How Eggsy Met Harry, As Told Through A Series of Soul Marks

by thayde

Summary

Eggsy stares at the Mark on his chest sometimes, and wonders if his soulmate would ever settle for street trash like him.
(1) His Own

The words have been scrawled across his heart since Eggsy was very young. They tattooed themselves into his skin right before his father died.

*Manners Maketh Man.*

The phrase was vertically stacked with swooping, aristocratic penmanship, and a color gradation ranging from an elegant indigo to a violent, bloody red. He never quite knew what to make of it, being a decidedly odd phrase for a Soul Mark.
(2) Everyone Else

Most Marks were, surprisingly, rather mundane. Since they represented the first meaningful words a soulmate would say to the bearer, many ran along similar lines. Variations of 'I love you' were really popular, and a lot of people had to rely on comparing the handwriting for verification. 'A pleasure to meet you' and 'My name is so-and-so' were not uncommon when it came to the romantics.

Hell, his mate Ryan, the sappiest bloke he’d ever met, was born with Hello scribbled in green behind his left ear.

Eggsy would always smile politely, and tease him how sweet it was that his soulmate would have him at 'hello'. But in the back of his mind, with guilt nibbling at his conscience, Eggsy would marvel at how boring most of them were.

But not mine, Eggsy would think with smug satisfaction. My soulmate will be amazing.
Eggsy doesn’t have that many memories of his father, but one will always vividly stand out in his mind. It’s right before his father ships out for his job, and it’s the last time Eggsy will ever see him alive. It’s also the first time Eggsy sees his own Mark.

He can remember waking in the night to the slight burning sensation on his flesh as the words were born. He was too young to read such a complex phrase, so he slipped out of his bed to search out his father. Eggsy found him doing a last minute check of his rucksack in the living room. And so, tugging at his pajama shirt, Eggsy presented the new adornment on his heart with questions burning in his eyes.

It’s the longest conversation they will ever have.

When he first read the words out loud for Eggsy, his father tripped over his own tongue, with a funny look on his face. “Manners maketh man. Huh.” Cocking his head to the side, Eggsy asked his father what it meant.

“Your soulmate sounds like quite the gentleman”, is the only reply he would give.

When Eggsy pressed him about it, his father distracted him with tales of meeting and courting his mother. Three o’clock in the morning rolled around before Eggsy’s eyes drooped in exhaustion and his father had to tuck him back into the bed. “Keep an eye out in the morning, my little spy. Your mother’s Mark is on the back of her neck, but it’s yellow, so it’s hard to see. If you can tell me what it says by the time I get back, I’ll show you my own Mark. If you can believe it, it’s the first thing I ever said to her.”

Intrigued and determined as only a child on a mission can be, Eggsy spent the next few weeks sneaking looks at the nape of his mother’s neck. He remembers being so proud of himself when he finally worked out what the letters spelled.

But his father never comes back, and he never gets to see his father’s Mark. All he has to show for it is a medal and a ridiculous passcode.

His mother, wrecked by the loss, can’t bear to hear Eggsy talk about her dead husband, so he never asks about it. And then she started dating that bastard Dean, and then she had the gaul to marry him, and his father became a permanently taboo subject.

Dean even made her grow her hair out to hide the will you marry me written in yellow block print.

Eggsy doesn’t think he’ll ever forgive her for actually doing it.
Ryan has always been very open about his green ‘hello’, but Eggsy’s other mate, Jamal, was much more reserved. It was years before he would show either of them his Mark, but eventually…well, he gives into their excessive badgering, and lifts his shirt just to shut them up.

And Eggsy is awestruck.

Curving along his ribs is a whole damn paragraph of loopy, handwritten poetry. Line after line, disappearing under the waist of his bluejeans is the wordiest Mark Eggsy has ever seen. It’s a series of pearl letters against ebony skin, and it explains so much—like why Jamal always had a small book of poetry on him, or those pocket shakespeare plays sold cheap in the Tesco junk isle.

He wants to be ready to meet her, whoever she it.

When he eventually asks Jamal about it, to confirm his suspicions over a quiet pint, Eggsy gets a story instead of a short answer. Apparently, around fifty years or so ago, the man with the longest Soul Mark in history lived and died in Seattle, across the pond in the United States. Starting from his left cheek, and wrapping around his body down to the toes on his right foot, was a long line of tiny black letters. There were thousands of words strung together without punctuation or capitalization. The man, a doctor, found his soulmate in Seatac Hospital six months before the woman died of cancer. His skin had cataloged every word she would ever speak to him. Her own mark had read I’ve been preparing my entire life for you.

Yeah, Eggy thinks, that’s definitely worth prepping for. The next day, he signs up for a library card and checks out the entire section on etiquette. He starts working on mimicking the posh tones from historical dramas shown on BBC. If manners really do maketh man…

Well, he’ll make himself ready for one hell of a man.
Dean

(5) Dean

So Dean. Dean is, well…the worst thing to happen to Eggsy. He’s also the best, but that’s only because he gave Eggsy his beautiful flower, Daisy. Aside from that, Eggsy would rather see Dean’s body tossed in a ditch somewhere and set on fire.

He hates Dean.

And the worst part about it all is that Dean wasn’t always like the bastard he is now. Okay, so he was, but he hid it for awhile in the beginning. Dean swept into his and his mother’s life all sweet-like and understanding. Was fairly good to them for a bit—long enough, at least, to get his claws in deep.

For the life of him, Eggsy can’t remember a point when Nice Dean became Bastard Dean. It was such a slow, controlled transition that he never saw it coming. His memories of that time are dream-like. One moment, he had his own room, an overprotective mom, a nice home in the suburbs, and a new uncle who gave him candy. Six months later, he woke up to a shitty two bedroom apartment in the slums, with a mother who smelled of menthols, and instructions to steal cigarettes from the corner store down the way.

Looking back with what he knows now, Eggsy is ashamed of how taken in he was at the start. It only took six months for Dean to ruin them both, and it’s so obvious now that his stepfather knew what he was doing. He was too practiced at it.

There wasn’t much he could do when Dean started slapping his mother around—too young, too small. He would grab at Dean’s leg or arm, and be tossed harshly on the floor for his efforts.

And then Dean would laugh at him.

Laugh at the little kid who wasn’t strong enough to stand against a grown man. Laugh at his impotent rage. Laugh because he was light and scrawny enough to actually catch some distance when thrown (another ‘best thing’, because Eggsy chalks up his parkour skills to that dubious introduction to flying).

Dean thought it was all funny as hell. Until Eggsy got older, that is, and stronger (though not much bigger, to his never-ending frustration). Until he could actually start causing problems for Dean. He gained a spot of training in the royal marines, though he quit when his mother tearfully begged him to come home over the phone. Ignoring the hole inside of him, he packed his bags and returned to his own private battleground, and started to fight back.

The first time he was able to hold Dean away from his mother was the day Rottweiler moved in. His mum doesn’t believe him, but Eggsy knows damn well that Dean let Rotti pay rent in the form of keeping Eggsy well in line. Not that his stepfather couldn’t do it on his own, but Eggsy did make a habit of being a handful.

And that was the way of it for awhile. Dean would start in on his mum, he would start to intervene, and then Rottweiler would drag him by his hair out of the way to keep him “occupied” until Dean was done. Lather, rinse, repeat.

And then the situation escalated further the day Dean punched his mother. Like, an actual punch, not the open handed stuff that had become the norm. It was the straw that broke the camels back, and
Eggsy was on him in a heartbeat. Leapt on Dean’s back, and was kicking and yelling and biting for all he was worth—went for a chokehold around his neck. Rotti ended up prying him off of Dean and folding his arms painfully behind his back until his shoulder blades touched each other. Eggsy ended up with a bloody mouth, bloody nose, bloody everything.

Through it all he was screaming “Fuck you! Don’t ever fucking touch my mother like that again! We’re fucking gone, you get me? I’m taking my mom and we’re leaving—“

“Oi, you’re fuckin’ leaving are you?” Dean viciously jabbed his finger against Eggsy’s chest. “We’ll damn well see about that. Michelle, stay on the couch, I don’t want you near the bedroom!”

Dean stormed into the next room, Rotti wrenching Eggsy along in his wake. He stares at his mother as he’s manhandled, and silently begs her to intervene, to leave with him, but she just stands there, wringing her hands with that helpless look on her face. Which is pretty much par for the course these days.

The door is slammed shut once they’re all inside. Dean drags a beat up chair to the center of the room, legs scraping ominously across the floorboards, and takes a seat. Rotti kicks the back of his legs, and Eggsy is dropped to his knees in front of his stepfather. The loud ‘crack’ from his joints impacting the floor is as loud as it’s painful. There’s a tense silence for a long, drawn out moment, where there’s nothing but his ragged breathing.

“Alright Eggsy, I think it’s high time you and I came to an understanding. Normally, I like a bit of fight in my boys—don’t I Rottweiler? But, you’re actin’ the fool here, and it’s become a real problem now.” Dean leans forward, propping his elbows on his knees, and uses his size to loom over him. Eggsy almost doesn’t notice Dean taking off his watch, of all things. “I don’t want you stickin’ your neb between me an’ your mum anymore.”

Eggsy sneers up at Dean, and spits a mouthful of blood and saliva at his feet in defiance. “If you think I’ll just lay down an’ take it while you—”

His body snaps to the side from the swift backhand delivered across his cheek, the loud smack actually echoing. “Shut the fuck up when I’m talkin’ to you. I got a business to run and it’s about to step up into the big times, so’s I can’t have you makin’ trouble from me anytime you feel like it.” Rotti, having lost the grip on his arms, grabs two fistfuls of cloth to haul him back upright. His shoulders are screaming at the sudden release—Eggsy couldn’t take a swing even if he had the focus of mind—he’s seeing double as it is.

Looming forward again, Dean extends his wrist before his captive’s eyes. Eggsy sucks in a desperate breath, and is just this side of freaking the fuck out, because that’s a Soul Mark—it’s a the sickest shade of orange and black, and the writing is the kind of scratchy you see when people carve their initials on pub tables.

_No, please stop._

What the fuck did he _do_ to his soulmate? Why is Dean with his mum if he has a soulmate? Those words and those colors don’t seem like a simple rejection. That’s the kind of shite murderers have been known for.

“I’m not going to tell you what happened to her. I think you can guess.” The implication is very clear. _If I can do it to my soulmate, I can do it to Michelle._

Heart pounding, he draws in a shaky breath. His voice is no more than a whisper. “That supposed to stop me, is it? How could you possibly think that ain’t motivating me all the more?”
Dean’s eyes are stone cold. His person is quietly menacing in a way Eggsy has never seen before on this man. He tries to suppress a shiver when Dean logically points out the glaring flaw in his thought process.

“I ain’t accustomed to lettin’ things go. I’ll find you. I’ll find her. You’re a gutter rat, Eggsy, and there’s no place you could take her that I can’t get to.” Dean wraps his large hand around Eggsy’s jaw and yanks his head closer to make his point. He smiles in wicked humor.

“And because she’s pregnant, and it’s mine, just like you.” Eggsy goes very still, eyes wide, and fuck, just fuck. There’s no way his mother will ever leave now, and he won’t leave his mother alone in this, so that makes Dean right. He fucking owns them now, owns him, and that’s the end of it.

Rotti shakes him hard when Dean demands a response. The harsh tug made on Eggsy’s shirt is too much for the threadbare cloth to withstand, and it tears along the front buttons. Deans eyes immediately hone in on the splash of color peaking out from under his ripped shirt, and he tears the cloth further to reveal his Mark.

Eggsy’s muscles spasm when his stepfather reaches forward, fingers extended and intentions obvious. He pushes himself back against his captor to avoid Dean’s touch, pressing his back flush along Rotti’s kneeling body (dimly registers the tremor running through that flesh and bone fortress). “No, please—!” Clamps his mouth down on the last word, refusing to say the phrase imprinted on Dean’s wrist. Won’t ever tell anyone how close this came to being a fucked up parody of a soulmate meeting. Bites the inside of his cheek till’ he tastes blood.

