthur bristled, but Major Emrys said firmly, "I'm ordering you to stand down. I've had Pellinor call in that boy who's watching from the trees. You need to be together right now."

"We have to make sure --" Arthur began, trailing off a moment later at Major Emrys' raised brow and pointed look.

She broke eye contact first, nodding to herself. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet, and Arthur had to strain to hear. "I've been doing this for a very long time, Captain Pendragon. You're safe. I've made certain of it."

Arthur wanted to ask what she had been doing and for how long, exactly, but his mind was a muddled mire, and his shoulders sagged. He wanted nothing more than to give the reins of leadership to someone else for a while so that he could rest and find his footing again, but he couldn't. This was his responsibility, his mess to fix.

He opened his mouth to argue, but Major Emrys' expression turned flinty, the way Merlin's expression turned flinty, sometimes, when people tried to contradict him. It deflated Arthur the way only a sucker punch in the gut could, knocking wind out of his lungs and strength from his legs. He nodded reluctantly, and asked, "And after?"

"After," Major Emrys repeated, taking Arthur's arm and guiding him to a spot where he could sit, "Let's worry about right now."

Arthur closed his eyes. He was numb. He barely felt it when Major Emrys' fingers found his pulse and counted the beats. His body jerked when she checked his reflexes. He shrugged out of his jacket by a matter of course, removed his equipment, and unbuttoned his shirt so that she could evaluate the worst of his injuries.

The bruise covering his shoulder, half of his chest and most of his back, was mottled and green around the edges. It hurt to move, but Arthur had been ignoring it all this time. He barely jerked when Major Emrys' fingers palpated the area, checking for broken bones, but when her hand lingered at his ribs, over his tattoo, he flushed.

Merlin.

He wished that he could feel Merlin.

He wished --

Arthur lowered his head, blinking back the prickle in his eyes. He tried to speak, but the words were thick in his throat. He had to swallow several times before the lump in his throat shifted enough for
him to breathe. "Aren't you going to ask me --"

"I know he's alive."

Arthur searched her face. Her expression was grim, firm, determined. Her eyes were hollow and distant and guarded. She was tense, fierce, resolute. He did not see conviction. He did not see belief. He did not see certainty.

He heard it. It was in the steadiness in her voice, in the depth of her tone, in the preciseness of her words. He felt it in the sure touch of her hand on his arm, the press of her warmth near him, in the acceleration of his own heartbeat.

He broke eye contact.

"How?" he asked, the question a hoarse croak.

The Major swallowed. Her lips pressed together so tightly they were a thin, white line. "Because I don't dare know anything else. And neither should you, Arthur. Neither should you."

Arthur covered his mouth with his hand. He rubbed at his eyes with forefinger and thumb and wiped at the tears that threatened to spill. "It's my fault. I'm sorry --"

The Major stood up abruptly and sat down next to him. She took his hand, entwining their fingers, and squeezed tightly. Arthur could feel his bones crack, and he didn't care. This brief pain was the least that he deserved.

"No." Major Emrys shook her head, and she didn't speak again until Arthur raised his eyes and met hers. "This is war, Arthur. You know as well as I do the hard decisions that you have to make, the people you have to risk. Merlin knew that. Your team knows that."

"But what they will never understand is the toll it takes on you to make that sacrifice."

Arthur looked away, his chest hurting. He stared down at their hands, clasped together like the survivors of a shipwreck, knuckles and fingers white from desperation, from the frantic scramble of holding close the last thing they held dear. He saw the scars on her hands -- old burn wounds, old cuts. The calluses on her fingers and palm from a lifetime of hard work.

The wedding ring on her finger.

"But you do," Arthur said, his voice soft.

Hunith didn't answer him. When he looked up, he saw her gaze fixed on the horizon through the barn door, locked on a distant point. She didn't seem to notice Geraint trudging up the rise and shaking off his camouflage poncho before entering the barn. She was staring at the rain.

Through the rain.

At something that Arthur couldn't see.

He thought about what she said. About sacrifice. About hard decisions and risking people. About knowing something as true with a tenacity stronger than blind faith and belief.

"Why did you do it?" The words were drowned by the creak of the barn settling under the rain, the clatter of empty thermos rolling on hay-covered floorboards, but Major Emrys' attention snapped to him, wide and alarmed and hurting. There was a watery glimmer in her eyes, a roll of shoulders
pushed back as she sat straighter, a deep, steadying breath.

She didn't answer him.

"Why did you send him away?" Major Emrys' grasp slackened around Arthur's hand, threatening to slip out, robbing him of the one steadying point that he'd had over the last few days. The flicker of guilt in her eyes was difficult for him to bear; it mirrored his own. He held firm, because he needed to know. He needed to understand. "Why did you let Merlin believe that his father was dead?"

Anger and shame was not a mixture that settled well in the belly. Arthur knew that from experience, and, it seemed, the Major knew it too. She turned away. The smile she struggled to make was forlorn and sad.

"To keep him safe," she finally said.

Safe from what? Arthur wanted to ask, but what came out of his mouth instead was, "What a good job I've done, then. I've delivered him to the enemy."

"Oh, Arthur," Major Emrys said, shifting her body to face him. She shook her head and squeezed his hand again. "I don't think anyone knows who the enemy is anymore."

Arthur hadn't noticed how the barn had gone quiet while he was talking to the Major, how the team had put aside their food and drinks and lowered their heads as they listened, how even Allan Kendrick was pretending not to pay attention. He wondered if Allan was thinking about Will. If he was afraid for his son, too.

Maybe the Major was right. Maybe that's what it came down to. Even the enemy didn't see themselves as the enemy, because they believed what they were doing was right. It's going to come down to choosing a side, isn't it? And it won't even be as simple as that."

He didn't realize he'd spoken out loud until he heard Leon's heavy sigh of understanding. It took longer for the others to realize what he meant. Gwaine brought up the rear when he tossed the sandwich wrapper into the large box and muttered, "Bollocks."

Major Emrys pulled her hand away from Arthur's. She stood up and paused, leaving a hand of fleeting reassurance on his shoulder. "We'll talk tomorrow. Get some rest, Arthur."

"Major Emrys --"

"Hunith," she corrected gently.

"Hunith," Arthur repeated, awkward and unsure. This was Merlin's mother. And he'd lost Merlin. He didn't feel as if he had the right to call her by name. "I need a favour."

She held her breath and released it in a sigh. "You should --"

"-- rest, I know," Arthur said. "And I will. We all will. But this is time-sensitive --"

"It can wait, Arthur."

Arthur stood up abruptly; he towered over Hunith. She stood up slowly, unperturbed, and Arthur didn't doubt that she could hold her own against Generals, never mind Captains who didn't even come close to outranking her. It wasn't about intimidation. It was strength of conviction that he wasn't sure he even had right now. "No, Hunith. It can't. It truly can't. If we stand a chance of getting
them back -- Merlin, my sister, Gwen, and Kay -- we need to start now."

Hunith glanced toward Allan, who shook his head; Arthur wasn't sure what sort of unspoken words passed between them, but he was unwilling to take no for an answer.

"I need an encrypted phone." Arthur paused. "Untraceable. With location scramble on the signal."

"I don't --"

Arthur took a step close to Hunith; now, they were sharing the same space. Her frame was lean and unbending, but Arthur found the will to put steel in his bones.

"You do," Arthur said firmly. "You can't tell me that Merlin didn't modify a few phones for you. Free service, optional GPS, data mining. A completely different universe of encryption. You must have at least one phone meeting our criteria."

"I --" Hunith hesitated. Her shoulders slumped slightly. "I do."

"I need that phone, Major Emrys," Arthur said. He glanced around the team and saw that Galahad still wearing his poncho, looking keen to go out again, if only to feel useful. "Galahad will go with you to retrieve it."

"Tomorrow, Captain," Hunith said, because it wasn't only Arthur who could separate business and personal.

"Tonight, Major. I need it tonight. If Galahad comes back empty-handed, I'll be the one knocking on your door."

Hunith gave him a considering look. The corner of her mouth twitched in something that might resemble a smile if the circumstances weren't so dire. "And there'll be no talking you out of waiting until you've rested? No reminding you not to make decisions that you'll regret?"

"Major Emrys, Hunith." Arthur hesitated, and said, "There is absolutely nothing that anyone could do at this point to make things worse. I've already mucked it up as badly as it'll go."

Hunith nodded sharply. She turned and walked away, gesturing for Galahad to follow her. At the opening to the barn, Hunith paused and turned to Arthur. "You really are as insufferable as Merlin says you are. No wonder he loves you."

Arthur's heart clenched and his chest burned with the ache. Even if he had the breath to answer Hunith, she swept her raincoat over her shoulders, tugged the hood over her head, and was gone.

No one said anything.

Arthur sagged, catching himself at the last moment, and he sat down. He stared at his hands for a long time before burying his face in them.

A weight took the seat on the hay bale next to him. Arthur dropped his hands in time to catch the ham-and-mustard sandwich that Perceval dropped in them.

"What's the plan?" Perceval asked quietly.

Arthur glanced toward Allan and shook his head. He didn't know who the man was other than he was Will's father. How did Allan feel about the situation? Did he know where Will was, what he was doing? Could Arthur even trust to discuss half-formed plans in front of a complete stranger?
Hadn't they just been talking about taking sides? Which one was Allan on?

The team had been routed at nearly every turn. Arthur was convinced that Bayard was the traitor. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but it was *instinct*, again. The attack plan that he and Merlin had given Bayard and Kilgarrah had been subtly different, but there had been too many parties at the ambush for Arthur to know for certain. Arthur couldn't afford for any more of their plans -- *his* plans -- to take a right turn down the loo.

Not again.

So, no, he wouldn't talk about his plans, however poor they were, in front of someone he didn't trust.

Perceval nodded, accepting Arthur's warning. Arthur unwrapped his sandwich and stared at it for a long time before taking a bite. It tasted... just like the other sandwich. It had no taste. The mustard was sharp and pungent, burning his nose; he chewed mechanically, but there was no flavour to it.

"You know," Allan said, speaking in a slow drawl, "I've known Hunith a long time. I couldn't say how long, exactly. I'd say it was well before both our boys were born. We went to the army at about the same time. I didn't see her for years. I went infantry, she went into the corps. We were moved all over the place. Just lucky that we were assigned to the same bases more often than not. Just as lucky that when the time came, we were around, me and Will, when her whole world fell apart."

Allan stretched out, nudging a second space heater that someone had set up, using his toe to turn it on a higher setting and to direct the blast in his direction.

"And it *did* fall apart, Captain," Allan said. "Anyone else wouldn't have managed. Wouldn't have been able to do half the things she's done. But I'm going to tell you one thing. She's not going to lose her son. She'll do whatever she needs to do to get him back."

Arthur glanced at Leon. Leon was across the barn, his face cast in shadows from the dim light scattered in a circle around the barn, reddened by the orange glow from the larger space heater.

"And me? I'm no different. Will's my only son. He's all I have left. So take some advice from an old mudder like me, Captain," Allan said, leaning back into the bale of hay at his back, tipping his cap lower over his eyes, "And that's to remember that there's a whole lot of history that's been buried, a whole lot of people who've been hurt, and a whole bushel more who stand to suffer once all of it comes to light. If I were you, I'd hold off on that phone call of yours until tomorrow."

"Why's that?" Lance asked. There was an edge to his voice that had taken root and stayed there ever since Gwen and Morgana were taken. He had buried himself in his work, falling silent and detached, barely speaking and never losing that frightening focus -- the focus of a man who would kill if only he had a target in front of him.

And Leon -- Leon had gone cold. They weren't functioning; they were *driven*, and that thing that drove them was a combination of desperation and vengeance.

It wasn't healthy. Arthur knew that. Arthur *resembled* that.

He stared down at the sandwich. The white bread was streaked with dirt from his hands. The dirt was ground into the creases of his palms, in the folds of his knuckles, under his nails.

"Well, boys," Allan said, crossing his legs at the ankles, folding his hands on his chest. "Maybe because tomorrow, you'll find out that the person you're about to call? It's the last person you *should* call."
Morgana stood between Gwen and the woman named Morgause, back straight, clothing torn and covered in dried mud, and said, "Surely you can afford to be reasonable and allow us to clean up."

They were -- Morgana wasn't quite certain where they were, but it amounted to nowhere good -- in a house in the country, somewhere in France where it was forested and hilly, which meant pretty much anywhere, since she couldn't remember her geography right now. She guessed that they were several hours away from the testing site, though distance and time could have been muddled by the storm, slowing them down and forcing them to take detours before they arrived at their destination.

For all Morgana knew, they were in a completely different dimension of reality. She had only caught glimpses of her surroundings. She'd searched for road markers, she'd scanned the horizon for landmarks. She had tried to situate herself based on the vegetation in the temperate forest, but there wasn't anything that stood out. This forest could be any forest around the world at roughly the same longitude, and she wouldn't know any better, because she wasn't a biologist.

If there was anything that Morgana did know, it was that the forest was a debris pile of broken branches and fallen tree trunks and raised water levels, that the house was relatively untouched by anything but the outer fringes of the storm, and that the storm itself had not only frightened their captors, but still frightened them.

Morgana did not like being in the dark. She didn't like not knowing what was going on. She especially did not like that she couldn't fathom why their captors were terrified of a bloody storm.

A storm that was, if the television in the distance was any indication, still raging, and raging hard; it was buffeting England, practically covering it. There was talk of ports and piers destroyed, of flooding, of people missing. Morgana and Gwen overheard some of their captors mutter that they wouldn't be going back until the storm cleared.

Back where?

If England was that way and they were here, then here was somewhere east of the testing site. The faint, distant trickle of information from a telly that was in a completely different part of the building had filled in some of the gaps as the hours and days passed, and Morgana had a sketchy idea of their location.

If they were on the fringes of the storm, then they were between fifty and one hundred kilometres from the testing site. Somewhere east.

The only reason why they were still in this house -- this terrible, mouldy-smelling house with only one bathroom that they were forced to share with several men, the majority of whom had poor hygienic habits, and who didn't have the courtesy of putting the toilet seat down -- was because they were waiting for the weather to clear before returning to England.

For whatever reason. It was the only thing that made sense.

And that time was, for all intents and purposes, soon, because Heathrow had announced that they were resuming operations and the weather appeared to be lessening. Gwen had overheard some of
the men talking about taking the Chunnel train as an alternative to the boats, because the piers were wrecked, and the waters too rough.

Morgana had long deduced that this house had never figured in their kidnappers' plans. The power had been turned off when they arrived; someone found the generator, filled it with diesel, and turned it on. The water had been shut off; when someone finally found the valve, the water flowed in spluttering brown for several minutes before it cleared. There had been no food in the pantry and several men had gone out to stock up. The trip had taken them nearly two hours.

Morgana calculated that a simple grocery trip only took forty-five minutes to an hour, and that a town was nearby -- within a half hour's drive.

If there was ever going to be a chance to escape, it would be now, when their captors didn't have their shite together, when they didn't have all the avenues covered, when they didn't have their resources.

Except Morgana and Gwen had already tried twice, and twice had been unceremoniously escorted back to the bedroom that had become their prison.

They hadn't been hurt. It didn't seem as if anyone wanted to do them harm. Morgana wasn't sure what they wanted. She wondered if they'd sent a ransom demand to her father yet, or if this was something else, some sort of psychological bullying bollocks, to keep Arthur from pulling too much at his leash.

"Well?" Morgana asked, raising an imperious brow. She crossed her arms over her chest loosely; some of the mud on her clothing was from that morning's escape attempt, and the dried dirt crumbled and fell onto the carpet. "Surely -- A bath?"

Morgause tilted her head and gave them a sympathetic, women-in-solidarity look that Morgana wanted to knock off Morgause's face, and said, "Surely, you can cooperate."

"You'll be moving us soon," Morgana pointed out. Gwen poked Morgana sharply in the low of her back -- hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough that Morgana would react. It was a warning to watch her tone. The guards had growled at Morgana more than once to shut her mouth, or they would put it to good use, but none of them had followed through.

"You don't want to provoke them," Gwen said.

But that was the thing. Morgana did want to provoke them. Not that she particularly enjoyed the experience thus far, but the kidnapping was boring. She didn't know what they wanted, what they were going to do. Waiting and wondering was driving her mad.

Gwen and Morgana had both figured out that the men were terrified of Morgause, and as long as Gwen and Morgana were in Morgause's good graces, they were unlikely to be harmed. Morgana hadn't pushed as far as she could as a result, but, still, there were several things that Morgana would not stand for, and one of them was being made to stay in damp, filthy clothing for several days.

"You'll be moving us soon," Morgana repeated, this time in a slightly softer tone -- on the level of a sledgehammer instead of a jackhammer, which was an improvement no matter what Gwen said. "Don't you think that waltzing us through the airport coated in muck won't catch someone's eye?"

Morgause raised an unimpressed eyebrow. There hadn't been many opportunities to interact with Morgause over the last few days -- she had either been away from the house for the most part, or had retreated further into the house for whatever reason, where neither Morgana nor Gwen could hear
her. Morgause was frustratingly difficult to read. "And what makes you think that we'll be moving you?"

"Do you know who I am?" Morgana asked, returning raised brow for raised brow.

Morgause smirked in amusement -- the sort of amusement of someone who was perfectly willing to play the game, believing that they held all the cards. "Do you know who I am, Morgana?"

"Ms. Pendragon," Morgana corrected with a bristle, realizing too late that she had let Morgause get under her skin. Morgana granted that it had been well done, and that she should applaud Morgause's tactics, but what she really wanted to do was scratch that self-assurance off the woman's face. Morgana's fingernails dug through the sleeves of her shirt and pressed half-moons into her arms. Into the body armour, at least.

"Ms. Pendragon," Morgause allowed mockingly, ducking her head, her eyes fixed on Morgana like a predator's.

Morgana forced herself to smile a thin boardroom smile, the sort that she gave the members of the board when the idiots thought they knew the business better than she did. It didn't faze Morgause, but it made Morgana feel better to be on more familiar ground.

"Ms. Gorlois," Morgana said sweetly, hiding her pleasure when she saw Morgause's unexpected twitch. "Your men have done nothing but talk about moving somewhere else. Somewhere... safer."

Morgana paused, turning her head slightly, raising a brow. Morgause's expression darkened faintly. Morgana hoped that Morgause was now of the impression that her men had big gobs needing shutting, and that she would be directing her growing fury in their direction. It did mean that Morgana would lose an avenue of information after the men had been properly chastised for their indiscretions, but she reasoned that it was a small price to pay for the opportunity to get Morgause's metaphorical goat.

"Hopefully somewhere with better amenities," Morgana said primly. "I can't say that I'm impressed with our current accommodations."

"I'll see what I can do to make you more comfortable, my lady," Morgause said, inclining her head.

She turned and walked out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her. Morgana grinned, rubbing her hands together. Morgause had come into the room earlier, unannounced, a woman on a mission who had suddenly been waylaid by Morgana's deflection tactics. They didn't know what Morgause had come into the room for, and Morgause probably couldn't remember at this point, but whatever it was, Morgana knew from experience that she needed to stall.

Stalling was important. It would give them time to formulate a plan, secure some sort of weapon, whatever they needed to keep Morgause from having the upper hand. The instant that they gave Morgause and her people an inch, they were doomed.

"What are you doing?" Gwen hissed. She tugged on Morgana's wrist until Morgana turned around. "I don't think you want to irritate the person keeping us hostage --"

"That's just it," Morgana said, capturing Gwen's hands and guiding her toward the window furthest from the door. They were on the second floor of the house and there was a steep ravine a few metres away from the wall, but that hadn't stopped them from climbing down the trellis the first night that they were there, never mind leaping to the closest tree branches and shimmying their way down on the second. The trellis had been torn down from the house, the branches had been chopped off, and
the windows nailed shut.

They'd spent most of the day worrying out the nails and were waiting for dark before trying another escape.

"What is it?" Gwen asked. "I'm not a mind reader, I don't know what's going on --"

In Morgana's estimation, Morgause and her men had not had a bloody clue what they were getting into, kidnapping a Colonel's daughter and a woman who was an army wife in a long line of army wives, who both had significant others in the SAS. Morgana and Gwen hadn't even begun to really make an effort to escape -- every attempt thus far had failed, but they had been good tests of the boundaries and security.

"We're not hostages," Morgana said, glancing out the window. She checked her watch; the patrol around the house was right on schedule.

"Oh," Gwen said. "And here I thought that they were holding us at gunpoint for a reason. How was I to know that this is how they treat their guests?"

"Difficult guests," Morgana said, keeping her voice down and frowning at Gwen to do the same. They hadn't found any bugs in the room, but that didn't mean that they weren't there, even if the house seemed to be a last-ditch plan B. "We're not hostages. That implies that they would call our families for a ransom."

"How do you know that?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Morgana asked. "No one's come to our rescue yet, have they? The instant they contact the Colonel, they're in for it. I'm sure Uther will happily pay whatever ransom demands they might make, but he'd really much rather storm down and kick their arses to the Baltic. Never mind what our boys will do to them once they find us."

At the mere mention of our boys, Gwen simultaneously relaxed and tensed. By silent, mutual agreement, neither of them had mentioned Leon or Lance or Arthur and the others. If they didn't talk about them, they weren't giving Morgause's people ammunition.

Besides, the boys were all right. They had to be. Morgana didn't want to believe that the team was gone, that they'd been captured, that --

The vision she'd had before they went to the testing site had been damning. Flames and destruction and bodies on the ground. But she didn't want to think about that. She held onto Gaius' cautions and warnings. Visions and dreams were dangerous things. They showed only a glimmer of the full picture, only one of many possible futures. Morgana told herself again and again that she might have had a vision of what had occurred, but she hadn't seen the outcome.

The boys were fine. They were alive. They were looking for Morgana and Gwen at right this instant. They would come and rescue them any moment now, and Morgana and Gwen had to do everything they could to ensure that they would be rescued.

Or until they escaped on their own, which was more likely. And infinitely more satisfying.

"Then, what do they want?" Gwen asked.

Morgana searched Gwen's expression before looking away under the pretence of searching for another way down from the second floor.
That first time, Morgause had tried to kidnap Morgana in Paris, and no one had satisfactorily answered the question of why. Uther had blown it off as an attempt to hold her hostage and ransom her -- something that was apparently quite common in the business, though there had been no direct attacks in the past. Arthur had been too preoccupied with other things and assumed that it had something to do with his mission -- and he was probably correct.

What if Morgana had been a target all along, but for another reason? Why come after her at the testing grounds of the Pendragon lab where the security was tight and they were just as likely to become cannon fodder as to leave unscathed?

Morgana had nothing to do with Arthur's mission. At the most, she could be used as leverage against her brother to ensure that he did what the NWO wanted him to do. Uther might think that Morgana was merely a pretty target for kidnappers, but Morgana wasn't so certain.

If she counted her considerable assets, Morgana was an attractive package all on her own, and she was being modest, for once. She was the vice-president of a major, multinational company with personal stock holdings in the millions, and she hobnobbed with every level of government, celebrity, and affluence. She had access codes on top of access codes, and direct knowledge of certain top secret levels of research that were so top secret, their designations were classified.

She had always wished that she had Arthur's skills at matching up puzzle pieces, at reading people, but she was no slouch. When it came to information, she was the queen.

So, what did the NWO want? And why would they keep Gwen? Was Gwen to be their assurance of Morgana's good behaviour? Or was it something else entirely?

She was missing an important piece of information, the key that would connect everything together.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. "Not yet. But I have a bad feeling."

It wasn't until later -- several mind-numbing hours later, with the sun setting on the horizon and Gwen completing a crude construction of a lock trap from the door using pieces of metal that they'd torn out from under the mattress, a hinge from the bottom of the dresser, and thumbtacks that they'd found in the back of the closet, right about where a teenager might hide an indecent poster from their mum -- that Morgana's fleeting bad feeling came to some substance.

Gwen hid the drop-lock in her coat pocket just as the guard arrived with their dinner -- a microwaved frozen Lean Cuisine pasta dish with rubbery chicken and plastic vegetables, which seemed to be the only thing that their captors knew how to cook. He dropped the trays on the dresser, glared around the room like he expected them to have dug a tunnel through which they'd crawl to freedom, and stepped aside.

Morgause came in, carrying a burlap sack. The door shut behind her. Morgana warily glanced from the sack to Morgause and back again. Gwen shifted from one foot to the other, the floor creaking under her light weight.

"Dear Morgana," Morgause said, her voice gentle where her expression was severe. "And Gwen. I do hope you understand that you have left me no choice."

"Have you come to kill us, then?" Gwen asked. She took a slight step back, as if she planned on jumping through the glass window and risk death rolling down the ravine rather than to give their captors the satisfaction.

"Now, why would I do that?" Morgause asked, a small smile twitching on her lips. Her amusement
faded quickly; she affected a concerned expression. "No, my dears. I come bearing bad news. I do hope you understand why I am sharing it with you."

Morgause dumped the contents of the burlap sack on the ground without ceremony. Stained and soiled clothing tumbled out in a small pile; a few other assorted objects landed pillow-soft on top before slipping off and clinking on the floor.

There was a set of keys. A watch. Two circular dog tags.

Morgana exchanged glances with Gwen. Gwen's hands flew to her mouth, a small sound escaped her lips, but neither one of them moved. Neither one of them said anything. Morgana wasn't sure that she could; she recognized the watch she'd given Leon for his birthday two years ago, the links covered in mud, the so-called indestructible faceplate broken, smeared with something too red to be dirt. The keychain was nothing special -- several house keys, a car key, a little nub with an Allen key, a leather hook too charred to read the imprint on one side, hiding the bottle opener on the other.

Morgana recognized the key ring. She'd seen it often enough -- usually retrieved from his pockets with a sigh and a mutter of does no one carry their own bloody tools whenever Gwen threw a dinner party for the team at her house.

It belonged to Lance.

A sob escaped Gwen's throat. Morgana was too numb to do anything but stare -- and suddenly, she was there, on the floor, reaching for Leon's wristwatch with trembling fingers.

She rubbed her thumb over the back of the faceplate, reading the familiar inscription.

Don't get killed, you big oaf. -- M.

Leon read the inscription and broke into a big, laughing smile, his eyes sparkling, his hands reaching for her. "I love you too, Morgana," he said, and pulled her into his lap.

"Happy birthday, Leon." She wrapped her arms around his neck and ignored Gwaine's hoots of encouragement.

"A bit less snogging, a bit more grinding, Morgana. It's the man's birthday! He deserves a bit of special attention, if you know what I mean."

Morgana didn't break the kiss, but she did pull an arm from around Leon's shoulders and raised two fingers in Gwaine's general direction.

Morgana's eyes stung.

"The testing grounds have been too heavily guarded, or we would have retrieved these items before now. As it was, my contacts were able to liberate these items from evidence, at considerable expense on my part," Morgause said, her voice without emotion.

"They're... They --" Gwen's words were strangled, her fingers curling around the dog tags, rubbing the stained surface over and over to read the letters and numbers stamped in them. She held up the tags for Morgana to see; in the smudge, she thought she saw Arthur on one tag and the letters Pe on another. Pendragon or Perceval or Pellinor.

"There are bodies are at the morgue waiting for dental records to confirm their identities. Their deaths were... quite grisly. I doubt that they died very fast."
There was a rustle of papers, and several glossy photographs, folded in the middle, landed on top of the clothing pile. They slid down in an avalanche of colour -- red and brown and black.

"Oh my God," Gwen sobbed, turning her head away. Morgana pulled her close; Gwen buried her face in Morgana's shoulder. Her body wracked with sobs.

The photographs were of several men -- or the same man, from different angles. The background was a combination of the stainless steel autopsy table and the pseudo-plastic of a body bag zipped open to reveal the upper torso and the head -- the skull -- of someone who had burned to death.

"You bitch," Morgana hissed. "You fucking bitch. Why would you --"

"They're gone," Morgause said, a hint of false sympathy in her voice. She shrugged her shoulders with the casualness of someone who had simply said, It's raining. "I assure you, dear Morgana, that we had nothing to do with their deaths. Please believe me when I say that the last thing I would want is to see your loved ones and your friends die. We did our best, but you were the only ones we could save."

"Why won't you let us go," Morgana snapped. "Why are we even here? We should be -- we should be with our families. They'll be --"

"You're not an idiot, Morgana," Morgause said. Morgana did not miss Morgause's condescending tone. "If our enemies know that you're alive, they'll seek to harm them, too."

"But why? We have nothing to do with -- we have nothing to do with anything," Morgana said. "Why would --"

"Can we take the risk?" Morgause asked. "I won't. And I know you won't want to put any more people in danger."

"In danger from whom?"

"Dear Morgana." Morgause smiled thinly. She shook her head imperceptibly before crouching down several feet away from them. Morgana held back a snarl. She could recognize psychological tactics when they were being used against her, and she didn't like it one bit. Morgause was making herself less physically imposing, less intimidating. It was all some sort of fucking ploy, Morgana knew. She didn't buy it. She had to struggle to make herself play along.

Morgause fell silent. She didn't say anything for some time. She reached for the pile of bloody, dirty clothing, running her fingers through the shredded fabric, stopping when she found a bullet hole.

She held it up to the light, making certain that both Morgana and Gwen saw it. Gwen shuddered, swallowing another sob; Morgana glared at Morgause.

Morgause feigned oh, lord, what am I like embarrassment before hastily dropping the material. She stood up slowly and said, "We'll talk in the morning."

She knocked on the door; the door opened just enough for the guard to recognize her before it opened wide, letting her through.

The door swung shut and locked with an ominous click.

Morgana listened as the footsteps retreated. Morgause's walk was distinctive; she headed down the hallway and down the stairs, disappearing somewhere below. The guard stopped at the head of the corridor, scraping his chair away from the wall before sitting down.
"Gwen. Gwen," Morgana said softly. She shook her friend until Gwen pried herself from Morgana, her hands dropping briefly before wiping her face. When Gwen was done, the tears were gone, and there was a venomous hate in her expression that frightened even Morgana.

"They're not," Gwen said.

"Gwen --"

"They're not," Gwen repeated, her voice a low hiss. She grabbed Morgana's hands and squeezed tight. "I'd know. You would know."

Morgana swallowed. She closed her eyes, but all she saw in her mind's eye was smoke and fire and blood. Her voice trembled. "Gwen --"

"No," Gwen said firmly. She let go of Morgana's hands and grasped her shoulders instead, her fingers digging even through the body armour they both still wore. Gwen shook Morgana once, twice, until Morgana glared. "Remember what Arthur said. Don't trust anyone but the team. We can't trust her, Morgana. She kidnapped us. She's keeping us prisoner. If she's trying to keep us safe, why is there a goddamned armed guard outside the door?"

Morgana's gaze drifted to the pile of clothing, at the key ring, at the dog tags. Her fingers curled around Leon's watch.

Gwen shook her again. "It's Arthur. He plans for everything. Contingency plans in contingency plans. He's ridiculous. You know that. You tease him about it all the time. Remember your birthday party last year? He took you on a scavenger hunt and no matter what you did you couldn't cheat your way through to the end. He was at least ten moves ahead, and that was for a game. You think he'd be any less prepared this time? You think he didn't plan for this? For the slim, slim chance that this might happen?"

There was no better description for Arthur than micromanager. He picked events and blueprints and plans apart until he had all of the basic components laid out before him. He was never satisfied unless he had all the details on whatever was in front of him, and if it wasn't enough, he would chase down the source until he knew everything down to the last atom.

He obsessed about the smallest thing. He wasted hours studying maps and routes for a school trip. He watched and re-watched documentaries until he had every frame memorized. He could quote chapter and verse of the most obscure army manual.

Late at night during the rare R&R when Leon was home, cuddled in their large bed with tangled sheets and missing pillows, Morgana would ask what kind of over-the-top plans that Arthur had come up with lately, and Leon would tell her stories that left her laughing so hard, her ribs ached. She would never forget how Arthur had gotten the lunch menu, unearthed the schedule of the best cook on the base, and lined up a list of all the possible replacements -- including two Cordon Bleu chefs hidden in the infantry ranks -- in case the cook ever fell ill.

All because Arthur didn't want to run the risk of being fed undercooked spaghetti and grenade launcher-worthy meatballs.

Arthur was always over-prepared. The more information he had, the more plans he put together. And Arthur had known about Morgana's vision. He might not have put any stock in her dreams before, he might not even put any stock in them now, but he wouldn't have dismissed it out of hand.

If he thought there was the slightest chance that Gwen and Morgana would have been kidnapped…
Morgana tapped her forehead with her fingers. She tried to think like Arthur. What would Arthur have done? He would've made certain that they could be found. Did that mean that he'd planted a tracking device on them?

She didn't see *how*. Their body armour was smooth and flexible. Tracking bugs could be built on the micro scale, but their transmission range would be limited.

Morgana shut her eyes tightly, trying to remember the latest in Pendragon technology. Arthur always kept up with the new internal reports -- internal reports that were so boring and dry that they made Morgana weep to try to fathom the purpose of the prototypes. She wished that she had more of a science background so that she could understand how the damned things worked, so that she could figure out what Arthur might have done.

She fingered Leon's watch like a worry stone, glancing down when a bumpy edge caught on her finger. It was an expensive watch, one of the most rugged on the market, because she knew how rough Leon could be with his things. The last watch she'd given him, a year after they first started dating, hadn't lasted more than six months. This one should be indestructible.

Morgana looked closer.

It wasn't an edge. It wasn't a bump. It was a *switch*.

She thumbed it gingerly. A tiny green light flashed on the watch face and faded.

Morgana shot Gwen a sharp look.

Gwen's eyes widened. She made a quick grab for Lance's keys, studying them carefully.

The bottle opener had been sharpened to a cutting edge. The keys had been modified without seeming to be modified so that they were an assortment of screwdrivers. The Allen key was still an Allen key, but the car key had electronic components in it. They both glanced at the door and listened hard. No one was coming.

Gwen pried the car key open with the Allen key. The circuit board and connector and the battery meant to remote-unlock and remote-alarm their car had been replaced with a different board, two different buttons, and a battery with enough power to send a signal to a satellite.

"Merlin," Gwen whispered, laughing softly. "Merlin did this. I should've guessed."

She pushed the little red button inside the car key and a little green light flashed and faded. The car key was reassembled and double-checked to make sure no one would be able to tell that it really wasn't a key anymore.

"They'll find us," Gwen whispered.

"They had damn well better," Morgana said. The flash of the swinging dog tags, wrapped in Gwen's hand, caught her attention, and she frowned.

"What is it?" Gwen asked.

"When have we ever seen them wear their tags?"

Their eyes met. Gwen stood up abruptly, pocketing the keys; Morgana fastened the watch around her wrist, where it slid loosely. Gwen retrieved one of the water bottles that they'd been saving on the off-chance that the guards would stop feeding them -- but more in case they would make good on
their escape and need water for the journey -- and splashed water on the dog tags, rubbing until they were clean.

Cleaner, anyway.

Both tags belonged to Arthur. They were imprinted with his name and service number. Morgana knew Leon's service number better than she knew the number to their house phone, and she knew that Gwen was much the same when it came to Lance.

Morgana flushed with regret that she never paid that much attention to Arthur's number, but it was Gwen who said, "It's not… Morgana, it's coordinates."

Morgana wrenched the tags out of Gwen's hands. Arthur wouldn't give them coordinates if they were taken captive. So what --

It dawned on her in an instant. "That bloody bastard."

"What?"

"He made me memorize numbers when we were kids. Useless numbers. I had to twist his arm purple before he'd tell me what they were for." Morgana held up the dog tags like they were a prize at a fair. "His mom's family home outside Paris. He's giving us a safe house."

"What do we do? Should we --"

Morgana shook her head. She put the dog tags around her neck, stuffing them in her body armour, out of sight. "We're going to wait. But the first chance we get…"

Morgana raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

ooOOoo

Four cement walls. Ceiling and floor. No windows. A metal door. A single incandescent bulb overhead, blearily yellow and flickering, guarded by a grating. There was a bucket in one corner. It was cold.

Merlin pulled his coat closed and crossed his arms over his chest.

He had a split lip, a black eye, and bruised -- if not cracked -- ribs. He had bruises on top of bruises. He had cuts and abrasions. He had scrapes and burns. He had -- he possibly also had a concussion, but he wasn't certain if that was a result of the repeated blows to the head from the beatings or a residual effect from the electromagnetic pulse from the testing grounds a few days ago.

A few days. A few weeks? He actually wasn't sure how much time had passed. He had no idea where he was.

Arthur's voice still rang in his head. The warning about the disruptor. Wide-angle spread, limited distance. And they'd been right in the middle of it.

Merlin knew the dangers of electromagnetic pulses as well as anyone. He'd set off a few small EMPs
himself during the course of a mission. Hell, he'd built a few. He'd even been in the vicinity when the power came to a screeching halt, absolutely certain that his hardware was protected because he'd designed it himself and had added an extra layer of magic to make double-sure. Not once, never once, had Merlin been knocked unconscious by an EMP.

Electromagnetic pulse, his arse.

Whatever it was, it had done a number on his magic. It was only sometime the night before that Merlin's magic stopped feeling like a combination between radio dead air and television snow and an astronomical black hole. Even then, it was skittish, more like the tide drawing away than rushing in.

He hadn't been hurt. He'd been damaged. Seriously damaged, like someone had taken a carving knife, sliced him open, and scraped out his guts. For a while after he'd first woken up, Merlin thought he'd gone blind, deaf and numb. He had no idea if his magic would even come back, but now that he could feel the spark of it, the heady rush of power that made him sway even while laying down on the cold concrete floor, Merlin knew that he would be all right. It was just a matter of time.

The problem was, he didn't know how much time he had. That they had.

The men had dragged Kay out a while ago. A few hours ago. Merlin wasn't sure. There was no way to tell how long it had been. There was no natural light, not even when the door was briefly opened. They'd stripped both Merlin and Kay of everything remotely electronic or metallic. They didn't have their watches, they didn't have their radios, they didn't have their phones, and they didn't have Merlin's computers or crack box. Worse, they didn't have any of Kay's weapons.

They'd done a good job searching Kay. Merlin had no idea where Kay had stashed half of the short blades and knives that their captors had found.

They were fucked.

They were doubly fucked, because they were beaten at least once a day -- Merlin guessed that the beatings were between twelve and eighteen hours apart, to give their captors the time to rest up between workouts and to do something about the nasty cuts on their knuckles -- and not once did they ask any questions.

Usually, the enemy asked questions first, then pummelled answers out of their prisoners.

This arse-backward approach was more along the lines of tenderizing them for the main event: an interrogation, if there was going to be an interrogation, coupled with outright torture. Merlin tried very hard not to think about it.

He tried very hard not to think about anything.

Merlin had learned not to react when the door was opened, and when it creaked open now, hitting someone or something and reverberating with a metallic clang, he stayed where he was, slumped against the wall, his legs curled up close to his chest, his breath wheezing, making himself as small and as pathetic as possible.

It wasn't hard.

The men who looked after them never spoke a word. Not to each other, not to Kay, not to Merlin. Not while they hauled either one of them to that other room, not while they boxed, using Kay and Merlin as punching bags, and not when they dropped Kay and Merlin in their luxurious concrete accommodations. They were disciplined.
Soldiers. Former soldiers. Mercenaries. Mercenaries. There was no distinguishing them or pinning them down. It was Kay who marked two men as North Koreans -- and only on the basis of how they moved when they prepared themselves for to attack.

It wasn't as if they had anything else to go on. Their clothing was generic; their weapons of every manufacture.

Merlin had never seen the North Koreans. He suspected that he and Kay didn't have the same people "taking care" of them.

Today, their needs were being looked after by two gentlemen with short white-blond hair close-cropped to their skulls. One wore camouflage pants, the other dress trousers. The former was young and dressed like a street thug; the latter was around Merlin's age, maybe older, and he looked like an university student.

Neither one of them carried weapons. They had learned their lesson after the first time Kay had relieved them of their burdens and killed three of their guards. They were sloppier around Merlin, but Merlin was waiting for the right time.

He was starting to suspect that there would be no right time.

The older man walked into the room first. He gave Merlin a critical glare. Merlin curled his legs up tighter, tucking his feet against the wall. He tried to hide himself inside the collar of his jacket, squirming and making a soft, whimpering sound.

The younger man dumped Kay in the middle of the room. Kay landed bonelessly, with a fleshy, exhausted *umph*. He didn't move.

The door swung shut behind their hosts. The locks ratcheted shut.

Merlin waited a breath. He waited another. He unfolded himself and crawled over to Kay.

Still breathing.

Thank the Gods.

Merlin shifted Kay around to make him more comfortable. The cold floor helped ease the worst of the injuries, but Merlin was concerned about Kay's burns. Merlin wasn't sure how Kay got those -- the hair on the back of his head was singed, and *something* had gotten through his coat and shirt and scorched his left shoulder and shoulder blade despite the Kevlar he'd worn on the battlefield. They were second degree burns, but without proper treatment, they would get infected.

The worst part was that their captors were taking advantage of Kay's existing injury. Merlin could see where it was cut and bleeding.

He wished -- and not for the last time -- that his magic was functional, so that he could at the very least conjure up some water from somewhere and clean Kay's wounds.

Or, better yet, get them both out of there.

Kay's eyes fluttered open. The bruising around his eyes hadn't quite swollen his right eye shut -- they must at least have one guy in common in the boxing ring, because Merlin had a matching black eye - - but his jaw was in worse shape. Merlin suspected a cracked tooth or two, though Kay never said. He never complained.
He barely groaned.

His breathing, though, was heavy and raspy and too shallow by far, but at least he was breathing.

They laid like that, side by side, soaking up the coolness of the concrete floor while quietly cursing the rough sandpaper feel of it, for what seemed like hours before Kay said hoarsely, "Something... something's changed."

"What?"

"They... cut it short," Kay said. He rolled onto his back. Merlin saw that the index and middle fingers of his right hand were swollen, marked as if someone had slammed a car door on them. Seriously bruised, but hopefully not broken.

"That was short?" Merlin asked quietly. He strained to listen through the metal door; there was a tiny crack on the bottom. Sometimes the light shifted as if someone were walking past, but for the most part, it was dark outside their cell. Merlin thought it was a small mercy that their cell had any light at all.

"Someone... came in. Told... them to stop." Kay paused, licking dry lips. "Afrikaans."

"Aredian," Merlin said unnecessarily. They'd already figured out that Aredian was involved somehow. Merlin thought that the NWO was pulling the strings here, but there was something wrong with the setup. With all the information that the Directory gave them, what little Olaf had passed on, and everything else that they'd gleaned on their own, Aredian remained the one and only guest at this party who dealt with mercenaries, and he was possibly the one and only person who didn't mind doing a bit of dirty work. Like helping the guests relax. "How's your --"

"Not... bad," Kay said. "One... tour down S'Africa. Yours...?"

"I can muddle through," Merlin said. "Uncle Gaius' girlfriend is Dutch."

"Yeah..." There was a small gasp that might have been a laugh, and Kay's mouth twisted in a crooked smile. His half-healed split lip split open again and bled; he didn't seem to care or notice. "Funny... thinking Gaius... has a girlfriend..."

Merlin chuckled. Kay made a sound that qualified as a strangled laugh. They both huffed for breath, holding their sides, doing their earnest best not to notice each other's tears of pain. They were silent for some time, their heavy gasps filling the room, until Merlin said, "Sorry."

"No... no. 'S good. Need... to think about... other things."

Like Arthur. The team. Morgana and Gwen.

Merlin squeezed his eyes shut and made a sound, lowering his head until the cold scrub of the floor met the scruff of his cheek. Arthur.

He tried to reach for him, to find him through the bond, but his magic stretched and snapped like a cold rubber band, and he grunted from the whiplash.

When he woke up the very first time, right after the shite had hit the fan, it was to a panicked Kay trying to revive him. Merlin had... lost it. He still didn't know what he said or did during that time, but Kay told him that his babble hadn't made sense and that Kay had knocked Merlin out before he could say anything beyond "Arthur" and "Holy shit" and "It huuuuurts".
Kay had apologized. Merlin had snorted at him. Better a bruise and a concussion than letting the enemy find out that Merlin wasn't just some glorified boy toy who was good at hacking communication networks and cracking encryptions.

Their captors transported them from the Pendragon testing grounds to the back of a SUV to the back of a van. They were blindfolded and their wrists and ankles were zip-tied for the majority of the journey down the smooth expanse of the asphalt highways before turning onto bumpy, poorly maintained gravel roads. Merlin and Kay had both been trained to notice everything, and at their first opportunity, had compared notes. At best that they could figure, they were in the industrial section of a town, possibly an abandoned building. The little that they'd been able to observe outside of their little cell amounted to a network of labyrinthine corridors and chambers that were, possibly, transport or storage areas.

The second day that they'd been there, Kay told Merlin that he'd noticed some old telephone wires outside their cell. The third day -- or at least, what felt like the third day -- Merlin told Kay that he'd spotted a weapons storage room adjacent to the boxing ring.

They'd both been able to confirm that they were brought to the same room for their daily beating regimen.

Food and water came by so sporadically that they could set their watches more accurately based on how often they were beaten, but at least, when it came, the water was clean and plentiful, and the food calorie-rich and palatable -- when they could eat it, never mind keep it down. They had tried to reserve scraps of bread and water, once, and had received an extra beating that day for their trouble.

Merlin wondered how much more either of them could take.

"They… They took my necklace," Kay mumbled sleepily, fighting his exhaustion to get the words out.

"What?" Merlin startled.

"Neck… necklace. The… new guy wanted it. Didn't… say why."

"Kay. Kay! What did he look like?" Merlin pushed himself up to his knees, rolling Kay carefully onto his back, shaking him in an effort to keep him awake. It was too late; Kay was unconscious again, and Merlin didn't have the heart to make him wake up to answer more questions. Instead, he sat back on his heels, pulling his coat closed again, and hugged his ribs.

They took Kay's necklace. The one that Kathy had made. The one that protected him from magical attacks -- though its potency was probably decreased by now, considering the effect of the so-called portable EMP. Why would they --

Merlin swayed, sick, and rolled onto his hip before catching himself from an inadvertent face-plant; he ended up on the floor, anyway, angled in a perfect position to watch as the shadows under the door shifted. The door creaked open. It swung until it hit the far wall, but no one came in.

Merlin was conscious of someone standing in the doorway. He wished -- he hoped -- that it was Arthur coming to the rescue, but that was quickly replaced with dread when he rolled his body just enough to recognize Jonathan Aredian.

He was dressed in dark trousers and a tweed jacket over a wool pullover on top of a collared shirt, all of it in muted colours that made the bright blue pin on his lapel stand out obnoxiously. His hair was combed back, and his pinched expression didn't show any of the amusement that Merlin had seen on
him at the Louvre.

Aredian watched them and said nothing. He watched them and stared. He watched and -- it was an annoying bit of looming that Merlin could do well without.

Merlin glared at Aredian as well as he was able through a black eye and slightly blurry vision, but when Aredian didn't react, Merlin decided that it was a waste of energy and rolled back onto the floor and closed his eyes.

Aredian made a sound that could've been a choke or a chortle. Merlin didn't care. Aredian said something in Afrikaans -- Merlin didn't even try to figure out what he said -- and there was the sound of footsteps retreating, someone obeying an order. The scrape of a chair along the cement floor stopped somewhere in the proximity of the door, and there was a faint scuffling while it was manoeuvred into position.

When Merlin opened his eyes again, Aredian was sitting just inside the doorway, blocking the entrance. His legs were crossed, his arms in his lap, and there was an unreadable but imperious look on his face.

Merlin ignored him. He turned a bit, giving Aredian his back.

There was a huff of breath, and, finally: "A large part of my business is the acquisition of rare and unique items and individuals. I am often commissioned to ferret out these things. However, a generous percentage of my income relies on my ability to anticipate the future needs of my customers, whether they are aware of their requirements or not, and to secure them accordingly. Selling to the highest bidder does have its rewards."

Merlin let the silence stretch for as long as he dared, unsure if Aredian would keep talking or not. "You... said. In Paris."

"I wasn't certain that you would remember. You seemed otherwise occupied at the time."

Merlin didn't dignify that with an answer. Aredian chuckled.

"I had hoped you would be more amenable after a few days as my guest. However, I do apologize. When I instructed my men to soften you up, I was unaware that they would take me quite so literally."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Bollocks," he muttered.

If Aredian heard, he made no sign. Instead, he continued, "Although, if one considers that the outcome of this treatment has been less than ideal, it's just as well that my men went for the direct approach. At least this way, we've eliminated quite a bit of time wasted pussyfooting around, if you catch my meaning. Honestly, I should have known that young Mr. Pendragon wouldn't have gone for someone like you if you weren't resilient."

Merlin tried -- and failed -- to muffle a physical reaction at the mention of Arthur's name, but at least he managed to keep from turning over entirely to scowl at Aredian, giving him the advantage that he was looking for. He croaked, "What do you want with us?"

The sound of rustling fabric -- uncrossing and crossing his legs -- made the pause distracting. "Your use of the word us amuses me."

This time, Merlin twisted and glared over his shoulder at Aredian; Aredian responded by brightening and smiling thinly. "You're not --"
"Now, now," Aredian said, holding up a placating hand. "There's no need to become agitated. Do calm yourself. As it turns out, both you and your friend will prove to be of some use to me."

Merlin didn't answer, but his brow furrowed into a frown.

"Mr. Lawhead, for instance. You see, I make a habit of hiring former soldiers. Their discipline, their training, their skills. His background will prove invaluable, particularly where it involves his former employer. This, of course, hinges on his willingness to wear a turncoat's mantle. Do you think that would interest him?"

"Fuck… you," Kay said quietly; he hadn't been as unconscious as Merlin had thought. Weak and hurt, yes, and not getting any better.

Aredian's chuckle was low and chilling. "I did suspect that you would be averse to a working relationship with me following your horrendous treatment, but I do believe I can bring you around. A pity that you're an orphan; family makes for excellent motivation."

Neither Merlin nor Kay reacted. Kay's file had been scrubbed as clean as the Directory could make it -- the Directory had been good for at least that one thing. As far as anyone was aware, Kay was never fostered, and he never had a family to rely on.

"Money, as I recall, has always been a primary incentive for you. Perhaps we could negotiate."

Kay's breathing was slow and raspy. Instead of a verbal response, he made a weak, rude gesture.

"Later, of course, when you're in better spirits. In fact, I would be pleased to give you a signing bonus should you be willing to give me the name of the person who cast the enchantment on your necklace. It's a very intriguing protection spell. Was it you? If it was… Well. I've rarely seen the like. It combines a particularly strong shielding with substantial deflection."

Merlin hid his flush of panic with a narrowing of his eyes. "Enchantment? The fuck are you smoking?"

He fell silent when Kay cleared his throat and shifted slightly in his crumpled position. "And… what makes you think… It weren't me?"

Merlin resisted the urge to kick Kay. Was he insane? Why would he even think about drawing attention to himself as having magic?

"Surely, if you had any magic of your own, you would have used it to avoid your current condition." Aredian said, tilting his head and throwing in a sardonic roll of his eyes for good measure.

"What are you --" Merlin rolled onto his side away from Aredian, pretending to shift closer to Kay. "What is he talking about? Magic?"

Kay made a soft, grunting sound accompanied by a shrug that looked painful.

Aredian sighed heavily. "Do be quiet, Merlin. While it is a pity that you aren't as esoterically inclined as your namesake, it's fortunate that you make up for it in… other ways."

All this rolling over and turning around was taking its toll on Merlin; he let himself fall on his back, gasped for breath, and made a token effort to sit up that failed miserably. Wearily, he asked, "What do you want?"

"Oh, many, many things, my young friend. But shall we begin with cracking the encryption on the
Pendragon database? It was quite unsportsmanlike of your beau to have taken that unnecessary measure."

Merlin didn't say anything for a long time. "If I do it, will you let us go?"

"Don't, Merlin," Kay rasped. "Don't."

"Hm," Aredian said, sounding as if he were genuinely considering Merlin's counteroffer, though Merlin was pretty sure he was playing games. "Considering the expense and risk that my men have taken to secure you, Merlin, I am inclined to believe that you owe me a great debt. And as all great debts go, they need to be repaid. With interest."

"I can pay," Merlin said abruptly. "Just. Just let me at a computer. I'll transfer any amount you want, any denomination, from any bank in the world. I'll make it untraceable. It'll be yours, free and clear. Please. Just. Please let me go --"

He hadn't meant to add a dramatic touch, but the sob worked its way out of him on its own and cracked his voice.

"There, there," Aredian said after a moment, sounding wholly unsympathetic. "That's lovely. You really are eager to please, aren't you? You'll do anything I ask --"

"Anything. Please --"

Another sob gasped through his chest and wracked him with coughs. Tears of pain and frustration streamed down his cheeks. Merlin would like nothing more than to blast his way out of this prison, taking Kay with him, but no matter how often he reached for it, his magic skirled away.

"Merlin," Kay warned, but whatever he was about to say was feeble and difficult to make out. Kay's lips moved, but Merlin couldn't make out the words.

Aredian made a soft, tsking sound. "You gentlemen are filthy. We cannot possibly have a civilized conversation while you are in this condition."

He stood up abruptly; the chair scraped on the floor.

"Clean them up," Aredian ordered. He left without another word.

Someone walked into the room and effortlessly hauled Merlin to his feet. He tottered a little, tried to stand, and sagged; the man behind Merlin caught him before he collapsed. Kay was dead weight from start to finish, and the guards weren't gentle when they dragged him out of the cell like he was a sack of potatoes.

They were hauled past the boxing ring, down another corridor that Merlin had never seen before, and left to lean and sag and fall against a tiled wall.

There was a moment's respite and Merlin blinked against the bright lights, trying to see their captors. He'd started to make out a blurred face just as a pillock turned a fire hose on them.

The tremors wracked Merlin's body without warning. One moment, he was fine, trying to rest; in the next, he was assaulted by shivers so violent that he wanted to die.
Kay had stopped shivering a long time ago. That was a bad sign.

They'd been sprayed with ice cold, high-pressure water for what had been an eternity, the blast literally sanding off a layer of skin. There had been no escaping it even if Merlin could have moved -- he'd been knocked off his feet more than once, landing in a slippery slide on the tiled floor even as the water kept coming.

Merlin thought for sure that he would drown. Now, he wished that he had.

They were brought back to their cells soaked to the bone, dripping water the entire way. They weren't given a change of clothes, and between the ice crystals that were forming on the outside of his jacket and the frosted puddle of water all around them, Merlin guessed that they'd lowered the thermostat, too.

"Kay," Merlin whispered. Kay was just out of reach. The missing part of his coat and shirt showed a ragged red and white -- more white than red -- blotch of skin where he'd been burned. There were greenish-yellow edges to the wound, and it didn't look good.

Point in fact, nothing looked good.

"Kay. Come on, Kay," Merlin said. He dropped his hand to the ground; the impact shattered the thin layer of ice on the puddle around him, spraying him with water.

He closed his eyes.

He shivered violently, his muscles contracting, his joints aching. He rode it out as best as he could until his body ran out of energy, and heaved a raspy breath, waiting for sleep to claim him.

He woke again and again every time his body seized, and every time it did, his magic flared unpredictably, making his limbs burn. Merlin stared at his hand, at the clawed curl of his fingers, at Kay, who hadn't so much as moved except for the rare hitch of his chest rising and falling.

There were voices down the corridor. They were getting louder and louder. They stopped outside their cell, and the metal door acted like a conductor.

"… you work for us, yes?" Bryn snarled. "You do what we tell you to do --"

"The terms of our agreement were changed," someone said, smooth and soft, a light lilt to his voice. It wasn't Aredian, but he had the same accent.

"By whom?"

"By us," said the new voice with an audible, mocking smirk. "You see, part of our payment for arranging the attack on the Pendragon building was a copy of their weapons database and prototypes. We are awaiting payment. Therefore, we are well within our rights to withhold delivery of services until we have that payment. It just so happens that the key to the database is now in our custody."

"And he hasn't given you shite, has he?" a familiar voice asked. Merlin couldn't place it. Whoever was speaking, it sounded like it was coming from just beyond the cell, muffled by faint background chatter. Merlin started to turn, to strain his hearing to see if he could identify the person, but another vicious shiver chose that moment to flare.

He lost thread of the conversation. He didn't even notice that the door had been opened or that there were new people in the room until he heard Bryn growl, "You're never going to get payment if he
"dies."

"He's still breathing, isn't he?"

"Not for long, he ain't," Bryn said. "What the fuck did you do? You were supposed to deliver him unharmed, and what the fuck is that? Is that one of the bodyguards? Why did you grab one of Pendragon's men?"

"That's none of your concern," the man said.

"Isn't it? Isn't it?" Bryn said, repeating twice more with growing, shrill disbelief. "You fucking dutchman. Stupid as fucking stumps. Don't you know who you're dealing with? We've got --"

The man rubbed his forehead in an annoyed, barely-restrained sigh. "Please, Mr. Nash. There's no need for insults. And we know perfectly well who we are dealing with --"

"Come on, boys," Bryn said. "We're taking what we're due."

There was an explosion of sound, and it took a moment for Merlin to recognize it as the simultaneous echo of multiple guns chambering bullets and clicking of safeties flipped off. He tried to open his eyes.

It was hard. His wet eyelashes must have frozen together.

Everything was still a blur. He couldn't make anyone out. One side of the room was pointing guns at the other side of the room in a scrambled standoff, and Merlin could only hope that everyone would shoot at the same time and make short work of killing them all.

The silence stretched. And stretched. It might have been only a few seconds, or it might have been several minutes. Merlin wasn't sure.

A single gunshot shattered the stalemate, and a body dropped to the ground.

Merlin blinked several times. The random shapes in the cell became less blotchy and more defined.

Less than half a metre away was Bryn Nash, his mouth open, his eyes glassy, his face splattered with blood from a gunshot wound to the temple.

"Was it just me?" someone asked.

"What?" The question was sharp and confused.

Merlin thought he saw a dismissive gesture out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't move to see who had made it.

"Well, I don't know about you," the speaker drawled, "But he got on my nerves. Bit of a schoolyard bully turned prison grunt and not much by way of brains to spare. We're better off without him. Maybe actually get some shite done."

"You… you shot him," a new voice stuttered, dumbfounded.

"I see your mum didn't raise herself some dumb brats," the first man said, throwing in a derisive grunt. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No. No! No problem. No problem at all." There was a scuff of boots on the ground, scraping over the cement, as someone backed away. "It's just. Tristan's not going to be happy."
"So what. So Tristan's not going to be happy. Who gives a fuck. Tristan's not here, is he? We are, stretching our necks out while he sits in his cushy little flat while some bird sucks his baby pickle of a cock. When has he ever taken a risk his whole bloody life? Never, that's when, and I should know. I grew up with the plonker; he's always had other people do his dirty business for him while he gets all the credit. You know what I think of that? He can go sod himself."

There was a long silence and a great deal of murmuring; Merlin was laying down on the ground, trapped in the rictus of another fever pitch, and he couldn't focus on the argument until it passed.

"Well. How about this? How about we take care of things a little differently, yeah?" There was another gesture. "You want the payment that's owed to you. No problem. This is what we'll do. You're going to take me to Mr. Aredian, and I'll fix this problem for him."

No. Merlin's hand closed into a painful fist. He tried to make a sound of protest, but it was muffled behind his chattering teeth. No. No --

Aredian's man paused before responding. "Yes. Let's do that," he said carefully.

The door shut behind them. Bryn's dead eyes stared at Merlin, his blood mixing with the puddles in the floor.

Goddamn it, Will. What are you doing?

ooOOoo

Arthur couldn't believe that he'd slept. He sat up, rubbing his face, guilty. He should have been doing something, anything, that would get them closer to finding Morgana and Gwen and Merlin and Kay. He shouldn't have been curled up under a waxy slicker, his head resting on the softest side of an ammunition packet, nestled on the crunch of hay and warmed by a pair of hot-air blasters set on low and aimed in his general direction.

Galahad had returned from Major Emrys' house with a few more supplies and the phone that he'd asked for, handing it to Arthur.

"She said to give you this, too," Galahad said, putting down half of the load he was carrying before sliding the shoulder strap of a large hip bag. It was leather but lovingly cared for, aged by sunlight and softened by use, still pliant and supple. Beads of water like dew on blades of grass rolled off the tanned hide when he shook it as dry as he could before passing it to Arthur.

"Said that it would be easier for me to get this to you than if she tried to sneak it out tomorrow, when the storm's supposed to break and she can't get out of the house for want of being watched. It's Your Eyes Only, and that context would help, but it might get you started on what you're looking for."

"She said all that?" Arthur asked, looking at the bag doubtfully; it wasn't heavy.

"All that," Galahad said, and didn't wait for Arthur's approval before picking his way through the mess of sprawled bodies to leave a bin of brownies on a sleeping Gwaine's chest and to replenish Lance's supplies
Arthur stared at the phone in his hands, Allan's words ringing in his ears, suddenly uncertain and confused. He'd wanted to call so many people -- but Allan was right. They were bugged.

It was Perceval who had clamped a hand on Arthur's shoulder and squeezed lightly, the voice of reason where Arthur's reason had long left him, "Clear head, yeah?"

"Yeah," Arthur said, and he put the phone aside. He kept the bag close, but his eyes were blurring, and he was exhausted, and maybe, just maybe, he would need a clear head for whatever was in the bag, too.

Now, hours later, shaking off the lingering pull of sleep, Arthur was no nearer the rare state of clear head than he had been the night before. His body felt heavy and laden, every ache and bruise magnified tenfold. His belly ached with a hunger he had forgotten until someone had put a sandwich in his hand the night before, wanting more. His throat was scratchy and dry, and he searched for the tea that he could smell faintly over the mustiness of hay, but that he had no right to ask for.

Allan had gone to the house after the false dawn; he returned just as the sky was starting to lighten, taking full advantage of the misty fog to mask his passage as he brought up fresh food and coffee. He had left again, Geraint and Lance and Galahad in tow, all of them heavily armed under the civilian clothes that Allan had provided.

"Will's," Allan had said by way of explanation, his voice flat and compounded by a lackadaisical shrug that his son had inherited. The clothes were a close fit for the three men. "He's always been a bit of a clothes-horse."

Geraint had found that funny. He'd laughed until he couldn't laugh anymore, because he was in pain. Lance had heaved a sigh, Galahad had grumbled that it wasn't that funny, but somehow everything was lighter.

The easy air lasted as long as it took until Gwaine woke up to find that the Tupperware of brownies on his chest had been emptied of all except for one. He stared at the crumbs with a pout large enough for a whole flock of pigeons to land on, and groused a sullen, "Now I know how Merlin felt."

Merlin.

Fuck.

Arthur's eyes prickled with tears. He blinked repeatedly and went to stand in the shadowed doorway of the barn, tracing the route that Allan and the others had taken a bare hour before, the mist covering up their passage, slowly and surely.

"We're due another blow in a few hours," Allan said, tugging his cap off his head to run a hand through his thinning hair. "Enough time to get us there and back, but Hunith's not off shift until three. That woman can drive with the best of them, God knows she's had plenty of practice, but --"

Arthur fixed Allan with an even glare, the one that was supposed to urge people to get to the damn point. He didn't say it out loud, though, because Allan had been a Master Sergeant, and probably had never withered under a commissioned officer's stare once in his long life.

"It's something Hunith said when I called her to sort ourselves for getting Geraint in for that scan. She weren't talking to me. Some bird named Shelley that she's mentioned before."
"And that's strange why?"

"It's strange because Hunith told her. So kind of you to offer. If I'm not still on shift when you clock out, I might take you up on it. That drive home yesterday was horrendous. I'm not keen on doing it again."

Arthur waited, because he was certain that he was missing an important detail.

"You tell me, Captain. Woman like her? Fazed by a bit of a storm?" Allan said, pulling his cap down securely, curling the ends of the lid to shadow his eyes even more, "Accepting help from someone who's almost certainly Directory? That sound like Hunith -- like Merlin's Mum -- to you?"

Arthur froze. He glanced at Leon before turning to look at Allan again. "What does it sound like to you, Master Sergeant?"

There was a flash of a grin that reminded Arthur of Will, full of deadly mischief. "Oh, I don't know. Sounds to me like it might be code. If I remember rightly, So kind of you means that someone's been asking too many questions."

Galahad had orders to stay at the hospital, under the guise of visiting a patient, or as an orderly if he was running the risk of getting kicked out, to crawl into the back seat of the Range Rover in case. Bohrs, Owain and Lamorak were out dumping their old vehicles and trading up for something more functional -- they would grab some additional supplies while they were out. One of them would stay behind, too, and follow Hunith and anyone else who might be tailing them.

Arthur ran the possibilities and the scenarios in his mind over and over again, wishing desperately that he had more information, more resources. He was reacting to everything that was happening, cobbling together his plans on the fly, and, normally, that was all right, but he didn't like it. He didn't like being the one at a serious disadvantage.

No one spoke for a while. They busied themselves in checking and rechecking their gear. Arthur knew what his team was doing -- pretending that they weren't watching their Captain fall apart in front of their eyes, that this Captain was struggling to hold himself together when everything was in shambles.

Eventually, Arthur made his way back inside, ignoring the wet chill of the fog and the dull ache beneath his temples that hinted that the worst of the storm was yet to come. He stepped over Gwaine after nodding at him; Gwaine returned the nod with a faint shrug and a raised chin that boomeranged the unspoken question right back at him.

All right, mate?

No, Arthur was not all right. But he was going to need to be.

Leon sat next to him, shoving a cold bacon butty at Arthur. "Eat."

He ate. It was as tasteless as the ham sandwich from the night before. The tea was watery and bland and lukewarm on his tongue, as if they'd used the same teabag a dozen times, but the tea was as black as pitch and the strong, acrid smell burned his tongue.

He brushed the crumbs from his fingertips and sat with Leon in strained silence. The phone that Major Emrys had sent back with Galahad mocked them.

It was a big, blocky, useless thing from the 1980s that shouldn't even be functional anymore. It
looked like a military Box modified and redesigned for civilian use, with a briefcase-sized battery to keep it powered for local calls and an antenna that could double as a javelin. That was a necessity back in the days when telecommunications was a new fad that was just starting to catch on, and was probably used by a tradesperson to get from place to place on the road without having to head back to the shop to get new call orders, if the dingings and scratches and greasy smear marks were anything to go by.

The phone didn't make sense.

Why would Merlin give his mother this monstrosity? It couldn't be hidden in a coat or trouser pocket. It couldn't be stashed aside, unnoticed, when someone walked by. The technology in the phone was so old that, by now, it probably couldn't even connect to a line. It wasn't even on the same grid anymore.

Which would, in theory, make it untraceable, if the old grids were still up and powered. Arthur wasn't sure if they were or if they weren't.

He reached for the phone, unclipping it from the rugged plastic hook. The soft push buttons lit up in neon yellow.

The device was powered, at least.

He pushed the call button.

The display was a two-line pixelated black-on-grey, and a message appeared: Enter number to call.

Who could he call?

Arthur had thought about it for a long time after Allan's warnings. He'd thought about it some more that morning when he woke up.

Should he call the Colonel, to tell him that Arthur was all right? To alert him that Morgana and Gwen had been taken?

Should he call Olaf, to tell him that the national security of Britain was in danger, because they'd taken Merlin and Kay?

Should he call his uncle Sol, pretend that he knew nothing of the Directory's betrayal, play dumb and hope that the team would find out what had happened to Morgana and Gwen and Merlin and Kay?

He couldn't trust anyone. He could only trust his team.

Arthur pushed the call button again to turn the phone off. Instead, a new message appeared on the screen.

Enter password

Arthur glanced sharply at Leon. Leon frowned, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and his gaze went from Arthur to the phone to Arthur again, wide eyed, eyebrows up.

"Merlin can put a Crack Box in a handheld game controller," Arthur said softly. He dropped the handset into his lap, the corded cable recoiling and pulling it back to clank against the plastic case. Arthur ran his hands all over the phone, battery base and all, but he couldn't find a catch, any way to make it break apart. He had no doubt that Merlin could input complex codes through the phone interface alone, but he didn't think that Merlin would have given his mother a scrambled, encrypted,
completely untraceable phone if he hadn't also incorporated some features to make it relatively easy for her to use.

He picked up the phone again. The display had gone dark.

He pressed the call button twice and the Enter password prompt appeared again.

"What did Galahad say again? About the phone?"

Arthur remembered Galahad's confused, I don't even know shrug when he had handed over the heavy case. He'd said something, too, but Arthur had answered with a dull nod, not really paying attention.

"That the Major said you'd know how to use it," Leon said quietly.

Arthur rubbed at his face. He dropped his hand.

Merlin would have given this phone to his Mum a long time ago. He wouldn't have had time to work on it after he joined Excalibur. He wouldn't have had time to work on it when he was in London, staying at Arthur's house, building little things. Arthur would have noticed this ugly brick on the kitchen table and have teased Merlin mercilessly for it.

This phone must somehow be similar to what Merlin had done for his Uncle Gaius -- he'd altered an ancient rotary phone, an ugly olive-green thing that weighed ten times as much as the London Directory, installing a device on the physical telephone line that would scramble source and destination. The encryption on the telephone was just as startling, and, on Merlin's last visit, he had even upgraded the telephone to include a short-range jammer, in case someone had the bright idea to install an espionage device.

"Won't they see all that gear when they crack it open to bug the phone?" Gwaine asked, crossing his arms and looking dubious.

Arthur looked up from the oversized sofa in the cramped living room, where he was having a conversation with Gaius on military tactics, mining the other man's mind. Thus far, Gaius had regaled Arthur with tales of Merlin's magical escapades, including how he created an illusion of a fence to stop bullies from chasing him down, or how he'd enchanted the windowsill of a next door neighbour famous for her pies to automatically carve out a slice and deliver it to him.

"The uproar," Gaius was saying, wiping a tear from his cheek as he chuckled his way through the story, "You'd think that someone had stolen the bloody Crown jewels. The Lieutenant even got the MPs involved. They came over each and every time under the pretence of looking for evidence on the pie thief, but we all knew that they only filed the reports so that they could have a slice of pie --"

"'Course not," Merlin said, glancing their way. "That's the genius. They'll only see the old rotary part, all original. I hid half of the microchips inside of those."

"Oh," Gwaine said, scowling a bit. "Why would you do that?"

Merlin shrugged. Arthur would remind Gwaine of the Directory's threat against magic users, and how much of a right git he was for having forgotten, but that would be later, because Gaius was starting on another story.

"And then there was the base cat -- the Colonel's cat, actually, but no one, not even the Colonel, could get near it. It was sweet as you please if you had food, but it would shred your trouser leg if
you didn't share. Merlin couldn't have been eleven when he dressed up in a suit -- I can't recall the occasion --"

"Mum was making me go to Annie's birthday party. God. It was dumb. She was a spoilt little brat. The invitations were engraved, and it said formal dress mandatory like she expected us to be wearing our whites or something, never mind that we were all only ten --"

"-- for some reason, Merlin had candy in his pocket --"

"I did not have candy in my pocket. It were Will's --"

"And the cat followed Merlin across the base, tripping him up a few times. When it finally clued in that Merlin wasn't giving up the candy, it turned Merlin's left leg into a shredding post. His Mum was horrified --"

"Oi -- what does that even have to do with war tactics?"

"Oh, hush, Merlin," Arthur said. "The more I learn about your magic, the better."

"Bollocks, you just want to hear how horrid my childhood was. Next I know, you'll be dragging us up north and begging my Mum for pictures of me in my nappies… Hey! What are you --" There was a loud smack -- the sort that came from knocking a heavy plastic handset on the fragile hand bones. Gwaine wenched his hand away, shaking it out.

"Ow! What the hell was that for?"

"I told you, quit pushing buttons. You'll break it."

"More like it'll break me," Gwaine complained, this side shy of an outright pout. "How do you turn the encrypt on, anyway? There's no switch."

"Password before the number," Merlin said absentmindedly, bowing his head to squint at as he worked on the jammer. "Gaius, don't you dare tell Arthur any more. At this rate, you'll run him off, and where will that leave me?"

Password.

A word. A number. An alphanumeric sequence. An unlimited string. It could be anything.

Or it could be just one thing. Something that a military mother would never forget.

Her son's service number.

Arthur punched it in.

The screen went black. Arthur had a sinking feeling that he'd cocked it up, that he entered the wrong code and accidentally locked the system, barring it from further use. But then the device beeped, a twin clicking sound came from both ends of the battery case, and a panel flopped open fast, catching itself about ten degrees down for a slow descent.

Inside the panel was a keyless, seamless touch keyboard, waterproof and indestructibly lined in one of those aircraft aluminum cases. There was a screen embedded in the top half of the battery pack case itself, roughly twenty centimetres in height and fifty in width, tilt-able for better viewing. It
flickered black and white a few times before a dragon appeared on the screen, curled around a big M.

On the bottom of the M was Merlinware and a flashing Loading... bar.

Arthur barked a small laugh. The team glanced up in his direction, and he could see their surprise, even a few flickers of a smile on their faces.

Hell. Arthur had surprised himself, too.

There was another phone embedded in the bottom half of the battery pack case, held in place with a Velcro strap. Arthur tugged on it; it was an iPhone, older model, stripped out of all of its extras. There was more Merlinware on the phone, and a dragon dancing in the background.

"Our Merlin thinks of everything," Leon said. Arthur glanced at the main screen. There were several icons on the screen.


Arthur touched the Mask icon. Another page appeared on the screen with several more icons -- Call. Web. Email.

There were also icons for a troubling number of direct backdoors, if Arthur was interpreting the icons correctly. Merlin had programmed his mother's phone with access to MI5, MI6, the CIA and several other government agencies, including the British Army.

One icon had prominence: a stylized dragon clutching a tiny sign.

Call Merlin.

Arthur's hand raised of its own volition, but he snatched his hand away before touching it. Whoever had captured Merlin had also taken all of his gear; they would be in possession of Merlin's phone. If Arthur called from this phone, even if it was a masked call bounced through only God knew how many servers and satellites, there was a chance that Arthur would be found out and give the game away.

As far as the world was concerned, Arthur and his team died on the testing grounds.

Arthur lowered his hand. It balled into a fist and dug into his thigh. When he reached to touch the screen again, it was to Secure Logoff.

The screen went black. A thin strip light where the phone had been flashed repeatedly until Arthur replaced the iPhone; the keyboard panel slowly slid shut, latching to a secured lock, and clicked twice.

No one would ever think that this phone was anything but an obsolete piece of technology. Arthur was suddenly very glad that Merlin was on their side.

He replaced the ugly handset on top of the battery case.

"What are we going to do?" Leon asked, his voice quiet.

Arthur hesitated. His shoulders tensed. He shook his head slowly, his eyes catching on the slim bag that Hunith had given Galahad to pass on to him. "I don't know yet."

"It's a bit of a waiting game," Perceval said, dropping a hay bale that probably weighed several
hundred pounds in the space across from Arthur and Leon. "I hate waiting games."

"Yeah," Leon said with a dry, flat chuckle.

They were in a sort of strategic limbo -- neither fleeing for their lives nor struggling to stay off the radar, trapped in a bubble of time when they knew nothing and nothing was happening. They could only sit and wait, hoping that an opportunity would present itself.

Arthur didn't want to sit and wait. He wanted to pull the strings, to create their own opportunities.

He stared at the leather bag for only seconds more before taking out the contents.

It was an old-style accordion file holder, the dark glossy brown faded to a light taupe, the corners worn and torn. There was red tape across the flap with the familiar white broken line that always accompanied classified information, the word TOP SECRET in big bold typeset letters. It had been cut a long time ago and even if the ragged edges fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, the tape was crumbling and flaking off from too much exposure to air and light.

Arthur unwound the string holding the flap shut. Inside was an inch-thick manila folder, the front cover labeled with more TOP SECRET cautions, these stamped in bright red ink that was still vibrant despite the papers' obvious age. Arthur glanced at it only long enough to acknowledge the level of TOP SECRET associated with the file -- not only was it well above Arthur's pay grade and still-fresh security classification, he doubted that even the Queen herself had the authority for these papers.

It chilled him.

The first few pages -- well-worn and dog-eared and creased as if they had been read many, many times -- had lines and lines of text blacked out. There were notes in the margin in blue ink, written in a sloppy, loopy handwriting, arrows pointing here and there to indicate a best attempt at filling in the blanks.

Arthur gave a quick flip through the papers to get an idea of what he was holding in his hand. It didn't take much for him to realize that the file contained mission briefs. Most of the sheets were mimeographed in ink that would fade with time, but were in surprisingly good condition; other pages were handwritten in pencil -- a soldier's notes in the field.

He thumbed through the briefs, trying to get an overview.

Operation Albion was a multi-national mission drawing talented personnel from several countries -- France, Holland, Canada, the United States -- but the bulk of the squad were made up of British SAS soldiers. They made up the core of the team code-named Black Knight, with eight men broken up into four smaller teams and paired up with men from foreign countries. Each of these teams were supplemented with commissioned soldiers who were also agents with the Directory.

The teams were deployed around the world at coordinates. Arthur traced a finger down the list. There were easily two dozen locations listed, each with their own subheaders and briefing notes that barely filled a five sentence paragraph that amounted to mission aborted or directive not achieved. He did the rough geography in his head; the locations were scattered around the world.

Somewhere in the Canadian North; a spot in the middle of the United States. One of them was at the bottom of South America, two in Asia, one in Australia. One more was in the former Soviet Union, somewhere in the far reaches where few people lived; there was mention of Tunguska. Two locations were in France, one in Norway, and three in England.

Arthur paused. "Gwaine. Where's your map?"
"Which one?"
Arthur raised his chin and gave Gwaine a long, vexed look. "The UK terrain map."
"Oh, that one." Gwaine paused.
"You have it, yeah?"
"No?"
Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt and counted to ten, but that didn't work. "Why don't you have the map?"
"I haven't carried an UK map since, oh, Basics?"
"Are you seriously telling me that you navigated us here without a bloody map?"
"Yes?"
Leon nudged Arthur's side subtly. It was his let it go, mate elbow, and it came as a package deal with a soft, under-the-breath chuckle.
Arthur gave him a sidelong glare.
"Gwaine?"
"Yes?"
"The only reason I'm not shooting you right now is not because you've already been shot, but because there's a slim chance you might be able to tell me where these coordinates are," Arthur said thinly.
"I'd say that the only reason you're not shooting me right now is because you love me that much," Gwaine said, fishing in his shirt pocket for a pencil. When he came up empty, he patted his torso, his pants, squeezed his pockets, and reached for his backpack.
Gareth silently got up, walked over to Gwaine, and dropped pencil and paper in his lap.
"Cheers, mate," Gwaine said, and held up his new tools. "All right. I'm ready."
Arthur shook his head and read out the UK coordinates and included the sites in France, Norway, and Russia. The out-of-country locations were purely as punishment, but Arthur had an ulterior motive. He wanted to know what the sites had in common. He made Gwaine repeat them back to him.
"Give me five minutes," Gwaine said, his brow already furrowing in concentration. Arthur replaced the page in the file, and kept reading.
Operation Albion didn't have a written or recorded mission statement anywhere in the file. The blacked-out cover sheets described the resources required to mount the mission and how it was imperative that it be carried out both successfully and before the Axis forces attained their goals -- whatever those goals were at the time. Without corroborating papers from the German forces, Arthur wondered if he would ever know for sure, but from what he understood in the field notes, there had been more than one recorded encounter with the Germans who were arriving at the same coordinates.
One entry read:

15-02 1845
Obs sqd 15 trps, 2 ofcrs, 1 srcr. W apprch on lcn. Comms rcvd ords hld bck & ambsh on dptr.
15-03 0115
Obs sqd 4 trps 1 ofcr, 1 srcr dprt lcn. Rtrn rte E. Ambsh succ, srcr capt, rmdr exctd per cntrl cmd.
NO SIGN OF DEVICE. Srcr intrg.
15-05 0615

It was terrible shorthand, and it took a few minutes to pierce through both the handwriting and the acronyms, but as far as Arthur could gather, one of the teams observed a squad of fifteen troops with two officer and one additional unidentified (srcr?) personnel that, when sounded out, was far too much like sorcerer for Arthur's liking. The squad arrived on their location via a western overland route and the team received orders to hold back, observe, and ambush when they left their location.

Seven and a half hours later, they observed the enemy squad emerging from the location. They lost eleven troops and one officer. The ambush was successful; the sorcerer was captured while the remainder were executed on command from their operators. Whatever the team had gone to the location to find, the enemy squad hadn't secured it, and the sorcerer was interrogated.

Two days later, the sorcerer committed suicide -- either the interrogation was untenable, or suicide was preferable to giving the team the information they were after. The team's operators were notified of the loss and given orders to move to a new location.

Arthur flipped through more papers. He skimmed them for the general overview -- he would read them more carefully at another time and try to correlate a detail on one page to a fact on another for a clearer image of the entire puzzle. He paused at a photograph.

It was a squad photograph, involving all the teams and their members, grouped together in whatever poses would get them all in one shot. Everyone was in uniform, with distinct differences between one nation's greens and another's; everyone was armed to some degree or another with a variety of favourite weapons. It was easy enough to pick out the SAS soldiers. They stood tall, shoulders back, hands free of weapons but loose-limbed and ready to grab whichever one would suit the situation best. Their uniforms bore no patch of squadron or rank or affiliation beyond British Army, and among the entire group, it was the SAS who wouldn't pass any kind of inspection.

Their gear was non-standard, their clothing dirty, their boots scuffed. Their haircuts were non-regulation and they had a could give a shite as long as it gets the job done attitude that Arthur knew far too well.

Even though Arthur had been guilty of exactly that same sentiment, he cast a glance in Gwaine's direction in particular.

He turned the black-and-white over to check for names, but there weren't any.

He was about to move past that single photograph and onto the next page when something familiar caught his eye.

The Colonel.

Uther Pendragon wasn't a Colonel in this photograph; squinting, Arthur could make out a Captain insignia. He hadn't been SAS, but while the brunt of those representing the British Isles in the photograph were SAS personnel, some appeared to have been pulled in from other divisions in the
It was a little disturbing to see Uther Pendragon so young.

It was a lot more disturbing to realize that the Colonel was involved in this. Arthur's mind started to race, to veer off in a half-million different tangents, but he had to stop, because each possibility and connection was idle speculation that wouldn't help him at all.

He scratched a spot over his eyebrow and grit his teeth. He didn't want to think about how close he'd been to calling Uther the night before, to let him know that he was all right, that Morgana had been taken. He was glad for Allan's warning, because if he had --

Arthur stopped himself from following that train of thought and focused on the photograph. His head was bowed, his brow was furrowed, and he grunted in frustration. "I need some light."

Almost at once, three torches shone on the photograph, bleaching out everything. One of the lights flickered, turned a dim yellow, and blinked out.

Gareth smacked the side of his torch with a mumbled curse before going to rummage for more batteries.

Arthur took Leon's offering.

Solomon Bayard was in the photograph, in the lower left corner; he was in dress uniform, as if he'd been coming out of a meeting with the Brass that required he be done up to the nines. His hair was short and parted on the side and slicked back. His expression was stern and stiff and distracted.

Somewhere in the middle, toward the back of the row was Olaf Niedermann. Unlike most of the people in the photograph, he was wearing civvies -- pressed trousers, a fitted vest, a jacket slung casually over his shoulders, shirtsleeves rolled up. He was wearing a fedora tucked low on his forehead, and his chin was down as if he were attempting to go incognito.

In the front row, crouched on one knee, a rifle with a sniper's scope on it, was The Dragon. Major Kilgarrah.

If Arthur hadn't been sitting down, he would have sat down hard right about now, because Major Kilgarrah had been a Major back then, too. He might not have recognized the Major behind the smoky veil from the cigarette that hung from his lower lip, but the cigarette was a giveaway. The Major's face was thinner in this photograph, his shoulders were not quite as broad, his chest not as barrel-round, but those were the same piercing eyes looking out at the camera, at Arthur.

A chill went down Arthur's spine.

"Is that Mandrake?" Perceval asked and Arthur looked where he was pointing. Sure enough, second row back, his face turned away to look at something off-frame, was Colonel Mandrake, only a Lieutenant in this photograph, narrow-shouldered and thin-framed and looking impossibly young. He must have been clean out of Basics at the time, with barely a few missions under his belt.

"Looks like him," Arthur said quietly.

He let his eyes drift over the faces of the other men in the photograph. He didn't recognize the foreigners, but that didn't come as a surprise. He thought one of them might be Aulfric, that CIA agent that hadn't even been human, according to Merlin, but he wasn't entirely sure.
He looked at Captain Uther Pendragon for a second time. His father wore his greens like a formal uniform, everything in place, everything regulation-perfect from the buzz cut of his hair right down to the polish on his shoes. He was expressionless -- a soldier at parade rest, gaze unfocused but alert, and the one thing that he seemed most alert to was the person next to him.

That person was a SAS soldier, shorter than his father by a few inches, broader of shoulder and wearing confidence and bravado on his sleeve like a badge of honour the way his father always only ever carried absolute conviction and authority. He had long hair -- longer than Gwaine's hair was now -- loose and curly and hurriedly brushed back, dark eyes, and a scruff on his cheek like he couldn't be bothered to shave because he'd been out in the field too long.

He certainly looked it.

There was something familiar about this man. Arthur had seen him before, somewhere, in passing. He closed his eyes to try to remember where --

A glimpse of a photograph in Hunith's kitchen, a couple in a wedding photograph on the mantle above the fireplace in Gaius' house.

Balinor.

Merlin's father.

Arthur brushed a hand over his mouth, the light of the torch jiggling all over the photograph before he turned it off. He stared at Balinor's picture for such a long time, he wasn't sure if he was trying to commit the man's face to memory so that he would be easier to identify if he should run into him again, or if he were trying to see traces of Merlin in the man.

The photograph, by itself, told a million stories, all of them with complicated subplots that interconnected and locked together and spiralled through and danced around, and Arthur felt a few more jigsaw puzzles he hadn't even known existed suddenly fall together neatly. Everything that had happened all those years ago were related to what was happening now. They might even be the same thing, but Arthur was damned if he knew what, where, why or how.

Arthur scratched his jaw, feeling the scruff under his fingers. Context. Major Emrys told Galahad that it would help if Arthur knew the story behind Operation Albion, but he was starting to think that he already had the context.

He just needed confirmation.

"Well, fuck, I need a map," Gwaine muttered. His brow was furrowed in a scrunched frown and his lower lip stuck out in an aggravated pout. An instant later, he shook his head. "No, scratch that. I need Google. Something's not right."

"What's not?"

Gwaine held up a hand in the air for silence, lowering it slowly, his fingers curling until his index finger was the last, asking for one more minute. "Shush. I'm thinking."

"That explains the smoke," Perceval said.

"Quiet," Arthur said, sitting up straight. He turned his head to the side. "Who's beeping?"

Everyone immediately checked their pockets, inspecting any of their tools -- their original mobiles had been ditched in exchange for untraceable disposables. Watches, GPS, locators, handheld
computers, radios -- they were all inspected and found wanting. Pellinor dug into the containers that Allan and Major Emrys had brought them; Arthur leaned in closer to the phone that Galahad had given him; Leon took a tracking device out of his pocket.

Leon hyperventilated. His fingers tightened around the plastic casing.

"It's Morgana. She's activated the watch."

Seconds later, Arthur's cell rang. Lance's hushed, frantic voice was barely audible.

"Gwen's -- the keys. She's -- Morgana."

"Get back with Geraint as soon as you can," Arthur said, keeping his voice calm and steady even though his heart was hammering in his chest. Morgana and Gwen were alive. "We'll find out where they are as soon as someone gets Gwaine a goddamn map."

He heard Lance's distant confirmation, the dial tone and the dead air of the phone. He tried very hard to ignore the anxiety and nervous energy in the barn as everyone waited for two more beacons to activate.

Minutes trickled past.

And there was nothing from Merlin and Kay.

ooOOoo

Morgana wasn't entirely certain whose paranoia was showing here -- her own or Gwen's -- but she'd insisted that they get what rest they could while they could and that they set up watch.

Gwen was sleeping half-curled up on the single bed in the room, still wearing her boots and her jacket, because they didn't know when they would have to move at a moment's notice. Morgana was looking out the window at... nothing. At the wilderness, at the setting sun, at the guard movement occurring just outside her line of sight, wandering by every quarter hour on the hour to glance at the narrow path between the house and the ravine. Sometimes, the guard would wander midway down that path, stopping underneath the window.

Morgan idly wondered if he would notice should she manage to get the heavy bedside table through the window to drop it on his head.

She crossed her arms. It was growing dark. By Leon's watch it was well after 1800 hours. The sky wasn't clear, and Morgana had noticed how distant city lights bounced off the clouds, a beacon for sanctuary and safety.

The guards were late with their dinner. They were never late. They rotated shifts, but the food and the water and the bathroom breaks came and went like clockwork. They never deviated from the pattern, which hinted that their captors were at least somewhat disciplined.

Once, Morgana hated her life that she would grow up an acknowledged military brat, that she could pick out a soldier in a crowd. Now, she was grateful for the education she had unwillingly received.
Between Uther and Arthur and Leon and Excalibur, Morgana had inadvertently learned how to pick out several important elements of the enemy's patterns.

In particular: weaknesses.

No one was in charge when Morgause was elsewhere; they followed her orders, nothing more. There was a measure of fear between the guards and Morgause, too, because they deferred to her in all things. They didn't even make eye contact if they could help it.

Morgana could work with that. If the guards were separated from Morgause, if they were presented with an unexpected situation, they would either scramble in confused response, a body without a head to guide it, or they would fight among themselves to try to figure out who was the top dog when the queen bitch was away.

The men were disciplined, but that discipline was either a result of doing things by rote. Their shift schedule, for one thing, was a big giveaway. The guard at the end of the hall was changed every four hours, and most of the time, the guard sat on his duff, reading a book, headphones stuck in his ears, or watched the footie game on his mobiles. Their attention span was short and sweet, just like Morgana wanted.

*Nothing's lazier than a man sitting down. You want them to pay attention, don't give them a chair to sit on.* Morgana had used Uther's words of wisdom more than once in the business battlefield. She would host press conferences but not offer seating unless the subject matter was sensitive and she wanted to minimize damaging questions; she would organize galas and openings and shows with banquet rooms next door, forcing people to stand and drink and mingle and pay attention to the speeches given.

As long as Morgana and Gwen didn't pull any more extreme escapes -- and if they were, the guards didn't need to know -- and portrayed the subdued kidnap victims they were supposed to be, they could lull the guard to a false sense of security and complacency.

Morgana knew that a man keeping to the same patrol route and the same timing didn't speak of a soldier's discipline; a good soldier would randomize the patrols, would keep his routes from becoming too predictable. There were holes in this prison, and it was just a matter of time before Morgana and Gwen exploited it. The guards were the key.

As much as Morgana had learned of the guards, she knew far more about Morgause. After the attempted kidnapping at the Louvre, Morgana had done as much research as she could without getting caught. Morgause was, in Morgana's mind, a coy temptress, a manipulative actress, someone with hidden agendas within hidden agendas. No matter what she said, she couldn't be trusted.

Morgana stared at the pile of dirty, bloody clothing on the floor.

Gwen had hidden different parts of the keychain on her person. Morgana had loosened the wristband of Leon's watch so that it would fit around her biceps before deciding that it would be best if she kept it out of sight and zipped it away in the body armour pocket just beneath her breast. If their captors wanted to take her watch away, they could take the slim Omega around her wrist, and not the one that had a tracking device in it.

She wanted to be found.

Morgana wondered when Merlin even had the time to install it.

She wondered where he was. If he was all right. The last thing she saw of him was the way he'd
fallen on the testing grounds, just like she'd seen him crumble in her vision.

Was he alive? Was he dead?

Oh, God. Arthur. Arthur must be a mess. Arthur…

Morgana felt the weight of the dog tags around her neck, hidden beneath the body armour.

Arthur would get them out of this. He would. Because he wouldn't accept anything less.

In the distance, Morgana heard the sound of a car engine approaching. It slowed, then stopped entirely, like someone snapping off a radio in the middle of a song, so suddenly that there was the creak and rock of brakes and groaning axles. Down the corridor, there were raised voices, a bustle of activity from the first floor. The guard at the end of the hall was on his feet, and there was the scrape of a chair being put away.

Morgana touched Gwen's foot. Gwen came awake with a jolt -- if she had even been asleep in the first place -- and they looked at each other in the dark.

"Something's happening," Morgana said.

Gwen sat up and shifted her weight from the bed so slowly that the rusty springs barely creaked. She walked on her toes, avoiding the spots that they already knew would creak and groan, and came to stand uncertainly beside Morgana, glancing out the window, once.

It was pitch-black outside, now; very little could be seen outside of the occasional flash of the torch carried by the man on patrol. Abruptly, the entire front of the house was washed out in bright spotlights.

They both startled and exchanged glances. They waited, but they couldn't hear anything beyond a few distant murmurs, voices torn apart by the wind. Footsteps outside the door only hinted at a moderately-agitated guard; there was more of a ruckus downstairs on the first floor.

"I think they're moving us," Gwen whispered. Morgana nodded. "Should we --"

Morgana glanced out the window. Now would be a prime chance for escape. The guards were distracted, there was so much noise that they might not even notice when they unlocked the window -- or shattered it, if it came to that. The man on patrol outside the house would be occupied with all the activity at the front, and they would get further away than on previous attempts before their absence was noticed.

There was still the ravine to contend with; even in low light or full daylight, one or the other of them had descended from the house and nearly tumbled down, risking their necks. They were not acrobats, and a leap of faith jump across the windowsill to grab a swaying branch that might or might not be strong enough to support their weight was hardly incentive to make an attempt. And, once they were discovered missing, they would be at a disadvantage; Leon's watch had a tiny compass, but neither of them had a flashlight. They would be far more hampered in the rough and unknown terrain than their captors.

Morgana was under no illusions than spending an hour a day on the elliptical at the gym was sufficient to make her fit for a hike through the forest in a desperate bid for escape. Also, there was Gwen to think about. Gwen and the baby.

"Let's see what they'll do," Morgana finally decided. Their captors' original intentions had been to take them to England; the storm had completely derailed those plans. And, considering that the
assault on the testing grounds had gone to shite for Arthur and his men, it had probably also gone to shite for everyone else, too, which meant that Morgause and her people might make a second attempt for the Pendragon files on the device. It was the only thing that made sense.

Morgana straightened suddenly, connecting the pieces. If there had been a member of the NWO working in the laboratory, why hadn't he attempted to extricate a copy of the device? Because he couldn't have; it was too large and unwieldy, and no one was allowed to cross the security without a thorough inspection, including electronic files. It would have been too much of a risk for that bastard who had nearly shot Gwen, and an open testing with minimal security would have been a prime target.

If the NWO -- Morgause, specifically -- had originally intended to steal the device, the backup plan was to gain access to whatever means were necessary to obtain data on either the device, or a copy of the device. With Merlin having encrypted the hard drive copy of the Pendragon database, that left --

That left Morgana and Gwen, both who had security clearance in spades.

Morgause would have taken Morgana and Gwen to London, to one of the quieter offices, and used their passwords to download fresh copies. But the storm had gotten in the way, and that would have given the Colonel plenty of time to implement all the cautionary precautions that they had -- which was a complete lockdown to ensure the safety of Pendragon stocks and stores. With the main bulk of security concentrated at the headquarters, that would leave some of the smaller satellite offices more vulnerable.

Paris. They would be taken to Paris. Morgana was almost certain of it.

One of their head offices was located there, in the fringes of the centre-ville, far from the tourist track while still keeping l'arc de triomphe in view from the top floors. It was in a nondescript building, nothing to draw attention to it, no ostentatious signposts beyond the simple plaque on the directory inside the security-controlled lobby: Pendragon Consulting.

The Paris office did not run any critical operation. There were no scientists; there was no massive computer database in the basement levels. The more senior personnel were former military spin doctors who were the front line against the press and the paparazzi; they were accustomed to fending off attacks from the gossip-hungry populace and the mad dog reporters who were keen on a photograph of the Princes in their army gear.

Pendragon Consulting -- or, more accurately, Morgana herself -- had acquired them in a coup d'état, stealing them right from under King Limited's noses. This was her personal army of public relations officers, those who were not easily fazed by whatever was thrown at them, however bare and revealing or top secret and classified, and they were experienced in deflection, subterfuge, and distraction.

They also weren't half-bad with guns.

The NWO was going to use Morgana to download the information that they wanted from the Pendragon database. And they would use Gwen to build a copy of the device.

She told Gwen as much in quiet, hushed and hurried breaths, and Gwen, bless her, raised a brow not to question or doubt, but in an expression that Morgana knew well: That's what they think.

Gwen had just enough time to ask, "What do you want me to do?" before the door to their cosy little cell was unlocked and pushed open.
"You're coming with us," the guard said, gesturing lazily with a handgun. Morgana could easily imagine a half dozen scenarios where she helped herself to the man's gun and shot him dead, but that was where her long-term combat planning ended. She could deal with someone one-on-one. But there was a small squad downstairs, and she didn't like her chances.

She wasn't Arthur. She would never want to be him, but at this particular moment, a little bit of brawn would be nice.

"Both of us?" Morgana asked.

"Both of you," the man said, again twitching his gun in a gesture for them to move.

Gwen and Morgana held onto each other, playing up the image of two frightened women -- and they were frightened, just not in the way that their captors believed -- down the corridor and down the staircase, where they stood in the middle of a perfect storm of movement as everyone packed up their gear and headed out the door.

Morgause was standing there, feet planted a shoulder-width apart, her arms crossed firmly over her chest. She was all in black, which was all very cloak-and-dagger; jeans and flat knee-high boots, turtleneck and leather jacket. There was a bulge in the fit of her coat that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than a holstered gun, and from the way one boot sagged on the outside of her right calf, there was at least another gun or a knife hidden inside. Her wavy blond hair was blown back from her shoulders, fastened from her face with a comb or a hair clip; she wore far too much dark eyeliner and that shade of lipstick did nothing for her complexion.

"We're leaving," Morgause said unnecessarily.

Morgana waited until Morgause turned on her heel and was nearly at the door to ask, "Why?"

A guard pushed them both after Morgause, but Morgana pushed back. She didn't think the guards would shoot them -- at least not yet. She was willing to take on one of Gwaine's long-odd bets. Morgause needed Morgana and Gwen, and hurting either one of them would eliminate any chance of obtaining any sort of cooperation.

"Why?" Morgana asked, huffing a laugh in reply; she tilted her head in an unconscious, bird-like manner that made Morgana want to snort. "Because, here, you are in danger."

"More than we already are?"

"Oh, Morgana, my dear, you need to very quickly learn that we are not the enemy. We're here to protect you --"

"Did my father send you, then?"

Morgause paused, a flash of anger in her eyes, and her lips twitched so violently between a scowl and a smirk that it was hard to see which emotion was the victor. "If your father knew that you were alive, you would be dead by now."

"What?" Morgana exchanged glances with Gwen; she looked stricken. Morgana told herself, and not for the first time, that she couldn't trust anything that this woman said or did. "He wouldn't -- what are you talking about?"

"He has made an attempt already, once," Morgause said. "At the testing ground. Don't you remember?"
Morgana didn't say anything. She let the silence draw Morgause out, to let the other woman fill the void. The tactic didn't work.

Instead of giving Morgana something that she could work with, Morgause sighed and said, "I will explain on the way."

"No, you'll explain now," Morgana said.

Morgause uncrossed her arms and approached them with loose limbs and a panther's grace, her wide eyes fixed on Morgana with an uncomfortable intensity. "There's no time. They're on the way."

"Who are they? What are you talking about? Why would my father want to hurt me, why would he want to hurt us --"

Morgause held out her hand, palm up in offering. "Come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Morgana said. She heard the scuff of shoe on carpet; she felt the hot, disgusting breath of the man behind her. Morgause's eyes flicked warily at something over Morgana's shoulder, and the looming presence of the guard eased.

Morgause dropped her hand. "I wish that you would trust me."

"You kidnapped us," Gwen blurted out. She immediately shied under Morgause's withering glance.

"Under the circumstances, I doubted that you would come with a complete stranger willingly, even one who is only trying to help you," Morgause said. She reached inside of her coat. Morgana couldn't help it; she froze reflexively, half expecting Morgause to draw her gun. Instead, Morgause took note of Morgana's reaction and moved a little slower. When she withdrew her hand, it was with a leather wallet in her hand. She flicked it open with a finger. "My name is Morgause Gorlois. I'm a senior inspector with Interpol. My department has been investigating a series of thefts targeting major weapons manufacturers, including Pendragon Consulting, and we have uncovered evidence that the thefts are inside jobs. And that, I'm afraid, is only the start of it."

Morgana raised an arched brow and waited.

Morgana knew all this, of course. Arthur had told her that part in great detail; he'd even used her computer access points to compile some of the research that he needed. He had even gone so far as to hint to the same presence of traitorous personnel involved in the thefts, but it was Morgana who had followed the bread crumbs that Arthur hadn't subtly left behind and filled in the blanks with information of her own.

The thefts had no personnel in common. The only glue that tied everything together were a few half-assed filed paper reports that had never been scanned into the database to complete the administrative archives. Paper reports that the Colonel had signed.

Morgana wasn't certain if she should try for shocked by the revelation, stunned by the information, or appalled at the implied accusation, but Morgause must have decided for herself that Morgana's silence was reaction enough because she said, "I'm certain you've done your own investigation. That you've uncovered a few things?"

There was a tiny little lilt, like an inquiring question, toward the end of her sentence. Morgana recognized it easily. The media used this tactic all the time. Boardroom members tried. Morgause was fishing.