Rough fingers brush over the words tattooed on his heart, and Eggsy wonders if this is a bit like what it means to be raped. The feeling of violation is total, consuming, and he could fight back, but he won’t. Not when Dean has threatened his mum—not when his enemy is at his back, and he can barely keep the world from tilting. All he can do is lay there, tremble, and let this horrible monster taint the only good thing left in him.

“Manners maketh man? Right crock of shite that is.” And God, but his ears burn, because it’s sick to hear those words from that mouth when they aren’t his to say. And then Dean fucking laughs at it, mocking his most intimate and treasured secret, and it’s shameful. Humiliating.

“That why you’s always goin’ on in that posh accent from telly, innit. Well, it stops now, boy, understand? You ain’t better than any of us”, Dean gestures to himself, “just because of this.” Sharply slaps Eggsy’s Mark to make his point.

Dean retreats from Eggsy’s space, and secures his watch back onto his wrist, effectively covering his Mark. “I trust this’ll stay between the three of us.” He heaves himself up from the chair and walks out—clearly doesn’t care for an answer.

If Rottweiler stays pressed against him some extra seconds before he lets Eggsy go, he doesn’t dare call him on it.
Daisy

(6) Daisy

He’ll never admit it to anyone now, but he hated Daisy while she was sleeping in his mum’s stomach (almost as much as he hates Dean still). Hated her passionately right up until nine months later when he fell in love for the first time. For the duration of his mum’s pregnancy, Dean actually backed off that year, and was even gentle at times. It just made Eggsy all the more angry, because he would stop for Daisy, but not for his mum (not for him).

He was the one to hold his mothers hand when Daisy was born. He was the one who held her first—not Dean, not even his mum, it was him. The doctor placed Daisy in his arms, and she opened her big blue eyes, stared up at him in wonder, and Eggsy had no choice but to give her his heart.

She slept a lot when they first brought her home, as did his mother, and Dean was miraculously understanding. Even bought most of the necessary baby supplies (though Eggsy had to nick the toys and clothing). All in all, they were the most peaceful handful of months he’d had in years.

For awhile, his mum was overprotective of Daisy, and barely let anyone else near the baby. Soon enough though, Eggsy was feeding Daisy most mornings, bathing her most evenings, and answering her cries when Dean was ‘busy’ with Michelle. Because of that reason alone, Dean let up on Eggsy a bit. Granted, Eggsy didn’t have as much time to dedicate towards causing him trouble either, but the end result was the same.

Even Rottweiler was strangely accommodating—particularly when Eggsy took care of his sister. Rotti would be found casually leaning against the kitchen table while Eggsy made Daisy breakfast. Or he’d just so happen to be awake when Eggsy woke up to Daisy’s night cries.

At first, Eggsy chalked it up to the novelty of a new child and ignored it. But then he’d notice Rotti staring at them with intent when he thought Eggsy wasn’t looking. Caught him at it with increasing frequency, and a sense of general alarm began to creep up on him. For a terrifying couple of days, he thought maybe it was Daisy that drew his eye…but that didn’t quite add up. For all his faults, Rottweiler never struck him as the sort. Still, Eggsy kept careful watch for it and never once saw Rotti glance her way. No, he only paid her attention when she was with Eggsy. Which was just peachy, in his opinion. So long as they all left Daisy alone, Eggsy could put up with being under scrutiny. Figured Dean just wanted an eye out for signs of Eggsy stirring up trouble again.

Until the pattern changed.

Looking back, Eggsy acknowledges how fucking dense he was. He really should have noticed something had shifted when Rottweiler actually started helping him. It was just innocuous things here and there, really. He’d hand Eggsy the baby bottle for heating if he was closer to it, or toss him a towel when Daisy was a little too playful at bathtime. Small things that didn’t really stand out on their own, but added up to something vastly out of character. It’s almost like Rotti wants to be part of a family, and the closest at hand is living with him.

Despite all the alertness he kept for any ill intent towards Daisy, he sure turned a blind eye towards protecting himself.

It all comes to a head on one of those rare afternoons he has the house and Daisy all to himself. Dean and Michelle are down at the corner pub, drinking and wheeling and dealing. They usually stay out until late when they do this, so Eggsy has decided to make it a pajama day for him and his flower.
He’s laid a pile of blankets on the living room floor and made a nest of pillows and cushions for the two of them, and has the radio on low to croon out slow, soothing jazz numbers.

All in all, it’s as close to a perfect day as Eggsy ever gets.

Surprise floods through him when the front door is unlocked and pushed open. Rottweiler’s tall frame steps over the threshold, shrugging off his leather jacket. Kicking the door shut with his foot, he tucks his keys into the jacket pocket, and tosses the garment over the back of the couch. He freezes when he notices Eggsy curled up in his soft manmade nest.

Eyes never leaving his form, Rotti wanders around the couch to stand before him. Eggsy stares up at him in silence, gaze following the lurch of Rotti’s adam’s apple when he swallows. Rotti waves his hand in a broad gesture towards the sea of bedding, raising an eyebrow. “What’s all this mess, then?”

The words lack their usual edge, Eggsy is surprised to note. Unsure of what to say, Eggsy just shrugs and hugs Daisy closer to himself. He drops his eyes to the ground and instinctively curls in on himself a bit. No one has ever seen him like this. It’s deeply unsettling for Rotti to witness this side of him—Eggsy feels raw and exposed, and it’s utterly humiliating.

Toeing off his boots, Rotti kicks them behind him before situating himself in the soft territory. Eggsy tenses at the intrusion, gaze snapping back onto his uninvited guest, but Rotti seems relaxed. Keeps his hands open on his knees, and stays out of Eggsy’s bubble of personal space. Upon noticing Eggsy’s raised eyebrows, it’s Rotti’s turn to shrug off the scrutiny. “Used to do this when I was a kid at me Mum’s.” Casts a knowing look at him from the corner of his eyes. “Always made me feel safe as houses.”

Slowly, Eggsy blinks at this stranger sitting in front of him. Shakes himself, and cautiously prompts, “your mum?”

Shooting him a sardonic look, Rotti keeps talking. “Yea, a prozi in the red-light district. Was out a lot, obviously. Big piles of blankets helped.”

*He’s trying to find common ground,* Eggsy realizes. He lets his taut muscles relax a bit. It’s always easy to forget that Rotti’s a bit older than him, and has already been where Eggsy’s been. And probably some unsavory places he hasn’t. In another life, one where they didn’t end up on opposite sides of Dean, they might’ve been friends.

Eggsy doesn’t press for more details than what Rotti has already offered, just skirts by the sensitive topic. “Daisy seems to like it well enough.”

He nods in agreement. “She does.” Rotti’s fingers start tapping out a nervous rhythm, eyeing Eggsy intently. “Ya’ look…real good with a baby.”

Eggsy looks up, eyes wide. That’s not the kind of thing you say to a friend, or an enemy, or whatever you’d call them. “Rotti, listen—”

“Do you have any idea”, Rotti interrupts, sotto voce, “any idea how you look right now?”

And yea, now that he’s gotten a clue, Eggsy can make an an educated guess. Hair mussed from sleep, low slung flannel pants showing off a small stretch of taut skin, and a soft shirt so threadbare it clings to him. To top it all off, he’s got an adorable rugrat curled into the crook of his neck.

It’s domestic as fuck, and Eggsy is just realizing that maybe that’s what Rotti wants. It would explain the weeks of hovering, of helping out with Daisy here and there, of his less caustic attitude whenever Dean wasn’t around.
It’s what they all seem to secretly want, but perpetually screw up—Eggsy is no exception.

“Look, it’s just—hang on.” Daisy starts squirming around in her sleep, and Eggsy gently lays her down on the soft floor, and makes a pillow corral in case she wakes up and rolls around. Turning back to Rotti, he takes a deep breath and braces himself for the conversation to come. There’s no point in pretending like he doesn’t know where this is going. “I get it, it’s hard to wait for. But wouldn’t you rather have a life with your soulmate—“

“I don’t have one.” Eggsy blinks. *Oh.* And that explains so much. About a quarter of the population never get a Soul Mark, and the older you get, the less likely you are to ever have one. Eggsy scoots forward to kneel next to Rotti. Keeps his voice low in light of the revelation. “I don’t know what that’s like, but it can’t be easy. Even so, I do have a soulmate. Somewhere, they’re waiting for me.”

Rotti huffs with derision, darts his hands forward to grasp Eggsy’s shoulders, and pulls him onto his lap. Eggsy’s bent legs end up on either side of Rotti’s waist, and his hands automatically brace against Rotti’s chest to stabilize himself. He eyes Eggsy’s chest as though he can see through the shirt straight to the Mark.

“Look, it’s shite, but we both know that a posh git like that will use you a few times for the hell of it, and toss you aside. They never think of us gutter-folk as real people—no, listen.” Eggsy starts to push away, only for Rotti to grab each of his knees and drag him back into the intimate position. Shakes him a bit to ensure his attention. “*Listen.* He’ll fuck you some, cuz’ how could he not, but he ain’t gonna *keep* you, Eggsy.”

Spine stiffening, Eggsy feels the knee-jerk offense course through him. He opens his mouth, but Rotti’s expression quells the acerbic retort waiting just behind his lips. His eyes are imploring, and steadfast. Rotti’s not saying it to be mean, not entirely. He really believes it.

“I’d keep you. I’d keep you so well, Eggsy. I aint got much right now, but I’m movin’ up the ladder, and we could make a decent go of it.”

Eggsy stills, throat suddenly dry, and swallows. Can barely meet his eyes. It’s just such a frank, honest proposal, and Eggsy aches at the desperation barely concealed behind the words.

Rotti leans forward until their nose’s brush with every word. “It ain’t gonna be immediate, but maybe in a year, I can find me own place, and you can come with me…we could…we *could,* Eggsy. Get a fuckin’ dog or something.” His hands slowly slide up from Eggsy’s knees, along the tops of his muscled thighs. Hands curl tantalizingly around his hips.

And Jesus, he’s so fucking good at this. Rotti knows just how far to push, just how much touch to give and withhold, and which words will draw him in. Knows just what Eggsy will respond to, because Rotti had probably been just the same.

“You’re so great with Daisy…I’ve always wanted kids, Eggsy, and we could start a family. A *real* family, not like the one’s we got stuck with. We’d be better. We’d be good together.” Rotti’s gives his hips a slight squeeze, finger creeping a little further back, skirting the edge of appropriate. He tugs down a bit, and Eggsy’s legs are split open a little wider on his lap.

Rotti’s words paint a lovely picture that speaks to the lonely boy that’s still tucked away inside of Eggsy; the side of him that just wanted someone to come take him away from the screaming and violence. *To save him.*

He opens his mouth to say no, that he’s still holding out for ‘the one’, instead… “We’d never get past an adoption screening.” For *fuck’s sake,* it’s like someone’s hijacked his brain.
Hands tighten at his hips, and Rotti’s eyes light up, though the rest of his face stays guardedly neutral. “There’s plenty ways around that—lotta’ unwanted kids round here, and…” He lifts a tentative hand to gently touch Eggsy’s cheek. “…most would be real happy to know how well you’d…care for it.”

Eggsy can’t fucking look away, because he wants that so badly. Wants someone to be on his side, in his bed, protecting his family—a family that doesn’t hurt. He’s so impatient, and he sometimes wonders if Dean isn’t right about his soulmate. If Rotti isn’t right about how stupid it is to wait around for an inevitable rejection. He wants it so fucking badly—

A cry shatters the electric silence, and the spell breaks. Reality comes crashing back and Eggsy jerks away, falling off of Rotti’s lap to land painfully on his ass. Scrambles to answer Daisy’s cries so he won’t have to look him in the eyes. Her whines are already dying down by the time Eggsy is perched over her, and he can feel Rotti’s gaze singe the back of his neck.

Still, he murmurs variations of “there there, little flower, what’s the matter….“ Daisy keeps pawing at her right foot, and Eggsy gently takes hold of the appendage to investigate. Sucks in a breath at what he finds.

Rotti leans over his shoulder, “What is it?”

“It’s…” Eggsy runs a thumb over the bottom of her foot, over a pale pink sketch of a daisy flower. “I think…it’s a Soul Mark.”

“Why aren’t there any words, then, if it’s a Mark?”

Eggsy shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe her soulmate’s mute?”

There’s a short, heavy silence, broken by Rotti’s sigh. Leans in to breathe into Eggsy’s ear. “Just, think about it, yeah?”

Once he gets an affirmative, Rotti drags a finger down Eggsy’s spine as he gets up. He pulls his boots and jacket back on, and vacates the apartment. Eggsy has never been more grateful. He coos at Daisy and congratulates her on her Mark, all the while rubbing his chest.

The skin over his heart is burning, and he wonders if his soulmate can feel how close he came to losing Eggsy today.
A Perfect Stranger

Rottweiler, like his namesake, is nothing if not persistent.

Once Eggsy had promised to seriously consider his proposal, Rotti just ran with it. In the classic inch-to-mile behavior, he was even more present with Eggsy than he had been while leading up to their tete-a-tete.

Daisy was hungry? There was Rotti hovering in the kitchen. Daisy needed a nap? There he was handing Eggsy her favorite blanket. Daisy wanted to wake up the whole damn household at three in the morning? There was Rotti laying in wait for Eggsy to come cuddle with his baby sister.

Those were the most risky times for Eggsy—when he ended up answering Daisy in the night. Rotti would watch him closely, almost obsessively, without uttering a single word. As soon as Eggsy had Daisy bundled up in his arms, Rotti would get this look, as though Egssy holding a baby was all he wanted in the world. Sidling up behind his target, Rotti would press himself flush against Eggsy’s back, broad hands sliding over ribs, under the nightshirt to trail along his stomach. With his arms full of a toddler, Eggsy could do little to prevent Rotti’s fingers from dancing along the waistband of his flannel pants, forever flirting with the edge of impropriety. Inevitably, he’d hook his palms on the jut of Eggsy’s hipbones and pull him back into his body, bury his face in Eggsy's hair or the crook of his neck and mumble pretty words against the flesh. “This is how it could be, always. Don’t ya’ want that too?”

With heat trailing behind Rotti’s hands, and the sparks from his voice against Eggsy’s throat, it was enticing. In the soft quiet of their darkened household, it always seemed so much more tantalizing than in the cold light of day. The promises Rotti made, the images his words would evoke…the night was Rotti’s high ground in their unspoken struggle, and he knew it.

Dean was away a lot these days, ostensibly building up new ‘business opportunities’, and Rotti took full advantage of that time as well. He’d cage Eggsy in against the table, or kitchen counter, always unintentionally, of course. He was just ‘reaching for something’. Or whenever he felt particularly bold, he’d straight up crowd Eggsy against a wall, close enough to make him blush and feel the electric current crackle to life between them, and then retreat just as suddenly. Rotti knew precisely how long he could touch, and where. Knew how far he could push Eggsy’s boundaries without crossing them, and he casually danced a jig along those proverbial lines in the sand.

And Eggsy…fucking hell but he was tempted, though he felt guilty as sin about it. Lately, he’d been thinking about the more unpleasant side of Soul Marks. It’s a topic he’s steadfastly avoided for many years now, but its bombarded Eggsy mind with a vengeance. An ugly known-but-never-spoken fact about Soul Marks was that not all of them came in pairs. There’s a very real chance that Eggsy’s bond is one-sided, that, while he is destined for his soulmate, his soulmate might not be destined for him. Which begged the question, what’s the point in waiting? He may have a soulmate, and they will meet eventually, but it could be decades before they cross paths. Is, say, twenty years of loneliness really worth a perfect match? Is it worth the wait when there’s no guarantee that his soulmate won’t reject him? When his soulmate might not even wear Eggsy’s Mark? Manners Maketh Man is hardly a promise.

What would a gentleman and a street rat have to talk about anyway?
On the flip side, Eggsy’s not even certain if he likes Rotti enough for a relationship. Sure, he gets caught up in the moment—he is a red-blooded young man with a sex drive to match—and Eggsy can admit to himself that he’s attracted to Rotti’s desire for him. So sue him, it’s new and it’s novel, and very much an ego boost to be pursued so rigorously. The chap’s bigger and stronger than Eggsy, older too, and more experienced. His qualities hit all of the right notes, the right _kinks_, because if he wanted, Rotti could bend Eggsy over a table and make him…just _make him_. To be so possessed….no apologies, no shame. It’s all very exhilarating.

However.

Eggsy isn’t stupid, regardless of his body being a downright traitorous bitch at times. He knows Rotti is painting a better picture than reality could ever provide. And this is still the guy who holds him down when Dean commands it. This is the guy who stood by when Dean beat the shit out of him, who watched on impassively when Dean hurt his mum and frightened Daisy.

And yeah, it’s his fucking job, and if Rotti pissed Dean off enough by protecting Eggsy…he understands the guy has to walk a knife’s edge, and look out for himself. And it’s not like he’s accepted Rotti’s proposal. To put it crudely, he can’t rightly expect Rotti to put his ass on the line when Eggsy isn’t giving over his.

In the back of his mind, though…he feels like that’s making excuses for Rotti. Wonders if he’s starting to sound like his Mum when she goes on about Dean, and doesn’t that thought scare the hell out of him? And Eggsy would _never_ have stood by idly if their lots had been reversed. At least, he likes to think so.

It’s a fine fucking line indeed, and it’s getting harder to keep it straight.

Eggsy still has yet to make his choice when the respite from Dean’s oppressive presence at the apartment finally comes to its inevitable end. Bright sunbeams warming the apartment on a balmy Saturday afternoon are irresistible, and Eggsy has given in to the urge of dressing Daisy in a yellow jumper for a long day at the park. He’s even put on his nice threads—a white button-down shirt with a grey blazer and slacks. Eggsy had pawed through six different thrift stores to find some job-interview worthy kit, though with Daisy’s arrival, those plans had been put on hiatus.

Today, Eggsy just wants to pretend to be normal for a little while. A normal brother taking his sister to the park because it was the nanny’s day off. A normal son who didn’t take on a father’s responsibilities because the real one was unfit. A normal man who wasn’t considering shacking up with a violent gang member just to escape his own unlucky circumstances.

A normal person his soulmate would greet with open arms.

Gathering the rest of Daisy’s supplies into the horrific baby bag that emasculated the hell out of him, he balances his sister on his hip and hands her the stuffed panda she was currently obsessed with. They get two steps towards the front door before it’s opened for them, admitting Dean, Michelle, Rotti, and two well-dressed blokes Eggsy has never seen before. He may not know the two guys, but they’re definitely in a class above Dean, which can’t bode well for why they’re slumming it. Definitely time to split.

Dean stops him in his tracks, eyebrows raised. “What the hell’re ya wearin’, boy?” The incredulity lacing his voice is unmistakeable. And Eggsy…well, he has no idea how to explain himself without exposing his flank for attack.

Michelle staves off what was sure to be a spectacular argument when she walks forward with a bright smile to cup his cheeks in her palms. “Oh Eggsy, you look so handsome!”
Heart suddenly in his throat, Eggsy looks away, all bitter remarks dissolving on his tongue like burnt sugar. This is the first time in years he’s seen a glimpse of the woman he remembers—the mother who would hold him after a nightmare and rock him back to sleep, and later, the protector who would step between him and Dean. He barely squeezes a “thanks Mum” out of his dry throat, bounces Daisy a bit to expel his nervous energy, and steps past her to leave.

“Yes, you have a lovely son, Michelle. Reminds me of a couple of my students. Fit right in with them if I didn’t know any better.” The man in a brown pinstripe suit plucks lightly at the collar of Eggsy’s blazer. Red flags spring up in his mind, and Eggsy draws back from the man—barely registers the other man humming in agreement. His eyes flick uncertainly to Dean, who is sporting a very interested expression, and then to his mother, who seems just as oblivious as usual. He doesn’t even try to catch Rotti’s eye.

“I’m…taking Daisy to the park. Be back later.” Eggsy flees from the group occupying the doorway before anyone can object, and books it as fast as he dares with a baby on board. Decidedly ignores the part where two upperclass chaps in a dump like this is nothing but trouble, because he’s going to have his pretend day, goddamnit.

Once he reaches the park, he shakes off the weird encounter so he and and Daisy can share an enjoyable day. They even join in on a picnic with a woman and her two year old. Eggsy is able to keep up his well-off middle class/defunct upper class persona fairly well, all things considered. He stumbles a bit when some of his mannered responses are oddly antiquated, though it’s to be expected, Eggsy reasons, since his ‘teachers’ were mostly BBC period dramas.

Years from now, he won’t remember her name. He won’t remember her son’s name, the color of her hair, or what they ate on that checkered blanket. What he will remember is their conversation. Eggsy can’t rightly recall how they got onto the topic of soulmates, just that she was so…unbelievable. Here was a woman that received a Mark when she was sixteen, and has waited fourteen years to meet her match. Is still waiting, and has never once wavered in her path.

“I’ve always known what I wanted, Eggsy. I want my soulmate, of course, but I’m not going to put my life on hold for them. Since I knew I wanted to be a mother, I went ahead and had a child.”

“But what if…what if your soulmate rejects your kid, because it isn’t theirs? What if they don’t want you, and you’ve spent all this time waiting for nothing?”

The woman smiles at him kindly. “Then I’ll mourn the missed opportunity, and move on. I have a beautiful son whom I love, and who loves me. I have a new career I’m excited about, and a group of friends and colleagues who support me. It won’t be my loss, but theirs.” She tugs down the collar of her shirt to reveal her neck. There are long and slender pale blue words encircling her throat like a necklace: You have such a beautiful life.

Eggsy stares at her, because damned if that doesn’t make so much sense, and how could he have missed something so simple? She reaches forward and takes hold of his hand. “It’s really easy to wait on a somebody whose supposedly perfect, but there’s no magical solution—no relationship can fix all your problems. It just means you have those same problems while in a relationship. And that usually makes things worse.” She squeezes his hand one more time before gathering her things.

Shame rushes through him at her words. Here he was, waiting for his soulmate to waltz in and fix his life, when he should be focusing on fixing his own issues. It’s not like he’s just been sitting around, wallowing in misery, but Eggsy can admit that he’s based a lot of his own choices and actions on a soulmate he’s never even met. He’s been approaching the Rotti Issue as though it were choosing between Rotti and his soulmate. He should have been asking himself if he wanted to choose Rotti at all, not if he wanted one over the other. It’s not fair to either of them, or him for that matter. He needs
to seriously reflect on whether he could be happy with just Rotti, and if that’s really the way out he’s been looking for.

If he’s going to be with Rotti, then he needs to be with Rotti. If he’s going to wait for his soulmate, then he needs to work on his own life to make it the best gift he can give.

She and Eggysy share a hug when they part ways, and he agrees to meet with her at the park for regular play dates for the kids. As he lies to her, all he can think is I could do this, like she is. If I want, I don’t have to pick either of them. I wonder if I could spend my life like her and be happy?

He ruminates on it all the way back, and thinks he’s finally knows what he wants to do.

Evening has fallen by the time he and Daisy get back to the apartment. As soon as Eggysy walks through the front door, he’s hit by a sense of dread. His mother is sitting on the couch watching BBC like normal, but Dean is staring intently, both arms spread along the back of the sofa like some kind of king. Rotti is perched against the arm, spine curved and eyes shadowed. The dying light peeking through the curtains throw their forms into ominous shadow, and the sinister scene is like a strange painting juxtaposing a warlord with the modern era.

Dean tilts his head, and smirks. “Eggsy. Nice of ya’ to join us.”

Swallowing, Eggysy closes the door behind him, and sets the ugly baby bag on the counter. “Got back a bit later than expected.”

Dean grunted in acknowledgement. “You shouldn’t be keepin’ yer sister out like this.”

Eyebrow flying up to his hairline, Eggysy gives the man the bitchface of the century. This from the bastard who barely spares his own child a second glance? “You can’t be serious, it ain’t even six yet.”

“Don’t give me no lip—“

His mother interrupts Dean for the first time since, well, Eggysy doesn’t know when. “Dean, surely it’s alright just this once. It’s sweet of him to spend time with Daisy like he does…”

Dean’s face hardens, lips pursed in a straight edge. After a tense moment, he relaxes again. “Yea, spose’ you’re right.” Eggysy releases a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “Why dun’ you take Daisy into the bedroom, Michelle. Calm er’ down before bed. I want to talk to Eggysy here ‘bout his future plans, anyway.”