It didn't hurt to throw Morgause a bone, and Morgana nodded minutely.
Morgause smiled kindly, but there was a smirk of triumph in there, too. "Trust me," she said again. "I will tell you everything, but we need to go. Please get in the car."

Morgana exchanged a long glance with Gwen. Would they still be traceable with the tracking devices if they were moved? Would their boys find them?

Gwen nodded. Morgana hoped that Gwen was a mind-reader and that she was answering Morgana's unspoken questions.

"All right," Morgana said, finally. Morgause relaxed, and led the way outside.

There were two large SUVs parked right in front of the house, the passenger side doors wide open, the interior lighting pale compared to the floodlights surrounding them. Morgana had an idle thought that Morgause was playing games, because who in their right mind would turn on the lights to let people know that they were home? Morgause hinted that there was someone after them, that they needed to hurry -- surely, in the dark of night, with the floodlights on, the house had been painted with a target.

Maybe that was the point.

The bull's-eye on the house would distract and delay whoever was coming their way. They would do a quick sweep of the house to make certain that no one was inside. Surely Morgause anticipated this happening, and would have given orders to set traps around the house to delay the enemy -- whoever the NWO's enemy was at this point -- even longer.

Morgana hoped that it wasn't the boys. She would be pissed if she'd blindly gone along with Morgause's plans to find out what she was after when Arthur and Leon and Lance and everyone else were on their way to rescue them.

"Morgana, you'll be riding with me in the lead car," Morgause said, gesturing lazily. "Gwen will be in the car right behind us."

Morgana moved closer to Gwen, the two clasping hands desperately. "No. We stay together."

Morgause sighed with affected patience and understanding, and said, "I understand your concern, but do trust me. If something happens on the way, at least I can assure that one of you will be safe. Believe me we are taking every precaution --"

"We stay together," Morgana snapped. "You said you'd tell us what was going on. We're both going to hear it from you."

Morgana pulled Gwen toward the back seat of the lead SUV and climbed in after her. Morgause's expression flitted from annoyance to aggravation, but she didn't protest more. A man slid in the driver's seat, and Morgause took the front passenger.

There was a long pause while the men milling about cleared the equipment out of the way, loading it in the back of a nondescript van; another car had already driven off with several guards. Morgana tried to count how many men there were but couldn't keep track. They were dressed in similar clothes, almost in uniform, and were moving too quickly.

Finally, the way was clear and the SUV engine roared to life; the driver pulled out at slow speed to avoid several people before rumbling over the rough gravel road. Morgana was jarred from side to side; Gwen hastily reached for her seat belt.

There were no words. Not for a long time. Morgana stared out of the side windows, but between the
darkness and the tinted glass, it was difficult to make out any clear features. Ahead of them was nothing but headlight-bright and washed-out roads, rough gravel playing havoc with the suspension. They were at a decent speed, kicking up a healthy quantity of dust, and if the floodlights at the house were the equivalent of a bright neon sign pointing down on it, the dust cloud was tantamount to the red pin on the GPS, easy to follow.

Morgana did not understand Morgause, never mind the NWO. From what Arthur had told them, Morgana gathered that both the people in charge and those who made up its constituents were civilians with varied backgrounds. Morgause had flashed her Interpol badge, and that hinted that, possibly, she'd obtained some tactical training, but it seemed not. There were just too many things being done wrong, but Morgana wasn't going to point those out.

Morgana knew everything about Morgause. She had made it her business to know. Arthur and the Colonel had taken pains to keep her in the dark, to sugar-coat the information, to pat her on the shoulder awkwardly and assure her that the matter was being taken care of. Where they failed to keep her in the loop, Morgana had opened up her own avenues of investigation.

Morgause was -- had been, before her abrupt disappearance -- the division chief of an international counterintelligence unit with Interpol, with several headline-grabbing successes under her belt. Her reputation for tracking down the enemy and bringing them to justice had given her a certain degree of leeway; in more recent years, there had been reprimands in her file for skirting the limits of the law. She shouldn't have done much damage to Interpol when she left except she had taken every member of her division with her, leaving Interpol a crippled, gaping hole and nothing to fill it with.

The men with Morgause must be part of that division; trained but not trained, disciplined but not really disciplined, obedient without kowtowing to her superiority. She had not missed the healthy respect that the men had for Morgause; it was a sort of respect that was borne out of fear.

Morgana knew it very well. She terrorized her own staff on a regular basis. But, unlike Morgause, she didn't go about waving guns in the air or kidnapping people, either.

The gravel road was interminable. She stared at the time on the dashboard. The minutes trickled by; it was forty-eight minutes of winding, jarring road before the driver slowed down to take a hairpin turn, and, just like that, they went from the roller-coaster rough to the calm sea sailing of the highway.

Morgana took note of both the time and the new compass heading that flashed on the rear view mirror.

"Where are we going?"

The driver's eyes flicked in the mirror, studying her; Morgause reached over to lower the volume to the radio.

"There were advantages and disadvantages to our last location," Morgause explained, her tone lingering on the edge of boredom. "In isolation, it was less likely that our movements would be noticed as long as only one or two new faces appear in town to gather supplies. However, it was equally likely that someone would notice the extra supplies and the automobiles."

Morgana resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Instead she stayed silent and attentive, the way she sometimes did when Leon and Arthur and the Colonel droned on and on at the dinner table. Tactics of warfare was a topic that was as dry as a bone even on the best of occasions, and she really didn't want to hear about how, on a mission that still hasn't been declassified, they escaped by the skin of
their teeth performing some manoeuvre that had been named for a General who was a century dead.

Even tuning out the conversation, some of the more important aspects did sink in, in particular psychological warfare. Uther had waxed philosophical about the dark side of war one too many times, and while he was generally tight-lipped when it came to some of the things he did both as a front-linesman and as a commanding officer, Morgana could read between the lines.

And sometimes, she could tell when Uther held himself back, keeping quiet on topics raised by Arthur and Leon. He carried himself like a man with heavy secrets, and Morgana didn't like secrets.

She knew how to pry them out of him. All it took was the Colonel's favourite whiskey. Four or five glasses was all that was needed to loosen his tongue. Morgana had done that exactly once, and never again; she had heard far too much of Uther's interrogation tactics when it came to the enemy.

"All for the good of Queen and Country," Uther said, waving his glass in the air. The whiskey sloshed along the sides, a few drops spilling out and staining his sleeve. "Some things can't be helped, Morgana. Some things… Are deplorable and loathsome, but one must play along."

"Sometimes it doesn't work the way it's supposed to. You can beat the enemy until their face is a mashed pulp and their ribs crackle every time they try to breathe. Pain isn't going to draw out the information you need. That's when you have to swallow your morals. That's when you have to pretend to be the enemy's friend."

He drank a generous quantity before sliding his glass on the table beside his overstuffed chair; for an instant, his expression was dark and distant. "You can't get too close to them. You can't. Because when the orders come down to slice their throat --"

Uther paused. He stared at nothing at all, at Morgana as if she weren't even there, his eyes glazed over.

"Morgana. Did you want something?"

"It can wait," Morgana said smoothly, her tone casual. It was a struggle to hide her horror, but she must have managed, because Uther took another drink.

This was what Morgause was doing. Morgana and Gwen had been on the receiving end of rough treatment -- in the definition where "rough" equated "menacing", and now, Morgause was building bridges, making amends, making friends with her prisoners in the hopes of getting on their good side and obtaining the information they wanted. And in the end…

Morgana couldn't forget the way that Uther had said those words.

Slice their throats --

"We are heading to more populated areas," Morgause continued, lowering the visor and flipping the mirror cover open. She dabbed at her makeup with her fingers, her eyes darting to meet Morgana's gaze in the reflection. "And that in itself poses its own risks. We are more likely to become faces in a crowd, but equally likely to be recognized. It becomes very important at this point that you follow our instructions implicitly. We wouldn't want you to get hurt, would we?"

Morgana didn't answer. Gwen glanced in her direction, her eyebrows raised. They couldn't talk, not
here. But Morgana knew what Gwen was asking.

"Who would hurt us?"

"Oh, Morgana. Don't play the fool."

"My... My father?" If anyone would attempt to kill her, Morgana expected it to be a business rival, someone whose sensibilities that she had offended. Cenred King, Odin Hertz. But her own father?

Morgause turned in her seat, her gaze fixed on Morgana; in the darkness Morgana couldn't see her expression, but she was fairly certain that it was mixed with glee. "Your step-father, yes. Who else?"

Gwen's hand found Morgana's and squeezed.

"I don't understand," Morgana said, her voice soft and hollow. "Why would he... Why would he want to kill me? And Arthur... What happened to Arthur? What --"

Morgause settled herself in her seat, facing forward; Morgana thought she saw the curl of a smirk on Morgause's lips. "Arthur is dead. Uther arranged for him to be killed. He was gunned down on the testing ground --"

"That's bollocks," Morgana said, shaking her head. "That's bollocks. Uther loves Arthur, he's groomed him to take over the company, Arthur is his heir --"

"And what good is a heir who buggers men?" Morgause said, turning her head slightly; the headlights of an oncoming car made her gaze glint menacingly. "The great Pendragon legacy ended with Arthur. You're not even of his blood, Morgana, what would he do with you?"

"For what? I don't --"

"Morgana," Morgause said, her voice low and warning. "Your step-father is not a nice man."

Morgana fell silent, her mind whirling. She told herself again and again that she couldn't believe what Morgause said, and yet, each and every word struck Morgana like a hammer blow, bruising her to the core, opening up old wounds. Despite protestations to the contrary, Uther had always preferred Arthur over her. He was the one who was given a car first; he was the one whose boyfriends were tolerated to a degree that Morgana's were not.

Honestly, the antics Gwaine had gotten up to...

Morgana had made her peace with Uther a long time ago. She'd grown up since then. She recognized her teenage rebellion, she'd rolled her eyes at her self-imposed martyrdom. Yes, granted, her boyfriends had had shady backgrounds and had propensity for criminal activities. Yes, the first thing that she did when she obtained her driver's license was to drive well over the speeding limit and nearly crash into a police cruiser. Of course Uther would favour Arthur. In Uther's eyes, Arthur was the perfect son.

She might not be his daughter by blood, there might be some discomfort, some issues that remained between them like a latrine trench, neither one of them willing to find a way past them, and she might have forsaken Uther Pendragon as her father, but she was still Arthur's sister.

And Arthur was not dead. He couldn't be. Gwen was right. She would know it if he were gone.

"No," Morgana said quietly, slowly, uncertainly. "Uther... Uther wouldn't do... he wouldn't --"
Gwen's fingernails dug half-moons into Morgana's hand.

The only sound was the faint news announcer's voice over the radio the music and the commercials filtering through at the station breaks, the rumble of the engine muffled inside the cab of the SUV, the rolling whir of the wheels as they accelerated past the traffic on the roads.

A kilometre; then five. Ten, then fifteen.

And finally, when Morgause decided that she had left Morgana stewing in her own thoughts long enough, the silence was broken.

"Almost thirty years ago, Uther Pendragon was a member of a team of soldiers hand-picked by the British government to participate in a highly classified mission. It was an international team that travelled the world and executed incursions into enemy territory with a single objective: to locate and recover artefacts. By all accounts, the missions were failures, and none of the teams were successful in this initiative. Several men died on their assignments, and for what?"

There was an edge to Morgause's voice that Morgana wasted no time identifying: resentment.

"These objects, these artefacts -- no man could possibly understand them. They're powerful. And governments wanted to use it for their own purposes, to bend them to their will. Because that's what men do, isn't it? They acquire everything that might make them stronger, but they never understand what they're using. They abuse and they misuse, and this power will turn on them."

"What was it? Those... objects?" Morgana asked, her voice low, too low to be audible, but Morgause heard her anyway.

"There was a time when society did not need science. When there was magic instead," Morgause said. "These are objects of magic."

Morgana stared at Morgause for a long time. Gwen's fingers tightened around Morgana's hand. Morgana turned to meet Gwen's gaze, and they both fought to keep straight faces before they failed, choking back on their own laughter.

Perhaps laughing at the person who engineered their kidnapping was the least good idea that Morgana had, but she couldn't help it. "You're nutters."

Morgause turned in her seat until she was facing them again; there was an orange-red gleam in her eyes that made Morgana and Gwen's laughter stutter in their chests. "Perhaps."

Then, without another word, Morgause turned around. The leather seat settled around her with a creak.

The oncoming traffic blinded them with headlights set on high beams. Sometimes, not often, Morgana would get a glimpse of the roadside signs. Names of towns with numbers listing distances; signposts advising stops ahead for gas and rest, assorted traffic signs, flashing lights warning caution.

Then, she saw the sign she was looking for. Paris.

"So, okay. Let's say you're not mad. Not even a little bit. And these people went around the world to recover some sort of valuable objects. You say my father was a part of this?"

"Many men were," Morgause said, turning her head slightly. Her eyes were half-hooded, her lashes
long even in the gloom. "It was an international team. The government had been convinced that the project was of utmost importance. Each group was given to believe that they were recovering objects of military significance that could not be left in the enemy's hands. They were to bring the weapons to a safe haven where they were to be..."

Morgause paused. She made a flippant gesture in the air.

"Disarmed." Morgause said the word with a dainty snort. "Stockpiled, more likely. And while the official line is that none of these artefacts were recovered, it's a certainty that some people retained more than their share."

"You said it was highly classified -- how do you know that?" Gwen asked.

Morgause didn't answer right away. Her expression turned wary when the driver was forced to slow down for the traffic ahead, which, given the hour, was unusual. It wasn't until nearly ten minutes later, when the SUV was speeding down the motorway, that Morgause spoke again.

"I've spent most of my professional career tracking down clues and obtaining access to sealed records," she said. "Have you any idea how difficult it is to attain certain levels of information?"

"I have no idea," Morgana said dryly. Her own classification rating was only because of the work Pendragon Consulting did for the British government, but however high it was, it wouldn't get her access to any of the sealed records. Even with the right rating, there were approval processes to go through, and it could take a dog's year before she got her hands on any paperwork -- paperwork that was invariably blacked out to within a fine millimetre of its life.

Morgause ignored the sarcasm in Morgana's tone and said, "My father's deathbed confession was the most revealing."

She turned in her seat again, and this time, it wasn't Morgana's imagination. Morgause's eyes really were glowing.

"Uther Pendragon is not the only one of the many in possession of one of the artefacts," Morgause said, her tone sickly sweet and ominous at the same time. "But he is the worst offender.

ooOOoo

Time passed in a stuttering hiccup of events, each of them different every time Merlin opened his eyes. He blinked and he was somewhere else.

Dragged down the hallway, one man on either side of him, his arms thrown over broad shoulders, his legs trailing behind him. Once or twice, he struggled, but he was given a rough shake and Will told him, "Damn it, Merls. Settle down."

Flat in the backseat of a car that reeked of cigarette smoke and engine oil, the bench seat rough rubber pleather, the seams digging into the scrapes and cuts on his face, the engine rumbling and the car jerking as it took on more passengers.

The flash of streetlights and storefront signs as they drove by at speed, too fast for Merlin to locate
himself using landmarks and street names. There was a man he didn't know in the driver's seat, and the front passenger was Will. Merlin would recognize his profile anywhere.

They pulled him out of the car. It was pitch black outside, but down the road there were a few streetlights and nearby buildings as decrepit as the one they were dragging him toward. The man on Merlin's left side lost his grip and Merlin nearly went tumbling onto the cracked asphalt of the driveway. Will lost his shite and nearly dropped Merlin, too.

He was flat on his back on a cot that was only marginally softer than the cold cement floor of his previous accommodations, and he figured that his hosts decided to upgrade him from cargo class all the way up to economy. It was dark in the room, the white walls illuminated by the city lights bouncing off the thick cloud cover outside and streaming through the horizontal blinds.

There was a thump just outside the door to Merlin's room. Someone said, "Sorry." Will said, "Oh, that's all right, I'm sure he won't notice another fucking bruise. You goddamn wanker. What part of we need them alive didn't sink through your thick head?"

Someone was poking Merlin's face. They were light, fleeting touches. A scrape of something over his skin. There was a man sitting on the edge of the cot. He wore dark grey trouser pants and a navy blue button-down, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. There was a stethoscope around his neck, and it bumped against Merlin's side. The man paused, and asked, "Ça va? Reste avec nous --"

"How are they?" The door to Merlin's room was ajar, the light glaring against the encroaching gloom. Merlin wondered how long he'd been drifting in and out, and he swore to the Gods that the next time he opened his eyes, it had better be to see Arthur, or there would be hell to pay. "He'll be fine," someone said. The doctor, probably. He had a thick French accent. "But that one? I cannot say for sure. Also with his injuries, he is fighting an infection. He will need around-the-clock care --" Will's voice cut through, sharp and angry. "Then, good thing we've got you here, yeah?"

The light clicked on overhead, blinding. Merlin threw up his arm to protect his eyes and pain shot down from his shoulder to his chest. The clatter of plates and cutlery nearby was loud enough to muffle his groan. He tried to roll away, but his entire body was on fire.

"No, don't you fucking dare pass out on me again, Merls," Will said, grabbing him by the arms. His fingers dug into bruises that Merlin wished he didn't have, because the ache was dull enough to keep him conscious and not enough to make everything go away.

"Lemme alone," Merlin said, swatting the air feebly. Will caught his hands and lowered them down.

"It's all right, yeah? Sit up some. Come on, there's a good boy --"

"Fuck. You," Merlin bit out. Will helped him sit up and pushed him against the headboard. "'M not a dog."

Will patted him on the head. "Calm down. I have a treat for you if you do."

Merlin kicked out at Will, his foot connecting with Will's thigh. He didn't have the energy for more.

"Is that how you treat your best mate? The one who sold his soul to the bloody devil to save your sorry life?"

"Hate your guts," Merlin said. He let his body sag; he wanted to lay down desperately. "Hope I die. Then you'll be the devil's bitch. He'll fuck you with his barbed fucking tail and you'll beg him for more."
"Don't be an arse," Will said, slapping Merlin's hip. It was, surprisingly, the only spot on Merlin's body that didn't hurt right now. "I'll be the one doing the fucking, yeah? The devil's a woman, I'll have you know. It's nothing but a sweet cunt for me --"

"Who's being an arse now?" Merlin said, blinking his eyes. He was feeling stronger, but that could just be an illusion. Merlin looked down at himself, saw the dried blood on his hands, the blood on his clothes, the streaks of dirt and cuts and tears. As if every part of his body was suddenly aware of his attention, each bruise flared up with the equivalent of an ear-splitting whine. He winced.

"Here," Will said. "I've got some water."

"Fuck water. Want morphine," Merlin said. The bed shifted as Will reached for something on a nearby table. Merlin forced himself to look at Will.

Will's hair had grown out since they last saw each other, and there was an edge to his features. He was thinner, but not gaunt; his face had lost some of the baby fat that had stuck around despite boot camp and years of army fare. There were worry lines around his eyes, the weight of strain in his expression, and about a million things dragging him down.

"Make do with this," Will said, taking Merlin's hand and putting a few pills in his palm.

"Paracetamol? Yeah, that'll help," Merlin snorted. He squinted at them but he wasn't a pharmacist.

"It's the good stuff. Just take it," Will said. Merlin grunted and put the pills in a dry mouth; Will shoved a glass into his hands, and Merlin nearly dropped water all over himself. Will steadied his trembling hand, and Merlin swallowed the water greedily, pills and all.

"Hey, easy --"

"Fuck off --"

"I'm not cleaning up your puke --"

"Yeah, you will, I'll toss all over you --"

"Goddamn it, Merls, stop -- stop fucking fighting me --"

"You -- fuck you --"

"Merls! Stop it! You'll hurt yourself --"

"Like your friends did?"

"They're not my friends --"

"Nice one, I'll believe that when --"

"Will you shut it!" Will used his body weight to hold Merlin down. Merlin managed a few feeble struggles, but that was it, he'd used up his reserves. "It's all right. It's all right. You're safe. I promise."

"Where's Arthur?" Merlin asked, his voice cracking. His eyes started to burn the way he hadn't let them ever since he'd woken up.

The hold Will had him under eased. Merlin could breathe again, but Will didn't let him go. His hands were tight on Merlin's arms as he drew back, biting his lower lip, shaking his head minutely.
A sob tore from Merlin's chest, broken and shattered. His heart stopped, his guts contracted, his lungs deflated. A tear burned its way down his cheek. "Where's Arthur? Where's Arthur, Will? Goddamn it, where is he?"

Will didn't answer right away. "He's dead, Merlin. I'm sorry."

Merlin stared. His vision swam and blurred. His limbs felt like lead. The bed beneath him was no longer a hard surface supporting him, but the ephemeral of nothing, and he was falling. He was drowning.

"No. No. No!"

He tried to break free from Will and he was surprised when Will let him go. Merlin tried to get off the bed but the best he could manage with Will in the way was a sliding tumble to the ground.

"He can't be dead. He can't--"

Will pulled him up into something of a sitting position, wedging him against the bed. Merlin's body wracked with sobs as the psychological crash from the attack, the torture, the interrogation, waking up to find his magic gone, and Arthur. Arthur--

His body hurt. His body ached. His ribs contracted and felt as if they would shatter with every strangled breath. Something hurt under his armpit, right where he'd been shot a fucking lifetime ago. All these physical pains were nothing compared to the heartbreak of loss. His soul was hollow.

He was only distantly aware of Will next to him, of Will's arms holding him, of Will's hand running soothing circles on his back. Will didn't say anything; he was just there, a solid presence.

Merlin wanted Arthur.

"Is he--" It was someone outside the room. Merlin didn't see who it was.

"He'll be all right. Just, fuck off for a second, yeah?" Will said, his voice a low, sad rumble.

Merlin gasped for breath, dimly aware of footsteps retreating. There was a long silence, and Will hugged Merlin closer, his lips pressed against Merlin's ear.

"We don't know. No one knows. He's vanished. Everyone's gone, not a trace of them," Will whispered hurriedly. There were new footsteps. They made different sounds -- a heavy clunk. The door swung open, and Will picked that moment to try to pick Merlin up. He grunted. "Come on, Merls. Quit being a bloody girl. Get on the damn bed. Your bloke's dead, and you're not doing yourself any good like this. You're supposed to rest."

"He doesn't have time to rest," the newcomer said, his accent light but present, marking him as foreign. His colouring was fair; his hair was balding, and he looked largely unimpressed and merciless. "We need the drive decrypted."

Will didn't answer the other man until he wrestled Merlin back onto the cot; Merlin struggled the entire time to keep up the act, to cover up his absolute, complete relief -- no one knows. He's vanished. He moaned in pain when Will dumped him, and that wasn't an act; he stayed still until the wash of it finally ebbed.

"You think he's in any state to do anything right now?"

"His fingers aren't broken," the man said.
Will's warmth left Merlin's side; Merlin didn't hear him move, but that wasn't anything new. He was as stealth-silent as Gwaine when he was angry, and even when he wasn't, he could move pretty damn quietly, too.

"Look, mate," Will said, his *don't fuck with me* tone low and dangerous. "Your boss gave me license to deal with him. So let me. Mind your own, and piss off, yeah? I'll get you the data, but not today."

"He has two hours," the man said.

"Two *hours*? Try two *days*, if you're lucky," Will snapped. "Two *weeks* if you keep up this big *I'm-a-plonker* act. Two *months* if I'm not around to keep Merlin nice and pliant. *Never* if you piss him off any more than he already is. You killed his boyfriend, and, yeah, fair enough, Pendragon was a fucking *arse* and I'd have done it myself if I could, so if you think for one second that Merlin's going to turn all *oh may I* just because you ask nice, you've got another thing coming."

"Mr. Aredian said --"

"I don't give two flying fucks what Aredian said. I know Merlin. I know him so damn well, I can tell you what he's going to do if you plant him in front of a computer right now. He'll *wipe* that hard drive, and where will you be then?"

"Jacob will stop him if --"

"Oh, *Jacob*? That bloke over at the garage with the melting face trick? He did such a *fine* job of trying, too. What was it he did? He got his bloody lappy all swollen with viruses when he tried to hack the drive. And that's passive defences, yeah? What do you think Merlin is going to do when he's got a computer in his hands when he's in this mood? He'll bring down the bloody *cops* on us. He'll wipe out your accounts. He'll post an embarrassing vid on YouTube of you in your birthday bits down on your hands and knees with a bridle and a saddle and having it up with a bit of pony play -- and if that's your thing, well, good on you, but he'll do it while you think he's playing *Solitaire*, and it'll take all of five minutes before your best mates start looking at you right strange. Now get the fuck out of my face and let me handle him."

There was a huff of breath, the scrape of a shoe, and the creak of the floor as the man walked away. Merlin imagined that there was some testosterone posturing in there somewhere, but he couldn't be arsed to turn around to see.

Fuck, but he hurt, and the unexpected *not-really-we-don't-know* news about Arthur had hit him hard. His head throbbed and he had a nose full of snot on top of everything else, and his lips were dry and cracked and bleeding and his throat was like sandpaper. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and cling to the thin hope that Arthur was alive.

Hope was all that he had left.

There was the sound of the door clicking shut, of someone coming over to the bed. "Fuck, Merlin," Will said, and his weight made the small cot dip again. "Shove over, won't you? I'm beat, I could use a nap."

"I'm beat, I could use a hospital," Merlin muttered. He tried to move, but it wasn't until Will helped him along that there was enough room for them both.

Will settled down, stretching out next to him; between the cold wall against Merlin's face and Will's body warmth on his other side, Merlin felt himself doze off a little.

He startled awake when he heard a scream, muffled by the walls. "Kay --"
"Yeah," Will said, quiet, tired. He put a hand on Merlin's chest to keep him down. "Stay here."

"Fuck you, I'll pitch myself out the window and do a runner, you bloody traitor," Merlin said, but he curled onto his side and tried to suck up the warmth that Will's body had left behind.

He didn't know how long it was before Will came back, pushing Merlin out of the way so that he could lay down. Will left the door wide open. Several people walked past in a hurry and ran back the other way.

"What --"

"They had to do a bit of surgery," Will said softly. "Internal bleeding. They caught it, but…"

"Infection," Merlin said.

"Yeah," Will said. "Triple whammy, the doctor said. The burn is the first one, unsanitary conditions the second and now back-alley surgery."

Merlin didn't say anything. He covered his mouth with his hands and muffled a scream. When he came up for air, gasping, he said, "I'm not doing anything if he dies. I'm not. I swear I'm not."

"That's what I told them, too. He's getting a transfusion and body fluids and antibiotics. Looks like a right cyborg, that one, all the stuff sticking out of him right now." Will waved his hand over his body to demonstrate. "Should be in a movie, maybe? Universal Soldier or some such rot?"

"He's more badass than Van Damme," Merlin said. He turned his head toward Will, resting his forehead on Will's shoulder. He didn't mean to put a whine in his voice, but it came out anyway. "What's going on, Will? Why --"

"No," Will snapped, angry. He shifted around on the bed until he was on his side, weight on his elbow as he glared down at Merlin. Any other time, Merlin would have burst out laughing, but he was undercover. They both were. He couldn't break out of his role, even if no one was watching, because someone was always watching. "No. You shut it. Don't give me this spineless bollocks. I'm your mate, I know what you're like. You're not stupid, you don't wear bloody blinders. You can't tell me you don't know what Pendragon was into, what he were doing, what other people wanted from him. Jesus fucking Christ, Merlin, you probably know more about what's going on than the people who are doing it."

Merlin made a quiet little sound, but otherwise said nothing. He couldn't see the door from where he was, but from the way the light shifted in the corridor, he could tell there was someone nearby, listening.

"It comes down to this, all right?" Will paused and licked his lips. "You're here. You've got something they want and it's locked up so tight, only you can break it. They need it done fast, and you've got to do it."

"Or what, they'll kill me?" Merlin tried to turn onto his side -- and as luck would have it, it was the favourite side of boxers everywhere. He groaned. "Fuck it, Will. They beat me. I thought I were going to die. They beat Kay. He's probably going to die. He can't die, Will. Fuck them. They can do what they want to me. They're not gonna get it. I won't give it to them. And if I die, well, that's tough shite for them."

Will didn't say anything for a while. "And me, Merls? What if you undoing what you did keeps me from dying?"
Merlin's head jerked up so fast, he gave himself whiplash on top of everything else, and he stared at Will through both eyes, because the one that was nearly swollen shut had forgotten that it was nearly swollen shut in his surprise.

Then, abruptly, Merlin lashed out and shoved Will off the bed. Will made a little shriek and landed with a thump. "Fuck off. You didn't put yourself up for barter. You didn't. You complete and utter shite. Tell me you didn't."

His voice cracked and broke and it was too hard to talk, but he kept talking.

"I can't, Will. I can't. Arthur's dead. Arthur's dead. I'm not going to -- you can't do this to me, you can't --"

"So don't let them kill me, Merlin," Will said from the floor. Merlin looked over the side; Will was holding his head where he must have hit it against the bedside table on his flailing fall. He stayed where he was, flat on the ground, looking up at Merlin. "Don't let them. Just do what they want. Please."

Merlin stared at Will, open-mouthed, his jaw working around words and questions that he wanted to ask, but couldn't. What's wrong with you? was first, followed by a mental mind-smash of tell me you didn't, you're playing a game, yeah, you told them you'd play it this way, you told them you knew how to manipulate me, you're not going to die, goddamn it Will, I'm serious here, you shouldn't have gotten yourself involved in this, you should've told Bayard to fuck off --

Instead, what came out was a seething, "I hate you."

Will spread his hands in a what can I do gesture and dropped them to his chest. "You'll forgive me. You always do."

"You kidnapped me. You let Freya and Bryn try to brainwash me --"

Will propped himself up on his elbows and gave Merlin a steady stare. "I don't know about Bryn, but Freya and me? We give a shite about you. You were with that plonker, and I couldn't stand it, thinking of him hurting you. We had to do something --"

"He wasn't hurting me. He wouldn't --" And fuck if terror didn't rise up and make Merlin's voice crackle like aluminum foil, because he couldn't feel Arthur. He didn't know if Arthur was all right. Even Will didn't know -- and the only thing that Merlin had to go on was Will's promise that no one knew, that Arthur had vanished. Merlin felt the tears burning in his eyes again, the swell in his throat keeping him from speaking, the sob that stuttered his chest and made it difficult to breathe. He rolled onto his back, a hand on his ribs, hurting, hurting, hurting. The physical had nothing on the emotional, and everything swirled in a melting pot of pain. He had to get himself together, he had to keep himself together. There was still a mission to do, still a threat to take care of, and two people to protect.

Kay and Will.

A lot of time must have passed, because there was a dip in the bed next to him as Will made himself comfortable again. Neither of them spoke, and if Merlin strained to listen, he could just hear the sound of someone fidgeting right outside the room.

"You killed Bryn," Merlin said quietly.

"No big loss," Will said without hesitation, but only someone who knew him well, only Merlin, would pick up on the thick in his voice. "Big fucking loudmouth, that one. More brawn than brain."
The sort to fix all of his problems with a bit of peacock posturing and the blunt end of his fists."

Will pressed his lips together.

Then, he added, "Freya's better off without him."

*Oh, God. Freya.* Merlin closed his eyes, trying not to think about Freya, but it all came at him in a rush. Her *other*form, her lack of control, all those times he had tried to teach her how to focus, to keep the beast at bay. Whatever Bryn had been doing to her, whatever magic he had used to bind her, whatever traps he had set up at his club to allow her to free the monster so that he could leach her magic from her -- it was all gone now. Bryn was dead. Freya was alone. What would happen to Freya now, without control?

But there had been another tone in Will's voice, a weight beyond the thick, something of responsibility and suppression, and Merlin closed his eyes.

"You like her."

"Always liked her. She never gave me the time of day. She was all eyes for you, even after she found out that the only thing that did it for you was cock, and then... we buggered off, didn't we? Me in the army, you fucking your way through Europe and turning yourself into some sort of underground cult hero --"

Merlin closed his eyes. The script. Will was sticking to the script. Merlin could do this. "I didn't fuck my way through Europe --"

"Could've fooled me --"

"You're the one chasing after every skirt that swishes in your direction --"

"At least I'm not a bloody trollop, dropping to my knees every time a dick wags in my face --"

"That made no sense." Merlin paused. "Are you saying that you've dropped to your knees every time a dick wagged in your face?"

"Oh, fuck you," Will said without heat. Neither of them spoke for a moment, and they both broke into giggles.

It hurt to laugh. It hurt Merlin's face where it was bruised and scraped. It hurt Merlin's chest where he'd received far too many punches. It hurt Merlin's ribs where they threatened to shatter. It hurt Merlin's heart, because the mission had taken a sideways turn in ways that none of them could have expected, and he didn't know what to do.

He didn't know what to do except to latch onto the opportunity that Will had made for him. He would stay with Will, make himself useful -- but only on conditions. He would make certain that Kay was all right. He would get himself to a computer. He would find out -- he would find Arthur. He would.

He would get his magic back, too. There had to be more left than just the occasional flicker under the surface of his skin.

Merlin sobered, groaning as he hugged his chest lightly, the weight of his own arms too much. "I want to see Kay."

"Tomorrow, all right? Let him rest," Will said.
"Tomorrow," Merlin repeated with heavy emphasis. He would ask again tomorrow, and if his demands weren't met, well, that was just another delay in Aredian's people getting what they wanted from him. He exhaled in a soft sigh. "Okay. Fine. Maybe I weren't wearing blinders. Maybe I know more than I let on, you know, what with Bryn and Tristan and his fucking cage matches and whatever. But that's the NWO. Who are... who are these guys?"

Will didn't say anything, but he shifted, sitting up a little, looking out the door. There was an audible creak, the floorboards giving way under someone's weights. "Don't be an idiot."

"I'm not," Merlin said, feeling tired suddenly. His body felt heavy and leaden, and he thought the drugs Will had given him were finally starting to work. "I mean. I heard a name. Aredian? I met him in France at a party. He said something about -- fuck, I don't even know. Is it the same guy? What does he have to do with any of this?"

Will rubbed his face with both hands, an energetic scrape of palm against two-day-old stubble. He mumbled something that was made incoherent by the changing landscape of his face, and when he finally dropped his arms, his face was red with held-breath and frustration. He blew out in a sigh, took a deep breath, and said, "Fuck if I know."

"Will."

"What?"

"You're a fucking moron," Merlin said, and he would've done worse than a sharp elbow in Will's ribs if he had the strength. "You can't seriously tell me you told them that they could kill you if I didn't cooperate --"

Will held up a hand. "I told them they could kill me if I couldn't get you to cooperate. There's a distinction --"

"No, there isn't."

"Yes, there is."

"No, there isn't --" Merlin made a frustrated sound; the effort of it made his insides ache. This was Will. Merlin should've known that he would be stupid about all this. "You walked into all this blind, didn't you?"

Will gave him an alarmed look. "Of course I did."

Merlin stared at him. He couldn't help the exasperated chuckle. "Of course. What was I thinking. You planning something in advance? Never."

"Har har har de fucking har," Will said with a snort. He sat up a little, waving a hand in the air as he spoke. "Look, as best as I can figure, the NWO hired these guys to help out at the testing site, yeah? They're mercenaries. They work for money, not some sort of fanatical cause --"

"So these guys aren't NWO?" Merlin asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"Fuck, no. Just look at them -- no wait, don't look at them. If they think you can ID them they'll shoot you or something. They're mercenaries. They work for money, not some sort of fanatical cause --"

"Unlike you --"
"Oi. Freya offered me a place to stay. It was Bryn's house, of course I'll listen to whatever shite spills out of his mouth and nod all polite-like until I can get my feet under me again. I never bought Bryn's bollocks. At least, not all of it. I mean -- all this taking over the world thing is way too Evil Overlord for my tastes, and I kept waiting for 007 to sweep in and blow his brains out --"

"Isn't that what you did?"

"Suppose that makes me James Bond now --"

"You're not half as ripped --"

"I'll have you know his eight-pack is all CGI --"

"You noticed his abs long enough to count them?"

"They have him on the bloody screen waltzing out of the ocean like he were Neptune or something, and thank fuck they put him in those itty bitty Speedos or I'd be running screaming out of the theatres the way I did when the camera pulled back in Watchmen and showed Naked Blue Guy in all his glory --"

"I still think they should've thrown in a strip-show hip-twirl --"

"Oh, fuck no, Merls. Shut the fuck up with the hip-twirl. I've been scarred for life. I have nightmares of giant blue dick --"

Merlin giggled. He couldn't help it. Will sounded so mortified. It was just the two of them, talking the way they always talked when they were together, and it almost made all the bad things go away. Almost.

"Anyway," Will said, taking a breath. "I don't know the logistics behind it. All I know is they were hired. Like hired-gun hired. The way I figure it, the NWO's all bluster and magic tricks --"

"Wait. Magic tricks?"

"Magic tricks," Will said firmly, raising a you damn well know what I'm talking about brow. He continued, "And that's another fucked up story for another time, but let's just say the NWO's not the most organized, if you know what I mean. I'd sooner go against Genghis Khan and his bloodthirsty horde with five greenies at my back than that lot. The deal was, the NWO would provide distraction, Aredian's boys would snatch the prototype and you, and they'd turn you both over to the NWO for enough money to buy one of those nice Spanish villas by the sea, the ones fancy enough to have pools, and throw a few pretty girls in the deal, too. Just, they'd be naked all the time. There wasn't enough money for bikinis --"

Merlin rolled his eyes. The movement made him groan and touch his face tenderly.

"You want some ice?"

"Yeah. Finish your story first. Do me a favour and skip the naked birds, though."

Will snorted. "Just pretend they're naked blokes. In any case, Aredian's boys didn't get the prototype but they got you. The prototype was supposed to be their main payment --"

"What?" Merlin almost sat up. It didn't make sense. Aredian was taking the prototype as payoff? The NWO didn't want the prototype? But they hacked the Pendragon database. They arranged to have Merlin kidnapped to crack the encryption on the hard drive --
"I don't know, mate," Will said. "And I don't bloody care. You're alive. That's all that matters."

"So Bryn came over to get me from them --?" Merlin trailed off, confused.

"As if I were going to let the NWO get their claws in you --"

"What did they want me for?"

"I don't know," Will said again. "I didn't ask. Whenever I brought it up, Bryn got mean and took it out on Freya --"

"Shite," Merlin said.

"And what were I going to do? She kept saying, it's fine, it's fine, I've gotten worse, and how do you think that made me feel? I kept my gob shut. Learned to do it well enough before I left the army --"

"If by well enough, you mean your flapping lips got you booted --"

"Anyway, it doesn't matter what's going on because I don't know what the fuck, and you're just as clueless, I guess, but it's looking like Bryn's little clubhouse group wanted you to hack the database that they were supposed to get a copy of, except you locked it up tighter than Elmira Days' cunt, you remember her --"

"I still don't know why you chased after her, she broke every boy's heart in our class --" Of course Merlin remembered Elmira Days and it wasn't a person it was code. Will must have done all that he could while Merlin was unconscious, but the building that they were in was locked tight, and there was no way out without getting caught. Or shot. Merlin gave Will a muted nod to indicate that he'd gotten the message.

"-- except for you," Will said, "What with you going after that Harry bloke --"

Harry, as in Harry Houdini, or more recently Harry Potter, because Will thought it was more fitting. Will was asking about using magic to get out, and considering Merlin's current state, even if his magic were working, even if… there was no way he could get them out. Merlin raised a brow and shook his head firmly no.

Will grimaced, and continued, "-- but in either case, Aredian's holding onto the database until it's cracked, because he wants it for his own nefarious means, and he's to copy it to give to the NWO, and the NWO wanted you not because of the database -- that's just a bonus -- but because of all the other fiddly things you can do once you get your hands on a computer. Except Aredian were supposed to trade you off once you cracked the database and keep the prototype, but there's no prototype anymore, it got snatched and taken to parts unknown, from what I've heard, and…"

Will spread his hands.

"It's a bit of a messy finger-pointing backstabbing mess all around. I swear to fuck I need a scorecard to keep track."

It made sense, Merlin decided. He still wasn't entirely clear on who wanted what and who was supposed to pay up and what was supposed to be exchanged, but the gist of it was that Aredian's group was to get their hands on Pendragon's weapon and prototype database as well as a working version of the portable directional EMP --

Which, Merlin emphasized in his mind, was definitely not a portable directional EMP.
-- and the NWO was to get the database too, but for another, unknown reason altogether, and they wanted Merlin for something else, like taking down the world networks and wantonly wrecking infrastructures to further the NWO's mandate. What, exactly, was on the database was still a big question mark, but at least Merlin was aware of his importance in this whole mess.

It came down to, as soon as he gave Aredian what he wanted with the database, he would either be traded off to the NWO, or he'd be killed outright for reasons of spite.

He exchanged a long look with Will. There was a tightness around his eyes, a thinness around his mouth. Will had already sketched out the coordinates on the map and he'd figured out that they were heading down the mire bare-arsed and with laser sights burning holes between their shoulder blades.

They were fucked.

They were going to have to work out a way out. Somehow.

Will nudged him. "You all right?"

"No, I'm not fucking all right. Why would you even think that? Arthur's dead --" Again, Merlin's voice cracked just to say the words, and he wished that he could feel his magic, please and thank you, and be back to normal so that he would know, even a little bit, if Arthur was all right. Just to be certain. "-- and I'm... I'm what, exactly? What are they going to do to me once I do what they want? What are they going to do to both of us? And Kay? What about Kay?"

Will didn't answer. He broke eye contact and rolled off the bed. "I'll get you that ice."

Merlin laid back down and stared up at the ceiling until it occurred to him to wonder who was paying Aredian to get the database and the prototype. And, if no one was paying him -- who was he planning on selling it to?

ooOOoo

It didn't mean anything.

The longer that the trackers remained silent, the more difficult Arthur it was to hold onto the belief that Merlin and Kay were all right.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. He couldn't think about Merlin and Kay right now. He had to trust that Merlin was all right. He had to --

Arthur leaned against the doorframe and stared through the rain. The storm wasn't a thunderous blast like it had been for the last few days -- it was on its dying legs, trickling down like a veil, mixing with the fog struggling vainly to rise from the field, from the distant bog. They would lose its cover, soon, and they would have to move.

They were moving.

The twilight had fallen some time ago. Lance, Geraint and Allan had returned from the hospital a few hours ago, loaded with medication and supplies that Major Emrys had raided from the hospital in
one of those rare moments when she had been able to pull away from her floor. The official diagnosis would have to wait until the Major was able to corner the specialist, but Lance said that the scan didn't show anything out of the ordinary. No bleeds, no breaks, nothing suspicious.

It was a relief to everyone, even Geraint, whose head still throbbed; he paused now and then to reach out for something nearby to steady himself and close his eyes against the pain. "Fuck," he'd said, "I've gotten hit bad during footie, but this is worse. Way worse."

Galahad was still with the Major, keeping an eye on her. He'd reported in twice, and the second time he'd grimly said, "This Shelley bird? Takes an awful lot of smoke breaks. Brings her mobile with her each time. Makes calls every half hour, doesn't say anything, hangs up after ten seconds. One of the vets I'm visiting, nice old bloke, says he's had his eye on Shelley ever since he got clocked in. Doesn't trust her one damn bit. Says he's seen her with some shady types late at night when the floor's supposed to be asleep, but he can never get close enough to make out what they say. He's overheard Directory once, and Bayard twice, but that's not what worries him. What worries him is that she's fixated on Hunith."

Arthur hadn't needed to tell Galahad to keep Hunith in line of sight and not to take any risks where she was concerned. Merlin wouldn't be happy with any of them if his Mum was in danger and they let something happen to her.

Merlin --

Arthur fished the locator out of his pocket and stared down at it. He resisted the urge to shake it, to make sure it was working; he'd already asked Perceval to check the battery and the controls and to verify the frequencies of the bugs that they'd set out for Merlin and Kay. Merlin had set them up, surely there was nothing wrong with them, but the screen remained blank.

He returned the locator in his pocket, but he kept his hand curled around it.

Morgana and Gwen were still in France, hours outside the testing ground, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Google Maps was embarrassingly more efficient than government satellites, and from the terrain, Gwaine had been able to discern the outline of a house around a thicket of woods. Leon and Lance had watched Arthur expectantly, and Arthur...

Arthur had frozen. He didn't have a plan. He couldn't even come up with an order beyond the immediate and the reactive, and after he'd received a few minutes of silent pleading, Arthur covered up his paralysis with a quiet "Not yet."

He didn't know what was wrong with him.

Arthur tried his best to ignore the crushed expression in Lance's eyes, the fierce fight in Leon's. Neither of them argued with Arthur, neither one of them even spoke. Except for Gwaine and Perceval, the rest of the team couldn't even make eye contact with Arthur.

He felt like a failure.

He was a failure.

Most of their equipment had been packed up and loaded in the vehicles that Bohrs, Owain, and Lamorak had acquired for them; they were on the other side of the thicket across the clearing, covered under camouflage netting and masked by fresh-cut shrub. The men who were watching Hunith's house, hadn't extended their coverage to include Allan's property, so they had that reprieve, at least.
Arthur thought that was curious. The Directory had pulled Will into the mission, had set him undercover with the enemy -- why wouldn't they watch Allan, too?

Because Allan didn't have something that they wanted. Allan hadn't been involved, even peripherally, with the secret missions. He couldn't say the same for Hunith. Her husband had gone missing, was reported MIA, then later KIA, but there had been no body to bury. And there were those files.

The puzzle pieces were getting more and more complicated, and it dawned on Arthur that he had been working from only a scrap of a reference image, and what he had been putting together didn't match what he saw in his head. It was bigger than he thought it was. A lot bigger.

He scratched his collarbone. He kept scratching until he felt the burn of bone under his fingernail, the wet of blood on his hand. Behind him, a mobile buzzed on low volume. Leon answered.

Arthur didn't listen in. He stared out at the rain. His fingers tightened around the silent locator. He willed for Merlin and Kay to activate their trackers.

"Arthur."

He turned around. Leon was covering the pick-up of his mobile. The team was in a ready state -- vibrating with tension, prepared to do anything and everything the instant they were given an order to follow. They'd been in this condition ever since Morgana and Gwen's trackers had activated.

Arthur was exhausted just looking at them.

"It's Galahad." Leon paused. "They're on their way, ETA thirty minutes. They're being followed."

Arthur nodded. He turned away dully. They were being followed. Of course they were --

It hit him like a bag of bricks. Why were they being followed? If the house was being watched, if a spy had been planted at Hunith's workplace, why was she being followed? From everything that Arthur had seen, the Major was an old hand at this. She knew how to maintain a routine, how to make even the faintest deviation unavoidable and inevitable and normal. Arthur and his men had done nothing to give themselves away. The regular patrols around Allan's property lines only confirmed that their presence continued to go undetected.

So, why --

Because they were after Hunith.

"Load the cars," Arthur said. "We'll intercept them on the back roads."

He crossed the barn and quickly went through his gear. The Kevlar was the heaviest, the nylon netting for his weapons and other equipment came on second. He buckled up and tightened the straps, yanking on the trench coat that he'd borrowed from the boat docks in France, and picked up the phone that the Major had given them.

Only to stop and find that his team was staring at him.


Everyone scattered in an instant. Gwaine hopped onto his good leg, shoving maps and small computer into his pack, before pulling on his boots with one hand and his vest with the other. Perceval loaded the last of the containers and hauled it onto his shoulder, leaving the barn. Lamorak
had a frantic scramble for keys before he remembered that he left them in the ignition. Leon, efficient as always, shouldered a pack and gave Gwaine a hand. Lance threw the last few pieces of his kit together before helping Geraint.

They left the barn in ones and twos, spaced at random intervals, hunkered low through the tall grass and heads raised, eyes alert, despite the rain.

Arthur turned to Allan. "Master Sergeant."

"Captain," Allan said, offering him a stiff salute. "I don't expect we'll see each other for a while."

"No, sir," Arthur said solemnly. He paused. "You never asked me about Will."

Allan nodded sharply. Just as quickly, he shook his head. "There's nothing to ask. It's Will. I know my boy. Whatever he's into, he'll get himself out, and he'll raise bloody hell doing it."

"I believe that," Arthur said. He crouched and retrieved his spare gun from an ankle holster, checked it, and handed it to Allan. Allan raised a brow. "We're not bringing Major Emrys back here. It's too risky. They'll come sniffing."

"If you come back here without Will and Merlin, I'll shoot you myself," Allan said, but he shook his head and made a slight gesture. "You keep that. I haven't lived this long without having a store or two to fall back on, never mind a few people that I can call for backup."

Arthur glanced at the exit in time to see Lance and Geraint duck into the darkness. "You've been planning for this for a long time."

"You have no idea, Captain," Allan said. "You have no idea. Now, go. Get."

It wasn't until Arthur was nearly at the lead SUV that he realized Allan's tone had almost been filled with glee. This was a war he'd been waiting for, and it was finally coming to a head. Arthur only wished he knew what the war was for.

The papers he'd folded up and placed in his pocket hadn't given him all of the answers.

Owain pulled out as soon as Arthur climbed in, keeping the headlights off until they were out of line of sight of the farm and the men who were keeping watch on Hunith's property. Arthur listened to the windshield wipers squeak before putting his earwig in.

"Alright, gentlemen. Here's the situation. They're not following Major Emrys' Land Rover out of concern for her personal safety. With luck, they won't expect us."

The SUVs split up at the first intersection. Arthur knew which one that Gwaine was driving -- with only one good leg, he needed to stay mobile, and mobile meant staying with the car -- because he was the one with the lead foot. The SUV skidded and slid through a patch of mud and created a veritable tidal wave through the flooded parts, heading west with every intention of detouring south and turning back to block off any possible escape route.

It was Geraint who had made the calculations and called out the best ambush point on the go: at a crossroads without direct line of sight of any witnesses, on a detour that few people used unless they
had all-wheel drive, four-by-four if they were lucky. Leon called Galahad and confirmed that there was only one vehicle on their tail, passing on instructions to Major Emrys to slow down at the base of the rise to let the other car catch up.

Twelve minutes passed before they caught sight of the Land Rover approaching them. From their position, Arthur could see Gwaine coming up behind the large black SUV, Perceval speeding down the rise from an intersecting side road, Bohrs from the other.

At the base of the hill, Major Emrys accelerated and suddenly veered hard right, blowing past Arthur's SUV. He saw her glance at them and spared no more thought for her as Owain jerked the wheel and slammed on the brakes, blocking off the road. Arthur was out of the car and heading toward the passenger side of the black SUV, not even waiting for it to slow down.

He shot at its tires. It took four shots before he got a direct hit, and the front passenger side wheel blew out with a thunderous crack that was muffled by the rain. The SUV continued forward, skidding into the mud, the bare rims sinking deeper and deeper, losing traction.

The SUV came to a juddering stop one foot deep in the muck.