Eggysy swallows, looks down at his shoes and braces himself. Nothing good can come of this. He reluctantly hands a drowsy Daisy off to his mum, kisses her cheek and whispers about what a lovely flower she’d been for him today. Watches them retreat until the bedroom door quietly clicks shut, and the dulcet voices of a radio float through the door.

Taking a deep breath, he finally looks back up to lock gazes. Deans eyes are flinty, wulfish, as he gestures to the coffee table situated in front of him. In a show of false bravado, Eggysy takes a seat on the second sofa, as far from Dean and Rotti as possible.

Rotti snorts in amused disbelief, but quickly returns to his stoic facade when Dean shoots him a narrow look. Turns that dark gaze back onto Eggysy. Clenches his scarred fist tightly, each knuckle cracking one after the other. A shiver works it’s way down Eggysy’s spine.

“Eggsy. Pick yer’ battles. This ain’t the time for a stand.” It’s spoken so matter-of-factly, that it’s eery. There’s a twisting in his gut, so Eggysy swallows his pride, and slowly changes seats. Smug
satisfaction settles into Dean’s face, and Eggsy bites back hard on the instinct to retaliate.

“Right then. You’s goin’ to work fer me. You been here rent-free fer long enough already. Time to earn yer keep.” Rotti gets up from the arm of the couch he’d been slouched against and moved to stand just beyond Eggsy’s peripheral vision.

A lead weight drops into his stomach. “What…would I be doing?”

Dean smirks. “What ya’ will be doin’ is drop-offs.”

“What am supposed to be delivering?” Eggsy already knows the answer. Dean knows that Eggsy knows. They do this anyway.

He points at Eggsy. “It ain’t for you to be askin’ those questions.”

“So drugs, then.” His tone is this side of snarky because apparently he can’t help himself. Rotti clamps a hand on the back of his neck, making Eggsy jump. Dean leans forward, invading his space.

“You start tomorrow. Rotti’ll pick out what ye’ wear.” Dean stands up from the couch and moves towards the room he shared with Michelle.

Eyes widening, Eggsy sucks in a breath. Delivering is one thing, but being assigned specific clothing has some dirty implications. Considering the fast and detrimental turn this conversation has taken, Eggsy quickly decides that yes, this is the place to make a stand.

“I ain’t doing it.” Ignoring the hand tightening on the back of his neck, Eggsy looks over to Dean’s now-halted figure. “I won’t run drugs for you, and I’m not putting out for your buyers.”

Hands clenching, Dean slowly turns around to face him, violence written in his every line. As he approaches, Rotti pulls him off the coffee table by his neck and shakes him like a disobedient dog. Pushes him to the ground in front of his stepfather.

Now, Eggsy learned a long time ago to always watch Dean’s hands. They told him when he could push the envelope or when Dean was just aching for an excuse to hit him. Now though, as Dean takes off his watch to reveal his Mark in some sick ritual, Eggsy sees something new. Dean isn’t angry this time. He isn’t annoyed, or insulted, or bored. Slowly, Eggsy looks up to meet those eyes, and all he can see is a quiet, eager violence. The man wants to hurt him for no better reason than because he can. Eggsy meets a true monster face to face, and knows it, for the first time in his life.

Dean reaches down with his rough hand and grabs Eggsy under his jaw to force his head back. “One chance, and I’ll forget ya’ said anything.”

Eggsy can’t stop the tremble that forces it’s way through his body, prostrated as he is before the Devil. No more than a whisper, “do your fucking worst.”

Chuckling, Dean nods his head in amiable agreement, like Eggsy had just asked to share a pint or something. “Ta mate, was hoping ya’d say that.”

What follows is nothing like Eggsy has ever experienced. It’s the worst one yet, and it fucking hurts like never before. His torso is attacked, his kidneys, knees, hands, and fingers. Reminds Eggsy who the boss is, and Dean makes a point by never once bruising his face. Rotti’s hands hold him down, hold him up, and every touch burns.

“You aint gonna’ do this for yourself, Eggsy.” Dean likes to talk between swings. “You’ll do it for yer Mum, and you’ll do it for my daughter.” My daughter breaks through the haze of pain, and
Eggsy is enraged. Daisy wasn’t _Dean’s_, she was Eggsy’s. He was the one to care for her, to love her, and if the world were fair, this demon wouldn’t ever see her. It’s the only time Eggsy gets a freak surge of energy to get through the wall of muscle and break that bastard’s nose.

He pays for it dearly, but it was worth it. Feels proud for all of five minutes. Dean takes it personally (rightly so), and makes his ire known.

It’s not just pain in the cards tonight, it’s humiliation and subjugation. He’s bringing Eggsy back to heel, like an pet left free too long. Dean won’t let him just grit his teeth through the pain and think of England this time, he pulls out every drop of shame he can. He makes Eggsy cry, makes him sob out loud like a fucking child. And after Dean finally wrings out a babbling promise of cooperation, he makes Eggsy kiss the toe of his boot.

Eggsy will never forgive himself for it, but he would’ve done anything to make it stop. He’ll never tell a soul.

Once it’s all said and done, he’s left on the living room floor with Rotti as his only company. Dean’s parting instructions are for Rotti to “make sure he ain’t still lyin’ there in the morning.” Jesus. Like he’s a pile of dirty clothes to be picked up.

Rotti hauls him up by his shoulders, and helps him stumble into his bedroom despite Eggsy’s feeble protests. “Shut up, Eggsy, you ain’t in no position. Take the help.” Strips them both down to their boxers, helps Eggsy into bed, and climbs in after him. Pulls Eggsy against his chest and curls around him. Strokes his hair like his mother used to, and Eggsy is weeping all over again, shoulders heaving in silent, embarrassed cries.

Rotti whispers twisted things into his ears that only make it that much worse. “Why don’t ya’ ever just agree with him? Ya’ know he’ll only make me hurt you, and I don’t like that. If you’d just say yes, it wouldn’t have to be like this no more. Don’t make me hurt you like this.” The words are all wrong, but the tone is so gentle.

“I’m sorry, Rotti.” Eggsy murmurs. “I’m sorry, so sorry…”

It’s at this point that the lightbulb clicks on in Eggsy’s brain. It’s a moment of perfect fucking clarity. All he can think about is his mom, sporting a blossoming black eye, and Dean being so sweet and apologetic, asking her to stop making him hurt her. It’s a slap in the face. Rotti is grooming him, and Eggsy’s pretty sure that Rotti himself doesn’t even realize it.

This messed up situation is flying every red flag that he screamed about at his mother for ignoring. These are all the signs he laid out in a logical argument to try and convince Michelle that yes, Dean was abusing her, and Eggsy, and it needed to stop.

Apparently now it’s Eggsy’s turn to be brought low, to be comforted by the tormenter who brought him low in first place, and then to apologize for it. God, he always knew intellectually why she could justify Deans actions, but he never understood before now. He’s such a fucking idiot. He’s a goddamn expert on this shite and he still fell for it hook, line, and bloody sinker.

It takes him a moment to realize that he’s still whispering his apologies like a skipping CD. He won’t do this. Licks his lips, and makes his choice. He’s hurt, and it’s the last fucking conversation he wants to have, but he’s going to do it different now. He’s going to be better, like that lady in the park. It starts with him, and it starts now.

“I’m sorry. But I can’t do this with you. I can’t be with you.”
Rotti’s hand stills, and the silence gains a new, heavy weight of it’s own. The empty space is drawn out like a thin wire, tight and sharp. An exhalation breaks the tension, and Rotti presses a kiss to back of Eggsy’s neck. “It’s just a bad night. You’ll feel better in the morning. You’ll see. I know just what ya’ need.” Eggsy thinks he should have warning bells going off in his head, but his emotional capacity has reached it’s limit for the night.
Okay, so many people have been guessing about the Harry Hart Mark, I've decided to keep track.

It's not a vote, exactly, but it WILL help shape what the phrase ends up being. So leave a comment with what you think should be tattooed on Harry bloody Hart!

Fuck You. : IIIIIIIIIIIII (15)
Go to Hell! : II (2)
I don’t know his name! : III (3)
Cut me some slack, it's been a horrifying couple of days. : IIIVIII (7)
You can’t be in debt when something is freely given. : IIII (4)
Oxfords Not Brogues : I (1)
Oh, like in My Fair Lady? : IIIVIIIIIII (10)
Mini-rant about classism. : II (2)
I’m Eggsy. : I (1)
Never met a tailor before, but I know you ain’t one. : II (2)
You should really go now. : III (3)
A mixture of a love declaration and insult after Harry ’died’. : I (1)
How deep does this fucking thing go? : I (1)

I feel like you guys are a bit angry with Harry....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(8) Rottweiler

As it is, Eggsy takes forever and a day to fall asleep. He’s thankfully alone when he wakes again. It’s a new morning, but he sure as hell doesn’t feel any better. The memories are still bitter on his tongue, and it takes every ounce of willpower to drag himself from bed. A hot shower is just what the doctor ordered, and it seems to revitalize him a little.

Eggsy has no idea how long he takes, but the water runs cold, and by the time he exits, there’s clothing laid out on the bed for him. Curtesy of Rotti if he had to guess.

Right. For his ‘new job’.

Letting out a sigh, he pulls the clothes on, and doesn’t have the energy to do more than sneer in disgust at his reflection. In the tight shirt and low riding jeans, he looks like a fucking twink. The only good thing is the new jacket, black with a gold pattern, and it sort of subtracts from the whole ‘toy’ look. Eggsy can get behind that, at least. Everything else is a travesty.

Rotti walks in without so much as a ‘by your leave’ and tells him it’s time to go. Wraps a hand around the back of his neck, as has become Rotti’s habit, and pulls him into the living room. Dean is waiting there with a fucking smile on his face, like he didn’t destroy the last shreds of self respect Eggsy had the other night. Doesn’t even say a word, just hands a saddlebag to Rotti, and starts making himself a bowl of cereal.
Eggsy doesn’t have time to get in a bitchy comment because Rotti is already hauling him out the front entrance by his scruff. As soon as the door is shut behind them, Rotti gives Eggsy a minor shake. “Don’t be makin’ no trouble. You already want another night like last?” As much as Eggsy is learning to hate the feeling of hands on the back of his neck, he gets that Rotti is trying to look out for him in his own misguided way.

The journey through their concrete jungle is spent listening to Rotti describe their plan of attack. His morning will be spent watching Rotti make his usual drops in the projects. Then, in the afternoon, Eggsy will make his maiden run. As he observes, he has to admit that Rotti was made for this work. He knew when to be friendly and when to be forceful. It probably helped that the guy had the muscles to back himself up.

Finally, it came time for Eggsy to take his turn. Rotti steers him to a middle class bar in one of the transition neighborhoods. Leaning on a brick wall across the way, Rotti finally tells him the whole story. “Alright, you’s doin’ something a bit different than me. You ain’t collectin’ anything, just droppin’ off. These blokes are a bit posh an’ have already paid. You’re looking for a group of uni students. Should be five of em’. Just go in, sit down with em’ or whatever. Be nice. Give each a packet and then get out. They only get one each, so don’ let em fool ya’. That’ll piss off Dean right quick.”

Rotti nudges him forward in a silent command to get started. Eggsy turns back to him. “Aren’t you… coming in?”

Smirking, Rotti pulls out a cigarette, Silk Cuts Eggsy notes absently, and starts fishing in his pockets for a lighter. “Be right ‘ere, waiting.” Huffing, Eggsy turns back to the bar. Swallows down his anxiety, crosses the street and walks in. Knows better than to give himself even a second to look back.

The bar is one he’s never been in, but it’s obvious why it was chosen as a drop point. It’s nice enough to cater to the bored or rebellious well-to-do’s, but located on the outskirts of the slums Eggsy grew up in. It wouldn’t be uncommon to see a poor bastard sharing a pint with a private school instructor in such a mixed-class establishment like this.