Galahad hadn't been certain, but Arthur confirmed two people in the front seats. They were moving, anxious, desperate, hurried, and beyond that, Arthur couldn't identify them. Between the light difference and the pouring rain, all he could verify was that the passenger was female, young and petite, and that the driver was a broad-shouldered man with a square head and short hair. They seemed oddly mismatched.

Leon was at the fender on the passenger side his weapon trained on both the rear and front passenger doors; Lamorak was on the driver's side, his gun arm up, his injured arm close to his body. The SUV was surrounded; Galahad and Gareth were sweeping the area through sniper scopes, waiting for someone else to appear.

If Gwaine, Perceval, and Bohrs hadn't run into anyone when they sped over the rough back roads to blockade the SUV, it was unlikely that anyone else would show up. They obviously hadn't planned on Arthur's team, and thought they would only have to deal with a single older nurse, alone.

Arthur made a few short gestures with his gun. Get out.

There was a pause, and both doors were opened. Lamorak yanked the driver out of the car, turned him around, and smashed him face first against the passenger door. Owain kept his gun trained on the driver while Lamorak frisked him, recovering three guns and a carbon-fibre knife.

Not the kind of gear that a farmer would pick up at the feed store.

Lamorak turned the man around. Arthur got a better look at his face. He memorized the square of the man’s jaw, the short haircut in the process of growing out, the scruff on his cheek. He wore a green turtleneck under a leather jacket, jeans, boots. He held his hands up, more resigned than frightened, a hint of anger and wariness, as if he were searching for a weakness that he could exploit to turn the tables.

Fat chance of that. Arthur had trained his men well.

Leon had finished with the woman; he had one gun and a short switchblade knife tucked into his nylon vest, out of easy reach. He turned her around, and --

Arthur lowered his gun, startled. It was only a millimetre drop, matched by Leon, and both of them raised their guns at the same time, recovering from their surprise.
The woman was svelte and slim, barely coming to Leon's shoulder. She was small-boned and fragile-looking, but Arthur knew from experience that there was nothing fragile about her. It had been years since he'd seen her, but there was no mistaking the high cheekbones, the haughty, imperious look, the fierce glint in her eyes. Her hair colour had changed, but it was still her.

"Hello, Vivian. Fancy seeing you here. I thought you were doing a medical internship in Amsterdam," Arthur said. He didn't need explicit directions to make the connection to what was really going on. "Or was that just a cover? Did Olaf recruit you? I should be surprised, but I'm really not. He'd recruit his own mother if it would get him an advantage."

Vivian was pale-faced, the colour fading under her makeup. Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened as she looked from him to Leon to the rest of the members of the team, and she blurted out, "We thought you were dead."

There were footsteps behind him. Major Emrys stopped just behind Arthur, and he could feel the questions that she didn't ask out loud.

"Zip ties and gags. Split them up," Arthur said. "Search the car, grab everything you find."

"Arthur--"

"Not a fucking word, Viv," Arthur snapped, ignoring the way her eyes widened -- half in anger, half in shock. "Really not in the mood to stop and chat."

He traded a glance with Leon. "No one talks to them."

Leon nodded, and Arthur holstered his gun once the two were in the back of the team's cars. They spared a moment longer to tear up the SUV when they didn't find anything incriminating and came up with two cell phones, several gun clips, a purse, the SUV's papers, and a camera with a telephoto lens. There was a secret compartment with more weapons, and those were transferred to one of the cars.

Arthur holstered his gun and turned to the Major; she had pulled the hood of her coat against the rain.

"Major Emrys," he began, stopping when he saw her raised brow. "Hunith. I hope you're not attached to the Land Rover. I'm pretty sure that it's been bugged and the people watching your house will come to find it when you don't return home at the usual time. Get everything you need out of it. You'll be coming with us."

The Major gave him a speculative look, one that was full of challenge, and it was so much like Merlin that Arthur bit the inside of his cheek and let the pain chase away the bubbling panic and despair. He thought she would protest the way Merlin would protest, nitpicking over one thing or another, but she only nodded and worked her way back to the Land Rover, Galahad going with her.

Arthur surveyed the area. He listened for the sound of oncoming cars through the rain, but it was quiet. In a few minutes, they would be gone, leaving behind one vehicle stuck in the mud, the other by the side of the road. A few minutes more, and their tracks and traces be washed away.

He went to Gwaine's car, gesturing with a finger for him to lower the window. There was a faint whir, and Gwaine stuck his head out, arm draping along the door. For once, he didn't have anything to say. No witty remark on the state of things, no snarky comment about needing his entire team to deal with two people. If anything, Gwaine looked troubled, his eyes dark, his brow pinched in a frown.

"Those coordinates I gave you," Arthur said. "Which one is nearest?"
Gwaine had to dig deep in his pocket for the scrap of paper with his calculations, the locations verified against Google Maps. "Four hours out. Drive part of the way, hike the rest."

Arthur nodded sharply. "All right. Take us there."

They paused only as long as it took for Major Emrys, Galahad and Owain to wrestle one long box, two packs, and a large medical kit into the boot of their car. Arthur wasn't in the least bit surprised that Hunith was already prepared to drop and go, or that she had a similar propensity as Merlin for overpacking gear, and, just like Merlin, she wasn't the least bit fazed by the weight she carried.

Owain climbed in the driver's seat again; Galahad took the front passenger spot and Lamorak took the middle seat. Major Emrys joined Arthur in the back seat, her mouth tight, her demeanour pale but determined. Gwaine wrangled his vehicle out around the edge of the road, avoiding the worst of the watery bits, and sped up the hill.

The usual radio chatter came over the earwig. Arthur plucked it from his ear and turned to the Major, but she broke the silence first.

"Why didn't you leave them?"

"We're supposed to be dead, Major Emrys," Arthur said, ignoring the raised brow at his continued use of her title. "I can't risk anybody finding out that we're not. And I'm not going to kill people when they might have information that I can use."

He reached into his inside pocket, removing the secured file. He'd folded it in two and the old papers were wrinkled, the photographs creased. He handed them to Hunith. She took the file warily.

"You said these would make sense with context. I want that context now, Major Emrys. We have roughly four hours before we reach our destination, and that should be plenty of time for you to tell me everything I need to know. And I mean everything."

When Hunith didn't answer right away, Arthur clenched his jaw to keep from snapping an abrupt now. Hunith fingered through the papers until the team photograph was on the very top; she smoothed out the crease until it was nothing but a line over several faces.

"I'll make it easy for you, Major Emrys," Arthur said. There was an edge to his voice because Galahad glanced sidelong in his direction and Owain's eyes darted in the rear view mirror. "Captain Balinor Emrys was recruited out of the SAS to participate in a top secret mission under international auspices but under the Directory's command. He led his own squad and was sent nearly all the way around the world on assignments with more blackout ink than I've ever seen in my entire career with the army. The official word is that the missions failed. But unofficially? This top secret mission was a suicide mission from the get go. They weren't supposed to make it back alive. And those who did --"

Hunith looked away. She stared out the window. Her hands were white-knuckled, clenching the edges of the papers. For an instant, the only sound was the crumpling of papers.

"Those who did survive fell in two groups. Those who were smart enough to put themselves in advantageous positions where no one could do anything against them. Like Major Kilgarrah, Colonel Mandrake, Director Solomon Bayard, Olaf Niedermann from MI-6, and my own bloody father."

Arthur paused. He was furious, and growing more so by the moment. Seeing the Colonel's photograph with the files had splashed him with cold shock, and now that he'd had time to let the information simmer on a low boil in the back of his mind, he was making connections that he didn't
Including the one where his father was one of the people who might have betrayed him.

"Then there are those who were smart enough to put everything together, to get what they could, and to vanishing. Maybe they staged their own death, maybe they just dropped off the face of the earth. They did it because they had no other choice, because they believe that they're doing the right thing."

"Arthur --"

"Major Emrys," Arthur said, his voice sledgehammer hard, "My team is fighting a war, and we don't know who is on our side. We know about the New World Order and their plans to bring down civilization as we know it. We know about the Directory and how they're supposed to be the Queen's personal army of sorcerers. It was a little hard to miss the dragons in France sweeping down from the sky and breathing fire on us."

Hunith whipped around to look at him, her eyes round. "Dragons?"

"Dragons," Arthur confirmed.

"We've seen them," Galahad whispered. "What do you think got Owain's back? Leon's?"

Hunith covered her mouth with her hand and closed her eyes. "Good God."


When Hunith looked at him, it was with wary eyes.

"He's had no one but you and Gaius and Will to help him carry his secret for years. But now he's got us. He's got the team. He's got me," Arthur said. "Now it's your turn, Major Emrys. Hunith. This is no time for secrets. Why did Balinor disappear?"

Hunith didn't say anything for the longest time. She smoothed out the papers in her hands again, an almost unconscious gesture.

"Why were they sent on those missions?" Arthur prompted.

"They were supposed to recover artefacts," Hunith said wearily. Her shoulders sagged. Arthur had seen Merlin like this, too, bowed under the weight that keeping his magic secret had become. How many secrets was Hunith keeping?

"What kind of artefacts?"

"Relics," Hunith said, half-turning her head to look at Arthur. "Archaeological relics. A scroll. A knot. A cup. An orb. A stone. There were so many of them. I don't think Balinor knew them all. He didn't… He wasn't an expert. He didn't recognize them or understand what they did. He wasn't allowed to study them after he turned them in, and if he asked questions? Well. You know how the army works as well as I do, Arthur. I don't pretend to know what they were, or why, and Balinor told me that…"

She paused.

"For the longest time, he told me that it was best that I didn't know, that he shouldn't even be telling me about them, but he had a feeling that someone should know. Then, one day, he came home on R&R. It was right before his last mission. Merlin was at school, and I'd left duty early because I
hadn't seen him in months."

Hunith trailed off.

"He said he found out what was going on. That it was wrong. They were going to harness the power
of the Old Religion and turn it into a weapon. His men were going to break in, take everything they
could, and they were going to hide them."

Arthur let the silence linger. His voice was soft when he said, "He couldn't come back after that."

"No." Hunith smiled, but it was faint, pale, and didn't reach her eyes, full of sorrow and pain. "He
couldn't."

"He had to protect you. You and Merlin," Arthur said.

"Yes," Hunith said simply.

"The Directory thought that he left something with you," Arthur said, remembering Gilli's
interrogation. God, that seemed like an entire age ago. "Do you know what it was?"

Hunith snorted. "They certainly searched my house often enough. Left it a mess each time and made
it look like a robbery."

Arthur stared out the window past Hunith, watching the landscape pass them by. Trees, shrubs.
Fences, paths. Houses, meadows. The windshield wipers squeaked as the rain let up a little, the
wheels squelched on the muddier sections of the gravel road. The vibrations through the vehicle's
suspension eased with an abrupt thump as they turned onto asphalt and the engine took on a different
pitch as it accelerated taking a hairpin turn a little too fast onto the highway.

Weapons.

Things that he never thought about -- that he had never even questioned -- suddenly made sense.
Why his father would retire from a successful career with the military to start up his own business.
How Pendragon Consulting always managed to get government contracts for prototypes where other
companies had to prove new technology through rigorous field tests. All the government
investigations that were so easily delayed or indefinitely rescheduled. Extra production runs, deadline
extensions, special privileges.

His father must have obtained one -- or several -- of the artefacts. He must have found a way to
reverse-engineer whatever they were and to transform them into weapons or armour. Pendragon's
body armour was without rival, and the white paper on it claimed the technology was based on
historically-accurate medieval equivalents. Arthur had always wondered about the materials used in
their fabrication, but he'd never pursued their identification beyond glancing at the generic names and
confusing chemical formulae.

The same went for weaponry. Missiles that caused more blast damage with smaller payloads. Bullets
with more piercing power but rapid deceleration on impact in order to do the most damage.

Whatever the Colonel had in his hot, little hands, it was enough to make the government sit up and
take notice. It was enough to make the army do whatever he wanted.

Fucking hell.

And to think that he would have called his father to let him know that he was alive, if it hadn't been
for Allan's gentle warning. Uther was… Uther was --

Arthur couldn't wrap his head around it.

He couldn't see Uther as being on anyone's side other than his own. He couldn't see him colluding with anyone. Maybe he worked with Bayard out of necessity -- *holy God*, but that explained why Bayard was always at the house when Arthur and Morgana had been growing up. It didn't seem likely that Uther would have allowed anyone to easily get their hands on the company's database. He wasn't that much of a fool. The only reason why he would have made such rapid arrangements with an external company, completely bypassing Arthur, was because he had nothing to worry about, because he was playing along with Bayard, to try to draw out the enemy, to, possibly get rid of Arthur --

Unless --

Unless Uther was *playing* Bayard for a fool, stringing him along, running a long con, letting him discover that there was nothing to discover. Because, whatever it was that the enemy was searching for? It wasn't in the database at all.

Arthur took a deep breath. His head hurt.

Whatever it was that everyone was after, it would have to wait.

He turned to Hunith. She was looking down at the photograph, her fingers splayed around one man's image.

"Are you in contact with him?"

Hunith made a soft sound. "It would be more accurate to say that he is in contact with *me*. Twice a year, maybe more, and always randomly --"

Hunith stammered to a stop when Arthur raised his finger at her, his eyes narrow. "Italy. You went on a trip to Italy recently. Merlin thought it was funny, because he'd never heard you even mention Italy before. You went to see him, didn't you? Is he there?"

Her mouth opened and closed several times before she admitted, "No. He's… He's always moving around."

Arthur drummed his finger on his knee. He was certain that Balinor had been on the testing fields. He didn't know *what the fuck* Balinor had to do with bloody *dragons*, but he was positive that the man and his men had been there, that they had captured the prototype. If Hunith had no way of reaching him, then how would anyone else? How would Balinor and his men even have *known* about the trap that Arthur had set, how he had planned to have it play out?

Arthur had reported to Bayard. Merlin had told Kilgarrah their plans. They both changed one crucial detail. Arthur had revealed that the prototype would be ensconced in the bunkers. Merlin told Kilgarrah that it would be out in the open air.

The wheels whirred on the asphalt. The vehicle swayed gently with every dip and curve in the road. Gwaine was in the lead, Leon was behind them.

The sky darkened, the traffic grew lighter, and the radio chatter filled the silence.

Arthur twisted around and rummaged through the back until he found the Major's phone.
He balanced the phone on his knee, unlocked the panel, and waited for Merlinware to load. He tapped through the option and ghosted the phone. It would ring out as Merlin's mobile number, but it would be untraceable.

"What are you going to do?" Hunith asked.

"Whatever I can," Arthur stared at the phone in his hand. "Galahad, turn the radio off. Nobody say anything."

He dialled a number.

It rang once, twice, three times. There was a moment of dead air before someone filled the silence with a gruff, frantic, "Thank the gods, Merlin. Where are you?"

The words stabbed in Arthur's chest. He swallowed hard before he spoke.

"If you want to know that, Major Kilgarrah, I suggest you get in touch with Lieutenant Balinor Emrys. I'm going to call back in one hour with coordinates. He will have twenty-four hours to meet us there. You and him. No one else. Do you understand?"

"Pendragon --"

"Do you understand, Major Kilgarrah?"

"I understand. One hour." There was a pause, the sound of a throat clearing. "Is --"

"No questions. One hour." Arthur hung up.

Shite.

Arthur stared at the Merlinware logo until the screen dimmed before putting the mobile back in its brackets and shutting down the terminal. He wouldn't be making any more phone calls for a while.

"What are you going to do?" Hunith asked again. The papers and photographs that she had so carefully smoothed out earlier were folded neatly in the middle again. She gave them to Arthur. Her hand was steady. Very steady, exactly the way Merlin's hands would be steady when he didn't know what was ahead but he was trusting Arthur.

He wasn't so certain that he was deserving of that trust.

Arthur ran his hand over his mouth and let it fall in his lap. More things clicked in place in his head, but it wasn't enough. He was starting to get the feeling that he would never fully know or understand what was going on. It was too big for him.

He closed his eyes and pared it down to the bare essentials. Morgana and Gwen. Merlin and Kay.

Merlin.

Everything else was a distant second.

Arthur reached over and tapped Galahad's shoulder. "Signal the lead car to pull over."

He leaned back in his seat and turned to Hunith.

"This is a war, Major Emrys," Arthur said quietly. "It didn't start that day when Balinor stole the artefacts and went off the radar. It's been a long time in the making -- it wouldn't be so sticky and
complicated otherwise. We've been pulled into this without being told what's going on, and we've been moved around like pawns on the chessboard in feints to draw out the other side.

"Except there's a whole lot of sides." Arthur paused as the convoy slowed down and stopped. He put the phone with the rest of the equipment and shoved the file back in his inner coat pocket, secure and out of sight. "I don't know who started this war. I don't know when it started. I don't care much, either. But someone got it wrong when they thought we were pawns. We're knights."

"Huzzah," Lamorak and Galahad said simultaneously.

There was a quirk of a smile on Hunith's lips.

"The first thing we're going to do is get our people back. Then, we're going to finish this." Arthur cracked the door open and stepped out. "Excuse me, Major Emrys. There's an old friend I need to get reacquainted with."

Arthur walked down the line of cars and tapped on the hood of the vehicle Perceval was driving. Leon stepped out a second later, shutting the door behind him.

"You're going to talk to her?"

"She's going to talk to me," Arthur corrected, and there was a flash of amusement in Leon's eyes, rare and fleeting these days. "Stay in the car. Switch with Geraint. I want you to hear what she has to say."

Leon nodded. He grabbed Arthur's arm just as Arthur headed for the rear. "You should know. They're being moved."

There was no question of whom. Leon would have been keeping an obsessive eye on the locators for Morgana -- just as Lance was no doubt doing with Gwen. Lance wasn't there to confirm but Arthur assumed that Leon had checked in with him. "Where?"

"Don't know yet," Leon said, his voice low. "Heading toward Paris."

Arthur tilted his head, his mind putting the connections together. "The NWO didn't get the database, remember? That was Aredian's people. They're wanting their own copy."

"They're going to use Morgana," Leon said, and there was a worried certainty in his voice.

"The PR office in Paris," Arthur said, keeping his voice down. The highway stretched out ahead and behind; the area was deserted, and there was no way for anyone to sneak up on them. The wind was picking up and tearing his words before they got very far, but Arthur wasn't taking any chances.

"Probably," Leon said, his tone strained. "Bad place for an incursion. Good staff, but they haven't seen combat in years, and --"

He paused.

Arthur did the math. They had a window of time in which they could operate and it would get narrower the longer they delayed. Morgana would put up a fuss -- she couldn't show up at the office without the right clothing, people would get suspicious -- and would contrive a way of keeping Gwen with her. That would net them a few additional hours to prepare, to set up a trap.

For a brief, brief instant, Arthur entertained the idea of leaving Morgana to the wolves, if only to rely on Morgana to glean more information for them. But now that he knew what they were after, he also
knew that the NWO wouldn't be happy once they discovered that it wasn't on the database.

There was no way that Uther would record in inventory whatever it was that he had kept for himself from the missions.

Arthur couldn't risk the NWO retaliating on Morgana or Gwen.

"Work out a plan," Arthur said, squeezing Leon's arm. "Whoever you need. Keep it small and keep it fast. We'll stop in an hour, review the plan, see if we need to split up."

"We shouldn't --"

"I put a call in to Major Kilgarrah," Arthur said. "The pillock thought I was Merlin. He answered the phone."

"And?"

"He's got twenty-four hours to produce Balinor," Arthur said. Leon glanced past him at the SUV with Hunith, and didn't ask any unnecessary questions, coming to the conclusions on his own. "I'm call him in an hour with coordinates."

Leon nodded. His hand slackened around Arthur's wrist and finally let go. He moved to the front passenger door, tapped the window, and exchanged places with Geraint. Geraint jogged to the other SUV, and Arthur climbed in the rear.

There was a pause while everyone checked in and gave the signal to proceed. The gravel screeched on the road before the wheels hummed on asphalt again.

Arthur didn't say anything for a long time. He didn't even look at Vivian. She squirmed in her seat, she made muffled sounds that might be anywhere from a protest to a curse -- probably both, and probably several of each. And finally, she made an audible huff of impatience and kicked Arthur in the shin.

From the angle, it wasn't hard enough to hurt, but it drew a scowl on Arthur's brow. He wasn't amused, and Vivian must have picked up on that because she withdrew in her seat, wedging herself against the door, her shoulders bowing in an attempt to make herself seem small.

Arthur turned to look at her. Her hands were zip-tied behind her back, which was always a risk because she might wriggle herself loose and they would be none the wiser, but the way her shoulders were pulled back -- uncomfortable and awkward -- were a good sign that she hadn't gotten free yet. She was still wearing a nurse's scrubs under her heavy coat and her hair was pulled back in an unkempt ponytail. She was wearing diamond earrings -- of course she was, because a nurse could afford diamond earrings; no wonder Major Emrys had no trouble picking her out -- and her makeup was, as always, impeccable.

Except where it was marred by duct tape.

It was a good look for Vivian, Arthur decided. Vivian and Morgana had graduated from the same school of sharp tongues and cutting remarks; Arthur had no desire to listen to that right now.

"As far as anyone's concerned, Vivian, my team and I are dead, and it's going to stay that way for the foreseeable future," Arthur said. "And you are going to help us maintain that cover. Can I trust you to do that?"

Vivian's head bobbed up and down in a nod.
"What about your partner? Can we trust him, too?"

Vivian hesitated for a moment before nodding, but she was less enthusiastic.

"I see," Arthur said, grimacing inwardly. He considered his options and decided that it would be safest for all of them if the other agent was disposed of. He didn't want to have to kill someone who was, for all intents and purposes, not the enemy in the sense that there were enemies, and then there were enemies. He wondered if Hunith would know people who could keep the man subdued and imprisoned for however long that it took them to complete their immediate mission, which was getting everyone back.

Arthur looked away.

*Everyone.*

"I'm going to guess that you're as much in the dark about the bigger picture as I was several days ago," Arthur said. "We all know that Olaf isn't that forthcoming. He likes playing his games. The whole dumb-as-a-stump act? He has it nailed down. Or maybe he really is that dumb."

Vivian made an indignant noise.

If Arthur could muster up amusement, he would. Vivian was as protective of her father's reputation as her father was protective of, well, Vivian.

"Tell me something, Viv. Would your dad have thrown me into the bloody pit if he'd known what was going to happen?" Arthur didn't think so, but then again, Olaf had tried to kill Arthur when he thought that Arthur was screwing around with Vivian. That was entirely Vivian's fault, though. "I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. He had no idea. Just like you have no idea. Right?"

Vivian didn't answer, but her glare spoke volumes.

"I'm going to take off your gag, and you'll answer some questions for me. I'm not going to bother with threats, Viv. You must've figured out we're beyond threats now. And you know what happens when I'm pushed too far."

Vivian's eyes widened, and she nodded.

Arthur reached over, fingering a corner of the tape. Vivian pulled her head away, her eyes shut tight in anticipation of a quick tear.

Instead, Arthur removed it slowly and carefully, which he knew from experience to be far more painful.

"You bloody fucking --"

Arthur put the tape back over her mouth. He patted it down for good measure.

From his position, Arthur saw the curl of a smirk on Leon's lips as he sketched out a rough map on a sheet of paper, already coming up with attack and recover options for Morgana and Gwen.

Arthur waited. He could afford to wait; he still had a little under an hour before he was expected to do anything. He reached into his coat pocket and checked his disposable mobile for want of something to do. Sometime during the drive, Gwaine must have figured out the locations of the coordinates, because Pellinor had sent him multiple texts with detailed information.
The coordinates for their location was somewhere in Snowdonia National Park. Pellinor included elevation and a quotation from Gwaine: *There's Fuckall there.*

Arthur put away his phone and glanced at Vivian. Her body language had gone from indignant to subdued. "Are you going to be nice?"

Vivian nodded.

This time, Arthur tore off the tape in one fast go. Vivian wasn't expecting it, and her yelp was high-pitched and sharp, causing all three men in the SUV to wince.

"All right," Arthur said, glancing down at the duct tape. There was an imprint of Vivian's lipstick on the glue -- probably the only thing that saved her lips from ruin, though she would probably put a facial on her expense reports after this. "Where were you going to take Major Emrys?"

"We weren't --"

"Viv." Arthur exhaled heavily. Vivian sat back, recoiling at his tone. "I have zero fucking patience right now. Up until this morning, your orders were to observe and report back. After this morning, you were told to escort Major Emrys to a safe location. What changed? Where were you going to take Major Emrys?"

"London," Vivian said, which didn't answer Arthur's question. He raised a brow, and Vivian hastily added, "Dad wanted me to pull her in before something happened."


"Before they got her," Vivian said. "Like they got Emrys' uncle. And before you ask, we both know who I'm talking about. I'm talking about the NWO."

Arthur stared. Leon raised his head. Owain was steady at the wheel, but he glanced sideways at Leon as if asking if they'd heard right.

"Are you sure they have Gaius?" Arthur's throat was tight; he was grateful that his voice didn't warble when he asked the question.

"He walked out of his house two nights ago and vanished," Vivian said. "No blips on the radar since then. We're assuming that the NWO have him."

"All right." Arthur's brow furrowed and he tried to think. He was going to have to ask Galahad if he had left Hunith alone long enough to use the phone to call Gaius, because the timing coincided with their arrival. If not Hunith, then maybe Allan had contacted him. Arthur was more inclined to believe that Gaius had executed a disappearing act, because, NWO or not, Gaius had power of his own. He'd seen some of it when they'd trained with him and Merlin. "So it was for her protection."

"Yes," Vivian said. Her perfectly-plucked brows rose faintly, as if she was wondering why Arthur wasn't more concerned for Gaius, but she knew better than to ask questions right now.

"What is Olaf doing, Viv? And don't go all doe-eyed on me with the *I don't know.* This isn't damage control that he's running. He's got a long game going. What is he after?"

"Classified," Vivian said.

Arthur snorted. "Declassify it for me. And dumb it down some, because we all know that us grunts don't have much by way of brain cells to rub together."
Vivian opened her mouth, only to snap it shut a moment later, sensing a trap. She stayed like that for some time before she finally said, "How much do you know?"

"Let's go with everything, and work our way down," Arthur said. He watched Vivian carefully. "Olaf knows about the artefacts. He was involved in the missions. He even ran a few. He probably became aware of the purpose behind the collection, too."

Vivian swallowed.

"He didn't like it," Arthur guessed, and he saw a flicker in Vivian's expression that was faint, but not concrete confirmation. He clarified, "He found out what some people were planning to do, and he tried to intervene."

Vivian blinked owlishly at him.

"He did intervene," Arthur continued. "And he got a slap on the wrist for his trouble. He was reassigned to a different department in MI-5 and stripped of some of his authority. He leveraged what he knew against a promotion where he could monitor things."

" Damn it, Arthur," Vivian snapped. "The CIA disproved telepathy in the 60s. How are you doing this?"

"They never disproved Arthur," Leon said. His head was still bowed, and his brow was furrowed in concentration as he wrote notes and compared it to a map of France that wouldn't give him the detailed information he needed to plan routes in and out of Paris, but they'd worked with less before. There wasn't much light in the SUV, but he was making do with the reflections from the dashboard and an occasional flash from a penlight.

Vivian snorted in response, but she didn't say anything more. It didn't matter to Arthur one way or another; she was telling him everything he needed to know anyway, whether she realized it or not.

Arthur parsed through what he knew of Olaf's background, his history, his assignments -- past and present, his insistence on pursuing Arthur for the Queen's service. Olaf was patriotic, even if he had a warped sense of duty. He was a rich man by inheritance and old money and, by all accounts, continued his career in the secret service because it was an indulgence to keep him busy. Whatever Olaf had done to be demoted and transferred to a different department, it wouldn't have stopped Olaf from doing whatever he could to jump the ladder and get his own back.

He'd stayed in his position for a reason.

Arthur shifted in his seat and studied Vivian. She'd done something to her hair, certainly. Her cover as a nurse at the veteran's hospital was marred by the simple fact that she was just a touch overdone, but that could easily be excused as part of Vivian's personality. And Vivian, regardless of the situation, never played well with others, so just how had anyone convinced her to partner up with someone, anyone, hinted that there was just a little bit more going on in the background that no one was letting on.

"You're not supposed to be in the backend of Wales tending to the sick and wounded," Arthur said finally. "That's not your thing. You'd break a nail filing paperwork or some other horrid administrative task. And there's no telling what the dry hospital air is doing to your hair."

"You noticed?" Vivian made a gesture as if she were going to reach for her hair to show him the damage already done, but she was still bound, and the movement made her wince and drop her shoulders.
"In fact, the Office thinks that you're off somewhere glamorous gathering information on one spy or another. You never thought you'd have to spend several months -- has it been nearly a year?"

"Feels like it," Leon said. The papers in his hands rustled as he checked the locator.

"You're here because Olaf asked you to be here. And that bloke with you? He's not really with you. He's just the muscle. Probably washed out of agent training, but he showed promise and dedication and Olaf never forgot him." Vivian didn't react visibly, but she didn't need to. Arthur continued, "You have absolutely no official reason to be watching Major Emrys. Absolutely no reason to be keeping an eye on Gaius. The NWO couldn't possibly think that either of them would have any information pertinent to their mission. Whatever the fuck their mission is."

He paused.

"Unless --" Arthur drummed his fingers on his knees. "Unless it's not the NWO who are after them. It's someone who's trying to find any data or hardware that Merlin might have left behind."

Notably the encryption key to crack the database, for one thing.

"Or for anything that might lead them to what they're really after," Arthur suggested. From the blank look on Vivian's face, however, he was guessing that about this, she really, honestly, had no idea.

That was all right, because she was giving up different kind of information altogether. It gave him hope, absurd and suffocating. Arthur tamped it down, because he couldn't let himself work on hope or assumptions. He needed facts. He needed confirmation.

"Olaf knows where Merlin might be," Arthur said. Leon's pencil stopped scratching on paper, and there was a tiny, imperceptible waver of surprise as the car drifted left before the course was adjusted, but more telling was the way that Vivian's eyes opened.. "They know that because of --" Will.

Leon turned to look at him. Arthur could tell that he was thinking the same thing. It was a flashbulb moment that he should have had a long time ago. Will wasn't working for the Directory. Olaf got to him first. Will was some sort of fucking double-double agent.

He wanted to ask a myriad of questions -- how do we reach him, what's the call schedule, does he have a drop box, what's the code sequence -- but they were all things that Vivian wouldn't know. Vivian wasn't interested in the operative aspects of an agent. She would never be on the sidelines looking in. No, she was the showpiece, the person who could wheedle what they were looking for with a wink at the right person and a bit of cleavage flash at another.

He couldn't call Olaf either, not without tipping his hand. And yet, he wanted so, so badly to know that Merlin and the others were all right.

Arthur kept his expression stony and cool.

There was no reason to think that Will wouldn't be with the NWO. He'd stick to them until his orders had changed. And his orders would only change if there was something worth going after -- like Merlin.

But if Arthur pegged Will right, Will was the sort who would fly two fingers in the general direction of his orders and do whatever he could to keep Merlin safe anyway.

There was a very good chance that Merlin and Kay were alive. The relief welled in Arthur's chest,
and he released it in a slow breath.

Arthur nodded sharply. "Thank you, Viv. You've been very helpful." He reached over with every intention of putting the duct tape back over her mouth when she stopped him with a squawk.

"What are you going to do --" She cut herself off before finishing her question, and Arthur had to give her credit for stopping where she did. The old Vivian would have demanded to know what Arthur was going to do with her.

"Need to know, Viv. And you definitely don't need to know." He pressed the duct tape over her mouth and pressed it down firmly despite her struggling. He took pity on her and said, "And in case you were wondering, you'll be fine. This is all going to work to our advantage. If you go missing, what is Olaf going to do? Everyone thinks you're somewhere nice and warm and glamorous where you're shoving your tits in the face of whoever happens to be your target for the day. We'll just put you somewhere safe and out of the way for the time being. Consider it a vacation."

Arthur put his earwig in. "Ask around. Find out who we can trust at our next location to keep an eye on our guests."

No one answered right away. Then, after a few minutes, Gareth handed his earwig over to Major Emrys.

"I know exactly where we can leave them," she said sweetly, and Arthur wasn't fooled by her tone. Not one bit.

ooO0000
Captain Uther Pendragon wasn't supposed to be part of this particular mission. He wasn't supposed to be part of anything, period. Uther resented the implication that he wasn't good enough, because if his skills were in high demand elsewhere, why wouldn't they be in high demand here?

It was only by virtue of the many connections that Uther had made in his still-short career in the military that he had even been considered at all. It was Olaf who recommended him -- grudgingly, but it was still a recommendation that weighed volumes considering Olaf's influence -- and Bayard who supported the decision to bring him in, though Uther had never been entirely clear why.

Seven months had passed, and Uther hadn't been on a single mission. He'd stayed behind, on the sidelines, at the command centre, guiding movements, following whatever noisy radio chatter there was. He was even, on one galling occasion, relegated to research. Research. Him? Captain Uther Pendragon? Research? He had a reputation for leading men against terrible odds and bringing them to victory. He did not do research.

Except, once he realized that it was an opportunity to be situated among the ranks of those in the know, he capitulated and he researched the shite out of whatever his assignment was. The men from the nameless government branch -- it hadn't taken long for Uther to learn that it was called the Directory, never mind what they actually did for Queen and Country -- were the ones who had the information that they needed to track down the artefacts.

Uther didn't understand the artefacts. Privately, he believed that they should leave the archaeological discoveries to the dusty archaeologists. What would the government need with a bunch of relics? What would their allies need with a bunch of relics? Uther considered it a waste of government money and resources.

He revised his opinion the first time he tracked down one of the artefacts and learned what it did. He'd scoffed at the notion that there was a key that could open any door. That was what skeleton keys were for. Except the document listed in detail the doors that it could access -- doors to other worlds. Other realms.

He didn't believe it until the team returned with the key. The key was placed in a secure box and escorted with an armed guard to the underground bunker for examination. Uther followed, confident in the belief that he belonged there, and he wasn't turned away. He lingered on the fringes, watching through the three-inch reinforced glass, and stared, mouth agape, as a Directory sorcerer ("A sorcerer? Preposterous.") chanted a guttural phrase, and a bloody doorway appeared out of thin air.

After seven months of regretting his decision to push for inclusion on this project, Uther saw nothing
but future opportunities. He created a meticulous inventory of the artefacts -- at first, there were only a handful, barely worth the paper they were written on, but as more and more of their men returned with one artefact or another, the inventory became more important.

To Uther.

He never shared the inventory with anyone. He suspected that the paperwork he was compiling would end up in a microfiche cabinet somewhere, lost and forgotten and that the artefacts would either languish in an armoury vault, boxed up and warehoused and assigned an obscure code, or that they would end up in the Directory's hands, where they would be studied and catalogued and measured before being stored away as curiosities. Uther kept the work he was doing a secret. He kept watch on all the teams and observed the artefacts' capabilities as best as he was able -- it wasn't always easy to sneak into the bunker without being noticed.

The first artefact that he removed for storage at a more secure location was a trident.

It was a beautiful thing, once it was cleaned of all the cobwebs and centuries of silt and salt that had accumulated on the surface. The shaft was made out of a silvery metal, solid and strong and unoxidized by time, ornately decorated in symbols and images that might mean something to a more educated mind. The prongs were made out of a reddish, tempered steel; it was not, like he first thought, bronze, but an annealing of different metals of such a high purity that no one could even fathom how anyone could have forged it, never mind attained such quality.

It was still sharp even after all these years. One of the researchers had touched the edge of the prongs and came away with a deep, painless slice that needed to be cauterized with a hot blade before it would stop bleeding.

The trident was Uther's favourite of all the artefacts that he had appropriated.

He would have a new favourite soon.

His research had been particularly fruitful this time around. He'd found not one, but several artefacts that were supposedly kept safe at one particular location, an underground temple that was much lauded in myth, but no one even remembered it these days. There was one particular artefact that had caught his eye, and when he compiled his research for the spooks running the show he quietly left this one thing out.

Uther sat on his research for weeks, waiting for the right time. He knew that the spooks wouldn't wait for the other teams to come in. They would go in right away. There were rumours that other countries -- enemy countries, unallied countries -- had gotten wind of what they were doing, and were hot on their heels to get to the locations before them. Lately, more than one team returned missing men, and they returned unsuccessful, the artefacts lost to someone else's government, to be locked away, forgotten, in a vault somewhere.

But not this time. Not these artefacts. When the time came, he presented his research. The Brass, predictably, had decided to send in a team right away. Kilgarrah was the one who pointed out that they didn't have the men to undertake such a large recovery.

That was when Uther volunteered.

Captain Uther Pendragon wasn't supposed to be part of this particular mission. But he made sure that the Brass had no other choice.
He had to be careful. The team leader was watching him carefully. Had watched him carefully ever since the trident went missing. The funny thing about that was that no one else noticed that the trident was gone. Had the team leader had his eye on it for himself? Uther decided that it didn't matter. He just had to be careful. Everything would be above board. And he outranked the team leader in any case. Who would the Brass believe?

Lieutenant Balinor Emrys or Captain Uther Pendragon?

Morgana woke up with a start. The darkness disoriented her, but a grounding presence kept her from crying out, alarmed. Gwen was holding her hand, and was murmuring softly.

"It's all right. It's ok. We've stopped."

Morgana blinked several times until her vision cleared and she was able to take in her surroundings. The dream lingered at the fringes of her awareness, and she only remembered a few details -- artefacts, trident, temple, Emrys. They were details that were quickly fading away from her grasp, and she was simply too tired to use the techniques that Merlin's uncle had taught her to try to cement the vision more firmly in her mind.

Merlin's uncle.

Merlin Emrys.

Emrys.

Morgana repeated the name in her mind over and over again until it was cemented there. Balinor Emrys. She wasn't sure who he was or what he was to Merlin. An uncle? His father? There was a connection there. It was important.

She couldn't place it.

"Are you -- where are we?" Morgana asked, keeping her voice low.

They were still in the back seat of the SUV, but it was quiet. The engine was off; the air in the cab was stifled and stuffy. It was dark as pitch outside even despite the tinted windows.

They were alone.

Morgana reached for the handle for the door. Gwen's fingers dug half-moons into her palm, and Morgana jerked, startled. Gwen pointed; Morgana followed the gesture and didn't see anything. Then -- suddenly, she could dimly make out movement outside the car.

They weren't as alone as she'd hoped they were. They were under guard.

Her eyes adjusted to the change in lighting and she realized that it was brighter than she'd expected.

"Where are we?"

"It looks like a warehouse," Gwen said. "An abandoned building. I'm not sure. They stopped for a minute, then drove inside."

"Are we there? In Paris, I mean?"

"I think so. I'm not sure. I haven't seen the Eiffel Tower or anything like that," Gwen said, her tone a little flippant, "But we're close. The industrial section, I think. I heard a lot of construction earlier, but
that's… that's stopped. Suddenly, I think. Like someone shut a door and the whole building got soundproofed."

"How come we're still here?"

"You were sleeping. I pretended I was asleep, too." Gwen hesitated, and added, "Morgause said to leave us here for now. That was an hour ago."

Morgana sat up a little straighter and groaned. "I have a crick in my neck."

She frowned at Gwen's raised brow.

"What?"

"Really? We've been kidnapped, our families don't know if we're all right, they're going to use us to break into Pendragon Consulting to steal another copy of the database, we don't know what they're going to do to us after, and a bloody crick in the neck is what you're worried about?"

Morgana scowled. She drummed her fingers on her knee for a long time. "Actually yes. But… never mind."

"Thank you!" Gwen said a little louder than strictly necessary, but she caught herself before her exclamation turned into something more. She hesitated, and asked, "How bad is it?"

"It's fine, it'll work itself out," Morgana said, dismissing Gwen's concerns. "And I'm not talking about my neck. If they don't need us anymore, we're just dead weight. We have to make sure they need us."

Morgana cringed at her own words. She didn't want to think about either one of them as "dead". Neither one of them spoke for a while.

The sun must be rising, because the light in the warehouse was less incandescent and more natural glow. Morgana was able to make out how many people were in the warehouse. On the assumption that the entire crew from the cabin in the middle of nowhere were here, too, it didn't look like there were many people. They would just have to wait until everyone was looking away at the same time - -

"I was thinking about that," Gwen said slowly. "What they want us for, I mean. They want a copy of the database, right? And they came to the testing grounds. It's safe to assume that they might want to get the disrupter."

"Except that they don't have it," Morgana said. "They lost out on the database so they went for the prototype, but they didn't get the prototype, which means they need the database again --"

She paused.

"They'll need someone to build it." Gwen nodded in agreement, and Morgana grabbed her hand. "Can you build it?"

"From memory? No. If I had the schematics, maybe. It won't be quick. Some of the parts were specially made. You can't buy those at the hardware store. I'd have to make new ones --"

"We'll have to let them find out that you can do it. That'll get us some time," Morgana said. As long as they were valuable to the NWO in some way, they would stay alive. As long as the NWO thought they could use one as leverage against the other, then they were more likely to keep both of them
around. The longer that they could stay alive the better, because they had tracking chips on their persons, and that would give Leon and Lance and Arthur the time they needed to put together a rescue mission.

"We're going to have to stall," Morgana said. She had no intention of letting them have any part of the company, database or not, but she would do whatever she could to slow them down.

"I don't think we can," Gwen said, looking through the windshield. There was a commotion; even through the car doors, they could hear shouting. One man was throwing his arms up in the air, another was shaking his head, a third was making a phone call. Whatever was going on, it was loud enough to attract Morgause's attention, because she walked out from wherever she had been.

Her appearance caused the animated conversation to quickly ebb to a close, and the man on the phone suddenly hung up. No one spoke and Morgause crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing.

Morgana had a feeling that no one wanted to start talking, that shooting the messenger was something very much in play here.

"Morgana --"

"We need to know what's going on. I just want to hear what they're saying," Morgana said. Then, carefully, quietly, she pulled at the latch and grimaced when she heard the too-loud click. No one outside of the SUV reacted. Even when she wedged the door open a little, giving them fresh air that was as fresh as automobile exhaust and industrial fumes could make it, no one even glanced in their direction.

With everyone's attention directed elsewhere, Morgana was tempted to use the opportunity to make a dash for freedom, but she wasn't so stupid to even try, not in the growing daylight, not without knowing where they were, never mind their surroundings. There might be twenty-some NWO members in the building, but there might be hundreds waiting outside.

Morgana and Gwen watched the show through the windshield, their heads tilted, straining to hear anything that might be said. The staring match lasted all of ten seconds before every pair of eyes dipped down to the ground, studying the cement as if they planned on installing it in their own homes.

"Well?" Morgause asked sharply. Everyone bodily flinched, as if her voice alone had been the crack of a whip. Impatient, Morgause pointed at the newest arrival. "You. Start talking."

"Um. I. Um."

"You," Morgause said, pointing at the man who had been in the middle of making a phone call. The first man withered and looked as if he were close to passing out.

"Tristan's group went to pick up the kid," he said, speaking slowly and carefully. He didn't physically move from his spot, but he leaned backward, as if he hoped he could push himself out of arm's reach in time to avoid a blow. "It didn't go well."

"Is he dead?" Morgause asked. Her eyes flared a red-orange shade. Morgana might have been willing to subscribe to the whole trick of light theory, but the whole eye-flash trick was starting to happen too frequently to be just that.

"N-no, Morgause. But --" He trailed off with a wince.

"What?"
The first man found his balls and spoke up. "Th-- they beat him. Both of them, I mean. It looked bad. There was a lot of blood. They might be dead. They didn't move much."

Morgause whirled around, and there was outrage in her expression. Her jaw was clenched tight, and she looked as if she were about to explode. "Why would they do that?"

No one answered her, and even in the car, Morgana could feel Morgause's seethe. She stalked away and promptly stalked back. "Where's Bryn?"

Everyone hesitated again.

"Now, him," the first man said, inhaling through his teeth before continuing. "He's dead."

"Go on," Morgause said, the encouragement more threat than anything else, her patience wearing thin by the slow pull of information, question by question, using dirty pliers.

"It were Tristan's new guy," the first man said, his face pale, but apparently emboldened by the fact that he wasn't dead yet. "I don't remember his name."

"Will something or other," the second man supplied. "Used to be in the army, that one. Tristan thought he'd be useful, especially because he and Emrys? They're mates."

"Were mates," the first man corrected. "They had a blow-out over something Bryn did. I don't know the details. Tristan tore Bryn a new one for that, I guess, but it went to shit when they tried to fix it --"

"And the relevance to the current situation is what, exactly?" Morgause snapped.

The room went absolutely silent. Morgana couldn't even hear a cricket chirp.

"Um." The first man grimaced when someone nearby elbowed him with a frantic start talking, or she'll do us all in nudge. "Right. Well. Bryn lost it when he saw Merlin's condition. Started barking orders and, well. You know Bryn. Even on a good day he's a right pillock. Thick in the head. I thought... Fuck, I don't know what the fuck I was thinking, but it felt almost like Bryn were going to do something to them. I felt the magic rise on the back of my head, I don't know if it were Bryn or one of the other guys, but --"

He stumbled to an uneasy stop.

"We were going to get pulled into a fight. I just knew it. And we were outnumbered. I swear we wouldn't have walked out, not alive anyway. Then that bloke --"

"Will," provided the second man.

"Yeah, Will. He pulled a gun, shot Bryn --" The man stopped wringing his hands long enough to poke an index finger jerkily at his own forehead. "And said, take me to your leader."

Morgause looked murderous. The man looked down.

"After that. Um. After that, I don't know. They were polite. Escorted us out. Told us to fuck off. Don't call us, we'll call you. There weren't any sign of that bloke --"

"Will," the second man said again.

"Yeah, him. No sign of him. I don't know. Um. We parked outside the building, tried to figure out what to do, then the next thing we know they're packing up everything. We see, um. Will?"
"Yeah, that's his name," the second man said. He shook his head a little, more in irritation than anything else. Morgana had to agree. Will wasn't that difficult of a name to remember.

"Will. He's carrying Emrys over his shoulder, tucks him away in a car. He goes back in, gets the other one, and..." The man took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "We tried to track them. They must have seen us. We lost them. No idea where either one of them are. Tried to call Will's number, but he weren't picking up."

There was a long, long silence. The temperature dropped at least several degrees, because Gwen's teeth chattered no matter what she did to muffle the sound, and Morgana had trouble suppressing shivers violent enough to make the SUV shake. Out in the open, the men subtly attempted to zip up their jackets and shove their hands in their pockets.

Morgause, the ice queen, was unaffected. She stood there and glared. Her eyes were glowing with a faint version of the red-and-orange devil-from-hell, but it seemed more unconscious than anything.

Oddly, coming to terms with the existence of magic was proving to be less traumatic than it probably should have given Morgana's dream-visions and the stress of their circumstances, but Morgana couldn't help but feel a brief flare of fear. Did Arthur know about this? Did he know about the magic? And if he did know, if the team knew, why hadn't they told her, why hadn't they prepared her for this?

She didn't have time to tabulate a long list of questions that she had every intention of firing at Arthur and Leon and the others, sniper-style, because something else struck her hard.

Emrys.

Her mind supplied her with Balinor Emrys, which made no sort of sense whatsoever, because she didn't know who he was or what he had to do with any of this beyond a faint niggling sensation that he was important. It was Gwen who broke the stretched silence to whisper, "Merlin. Merlin's alive."

Morgana clenched her fingers tighter around Gwen's hand. She made a shh face, not wanting to make a sound, because she didn't want to attract the men's attention, and she definitely didn't want to have Morgause looking at them right then. The seconds trickled, and no one so much as moved; no one so much as diverted their attention from where it was fixed on the floor.

Merlin was alive.

He was a prisoner, just like they were. Morgana didn't know who the second man with Merlin was, but it couldn't have been Arthur, because Arthur had been with them in the bunker, and --

Kay.

Her eyes widened. Merlin and Kay had gone out to the field to set up an independent test for the EMP disruptor, something that the technicians hadn't touched, something that could be verified as having been functioning before the test began. Merlin had fallen when the EMP had been prematurely triggered; Kay had tried to revive him --

Kay.

Oh, fuck.

Were they even alive? This sounded like old news, and anything could have happened during that time. They might have succumbed to their injuries from the fight on the testing grounds. They had been beaten to within an inch of their lives, from the sounds of it. And they might be dead.
Gwen must be thinking the same thing, because her fingers tightened around Morgana's hands. They exchanged a long glance.

They had to be alive. The team would be devastated if they lost both Merlin and Kay. It would break Arthur if he lost Merlin.

Morgana heard a faint sound; she raised her eyes in time to see someone hastily getting out of Morgause's way.

"And whom," Morgause said, turning to the second man, the one who had his mobile out. "Were you calling?"

"Will," he said, swallowing hard. "I was trying to raise him. I mean, he's not the sort to give someone a second look if they can't even remember his name --"

The first man made a dismissive gesture.

"-- but him and I, we hung out at Bryn's, once, arguing over footie. I thought maybe he'd pick up if he saw my number." He paused.

"And?" Morgause asked.

"It was ringing when you came out. I hung up," he said.

Morgause glowered.

The man faltered.

Morgause uncrossed her arms and let them hang at her sides, her hands bunched into fists.

"I-- I should... try again?" the man suggested.

Morgause turned to a different man. "And you. Call Tristan. I want to know what he knows. I want to know now."

She stared at each man in the group for such an uncomfortable length of time that the men shuffled where they stood, naughty boys withering under their schoolteacher's gaze. Then, abruptly, Morgause turned on her heel and stalked off to the side of the warehouse, where she yanked a door open and disappeared into a small cubicle office, the windows covered by ratty horizontal blinds.

With her departure came a sudden heat into the room, air filling in the vacuum that Morgause left behind. A few guards took a few aborted steps in random directions, unsure of what to do, before figuring out that whatever they should do, it had better be somewhere else in case Morgause came storming out again. Those who stuck around sagged visibly, the air gone out of their sails.

The man who had called Will had his phone against his ear. He bounced on the balls of his feet, closed his eyes, and mouthed something over and over again. It took Morgana a while to figure out that he was quietly begging. Come on. Come on. Come on. Answer, damn it.

She searched around for the man that Morgause had singled out to call Tristan; he was pacing in place, back and forth, back and forth, never more than one step in either direction. Then, when the call made it through, he moved into explosive action, heading in the direction that he was facing; it brought him close to the SUV.

Morgana winced. She hoped he wouldn't notice that the rear passenger door was ajar.
He stopped short of the front doors and stalked a few steps forward before banging his fist on the hood of the SUV.

"Goddamn it. I don't give a flying fuck if he's otherwise occupied. You pull that bitch off his cock and stuff his baby Vienna sausage back in his pants if you have to. I want him on the phone now. What? Fuck you too. Just do it. Now."

He drummed his fingers lazily on the glossy surface of the hood while he waited. The other man was still in silent prayer, a look of intense concentration on his face, as if he were literally willing for someone to pick up the phone on the other end. Morgana had no idea how many ring-throughs he'd listened to, but he hung up punched a few keys on his cell, and repeated the entire process.

She thought she saw a faint red gleam in his eyes right before he shut them again.

"It's Hank. Henry -- no, don't you fucking give me Hank who? Henry who? Gibson, you twat." He leaned his body against the side fender of the SUV and draped his right arm across the hood. His hand lifted up in a I don't know shrug. "Weather's great. Food's bland. Wine's cheap, and I haven't seen any fucking tits because the shite has hit the bloody fan, what the fuck is wrong with you? Haven't you heard?"

There was a pause.

"No, you daft thick," Hank said, slapping his palm down on the hood. "No, not that even. Bryn Nash, is what I'm talking about. No, Bryn's not with us. Yeah, he met up with the others like he was supposed to. No, he didn't get the goods. No, he's bloody dead, you fuck."

The pause was longer this time. Hank fidgeted in place, straightening up. His fingers drummed on the hood again in rhythm. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap-twap.

"Orright. So you didn't give Will any special orders, like getting rid of ballast?"

Hank's fingers never stopped drumming. The sound was faint and quick, changing pattern the more Hank listened. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap-taptaptap-twap.

"Sounds like it was. Yeah. That bloke. Will. Who brought him in anyway? Bryn? But you vetted him, yeah? No, I didn't see his fucking file. There's a reason why you're the fucking head of your branch, but I'm starting to think we're going to be changing that. No, I don't fucking care. You report to Morgause, you tell her, you pillock. Grovel at her feet. I'm calling for an explanation for this clusterfuck. Morgause's pissed. What the hell is -- no, goddamn it, no. We don't know where they are. They've moved. Yeah, that's right. Now you're getting it. We've lost bloody Emrys."


"No, I don't know what she wants to do yet."

"Yeah, that might get a good idea, think you can live that long without some bird attached to your cock? If your fucking head wasn't in your goddamn pants all the fucking time, maybe you'd have noticed Will getting twitchy and this wouldn't have fucking happened. Oi. Shut your mouth. You pack up all your strongest, and that includes you, and when Morgause makes the call, you had better goddamn be here, or I'll come after you myself."

Tap-taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap
"Give me that, let me try." Nick slapped the phone in Hank's hand; Hank scrolled through the list of options and pushed the call button before pressing it against his ear. He shifted his stance just enough for Morgana and Gwen to see a bright red gleam in his eyes, there one second, gone the next. A murmur of syllables, guttural and low, escaped his mouth, and that was it.

They waited. Seconds trickled by. Minutes.

Hank's body language abruptly changed from tense and anxious to tight and aggravated. He swung his body away from Nick for an instant.

"No, it ain't Nick, it's Hank, and don't you fucking hang up --"

Hank stared at the phone in his hands for several long seconds. Morgana couldn't help it; she covered her mouth to muffle her choked laugh at the disbelieving expression on Hank's face.

"Bloody fucker hung up on me," Hank said. He pushed the call button again, repeating the ritual of flashing eyes and guttural words that would, under any other circumstance, sound like he was swearing. This time, he didn't have to wait as long for a response, and he hurriedly said, "We want to know what you want. How much?"

Hank made a gesture with his free hand; Nick whirled and ran for a bank of tables where there was a computer setup with a bank of monitors. Morgana guessed that they were going to try to trace the call.

She inwardly begged Will to hang up. Merlin and Kay might not be in the best of hands right now, but whoever they were, it had to be a damn sight better than the NWO. Morgana didn't want Morgause to get her hands on either of them. Especially not Merlin.

"Why'd you do it, then? Yeah, I'm on board with that, Bryn was a fucking pillock, and the world's better for him gone," Hank said, his voice smooth. He reminded Morgana of all the police negotiators that she saw in the movies -- calm, collected, serpent-slick. "From what I'm hearing, though, you're not doing those two any favours. They're being beaten -- What?"

There was a long, strained pause. Hank pushed a finger in his other ear and bowed his head, straining to listen.

"Say that again --" Hank stopped, lowered the phone, and roared, "Shut your gobs! I want quiet. QUIET."

His eyes squinted, as if trying to read fine print. His head tilted in concentration.

Only a few seconds passed before Hank dropped his arm. "Goddamn it. He hung up again. Tell me you got him."

Someone at the computer -- a tall, lanky man more bone than muscle -- shoved wireframe glasses up his nose and shook his head, making a cutting gesture across his throat.

"Goddamn. Goddamn." Hank pushed a button on the mobile, presumably redialling, and started pacing. Minutes passed. He pushed a button on the phone. He continued to pace. He did it a third time, and after a half hour, tossed the mobile to Nick. "Son of a bitch."

He stalked across the room and headed for the same door that Morgause had disappeared behind.

Morgana and Gwen exchanged glances. They were both dying of curiosity. Morgana could see the opportunity of finding out what was going on slipping away, so she broke from Gwen and pushed
the door open slowly.

"Morgana --"

"Shh. Stay here."

Morgana ignored the flash of panic in Gwen's expression and winced when the hinges squeaked a little, but no one glanced in her direction. She didn't shut the door all the way, and hugged the side of the car, looking around with wide eyes.

Most of the guards had scattered. Those remaining were lurking around the computer table at one side of the large space, while a few men were on the far end of the warehouse -- she'd been right, it was a warehouse -- polishing their weapons and eating a sandwich. One of those men glanced in her direction, and she froze; he returned to eating his sandwich, tossing the plastic wrapper on the ground.

Morgana slipped to the front of the SUV. Nick scratched the back of his head, a peevish expression on his face. Morgana was certain that he was looking straight at her, but for some reason, he didn't react.

Made braver by the lack of any hostile response, Morgana took a few steps away from the SUV. Still nothing. She crept toward the office in the back room, and stayed close to the wall. She stopped right behind the door; Hank had left it ajar behind him when he stormed in.

"I got through to Tristan," Hank said. "He says he doesn't know anything about Will. As far as he knows, Bryn went to the pick-up spot, met up with their contact, and was taken to the location where they were holding Emrys. That's the last he heard from Bryn. He assumed that they were on their way back."

If glowering could be presented in words, they would be best represented by the strangled grunt Hank made before he shuffled two spaces over, possibly to get out of range.

"Yes. I agree. He's been getting too cocky lately. If you want to redistribute his men under another --"

"And Will?" Morgause asked, her voice sharp. "Has Nick --"

"Nick tried summoning Will to the phone, but he couldn't manage it. I made the call. There's something... shielding them, I'm not sure what, but I got through it long enough a couple of times. Will hung up on me the first time. The second --"

Hank hesitated.

"What?" There was dry annoyance in the tone, like the rustle of old, antique paper in parched air, the edges brittle and crumbling.

The silence stretched. Morgana turned her head around. The guards were still ignoring her. Gwen was just faintly visible through the windshield, and Morgana imagined that Gwen was frantic. The horizontal blinds around the office were in worse shape up close, coated in a good dusting of dirt, the edges of several blades covered with something black and green and which reminded her of the mould growing in the back of the refrigerator at that old on-base house where she had grown up.

There was a scrape of a chair on the floor. It sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard.

"Will said --" Hank cleared his throat loudly. "Will said, and I'm quoting him here, to piss off. He
said whatever we had planned, we're going to have to find another way to do it. It's Tristan's fault, he sent Bryn to the wrong meeting place, delayed them too long. It took them a day to get the right information. If they'd been there in time, he could've gotten Emrys to crack the database, and they'd what they wanted. They'd have brought Emrys back. Except they got bloody lost, they were impatient, Emrys didn't give up anything, and..."

"And what?"

"Bryn's boys were too late," Hank said, his voice a low murmur. "He didn't make it. Emrys is dead."

No.


No. No. No.

All the air went out of the warehouse. All the sound, too. The heat vanished and left Morgana with an unearthly chill.

She exhaled a strangled breath that curled like steam.

There was a faint crack. Morgana didn't dare move. The crack became a crackle that became a crinkle.

She side-eyed and saw ice crystals spreading on the glass of the window around the small warehouse office. Tiny icicles formed from the humidity in the air hung from the ratty horizontal blinds. There was no starting point; it simply appeared.

Gwen dropped a container of liquid nitrogen, once. The black enamel of the laboratory table had frosted, even going so far as to bloom in a small ice crystal, but it was nothing like this. This was like an artic blast in less than a nanosecond.

The wood creaked. The plastic pinged. The glass split.

Everything erupted in a chilling explosion, a deadly splutter of breaking glass and ice crystals, as all of the windows blew out.

Morgana shrieked, throwing her arms up to protect her face, turning around to the wall. She wasn't fast enough. Nothing could be fast enough. She felt tiny cuts on her cheek, blood on her hands, glass in her hair. The body armour protected her from the worst of it.

There was an abrupt creak, stomping footsteps, a slamming door.

Morgana lowered her arms. Her cheek stung. Something ran down into her eye. She touched it. It was blood.

"Morgana," Morgause said, approaching with her hands spread out, fingers splayed, the way anyone would try to soothe a frightened animal. "Are you all right?"

No, I'm not bloody all right. Does it look like I'm all right? Morgana wanted to say. You kidnapped me. I don't know if Leon is alive. I don't know if Arthur is alive. Merlin is dead. How the bloody fuck could anyone be all right?

Instead, she blurted out, "I was looking for the loo."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, strained and awkward. No one moved; no one reacted. An
automobile door swung open with a creak in the distance; there was a shuffle of footsteps and a pause. Hank crept a cautious distance away from Morgause, his gaze drifting from her to Morgana and back to Morgause.

Morgana wanted to close her eyes tight and rewind time the way they did in the movies. She had not just said *I was looking for the loo* like an idiot. Anyone with half a brain could see that it was a transparent excuse. She had been eavesdropping, plain and simple, and there was nothing, *nothing* that anyone could do to convince anyone otherwise. Maybe if she hadn't been so startled by the explosion of glass and stung by the little cuts across her cheek, she would have come up with a better excuse, something that was sufficiently plausible.

Anything but *I was looking for the loo*.

If there had been any saving grace in her sputter, it was that Arthur hadn't been there to witness how poorly she had reacted. At least her voice had been steady, with only a faint quaver.

Morgana had no idea how Morgause would respond to that, but she wasn't expecting to see the quirk at the corner of her mouth, a stifled smile, an aborted laugh. Her eyes sparkled with amusement, and she tilted her head. "Oh, Morgana. There's no need to skulk about. If there's something that you'd like to know, you simply have to ask. I have no secrets from you."

"Yes, you do," Morgana thought.

Morgause took a step closer, a finger hovering just over one of the cuts on Morgana's face; it took everything in Morgana to keep from wrenching away. Morgause didn't seem to notice, because she shook her head with concern. "Does it hurt?"

"A… little?" Morgana ventured. "It's all right."

"No, it's not." A frown furrowed Morgause's brow. "I am truly sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen, for you to get hurt --"

"It's not your fault. You didn't do that," Morgana said, but it was only belatedly that she realized that Morgause and Hank weren't injured at all, which made sense if the blinds had protected them from the worst of it. Except the glass had exploded *outward*.

Morgana might handle the public relations and publicity aspects of Pendragon Consulting, but it didn't mean that she was a slouch in the weaponry department. Her entire *life* revolved around weapons. She knew enough to realize that the blast had been from the inside of the room, and that suddenly, nothing made sense anymore.

"How aren't you hurt?" Morgana asked.

An actual smile did appear this time, thin but genuine; Morgause tilted her head and placed her hand on Morgana's shoulder, pulling her forward with a gentle touch and leading her inside the office. The shattered glass and dusty glass crinkled underfoot until they crossed the threshold, where there wasn't a speck of broken glass in sight.

"Have someone clean this up, and bring me a first aid kit," Morgause said. Morgana felt, rather than saw, Hank leave the room with a grunt of relief.

The office was small and sparse; there was a desk made out of sheet metal heat-folded into its current shape and spray-painted a protective lacquer in plasticized grey; there were scrapes on the cement floor where the desk had protested being shoved against the wall. Two cafeteria chairs were on their sides, a dusty, stained couch in a dull shade had been clawed to within an inch of its life, and the
blinds surrounding the office were torn askew. There was a door on the far side; it was narrow and windowless, a supply closet of some sort or an exit to a different area.

A hurricane had raged in this room. Morgana suppressed an involuntary shudder.

"Here, sit," Morgause said, picking up one of the chairs. When Morgana didn't move, Morgause made a soft clucking sound and guided Morgana over, pushing her until the back of her knees hit the chair and she sat down involuntarily. A few moments later, Hank returned with a first aid kit and left straightaway; Morgause set it on the floor and rummaged through it before dragging the second chair over. Morgana flinched as Morgause cleaned the wounds, but neither of them spoke for the longest time.

"You have no secrets from me?" Morgana repeated, glancing at Morgause. "Isn't that what you said?"

"That's true," Morgause allowed, bowing her head. She poured more antiseptic onto a piece of gauze and continued to dab at the small cuts on Morgana's face. "I did say that. You can ask me anything. I can't promise that I will be able to answer all of your questions --"

"What happened here?" Morgana turned her head around, surveying the damage a second time. She was almost certain that she could pinpoint the epicentre.

"I'm afraid I lost my temper," Morgause said.

Morgana stared at Morgause, incredulous. "You lost your temper. You threw a tantrum and somehow, simultaneously, the room blew to smithereens."

"That's essentially correct," Morgause said, frowning a little. Her shoulder raised in a tiny shrug.

"I... I don't understand," Morgana said.

Morgause didn't answer right away. When she did, it was with a patient sigh. "I have magic, Morgana. And sometimes, my magic expresses my anger in destructive ways."

The silence stretched. Morgause continued to dab at Morgana's face, every touch feather-light. Morgana's heart rate went up, and she tried to calm a sensation that was halfway between panic and fascination. "Magic."

A slow, fleeting smile crossed Morgause's lips. "Magic," she repeated. "It's real, Morgana. As real as your visions."

"My --" Morgana clamped her mouth shut, alarmed. "I don't have visions."

"Yes, you do," Morgause said, dropping her arm to her lap. She tilted her head and studied Morgana's expression for a moment. Morgana didn't know what she was looking for, but she sincerely hoped that Morgause wouldn't find it. How did Morgause know about the visions? She hadn't told anyone about her nightmares outside of physicians and herbalists and pharmacists. Arthur knew, of course; so did Uther. Poor Leon held her night after night when she woke thrashing and screaming. Merlin knew, and so did his uncle, Gaius.

Merlin.

A flare of suspicion, of distrust, of doubt flooded through her and drowned fear and caution. Merlin had known. Had he told Morgause? Had he --
Merlin wouldn't betray her. Merlin wouldn't betray Arthur. She had seen the soft looks that Merlin had given Arthur at the dinner table when Morgana and Leon announced their engagement. She had seen the way Arthur had draped his arm over the back of Merlin's chair at the little restaurant outside of Paris and the way that Merlin had curled closer to Arthur, as if he wanted nothing more but to rest against him forever. The morning of the prototype testing, she had tried not to stare as Arthur and Merlin touched each other as if it were going to be the last time they ever would, the both of them as desperate as thirsty men trying to squeeze out one more drop of water from the gourd.

This was -- this was Morgause's tricks. The tone of voice, the tender care, the gentle mannerisms. It was a cloying ploy to break Morgana's defences, to gain Morgana's trust.

"How did --"

"We've been watching you for a long time," Morgause said. "Ever since you were very small. Do you think we wouldn't have noticed all the doctor visits? All the prescriptions? And one day, you walked into a herbalist's shop. You asked him if there was anything that could make bad dreams go away."

Morgana had gone to many herbalist shops. Their faces blurred together; she couldn't be sure which one that Morgause was talking about. One of them -- several of them? -- must work for the NWO.

"There are many things that can calm a troubled mind and soothe bad dreams," Morgause continued. She used her little finger to brush aside Morgana's hair and continued to clean the little cuts. "But there are very few things that can stop a vision breaking through the veil of time. If an event is meant to be, it will be seen, and your magic doesn't care if you want to see it or not. You can't stop it. You can only accept it."

Morgana stared. Gaius had said something of the same, but he had also said that they could be tempered, guided, calmed. Given time, she could make the visions come at will instead of letting them overwhelm her. Morgause was making it sound as if she had no choice at all.

Morgause dropped her arm and studied Morgana's face before frowning faintly. "I fear that some of these might scar. It's a shame."

Morgana was so surprised that she barely reacted when Morgause stroked her cheek with the back of a finger. She turned away as soon as there was eye contact.

"There is something that I can do about that, Morgana. I can make it so that you never scar. Not now, not ever. You'll be perfect no matter what happens."

Vanity. Morgause was appealing to Morgana's vanity. The knowledge that Morgause knew to do that -- how many spa days had Morgana taken in the last few years? She didn't even want to think about it -- only sent a bolt of fear down her spine.

"There's a cost," Morgause warned. "When it comes to magic, there is always a price. But for this, I am going to ask for one simple thing. I'm going to ask that you believe."

Believe what? Morgana wanted to ask. The words died on her lips as she took another look around the room. She remembered how Morgause had so easily kidnapped her from the Louvre, the maelstrom that had erupted in the alley when Arthur and Leon and the team had saved her.
Morgause pulled Morgana to her feet and led her to the rear of the room; the narrow door opened up into a bathroom that was barely large enough for someone to turn around, never mind for two people to stand side-by-side. The toilet seat was down, the lid covered with dust and dirt and fingerprints and other marks that made Morgana think of rats or mice before she very firmly made herself think about other things. There was a sink in front of her, the edge cracked. The faucet dripped once every minute, and once every minute for however length of time had passed since the warehouse had first been abandoned had been enough to streak the sink with mould and rust. Morgause wiped at the mirror with a grungy, threadbare towel, revealing a surface slightly warped at the edges, the silver flaking off behind the glass.

Morgana looked terrible.

Under the stark light of the single uncovered incandescent bulb, there were a dozen tiny cuts across her face where she hadn't been quick enough to cover it with her arms; sharp horizontal lines that were both thin and deep and only crusting over now. It wasn't just the cuts, either; her eyes were distant, unfocused; there were bags under them, too. Her makeup was smeared where she hadn't been able to wash it off well enough at the cabin, and her cheeks were pale with shock.

Morgause pushed back the sleeve of her arm and removed an ornate bracelet, a pretty thing that Morgana might even have appreciated, once, before all this. It was made out of gold, the center band twisted and twined on itself, nearly every gap filled with a mosaic that was either made of polished semi-precious stones or dull jewels, and Morgana could tell from a glance alone that the bracelet was old.

Not vintage old.

Ancient.

Without a word, without warning, Morgause snapped it on the thin wrist of Morgana's right arm; it was nearly a shackle from the way the latch clicked and the weight of it hanging against her hand.

"Look," Morgause said, pushing Morgana closer to the mirror.

Nothing happened.

And then --

The small cuts closed. The scabs fell of their own accord. The injuries healed until Morgana's skin was unbroken and clear of bruises and wounds. The dark circles under her eyes faded away, her cheeks pinking up, colour returned to her face.

Morgana's eyes widened. She couldn't help it. She shot a frightened glance at Morgause, because this was not real. It was not happening.

She reached for the bracelet in a scramble to remove it, but Morgause gave her a kindly smile and stopped her.

"Keep it. It's a gift," Morgause said, her voice gentle. Morgana suppressed the shudder that ran down her spine at the teasing tone in Morgause's voice, at the light touch of her fingers along her cheek. Morgause's smile faded and she squeezed past Morgana, leaving her in the bathroom.

Morgana looked at the bracelet. She looked at herself in the mirror again. She didn't feel any magic being used, but she supposed that was sort of the point. She wondered if the injuries would come back if she took the bracelet off.
Her fingers fumbled with the latch; there was some trick to it that she couldn't figure out, and after almost panicking that maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't be able to remove it at all, that it wasn't only a healing bracelet but something meant to keep her captive, the bracelet snapped open and nearly fell into the sink. Morgana left it on the toilet seat and leaned closer to the mirror, shifting from side to side to make sure that the shadows and the light wouldn't play tricks on her.

She was healed; the little cuts didn't return, the circles under her eyes didn't come back. She waited, and she waited some more, but nothing happened.

*All right. I guess I believe in magic,* Morgana decided. She was already willing to believe that *something* existed, because otherwise, what was the point of the visions that she suffered day in and day out?

The bracelet glinted at her from its perch. Morgana thought of leaving it there, but if Morgause noticed that she wasn't wearing it, Morgana might lose whatever good graces she had gotten herself in. Reluctantly, she put it on again and stepped out of the bathroom.

The heavy sheet-metal desk had been moved into what approximated its original position, and Morgana stared at it for a while, wondering why she hadn't heard the scrape of the legs on the floor, or, failing that, the sound of the men coming into the office to lift it up and move it. Morgause was seated behind it, calm and at ease, papers in her hand; Morgana was immediately wary, but she did her best not to show it.

"All right," Morgana said slowly. "I'll grant you that… magic exists. But why -- why would you show me? What does that have to do with anything?"

Morgause lowered her papers slowly, using them in a vain attempt to hide the smirk of triumph that came and faded before she looked up at Morgana. "It has everything to do with everything."

Morgana wrapped her arms around herself. Arthur had described the NWO's mandate, how they wanted to restore civilization to pre-industrialized levels -- pre-Renaissance, pre-Medieval, it had seemed to Morgana. Although she hadn't said anything at the time, it was all horribly *backward.* Why would anyone want to go back to that time? They'd need an apocalypse to make that happen -- and even then…

Even then, the NWO would be in the same boat as everyone else, with uncertain livelihoods, survival rates, and futures.

But now, she understood. The NWO wanted to do this because they had an advantage. They had magic.

They bloody well had *magic.*

Morgause's chair creaked as she leaned forward and put down several papers on the desk. She spread them out, one by one, adjusting them to align perfectly with one another.

They were yellowed with age, the corners minutely folded and creased; the ink could have been black, once, or blue, but there was no telling now. The colours had faded, they'd bled into the sheet, and now the edges were iridescent, like dark, shadowed rainbow. The notes were jotted along the edge, the handwriting illegible, but the main content was a sketched image in pencil, awkward, rubbed out, done from memory.

Square objects, triangular objects, artistically-rendered objects. A triskelion that looked too finely cut to be wood or stone, a pyramidal shape, another oblong, a third hexagonal.
Morgana didn't know what they were, but they looked old, important. Archaeologically important. She remembered the conversation on the drive to Paris.

Artefacts.

"Dear Morgana. You're one of the blessed. You will be helping us return these objects to those whom they belong."

Nutters, Morgana decided. Absolutely fucking nutters.

ooOoo

They gave Merlin five minutes with Kay, which was at once generous and not enough, but that might have been on purpose.

Five minutes was enough to organize a coup. Arthur had drilled so many plans and manoeuvres in their heads that all they really needed to escape was to agree on a simple signal. Whoever saw the opportunity would flag it, and...

Except there wasn't much that they could organize when one of them was unconscious.

Kay was pale, and Merlin would never have thought so before, but there were good sorts of pale and bad sorts of pale. He was of the mind that Kay fell firmly in the first camp, and he really hoped that it wasn't wishful thinking. There was some colour to Kay. It wasn't gray or green or yellow except for where the bruises stood out in garish purples and blacks, and there was not enough contrast in shade between the white bandages and his skin.

Merlin dragged his chair closer and looked over his shoulder. His body ached, but all those hurts faded in the light of Kay's injuries. Will had said that the back-alley surgery had gone well, which had scared Merlin, because back-alley surgery brought up all sorts of Jack the Ripper and organ harvesting connotations. But now that he was seeing Kay with his own eyes, and whoever they had brought in to look after Kay? He had been halfway competent, as far as Merlin could tell. The bandages covered nearly everything, so it was hard to be certain, but the bandages were clean and there wasn't any blood or pus seeping through. Where Kay wasn't wrapped up like a mummy, there was stitching over the most gapping wounds, black string standing out where the skin was knitting together, knotted up with tiny, precise knots.

On the bedside table were several pill bottles, organized not by size, but by dosing instructions. Several of the pills were on top of a sheet of paper, and someone had drawn circles around each one.

À prendre à 6h30 avec de l'eau.

À prendre à 8h30 avec un repas.

À prendre à midi quinze minutes avant diner.

The schedule was strict, and Merlin could tell the time based on which pill was missing. It was somewhere between 0930 and 1030, nearly to the next antibiotic and glass of water. Someone would wake Kay up soon, but before they did that, they'd make Merlin leave.
Pour des douleurs et malaises. Maximum 8 par 24h. Téléphoner immédiatement au premier signe d'infection. Inspecte les sutures chaque deux ou trois heures. Remplacez les pansements tâchés après laver et sécher le site avec de l'eau tiède.

There was a phone number, too, but it was a 07 number, which meant a mobile, which meant that they could be literally anywhere in France.

Merlin picked up one of the pill bottles. There was a prescription number and a store name and identifier code. There was also an address and a phone number.

Paris.

There was a strong possibility that they were still in Paris, or at least nearby; Merlin wasn't laying any bets. The men could have made an extra-long trip into the city to gather supplies without having to worry about attracting attention in the smaller banlieus around Paris.

The name on the bottle was a generic Michel Michaud, there was dosage information, the number of pills dispensed, the number of refills. Antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, painkillers, some other drugs that Merlin didn't recognize and which could be anything from horse tranquilizers to fertility pills for all that Merlin knew.

Merlin put the bottles back in the same order that they were in, careful not to attract too much attention with a rattle of pills. Will was being particularly stingy about dispensing any painkillers for Merlin, and the sudden flare-up in both his head and his ribs made the bottles of painkillers on the bedside table look particularly inviting.

"The doctor was in this morning," Will said from the doorway. Merlin suppressed a startle, but the accompanying flash of pain from the unexpected muscle twitch gave him away. Will smirked in amusement, but Merlin saw a touch of concern in his eyes. "Said he was looking good. Was all smug about it, too, but if you ask me --"

"I'm not --"

"-- that's got more to do with the green goop that they've been feeding him than any of those pills they left for him."

Merlin's eyes snapped to Will. "What?"

Will shrugged an insouciant shoulder. He was wearing a white long-sleeved shirt layered over one or two other shirts, his jeans were pale and over-worn, the black belt was pulled a notch tighter than Merlin remembered. He wasn't armed, but he didn't look too put-out about it, and a Will that wasn't put-out about not having a weapon meant that he had a weapon somewhere on his person, anyway.

"Smells like that brew your uncle Gaius gave us when we were kids, sick with the flu, faces full of snot. Remember that? Cleared us right up, dried up the nose, and thank fuck we'd thought of keeping all the phlegm in a jar --"

Merlin half-grimaced, half-chuckled. There would be no forgetting the horrified expression on Gaius' face when Merlin and Will had presented him with a little moulded statue made out of dried snot and hacked-up phlegm. They'd figured that it was perfect homage to Gaius' unsung skills as a healer, even though they both agreed that Gaius' robots were infinitely more fun to play with than Gaius' mad scientist set.

"He still has it," Merlin said. "Keeps it under a vacuum-sealed dome purged with nitrogen. Said to me once he couldn't figure out how to safely destroy it without releasing the virus to the atmosphere,
"How quaint," someone said from behind Will. The man was shorter, stouter, with hands like boxer mitts and a face to match, his forehead sloped into a Cro-Magnon ridge and falling flat from a crushed nose and long jowls that hung from sunken cheekbones. His hair was a thinning white-blonde, his hair a ruddy brown from a lifetime of too much sun, and a good half of the lines on his face were scars, not wrinkles. He made a crooked-finger gesture at Merlin. "Your time's up."

Merlin quailed reflexively. He was one of the men who had taken his time beating Merlin up. His knuckles didn't look half as damaged as Merlin's face, and Merlin could attest for the power in the man's punches. His ribs began to throb in sympathy, while his entire body tensed in anticipation of another blow.

Niels -- last name unknown, though Merlin had overheard some of the others refer to him as the Gravedigger -- brushed past Will and came into the room. Merlin stood up abruptly, lost his balance, wavered, crashed back into the bedside table, and knocked all the pill bottles over. Merlin scrambled away, darting around the table, following the wall until he stumbled into the closet. Niels grabbed Merlin's flailing arms and wrenched him out roughly; Merlin let his knees buckle under him rather than to crash into Niels' chest.

"Look, mate, all this is unnecessary --" Will said, looming behind Niels.

Niels kept Merlin's wrists in an iron shackle of a grip and yanked roughly -- it was a little too much, between the feeling of getting his arms torn out of his socket and the screaming ache of his ribs. Merlin cried out and sobbed.

"Will --"

"Stand up," Niels snapped. He pulled roughly at Merlin's arms, and Merlin tried -- and deliberately failed, twice -- to get to his feet. Once satisfied that Merlin was at least somewhat obeisant, Niels pulled Merlin out of the room.

Merlin immediately dug in his heels; his feet slid over the carpet. He shifted to brace himself against the door frame, but he didn't have the leverage and was unceremoniously dumped in the corridor. Merlin sobbed, crossing his arms over his chest. He pulled his legs under him and made himself as small as possible. "Please don't hurt me. Please --"

Niels' hand curled around the back of Merlin's neck, cigar-thick fingers digging in painfully. Merlin was forced to his feet and walked down the corridor until they reached the stairs. Niels was careful to keep a firm grasp on Merlin, probably so that Merlin wouldn't fling himself down and break his neck in a clumsy attempt to get away.

Merlin took the opportunity to observe his surroundings. The second floor was a series of rooms; Merlin was in the room overlooking a nondescript back alley on one side of the house, while Kay was on the other side, closer to the front, without anything but a side view of blacked-out windows, the stink of spray paint still lingering in the room. There was a bathroom right next to Merlin's room, again with the alley view, the window too narrow to squeeze through. The bathroom was a little bit bigger than a broom closet; the shower doors would be at Merlin's back when he took a piss, the sink on his right side. The only objects he could consider using as a weapon were the plunger next to the toilet bowl, a bog roll of cheap two-ply paper, and a flimsy excuse for a shower head on a long coil.

There was little by way of furniture that he could see on the first floor; he wasn't given much of a chance to explore. Niels unceremoniously marched him around the staircase, past a smoky kitchen with three men around the small linoleum table covered in ashtrays and beer bottles, and toward the
back door.

Merlin's mind had two seconds to consider *freedom*! before Niels stopped him, reached for a doorknob on Merlin's right side, and opened a narrow pantry door to the basement.

The stairs going down was more of a rickety ladder slanted along an angle, the "steps" were pointing downward so that Merlin had to walk on the edges. He slipped a couple of times, his foot getting wedged each time. At the bottom, Niels released him with a hard push. Merlin let himself fall to his knees; he wasn't so sure he would've been able to stay upright, anyway.

The basement was clean, devoid of anything useful. There were empty shelves along one wall, a small metal door for the archaic and defunct coal delivery, additional pantry space under the makeshift stairs, a table with two chairs. There were no windows, and the entire space was illuminated by four incandescent bulbs hanging from the wall, glaringly bright without lampshades or diffusers.

Merlin took the opportunity to scramble away from Niels; he wedged himself in the furthest corner, gathering his legs to his chest and covering his head with his arms.

Through the crack of his fingers, Merlin saw that Will had followed them down, that he was standing at the base of the makeshift ladder-stairs, that his hands were in his pockets, and he was staring at Merlin unhappily.

Will shot a glare at Niels. "You didn't have to do that."

"He wasn't cooperating. You saw him," Niels said, his voice a low rumble, his accent soft and rolling.

"He's scared," Will said. "He's *hurt*. If you'd just told me to bring him down here, I would have. There's no need to fling him about."

"He would've run."

"You're bloody blind, mate," Will said, grunting. "He can barely walk. Maybe he would've gotten a step or two from me, but I would've caught him right quick. Besides, he's not going to run, is he? He knows what he's in for if he does. Don't you, Merls?"

Merlin sniffled and sobbed loudly.

"See? Oh, Jesus --" Will started to come toward Merlin, but Niels held him back.

"Leave him," Niels said.

Will was two seconds away from getting into Niels' business, and from the way Niels' hands bunched up into fists, he knew it too. Will's jaw worked, a muscle popping, but he finally exhaled loudly and said, "I get what this is. You don't trust me."

"And why should we?"

Merlin couldn't help the startle. He hadn't seen or spoken to Aredian since the Louvre, and at most, both Kay and he had guessed that he was nearby based on how the men were acting before they were moved to this new location. Hearing Aredian's voice *now*, when he was nothing but a mysterious, looming threat in the background, did absolutely nothing to settle the sudden uneasiness in Merlin's stomach.
There was a creak on the stair-ladder, the slow clip of a leisurely descent. Merlin risked a glance; Aredian was coming down the stairs, several men behind him. One was a narrow-shouldered man with a bit of a pot belly; Merlin couldn't look at his face for very long before his eyes started to hurt. His magic flared weakly in response; this was the man that Arthur had seen at the garage, the one whose face never seemed to stay the same. Jacob? Was that his name? Whether the changing facial features were because of a spell or a natural ability, Merlin couldn't say; his magic retreated with something of a whine, like an injured puppy trying to find refuge.

"Because we had an agreement," Will said, spreading his arms. "I keep an eye on Merlin, I make sure that he does what you want him to do, because you and I both know that he's not going to do anything if someone else asks him to. You, for instance."

"Are you sure about that?" Aredian asked, his eyebrow raised. He smiled a small, smarmy smile that made Merlin shudder. "He responded well enough to Arthur --"

"Don't fucking say that name in front of me," Will exploded. "That pillock hurt him --"

Aredian sniffed. He made a placating gesture. "Do let someone finish, hm?"

Will huffed and glowered and crossed his arms.

"Arthur Pendragon," Aredian said, repeating the name just to be an arse, "Was not the most sophisticated of men. His techniques of manipulation, and perhaps even sado-masochism, were crude and amateurish, at best. Implying that I cannot do better than him only makes for an invitation to rise to the challenge."

He took a step forward.

Will moved into his path. "I don't know if you know this, mate, but this isn't a bloody game to me. Merlin's valuable. We both know that. So if you think for one instant that he'll be on your side, that he'll let you get control if you start fucking him, you've got another thing coming."

Merlin kept his head down, but he was acutely aware of Aredian's soft "Hm?" and the weight of his scrutiny.

"Go on," Aredian said.

"He's a genius," Will said. "You get that? He's a genius. Sure, he looks weak and everything, makes your inner testosterone monster want to protect him, but that show he pulled around Pendragon? It was just that, a show."

Merlin held his breath. **What are you doing, Will? Goddamn it. What are you doing?**

"You don't think someone smart enough to do half the things he does isn't also smart enough to pull a con? And what a fucking con it is, too," Will said, snorting. "Pulled it on Bryn and Tristan in school. Pulled it on half a dozen blokes through uni. Batted those long lashes and went all doe-eyed and got whatever the fuck he wanted wherever he went. You think he's really half as naïve as he looks? You think Pendragon was pushing him around? Well, news flash, mate. The brain follows wherever the dick goes, and believe me, that one there?"

There was a brief pause. Merlin did not look up. There was a creak as someone behind Aredian stepped off the last step of the makeshift staircase and came to ground.

"That one there, he gets dicks to follow him like he's the Bloody Pied Piper of Penises," Will said.
Someone muffled a laugh. Merlin resisted the urge to roll his eyes and shake his head.

"Who do you think really was running things? That bloody pillock, Pendragon?" Will snorted. "More like it was Merlin all along."

There was a shuffle. People were moving around.

"Tristan mentioned that he would be easy to control," Aredian said. It was a statement of fact, but Merlin wasn't sure if he heard doubt in Aredian's voice.

"And that's coming from a schoolyard bully. You believe that?" Will snorted. "Merlin was having it on with him even back then. Figured out early that letting Tristan get a few punches in would save him from worse. But don't think for a second that he didn't get his own back. Just ask Tristan what happened that one year -- what was it, Year Five? Year Six? Merls, do you remember?"

Merlin shifted slightly -- just enough to fly a rude gesture in Will's direction.

"Doesn't matter. What matters is, someone took a picture of Tristan's wee willy and papered it all over school. Broadcasted an audio file of Tristan and Bryn in a mutual hand job over the intercom," Will said, and there was a grin of amusement in his voice. "Who do you think did that?"

Jesus, Will. Merlin resisted the urge to look up. Merlin remembered Tristan's horrified expression, Bryn's muted outrage. They had never found out who had done it, and they'd tried to get the information out of half of the school, one beating at a time, but no one had known. Except for Merlin and Will. And it hadn't been Merlin. It had been Will.

Why was Will painting Merlin in a new light? Why was he making Aredian think that Merlin was cannier than he let on? Why was he --

"And that other one?" Will snorted. "Arthur bloody Pendragon? You think he's keen on the latest and greatest? You think he asked Merlin here to lock the hard drive tighter than Debbie Fillmore's cunt? Fuck, no. He's the one that put it in Pendragon's head. Made him come up with the idea himself. I fucking guarantee it. Merlin here wasn't going to let anyone else have it for free when he could bloody well profit from it."

"Only he didn't anticipate how deep it went," Aredian said with a grunt, sounding as if he were catching on.

"Not by far," Will said.

There was another silence, and Merlin risked a quick glance up, masked by small, shifting movements to try and make himself into an even smaller ball. Aredian was looking at Will with a contemplative look; Will's shoulders dropped from a shrug. One man behind Aredian was dark and foreboding, his arms crossed over his chest; another was leaning against the far wall, his hands shoved in his pockets, his gaze sharp and darting.

Merlin's magic crawled under his skin in faint, feeble recognition. For all that these men had the heavier, muscled frame of a mercenary, they were also sorcerers.

Merlin ducked his head down.

"Let me deal with him. Like we agreed. It's on me if he fucks up, and I can make sure he doesn't fuck up. I know all his tricks. I helped him come up with most of them," Will said.

Merlin screwed his eyes shut tightly, covering his head with his hands, doing everything physically
possible to keep from either bursting out with laughter or to shout at Will for being a wanker -- both were equally likely. Merlin was finally understanding what Will was doing and why.

The threat had been there in what Aredian had said. That he'd take over where Arthur had "left off". That he'd be the dominant personality in a fucked-up game that was more real than what Merlin and Arthur had role-played for the sake of their cover stories.

Merlin shuddered inwardly.

Will was stripping him of the cover, giving Merlin an excuse for the pretence with Arthur, and was turning him into some sort of evil mastermind, someone who used his brain and his body to get what he wanted because he didn't have the brawn to do it by force. Now, Aredian was wary of Merlin, of how Merlin would play him, and he was coming to realize that his games would come to nothing because Merlin would only turn the tables on him.

It didn't matter that none of it was true. It only mattered that Aredian believed it. Will had given him another code name: Debbie Fillmore.

"Arse and tits, that's all she is," Will snapped, dropping his backpack on the floor and throwing himself onto Merlin's bed. "I mean, you look at her and think, I want to fuck that, I want to bite that arse, I want to bury my face in those tits. You don't think that she's got any brain cells under all that peroxide. But I fell for her simper hook, line, and sinker. I can't believe it. I'm a fucking idiot."

Merlin looked over his shoulder. Will was covering his face with his hands. Merlin shrugged and said, "Yes, you are."

"I'm sorry, mate. I'm so fucking sorry. You could've gotten nailed for changing her grades and giving her access to the prof's email, and, Jesus, what the fuck --" Will made a loud, groaning noise. It almost sounded like he was suffocating himself.

"Is it too soon to say I told you so?" Merlin asked. He grinned when he saw Will's raised arm, two fingers high in the air.

Debbie Fillmore was a man-eater, plain and simple. She led men on, allowed them to spoil and pamper her, and never, ever, carried through on her promises. Will had been under the impression that she would suck his cock -- he'd waxed philosophical about her lush lips more than once and how amazing it would be -- and Merlin was willing to bet that he didn't even get so much as a grope through his jeans for all his trouble.

"Let me know when you're done feeling sorry for yourself and when you're ready for a bit of revenge," Merlin said.

It took less than fifteen seconds before Will threw the pillow from his face and scrambled to sit next to Merlin. "First, undo everything she asked me to tell you to do --"

Debbie Fillmore.

Gods. What was Will thinking, bringing Debbie Fillmore into this? How was Merlin even Debbie Fillmore?

Then realization hit. Will wanted Merlin to be Debbie Fillmore.

Merlin had to bite his tongue to keep from groaning in disgust.
He tried to focus on Aredian's response, but there was a crash up the stairs and a loud, indelicate clomp on the creaking ladder-stairs, and someone new said, "Baas, sy foorn hou aan lui."

Boss, his phone keeps ringing.

Just as he finished speaking, something rang. And again. Merlin raised his chin, and found everyone looking at a mobile in the newcomer's hand.

They waited until it stopped ringing, and Will shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

When it rang again, Merlin saw Will's body jerk; he forced himself to keep still, to keep from wrenching the phone out of the man's hand; Aredian noticed and shot a glance at the man leaning against the wall.

The man stood up straight -- his gaze was even more menacing when viewed directly, and was even more chilling when there was a flash of red-orange in his eyes.

"Ja, dis 'n compulsive. Dit moet hom nou nog affekteer nie."

Yeah, there's a compulsion. It shouldn't be affecting him now.

The phone rang through until the caller gave up. When it started again, the compulsion was even stronger -- Will reacted so fast that he snatched the mobile away from the man, but he had enough self preservation not to answer. He stared at the phone in his hand before dropping it as if it were a red-hot coal.

The sorcerer barked a low, sharp laugh. "Bakgat, wie ookal dit is, is sterk. Ek kannie dit elke keer blok nie, hy kan netsowel antwoord."

That's good. That's a good one, whoever it is. May as well have him answer. I can't block it every time it's cast.

There was a pause, and the sorcerer continued, this time in English, his enthusiasm gone, "If he gets enough hits through, and is smart enough to try, he might track us back here. Distract him. Have the man pick up."

The mobile -- Merlin recognized it as Will's, the one that Merlin had heavily modified -- laid silent on the floor. When it rang, Will checked himself, jumping back instead of forward, and it was far too obvious that he knew that something was going on but he didn't know what, and wasn't going to ask.

"Answer it," Aredian said, and, tilting his head, shifted his stance. He drew a gun, flicked off the safety, and pointed it at Will's head.

Will rolled his eyes. He picked up the phone, wiped the screen on his shirt, and checked it before hitting a button. "'Nick, you thick numpty. I told you not to ring --"

There was a pause when Will was cut off. He grunted and hung up, obviously not liking what he heard.

"It weren't Nick," Will said by offer of explanation. He offered the mobile back to Aredian.

It promptly rang in his hands again. Aredian gestured for him to pick up with the muzzle of his gun.

Will stretched his neck before pressing the mobile against his ear again. He opened his mouth to speak but he didn't get a word out; almost right away, his face screwed up in distaste.

"What do you mean, how much? If it were about money, mate, you still wouldn't have enough."
There was a brief pause. "Fucking hell, what's with the twenty questions? You want to know why? I have it in one. It were Bryn. He were a bloody arse. Stupid as fuck, too --"

Another pause. Will threw out his arm. He rolled his eyes at the ceiling before making an exasperated noise. 

"You got it all wrong, mate. All this bollocks? It wouldn't have happened if only Bryn hadn't been a fucking pillock --" Will made a I'm playing by ear face at Aredian, and promptly put the phone on his chest, muffling it. "What do you want me to tell him?"

Aredian shrugged a shoulder and rolled the gun in the air. "They've lost their chance."

"You want them off your backs, permanent-like?" Will asked. He didn't wait for an answer; he brought the phone to his ear again. "Orright, here's the state of things. Shut your gob and listen. Bryn fucked up. He fucked up bad. Got the address wrong, called to get the right location, and in the meantime? Tossed back some of that fine wine they have out here and partook in a little French muff. You know how Bryn is. Fuck, you know how Tristan is.

"But you know how it goes. We get there late, they figure we're not interested, so they get what they want and have themselves a little fun out of it, yeah? Except Merlin? He weren't talking, and they went a little rough, and, well."

Will paused.

"I warned Nick that our Bryn was a monumental tosser, that he'd mess up somehow, and he did. They brought me as insurance, they needed me to get Merlin to fix what he were supposed to fix, except, a little hard for me to do that when it's a bunch of too late and finger pointing and Bryn having himself a good jail yard tantrum."

Will took a deep breath. He glanced at Merlin; their eyes met, and Will nodded, slow and sure, before turning around. His voice took a sledgehammer edge.

"Pear-shaped ain't the word for the way things were going. So you know what I went and did? I did what I could to salvage the situation. Got rid of the dead weight, offered myself up, told them I could get Merlin to crack the encryption so they could get their payment so they'd let him go and I could bring them back, and it's all systems green until --"

Will trailed off. He barked a sharp, dry laugh. "Here's where I say, piss off, mate. You fucked up, letting Tristan run things, letting him put Bryn in charge. Merlin's dead."

There was a long silence.

"Merlin's dead, you arse. So whatever the fuck you wanted him for, you're up the duff without a bloody oar," Will said. He glanced at Aredian. "And on top of that, you still owe Aredian's boys."

Will hung up. He let his arm drop to his side. An instant later, he offered his phone to whoever was nearest, but no one took it away from him.

Aredian lowered his gun. The mood seemed to relax a little.

"Why did you do that?" Aredian asked. "Why did you tell him that Merlin was dead?"

"Well, first, I figure they owe you a big load of cash for getting your men in the thick of it. From what I heard, it was pretty nasty. Plus, I wouldn't mind a cut of that, you know, because I've got expenses, what with that one over there," Will thumbed in Merlin's direction before raising a finger
to the ceiling. "Plus that one up there."

"We could minimize those expenses," someone behind Aredian said.

"No skin off my nose if you do," Will said without hesitation. "But you want my advice? Merls is a hell of a lot easier to handle when he thinks he's safe, and that bloke upstairs? He was the bodyguard --"

"That's your job now --"

"Bollocks it is," Will said, almost choking on his own spit. "No, my job is getting Merls to do what he's supposed to do, and, personally, I'd like him to do that instead of running off and leaving my neck on the line -- and, speaking of, how about you give me some time with him? Get him calmed down, his mind on the game?"

Aredian studied him appraisingly before nodding curtly. He turned and gestured toward the men with him; they filed up the stairs slowly, one by one, as if the ladder-stairs might collapse under their combined weight when going up when it hadn't while they had come down. "You have five minutes."

Will checked his watch. "Give me until half after, yeah?"

Aredian glanced at his watch -- Merlin saw the flash of something shiny on Aredian's wrist -- and grunted. He gestured at the sorcerer by the wall to stay and left them in the basement. Except for Niels, who stayed by the staircase, arms at his side like a puffed-up bouncer, the man with the illusionary smear for a face, and the sorcerer, they were alone.

Merlin stared at the phone in Will's hand, and followed it until it disappeared in Will's front jeans pocket.

Will sat down next to him, shoulder to thigh, and exhaled in a heavy sigh. Neither one of them spoke. Merlin relaxed his body a little, his forehead on his knees, turning his head to watch Will.

"Debbie Fillmore? Really?"

"Needed a bloody corkscrew to get through that plug in her pussy, I swear," Will said, shrugging.

Merlin snorted. "You never saw that Promised Land. I don't care what you say. She wouldn't let your grotty arse near her with a ten-foot pole --"

"I never said nothing about Promised Land, Merls. It was Purgatory the entire time. It were sloppy seconds and thirds by the time I got a turn --"

Merlin couldn't help it. He laughed. It was short and it hurt, especially considering how tightly wound up he was, but he laughed. Debbie Fillmore. Sloppy seconds. Purgatory. It was seven types of ridiculous that they were discussing Will's love life in front of the same men who were holding Merlin and Kay captive -- who were holding Will, too, after a fashion. One of those men was the one who had beaten Merlin. Another one was a sorcerer. The third was a walking CGI nightmare that reminded Merlin of the blooper reel of an animated movie, the hair suddenly going crazy or the jaw unhinging or the snaggletooth growing like Pinocchio's nose through cheek and jaw.

Neither one of them said anything for a while. Will's body heat seeped through Merlin's body and made some of the worst body aches go away. Merlin unwound himself a little bit more, letting his legs stretch out, but any more than that? He winced.
"You all right?" Will asked.

"What do you think?" Merlin retorted. "I fucking hurt everywhere. Where are those drugs?"

"You can't have any," Will said. "Maybe later."

"I actually fancy the idea of being stoned out of my mind when they decide to start beating me again," Merlin said. A bit of a whine slipped into his voice. "Please?"

Will turned his head to look at Merlin, scowling. "Oi. No games, yeah? Not on me. Also, man up some. They rolled you over lightly compared to, I don't know, oh, Kay?"

Merlin slumped a little and went silent. He buried his face in his hands. After a few seconds, Will elbowed him right where one of the worst bruises was. Merlin grunted.

"Look. I know you were listening last night when I spelled it out for you. I know you were listening when me and Mr. Aredian were having a chat a second ago. And you damn well had better be listening now, because this is lecture number three, and I'm not going to go for four, yeah?"

"I can't believe you're lecturing me," Merlin muttered.

"Yeah, it's a switch, right? Bloody hated it when you nattered on at me like a fishwife, but being the one doing the talking? Now I know why you ragged on me so much. It's kind of fun."

"Shut up," Merlin said.

"No, you shut it," Will said. "You want to play the martyr? Any other time, I'd say, be my guest, try not to get blood on that shirt, I plan on stealing it after the funeral. But now? You don't get to waltz up to them and say, go on, do your worst, I can take it because their worst? It'll be beating on me and cutting me up and shoving uncomfortable objects into holes not meant for them. Guess what, Merls? I can't take it. Especially not the objects up my bumhole. That's your thing, not mine. Let's leave my arse out of any sort of corporal punishment."

Merlin chuckled, but the sound of it was strangled and humourless.

"And what about Kay? I went through a lot of trouble to get him a doctor. Hocked my firstborn quintuplets to make it happen. And he'll be fine. But he won't be if you don't get your head on straight."

"You shouldn't have gotten involved --"

"What were I supposed to do? Saw you lying there in a bloody puddle. I couldn't think of anything other than, who's going to pull me out of the gutter the next time I'm piss-drunk?"

Merlin snorted. "Yeah, because it's all about you."

"Damn right it is."

"I thought you hated Kay."

"Well..." Will shrugged. "Him and me? I don't know. He might be a half-decent chap, if he ever gets the chip off his shoulder. But don't get me wrong. I'm not being completely altruistic here. I figure, I get him all better, fighting fit and all, and then I can go another round with him. He got lucky that last time, but he's not laying another punch on me, not ever again --"

"Oh my God," Merlin huffed, closing his eyes. He rubbed them with the forefinger and thumb of
one hand and made a gesture in the air with the other. "Why don't you just measure your dicks or something?"

Will didn't answer right away. He spread his hands awkwardly in the air. "Well. Mine's bigger, that's for sure."

Merlin shot him a sidelong look.