It’s easy to pick out his targets. They’re crowded around the the pool table tucked all the way in the back. All are wearing their matching uni sweatshirts. Shoulder through the smoke and crowds, Eggsy can tell the moment he’s been spotted. A blonde man looks up from lining his shot to give him the slow once-over, smiles condescendingly, and points him out to his friends. Stifling a frown, Eggsy walks up to the group and introduces himself. Two laughing girls each take one of his arms and pulls him down to sit at a side table. “So Eggsy, that’s not a very common name.” The brunette girl, Shannon, presses into his space. “Yes, is that a… family name? Prestige handed down through your generations?” The blond man is standing before him now, hip cocked out, pool cue in hand like a staff. His voice is dripping with disdain, and his chin is tilted up at that superior angle. The second male, bent over the pool table to take his shot, mutters “mutt’s don’t have clean pedigrees. Don’t dally with strays.” His voice is low, but Eggsy still catches it.

Before he can make a snappy comeback, one of the girls flips her hair and throws in her two pence. “Well I like it, it’s got an edge to it.” Throws him a heated glance. “Definitely suits you.”

At that point, Eggsy can’t tell who’s coming or going, because he’s found himself seated in the middle of a group of fancy uni kids, and three out of five of them are all over him. The two girls
couldn’t be more obvious, and the condescending prick in front of him hasn’t stopped staring. Even the jackass with brown hair is eyeing him discreetly.

“Ah. Right then. Well, I have some things for you then?” And it’s as simple as that. They all palm their wrapped little bags under the pretense of shaking hands, nice to see you, goodbye.

Shannon places a lip-smacking kiss on his cheek. “I hope to see you next time.”

The brunette, back on the pool table, rolls his eyes at the girls. “Jesus.”

He’s almost out of the bar when the blond man, William, as his name turns out to be, catches his elbow and pulls him aside. Steps in close and holds up a folded twenty pound note. “For your troubles.” Eggsy goes to take the bill, but William ignores him and stuffs the money deep into his front pocket. Hooks the two fingers inside the material to tug him even closer, and speaks lowly in his ear. “So how would it work if I wanted to meet you later? Do you have a place we can go?”

Eggsy jerks back in surprise, eyes wide. “I don’t, that’s not. I don’t do that sort of thing.”

A look of confusion passes over Williams face, before it clears up with a smirk. “Oh, right. Look, the reluctant virgin may be a turn on for most of your clients, but all I’m interested in—“

“I ain’t for sale.” Eggsy breaks the blonde’s hold on his pocket, and marches towards the front door again to continue on his way.

William doesn’t try to stop him again, but he does call after. “Everyone’s for sale. I’ll talk to your boss, shall I?”

Eggsy grits his teeth and ignores him.

Rotti is waiting for him outside, and doesn’t bother to ask how it went. He imagines it’s written clearly in his expression. They hit two more places after that, a dance lounge and another pub, and it pretty much goes the same as the first. It’s depressing.

On the way back, Eggsy can’t keep his incredulity at the situation in check any longer. “Rotti, why the fuck were they practically climbing all over me?”

Rotti takes a drag on his Silk Cut and shrugs. “Is’ like me mum always said. All them posh blokes love a bit of rough.”

A small smile inches its way onto Eggsy’s face. So, a gentleman might like someone like Eggsy after all? He glances at Rotti. “They do?”

Rotti looks over at him, and guesses his thought process in a heartbeat. Rolls his eyes harder than marble. “Don’t get yer’ hopes up. It makes em’ feel powerful, having a street rat as a whore, and then bein’ thanked for it.” The smile slips off of Eggsy’s face. “And they don’t feel bad about not wining and dining em’ like they’d have to with partners on their own level—shite!”

The cigarette falls from Rotti’s fingers, and he shakes his hand as though burned. “Damn it to hell…” Eggsy looks towards Rotti’s hand, and sees a red shape on the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. He tries to grab Rotti’s hand for a closer look, but Rotti quickly shoves his hands in his pocket. “Mind yer own fucking business!”

Eyebrows reaching new heights, Eggsy stares at Rotti, waiting for an explanation. A heartbeat later, and Rotti sighs, laying a hand on Eggsy’s neck. “Cigarette burnt me. It hurt is all. Let’s just get back.”
Get back they do, and Dean doesn’t even bat an eye. Eggsy goes straight to the baby pen to pick up Daisy and bounce her around. When his mother asks where he’s been, he lies. These days he’s very good at lying.

Three weeks this goes on. Most afternoons, Rotti drags him around to make his drops, and he gets propositioned nearly every time. The tips are good, though, even though he turns everyone down flat. Even Dean pretty much leaves him alone so long as the work gets done.

No, the big issue during this time is Rotti himself. He’s acting weird, and it’s putting Eggsy on edge. He’s hovering just a tad more than usual, and there’s a manic edge to it now. Something sharp and piercing. If he had to guess, Eggsy would say it started that first day on the job. Rotti has taken to wearing a bandaid over the cigarette burn, which isn’t weird in and of itself. What’s strange is that he’s still wearing it religiously two weeks later. Eggsy can make a short leap of intuition about why that is.

Tonight, as he watches from the corner of his eye, he can’t decide if it would be a bad idea or an incredibly bad idea to ask Rotti point blank if he has a Mark now.

He’s also tracking his mother as she gathers all her things into her purse with a huge grin on her face. Michelle is wearing a nice dress with one of the more expensive sweaters Eggsy had gotten her for Christmas a couple years ago, and she fusses with her hair about every five minutes. She’s going to the movies after sharing a pint, and Dean is actually taking her out on a date. Eggsy can’t remember the last time.

“Eggsy, you have all the emergency numbers? She’s already been fed, so just give her a bath and put her down with a story.”

“Yes mum, you already went over this.” Resists the urge to comment on how he already knows all this because he spends more time looking after Daisy than she does. Eggsy hears Rotti stifle a snicker from the couch. Being present for a lot of Eggsy’s caregiving, he probably shares the thought.

Michelle just smiles brightly at him, and checks her hair for the umpteenth time. Dean walks into the living room, wearing the same crap clothing he did every day. Eggsy glares at him for not bothering to dress up.

“Michelle, babe, we’re goin’ soon. Why don’t you hurry ahead to the Black Prince, and order me a pint. Be right behind ya. Jus’ need ta’ find my phone.”

Muscles tensing, Eggsy’s attention goes into high alert. His mum exits the flat, and there’s Dean standing in front of him. Eggsy can practically feel a laser focus from the vicinity of the couch.

“You been doin’ good on yer’ runs, Eggsy. Clients seem ta’ like ya.”

Blinking at the compliment, Eggsy slowly nods. “Yeah…I guess.”

“Makin’ good tips, too, I hear.”

Again, Eggsy nods. The ‘nice guy’ act is littered with signs reading ‘caution: falling rocks’.

“Make more if you were a bit friendlier.”

Ah. Eggsy raises a brow. “Friendlier how?”

“Don’t play dumb. Set you up with a place to meet em’ in a day or so. Make a mint.” Dean speaks as though the matter is already settled, no problem. To be honest, Eggsy has kind of been expecting
this. He embraces his inner saint, and does his very best to stay calm despite the brewing storm.

“No. Won’t be doing nothing of the sort.” His voice is a mockery of Dean’s. Says it plainly, as though the matter is already settled, no problem (because it damn well is).

And Dean smiles, and has the gaul to open his smug mouth. “We been down this road plenty of times, boy. I gotta’ meet your mum soon, so lets skip this bit, yeah? You say ya’ won’t. I say ya’ will, and then I explain why ya’ will. It’s for yer mum. It’s for Daisy. Do us all a favor and make it easier on them.” Dean is shrugging into his coat now, confident that the matter is closed.

Anger wells up within Eggsy so quickly it overflows. No. He’s not doing this anymore, remember? Amidst the maelstrom of rage and shame and hate, there’s a strange calm settling over Eggsy. It’s like the last puzzle piece has clicked into place. For the first time in his life, Eggsy realizes that he actually has some power here. The second he started bringing Daisy into this mess, the dynamics shifted. It just took Eggsy a bit to realize it.

Because Daisy? She’s the hard, unmoving proverbial line in the sand. He can get away with this. The words spill forth and it’s like draining a blister—the pressure is released and it’s satisfying in a horrific way.

“Yeah. You can hurt me, and humiliate me, but you hurt Daisy, and that’s where this all ends. And you were right—Mum will never leave you for my sake.” It’s like ripping his own heart out to admit that aloud. “But she will for Daisy.” The words taste bitter and acidic. “And then there’s me. I’d rather die than turn tricks, and I’d rather kill you than let you hurt Daisy like you hurt me.” Draws in a shaky breath, eyes wild. “Be better for us all if you let this one thing go. Seems like an awful lot to lose for something so trivial.” Eggsy holds his breath, poised for action.

The look on Dean’s face is something new, but Eggsy can tell right off the bat that he’s won this round. Dean may be a right bastard, but he likes things the way they are now, and the money he’d make by whoring him out just doesn’t pass the cost benefit analysis.

Eggsy tries not to think about the day when Dean no longer finds them worth the trouble.

An emptiness falls over Dean’s countenance, and it’s so hollow as to be terrifying. “Watch yourself, Eggsy. You never know when I’ll get bored of playin’ house.” He walks out of the house then, calm as you please, door shut after him with a gentle click.

The unwanted child still crouched in the corner of Eggsy’s soul shivers in trepidation. He took a risk and called Dean’s bluff. He even won this time, but he also saw a glimpse of the bottomless hole inside that man. Idly wonders how many more victims will be tossed in to feed the starving monster.

Eggsy hopes to God that he’s enough to sate that hunger.

Rotti jolts him from his morbid thoughts. “What the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

Letting out a breath, and a little bit in shock from dodging a bullet, Eggsy barely pays Rotti any mind. “Nothing’s wrong with me. I won’t peddle my arse around on Dean’s say so.”

With only half his attention on his surroundings, he completely misses the part where Rotti moves. One minute, the bloke’s kicked back on the couch like it’s Key West, and the next he’s pulling Eggsy out of his seat by his hair. It fucking hurts—takes him completely by surprise.

Flailing as he’s hauled about, his mouth runs at a mile a minute. “What the fucking hell are you doing?! Have you lost your goddamn mind—”
Rotti shakes him hard enough to rattle the bonecage of his skull. Eggsy’s hand flies to his scalp in an attempt to alleviate the shooting pains from the harsh grip on his hair.

“I just ain’t bloody good enough for you, am I?!” He grabs Eggsy’s wrist with his free arm, and shoves him face first against the nearest wall. Takes the arm he’s captured and twists it behind Eggsy’s back, pushing his hand towards Eggsy’s own neck in a grappling hold.

Grunting in pain, Eggsy has trouble tracking the ‘conversation’. “What’re you even on about? There’s—“

Rotti snarls into his ear, crazed and strained. “All you had to do was say ‘yes’, Eggsy! I woulda’ taken you away from all this! But no, I ain’t posh enough for ya’, am I? Only a highbrow gentleman is good enough for Eggsy Unwin!”

“Rotti, it ain’t like that!”

The larger man relinquishes his handful of hair and trades it out for Eggsy’s free hand. Bends that arm up to join it’s twin, making Eggsy arch his back and stand on tiptoe. He shoves Eggsy against the wall again in a silent command to shut the hell up.

“Then what’s it like, huh?! You fucking gambled with your family, with Daisy, sayin’ no to Dean like that! You said you’d rather kill, rather die. So you’d rather die than be with me?! Are you that desperate to get fucked over by some snobby bastard an’ tossed out in the morning with the trash?! To be some richie’s private slut till’ he gets bored and passes you around to all his friends?!”

Transferring both of Eggsy’s thin wrists into one callused hand, Rotti flips him around so they’re face to face, and keeps him bodily pinned. Eggsy gets his first real eyeful of Rotti’s enraged expression, and oh fuck, but he’s never seen him so out of control. A spark of true fear ignites in Eggsy’s belly.

“Listen—“

“You wanna be treated like that, I can treat you like that.”

Eggsy starts babbling, “I just didn’t wanna’ lead you on. Nothin’ personal, but I just—“

“Want a soulmate. Always waitin’ for some special perfect person that don’t exist. We all want a soulmate, but when you gonna’ learn that people like us don’t get fairytale endings?! He ain’t gonna want you! Why can’t you get that through your thick fucking skull?”