"What? The doctor told me to get his clothes off. It were right there in my face --"

A laugh bubbled in Merlin's chest. It came out as a choking sound, grew into giggles, and became a gut-splitting howl. Between the ache in his ribs and the pain in his head and the full-body bruise, the laughter didn't last long, and Merlin was wiping tears that were as much of amusement as of pain from his cheeks by the time he was done.

Will's affronted expression nearly set him off laughing again.

"It weren't funny."

"It were," Merlin said. "What, did you whip yours out and compare?"

"Oh, fuck you," Will snapped, but it was without heat.

Neither of them spoke for a while. The sorcerer was leaning against the wall again, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. His head was down, but his chin was up, his head cocked; he was aware of them, of the room, of everything. The faceless hacker fidgeted every few minutes, impatient and anxious, but unwilling to break the silence or to urge them to hurry them along. Niels was stone-faced and impassive.

Merlin's eyes went back to the faceless hacker. There was something about him, a half-remembered memory. It wouldn't come to the surface so he didn't force it. He'd remember eventually. He shook his head and turned to Will.

"We're in the shite, aren't we?"

Will shot him a mocking look. "No. Are we? I hadn't noticed --"

"Fuck you, Will," Merlin said.

"You know this is your fault. You got yourself into this. I warned you about Pendragon. I warned you about Bryn. And now this. What the fuck do you think this is, Merlin? These guys? They're not the sort you can charm and bilk of a few thousand pounds because you're bored. They're the serious, big-leagues type. The kind that Interpol puts together Top Ten Most Wanted lists for. They're the sort who are going to kill you dead, and by definition, me, if you don't do what they want."

Merlin stared at his hands. He wrung them together.

"So give them something, yeah?"

Merlin didn't answer. He wasn't supposed to. He was supposed to get his head together. He was supposed to manipulate everyone else into doing what he wanted. He was supposed to get them out of this.

He couldn't believe that he was going to channel the spirit of Debbie Fillmore.

Merlin ran his hands through his hair several times. His fingers caught on knots and patches of dried
blood and came away covered in flakes. It reminded him of how badly he'd been hurt. How much he'd ignored his injuries in favour of staying strong.

Debbie Fillmore would milk it for all that it was worth.

Swallowing hard -- he couldn't fucking believe Will was doing this to him, Merlin was going to strangle him once this was all over -- Merlin lowered his hands. They were shaking like branches in a storm, his fingers trembling. He breathed in sharply, hard enough to make his lungs hurt, his chest hurt, to make the dull, constant throbbing from his ribs flare into something more than was tolerable, and a strangled, sobbing sound escaped his lips.

"I can't, Will. I can't --" he held his hands up and there was no missing how badly he shook. "I can't even fucking type, I can't think straight, I fucking hurt everywhere --"

"I'm not giving you any more drugs. Not yet," Will said, not a single trace of sympathy in his voice. "Need your head clear. You're going to unlock the drive --"

"Fuck you, and what's going to stop them from killing us once I had everything over?"

"Your continued cooperation," Aredian said, descending the stairs again. Was it already half after? Merlin glanced at Will's watch when he let his body curl into itself, shying away from Aredian.

The last thing he wanted -- the absolute last -- was to put himself in Aredian's hands. Every file that Merlin had read on the man had listed him as a torturer, an interrogator. Merlin was sure that he could hold out, but there was no point in holding out when they were all captive. Will was right, he had to give them something, even if he didn't want to.

"Merls," Will said, elbowing him lightly. "Come on, don't be such a bloody chicken. You can do this, yeah?"

Merlin sniffled and wiped his face. He nodded, but it took time before his voice worked -- Gods, he was in massive amounts of pain, and where had that come from --

He glanced up to see a dark-skinned man staring at him intently, his eyes so naturally black that they turned the magic in them a dull shade of orange. His body recoiled in terror before he acknowledged who and what the man was. Merlin was just starting to relax when his body was hit by a spell, and he felt as if it were being crushed, a heavy weight pressing down. He gasped for breath but the force was too much; he couldn't inhale, he couldn't fill his lungs. His ribs cracked and a few seconds later, there was a pop.

Merlin screamed.

His body curled onto itself as much as it wanted to straighten out, a complicated dance of contraction and relaxation. He convulsed on the floor next to Will, Will's voice distant despite the proximity, and he was only peripherally aware of Will grabbing him, of holding his head, of keeping him from hurting himself more than he already was. He could make out shouts of confusion, barked orders, laughter.

And as abruptly as it began, the pressure, the weight, the firing of all of his nerve endings? It faded. All of it.

Merlin gasped for air like a fish out of water. His lungs burned. His chest made an uncomfortable, crackling sensation every time it expanded too much. His guts were in knots, his joints ached, his muscles were as sore as if he'd just run a triathlon ten times in a row. There were sparks in his eyes, his vision blurred, a ringing in his ears. He coughed and gagged and there was a sudden, disorienting
shift as he was turned onto his side and vomited bile all over the floor.

He had only a moment's respite before a shadow loomed over him, as Will was pushed away and all semblance of physical support disappeared. Merlin was pulled up from the floor, handled so easily that he might have been a rag doll.

Merlin blinked through the daze of his vision, the tears blurring clarity. He only dimly made out Aredian's features, stern and unyielding, as Aredian loomed over him.

It might have been his imagination, but he could have sworn that Aredian's eyes shifted from a watered-shade to a glimmer of orange-red before fading away.

Aredian touched Merlin's cheek. Merlin recoiled and banged his head against the wall behind him. The stroke of fingers returned, gentle, calming, caring, and it was such a contradiction to the expression on Aredian's face that Merlin wanted to vomit all over again.

"I can be a patient man, Merlin," Aredian said, his voice soft and soothing and alluring. Merlin closed his eyes. He had a sick feeling that he knew what Aredian was doing. "When time is of the essence, my patience is fleeting. The pain that you have just endured? That was his doing --"

Aredian shifted. The shadow left Merlin's face and his head rolled off to the side, and he looked at the second sorcerer, the one whose eyes truly were so black that it was a wonder that his magic had given them any colour at all. He shivered to look at him. He couldn't meet the man's eyes. There was something wrong with his magic, something different and alien, and he shouldn't be afraid, but he was.

"In comparison, you'll find that I am not nearly as merciful. Your pain will be ten times that, and ten times again, because I will do the same to your friend Will, and I'll make sure that you can feel how he suffers through every single second."

Merlin made a soft sound. It might have been a whine; it could have been a protest. He wasn't sure; everything came to him in an echo.

Merlin wanted to grab Aredian's shirt. He wanted to pull the man down. He wanted to slam his forehead into Aredian's face and break his nose.

Instead, he let his body sag, falling limp and unresisting. "Please don't," he thought he said, and it must have been close enough, because Aredian hummed.

"I am pleased to see that you grasp the severity of the situation." Aredian let Merlin fall the bare foot to the ground; it might as well have been a kilometre for the eternity it took before his shoulders crashed down hard and his head bounced on concrete. He rose and moved away in a swirl of movement that left cool air behind, and, somehow, it made Merlin's body ache all the more.

Will knelt at his side an instant later, his hands wavering in the air with uncertainty; he was torn between accusation and worry. "What did you do? Merlin, can you hear me?"

Merlin laid flat on the ground. He took slower, shallower breaths, and while it made his chest hurt less, it didn't resolve the nerve endings that were flaring as if someone had taken a blowtorch to them. He was thankful that Will didn't try to touch him just yet.

He could hear Aredian speaking to someone else, but it took him a while to parse what he knew of Dutch and use it to figure out what Aredian said. "Wat het jy nodig?"

What do you need to start?
"Alles," someone said. Everything. Merlin managed to turn his head just enough to see that it was the blur-faced man who answered. "Om deur die eerste slot te kom, het ek die paswoorde nodig."

Let's start with the hack password to get through the first lock."

"Hoeveel slotte is daar?" How many locks are there?

"Fok alleen weet. Miskien is daar geen, miskien is dit dubbek enkryptie of honderde. Dit kan my tien minute of tien dae vat. Ek weet regtig nie. None whatsoever. It might be a two-level encryption, or it might be two hundred. I could be done in ten minutes, I could be done in ten days. Who the fuck knows?"

There was a shift of movement, a gesture too quick for Merlin to follow. "Get him up."

Will hissed through his teeth, unsure where to put his hands. He grabbed Merlin's tattered shirt with one hand and wrapped his other arm around Merlin's shoulders. Merlin was pulled into a sitting position and readjusted; one of his arms was thrown behind Will's neck. Will rolled Merlin onto his hip, and pulled.

It was an exercise in failure, because Merlin's legs weren't cooperating.

"Come on, mate. Work with me here," Will said. It was phrased as a command but it came out as a helpless plead. "On three."

"Is that… On three… or one, two, three --" Merlin rasped.

"It's on fucking three," Will snapped, and hauled Merlin up with a grunt. Merlin scrambled, but it was more of an awkward attempt, wobblier than a newborn colt trying to get up for the first time. Every millimetre of his body screamed. Merlin wanted to die. The world reeled and careened around him, and Merlin grabbed for something, anything for balance.

He clutched at Will like a limpet, but his feet were under him, and he was somewhat vertical, even if the ground was a teeter-totter that wouldn't bloody well stay still. It didn't help that he couldn't feel his toes, or that his fingers were tingling.

"All right, Merls?" Will asked, his tone urgent.

"Uh," was Merlin's eloquent reply, and it must have been answer enough, because Will moved forward, nearly leaving Merlin behind.

"We're moving. Just a couple of steps."

"On three… again?" Merlin asked.

"Jesus, Merlin. Move."

It was a tangle of limbs until Merlin could focus on his left leg moving forward, then his right, and a couple of steps was one of Arthur's body-numbing fifty-K rucksack hikes across the few metres to the table where blur-face was waiting. There was a black box -- Merlin recognized it as a hard drive, probably the hard drive -- and it was hooked up to a laptop.

The screen on the laptop was black, but there was a prompt box. The box didn't have any headers, only a large box for data entry.
"First password," the Blur said. Merlin had heard someone call him Jacob; he couldn't think of him as anything other than Blur. There was something about him. Merlin couldn't put his finger on it. His mind had gone numb, and he was having trouble thinking, but it was just on the tip of his tongue --

"First password," Merlin repeated. He raised a hand and rubbed his eyes, because he couldn't make out the keyboard. He reached out and wavered; he found a few keys by sheer luck and punched down on them, not sure which ones he was hitting. He paused, rubbed his eyes again and peered down, dragging Will with him, and squinted first at the keyboard, then at the screen.

There wasn't anything fancy about the screen or the display. A square box with a data entry block. That was all he could make out.

Except.

Another look at the Blur, and Merlin remembered something.

He thumped the keyboard. With mangled fingers, he managed to push the shift key down with his pinky finger and typed the Y. Then, very deliberately, he stopped. "Wait."

"For what?" Aredian said, his tone warning.

"How many times…" Merlin paused for breath and continued, "Have you… tried to crack… the password?"

"I didn't keep count," Blur said. "A few. I tried to backdoor it, but --"

Merlin started laughing. It was low and hoarse, a hyena pitch, a rapid he-he-he that erupted into a cough of pain. He wrapped his free arm around his chest and clenched painfully at Will's shoulder with the other. "A few. Need to do… better than that…"

"What does it matter?"

Merlin gestured feebly toward the laptop, at the small square box, at the stars from the mangled thump of fingers on the keyboard. "This… is the backdoor. Set it up for… crash password…"

"Oh, fuck," Blur said, immediately whirling the laptop around. He disconnected the drive and stared, half-panicked, at the laptop until the screen flashed and restored normal features. As Merlin watched -- as everyone watched -- his fingers pounded on the keyboard at mesmerizing speeds, almost with a pianist's grace. He saw what he wanted to see, tilted his head back to the ceiling, blowing out a relieved breath. "Jesus fuck. Jesus fuck."

Calmly -- with more poise than anyone had the right to, Aredian said, "What is it?"

"Your man… nearly killed me," Merlin said. He couldn't help the wry smile that crossed his face. "And he knows it. Couldn't… crack the password. Three tries… and you're out. Locked system. Need to hook up to the… master controller… to unlock. Bypass that… go by backdoor…"

Merlin huffed a laugh. "Three tries… wipes the drive… and… whatever it's… hooked up to…"

"For fuck's sake," Will said, letting go of Merlin long enough to wave an angry hand in Blur's direction. "Are you telling me that this bloody pillock knew he only had three goes at this thing? That he's set you up so that if it -- I mean, when it crashes?"

"Yeah… pretty sure…" Merlin grimaced. He turned his head to rest it against Will's shoulder. "I know… this guy…"
He didn't know him *personally*. It was the reputation that interested him. Something in MI-5's files that had been corroborated by the Directory. A curious footnote that wasn't the main focus of the man's skills. Computer programmer by trade, some hacking under his belt, but what the file emphasized was his lack of identity. There were no photographs of this man, no fingerprints, no *anything*. He was a minor sorcerer. Nothing of importance.

The Blur's presence was like a bee's hive on Merlin's skin.

"Goes by… Seesaw… Jigsaw… something-saw… I don't know. Doesn't matter. Buddy of mine killed because of him. Couldn't… hack a system. Called in 3Trey. Was on the last screen. Didn't know. Same M.O. He fails last try, system dies, so does he. All his fault," Merlin said, gesturing at the Blur. "Teflon man. Nothing sticks to him."

Merlin laughed again, and it hurt. This time when he coughed, he coughed up blood. His palm was smeared with it.

"Shite, Merlin --" Will hefted him up; Merlin hadn't realized that he was collapsing.

"Enter the code, then," Aredian said. Merlin was only peripherally aware that Niels had stepped up, that he had dragged the Blur away from the computer. The Blur was making indignant noises -- *I don't know what he's talking about, it's not me, I wouldn't screw you like that* -- but Merlin tuned him out.

"Can't type," Merlin managed. He held up his hand and touched his fingers to his thumb, one by one. "Numb. Seeing double. The *fuck* did you… do to me?"

"Recite it," Aredian pressed. "What's the password? Tell me."

"Five… six seven one seven two… capital W… capital X… capital M… seven nine… no. No. Small M. six seven seven nine…" Merlin pressed a hand to his forehead, trailing off. "No, no. Again. Five… six seven one eight one seven two…"

He paused.

"Fuck," he whispered, shaking his head, trying to clear it. Or, more likely, trying to fake trying to clear it, because he knew the damn code backward and forward. He never forgot numbers or passwords. He might be a communications specialist, he might be able to hack with the best, but encryption codes had eaten his brain a long time ago, and he would never forget a code. Drugged, half-conscious, tortured -- he knew the bloody codes, and he wouldn't give them up.

"He can't do this," Will said. "His head's not right. I don't know what's wrong with him now, what the *fuck* you did to him, but he's normally -- he never stumbles like this. I've never seen him -- No, don't --"

Merlin was wrenched out of Will's grasp. Someone dragged him aside, out of the way. His body collided hard with the bookshelves, and his legs gave out from under him.

"Fuck you and fuck the horse you rode in on and fuck your fucking wanker of a hacker and fuck -- can't you bloody well see that he tried? He's trying! He was cooperating --"

There was a crash, a scuffle, the sound of blows landing.

Merlin tried to open his eyes, but all he saw was rotted wood too close to his face, and it made his vision swim. He tried to turn, he tried to move. He reached frantically for his magic, but it was
distant, out of his reach.

A whimper escaped his throat. A quiet cry. Will.

The beating went on for some time.

Merlin sobbed.

Will.

ooOOoo

A druid circle showing damage that probably happened within the last year, a mound of cairn stones littered with garbage and covered in graffiti, a small, square room inside a barrow.

Arthur glanced at the GPS before meeting Perceval's eyes. "Wasted trip."

He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find here, but it wasn't indications that the otherwise top-notch park staff weren't doing their part of the upkeep of the ruins littered around Snowden. He took another slow look around him, waiting for the puzzle pieces to snap together, for something to jump out and tell him that yes, this was what he was looking for, this was what everyone was after, the answer to all his questions.

There were snow-capped mountain peaks, a landscape scraped bare by glaciers and deforestation, trodden paths gouging the ground. The wind was crisp, the sky was covered with a thin haze of clouds, the stars and the moon shone through and illuminated the area with a nearly fluorescent light.

He turned around and looked at his team. Perceval hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder, while Lamorak crouched near a stone, brushing at it with his fingertips. Pellinor's back was to Lamorak, keeping an eye out for intruders that they would see from a kilometre away, anyway -- the sky was that clear, and the area without any significant cover.

Lamorak had insisted on coming along. "I can still shoot. Can do one sight better than Gwaine, anyway. I can walk. And I have a map."

Major Emrys was the only one who was studying the burial mound with a thoughtful expression on her face.

The rest of Excalibur had split off to deliver Vivian and her partner to Major Emrys' colleagues, while Leon went ahead to the private airfield owned by yet another of Major Emrys' friends. At every turn, Merlin's mother surprised Arthur, not just with her knowledge but her resiliency. Not many women her age could keep up with a SAS team on a double-time march up a mountain. He had warned her that they would be in and out, that it would be best if she waited with the car. She had warned him that she wouldn't be left behind with a raised brow that reminded him so much of Merlin that he let her believe pulling rank was the only reason that he had let her come along at all.

And here they were. On a mountain. Inside a druid circle. No closer to answers than they had been before they broke past the chained entrance gates and started their hike.
Major Emrys was still staring at the mound. "What is it?"

"Oh," she said, shaking her head, tearing her gaze away from the entrance. There was a drop of eyelashes, a small shuffle of feet, a rounding of shoulders before she met Arthur's eyes, and while the shadows cast from the stars and the sliver of moonlight overhead hid her expression, he thought that she looked… wistful. "Balinor and I came here. As often as we could."

"Do you know anything about this place? Anything that would explain why it would be a site of interest?"

Major Emrys -- Arthur had to force himself to think of her as Hunith, but the separation that the formal title allowed let him keep his wits about him for a little while longer -- didn't answer him right away. She let her attention pass over the druid circle, the cairn, the burial site. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't even think it matters. It was only a story."

"Major Emrys," Arthur warned, taking a step closer, "Hunith. Did Balinor tell you the story?"

"Gaius, actually," the Major said, reaching up to adjust the collar of her coat to brace against the icy wind that blustered through before fading in a sigh. "He teased me about this place all the time. He told me the druids conducted rites to the Old Religion here, that it was a place where couples came, where the spirits would bless their handfasting."

For a brief moment, Arthur felt the pull of the earth, the kiss of the wind, a burn in his palm, the wet of rain. He felt a tightening around his wrist and the distant whispering of words that he couldn't make out, the sensation of Merlin's body against his in a clearing far away from here.

Arthur coloured and looked away. He cleared his throat and stared off at the horizon, ignoring the heat that ran down his spine, the ache in his side where his tattoo was, the hurt in his heart that stretched and expanded like a living thing, threatening to engulf him. "What else did he say?"

Major Emrys didn't answer right away. "That there was a prophecy. He said this was the place where magic would be returned to the land."

"How?"

"He didn't say. I never asked," Major Emrys said, and when Arthur glanced in her direction, he found her pointedly avoiding eye contact.

"Did he handfast you here?" Arthur asked. "Gaius, I mean?"

Major Emrys' gaze was sharp and cutting, but she said softly, "He did."

They stared at each other for a long time. There was a buzzing sensation under Arthur's skin. A muffled shout of triumph inside his head. A part of him had made the connection, had found significance in this location, but another part of him refused to accept it, refused to acknowledge the significance.

Arthur gestured at Perceval, who frowned faintly but nodded; he moved away and took Pellinor and Lamorak with him. Arthur waited until they were out of earshot before approaching Major Emrys slowly. He worked his jaw; the words were in his head, the question on his lips. He didn't want to ask.
"Major Emrys," he said softly. "Hunith."

She refused to meet his eyes.

"People have been coming here for decades. Centuries, even. If there had been anything to find here, it would have been found a long time ago. By collectors. Tomb raiders. Archaeologists. But there's never been anything to find here, has there? Because it hadn't… It hadn't arrived yet."

Major Emrys exhaled heavily; Arthur could see her breath on the air.

"You've had a lot longer to think about this. To figure out what was going on. And you know what it is, don't you?" Arthur lowered his voice. He touched Hunith's arm gently. "It's not your fault. You couldn't have known, either of you. It happened before Balinor and the others were selected for the missions. Somehow, Balinor made the connection, the significance of this place. That was part of the reason why he left, wasn't it?"

Major Emrys shifted her weight from one foot to the other as if she meant to leave, but she stayed close, dropping her gaze.

"The place where magic returns, Hunith. This place. This same place that you've been so many times with Balinor," Arthur continued, keeping his tone soft. "Balinor didn't want you in danger. He didn't want you to be worried. That's why he didn't tell you. He let everyone think that whatever was here, he'd found it and took it away. Except he left it with you."

Arthur paused, letting the silence linger, giving Hunith as much time as she needed to come up with an answer, to deny what he said. Except she didn't. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

"It's Merlin, isn't it?"

The wind whistled, the clouds moved, the stars twinkled.

And finally, Hunith nodded.

Arthur stared up at the sky. The stars were blurred and his eyes burned from the cold wind until he blinked away the tears. He listened as Hunith started to speak, only to stop a moment later, leaving them in silence.

Arthur didn't want to know how Hunith and Balinor realized that it was Merlin. He didn't want to hear how they'd laughed off Gaius' ancient prophecy, the stories of old druidic circles and places of power. He didn't want to hear how they'd known that Merlin had been magic since birth, because he'd heard that from Gaius already. He didn't want to know what had gone through Balinor's mind the day that he learned whatever it was that he had learned and connected the dots. He didn't want to know the clues that Balinor had left behind for Hunith, hints that only she could interpret because they were of shared private moments, to let her find out the truth on her own terms, because he hadn't known how to tell her himself.

It was a frantic gasp for breath that eased the knot in his chest, but it was the determination in his words that cut through the grief and the guilt. "We'll get him back."

Hunith looked up at him. Her eyes were dry, her cheeks were pale, her mouth was set. For an instant, he thought that she was paralyzed with her own pain and couldn't continue.

Instead, she gave him a firm nod.
"Yes, we will."

"We're going to need help," Arthur said. "I'm going to need your help."

"I know," Hunith said. She took a deep breath and nodded again.

Arthur stared at her for a long time before taking a step back. He waved in Perceval's direction. "Let's have the phone."

He set Merlin's phone down on the ground and went through the motions; he wasn't surprised in the least that the mobile was picking up service even this far away from cell towers. He selected the icons to mask their location, to spoof a different number, to scramble the call from eavesdroppers, to make their call untraceable, and dialled The Dragon.

The call was picked up on the first ring. "You're late."

"We're operating on our own terms," Arthur said calmly, because that was the mandate of every SAS team anyway -- the ability to adapt to a given situation, to evaluate the mission, to come up with their own plans, particularly during a mission. He was making this particular point on purpose. "I'm not going to ask why things went the way they did or why you felt it was important to keep us out of the loop, because we're past that. I want you to shut up and listen.

"The number of people who are aware that we are alive are limited. It'll stay that way. I'm going to be generous and assume that you haven't told anyone that you've heard from us, and that the reason you haven't is because you don't want to alert the wrong people.

"The NWO has Morgana and Gwen. We know their location."

"Exfil?" Major Kilgarrah asked. "Do you need --"

"Don't worry about it," Arthur interrupted. He waited for a moment and added, "Someone has Merlin and Kay."

Even if Arthur didn't already have strong suspicions and a half-hearted confirmation otherwise, the sharp inhalation on the other end of the line was enough for Arthur. Major Kilgarrah, and by definition, Balinor and his people, didn't know where Merlin was. Arthur switched the phone from one ear to the other and scratched his brow, and waited for Major Kilgarrah to say something.

When he spoke, it was a croaked "How?"

"Before the attack, we were pretty sure that there was a traitor somewhere. Too many things were going wrong. Merlin told you one plan. I told Bayard another. Neither plan contained a pertinent detail: Merlin and Kay would have been on the field when we triggered the manoeuvres that we had in mind. Now, for one reason or another we got attacked early. I'm not sure who tripped the wire. Maybe it was MI-5. Maybe the CIA. Maybe the NWO. Maybe you.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. We're handling the loose ends. We're getting our people back," Arthur said. Leon's strategy to rescue Gwen and Morgana had enough holes to drive a lorry through, but the team had been working together for so long that all that really mattered was the outcome. Now that he knew that Will was a spy -- not for the Directory and definitely not for the NWO, but for MI-5, it was going to be a simple matter of tracking his location, and the easiest way was to look for his mobile.

Hopefully, Will was still carrying the phone that Merlin had modified. They hadn't had the time to unload the equipment and to do a location search just yet, but they would. As soon as they could.
Failing that, if the tracker on Will's phone didn't pan out, then Arthur would be having a chat with Olaf, and it would be on his terms.

"I see," Major Kilgarrah finally said, his voice deep and rough, scratchy and hoarse. "If you're handling it, what are you calling me for?"

"I made that clear in our last conversation," Arthur said, casting a glance in Hunith's direction. She nodded encouragingly, and Arthur paused before reciting the coordinates that he'd set to memory. He waited until Major Kilgarrah read them back to him. "Lieutenant Balinor Emrys. No one else. Twenty-four hours from now."

Arthur cradled the phone against his ear and started the timer on his watch.

Major Kilgarrah didn't answer right away. If anything, the pause was unnecessarily long. Arthur could hear him breathing in and out, big long heaves full of irritation and thoughtful contemplation. Paper shuffled; fabric rustled; a clasp clipped shut. There were murmurs in the background, nothing concrete or clear enough to be voices. He finally said, "I can't bring a man back from the dead."

"That would be a neat trick if he were actually dead," Arthur said. "Get him there, Major Kilgarrah. I don't care what you have to tell him. Trick him, lie to him, give him some sort of bollocks excuse or some ridiculous story. I don't care."

He paused.

Major Kilgarrah took a deep inhale -- a cigarette, most likely, or one of those horrible imported cigars, Arthur didn't know. There was a heave of a chest deflating, of smoke filling the air, and Arthur was glad of the distance between them.

"You're that far gone, aren't you, boy?"

"Major Kilgarrah," Arthur said, as respectfully as he could manage before he raised two fingers in The Dragon's general direction, "I'm so far gone, I'm not even on the radar. And I'm not going to be, either."

"You don't understand what you're getting into --"

"I don't? And whose fucking fault is that? Bayard's? Yours?" Arthur barked a rueful laugh. "Try everyone who went on that so-called secret mission to recover artefacts that should've been left alone in the first place."

The Dragon coughed.

"Twenty-four hours." He hung up, disconnected the phone, shut it down.

Hunith was staring off in the dark distance, her eyes narrow slits against the wind. Before he could ask if she was all right, she turned on her heel and said, "Let's go."

"They haven't moved," Leon said. The tracker was in his hand, but he was looking out the window as if he expected Morgana to materialize on the street below.

They were on a depilated part of town, the buildings partially abandoned and used only for storage.
The warehouse behind the buildings across the street was only one of many, and none of them dared go any closer than they already were for fear of triggering any wards. Without Merlin, there was no way to know for certain what magic protected the area -- if any magic had been used at all for that express purpose.

The team had set up shop on the second level of an abandoned building that might have been a workshop, once. The floor was covered with pale splotches on the cement where heavy equipment used to be; there were darker spots, too, where something hot had scorched the area. The windows were frosted or boarded over; it was a simple thing to break a few of the boards here and there, to smear a clean spot, so that they could see through.

There wasn't much movement at the target location. Lance was in a different building with Gwaine; the most excitement that they'd had since arriving in Paris and securing their locations had been when a cockroach had crawled onto Gwaine's foot and threatened to lay eggs there.

The NWO wasn't moving. They'd pulled in all of their resources and were protecting the core. That told Arthur that they had no plans on staying there long. It meant that they were going to act soon.

Gwaine had used infrared to distinguish body heat from building and counted the number of people inside. He noted which ones were moving and which ones weren't. He calculated their height and weight and plotted their movements down to centimetre grids, and he did it again from scratch to make double-sure before he checked his figures with Galahad and Geraint. Six men -- five, if one was Morgause -- were patrolling the house. There were two heat signatures that never left the middle of the warehouse. The satellite footage that Pellinor was able to download confirmed two cars parked between warehouses, using the buildings' heights and shadows as cover. Lucan, the quietest member of the team and the one with the most flawless French, wandered around the neighbourhood in a punter's outfit, collar up, cap down, bumming cigarettes and asking about work and if a new company was moving into the area, gathering information from the locals.

Excalibur easily outnumbered the NWO, but that would only matter if the NWO didn't have another unknown number of sorcerers.

The only thing that grated at Arthur was that Gwaine couldn't identify any of the people as Merlin or Kay. He told himself that the NWO wouldn't be so stupid as to put them all together in one basket, but he had hoped.

He forced himself to focus. If Merlin and Kay weren't at this location, it wouldn't take the team long to find them. And they would be found. They just had to take it one thing at a time. Morgana and Gwen, first. Then Merlin and Kay.

Arthur had studied Hunith speculatively before Hunith answered his unspoken question with a raised brow and a scoff. No, she didn't have magic.

"It's quiet," Arthur said. "It's too quiet."

"What are you thinking?" Leon asked.

"They didn't hole up in some shite warehouse if they meant to stay there for long. None of the locals have seen anyone new picking up supplies. They're in and out," Arthur said. He rubbed his forehead, trying to think. He hadn't slept in more than forty-eight hours. The catnaps on the flight had left him far more exhausted than he'd been before he closed his eyes. "What's close?"

"Nothing's close," Leon said. He paused. "Why don't you get some sleep?"
Arthur held up a finger, shaking his head. He had spent far too much time wallowing in failure, in guilt. The clusterfuck at the testing ground should never had happened. Morgana and Gwen should not have been taken; Merlin and Kay should not have fallen on the field. They shouldn't have wasted time retreating to England when they could have stayed here where Morgana and Gwen had been all along -- though the others would argue that they needed to resupply, and a reluctant part of Arthur agreed.

None of them would have been in the NWO's clutches for this long. They wouldn't have --

But they'd only activated the trackers a little over twenty-four hours ago. As far as the Directory had been able to tell, the NWO operated out of England. It had been a reasonable assumption --

Arthur rubbed his face. When he dropped his hands, he realized he'd missed part of what Leon had said. "... the prototype, they don't have the hard drive, they don't have Merlin, and they don't have Kay. I've been trying to figure it out, what they'd even want with Morgana --"

He struggled to remember what Hunith had told him on the flight over, in-between snatches of sleep and whenever she remembered a detail.

"No, I recognize him, but only because he's been in the news on more than one occasion," Hunith said, peering closer at the group photograph. "You don't look very much like him."

"Arthur's smile was short-lived. "They say I look more like my mother. Balinor never mentioned Uther at all?"

Hunith gave Arthur a long, critical look, the sort he received from people who couldn't understand why Arthur referred to his father more as "The Colonel" or "Uther" than "dad", but she shook her head in answer. "No. If he did, it must have been in passing. He rarely spoke about his missions."

Arthur didn't expect anything less. After debriefings, he rarely discussed missions; it never went beyond the team. For Balinor to be tight-lipped about his assignments came as no surprise; it was a hallmark of any soldier.

"I did get the impression that there weren't a lot of people that he respected in the group," Hunith said. "His own men, he trusted absolutely. But the rest? Not hardly."

Arthur dropped his hand and stared out the window at absolutely nothing at all: the sidewalks were still cracked, the road was rough, the buildings across the street short, squat, and decrepit. The area was deserted, the single tree at the end of the block a skeleton holding onto its last green leaf, and, were this the Wild West, Arthur would expect a tumbleweed to come rolling past.

"... I'm more worried about Gwen. With Morgana, they've got access to Pendragon, but Gwen?" Leon was saying, his voice quiet, thinking out loud.

"They look broken up into groups," Arthur said, finally putting a finger on the peculiarities of the group arrangement. At first glance, it looked as if they were mixed up, all levels of authority blending until there was no distinction between them, but something in the way that Hunith was holding the photograph made more clear the division.

"Oh, yes," Hunith said. "I'd noticed that, too."

She traced a finger around Balinor's team, then again around a different group, and a third time around yet another. "These were the first teams. The riskiest artefacts were their responsibility --"
"Riskiest?"

"I never understood if Balinor meant in terms of the danger associated with their location, or if the artefacts themselves were dangerous. I assumed a mixture of both."

Arthur nodded and gestured for Hunith to continue.

"These would be the administrators, I suppose. No better word for it. Balinor hated them in particular. They researched the artefacts, uncovered data, even prioritized the missions. He complained about being pulled off one mission in favour of another at the last minute. It made it hard for him to prepare."

Arthur nodded, wishing he didn't understand that sentiment. He'd been in that same boat too many times. He stared at the area that Hunith had indicated; his father was among them.

That made sense, and yet, it didn't. He had only ever known his father to be at the head of the line, leading another group into combat. In this photograph, he was a Captain; surely he should have been part of the assault teams.

"What happened to the artefacts after they were recovered?"

"I suppose they were put away; Balinor said that once he turned them in, that was the last he saw of them. Most were locked away in a vault; others packed into boxes."

"Who had access?"

It hit him in a flash.


"To what?" Leon asked. "They have the hard drive --"

"Had the hard drive. It's encrypted. They couldn't be sure they would ever get Merlin, never mind get him to cooperate."

Leon left the window for the first time since Arthur had arrived and went to the road map of Paris that Lucan had picked up at a gas station. It was flattened out on top of a makeshift table of boxes and crates, and his finger rose and dipped as he traced a finger around an area before tapping on a single spot. "They're going to try for one of the offices -- probably the smallest one. That would be the PR office, right? That's not far."

"Right," Arthur said. He raised an arm over his head, letting it lean against the windowsill; he scraped at the top of his head with his thumb. He was missing something. He knew he was. Why would the NWO have concentrated their forces on Morgana and Gwen when, if they were that interested in the hard drive and its contents, they should have focused on Merlin instead?

"They won't hit during daylight," Leon said.

"No, they won't." Arthur ran his hands through his hair, frustrated. There were too many elements to this, too many questions, too many unknowns. He trimmed it down to the bare essentials. He got rid of the why would they take Morgana and Gwen. He ignored the what are they after. He abandoned where are they being taken and focused on the important detail: getting Morgana and Gwen back.
Everything else was gravy.

Arthur dropped his hands. "Actually, they might. Wait until the end of the day, nearly everyone's gone. Security won't wonder why they're going back in, people do that all the time, especially if they're PR. Less suspicion that way."

Leon chewed his thumbnail.

Arthur stared down at the map, trying to decide on the best approach.

"They're going to split them up," Leon said finally. "No way they're going to trust Morgana on her own. They're going to use Gwen, hostage her against Morgana's good behaviour."

Something dropped behind them. They both whirled, hands on their guns, their weapons drawn and nearly raised by the time they realized that it was Lance.

"Shite," Leon said, holstering his weapon. "Give a man some warning, yeah?"

"Sorry," Lance said neutrally, but he didn't sound like it. More than anything, Arthur thought that Lance was lost, broken, at loose ends, a little like he was, like Leon was, though they had fought -- were fighting -- not to show it. That they could see the fraying around the edges was worrisome.

"We're getting them back. Both of them," Arthur said. Lance didn't meet his eyes, and Arthur knew why -- because he didn't want Arthur and Leon to see the despair that was in them. The same despair that Arthur saw when he looked in the mirror.

He didn't look in the mirror anymore.

"And we're going to do it tonight," Arthur said. "They took them from us. We'll just take them back."

Lance raised his chin a little, angled his body more toward Leon and Arthur. He was listening, but he held himself so tightly that Arthur thought he would break into a run and attack the warehouse right now.

"Two teams, two targets," Arthur said. "It's almost guaranteed that they'll take Morgana to the PR offices. A small group, because they won't need more than that to keep Morgana under control."

Because they'll have Gwen, Arthur didn't say out loud. Because they might use magic to keep Morgana from running.

"Second team does a direct assault on the warehouse. Attack at the same time so that they can't coordinate responses," Arthur said. They couldn't take the risk that the men at the warehouse and the men who escorted Morgana would be in constant communication. Any hint of something out of the unusual at either end might put Morgana and Gwen in danger.

Lance nodded again, and he came closer. His head was still down, but he was studying the rough building blueprints, immediately assuming that he would be on the warehouse team. At any other time, Arthur might tell Leon and Lance to stand down, that they were compromised, that he couldn't trust their reactions in a firefight, but the truth was, he wouldn't be able to trust anyone else.

He was just as compromised as they were.

"Keep your heads in the game, yeah?" Arthur said. "By the book. Lance, get Perceval in here. You two will be running the assault on the warehouse. Two separate teams taking both egress points with
snipers at elevation, because if they've set up a magical warning system, you lose your advantage. The sooner their sorcerers are put down, the faster you'll get inside to Gwen. Gwaine's probably already worked out where he wants to be, and he'll tell you where to put the others."

"All right," Lance said, speaking for the first time. He had been uncharacteristically silent since the testing fields, the prototype and the kidnapping, shutting down and turning inward. Arthur wished that he had done something, that he'd spoken to Lance, that he'd kept the other man from dwelling in misery and desperation, but --

There must have been something in his expression, because Lance reached over and took Arthur's arm, digging his fingers in a tight squeeze. Lance's brown eyes were dark and unreadable. "Keep your head in the game, yeah?"

Arthur exhaled. He nodded sharply. "Yeah."

Lance stepped out of the room to get Perceval.

"You still have that plan? The one you wrote up in the car?" Arthur asked, crouching down to flip through the small pile of maps, trying to find one that was closer to street level near the Pendragon offices. Lucan had found a little computer shop in town; he'd used it to print out Google maps.

"Arthur," Leon said. There was something in his tone, and Arthur looked up. Neither one of them said anything until Leon cleared his throat and said, "You know that we don't blame you?"

Arthur stared at Leon for a long time. A part of him had yearned to hear those words, even though he hadn't asked his men for forgiveness. He couldn't do that, not when he couldn't even forgive himself, and another part, the responsible, level-headed and logical part of him, didn't think that anyone would ever forgive him for his mistake, for this mistake, no matter what they said.

Another wave of guilt unfurled in Arthur's gut, drawing back like the tide, sucked deep into the distance from the cracks that were starting to show on the ocean floor. His emotions were surging forward, threatening to crash like a tsunami wave, obliterating everything in sight. Arthur looked away and found the map that he was looking for; he put it on top of the others and stared at it until he realized that he couldn't make out the features for the tears filling in his eyes.

"Arthur --"

Arthur stopped him with a raised hand and shook his head. He took a deep breath, held it, forced himself under control. He pushed back every ounce of pain that he could feel, that he couldn't stop himself from feeling. He kept the rage at a low boil, steaming and sputtering. He ignored the niggle of resentment that remained persistent beneath it all, because they were rescuing Gwen and Morgana and not Merlin.

He wasn't ready for it when Leon grabbed him by his jacket and hauled him to his feet. He stumbled back and was crashed against the wall, the plaster caving under the impact.

Arthur stared at Leon. Leon stared back. Leon's fists tightened in his coat, twisted the fabric of his shirt underneath, the collar a sudden tourniquet at his throat. Arthur didn't fight him, but he coughed once, his hands loose around Leon's wrists.

Just as abruptly as it happened, Leon let him go, taking a hasty step back, a hand covering his mouth in a mixture of disgust and dismay. Arthur crumpled a little, the crash of exhaustion weighing down, his body suddenly too heavy to keep upright.

He fell to one knee, his hand touching his throat. He inhaled a raspy breath and closed his eyes,
trying not to think of the one thing he'd avoided all this time -- that even once they found Merlin, once Merlin was back, would Merlin hate Arthur for his failure?

His best friend did. His team did.

"Arthur, I --" There was a soft whimper in Leon's tone.

Arthur couldn't raise his eyes. He didn't dare. He swallowed hard, and it burned his throat. He shook his head again, and when he spoke, it was without recognizing his own voice. "I keep seeing him the way he was in Algiers. Cut and bloodied and dying. That's my greatest fear. That we'll find him and it'll be like that again. Except it'll be a million times worse, because I'm too late, and he's already gone before I can say good-bye. So don't you think, not for one second, that I don't know how you feel. They have my sister. They have one of my oldest friends. Don't you dare tell me that you forgive me when that's nothing but a goddamn lie to get me to keep going because you need me to help you get Morgana and Gwen back. I will get them back."

Arthur wiped the tears from his face; they were hot on his palm. There was too much of it and he had to use the back of his sleeve. They kept falling and Arthur couldn't keep up; the tears rolled down his cheeks and fell to the floor.

He didn't know how long he was there, on one knee, his head bowed, not making a sound except for the deafening crash of every single tear splattering. Deep emotion warred with restraint and his body shook; the battle sapped him of his strength and his resolve, draining him dry of tears and care.

Arthur straightened with difficulty. He got his feet under him. He stood up with a heave and didn't meet Leon's eyes. He didn't know when Lance and Perceval had arrived, but he couldn't look at them either. He wiped at his face with damp hands and scrubbed the very last of his grief away, pushing it aside, and took a step toward the makeshift table and the maps.

"Let's get this done," he said.

ooOoo

Morgause had given Morgana new clothing -- something stylish but loose enough to wear over the body armour that Morgause "wouldn't dream of asking you to remove" -- and the clothing itself smelled faintly of someone else's perfume, musky and spicy with a bit of over-sweetness that made Morgana's throat scratch from a sudden, unexpected allergy.

"You shouldn't --" Gwen stopped herself. She paused and closed the distance between them to help Morgana with the jacket when the sleeve was caught in Morgause's bracelet. "You shouldn't be helping them."

"You heard what she said," Morgana said, casting a sidelong glance toward the office door. It was ajar, just enough that the man standing guard could listen to them talking while still giving Morgana a sense of privacy. "My father -- my own father -- stole artefacts during the war. They're just trying to recover them."

"First of all, how do you know that's true? You only have her word to go on, and how can you even trust her? Look what she's done to us. She almost killed you in that explosion, and what does she do?"
She says *oops, sorry* and pretends it never happened? And second -- they're old, dating back from only God knows when. How can they claim that it belongs to them? For all we know, the kid down the block could say that they belong to them, and who's going to say no? If anything, they should be in *museums* --"

Morgana raised an eyebrow, wriggling them to let Gwen know that she was going just a bit too far, and Gwen dialled it back down with an exasperated sigh.

"They kidnapped us, Morgana. Why would you help them in the first place?"

"I…" Morgana trailed off, but Gwen barrelled on.

"I just want to go home. I just want *Lance*, but he's *gone,*" Gwen said, her voice warbling. Her eyes were dry of tears, though, like someone who hadn't quite given up hope and having a hard time hanging on to whatever was left. "I can't…"

Morgana held Gwen close. She didn't risk whispering anything other than faint assurances that *everything will be all right, I'll have this sorted in no time, Morgause promised that if I helped them with this one thing, they'll let us go.* Gwen knew better, though, because she pinched Morgana's side.

"Let me go with you. Tell Morgause that you won't do it. Don't let them split us. Please."

"I'm afraid that we have no choice in the matter," Morgause said, sweeping inside. She'd changed her clothing, too; she was in a casual business suit, the dark brown trousers and matching jacket offset by the turquoise shirt she wore beneath, buttons open nearly to her cleavage. Her hair was pinned up at the sides and fell down her back in a cascade of curls; Morgana thought that Morgause looked the part of a perfect James Bond villain. But to anyone who didn't know who she was and what she had done, Morgause looked like any other woman in Paris: done up to the nines in the latest fashions, her makeup impeccable, her appearance simultaneously foreboding and seductive.

In comparison, Morgana felt grubby, but that could be because she hadn't had a shower in the last few days, and the wash-up that she'd been allowed at the cottage had been quick and abrupt.

That there would be no deterring Morgause, but Morgana made at least an attempt to change her mind. "Gwen knows the database, she would be faster at finding everything that you are looking for --"

"It's not a matter of finding," Morgause said calmly, quick with an answer to everything. "We won't be staying long, but all the same, it would be best if we didn't do anything to attract attention. The more of us there are --"

Morgana turned to Gwen, holding her hand. "But --"

"Gwen will be well taken care of while we are gone, Morgana," Morgause said, "Though I do admit that the sooner that we complete our task this evening, the sooner that we can return and put your worries to rest."

The threat was subtle -- very subtle. Morgana cast a worried glance at Gwen, but Gwen only nodded faintly, her eyes wide with *be careful* and *I'll be fine.*

Morgana didn't know if *she* would be fine, but she knew that Gwen was more than perfectly capable of fashioning picklocks out of a mound of dust and a sliver of wood, never mind short-circuiting an alarm with a gum wrapper magnet.

"Are you ready?" Morgause asked, her tone soft and sweet, the reasonable sort that was perfectly
willing to wait as long as it took before Morgana finished dressing in someone's cast-offs that were just a little too large for her across the shoulder and a bit too wide at the waist. The legs were short, but Morgana had tugged the trousers down around her hips, and there was a chance that no one would notice that she was wearing scuffed boots tucked underneath the fabric instead of her trademark stilettos.

At the very least, there would be someone there who would recognize her and raise the alarm. Morgana wondered if Morgause had thought about that and if she had a contingency plan in place if that happened.

"I... I suppose," Morgana said, glancing hesitantly at Gwen.

"Oh, dear Morgana," Morgause said, sliding her hand around Morgana's arm to hold it possessively, "A little more confidence, yes? No one will be the wiser, I promise you."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Morgana muttered under her breath, too quiet for anyone to hear. She let Morgause lead her to the SUV and climbed in the back seat with Morgause, pausing to look over her shoulder at Gwen. The doors shut just as one of the men took Gwen's arm and roughly pulled her aside, leading her into the office. Morgana squawked. "He's --"

"He's ensuring that she stays in a safe place and doesn't get any silly notions of escape," Morgause said, and there was an edge to her tone that hadn't been there before. Very quickly, she forced a smile and said, "Not that there is anything to escape from. You are both quite free to leave when we have the database, though I do hope that you both have considered what I have told you and realize that you are safer if you remain with us."

Morgana didn't answer, not out loud at least; she doubted that her immediate retort, which was to the order of fat chance of that, wouldn't go over very well. She played idly with the bracelet that Morgause had given her and stared out the window, memorizing every detail as they drove through the warehouse doors. How many men there were, which turns they made before reaching the main road, what buildings were around, which sector they were in. Morgana had a feeling that Morgause didn't plan on returning to the warehouse once they were done, but if there was a chance, however slim, that they would, Morgana intended on using every advantage to take Gwen and get out.

The dog tags -- Arthur's dog tags -- with the coordinates to the safe house hung heavily around her neck. Leon's watch was a comforting weight around her arm, though she had a nagging feeling that if there was anyone monitoring the tracking signal, they would have shown up by now.

The drive to the Pendragon offices should have been shorter than it was. In the late evening Paris traffic, it took only twice as long as it would have taken if they were to have walked; Morgana recognized the streets and the signposts and the storefronts and even her favourite restaurant, already packed full with both patrons and tables spilling onto the sidewalk. The SUV parked across the street in a space meant for two, and Morgana had the faint hope that a constable would walk by and ticket them. Maybe she could signal for help --

"This is what we're going to do," Morgause said, stopping Morgana before she could try for the door handle. "We will walk in together. Hank will follow us. You'll sign us in under assumed names -- do not use your own. We don't want to attract unwanted attention, do we?"

"No," Morgana answered faintly. "Of course not."

"Very good. From there we will go to the offices where you will access the server. Hank will copy the information that we need." Morgause paused. "Is that clear?"
"I still don't understand why you need the database. I've told you, I know everything that's in the inventory, if there were any artefacts being stored there, I would know --"

"Dear Morgana," Morgause said, and this time there was no trace of mock affection in her voice, but the sharp slap of shut up and do what I say. She must have realized her mistake, because her features were schooled to a patient smile, and she tilted her head to offer a reassuring, "I'm certain if the artefacts had been properly catalogued, you would know about them. Your father, however, is an intelligent man. Surely you don't think he would properly identify the very objects he had stolen?"

Morgana sagged and looked away. "How would you even know what they are, then? If he entered them in the inventory, if he called them something else, how would -- I mean, by your reasoning, he could say they were bloody paper clips and no one would know any better --"

"Leave that to me," Morgause said.

"We're wasting time," Hank said. He glanced at Morgana in the rearview mirror; Morgause gave him a glare, but nodded.

"Shall we?"

Morgana tried for the door, but the child lock had been activated; she had to wait for Hank to get out of the passenger side and to open it for her. His hand was firm at her elbow, leaving a hint that he'd happily pull her arm out of its socket if she thought about running. She grimaced and followed Morgause across the road.

The Pendragon Consulting PR offices took up the top two floors of the building -- a building surrounded with mirrored and clear glass alternating on each floor and garishly decorated with marble floors and paneled walls. Several other companies rented offices on the other levels, their names listed on the directory along the wall, but access to the Pendragon elevator was monitored by both security personnel and video surveillance. Morgana approached the desk -- the guard was someone she didn't recognize, an older gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and a kindly smile, though she didn't doubt for an instant that the man would draw his gun if Morgana gave him a signal. But her eyes fell on the wedding ring on his left hand, and she couldn't do it. She didn't want his death on her conscience.

"Joanne Montpassant pour Anne Marie Billiard," Morgana said, using the name of a reporter from Le Monde. Joanne came to the office often enough that her name was perpetually on the appointment list, and it wouldn't trigger any alarm bells. Morgause made a soft sound that might have been approval.

"Signe ici," the guard said, gesturing to the sign-in book. Morgana used her fake name, made a mental note to tighten up the security guidelines, because she hadn't even been asked for identification, but she would be damned if she would sign in for Morgause and Hank. She stepped aside to let them do it for themselves. "Le premier ascenseur à vôtre gauche. Neuvième étage."

"Merci," Morgana said. Morgause led the way. They didn't have to wait long for the elevator; the doors opened right away. Morgana paused, not wanting to step inside, hesitating a moment too long; Hank gestured rudely.

Morgana shot a half-frantic, half-pleading glance at the security desk, but the guard had gone back to his post, shaking out the newspaper. She almost stumbled getting into the elevator when she saw someone walking past the building doors, a flare of hope dying a second later when it was the night guard coming in for his shift -- another guard she didn't recognize and who probably wouldn't
recognize her, either.

Her odds of escape were dwindling more and more with every passing second.

She was silent on the short trip to the ninth floor. She was complacent as Morgause led the way through the corridors and blew past the empty receptionist's desk -- a desk that was never empty at this time of night considering the late hours that most of the PR staff kept. Morgana wondered if the receptionist -- who most definitely would have recognized her -- had been paid off to be somewhere else at this exact same time, or if it was sheer coincidence and nothing more.

"Take us to a private office. Out of the way, where no one will see us," Morgause said.

Morgana led the way to one of the quieter offices on the floor. Most of them were empty; Morgana distantly recalled that an event was coming up and that most of the staff would be on-site to set it up. Once again, they didn't run into anyone, and Morgana wondered if this had all been set up beforehand, with NWO surveillance on the offices to determine the best times to come in and money exchanged under the table to be conspicuously absent at this time and that hour.