His eyes are boring into Eggsy’s, demanding answers. Sucking in a shaky breath, Eggsy licks his lips and tries to reason with him. “Look, you don’t understand what it’s like, Rotti, to know that there’s someone out there made just for you. Even the slightest chance—“

Rotti’s expression darkens like a stormcloud, his eyebrows drawing down and his lips twisting into an ugly sneer. Keeping Eggsy on his toes by pulling up on his arms, Rotti drags him away from the wall. Stumbling along for the walk, he can’t stop Rotti from shoving him onto the kitchen counter, his bent form sending mail and spice bottles tumbling to the floor.

Being as short as he is, Eggsy’s toes can only brush against the ground when they scrabble for purchase. He blindly tries to kick out behind him, but Rotti has already muscled his way between Eggsy’s legs, forcing them wide open and rendering them completely ineffectual. As fucking humiliating as this is, Eggsy tries to work out what changed, because Rotti is many things, but he’s not this.
Rotti has braced his free hand on the counter right by Eggsy’s face. The hand with the ‘burn’. The hand he hasn’t seen without a bandaid for weeks now. It answers Eggsy’s questions on whether or not Rotti got a Mark, because there’s a tiny pink No etched on his skin.

Swallows, and tries to think despite the ache in his abdomen from being pressed so heavily against the sharp counter ledge. “It might not mean what you think.” His voice wavers in distress.

Rotti lets out a heartbreaking sound, somewhere between a bitter sob and and scornful laugh. “We both know exactly what it means. My own soulmate won’t want nothin’ ta’ do with me, just like yours. So don’t tell me I can’t bloody well understand.”

He can feel the back of Rotti’s fumbling hand pressed against flank when he reaches between them. The sound of Rotti’s belt buckle being unclasped is louder than a gunshot to Eggsy’s ear. “Oh Christ, oh jesus, this isn’t happening…” The sound of jeans sliding over skin meets his ears, and his eyes start to water.

As much as he liked to fantasize about being bent over a surface, the reality of this little scenario is extremely unsexy. Is terrifying. At the sound and feel of his own zipper being undone, the panic settles in under his skin. Gasps out a tearful “God, Rotti, please….”

Exhaling hotly against the back of Eggsy’s neck, Rotti groans in frustration. His voice is wrecked, and infused with such tragic longing. “You got no idea how badly I want you to say that to me under better circumstances.” It makes Eggsy’s heart ache for the poor bastard, despite himself. He knows firsthand how fucking crazy soulmates can make you.

“Don’t do this. Please, Rotti. This can’t be taken back. Don’t do this.” His jeans are roughly peeled off, and the scrape of rough fabric is unpleasant against his alert skin, leaving red marks in its wake.

Rotti leans forward, voice dark as sin, and his words reverberate bitingly in Eggsy’s ear. “Then say ‘no’.”

Eggsy stills, bites down to silence his tongue at the last second. Oh, Rotti, you fucking tragic fool.

“Manners maketh man.” His soulmate’s words in Rotti’s mouth sound small, and desperate, and pleading like a churchgoer. “Eggsy, please. Manners maketh man.”

Rotti presses their naked skin together in a hot line, and Eggsy is relieved to find that Rotti isn’t remotely getting off on this any more than he is. Closing his eyes, Eggsy takes a deep breath in an effort to calm his rabbiting heart. “It doesn’t work that way, Rotti. Let me up. You don’t want us to be like this.”

“Why not?” Rotti’s tone is almost plaintive. “Why can’t it work that way?”

“Because…” Eggsy starts, but can’t seem to find the words to finish. Because seriously, why not? This situation is fucked up, but it’s charged with rabid emotion, and Rotti has said the words. There are no studies out that have definitively proved that the soulmate phenomena can’t be induced. In fact, it’s a topic of heated debate, and has been for the last decade. Insides turning to lead, Eggsy realizes that Rotti could actually be right.

He can never say ‘no’ to Rotti ever again.

“How can you know that we ain’t soulmates. All you gotta do is say the damn word.”
Casting his mind about, Eggsy spits out the only thing he can think of. “Because my soulmate would 
*never* do this to me. Not like this.” Swallows his pride and his honor and every ounce of pity he 
holds for this desperate creature. Plays on Rotti’s vulnerability and hits him where it counts. “If 
you’re my soulmate, then you’ll stop right now. *Prove to me that you’re my soulmate.*” He knows 
Rotti isn’t his Other, knows it in his blood, in his gut, like he knows his own heartbeat. It’s cruel to 
let him think he has a shot with Eggsy.

But right now, he’ll fucking say *anything.*

There’s a long, tense moment where Eggsy thinks he’s fucked, quite literally. Eventually though, 
Rotti steps away from Eggsy and fixes his pants. Eggsy stays where he is, as though any movement 
will bring the predator back. It’s so mortifying to lay there, bare arse on display, panting like he’s run 
a mile, and in such a vulnerable state.

Tenses when he feels a hot hand rest on his naked hip. The words “I’ll prove it to you” remain 
hanging in the air above him long after Rotti has left the apartment, and they leave a sense of 
impending doom. Eggsy stays like that until he’s shaken out of his fugue state by a distant wailing 
coming from his bedroom. *Daisy.*

He slowly pushes himself onto unsteady legs, and makes a mental note to clean up the mess in the 
厨房 before his mum gets home. Feels cheap when he pulls up his pants.

Finds himself cradling Daisy to his chest, laying his options out to the child. Mutters about what he’s 
going to do, what he think *Rotti’s going to do* in some futile attempt to force a soulmate bond. It’s not 
like Eggsy can go to the police. He can just picture that going down. *Hi, my name is Eggsy Unwin, 
and this guy who lives with us but isn’t on the lease tried to rape me. He’s still living with us. No sir, 
I don’t think it was totally malicious—he thinks I’m his soulmate, but he’s not—well, yes sir, he did 
say the words, but I know he ain’t…wait that doesn’t fucking matter, he was going to rape me. No, 
he did stop. Eventually, but— Yeah, that’s my stepfather—no, we’re not a drug family, I promise.*

Not the smartest course of action. And Dean might actually kill him if he brought the coppers down 
on their heads.

He’s going to have to see Rotti tomorrow. And the next day. And all the days after that.

Once Daisy is put down again, sleeping like the baby she is, Eggsy shoves a chair under his 
doorknob and collapses on his bed. The sickest part is that Eggsy isn’t all that angry. All he can think 
about is how badly soulmates fuck them up without even having to meet them.

By the time he sleeps, he still hasn’t figured out what he’s going to do about all this. His last thought, 
tired and anxious, is pondering what Rotti’s going to do next. His fixation…for whatever reason, 
he’s fixated on Eggsy, and it’s finally turned dangerous.

The next two weeks are awkward as fuck. He sees Rotti, and Rotti sees him, and they pretend that 
nothing untoward ever happened. At least, they do if you exclude Eggsy keeping out of arms range of 
Rotti at all times. Rotti still whispers shit like *I’d make a soft little nest for you and a little one,* but 
those words have a twisted edge to them now. If anyone notices the new tension, no one mentions it.

Eggsy avoids him like the plague, but he can’t keep away from Rotti forever. He still has to make his 
drops, and Rotti is still his ‘handler’, after a fashion. Except now, Rotti has a new game. It’s called 
Make Eggsy Say No. For whatever reason, Rotti seems under the impression that it would make 
their little charade okay.

As for Eggsy…he’s not okay. Hasn’t been okay since that night, and he’s sure as fuck not thinking
straight. He’s not an expert, but he can see in himself, distantly, the flight risk he poses. Eggsy is jittery, nervous, and has been making split second choices that border on reckless.

Bottom line, Eggsy has not been making good choices.

And he’d never guess it, but by this time tomorrow, he’ll be grateful for every nerve-wracking second. Because that edge of panic is what brings him to his soulmate.

Today, they have a new set of clients in the nicer side of town, where all the three story icy-covered houses are. They’re not new to Dean, but Eggsy’s never made a drop to them. He’s wearing his good clothes—the grey slacks and blazer—and Eggsy is following Rotti through the streets at a slight distance.

“There’s six of em’ this time, but they’ve paid for eight packets. Two of em’ ya’ know. They came to the apartment once, remember? Pull out them fancy manners you got. Them’ll like it.”

Eggsy is very deliberate in keeping his voice level for Rotti these days. “I thought you said they all like the rough street character?”

“They do. But these chavs are different. They like the schoolboy gig.”

Stomach flipping, Eggsy looks stricken, because that’s a line he really shouldn’t cross. “What?! I’m not going in there to get them off!”

Dropping the spent cigarette to ground, Rotti grinds it into the pavement with the heel of his leather boot. “You ain’t supposed to fuck em’, you berk. Lose all yer’ value that way. You’s gonna walk in there all pretty like, bat your eyes, and play up the angle. Make the drop, and get out.”

That’s playing with fire if he ever heard of it. “You can’t be serious—“

“Look, Dean’s expectin’ it to get done.” Rotti steps forward to tower over Eggsy’s short form, and his voice takes on a harsh edge, accent thickening. “You’s gonna’ do what e’ tells ya’ or get punished.”

Eggsy glares up at Rotti, but still yanks the saddle bag from him.

Rotti gives him a narrow look. “He’s the boss, so long as you live with him.”

_Until you shack up with me_ is unspoken, but obvious, as per fucking usual. Pursing his lips, Eggsy turns sharply on his heels and starts marching resolutely down the sidewalk.

Rotti leaves, not dressed well enough to blend into the area. All the houses in the neighborhood were gentrified with big windows and heavy curtains. The kind of houses Eggsy would pretend to live in when he was a child. He finds himself approaching a tall, three story tudor style house, and it’s nicer than anything he’s ever been inside.

Heart in his throat, Eggsy pushes the fear down into his stomach, and knocks on the heavy wooden door. Nobody answers. Shakes himself for being an idiot, and uses the metal knocker this time.

The door swings open to reveal the salacious gent he’d met the day he’d taken Daisy to the park. He’s dressed in a pinstripe suit that probably cost more than Eggsy spends on food in two months. His unctuous smile creeps Eggsy out beyond reason. “Ah, I’ve been expecting you. Do come in.” The man doesn’t step very far to the side, and Eggsy has to slide uncomfortably close to him in order to pass.
The receiving room (because this house is big enough to need one) is filled with men in suits. They’re seated on sofas, fancy chairs, and all are palming rich drinks in crystal glasses. Eggsy falters when all eyes turn to him. He jumps when the first man (Pinstripe, as Eggsy mentally tallies him) steps beside him and lays a hand on his shoulder.

“Gentlemen, this is the boy I mentioned earlier. Eggsy, why don’t you have a seat?” Keeping his hand on Eggsy’s shoulder, the man steers him to sit on the sofa next to his friend. Eggsy is caged in between the two men, thighs pressed against thighs on either side.

“Um, I’m not here long. I have some things to give you—“

“Indeed, I think you do.” Another man, this one clad in a black suit and irish accent, stands in front of him, and places a drink in his hand. “1965 Strathclyde. An excellent year for scotch. I think you’ll enjoy this. Slainte.” Taking a sip, the man nods his head to Eggsy, urging him to do the same.

“Right. Thanks.” Eggsy takes in a mouthful of bitter liquid, and immediately schools his face into a false look of enjoyment. He is already starting to regret this. It burns going down, and pools in his stomach. “Smooth” he croaks out, and tries to hand the drink back.

The man raises an eyebrow. “Young man, that scotch is almost fifty years old. Drink up and learn to appreciate rare spirits.” Eggsy feels his face flush in embarrassment. Takes another gulp to appease the man.

“So Eggsy, tell me about yourself.” The bloke on his left, previously silent, stretches an arm along the back of the couch. Eggsy tries to shift away. Pulls his satchel onto his lap and starts fiddling with the clasp. His finger are clumsy. “There’s…there’s not much to say. I have some packages for you…”

The first man pulls the bag from Eggsy’s numbing fingers and hands it off to the gent standing before him. “There’s time enough for that later. Right now, I’m more interested in you.”

Eggsy watches in slow confusion as Black Suit empties his bag on the coffee table, and picks up one of the little wrapped squares. “Wait…you’re only ‘spose to get to get eight. The others go to—“

Pinstripe hooks a finger along his jaw and turns his face to lock eyes with him. “I told you, Eggsy, don’t worry about it.”