Morgause pointed to the desk chair and Morgana sat down. It was a smaller room than her own, the desk of less-fine quality. There was a photograph in one corner, a man and a woman, both of them smiling; in the backdrop was the Seine and Notre-Dame. Morgana tried not to look at it.

"Log in and access the main network," Morgause said.

"I'm not mapped on this computer," Morgana said. "I don't know the server address --"

There was a gleam in Morgause's eyes, fiery orange and bright, and Morgana found herself turning to the computer, waiting for it to come out of sleep mode. She typed in her username and password to get past the main log-in, mapped herself to the main directory, and entered the access code when the prompt came up.

"Navigate to the weapons and prototype database," Morgause ordered.

It was surreal. Morgana's fingers were working of their own volition. It was almost as if she was a passenger in her own body, without control of her actions. She was a puppet, responding to the puppeteer's deft movements, performing whatever Morgause wanted.

The gleam in Morgause's eyes reflected off the dark screen.

Morgana guided the mouse, click after click, until she had reached the subdirectory with the special-access requirements. Attempting to open it required a new log-in. Morgana managed to resist for what seemed to be only a breath before the compulsion to continue became irresistible.

"All right, move," Hank said. Morgana sat there dumbly before Hank hissed a long-suffering sigh and rolled her chair out of his way; he took out a small slimline hard drive from his inside coat pocket and hooked it to the desktop by firewire.

Morgana made another note. No desktops in the office. They were a security breach. She watched with a sinking heart as the very core of Pendragon Consulting's future was copied onto the hard drive.

"How long will it take?" Morgause asked.

"Hard to say," Hank said. "Depends on how good the connection to the main network is. Could be a half hour, could be more. It's a big database. A few terabytes, easy."
"Can we search it while it's copying?"

Hank leaned down and typed in a few commands. "Yeah, it looks like it. What's the search string?"

Morgause took the keyboard from Hank and entered a phrase; Morgana couldn't see what it was. She didn't try very hard, either. Her attention was caught by a pinpoint laser beam on the back of Hank's head.

A tiny red circle. Tiny. Tight. A laser pointer didn't have that kind of coherence. Morgana didn't immediately put the pieces together, but when she finally figured out what the red dot meant, she couldn't breathe. Morgana stayed very, very still.

She saw a second red dot on the back of Morgause's head.

*Do it*, Morgana pleaded. Her finger tapped on the armrest of the chair in Morse Code. *SOS.*

Morgause straightened and moved just as the front of Hank's head blew out in an explosive exit wound that blew up the flatscreen monitor. A second bullet, a microsecond behind the first, missed where Morgause's head had been and went through-and-through her arm.

She screamed in pain and whirled around, her eyes a molten orange, like burning lava bubbling from the lip of a volcano ready to erupt. She wrenched Morgana out of her seat and turned her around, using her as a shield, and backed them both out of the office, away from the windows. Morgana struggled, but the compulsion to obey still held, and she couldn't do much more than to swing her arms feebly in protest.

Morgana saw a blur of black coming at them. A rush of adrenaline flooded through Morgana, strong enough to override Morgause's magic. She stabbed an elbow in Morgause's gut and wrenched herself free, falling to the ground. The black blur was a tall man from head to toe in combat blacks, his face concealed behind a balaclava, his eyes covered by opaque goggles. He went after Morgause, his gun raised in the air, the reverb of repeated gunshots mocked by the repeated *clink-clink-clink* as the bullets struck an invisible force and fell to the ground, harmless and useless.

Morgause raised her uninjured arm; the black figure was thrown through the air, his body flailing until a hard connection against the far wall stopped his flight. He thumped on the ground. He rolled to his feet, shaking his head.

Morgause grabbed Morgana's arm only to drop her a moment later to defend herself from the blows of a second man appearing out of thin air. He was dressed like the first, but he kept his weapons clear and close to his body, not wanting to risk wild fire in close quarters, that a stray bullet might strike a target he hadn't planned for.

It was a manic dance of strikes and blows and punches; Morgause had the advantage with her magic, but the man fought dirty -- he went for Morgause's wound, only to be knocked off his feet by a kick to his legs.

"Morgana, come --"

Morgause's eyes were glowing pools of brilliant flame, her lips set in a determined line, blood pooling down her injured shoulder and arm, front and back. Morgana's body responded to the command; she climbed to her feet and walked toward Morgause.

A canister bounced into the space between them, hissing in a high-pressure pitch that billowed smoke all around them in a cloud. Morgana held her breath, but her eyes burned, burned, *burned.*
She couldn't see; she panicked and took a deep breath of air and it seared her throat.

Someone grabbed her. If she wasn't already blind and miserable, she was hauled upside down, and deposited on a hard, muscular shoulder. Disoriented, dizzy, sick, Morgana made a few frantic grabs, feeling nylon netting and straps and Kevlar --

Then, very suddenly, she was put back on her feet and someone else wrapped their arm around her waist, hauling her along, quickly, quickly, quickly. Morgana stumbled, trying to keep up. The man holding her up carried her weight for the few steps before she could find her feet again, suddenly glad that Morgause hadn't insisted that she wear stylish shoes, because she would have broken her ankle already.

There were gunshots in the background, an explosive crash, the smell of burning plastic, the crackle of fire. She could smell smoke.

Morgana tried to open her eyes, but exposure to air only made the pain worse. Smoke bombs like that had a narrow blast range, and they could be mixed with anything -- chemicals to knock someone out, pepper spray, a dumbed-down version of mustard gas. She didn't know what compound had been in this smoke bomb, and if not for the distraction of combat behind her, she would have screamed in pain by now.

Her body stopped working. She felt the urge to stop and turn back. The man must have sensed that something was off, because he picked her up as if she weighed nothing and kept moving.

Down one corridor, down another. Around the corner, through a narrow passage.

She heard a click, a beep, a whir. Running footsteps, gunfire, another crash. Smoke reached Morgana's nostrils, acrid and sharp, burning what had already burned from the pepper spray smoke bomb. This wasn't another canister, this was fire, real fire, and --

The overhead sprinklers activated. Morgana was sprayed with water for less than ten seconds before there was a musical ding. She was carried into the elevator -- the express private elevator that Morgana and some of the executives of her department used that was hidden in a corridor just past Morgana's office -- and was put down. The man kept a hand around her, steadying her, and there was the warning computerized voice repeating portes ouvertes, portes ouvertes. The doors were released, they whirred shut, and something bounced into the elevator at the very nick of time.

Morgana strained to open her eyes. All she could see was a blur.

A wet cloth was pressed against her face, the moisture counteracting the special ingredient in the smoke bomb. Morgana gasped in relief, wrenching the cloth away from the man, and finished the job just as the elevator doors opened again. From the stale rush of air, she knew they were in the parking garage, but all the lights were out.

The men pulled her with them. They both touched their goggles as they left the bright light of the elevator; Morgana could hear the rumble of an engine in the distance. Morgana clutched the arm around her waist, stumbled again when he stopped her, and tripped twice right before she was lifted up and pushed into the back seat of a car, the covers rough and well-used, the leather cracked and dry.

One of the men joined her in the back seat; the other climbed into the front. The doors slammed shut, the engine of the car was gunned, and Morgana was blinded again when they hit the next-to-last
parking level, illuminated with bright yellow lights that were searing compared to the complete pitch black of the previous floor.

The driver wasn't masked, but he was wearing goggles that he immediately ripped off; before Morgana could get a look at his face, she slid across the back seat into the other man's lap. She didn't have time to recover before she slid off again. The driver wove in and out of the underground parking like a slalom skier, accelerating into the turns, never once slowing down.

And, suddenly, they were out, squealing into Paris traffic, greeted by an angry wash of furious honking as a few cars slammed on their brakes to avoid hitting them.

It was full dark, now. The sun had set when they were in the office, breaking into the Pendragon network. The city lights flickered in and out as they wove through traffic, speeding past slower traffic, breaking speed limits, cutting through red lights. Eventually, they slowed down, blending in.

The man next to her pulled off his balaclava. He ran a rueful hand through his hair and turned to look at Morgana. His eyes were bright, sure, determined; his expression set with relief so immense that it swallowed all the air in the car.

Leon.

"Leon," Morgana said, and threw herself into his arms. "Leon. Oh my God. Leon."

Her body shook and shuddered. All the emotions that she'd been holding back, all the terror and the fear, they all came out in that moment. She clutched him tightly, a strangled sob ruining her words. "They said you were dead. They said --"

"It's all right, baby. It's all right. You're safe. You're safe --"

"Gwen," Morgana gasped, pulling away, but nearly as soon as she did, Leon pulled her close and held her tightly. "They've got Gwen. They're going to -- They're at a warehouse, they're somewhere in the industrial district, I can take you there --"

"Shh, it's all right, it's all right. We know."

"No, you don't understand --"

"gana," Arthur said from the front seat, his voice low and soft but cutting through her growing panic with his infuriatingly steady calm, "The others are getting her out right now."

Gwen watched the SUV leave with misgivings. She crossed her arms over her chest, alternatively hoping that Morgana wouldn't do something stupid, and hoping that she would be all right. Nick grabbed her arm roughly and pulled Gwen away before the SUV was even out of the warehouse. Gwen looked over her shoulder, hoping for a last glance at Morgana, but the windows were tinted black and there was no way to tell what was going on inside.

The SUV was gone a moment later, leaving behind a cloud of automobile exhaust; the warehouse doors were rolled shut with an ominous clang that reverberated and echoed in the large, empty space. The warped metal didn't shut properly; there was a gap at the very top, like an open V-neck shirt showing too much cleavage, letting a sliver of natural sunlight to shine through.
Nick left her in the back office, shutting her in. The door clicked, but it seemed comical, somehow, to keep her prisoner in a room that was missing all of its windows.

Someone had picked up nearly all of the broken glass, the horizontal blinds were crooked and limp, and there was no real sense of privacy.

Morgana had told her what happened. That Morgause had used magic, and in a fit of temper had caused a shockwave that had shattered the windows.


Gwen had seen Morgana's wounds right before Morgause brought her into the office under the pretext of taking care of the injuries, and she'd thought exactly two things. The first was that Morgana was lucky that she hadn't been killed, and the second was that there was no way that their kidnapper had the charming bedside manner required to enchant cuts and scrapes into oblivion.

Morgana had called Gwen's attention to the bracelet around her wrist without actually calling Gwen's attention to it; a subtle brush of the jewellery against the metal buckle of her belt, unconscious twisting touches with her hand. Its sudden appearance was easy to connect with Morgana's miraculous healing, but if she was healed now, why was she keeping it? Gwen wondered if Morgana could remove it, if she even wanted to. And then, because she was a bit of a geek who had played AD&D with Elyan years ago, Gwen couldn't help thinking that the bracelet might have more than one enchantment cast on it.

Gwen paced inside the office, front to back, side to side.

Morgana was a consummate actress, full of poise and grace. While Gwen didn't attend as many open shows or galas as Morgana, while their men were out on the battlefield, Morgana often had Gwen accompany her. She had seen Morgana go from hot to cold in an instant, charming the pants off stockbrokers and investors alike, only to turn around with a fleeting grimace of disgust and an unconscious wipe of her fingers down the side of her gown, trying to get them clean after having had to deal with smarmy men who oozed of slime. Sometimes, it was hard to tell when Morgana was being sincere.

Gwen still didn't know if Morgana was being honest when she insisted on a copy of Gwen's meatloaf recipe, it was that delicious -- particularly since Morgana rarely took more than two bites of it. "Oh, I couldn't eat any more, I had far too much salad --"

Gwen grunted inwardly. No one filled up on salad, not even a twig like Morgana.

It was no different in this situation. In the beginning, Gwen had been able to tell when Morgana was playing along to win their kidnapper's trust, but after Morgause's impassionate appeals to Morgana's sense of honour and responsibility and fair play, Gwen wasn't so sure.

She remembered a time when Morgana had rebelled against her father, when she'd left home in a flurry of temper, when she had very nearly cut off all contact until Arthur had protected the last bridge that was left with a simple note. Gwen knew that there were many things that Morgana didn't like about Uther -- she'd complained about him enough growing up, though the complaints were now fewer, pointed, discreet and severe. And, of late, with everything that was going on, with the secret investigation that Morgana had continued even after she had obtained the information that Arthur had asked for?

Nothing fanned the flames or threw fuel to the fire of embers so close to dying out than discovering that everything one had ever known about their own family had been a lie, and Morgause had picked
exactly the right thing to lure Morgana to her side.

Gwen sat down heavily on the ratty, dusty couch and pulled her legs to her chest. She wrapped her arms around them and side-eyed the activity going on outside the office. Every now and then, Nick would wander over, look through the door to check in on her, and leave when he found her still sitting on the couch, huddling with fear.

Except she wasn't afraid. She hadn't been afraid for a long time. She didn't mind playing the part she was playing now -- that part, the one in the ridiculous Hollywood movies, with the helpless kidnap victims who didn't know their elbow from their arse when there was a perfectly reasonable escape route right in front of them if they'd only open their eyes and see it. She took on this role only because no one would believe it if Morgana tried, no matter how good her acting was, because Morgana didn't do cowering; she was the one making other people sob for mercy.

Gwen was an army wife in a long line of army wives. She'd sat home with her mum, the two holding each others' hands until their fingers were numb, watching the wartime video and listening to anchor people who didn't know what was going on any more than the next person, but quite happily making alarming assumptions. Gwen had grown up with a prayer on her lips every morning asking for her dad to be safe, and now she woke up every morning with that same prayer for Lance and Leon and Arthur and everyone in Excalibur.

Fear had been in the back of Gwen's mind for a long time, but it didn't paralyze her, it didn't stun her.

Time passed with nothing but background noise to keep her company. She stood up and went to the desk; there were a few papers on it, papers with sketches and drawings. She scattered them out to study them, trying to be inconspicuous about it, but it seemed that it didn't matter if she saw them or not. Nick came by again, glanced in, and wandered off.

The sheets of paper were photocopies of photocopies of originals, drawings of the artefacts that Morgause had been talking about. There were blurred lines and faded chicken scribbles here and there, arrows pointing at specific areas, additional doodles and squiggly lines. Along one side was a perfect block of handwriting, truncated in half by the photocopier, the content illegible but only because Gwen didn't know a word of Welsh.

It occurred to Gwen that these weren't reproduction sketches from memory or out of a book, but actual drawings from direct observation of the real thing. And more, the chicken scratches and additional detail around the principal artefact made Gwen think of any number of prototype designs that she'd seen before -- that she'd drawn out herself.

These weren't records of artefacts that existed. These were records of blueprints intended for the construction or reconstruction of the artefacts, either by hand-design or for mass reproduction. Gwen couldn't fathom why, but between too many late nights rolling dice while Elyan Game-mastered their motley crew of adventurers through one catacomb or another and Morgause's single-minded intensity, Gwen had a pretty good guess that whatever these artefacts were capable of, they were magical, and it was nothing good.

Gwen piled the papers together in a minuscule stack; there were only eight sheets, and, after a glance over her shoulder, she folded them in half, and again in quarters, before stuffing them inside her jacket. She didn't think that anyone would miss them, and that was only because any useful information was essentially faded beyond deciphering.

A cursory inspection of the desk revealed nothing else. The drawers squeaked when she opened and closed them -- Nick came by to see what she was doing, but smirked at her and walked away -- but were empty except for a washed-out company letterhead and rat droppings.
A lot of rat droppings.

Gwen made a face and went to the bathroom, turning on the tap. The pipes rattled for a good minute before a splurt of rusty water fell out of the tap in a gelatinous glob; it was several more minutes of running water before it looked clean enough to use. She rubbed her hands under the lukewarm water, her fingernails scratching at her skin. There was no soap, and she hadn't actually touched the rat droppings, but, still, it was the principle of the thing.

She shut off the water; it continued to run until it was down to the same slow drip as before. She shook out her hands, looking for something to dry them off on, but there was only that rag that had seen better days. She resorted to rubbing her hands on her trouser legs, and was on her way out of the bathroom when she heard a loud pop and a sharp whistle.

Gwen looked up. She didn't see it right away, not until the dark grey container came through the gap between the warehouse doors.

She knew that sound. She knew that design. Gwen scrambled back into the bathroom, slamming the door shut. She closed her eyes and clamped her hands over her ears, because she would be damned if she would be caught guard by a flash-bang ever again.

There was a clink when it landed, a chorus of frantic shouts. Gwen staggered back against the sink at the explosion of eardrum-rendering noise and the bright blue-white that pierced the cracks around the bathroom door and was visible even through closed eyes. Disoriented, Gwen slipped and fell, hitting the back of her head against the sink, but it was a dull ache compared to the ringing in her ears and the stars she was seeing as the light faded.

When Gwen had first started at Pendragon Consulting, she'd been assigned to the weapons testing division. Her job had been to find design flaws in projectile devices meant to neutralize crowds without any lasting damage. Previous designs had too long of a delay, plenty of noise, but not enough of a flash. She had tried several new compounds and had been the victim of a few premature detonations, and had sworn that she would never be near when one of the canisters went off when they finalized the trigger system. The redesign was still in use all these years later, and it was one of the things that Gwen had always hoped wouldn't be used against innocent citizens.

But this time?

She didn't complain about being on the wrong side of the explosion. The flash-bang couldn't be used against nicer people.

Her heart was in her throat when she heard distant gunfire -- short, measured bursts of semiautomatics keeping the enemy disoriented and pinned down -- but it was hard to tell what it was at first beyond a staccato drumming that grew louder and increasingly more constant. The thrum increased and cut off; there was another blast, this time explosive, that rocked the far end of the building and jarred the framework.

The bathroom door drifted open.

The light shining through was the ambient light from old incandescent bulbs, a bit on the yellow side. It shone through the crack with a halo that didn't fade until Gwen blinked a few times.

Morgause's people were shouting. Guns were firing. A crackle that Gwen couldn't identify but decided had to be magic impacted with something solid and --

The warehouse creaked. Listed.
A crumbling of plaster fell on top of Gwen's head. The ceiling split in a clean crack. The splashguard tiles behind the sink popped off. The bottom corner of the door dug into the cement floor and splintered.

_Shite._

The building was collapsing.

The exchange of gunfire reached torrential levels before stopping abruptly. Gwen resisted the urge to peek outside, to see if it was over.

Instead, she remembered her dad's stories of the war, how the silence on the battlefield didn't always mean that the fight was over, and huddled under the sink. She covered her head with her arms.

The explosion rocked the building again, this time too close for comfort. The shockwave jarred her teeth, left her skin tingling and made the earlier ringing in her ears from the flash-bang seem like the aftermath of a hard rock concert and not the start of a bloody _war._

It seemed as if nearly as soon as the blowback from the bomb -- _missile?_ -- had faded, the warehouse was filled with the sound of gunfire again. It was coming from all sides, but Gwen was certain that impossible, because _surely,_ by now, Morgause's men would be down to a bare few. There hadn't been much cover for them; she couldn't imagine how they would have survived the initial assault, unless --

Of course.

_Magic._

Stupid thing.

Gwen imagined anything from illusions to shields to fireballs and magic missiles and lightning bolts and all of the other ridiculous over-the-top spells that she'd used when she had played an Elven Mage, the sort that technically shouldn't be possible in the real world but which was apparently a very real possibility now. She couldn't help it; a hysterical laugh escaped her lips. She covered her mouth with her hand and tried to calm herself with happy thoughts, but her brain was rapidly calculating dice statistics and probabilities and damage ratings and area of effect and _how long_ before a mage's constitution could last before they ran out of stamina to continue casting spells.

A large chunk of plaster broke from the ceiling and crashed on top of the toilet seat. A few more tiles fell from the wall and shattered like plates at a Greek restaurant. The sink creaked and a cold trickle of water ran down Gwen's back.

The gunfire continued in volleys -- three gunshots from one side, a short burst of semiautomatic fire from another, a magazine emptying to too-loud _click-click-click_ before a loud swap-out. It was almost a stalemate, except one side refused to give up the advantage, pressing forward with ever-increasing bursts of gunfire that seemed to originate from different angles, hinting at men perpetually on the move behind one object or another, never giving up their covers nor yielding an advantage.

There was shouting over the gunfire, guttural and reverberating; Gwen immediately flashed back on any episodes of _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ when Willow had turned into Evil Willow, because that's what it sounded like. It was an unearthly chant from a human throat, low and grating, someone warbling over a cheese grater. The fine hairs on the back of her neck raised, the bottom of her stomach dropped, and a feeling of _this is very bad_ ran through her body. Gwen curled onto herself even more, her forehead against her knees, an arm around her legs, the other covering her head.
The tingling of spiders crawling all over her body drew a soft whimper from her lips, and Gwen admitted, yes, **now** she was afraid, more afraid than she'd ever been wondering if her dad was coming home after his latest tour, if Lance would call after a mission. This dark magic was digging deep, deep down into her soul. It found the fear that she had long ago buried, compartmentalized, locked away; it released her emotions as if it were the key to Pandora's Box setting every monster free. Gwen quavered and shivered, she trembled and shuddered, she hugged herself even tighter. She jerked at every gunshot, at every recoil, at every scream, at every cry.

And then, silence.

Gwen was drowning in her own fear. The gunfire was one-sided now. The other side had gone silent. There was muffled screaming in the distance. The guttural chanting continued, growing more confident; a second voice picked it up, a third. It was a disharmonious threnody, a chilling opera supported by the drumming footsteps emerging from behind their protective shelter and to race across the open warehouse to finish off the enemy.

Her rescuers.

Gwen sobbed. So close to freedom, only to be kept captive despite the war that had raged right outside her door.

There was a whipcrack, a sonic boom; one, two, three; distant shots taken one after the other in a reverberation that warmed her to the core, and the icy grip of a tight-fisted fear suddenly dropped away. Gwen gasped, a frisson passing over her skin; she rubbed at her arms and her legs and her head, trying to get the lingering remnants off, off, off, because she couldn't take it anymore.

Suddenly there were gunshots -- from the other side of the warehouse, scuffling and scraping; blows landing repeatedly in hand-to-hand combat that was over all too quickly, and then --

The bathroom door was yanked open, the bottom of it scraping and splintering on cement rough enough to act like sandpaper. Blinding light filled the bathroom only to be blocked off as a large figure stepped in front of her.

The man was head to toe in combat blacks; Kevlar vest and balaclava and goggles; boots and semiautomatics holstered knives. There was a bulging pouch on his hip that couldn't be an ammunition pouch, it was too large and oblong. It couldn't be for additional equipment because a soldier on the battlefield needed immediate access to their weapons and their tools. It wasn't for supplies, for provisions, for water. It was specially-shaped, constructed for medics, and she knew that pouch because she designed it, she made it, she knew it --

"Lance," she screeched, and threw herself into his arms.

He spared one instant for an encompassing hug that filled her with warmth and pleasure and immeasurable relief. Lance was alive, Morgause had lied, and she was free, in her husband's arms, and this was never happening ever again, she was going to implant the entire team and Morgana and herself with microchips and she would have Merlin write up a tracking protocol so that they would know where everyone was at all times --

"Morgana," Gwen said suddenly, but just as she spoke, Lance pulled her out of her crouch and to her feet. He guided her out of what remained of the office -- which wasn't much -- and shielding her with his body, keeping her from seeing the damage and destruction. She didn't care, she needed to see it, she needed to know that these bastards were all dead, because if they weren't, she was going to take the gun out of Lance's hip holster and she would shoot them herself -- "Wait. Morgana --"
"Arthur and Leon," Lance whispered in her ear, his voice muffled even more by the balaclava, but Gwen heard, she understood, and she rejoiced on so many levels that she couldn't find the words to explain how she was feeling right now. Arthur and Leon were alive. If they were after Morgana then she would be all right, too. And from the number of men wearing black-on-black, securing the area, keeping things moving, filing out, the entire team was there --

Maybe even Kay and Merlin.

The fresh air right outside the warehouse never smelled so good, even if it was fraught with automobile exhaust and gunpowder and still-settling dust debris from the explosions, and it was wonderful because she was safe now, and so was everyone that she loved.

A navy blue SUV screeched to a stop in front of them; Lance pushed Gwen toward the rear passenger door. The vehicle was filled up quickly, and she was squeezed between a large, solid body that could only be Perceval. She didn't care that she barely had enough room to sit, because Lance tore off his goggles and his balaclava and hugged her close. This time, his voice wasn't muffled when he spoke, but he whispered with fierce declaration, "I love you."

ooOOoo

Somehow, during the few rare seconds of consciousness, Merlin managed to come to a decision.

It wasn't a new decision. In fact, it was the same recurring decision that he'd made since waking up for the first time in a cold room in the basement of a building that could have been any building in the world, the door slamming open to introduce two dour-faced men who dragged him away for his first torture session.

Get out.

The difference was that, sometime during those rare few seconds of consciousness, Merlin managed to refine his decision further.

Get them out.

Jonathan Aredian was a master torturer and an interrogator. No one knew exactly how he had learned his skills or whose student he had been, but his surviving victims, of whom there were very few, attested to his ability. Those men had been the top secret agents of their respective countries, hardened and trained to endure whatever hardships they needed to endure to successfully complete their missions. Merlin knew that they were good at what they did, because they had lived through the torture and the interrogation and escaped, even if a fair number of state secrets had been spilled in the process.

Aredian's track record was spotless.

Kay was injured, conscious only part of the time. He was being given some sort of potion to accelerate the healing, given drugs to keep him under, but for what purpose?

Will had been beaten for what seemed like hours, each and every blow magnified so that Merlin would feel it, too. There wasn't a bruise on Merlin's body, but all of his nerve endings were on fire.
He was burning from the inside-out, but he knew the pain would end.

Eventually.

He knew he was dreaming when he heard Locher's voice explaining to him how to survive the worst pain that he could possibly imagine. "It comes in accepting that the worst is always to come. You might think that there's no way it would get worse, but it will. It comes in knowing that your body will adapt to whatever you're put through, but only if you let it."

"What happens if I do?"

"It's like a cup of the foulest whiskey you've ever tasted," Locher said. "You can only fill the glass so much before you end up pouring the rest of the bottle all over the bar. But by that time you're so drunk that you don't notice you're drinking something worse than formaldehyde and you definitely don't notice you're sitting in your own piss."

"And if I don't? If I try to fight it?"

"You cave. You break. You die." Locher made a small sound that Merlin couldn't place. "Let's not do that."

"So, how? How do I --" Merlin heard his own nervous laughter. "I mean --"

"You start by accepting that pain is fleeting. That there are stronger things than pain."

The lights turned on in the room. Merlin wrenched his head back and squeezed his eyes shut. His arms strained to cover his face, because the light was bright, but whoever had dragged him out of the barracks at arse o'clock and tied him to this chair? They'd done a good job. The point of that exercise was to keep Merlin off balance, to rob him of his psychological anchor, to keep him lost and disoriented.

It had worked. Merlin had been scared out of his mind.

Except as soon as he had a chance, he opened his mouth and started talking. He talked a lot. He asked about the weather, complained about the facility's maintenance, revealed his suspicions that the mess hall's meatloaf didn't actually contain any real meat.

He did what he was taught to do. If he were kept off-balance, then he needed to keep his interrogators off-balance, too. So he asked questions. He kept talking. He stalled for time until he could get his wits around him again.

"Like what?"

"That's for you to decide, kid," Locher said. "It's different for everyone."

Merlin was awakened by a splash of cold water. He spluttered and coughed and gasped, disoriented as his body moved -- was moved -- seemingly of its own volition. He struggled to stay awake, but it was hard; he only caught glimpses of where he was being taken.

Down the corridor. Past the bedroom where he'd last seen Kay.

Down the stairs, where his legs failed him, and he was dragged down. He couldn't feel the bruises forming on his feet, on his shins.
Another corridor. The smell of coffee. A set of stairs that weren't stairs.

A chair.

*A bloody fucking chair.*

Merlin forced his eyes to open. One of the lightbulbs overhead was swinging, casting sickening shadows on the rough floor. Footsteps retreated, the stairs creaked, a door was shut. Aredian was sitting leisurely at the table on the far end of the room, sipping his tea.

He was eating toast.

Merlin's stomach was so empty it didn't even try to rumble half-hearted. He didn't even know if he could keep food down, anyway.

"I'm hungry," he said anyway. Aredian might think that he was filling the silence just to fill the silence, or he might think that Merlin was trying to distract him. It didn't matter. Zipped lips or loose lips -- Aredian had been reported to being impervious to every anti-interrogation trick that secret agents had tried. It wasn't that he didn't have a conscience -- most interrogators didn't. It was that compiling a psychological profile comprehensive enough to come up with counter-tactics was downright impossible.

Aredian brushed the crumbs from his fingers on a paper napkin and sipped his tea. He didn't look in Merlin's direction.

"I'm thirsty, too," Merlin said.

At any given time, there were anywhere from four to six mercenaries in the house, keeping watch on them. Kay didn't require much by way of guarding, Merlin was believed to be a spineless boy toy, and Will? As far as they were concerned, Will had been on their side, though now that they'd fucked him over, no one was stupid enough to think that was still true. But he didn't need much watching, either, did he? Merlin didn't know how badly beaten Will was, but it had to have been bad.

"My Mum... my Mum used to make me tea," Merlin said. "Mixed it with... With gin or rum or whiskey or whatever she had on hand. She did it because... Because... I don't know. It were good, though. Always put me to sleep."

Aredian's eyebrow twitched, but that was the only reaction Merlin got out of him for his trouble. That was all right. He was listening.

When Aredian was in the house, there were at least three to four more men. A total of anywhere from eight up to a dozen mercenaries. They would have a better chance to escape when Aredian wasn't in the house.

"And toast. Homemade gooseberry jam. She would... She would make me eat one slice with... with marmite. Wouldn't let me have the gooseberry until I ate the one with marmite."

Aredian didn't answer. If anything, he paused to study a new piece of toast as if he were personally taking offence to it. He must have tried marmite, if the sour look on his face was any indication. Of course, Aredian couldn't know that Merlin's Mum would never give Merlin tea with alcohol in it -- she thought that a dollop of *milk* and sugar was a sacrilege to the sanctity that was tea -- and that she wouldn't force-feed Merlin marmite when she couldn't stand it herself.

Merlin didn't think marmite was all that bad.
Merlin's eyes drooped. The most likely way of getting rid of Aredian, at least for a time, was to give him something that he wanted. Merlin could do that. The password to the hard drive would probably satisfy Aredian; there was neither computer nor hard drive in sight, so he would need to go to wherever it was -- hopefully off-site -- in order to test whatever Merlin gave him.

Merlin couldn't give it to him easily, though. Not without Aredian thinking that something was up. And something would be up -- behind the password was still encrypted data.

It was beautiful how he'd set it up. He'd been impressed with himself for thinking of it at the last minute. Accessing the hard drive would let someone see but not touch the encrypted data. Any attempt to crack the code would first need to be approved by password. It was another layer of security that Merlin didn't even think he'd have needed, just something else to fly the fingers at the NWO, but it was a layer that was going to give Merlin the time to get Will and Kay out.

Himself, too, if at all possible, but he was focusing on Will and Kay. An interrogator would use whatever tools they had in their toolbox to break their target, and right now, Will and Kay was leverage that Merlin couldn't afford.

He was fairly certain that Blur-face would claim to be able to break the encryption himself, which meant even more time for Merlin's plan to work.

Once he had a plan.

Merlin shook himself a little, struggling to stay awake. He felt drugged, and he wasn't sure if it was a spell, or if it was just residual exhaustion from having endured too much.

"Arthur..." Merlin fell quiet to say his name. His eyes watered a little, and he hadn't even known that he could feel more pain given his current condition, but he could. He did. "He... He made me drink protein shakes every morning. They were gross. I'd rather eat marmite toast --"

Aredian's chair scraped across the cement floor. Merlin flinched involuntarily, cowing a little.

"Sorry, sorry," he mumbled. "I'll shut up --"

A plate was shoved under Merlin's nose. There was a single triangle of toast on the plate, buttered on one side, a generous bite already torn out of it. Merlin dared to look up at Aredian; Aredian raised a single brow.

Merlin wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. His fingers wouldn't close properly around the piece, and he nearly dropped it, but once he had it in hand, he swallowed it down, hardly chewing.

Which meant that he nearly choked on it, too, but he coughed and swallowed hard, even though his mouth was dry.

"Feeling better?" Aredian asked. His tone was almost kind. Practiced and forced and believable, but Merlin didn't want to believe it for one second.

He nodded. He kept his eyes down.

"Good." Aredian walked away. He came back with a notebook and a pen. "The password, please."

It was the please that did Merlin in. He couldn't help himself. He laughed, but the laugh came out as a snort.

He got backhanded for his trouble. The chair followed him down to the floor. Merlin saw stars.
When he opened his eyes again, Aredian was helping him sit down. It was a disturbing loss of time, but came with a disturbing sense of care.

The notebook and the pen were shoved in his hands. Merlin stared at them until he remembered what Aredian wanted him to do. His fingers trembled to turn to the first page. The pen was slick in his buttered fingertips. He wiped his hand on his dirty jeans before trying again.

His five looked like an S. His sevens were aborted T's. His ones were squiggly lines.

He crossed out three attempts, all of varying lengths, until he had three in a row that were roughly the same length and roughly in the same order and which were the password that Aredian was asking after.

Aredian took the notebook from his hands, reviewed his answers, and tore the page out of the book before giving it to Merlin. "Again."

Merlin huffed a small laugh; it came out as a breathy groan. Groaning was apparently acceptable, because Aredian didn't hit him again.

Merlin opened his hand and flexed it. He wrapped his fingers around the pen with difficulty. He repeated the full code three times, making a correction only once.

Aredian ripped the page out and made him do it a third time. And a fourth.

He compared all the pages, checked to see if the passwords were all the same, and gave Merlin a curt nod. "Very good."

Aredian took the notebook and pen from Merlin's hands and went to put them on the table. The pages with the passwords were folded carefully and inserted in his inside coat pocket.

He sat down.

Merlin must have drifted off, because by the time he looked up, distracted by the distant slam of doors closing, the roar of an engine, and the sound of a car leaving.

Aredian, however, was seated in his chair right in front of Merlin. His hands were on his thighs, and he was studying Merlin speculatively. "Back in the world of the living, are we?"

"I don't know about you," Merlin answered faintly, blinking slowly. He heaved a deep breath. It was entirely possible that his body was in pain, but he felt disconnected from it. "Did you drug me?"

Aredian raised a hand and twirled a finger in the air. "Something of the sort."

"Oh," Merlin said. He let the silence stretch. "I don't like it."

"You would rather be in pain?"

"I'd rather know… what kind of shape I'm in."

Aredian tilted his head. "You'll live."

"Okay. That's good." Merlin paused. "Will I want to live?"

A sharp laugh, sudden and crisp, filled the air, surprising even Aredian. He schooled his features with difficulty, but there was no missing a renewed interest in his eyes. That interest hardened, the faint amusement faded, and Aredian leaned forward, elbows nearly on his knees. "It was good of
your friend to tell me the sort of games that you like to play. I learned a great deal about you from him. For instance, I am aware that it would require great effort on my part to break you. Attempting to bend your resolve would be a waste of time. You are willing to do whatever is necessary to maintain control -- including the pretence of an offering of complete submission."

"Hm," Merlin said. He wanted to say that, no, control was something that Arthur liked, but if he really thought about it, Merlin had always wanted to have a measure of it, too.

Aredian's mouth twitched at the corners. "Even now, you are playing a game, Merlin. It amuses me, but it will only amuse me for so long. For instance, Will attempted to trick me, and it backfired on him."

Merlin understood that to mean, you two are up to something, and I'm not sure what it was, but it doesn't matter because I showed both of you what happens when you try to fuck with me."

"I do not tolerate disobedience, Merlin. I will not suffer games. Do you understand?"

"Hm," Merlin said again. The way Aredian's hands twitched was a hint that his answer was probably not enough. He very quickly said, "Yes."

Aredian nodded. "You work for me."

"The pay sucks," Merlin said. He didn't get backhanded for that, but it was a near thing.

Aredian stood up forcefully enough for a fingernails-on-chalkboard scrape of his chair. He loomed over Merlin -- Merlin recognized an intimidation tactic when he saw it, and he kept his head firmly down, eyes on the ground. The unrequited staring must have lasted a while, because sometime in between blinking his eyes, Aredian left, and there was Will, trying to get him to stand up.

"Ugh. All that posh food your bloke fed you went to your hips, because you weight a million stone," Will said. Merlin felt his body swing like a curtain in the breeze and tried to get his legs under him. Will was more patient than the men who had brought him to the basement in the first place -- the very same men who were watching the proceedings from the stairs, smirks on their faces -- because he gave Merlin a half-arsed chance of standing up on his own two feet. It didn't last long, though, because Merlin's legs gave out.

Will let him fall. He groaned. "Sod it."

Will gingerly laid down on the floor next to Merlin. He was favouring his ribs, that much was obvious. There was Picasso-worthy bruise-marbling all on the left side of his face; his eye wasn't swollen shut, but it might as well be, because someone -- probably the same doctor who was taking care of Kay -- had taped the eyelid down to protect the eye.

The two men came down the stairs. Will stopped them with a wave of his hand. "Just let us die here. It'll be convenient for you. Won't have to move us. Dig a hole through the cement, stuff us in, pour cement on top, not a trace that we've ever been."

The two men grunted. Will made an aborted effort to rearrange Merlin's sprawled limbs and to stop him from using his own face as a pillow. They both laid there, breathing heavy, for what seemed like a full hour before Aredian's men spoke. They must have been speaking Afrikaans, but Merlin didn't care, he didn't even try to parse what was being said, and, eventually, the two came to an agreement and went up the stairs.

There was a click of the door locking.
"How bad?"

"Bruises and cuts. They fed me that green goop of theirs. I swear, Gaius' slop is better than what they made me drink. I'll be feeling it for a while, but I'm all right," Will said, his voice soft. "You got the worst of it."

"Kay?"

"Awake. Heard you screaming, tried to come down to help, the doctor kept him there."

Merlin grunted. He pushed himself onto his side and stared up at the closed door.

"Y doctor?" Will gave it some thought and shrugged. "Mae e'n llawn ofn. Mae teulu ganddo fe. Dwibam yn gwybod os neuth e helpu."

Merlin wasn't encouraged by Will's answer. The doctor was scared and he had family. Will wasn't sure if the doctor would help. It didn't matter. "Mae'n rhaid i ni fynd o 'ma. Gyd o ni. Nawr." We've got to get out. All of us. Now.


Merlin pinched the bridge of his nose but managed a small chuckle.

"I might at that," Merlin whispered in English.


"Oes gen ti blan?" Merlin asked. Got a plan?

"Dim eto." Not yet. Will shifted slightly. "Gallu di --"

Can you -- Merlin closed his eyes. He didn't have to ask what Will was talking about.

The silence stretched while he reached for his magic, but found it shying away again. He shook his head. His magic was there, rumbling under the surface, the shy kid hiding behind his parents' legs, escaping whenever someone reached for him. He just had to catch it. "Falle."

Maybe.


"Will..."

"Ca dy geg a cha dy lygaid, Merlin. Bydd e'n iawn," Will said. Shut your gob and shut your eyes, Merlin. It'll be fine.
Will heaved a deep breath and nodded, as if trying to convince himself.

"Trystia fi," he said. Trust me.

Merlin smiled a little, and he closed his eyes.

There was a strange man looming over Merlin when he woke up.

He wasn't in the basement anymore. Someone had carried him to his room. The overhead light was on, the blinds were drawn, and the strange man had horrible breath.

Something cold pressed against Merlin's chest. It moved again. And again. The man nodded his head and glanced up; he seemed surprised to see that Merlin was wake.

"Ça va?" he asked. Are you all right?

Merlin glanced down at himself. His tattered shirt was open and someone would have to be bloody blind to miss the canvas of bruises. Purple interlocked with green that mixed with yellows in framework mosaics that might be pretty if they didn't hurt so damn much. "What do you think?" Merlin muttered.

"He's fine," Will said. He was leaning against the edge of the window, his fingers parting the curtains just enough to see through. It was dark out. Merlin wondered what time it was. "When he's really out of sorts, he doesn't say a word."

The man shot an uncomprehending glance between Will and Merlin and back. Will paced the length of the room and went to the doorway; he peered out before disappearing down the hall. He came back a few minutes later and gave Merlin a gesture that stood for all clear.

For now, anyway.

The man -- the doctor, if the stethoscope around his neck was any indication -- shook his head and wrung his hands. "Je ne peux pas -- c'est impossible. Ma famille --"

I can't -- it's impossible. My family --

"You can come with --" Will began, and rolled his eyes when he saw the confused wriggle on the man's face. "Vous pouvez venir avec nous."

You can come with us.

"Non, non. C'est pas sauf. Je ne suis pas stupide, je ne vous connaisse pas, vous ne pouvez pas m'assurer --"

No, no. It's not safe. I'm not an idiot, I don't know you, you can't promise me --

Will rolled his eyes and glanced at Merlin. "Some help here?"

"You're doing fine," Merlin said, closing his eyes. He laid down on the bed. He was feeling marginally better, but he was so, so tired.
Will risked another glance out the door, tilting his head to listen to the men on the first floor. Merlin couldn't make out how many there were; he didn't try. He shut his eyes and let the dull buzz of his magic lull him to a state of lucid dreaming, where --

Arthur was laughing, his head thrown back, the deep rumble filling the air with complete, unbridled joy; his face cast bright by the flames of the campfire, his blue eyes twinkling the way they could only twinkle if they were filled with tears of amusement.

Merlin held out his hand.

Arthur sobered, his wide smile turning soft, and he stared at Merlin as if Merlin was a mystery to him, but one he was quite content to have. His fingers brushed Merlin's before sliding over his palm to wrap around Merlin's wrist in a handclasp. Merlin pulled him up. Arthur stood and took a single step to cut the distance between them, the air between them suddenly warm despite the winter wind.

"It's cold, Sire," Merlin remarked.

"Very, very cold," Arthur agreed. There was a smug smirk across his face, and Merlin wasn't sure if he wanted to slap it off or kiss it away. He could be such a bloody prat, sometimes --

There were catcalls around them, easily ignored; by now there were no secrets between King and Knights. They could hardly hide their relationships from the very men sworn to protect the King when the Knights did all within their means to push the two of them together.

"What do you propose to do about it?" Merlin asked. "Pass an edict forbidding winter on pain of death?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Merlin. I'm just going to take you to bed."

The world upended suddenly, and Merlin grunted; Arthur's shoulder was only soft when they were cuddling under warm sheets, and definitely not when it was digging into Merlin's belly. Merlin smacked Arthur's arse only to have his hand sting for his trouble; he waved helplessly at the Knights as Arthur carried him to the Royal Tent --

"Merlin. Merlin."

The voice was familiar and long-missed; but it wasn't Arthur's. It wasn't Will's, either, and this time when Merlin's eyes snapped open, it was to see Kay.

He was worse for wear, with scrapes and cuts and bruises on his face, a white bandage across his chest, striping over his shoulder and wrapped all the way down to his hips. It was freshly done, too, and tightly; Merlin had seen Lance do this kind of bandaging before, on the battlefield, securing injuries as firmly as he was able to give the soldier a chance to keep fighting just that little longer before they could be taken to the MASH unit.

Kay didn't look right. He was pale and a little green around the edges. He was breathing shallowly and swallowing heavily, a combination of doing his best to minimize the pain of moving while refusing to acknowledge the roiling in his belly from too many drugs in too short a time. He shouldn't be up out of bed, but he was; shirtless and sockless and shoeless but dressed in his trousers from the testing ground. There was a gun in his hand, hidden between his knees, and Merlin wondered how he had gotten it without an alarm having been raised.

But a gun in his hand meant something, and Merlin sat up with difficulty, fighting off whatever was
making him drowsy and complacent. Magic, he guessed, because his own was staticky, full of angry charge, wanting to counteract it. Merlin managed to keep his magic under control, but only just. He needed to use whatever he had for their escape.

"It's now, then?" Merlin asked.

"Soon," Kay said. He glanced at his watch. "We have a few minutes. Will wants me to help you down."

Merlin didn't register the words. His attention was fixed by the watch. There was something about it, something -- "You didn't have that before."

"Will got some of our gear back. Not all of it, didn't want to draw attention. Your bag's somewhere else, he couldn't get to it --"

The watch. Merlin grabbed for the watch. Kay tried to get his arm free when he suddenly stopped and swatted Merlin's hands away before hastily removing and handing it over.

"Oh, God. I completely forgot. Is it --"

"Just a second," Merlin said. He pushed the button and saw the tracking light flash once, just the once, and that was enough. He nodded in relief. "It works. Here. Put it on."

"You should --"

"Whatever harebrained scheme Will's come up with, you're going to need the watch. He's really not as ditzy as he makes himself look, honest." Merlin had never been on a mission with Will -- they were assigned to the same squad while in Boot Camp, but beyond that, they had their own teams -- but he knew how Will's mind worked. If he said 1901, he meant nineteen hours zero one and not a second more.

Kay raised a dubious brow.

"Think Arthur, only a whole lot less anal about everything else but the timing," Merlin said, and a twitch of amusement tugged at Kay's jaw.

"I've been hanging out with Gwaine too long if I think Arthur, but with less anal is not the image we want to go for here, but, yeah. Yeah, thanks for that." Kay snapped on the watch and checked the time again. "Come on, let's move, just stand up slowly at first --"

Kay shifted from the bed, holding out his hand for Merlin. Merlin didn't like how Kay was a little wobbly on his feet.

Wobblier than Merlin.

"I'm not dead," Merlin complained, swinging his feet to the ground. "And besides, what about you? You look --"

"Fine. I'm fine." Kay took Merlin's arm and hefted him up; they both wavered, using the other for balance. Kay was pale, and some flecks of colour appeared on the bandages.

"Kay --"

"Let's go," Kay said.

They moved to the stairs, and to Merlin, it sounded like they were a herd of elephant tromping down,
stepping on every loose floorboard, hitting every creaking piece. He was surprised that no one came to see what was going on, but he figured that since both Merlin and Kay were in bad shape, Aredian's men didn't think either of them were in any condition to run.

There was also the possibility that the sorcerers did something to the perimeter of the house, locking them in, but Merlin's magic wasn't in any condition to check, never mind counteract it.

They were halfway down when they heard a noise. Something clinked and rolled down the corridor. Kay leaned against the wall to brace himself, holding his gun steady. There wasn't the slightest waver, but his forehead was beading with exertion as he strained against a bodily tremble. Merlin clenched the railing with a death grip, glad that his legs were at least less rubbery this time, and took a single step back, staying out of Kay's line of fire.

Footsteps chased after a coin, the glint of it just visible in the hallway lights. There was mocking laughter from the other end of the corridor until the coin was retrieved. The footsteps retreated, returning to the kitchen. The conversation was jovial, good-natured, just a bunch of foreign kidnappers gossiping away.

It was a little surreal.

There was a creak from the other side of the stairs, loud footsteps stomping across the scuffed hardwood floors, a bit of sharp conversation and pacing. The shadows shifted and shifted again. Merlin tried to make out what the man was saying, but couldn't patch it together outside of a few words in Dutch.

"Fucking bunch of fucking mercenaries from fucking only God knows where don't fucking know how to change a fucking bog roll," Will said, emerging from the loo at the front of the house, tucking his shirt down his trousers. Merlin rolled his eyes, tapped Kay's arm, and held up five fingers.

Five fucking meant five other people in the house.

Kay frowned, as if wondering how Merlin knew that, but Kay nodded, and Will scratched the back of his neck in a I know you're there gesture that finished off with a subtle get ready signal that even Kay could understand.

Will made a show of wincing and moaning and groaning as he twisted his body this way and that way, trying to get the long tails of his button-down tucked in. "Which one of you pillocks punched me in the kidneys, anyway? Why did anyone even think that was a good idea? I'm on your bloody side, you collective set of numpties, and now I'm taking a piss every five minutes like I were preggo - -"

His voice faded a little when he entered the kitchen. Merlin caught the tail-end of a wave of Will's hand, imitating a round, pregnant belly. The conversation in the kitchen ebbed only for a second before someone snorted at Will and said, "Stop being a whiny Brit and take your bloody cards --"

A poker game. Merlin pinched the bridge of his nose.

Of course, Will would try to distract their kidnappers with a bloody poker game.

"I don't want those cards. I want fresh cards. How do I know you lot didn't look at my hand while I was shaking my pipe?"

"You have pipe to shake? And here I thought you were a girl, the way you're playing --"

"Oi, I'll have to know my dick's --"
The man who was on his mobile, pacing the room on their right side, abruptly cut off the conversation with a sharp "Ja." There was another pause, and "Ek sal die ander se hy is oppad. Ons sal hom reg kry om te trek."

Merlin exchanged glances with Kay.

*I'll tell the others that he's coming. We'll have him ready for transport,* the man had said. Merlin didn't waste any time wondering who he was talking about because the man came around the corner in a heavy thump of footfalls, and Niels came into view. Kay shifted his stance and Merlin held his breath.

"Look away if you're squeamish, ladies, but is it a bad thing if there's blood in your piss?" Will asked. There was a faint chuckle, a mocking, *you're an idiot,* and if there was an actual answer to Will's question, Merlin didn't hear it, because there were three nearly-simultaneous gunshots and a loud crash. Niels put on a burst of speed, drawing his gun at the same time. He saw Kay and Merlin on the stairs, and raised his hand, a touch of orange in his eyes right before --

Kay pulled the trigger and put him down with a single bullet to the brain.

They couldn't move down the stairs fast enough, but Kay was more coordinated than Merlin, which wasn't right, not when Kay's entire side was dotting red with blood through the fresh bandage. Merlin stumbled on the bottom step, nearly falling over completely when he crouched over Niels' body to take the dropped gun. When he stood up, Kay was at the corridor, shouldering the edge, ready to turn around and give Will cover --

Will went flying down the hall. He crashed into the far wall. Glass tinkled where the window broke. Plaster splintered and caved in. Wood creaked.

Will groaned, holding his head, but he was conscious at least. He grabbed for his gun --

It was swept aside by magic, just out of his reach --

And an invisible hand snatched him, holding him up by his throat until he couldn't touch the floor, not even with the tip of his toes. Will scratched at whatever was throttling him, but there wasn't anything there; his arms flailed a moment later, windmilling for purchase.

Kay turned from his hiding place and released two precise shots. There was a thump of a body falling, a matching thump of Will crumpling to the floor, and a shout.

"*Deskant!* *Dis deskant!* The other side!

Merlin understood that much without thinking too hard about it. He didn't need Kay's warning signals. He turned around just as another man emerged from the sitting room, the second door to the kitchen swinging behind him. The blast of magic hit him square in the chest. His breath was knocked out of him. His balance. His bloody *gravity.*

He was flung to the wall, to the ceiling, and *pinned* there.