Eggsy shrugs the hand off of his face to watch Black Suit open the packet. It takes a lot more energy than it should. Wait.

Tipping the packet upside down, a fine white powder spills onto the table surface. Holy hell. Eggsy sags against the couch in exhaustion, and his head lolls forward until his chin touches his chest. He strains his eyes to keep watching, panic fighting it’s way back to the surface of his mind.

Jesus, he thought he was…well he didn’t know what he thought. He’d been lying to himself that his deliveries were weed, even though he noticed each pack was a little bit heavy for that. But blow is hard shit. Jesus, he can get in so much fucking trouble for this, real jail time.

Eggsy doesn’t realize he’s started breathing harder until Sofa Man makes a comment on it. “Calm down, baby, everything will be fine.” He’s dimly aware of a hand playing with the hair on the nape of his neck. The glass of remaining scotch slips from his finger to fall onto the carpet.

“Shite. Sorry ‘bout that. Gotta’ go.” Eggsy tries to stand, but Pinstripe pulls his back down. An
inhale can be heard from the men snorting coke on the coffee table, but Eggsy’s attention is focused on the hand sliding up his thigh.

“Don’t mind the spill, dear boy. Relax, stay awhile. Make yourself more…comfortable.”

Eggsy lazily pushes the hand from his lap, only for it to return post haste. He’s sweating now, like the temperature suddenly skyrocketed, and the hand idly playing with his fly isn’t helping matters.

“Stop. I don’t want you to do that. I want you stop…” He can hear his own voice as though through a layer of cotton. Another pair of hands start trailing over his chest, fingers teasing a nipple during the exploration.

“But you seem to be enjoying yourself.” Hands pull at his knees to spread his legs. Eggsy gasps in pleasure when nails are raked along his inseam, lighting a fire along his skin. “If you want us to stop, Eggsy, just say no.”

Except, he’s not supposed to say ‘no’. Why was that again? His thoughts are slow, like cold syrup, and what—

“—was in that drink?” He slurs. Doesn’t even notice the transition from thought to word. “Gave me som’thin…oh, fuck…!” His belt is open, and his zipper is down, and when did that hand wander into his pants?

“We’ll look after you. You’ll like it here.” A mouth lightly captures his, softly biting at his lips while the other continues to spout tempting words, hot and heady. “Keep you warm, well fed, full and well fucked…there’s enough of you to go around.” The hand toying with his nipple pinches and twists, and Eggsy mewls up into the wet heat at his mouth. Hips undulating on their own, Eggsy barely turns his head away.

“Just…wait a minute—ah! Stop…” Lips have found his neck instead, and it’s so fucking tempting to just let this happen. It feels so good…and he feels so fucking weak and pathetic for sort of liking it.

Pinstripe leans in to whisper heatedly in Eggsy’s ear. “If you’re very good, I’ll let you address me as ‘Daddy’.” Heat surges through his veins at that, tension coiling tight in his belly to compete with the growing sickness twisting inside. He’s throbbing, and he wants—

—but not like this. Not like this. Not with them.

“I don’t want this. I have a soulmate. He’s waiting…. I have to go.” He frantically pushes the hands off his body, but their grips are tightening on his arms, on his legs, and his clothes. “Let me go.” Fear is growing exponentially, panic finally wresting control from Eggsy. Adrenaline surges through him, and he flings himself from the couch. Stumbles as fast as he can to the front door, barely dodging fingers tugging on the tails of his blazer.

The world is tilting on it’s axis, and the last thing Eggsy really remembers is using the wall to keep himself upright and moving. Barely recalls snatches of sky, and buildings, and scraping his hands on concrete.

Then he remembers falling into black.

When he wakes up next, it’s to Jamal’s worried eyes. Looking around, he finds himself in his friends bed. Mouth dry as the sahara, he coughs and makes the universal sign for ‘water’. Sitting up, the world tips again, though not as badly as before. Squeezes his eyes shut to fight the burning tears.

Eggsy gulps down the water offered by Jamal as though he’ll die of thirst any minute now. ”When
“Did…how long have I been here?”

“Twelve hours, bruv. What the fuck happened to ya’?”

What? He could have sworn he was at that, that house, maybe ten minutes ago. “Are you sure?”

Jamal looks at him with raised eyebrows. “Yeah, man. Came home to find you passed out on my welcome mat. You woke up twice, but didn’t seem to know where you were or…who I was, and what you were doing here. Scared the shite outa’ me, mate.”

“And…what was…” He doesn’t want to ask, but he needs to. Mans the fuck up and addresses the issue head on. “Was I wearing clothes?”

Jamal nods. “Yeah, bruv. Yer’ pants were open…but I don’t think anything happened. I didn’t see no…signs. Gotta’ make a call, be back.”

Eggsy nods, stark relief rushing over him. It’s short lived, however, because the reality of his situation comes crashing into the forefront of his mind. “Jamal, did I have a, a black bag, like a messenger bag, with me?”

His friend shakes his head in the negative. Fuck, that bag had other peoples drugs in it. Panic starts clawing down his spine again. He’s lost Dean’s drugs. He can’t go back home now. He’ll be killed for losing so much valuable merchandise, or worse.

Jamal comes back shortly, shoving his iPhone into his pocket. “Just called Ryan to let him know you woke up. Wants to meet at the pub when he’s off work tonight, if you’re up for it.”

Eggsy looks up at him, hesitating to meet his friends eyes. “What did you tell him?”

“Not much. Just that Dean fucked you up again. No…details.”

Nodding, Eggsy sighs in muted relief. “Keep it that way, yeah? Just, between us.”

They shake on it, and Jamal leaves Eggsy alone to shower. As much as he hates wasting good supplies, Eggsy can’t stand to keep the clothes. He tosses them in the garbage, and fishes out the emergency supply he stashed here for just such an occasion. He even has that cool jacket with the black and gold print from when he left it here on accident a few days ago.

The shower helps. His sense of time is still pretty warped. Twelve hours had seemed like twenty minutes for him, and that pattern still continues. As soon as he steps into the hot shower, Eggsy just checks out until he realizes the water turned cold. He gets dressed, and it’s suddenly been two hours. The time stretches get shorter and shorter, but it’s still pretty damn disconcerting. He sleeps the rest of the day, until it’s time to leave.

When Jamal asks him if wants to stay in, Eggsy lies and tells him no, he’s been looking forward to it.

They end up at a pub, Eggsy mulling over his life choices as he nursed something bitter. Knows he really shouldn’t be drinking, but can’t bring himself to care. He tries to put on a graceful face for his friends, but it’s difficult. It’s not that he’s depressed, or afraid anymore. No, Eggsy’s just pissed, as in seriously brassed off. He’s at the end of his rope—he’s done.

Of course, this is when Rotti and his hanger-ons decide to put in their appearance. The usual postering and chest thumping goes on, and Rotti sidles up next to Eggsy. “Dean’s lookin’ fer ya’. You really done it this time.” Places a heavy hand on Eggsy’s neck, as usual. “Just say the word, Eggsy. Say it, and this don’t have to happen.”
Erupting from his seat, Eggsy shoves Rotti’s hand off of him. Hisses like an angry cat. “Never. Come on guys. We’re going.” Crashes into Rotti accidentally-on-purpose on his way out the door, letting his fingers do the walking.

When he dangles the car keys stolen from Rotti seconds earlier, there’s a vindictive pleasure coursing through his being. It’s like he’s watching himself from the outside, and some angry, arrogant kid has taken over his body. Revving the engine was like screaming ‘fuck you’ to the whole world and everyone in it. The dozen donuts was just to shove it in Rotti’s face.

The joy ride is dark and exhilarating, and for a wild moment, Eggsy is free. It’s even better when the cop car joins in the chase. He’s got his friends, a tank of gas, and a way out of any trouble coming his way. He’s untouchable. He’s invincible. He’s—

—gonna’ hit a bloody dog! Shite!

Swerving to miss some dumb stray that wandered into the middle of the street, Eggsy drives right into a barricade. The impact has the same effect as dumping a bucket of ice-cold water on his head. Eggsy comes back to himself with alarming speed, and has just enough presence of mind to tell Ryan and Jamal to get out of the car and run.

Why does he let them go? It’s because it’s the right thing to do. Though he would be lying if he claimed he wasn’t thinking about Soul Marks. Jamal had been reading a copy of King Henry IV just that day, waiting with unending patience for his soulmate, and the very idea of Ryan missing out on the fateful ‘hello’ coming his way was heartbreaking. Better for Eggsy to end up in jail than they miss out on finding their matches. Just in case.

Besides, it’s not like his own soulmate would look twice at him. They haven’t even met, and he’s already lost.

As soon as they disappear into the darkness, Eggsy floors the pedal and is off again. When he finally reaches the end of his road, all he does is calmly offer up his wrists for the steel cuffs because it’s no less than he deserves.

Years from now, when Eggsy looks back, he’ll think yeah, that was the night I decided to join Kingsmen, and I didn’t even know it existed. Because there was nothing else he was good for.

He won’t give up the names of his friends to his interrogator. Frankly, he’d rather rot in prison. When he’s told to call his Mum and let her know he’ll be in jail for the next eighteen months, he almost does it. As much as he doesn’t want to leave her and Daisy alone in that hell hole, he’s terrified of going home. It’s just going to hurt, and maybe kill him, and Rotti will be there to make him feel dirty and sorry for him at the same time…prison could be a fucking relief.

And then reality sets back in, and he knows he can’t just walk away from them. Knows how prison is for boys like him with pretty eyes and enough hair for a handhold. He’s desperate when he pulls out his medal. He’s half crazed when he makes his one phone call to a fairy tale. Oxfords, not brogues…he’s damned lucky to have even remember that phrase. Eggsy doesn’t really expect it to work, but it still utterly crushes his heart when the lady hangs up on him.

And then, like magic, he’s released. No questions asked, or answered.

The morning light is blinding to Eggsy and he almost misses the suave gentleman leaning on the wall outside the station. His pinstripe suit is classy and pricey, and the glasses just give the man an edge. The tilt of his jaw pours heat right into Eggsy’s body, because that man is everything he’s ever wanted made flesh.
Eggsy imagines his soulmate will be something like this beautiful person.

His name is Harry Hart, and Eggsy is a little bit in love. He’s also a little bitter. Privately wonders if Harry does this often—waiting for lads like him to owe a favor or two. Every time he meets a guy in a suit, they hurt him, or drug him, or both. Doesn’t trust that he’s any different from the current standard. But, maybe….

They end up at the Black Prince, of all places. Maybe it’s the damask wall paper, but Harry seems like he personifies a class of his own. Harry orders a beer that Eggsy can get behind, and it’s the first time he’s seen a gentleman with a drink Eggsy can actually stomach. And another thing—Harry is funny. Eggsy actually starts to like the bloke.

A little more than a bit in love, then.

Of course, the subject of his dad comes up, and of course he knows Harry Hart. He’s the one to give him the medal, and the one his father died for. Eggsy isn’t sure what to say about that, but telling him it’s okay is a good place to start.

For a moment, he does wonder where Harry has been all these years. Help would have been very welcome long before he found himself on the wrong side of a cell. But…cleaning up Eggsy’s life was never Harry’s job. Not really. It’s a nice fantasy, but Eggsy’s life is Eggsy’s responsibility. The lady in the park taught him that much.

“Your father was a good man. I was foolish, and my mistakes cost him his life. I owe your family a debt because of it.” Harry is regal in his sadness, as though he is owning up to a great sin. Eggsy isn’t going to have any of that.

“You said he died protecting you, right?”

Harry nods. “He did.”

“Then you don’t owe me a thing. I’m…I appreciate the help you gave me. But if he, I don’t know, took a bullet for you or something, then that was his choice. It was his gift to you. You can’t be in debt when something is freely given.”

And then Harry Hart smiles at him, eyebrows raised minutely in surprise. It’s the first real smile Eggsy sees on the man, and his heart flutters from being the one to bring it about.

“You surprised me, Eggsy. You have a good heart.”

Eggsy flushes as the compliment.

“Perhaps you can explain to me, then, where it all went wrong for you?”

Blinking, Eggsy raises an eyebrow in silent inquiry.