Somehow, he'd managed to keep a grip on the gun. He blinked several times, trying to clear his vision, trying to *see* -- Merlin was only dimly aware of a firefight going on in the corner, that he had to stop the man before he had the jump on Kay --

He couldn't see. He couldn't --

He fired twice. The man didn't go down.
They had to get out of here. They had to. There was no way that anything would have gone well even if they had tried to escape. Aredian would continue to use Will and Kay against Merlin. He would put Kay to work somewhere else to pay off the debts he owed for the medical care. He would kill them just to get Merlin to cooperate.

Merlin couldn't cooperate. Whatever was on that hard drive that Aredian wanted so badly -- the schematics to the prototype? Something else? -- Merlin wasn't going to let him have it. It was Arthur's legacy --

Will managed to scramble for cover. He was returning fire, taking care to conserve his bullets. However that he'd managed to steal the guns in the first place without anyone noticing, he hadn't managed to get a few extra magazines while he was at it. Merlin would ask him why and how later, much later, when they were out of this mess, at a pub somewhere with a boatload of beer in front of them --

The sorcerer cleared the stairs and turned to Kay and Will. He raised his arm. Will spotted him, whirled on his heel, his gun following suit. He pulled the trigger -- he must have, because Will was like Gwaine, he never missed, never, ever, ever.

The shot went wild. Will's arms were pinned over his head.

"Ag fok man, kan jy nie eers een ou uitvat nie? Ek het al die ander twee vir jou gedoen," the sorcerer mocked.

Oh, for pity's sake, you can't take down one man? I've taken the other two for you.

Merlin blinked, struggled, but he couldn't move.

He saw Kay whip around as if struck, a welt of red appearing on his cheek, but there was no sign of where it had come from, or what had been the cause. Kay didn't pay his injury any mind, and turned around again, firing one shot as cover. He twisted back and saw the sorcerer was occupied, torn between the advancing men on the other end of the corridor and needing backup, yesterday --

It couldn't end like this. It couldn't. Will's plans were half-arsed even on a good day, with a great beginning, a large cock-up in the middle and an immense success at the end -- Will would get a promotion if only he could keep his dick in his pants and his mouth in his head --

And --

Just. No.

If the mercenaries won the upper hand here, if they kept them from escaping, it would be the end. They'd finish Kay off entirely, because he'd shown where his loyalties were. Good mercenaries were a dime a dozen, and Kay was just another soldier.

They might keep Will to continue to control Merlin, but they wouldn't be sitting down with him at the kitchen table for a game of poker that they would lose, only they didn't know it yet. No, they would have Will beaten to an inch of his life. They would cut him open. They would bleed him dry. For every disobedience, for every resistance, for everything that Merlin didn't do fast enough, they would hurt Will and they would kill him, and --

No --

He fought it.
This couldn't be the fate that was meant for them. It was wrong, alien, foreign.

He struggled against the sorcerer's magic. He pushed and pulled. He squirmed and shoved and thrashed. He was in a metaphorical magical web, tangled in sticky spider silk. There was no give. Merlin gasped, weak and defeated, but another line of blood appeared on Kay's chest, across the collarbone, cutting the bandage neatly in two at the shoulder. Kay didn't make a sound, he continued on as if it hadn't happened.

Because he had no other choice. There had never been any other choice. If they gave up, it meant the end of everything.

Merlin couldn't give up.

Merlin reached deep, deep down. He went as far into himself as he could go. He went past the rush of blood through his veins, the crackle of electricity in his body, the twining and untwining of DNA. He went to that spot between heartbeats, in that complete, utter perfect silence, in that darkness where there was now a light, and found a boundless strength that wasn't his own, a will and a resilience that stood fast against the pain.

Arthur.

Arthur Arthur Arthur.

The sorcerer's spell faltered. Merlin slipped from the ceiling and halfway down the wall. A gunshot cracked, and Merlin saw the bullet leave the barrel of Will's gun, the puff of gun smoke propelling it forward, the tiny shockwave that vibrated the air --

Time expanded and snapped into place in a dizzying duality of realities, one overlapping the other, and a cascade of events happened in double time --

Kay whipped away from laying down cover fire, the bandage at his shoulder loose and unfurled, a fresh cut, razor-sharp and thin, splitting his skin just under the collarbone again. The sorcerer's concentration had been broken by whatever Merlin had done. The sorcerer's magic faltered and Merlin dropped from the ceiling again. Whatever was holding Will in the corner, his arms over his head, had weakened and Will dropped his arm and shot wild, again.

And Arthur --

Arthur was alive.

Arthur.

A flare of magic erupted from Merlin's body, manic and uncontrollable. Aredian's sorcerer shouted in alarm, a warning full of confusion and fear and panic. Merlin's magic tore through the tingling sensation that had lingered in his body days after he had awakened, ever since the first time he realized that his magic was slowly coming back. It felt like he was being ripped open, shedding a skin that didn't belong, that was too tight around him. Something closed around his body -- the sorcerer's spider web? Something else, more sinister? -- and tightened, twisting and twining until he gasped for air.

He fought it too.

Because there was something to live for. Kay. Will.

Arthur.
Something broke.

There was a distant, magical *tinkling*. A barely-there, ephemeral *glittering*.

And chains that he hadn't known he had worn his entire life shattered, the links showering down in a diamond-bright cascade, a thick mist through which everything was suddenly more clear.

Magic coursed through Merlin's body like it never had before. He felt every bruise in his body, every break, the pain magnified a thousandfold by the reawakening of deadened nerves suddenly firing again and again.

There was a thunderous crack.

The house shifted an inch from the foundations, perched precariously over the basement, teetering and tottering, the floors creaking in protest. A board popped loose from the staircase, a window split neatly in two, a door fell off its hinges.

Merlin didn't know he was screaming until he couldn't scream anymore.

Whatever those chains had been, they'd been there a long time. They'd been holding Merlin *back*. They'd been keeping his magic prisoner, under control, and now his magic was *free*.

And vengeful.

The damage that the EMP disruptor had done to Merlin's magic was washed away and healed as if it had never been. The spider web of the sorcerer's spell was unfurled and Merlin fell to the ground hard, the shock going through his knees and up his spine.

There was another disconnection then, in that moment, the sensation of being out of time, *ahead* of time. The spell holding Will snapped and Will reacted with the speed of long practice and training. He fired one bullet, only one, and the sorcerer was dead.

He turned around, but not in time; another sorcerer came around the corner and swept a hand in the air, knocking both Will and Kay off their feet. A great weight crushed down on them.

It was the actual crack of a gunshot that pulled Merlin into the here-and-now, in time to see the sorcerer's head snap back and his body fall under him. Merlin turned, raising a hand without knowing what he was doing or why he was doing it, and a guttural sound escaped his mouth, the syllables shredded by a throat already torn to tatters from screaming.

Merlin crushed the sorcerer just as he stepped into the doorway, beating him to the punch. The man had been in mid-spell, but Merlin completed it for him in a single word and turned it back on him.

Merlin slipped and collapsed. His vision was narrowing and fading. There were spots of light around the edges, and those edges were fuzzy, grey, turning black.

There was another gunshot. Two.

A distant voice, like an echo down a tunnel: "There were *six*, you arse. *Six*, not five."

"He must've come in while I was in the loo," Will said, the shrug audible in his voice. Merlin laid down with a faint wave of amusement, because, of course. *Will*.

"We have to go. Now. That other bloke? The one who came in while you were in the loo? I heard him say that Aredian was on his way. They're going to transport Merlin somewhere else."
"What about us?" Will asked. Merlin moaned when he felt a hand slide under his arm, tugging him up. He was fairly certain that he was pleading, _leave me here, I'll be all right, just need a minute_, but no one answered him.

"What do you think? Extra baggage he doesn't need, aren't we?" Kay said, and there was a pinkish shade around Kay, an aura that Merlin hadn't noticed before, and it flared red in random spots, pulsing and throbbing in something like pain. But whatever he was feeling, however injured he was, Kay took a deep breath and helped Will get Merlin to his feet. "There's a car, at least?"

"End of the block," Will said. "Just need to get there."

Merlin's body swayed, and he recognized the sensation of being _moved_, yet once again, and without conscious decision from him. This time, though, he was aware that it was Kay and Will who were doing the moving, and he somehow managed to convince his body to respond. It was feeble and uncoordinated and several degrees of embarrassing, if anyone ever shot a video of this, but they made it to wherever they were going.

And stopped.

"Door's done in," Will said, jiggling the handle. He gave it a couple of good kicks, but it held firm. "Must be a key somewhere --"

Merlin opened his eyes. They were in the kitchen; the sink was piled full of dishes and the nearby garbage was overflowing with takeaway containers and Styrofoam plates and rotting food. There was an upended chair nearby, a blood splatter along the wall, and Merlin thought he saw an arm on the floor just out of the corner of his eye.

The lock wasn't anything special. A doorknob, a deadbolt.

"I'll check the front, here, hold him," Will said.

Kay took on most of Merlin's weight. Merlin said, "N… no. Won't… It's magic --"

He couldn't get the damn words out. He was sleepy and tired and drunk. Drunk on this power that was thrumming through his veins, that was revelling in its newfound freedom. Whatever had kept it trapped, _wherever_ it had been trapped, it must have been small and cramped, because Merlin's magic was zipping around with the glee of a soaked puppy right after its bath, rubbing itself on every surface. It was taking all of Merlin's concentration to keep his magic from going completely _mutters_.

Will came back to the kitchen, and Merlin scowled, because he hadn't realized that he'd left. "He's right. We're boxed in. All the doors. The windows. Take a look --"

He used the butt of his gun to pound at the small window at eye level. The glass broke, but instead of spraying outside, the slivers tilted ever so slightly, as if something was holding it up from the other side.

"Boxed in," Kay agreed, but there was a hard edge to his voice. "I suppose we should have kept one of these pillocks alive."

"Don't think it would've mattered much," Will said. "It were cast from out, means this lot were trapped in with us whether they liked it or not."

"Aredian?" Kay asked.

"No, I'm thinking that other bloke, the one who kicked my bollocks in --" Will paused. "Never mind,
you weren't there for that. Those were some fun times, let me tell you. You missed out -- I'd look out for him if I were you, he's a slick one. He's like all the evil bastards from Hollywood movies rolled up into one --"

Will was panicking. If they didn't have a way out, they were *fucked*. Kay was keeping calm, but Merlin could feel the adrenaline drain out of his body and his body begin to sag in both exhaustion and defeat.

Aredian was coming to the house. Other mercenaries -- other *sorcerers* -- were coming.

Arthur was out there. Arthur was alive. Merlin could *feel* him again.

Merlin's magic flared. The door creaked under the strain.

There was no finesse in it. No looking for the weak spots, no trying to untangle what was done, no spells. Merlin's magic pushed and pushed until there was no more flex or give in the thing holding them trapped here.

Then, like a battering ram, it eased off before rallying for a second shove, this one drawing magic from every millimetre of Merlin's body to power it through.

The door blew off its hinges. It broke clean through the shield keeping them prisoner.

The glistening edges of the broken shield, cracked and jagged like glass, were visible in the dark; bits and pieces of it dangled from where the breaks met before it faded entirely.

Satisfied, Merlin's magic settled into his core, seething in contentment the way a prize heavyweight fighter seethed, perfectly aware that nothing could stand up against him.

"Oh, I knew there was a reason I kept you around," Will said, taking Merlin's arm and draping it over his shoulder again. "You're handy to have around, you are."

"Keep… telling you… that," Merlin said, the words coming out easier now that he didn't have to expend all his concentration to keep his bloody magic from having a temper tantrum. He wished he could be happier that it was back, that it hadn't been permanent, that *Arthur was still alive*, but his body was failing him, and all he wanted was to go somewhere nice and warm where he could close his eyes and sleep for a year. *Just a bit more*, he told himself. "You… never believe… me."

"Sure I do," Will said, his tone encouraging. "But there's no need to feed your ego, is there?"

They walked down the steps. Merlin even managed to help. Every once in a while, Kay's fingers around his waist would dig in a little too tight, but it couldn't be because Merlin was slipping. It could only be because Kay was in pain.

A sidelong glance supported his conclusion. The bandages had been white and pristine only minutes ago.

They were soaked through and an angry red now.

Merlin didn't know where they were going. It almost felt like they were trudging along in circles. Maybe Will was lost -- which was unlikely even on the worst day. Maybe they'd gone in the wrong direction and were working their way back.

"There. I see him --" Will said.
Merlin raised his head and looked in the general direction that they were facing, but Will was looking somewhere else, somewhere to the right. There was a dark grey van parked on the corner, the engine running, the headlights off, the wheels pointing out as if the driver fully expected to need to peel out of there right now. There was a single person in the car, behind the wheel. Every few seconds, he stuck his head out of the shadows of the car and pressed his face against the glass, covering his face against the glare of the streetlights.

Merlin didn't know how Will had convinced the doctor to help them. As grateful as he was, Merlin couldn't help but perversely think that Will could have taught the doctor how to be subtle.

The grey van's headlights flashed.

Will groaned. "I suppose I should've told him to... I don't know, how do you say keep it on the down-low in French?"

Merlin raised a hand and feebly swatted Will on the back of his head. "Come on," Will said, but he made them wait for another ten seconds to make sure the roads were clear.

It was ten seconds too long.

They were halfway across the median when a car rounded the corner, the headlights cutting a beam through the dark. The black sedan came to a skidding stop.

"Shite," Will said, and he pulled them along faster. "Go. Get to the van --"

Kay didn't ask questions, and Merlin wasn't so sure he wanted to know who it was. They both kept moving, leaning against the other. Kay grit his teeth and moaned, for a moment there, Merlin thought they would both go down.

Merlin risked a glance over his shoulder.

Will's gun was up; he was aiming at the car. The car's engine rumbled and roared but the sedan didn't advance. Will retreated. It took him three steps before he reached Merlin and Kay. He blindly fumbled to take Kay's arm, pulling them both toward the van.

The van lurched forward so fast that it clipped the rear fender of the car parked in front of it. The doctor twisted the wheel too much and almost did an U-turn away from them. The van jarred to a stop and the rear passenger door clicked before automatically sliding open.

There was a baby booster seat in the back seat.

"Venez! Venez vite!" The doctor waved his arm in urgent invitation.

Will pulled Kay along. Kay was pale and drawn and holding onto his gun by sheer force of will. Merlin didn't know how long Kay would last. He tried to help, hating that he was stronger than Kay right now. "Come on. Move. Move --"

A man in a long black trench coat emerged from the sedan. Even with the streetlights, it was hard to make him out. It wasn't until he'd advanced into the shadowed spaces between the overhead lights that Merlin was able to identify him -- the scarified African with eyes so black that his own magic couldn't shine through.

A cold chill ran down Merlin's spine. He met the man's gaze for the first time, brief and fleeting, and
it twigged a memory.

He'd been half-drunk, licking his wounds after an one-night stand that had gone all sorts of wrong, an one-night stand that had been supposed to make him feel better after the worst break-up of his entire life. Will had disappeared somewhere between I got to take a piss and I'm only getting the next round because you're too bladdered to walk when a pretty girl slid in the booth next to Merlin.

"I can take care of your problem for you," she said.

Merlin was drunk, but not drunk enough to mistake what she'd said for sexual innuendo, but he stared at her owlishly for a long time, blinking slowly. "Why?"

"Because you're such a nice guy. You don't deserve whatever's been done to you."

"How do you know I'm a nice guy? I could be a complete utter bastard. Maybe I deserve it," Merlin said, and if he pouted a little bit because he kind of did feel like he had deserved having half his shite stolen by a bloke who hadn't even had the decency to blow Merlin, and couldn't be bothered to even offer to get a towel to wipe off the mess he'd made when he'd come all over Merlin's chest.

Maybe he shouldn't have drunk so much.

"Honey," the woman said, her voice suddenly three octaves lower in a baritone bass that resounded with the thump-thump of a heavy drum, "You're a nice guy. Too nice."

Every hackle Merlin had went up in warning, and his magic swirled and coiled in protective reflex, ready to sucker-punch the pretty girl who was bloody well possessed by a God, her eyes so dark with it that he could barely see the power shining through.

And that was when Will decided to show up to save him. He slammed down the pints on the table, jerked his thumb at the woman, and said, "You're wasting your time with this one. He likes dick. Now, me, on the other hand, I like tits, and I especially like yours. I don't suppose you'd be inclined to lifting your shirt and rubbing them all over my face, would you?"

She'd smiled thinly at Will and broadly at Merlin and told Merlin to call her if he ever changed his mind and scrawled her number in red ink on his pale skin, and in the dark light of the bar it looked like splotches of blood and it scared the shite out of him.

Merlin had never seen her again. He expressly forbade Will from calling the number. He never learned why she had targeted him, and he never figured out who or what the woman's voudoun was, but he'd sacrificed the time he should have been using to write a lab paper in order to raid the library, and he knew enough -- he remembered enough -- to know that a voudoun priest's power came directly from a God.

His knees buckled under him. Fucking hell. How was he going to protect them from a sorcerer who was powered up by a God? His magic might be buzzing under the surface, stronger than he had ever felt it, but he was weaker than a kitten right now and he couldn't remember a single spell to save his life -- to save all their lives --

"Goddamn it, Merls! Just a little more! Hang on!"

Will managed several gunshots before he was swatted aside like he was nothing more than an annoying fly. He rolled across the road until he was nearly to the sidewalk, his gun just out of reach. Merlin was wrenched out of Kay's grasp and dragged toward the sedan.
Merlin's clothes weren't any protection against the asphalt. His shirt rode up his chest. The gravel cut into his skin.

Into his tattoo.

And Merlin remembered.

Spells.

Kay staggered against the van and shot blindly. The bullets sparked against a shield -- *flick-flick-flick* -- and stopped. Kay had the sense to save his bullets. Will rolled to the kerb, grabbed his gun, fired two shots before coming to the same conclusion as Kay. He surged forward at a limping run instead -

Car engines roared in the distance, seemingly coming from all directions. Merlin suddenly understood why the priest hadn't emerged from the car right away when he'd arrived -- it was because there was backup, and he'd called them, and they were coming. Other people who would stop them. Who would kill Will and Kay for trying to escape. Who would hunt down the doctor's family and slaughter them in front of him before finishing him off. Who would --

They were *fucked*.

Merlin came to a dizzying, dragging stop at the voudoun priest's feet. The man's lips curled in a cocksure smirk and he raised both hands, fingers curled like tiger claws. The incantation spilling from his lips was low and guttural, a subsonic pitch curling around the syllables like fingernails on a chalkboard. It was the sound of something no human should ever hear, something foreign and alien and not of this world, the slow, digging rhythm of something crawling out of the very pits of perditions, claws scratching over gravel.

Merlin slapped his hands over his ears.

"*Run!*" he shouted. "Goddamn it, Will. *Run!*"

There were moments when even the slow pass of seconds could stretch out into an eternity. Every time he kissed Arthur. That perfect synchronicity when the sun rose or descended over the horizon and cast a golden halo around the crown of Arthur's head. When Merlin first felt the EMP disruptor blast through him and *cut* him like a scythe, severing him from his magic, his heart from his soul.

And this one:

The anguish in Will's eyes, the desperate refusal, the growing defeat, the rebellious acceptance. Will skid to a stop, coming to a crashing halt anyway against the sorcerer's shield, and pressed his hand against it.

He sank to his knees and pounded his fist on the shield.

It was an entire conversation in the blink of an eye.

*I can't leave you --*

*Go, you fucking pillock. I'm giving you this chance --*

*Merlin --*

*I don't even know if it's going to work. I'm so tired --*
Arthur will kill me dead if I leave you behind --

If you don't run, I'll kill you myself --

Will licked his lips and shook his head and staggered to his feet and somehow the van was right behind him, Kay pulling him inside --

The stretch of time didn't simply resume; it raced along at double-speed. The priest finished his incantation just as the van reached the end of the street. The van rubber-banded into an abrupt stop, the rear wheels squealing without purchase, a creak of metal bending and creasing as if a giant's hand had reached down to pick them up --

Merlin touched his tattoo, his fingers brushing the coiled mangle of runes, and he bowed his head against the asphalt to hide his eyes.

He didn't need much. A nudge to the wild wild magic that was just looking for an excuse. A force of will to guide it where he needed it to go. An exhalation as he released every ounce of strength he had.

The spell was meant to knockback, to create a bubble of personal space, to push away anything that was too close or anything that Merlin wanted out of his path.

With this much magic surging through his veins, released without constraint, the spell was a knockback of nuclear proportions --

Cars parked along the sides of the streets were shoved against the kerb and knocked over. Buildings that had stood since before the French Revolution rattled from their foundations and windows shattered inward. Streetlamps were toppled in a shower of sparks, and for a moment the street was set alight as if it were the bright of day before they were doused in the pitch.

The priest's sedan went screeching backward, the engine still rumbling, still running, before it was flipped onto its side by a force beyond its reckoning. The priest threw up his arms in a cross to block the force of Merlin's magic, his own chanting interrupted, and skidded backward until it was too much and he was thrown against the underside of his car.

There was a groan. A strangled sound. A muffled thump.

The force that was holding the van in the air abruptly let go. The van crashed down, bounced, and screeched forward in a stutter-start as the wheels finally found some contact with the ground.

There was a shout --

"Stop! Wait! Go back!"

-- but the van kept going, screaming and skidding, and finally, it was gone.

Merlin slumped flat to the ground, drained of energy. He turned his head to the side, gasping for breath, little stars appearing in his vision until he realized they weren't stars, but flames.

Something sparked.

The car exploded.

The shockwave juddered through Merlin. He coughed and gasped. He turned his head away from
the smell of burning flesh and pushed himself to his feet. His legs were as wobbly as a newborn foal's, and he only managed a few measly steps before two cars blocked him in.

ooOOoo

The safe house in Paris was only a safe house as long as they didn't attract attention, and several large vehicles with borrowed license plates parked in front of the building was tantamount to a flashing neon sign with an arrow pointing down on them.

Arthur didn't think that his mother's summer home was under surveillance. He didn't even think that anyone even knew that he still owned it. When he turned nineteen and his mother's trust fund ceased to be a trust fund and became a full-fledged inheritance, Uther had lectured about the impracticalities of owning property in a foreign country, even if it was one of his few last ties to his mother's side of the family. Arthur had made noise about selling the house to avoid the taxes associated with it, made a few phone calls to lawyers, and that had been that.

Uther didn't need to know that Arthur had never followed through.

As far as he knew, people either weren't aware of or had forgotten that he owned not only this house, but others across Europe. The Dubois family was old money, the sort that was tied back to Merovingian royalty, but he hadn't been in contact with any of them in a very long time. He wasn't even sure if he remembered his grandmother's first name.

Thérèse? Béatrice?

It didn't matter.

While he suspected that Olaf, by virtue of MI-5, had done enough digging into Arthur's finances to know what he spent on his last trip to the pharmacy -- right down to the brand of condoms and the chocolate bars he'd thrown in for Merlin's sweet tooth -- by the time that anyone came down on the house to investigate, Arthur and his team would be gone.

They only stopped here for Gwen and Morgana to shower and change, and while they took two showers each and drained the hot water tank before any of the men could have a turn, no one complained. Someone had picked up enough take-away to feed an entire army base, and by the time they finished eating, Arthur was surprised that no one had eaten the containers, too.

And now, they were packing up to leave. Arthur wanted to make certain that the team was established at a new location before he went to meet with Balinor.

Major Emrys came into the kitchen where he was bagging up the last of the rubbish -- a job that he could have given someone else, but when he was at loose ends, he was at loose ends, and he needed something to do while Morgana debated the merits of a third shower while Leon tried to talk her out of it.

"How are they?"

"Physically fine," Major -- Hunith said. She shook out the coat in her arms and pulled it on. Arthur took that as a sign that Leon had dragged Morgana away from the bathroom, probably with promises
of a hot tub and spa days, and looked over the kitchen one last time, making sure they weren't leaving anything behind. The kitchen was just the way they'd left it, and while it wouldn't pass a forensic examination, a cursory examination wouldn't make anyone think that someone had been here.

The timing couldn't be better, either. Arthur had retained a monthly cleaning services to keep the house and all the furnishings from disintegrating under the weight of encroaching dust. They weren't due for another two days, and he hoped it would be that long before anyone figured out that Arthur and his team were still alive and started looking under every stone in search for them. The cleaning services would take care of any remaining traces and smudge whatever fingerprints they'd left behind.

He tied the garbage bag shut. Hunith was looking at him strangely when he looked up.

"What is it?"

"What Morgana said --"

Arthur held up a hand. "Not up for discussion."

"Arthur, you have to consider --"

"Are you giving up, Hunith? No, you're not. Deep in your heart, you're not. So why should I?" He leaned against the kitchen counter, the edge digging into his hip, and rubbed his face with one hand.

Morgana's words still resounded in his head.

*Morgana was drowning in one of Leon's over-sized shirts, but they'd found an old trunk of clothing in the upstairs bedroom that could have belonged to Arthur's mother when she was younger, or to one of his aunts -- he wasn't sure. He hadn't been at the house for a long time, and he knew that no one had come here to clean things out after she had died.*

*She stood there, her arms crossed, her wet hair dripping down her back and onto the floor, watching as Arthur packed another case and gave it to Pellinor. Pellinor balanced it on top of another box and carried both toward the garage; they'd bring the vehicles in one by one, close to the door, and load the latest batch of SUVs that Owain and Bohrs had appropriated.*

*Arthur spared a glance for Morgana and paused when he saw how lost she was. Her hands were on her elbows and the knuckles were white; there was a tightening strain around her mouth and the beginnings of a crease on her brow. She'd been through extreme trauma, the psychological upheaval more than most could handle, but she was keeping it together as well as anyone could have expected.*

"There'll be food in a bit," Arthur said, squeezing Morgana's hand.

*She threw her arms around his waist, then, burying her face in his shoulder. He stood there awkwardly for a minute before remembering that this was his sister, that, even though she hadn't left Leon's side ever since the rescue, she had thought that he was dead and -- He held her tightly. He didn't even realize that she was crying until he felt her tears through the fabric of his sleeve.*

*I hope you're not going to blow your nose on my shirt, too," Arthur said, kissing the top of*
Morgana's head. "I only have so many clothes."

Morgana's body stuttered in a half-laugh, half-sob. She punched his arm, but she didn't pull away.

Pellinor came back for another load, saw that Arthur wasn't ready, and discreetly went somewhere else.

"Is Morgause --"

"I don't know," Arthur admitted. Between the smoke bombs meant to distract Morgause and make it difficult for her to cast spells, never mind hit her target, and the injuries that he'd managed to inflict, somewhere in there, Morgause had cast her own smoke bomb and had evaded him. After the fire started to spread and the sprinkler systems activated, Arthur didn't want to be delayed. Not by Morgause, not her people, and definitely not the whole of the emergency response services. His goal had been to get Morgana out, and even if he had a personal agenda here, eliminating Morgause hadn't been in the cards.

He winced a little when Morgana squeezed him a little too tight. There was a large bruise forming on his right side where Morgause had gotten in a roundhouse kick. No matter what he thought about that woman, she was a good fighter.

Too good.

Arthur perversely thought that it was unfair that the enemy weren't simply good at combat -- they had to have magic on top of it.

He eased his hold around Morgana and leaned back a bit so that he could see her face. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her nose was messy and he wasn't even going to mention the blotches on her cheeks. She might eviscerate him. "We're not going to let anyone else grab you, all right?"

Morgana nodded and sniffled. She wiped her face with her palms and nodded again. Her eyes went down and her shoulders slumped and everything about her body language screamed wrongwrongwrong and Arthur suddenly didn't want to hear what she was gearing up to say.

"That's not... It's not --"

"Morgana, we can talk later. The sooner we --"

"Will you shut up?" Morgana snapped. "That's not -- it's not. Goddamn it, Arthur. I don't know how to say this --"

"So don't," Arthur said, pulling away from Morgana entirely. He turned his back on her and inspected the contents of another case before securing it.

There was a long silence, a shuffle of footsteps on the carpet, and for an instant, Arthur thought that Morgana took his advice. He didn't want her to talk about the kidnapping or how she was treated or what they'd done to her until she was ready; pushing herself to say something wasn't going to help anyone.

"We overheard them talking," Morgana said, and Arthur's shoulders stiffened. He let the lid of another case slam shut even though he wasn't done packing it. "They said they've been double-crossed."
Arthur shifted a little, meeting Morgana's eyes briefly. Double-crossed by whom?

"They were supposed to bring Merlin to them, but they didn't. Someone at the NWO was late, or got the directions wrong, or something. I think his name was Bryn. When they got there they..." Morgana's lips pressed shut, thin and white with concern. She looked ill.

Arthur turned to look at her and abruptly tore his gaze away. The sinking feeling in his stomach, the one that had been following him ever since the testing grounds, had hit rock bottom, broken through the crust, and kept on dropping.

"They talked to someone on the phone, someone who was supposed to have been there to get him," Morgana said. "They talked to Will."

And stopped there. She heaved a shaky breath and her eyes filled with tears again.

"It's about Merlin, Arthur," Morgana said. "They said he's... he's dead."

Arthur stared down the hall, at the old landscape portrait of rows upon rows of purple fields against a pale blue sky, a horse-drawn carriage in the distance, ambling away. He stared through it, at nothing at all, seeing nothing but the black pinpoint of pain on the horizon, kept at bay only by the long denial of the potential truth. He'd been holding on to hope for so long that he didn't want to even entertain the possibility that he was wrong. His hands clenched into fists, and a rage tore through him; he struck the pile of cases and weapons and scattered them down the corridor.

"No," Arthur said, turning to Morgana with such venom in his voice that he didn't even register how she winced, nor how she quailed. "No. Absolutely the fuck not. I don't care what you heard. You heard wrong. Just like your vision was wrong. Merlin's not dead. He's not. Do you understand me? He's not dead."

Arthur didn't see Leon arrive. Leon put his arms around Morgana and pulled her close to him; he gave Arthur a glare that wasn't unlike the heated look that he'd given Morgana bare moments before.

Perceval was on the stairs, holding the case that had slid all the way down to the first level. Pellinor had come out from wherever she had gone and looked as if he wished he'd stayed there. Lamorak and Galahad were behind Leon and Morgana, and they averted their eyes guiltily.

Arthur knew that guilt. He'd seen it in the mirror often enough. It was why he rarely looked in his reflection anymore.

"Goddamn it. Don't you dare think for one second that we've lost them. Don't you fucking give up on them. Not on our Merlin. Not on Kay."

Arthur's voice had broken toward the end, and he turned around, picking up one of the empty cases, roughly shoving the guns into their slots, counting the ammunition that they had left. He was aware of the eyes on him.

Everyone left without a word.


He wrenched his arm away from her. This time, when he heard the shuffle of footsteps across the carpet, it really was Morgana walking away. Arthur waited until she was gone, until everyone had gone, before sagging against the wall and burying his face in his hands.

A gentle touch drew Arthur's hand from his face, and he couldn't meet Hunith's eyes. He stared at her collar instead, at the curl of fabric that had finally given up and bowed under the pressure of the last few days.

"I'm scared," Arthur whispered. "I'm scared that he's gone and I'm never going to get him back. I know everyone's thinking it. God, even I'm thinking it. I'm thinking this has all gone to shite and there's no turning around and doing it over until we get it right. There's no exercise in the world that could've prepared us for this --"

Hunith placed a hand on Arthur's shoulder, and Arthur's breath hitched.

"But I can't think. I can't. If I let myself go down that path, then I'm lost. We all are. I can't let that happen. So, I don't care. I don't. Will might have told Morgause that Merlin's dead, but it makes no sense. Why would he kill Merlin? And why wouldn't Merlin…"

He trailed off. Why wouldn't Merlin use his magic to defend, to protect himself? Arthur had made him swear to it. If the situation looked bleak, if it was bleak, Merlin was to do anything and everything that he could to ensure that he would come back to Arthur. Even if it meant revealing his secret.

It was Will who had said that Merlin was dead. There had to be a reason why Will would want Morgause to know -- to think -- that Merlin was dead, but Arthur couldn't fathom what it might be. Every time he tried, his mind latched onto those words.

They said he's dead.

"I won't believe it. Not unless I've seen it with my own eyes. I can't keep doing this if I know he's gone, Hunith. I can't. So it's not true. It's not true until it is."

He raised his chin and braved a look into her eyes. Her gaze was watery but strong, her mouth set and determined, and she did the last thing he ever would have expected her to do, all things considered.

She hugged him.

She had to pull him down to do it, and he resisted at first, because he had no right to this, no right at all. He didn't deserve the comfort she was giving him, the reassurance. She was sharing her hope and her belief with him, and he clung to it for all that he was worth.

It was his only lifeline right now. Morgana's words had nearly broken him.

"Don't ever give up," Hunith said, her voice so soft that he had to strain to hear, even from this close. "Because he wouldn't. He wouldn't give up on himself. He wouldn't give up on you."

"He wouldn't give up on anyone," Arthur said, his laugh dry and hoarse, his chest aching. When
Hunith let him go, the pain was less, but still there, burning like a flickering flame at the end of its wick, coming too close to the melted wax where it would drown and take him with it.

"He wouldn't," Hunith said, and she blinked several times and looked away.

They finished cleaning up in the kitchen in silence. Arthur flicked the lights off, carrying the garbage bag with him into the next room.

"Arthur!" Frantic footfalls came down the corridor, stumbling over the raised step. "Arthur! Kay's tracker just came on!"

Arthur dropped the garbage bag. He squeezed past Hunith and followed Lamorak into the main room. Their equipment was in increasing states of disassembly, but some of the computers were still running. Nearly everyone had crowded around the terminal, but they cleared a space for Arthur.

"Where?"

"18e arrondissement," Gwaine said, affecting a French accent that was pitched a little higher than usual. His nerves were showing, but he hid them with a casual flip through the maps. They were new maps. Lucan had gotten better maps at a bookstore, though Arthur was damned if he knew when Lucan even had the time to do that in-between their missions and their arrival at the safe house.

"Nothing from Merlin yet," Lancelot said, answering the question that was at the very tip of Arthur's tongue. He very quickly added, "But that doesn't mean anything. Maybe he just didn't get to his gear --"

Arthur interrupted him. "Did anyone run a trace on Will's phone?"

Lamorak shoved at Gareth. "I were working on it --"

"Yeah, you were working too slow --"

"No, don't do it like --"

"I know what I'm doing, thanks --"

Arthur tuned them both out and tilted the screen. He stared at the blinking dot and chewed on a fingernail. The coordinates didn't change, but that wouldn't mean much; the tracker was good to within a hundred metres, easily within line of sight if there wasn't anything obscuring their path.

"Oh, shite," Gwaine said, twitching. "Shite, shite. It's the 18th, all right, but right out, in the banlieu. Aubervilliers. It'll take us --"

"Thirty-six minutes to get there," Bedivere said, looking at his watch. "Thirty-four if we leave right the fuck now."

Everyone scrambled. No one waited for Arthur. It took one sharp whistle to get everyone to freeze.

"Leon. Get everyone to the next location. Gwaine, you're staying on the maps. Gareth, follow Will's mobile. Perce, Lance, Lamorak, Galahad, Bedivere, Owain, you're with me. We're taking two cars, Leon, you get the rest. We'll meet up as soon as we know we're not being followed." Arthur paused. "Move."

The team scattered, and this time, there were two squads rushing in different directions instead of everyone doing the same thing. Arthur felt a knot unfurl in his chest and firmly tamped down the
"I'm coming, too," Gwaine said, hopping to his feet.

"You're staying on comms and you're eyes on the satellite and you're going to talk us through. That's what you're doing." Arthur didn't wait around for Gwaine's retort and followed the others toward the corridor where the unpacked equipment was still scattered.

"You want the sat phone?"

"Leave it with Leon. Give me a disposable," Arthur said. Lamorak tossed him a mobile, a cheap plastic thing with maybe eight minutes left on it, and he shoved it in his front pocket.

He geared up with whatever was left -- there wouldn't be time to rummage through whatever was already loaded to get everyone's preferred tools -- and was pushing an earwig into his ear at the same time that he climbed in the lead car, Owain at the wheel. Hunith was standing on the kerb just as they pulled away, and he gave her a firm nod.

She didn't answer. She went back inside.

In the rearview mirror, Arthur watched Bedivere take an alternate route; they would congregate on the location seconds apart with the intention of blocking off any vehicular escape. Gwaine's voice was all business over the radio, but Arthur could tell that he was angry at being left behind. He'd become one of Merlin's closest friends, of course he wanted to get a few punches in if he could manage it, and that was the problem. He couldn't manage it. He wouldn't be able to keep up, not with that leg, and Arthur didn't want any more losses, any more casualties.

There was the constant drumming of fingers on a laptop and nothing from Gwaine for a few minutes. Arthur exchanged glances with Owain, who shrugged, but it was Lance, in the back seat, who winced. "Gwaine?"

There was no answer.

"Gwaine," Arthur said, and his own voice sounded deadly, even to him, "Now is not the time to pull the silent treatment. I will shoot you."

"Hold onto your bloody cock, Arthur -- oh, shite, sorry, Merlin's Mum. It's just this poncy piece of shite laptop? Not pulling the feed quick as -- fuckshite --"

The radio crackled. Arthur winced and tiled his head, Owain nearly jerked the wheel into oncoming traffic.

"Fuckshite fuck --"

"Goddamn it, Gwaine, use your words." Perceval's voice was a whipcrack over the radio.

"There's a fire burning right where you're going, smoke's obscuring the sat feed, EMS is on site at the last image --"

Gareth's voice interrupted. "Kay's tracker is synched with Will's GPS, they're both moving north, eight klicks from last known --"

"I'm listening to the police band now," Lucan said. "Reporting shots fired, a potential drive-by at one of the houses in the neighbourhood a block over, a car bomb, one db, but it's not --"
Arthur's insides went cold. *Db* stood for dead body.

"-- I repeat, it's *not* Merlin, they're talking about a different bloke, dark skin --"

The relief that washed over him didn't melt the ice one bit. "You're supposed to be *moving*," Arthur snarled.

"We're en route," Leon cut in.

Arthur worked his jaw. "Gwaine. Alternate our route. Anything to get us closer to the trackers."

"What about the explosion --" Bedivere's voice was low and quiet over the radio.

"If the police is on site now, we'll get blocked in," Owain said. "No traffic in or out until they clear the zone."

"Can't afford that," Perceval said.

"Gwaine --" Arthur rubbed his head. He didn't want to reroute. He wanted to go to the original location of the phone GPS and the tracker, he wanted to tear the area apart from top to bottom, he wanted to scour it for clues. He wanted information. He needed information. Who had Merlin and Kay and how did they fit into all this? What did they want with Merlin and Kay?

More important, however, was where the tracker had been and where it was moving *to*. Where there was an explosion, there was damage, and the possibility that Merlin had been forced to use his magic to ensure escape.

Arthur's heart raced.

Merlin was alive. He had to be.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm rerouting -- *fuck this shite* -- sorry again, Merlin's Mum. Can you keep an eye on this screen? Hit refresh every few seconds, we'll get eyes on scene soonish, I think --"

Arthur tuned out Gwaine's chatter. He really was the worst person to have running comms. The man would *not shut up*. "Will's number. Right now."

He had it memorized, but he wanted confirmation as he punched it into the disposable mobile. It rang. It rang and rang and rang.

He hung up and dialled again.

The same thing happened the second time. And a third. Arthur barely registered the directions that Gwaine gave them, the ETA as they closed in the distance separating them from the location of the phone GPS and Kay's tracker.

Then, finally, the phone was answered.

"Yeah, what?" Will's tone was high-pitched and harried. "Look, mate, if you're a telemarketer, this really isn't a good time, but as long as I've got you on the line, how about you fucking check the no-call list and look up this number? Because I'm on it, you fucker, and if you call me one more time --"

"Will. Is it safe to talk?"

"What? *What?*" Will exhaled and took in a strangled breath of relief. "Holy *shite*. I'm talking to the goddamn dead. Yes. Fuck, yes, it's safe to talk."
"Are Kay and Merlin with you?" Arthur's voice was hoarse.

There was a pause. "Please tell me you're on my arse tracking my phone. Kay needs a hospital right the fuck now."

"How bad?" Arthur asked, twisting around to glance in the back seat, gesturing at Lance. Lance leaned forward, listening.

"Bad, but not bad. Got a médecin with me but he's at the wheel. Driving like a fucking carjacker, yo, jesus. Slow the fuck down, mate -- stop, stop, stop, help's coming, see that alley there, go for that, go --"

Arthur pulled the phone down and tapped his earwig. "What's our ETA?"

"Two minutes, you should be getting line of sight anytime now," Gwaine said. "Might want to slow down some, or you'll blow right past. They're on your left -- No, Bedivere, they'll be on your right. Your right -- yes, yours, not mine, how do you even know which way I'm facing, what is wrong with you --"

Owain moved his lead foot from the gas pedal, but only just.

"Nearly there," Arthur told Will. He forced himself to breathe. He'd noticed how Will had avoided mentioning anything about Merlin and was afraid to ask again.

"Good, good," Will said. "My doctor's having a panic attack, I'll slap him later. Kay -- Kay, it's all right, the team's coming, they'll be here in a second, you'll be fine, they'll stitch you up as soon as they finish yelling at you for being a bloody numpty -- what did you think you were doing, passing out on me like that --"

Owain angled the SUV to both block off and protect the alley, and all four doors were open even before the SUV came to a complete stop. They cleared the other area, and Arthur relaxed only marginally when he spotted the second team doing the same on the other end of the alley. Lamorak went to the van with Lance, both of them careful; Will opened the side door, his arms up in the air, his hands bloody from applying pressure on Kay's wounds, blood seeping through a child's blanket.

Will was talking almost at once. "Thank fuck. All right. Kay's got internal injuries, doctor did back-alley surgery on him over at the house, stopped a bleed, thinks either it opened up again or he popped a stitch. Shouldn't have been moving, but Kay loaded himself up with painkillers, he needs antibiotics like whoa, and will someone calm the doctor down before I do? Tell him his wife and kid will be all right, we'll grab them and drop them at a safe house, yeah?"

Arthur nodded at Galahad. Galahad pulled the doctor out of the driver's seat and pressed him against the wall, talking to him quietly and reassuringly in impeccable French. Almost immediately, the doctor calmed down, though whether it was what Galahad had said or finally talking to someone who wasn't butchering his French, Arthur wasn't sure.

"You couldn't have waited?" Perceval asked.

"No, I bloody well couldn't have waited," Will said, throwing his arms up in frustration. "How'd you even know where we were? And if you've known for a while, why the fuck didn't you show up --"

"We didn't know they were with you. You're undercover, what were we supposed to do?" Bedivere elbowed past Will and went to see if he could help Lance. From where Arthur stood, he could see that Lance was working quickly. There was a bandage around Kay's chest, and Lance left it, organizing to have him moved instead of working on him any further. It looked grim, but Lance
wouldn't be moving Kay if his vital signs weren't strong.

Will made a strangled sound. He would have run his bloodstained hands through his hair but he had the presence of mind not to; instead, he made that sound again, and it cut through Arthur's heart.

It was like listening to a wounded animal.

Arthur didn't need to look into the van to know that Merlin wasn't there.

"He's still back there," Will said, throwing his arm out the way they'd come, pointing with a shaky finger. Arthur ignored how Will's voice cracked, how it was a fine razor's edge away from a sob. "He's still -- we could get him, Arthur, we could --"

Arthur shook his head. It was too late. *They* had been too late. If the EMS had found Merlin at the site of the explosion, Gareth would have heard about it.

"Oh, *fuck*. *Fucking* fuck. They have him *again,*" Will said, and this time, there was no missing the break in his voice or the strangled sob.

"Who has him? Will! Who has him?"

"*Fuck!* Who do you think? Aredian, that's who --"

Arthur ignored the way his guts clenched and his lungs constricted. His heart didn't feel as if it were beating properly, and he ignored that, too. He couldn't feel his fingers, then his hands, then his arms. Even his legs didn't feel like they were attached to him anymore.

Arthur heard himself talk through a muffled veil, drowning in grief and fury and rage. He didn't recognize himself. He didn't recognize the people around him. It was hard to make out anything when his vision had gone red.

"Bedivere, Galahad, Perce. Go with the doctor, get his family, get him out of the country. Lance, get Kay in the back of the SUV. Will, you're with us. Let's go."

"Go *where*? Do you have a fucking crystal ball that says where he is? Because I'm not leaving until - -"

Arthur grabbed Will and slammed him against the van. He wasn't even conscious what he was doing, but Will flinched back as if struck, and there were arms around Arthur, pulling him away. Perceval let him go almost immediately, and Arthur stalked off, taking a breath.

He didn't want to be breathing.

He wanted to scream.

ooOoo

"I thought we had an understanding."

Merlin tracked Aredian's movements as the man walked in circles around him. Of course, the instant
that Merlin couldn't see him anymore was when his body wracked with pain.

The first time it happened, Merlin nearly bit through his tongue. It had caught him by surprise. Now, he refused to scream and grit his teeth instead, screwing his eyes shut so tight that he saw white blinding stars.

"I'm disappointed in you, Merlin," Aredian said, coming around to stand in front of him.

All of Merlin's nerve endings were on fire. It took longer and longer for it to die down enough to gasp for air that didn't sear his lungs. Aredian waited patiently, because the smug bastard knew what he was doing to Merlin.

The sad part was, Merlin knew, too.

It was a psychological warfare tactic -- hurt the prisoner, make him suffer unspeakable pain. The pain only ever went away when the torturer was in his line of sight, forcing a connection between freedom from pain and the torturer himself. It was a subconscious Pavlovian tactic and Merlin refused to let it work. He wasn't going to be trained like a dog.

Instead, he focused on the growing ache in his shoulders, the tingling numbness of his hands, the trembling of his thighs. He told himself over and over, *I'm going to fucking kill you* whenever Aredian wandered in front of him.

The shackles dug into his wrists. The chain overhead was too short to let Merlin do much more than stand on the very tip of his toes. His calves burned, his legs ached. When he wasn't hurting enough, Merlin let his weight drop a little, biting back a groan when it felt as if his arms were being torn out of their sockets.

"I was hoping that we could work together and come to a mutually beneficial relationship," Aredian said. He tut-tutted and let his eyes rove down Merlin's body.

He'd been doing that more and more over the last few minutes. Looking and touching. Aredian reached out and traced a finger down Merlin's torso, the contact interrupted only by the tatters of the shirt that Merlin was still -- barely -- wearing. Merlin fought down his instinct to shy away, to shudder in revulsion, to vomit.

He fought down his magic, too. It was too weak to do anything right now. He was too weak.

"Shame about your friends," Aredian said. He shrugged nonchalantly, as if it was a *never mind* that barely merited even a fraction of his attention. "A pity, though. Lawhead was interesting. If I'd realized his magic was strong, I would have moved him elsewhere sooner, where he could be properly restrained and… motivated."

It wasn't the first time that Aredian had mentioned Kay in that wistful tone, as if he genuinely regretted that Kay had gotten away. Merlin had picked up on enough hints in the last twenty minutes to know that Aredian believed that Kay had magic -- *I still have the necklace he was wearing on the field* -- but that he hadn't been certain until the escape. Aredian thought that Kay's injuries were too severe to actually use his magic, and without anyone to contradict him, Kay became the person responsible for the death of his sorcerer.

How Aredian couldn't sense the power *throbbing* through Merlin's body, Merlin didn't know, but he wasn't going to complain. His magic might happily destroy everything within reach -- and his reach had become even longer, somehow -- but Merlin wasn't. If the spell he'd pulled from the tattoo hadn't taken every ounce of strength out of him, trying to get up to run afterward had done it.
Now, though, Merlin fought to keep his magic from inching up his arms to shatter the shackles.

"I don't understand why they would leave you behind," Aredian said. He shook his head. "Maybe they didn't value you enough. Maybe they --"

Aredian ran his fingernails over a scrape on Merlin's chest, tearing the fragile scabs. Merlin shuddered and bowed, and frantically struggled to maintain his balance.

"-- maybe they took you along to use as cannon fodder."

"Go to Hell," Merlin spat out.

Aredian slapped him. Merlin swung on his strained arms, scrambling to find his footing. Once he managed most of the weight off his arms, gasping for breath, Aredian punched him in the gut.

Merlin nearly folded in two. His vision swam. Bile burned the back of his throat and a metallic tang filled his mouth. His legs were heavy under him, but he managed, eventually, to get his feet touching the ground.

"I warned you," Aredian hissed in his ear. He was so close that his body heat seared through Merlin's body. He grabbed Merlin's hair and pulled his hair back just enough that he was forced to look Aredian in the eye. He could smell Aredian's acrid breath, the lingering stink of cigarette smoke, the burnt coffee bean of a recent cup of coffee, taken black, without sugar.

Fuck you fuckyoufuckyou. Merlin didn't care anymore. All that mattered was that Will and Kay were gone, they were safe. They were out of Aredian's reach. Now that he could, Merlin was going to blow this building and everyone in it to kingdom come. He was going to keep his promise to Arthur. He was going to do whatever he could to get away. Whatever he could to get back to him.

It didn't matter that Merlin wouldn't be strong enough to escape as long as these fucking bastards were dead.

He reached for his magic. He didn't bother with a spell. He concentrated on repeating the same surge of power that he had released on the street to stop the voudoun priest before a God's magic filled him.

A door opened and shut somewhere behind Merlin, and Merlin didn't care. Whoever it was, Merlin was going to destroy them, too.

"I warned you what would happen. I'm going to find your friends. I'm going to drag them back here. I'm going to flay the skin from their bodies. I'm going to cover them in salt. I'm going to set them on fire while they're still alive. You're going to hear them scream. You're going to feel them die. I warned you --"

"And I warned you," someone said.

Aredian stood up straight, his spine ramrod stiff, the colour draining from his face except for two red spots on his cheeks.

He took a step back.

Merlin's magic bubbled under the surface, ready to lash out, ready to punish, to destroy, to end everything, but something in Aredian's demeanour gave him pause.

"I told you not to hurt him."
And there it was -- the hint of an accent, at once smooth and rough around the edges, polished and cultured.

A bit like Merlin's, when he was tired, or when he was out drinking with Will.

Someone came closer, the scruff of rubber under the shoe scraping along the floor.

Aredian backed away.

"Cut him down."

There was a warmth behind Merlin. The scrape of a chair dragged over, the creak of it taking someone's weight, the strain of someone reaching for the chain overhead. The clink and clatter as the knot was pulled apart, as Merlin was carefully guided to his feet and supported until he was gently laid on the ground.

"Keys," a new voice said, and there was a murmur of *who has the keys* and *give them to him* before the click of handcuffs eased the pressure around Merlin's wrists.

Merlin swallowed down his rage. He left it boiling under the surface, ready to lash out.

He was turned over, and the light shifted as a figure towered over him and crouched down.

Merlin stared.

"Are you all right?"

It was Mordred.

Mordred ap Aneurin.

Things had just gone ninety degrees *sideways*. 

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Chapter End Notes

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