“You were a very promising gymnast in school, and yet you gave it up. Excellent grades before they plummeted. You excelled in the royal marines, and yet you dropped out after the first six months. And now I find you in prison. I must say, I’m a little disappointed to find such a promising young man throwing away his future.”

Every word stabs Eggsy in the heart. His throat tightens as Harry lays all of his faults and mistakes on the table in such a logical fashion. Exhales through his nose, and put on a bitter smile.

“Fuck you.”
Not a single muscle twitches on Harry’s face, but his features still seem to sharpen. “I beg your pardon.”

Eggsy sits back against the booth, and glares at the man sitting jack of him. “You heard me. So you read my file, or whatever. That doesn’t mean you know anything about me. You can act like you’re better than me all you like, and yes, you probably are better than me. But I made those choices for good reasons. I own all my mistakes because they were made doing what I thought was right. So yeah. Fuck you.”

As much as Eggsy likes Harry, he isn’t going live and die by his word just because he wears a suit. Before Harry can respond to Eggsy’s impassioned speach, a bell rings, signaling the arrival of Rotti and his henchmen. Eggsy snorts, and puts his head in his hands. Breathes out “come the fuck on”, gaining a disapproving frown from across the table. Eggsy rolls his eyes at Harry’s look, and mutters, “cut me some slack, it’s been a horrifying couple of days.” Promptly ignores the spike of interest in Harry’s eyes.

Rotti spots him almost immediately, and Eggsy can see the cogs turning at high speeds when Rotti lays eyes on Harry. With Harry Hart being Eggsy’s closest approximation of a gentleman, Rotti automatically labels him as Enemy Number One.

“As Eggsy, you think you’d ‘ave the smarts to keep away from here.” Rotti clamps his customary hand on the back of Eggsy’s neck, and squeezes. “It’s time.” Eggsy looks up from his hands, meets Harry’s gaze with a hangdog expression. At least he can spare his father’s friend. “You should really go now. Thanks for the help.”

For a moment, it doesn’t look like Harry is going to leave. And then the hope that Eggsy didn’t even realize had blossomed was crushed. Harry Hart stands up and walks towards the front door. Eggsy watches him walk out of his life, probably forever.

Looks up at Rotti with wide eyes, and swallows. “How bad is it?”

Something in Rotti softens a touch, and Eggsy clings to that. Whatever has gone down between them in the past, they’ve been through it together. They’ll go through this together too. It’s comforting in a diseased way. “Real bad.” Rotti drops his voice to a whisper. “You can still say ‘no’.”

It’s quite possibly the hardest thing he’s ever done, turning Rotti down.

They’re pulled from their private conversation by the sharp sound of the pub door latch, and the words that hit Eggsy like bullets.

“Manners. Maketh. Man.”

Eggsy doesn’t breathe. Whips his head up to stare at his soulmate, Harry Hart. His back is to Eggsy, and the strong lines of his form are outlined in the filtered light, like a holy entity come to bless and destroy in equal measures.

Never again will Eggsy see a more beautiful sight.

The hand on Eggsy’s neck spasms. Rotti looks wrecked, and despite himself, Eggsy feels kind of bad for the guy. At least, he does until Rotti stalks forward to throw down a gauntlet at Harry’s feet.

What follows is an incredible display of lovely violence, dealt out with graceful efficiency. When Harry knocks Rotti out with nothing but an umbrella and a bar glass, Eggsy has to shift in his seat because his blood is running hot. One minute is all it took to lay waste to the group of titans that have terrorized Eggsy since he was a child. His soulmate literally walked into his life to slay his demons.
It’s the stuff of legends.

Eggsy can’t take his eyes off of Harry Hart, one man death squad, and tucks every image into his heart.

After extracting a promise of silence about everything Eggsy learned and saw today, Harry leaves him with nothing but a pat on the shoulder and a business card for some tailor shop. When the door closes behind his soulmate, Eggsy slums down in the booth, empty.

There was nothing.

No indication that Eggsy said the words on Harry’s Mark, assuming he even had one. Coming down from the high of meeting his soulmate, the full consequences hit him hard. It’s too soon, too wrong, too horrible of circumstances to have met under. What he’d fucking mouthed off to Harry, what he’d implied about himself—he’s already ruined everything and he didn’t know it until it was too late.

He’d committed to changing his life to make it worthy of a soulmate, bettering himself, literally days ago, and he doesn’t even get the chance to act on it. He’s waited too long, and now there’s no way a gentleman like Harry would ever look at Eggsy in a romantic light.

Jesus, he said ‘fuck you’ to his soulmate.

All that BBC mimicry was pointless after all. From now on, he’ll drag out every bit of rough he has. Tuck the accent away into a corner of his soul, and slouch while he walks like a thug. Eggsy’s going to strip away every bit of trim he’d smoothed into his character, and turn into the opposite.

Eyes closed, he takes a deep breath. He’s going to have to go home at some point. He glances to Rotti’s form passed out on the dirty pub floor. Decides it would probably be kinder to leave him here rather than wake him up and drag him into the impending confrontation with Dean. Also kinder to Eggsy, but that’s beside the point.

Maybe it’s good that Harry doesn’t know. Just in case he dies tonight.

He stands and starts making his way home. No use putting it off any longer. Even if he wanted to, Eggsy would bet his soul that the bartender has already called Dean to let him know what went down. He glares at said bartender as he exits the building. Glancing back at the Black Prince, Eggsy snorts at the irony. Fitting place to meet Harry fucking Hart, soulmate extraordinaire.

It’s bitter sweet at best.

All too soon, he finds himself staring at the apartment door. He lifts a fist to knock, but the door is wrenched open and Dean roughly grabs Eggsy’s collar to yank him inside. He’s flung against the kitchen counter, and his pulse skyrockets. Looking wildly around the room, his mother and sister are nowhere in sight.

“Where are they?! I swear to—“ Eggsy is silenced by a harsh backhand. His head snaps to the side, blood flying from his nose.

“Who was the man, Eggsy? Who knocked about my boys?!”

Dragging in an unsteady breath, Eggsy braces himself. “I don’t know who he was. Just some berk cruisin’ the pub, I guess.” A cold blade is pressed against his neck. He stiffens, eyes wide.

“Right now, I’m ignorin’ the royal fuck up you made of my best clients. Start makin’ amends or I’ll slit your fuckin’ throat. Tell me his name!”
“I don’t know his name! I don’t know anything about him!”

“Don’t fucking lie to me!” The knife is pressed harder against his neck, and the blade bites into his skin. Blood wells up in the shallow cut, staining his white t-shirt.

Dean leans in close, and speaks deliberately. “Eggsy, I’m getting bored of you. Give me a name.”

Eggsy stares into empty eyes. It’s such an easy decision, he feels like his entire life has been leading up to this choice. He’d rather die protecting his soulmate than betraying him. Spits out a “go to hell”, and closes his eyes tight.

“Release the boy now, or I will be forced to take countermeasures against your person.” Eggsy’s eyes snap open at the sound of Harry Hart’s voice echoing electronically through the apartment. “If you do not comply, I will turn you in for the police to deal with.”

His heart in his hand, Eggsy takes the chance to break away from Dean, and open the bedroom door. His mum is sitting by the radio, cradling Daisy and humming along with the current song. Her eyes are shut, as though she wants to be anywhere but here.

“Mum.” She looks up at Eggsy’s soft voice. “Mum…we need to leave. Now. Get your things.” Michelle just stares at him sadly. Eggsy knows that look. It’s the same one she’s worn since his Dad died. “Mum…”

“Eggsy, where would we go? We have no where else to go.” Her voice is soft, pleading with him to understand.

He sighs, because he does understand. “Then give me Daisy.”

Eyebrows fly to Michelle’s hairline. “What?”

“Maybe you can’t get out, but I can. So give me Daisy. Let me take her away from here.”

“My Eggsy, you can’t find a job and take care of a toddler at the same time.”

“I can make it work, Mum. I will make it work—“

“No Eggsy.”

It rips his heart out. They’ve had this conversation so many times that he knows she isn’t going to change her mind. Not for him at least. Perhaps when Daisy is a little older…. Until then, Eggsy has to find another solution.

The only other solution.

It’s a gamble he’ll have to make—he’ll have to trust that without him to exacerbate things, they can survive Dean until he comes back. Especially Daisy. He may be leaving her alone in a horrible place, but if he can pull this off, he’ll be able to take them away from the situation. And maybe, it’s better to do this while she’s young enough to forget. She can still recover from this, even though he never will. Eggsy kisses his mum’s cheek, then Daisy’s.

Dean isn’t in the apartment any longer, probably off hunting down Rotti. Eggsy leaves for what he hopes is the last time, and pulls out the business card from Harry Hart. He’ll do it for Daisy. He’ll do it for his Mum.

He’ll do it because, more than anything else, he wants Harry Hart to smile at him again.
Okay, so many people have been guessing about the Harry Hart Mark, I've decided to keep track.

It's not a vote, exactly, but it WILL help shape what the phrase ends up being. So leave a comment with what you think should be tattooed on Harry bloody Hart!

Fuck You. : 15
Go to Hell! : 2
I don't know his name! : 3
Cut me some slack, it's been a horrifying couple of days. : 7
You can't be in debt when something is freely given. : 4
Oxfords Not Brogues : 1
Oh, like in My Fair Lady? : 10
Mini-rant about classism. : 2
I'm Eggy. : 1
Never met a tailor before, but I know you ain't one. : 2
You should really go now. : 3
A mixture of a love declaration and insult after Harry 'died'. : 1
How deep does this fucking thing go? : 1

I feel like you guys are a bit angry with Harry....
(9) Merlin

It’s a long walk to Saville Row, and it’s just as well. He’s not in the right frame of mind to be making life altering decisions, but, once again, needs must. The air is cool against his brow, which is beaded with minor sweat. His skin is still burning from the adrenaline spike and fight or flight reflex that Dean always manages to elicit with terrifying ease.

Slowing his pace, Eggsy uses his time wisely. He needs to make some choices before he sees Harry again, needs to plan. Gotta’ decide what to tell him about Dean, because he fucking heard every word said in the apartment, but what else does he know? He casually tossed out every one of Eggsy’s failures for display, and did it as though it was nothing. As though there was so much more Harry could find out if only he was so inclined to look.

Oh God. Does he know about the drugs? About the clients, and what they say about him? Breathing hard (and not entirely from his sudden freerun across the city), Eggsy swerves into the next alley he comes across.

Wanders to the very back of it, sliding amongst the shadows of dumpsters and fire escapes. Pushes his back into the wall until bricks bite into his flesh. Presses one hand over his mouth and the other over his rapidly beating heart. His chest aches in pain from the colorful bruising hidden under his t-shirt. He’s shaking. He’s fucking shaking and what is he even doing?
Drags his hand from his mouth to his neck, twitching from the sting of sweat invading the thin cuts that adorn his throat. Jesus. Kneels down to sit on the chilled concrete. A low whine echoes softly in the narrow space.

I almost died. I... I almost died. I could have died. Would Dean have gone through with it? Would he have cut his throat and bled him out right there on the kitchen linoleum? Have Rotti toss his body into a dumpster, and then call him a hooker when the coppers came looking? If they came looking at all. Christ, he came this fucking close to just disappearing.

His mother… would she even have known? Dean’s got them so well trained up to ignore the sounds of violence, Eggsy doubts she would have come out of the bedroom. Not with Daisy in her arms. Jesus, fuck. She wouldn’t have come to help him. She wouldn’t ever have known his fate. She wouldn’t have…and Daisy might have never know him. She’d grow up thinking he’d just ran off on a lark. Or she’d never even have known his name….

The sound gets louder, and Eggsy finally realizes it’s coming from himself. He keens out into the damp air, like some wounded animal, and he can’t stop it. He’s all throbbing red and black inside, and it hurts so much. It wells up in his throat like some physical thing; a small beast of pain trying to claw it’s way out of his throat. The last few days come crashing down, and spilling out and he can’t make it stop.

Can feel the ghost of Rotti’s body heat curl up along his spine, and phantom pinstriped hands crawling along his thighs. The edges of reality sharpened, and the blur of rohypnol and scotch pick mean-spiritedly at the edge of his instincts. He knows the fingers tucking money into his front pocket aren’t real, but it feels so damn real. It’ll always be real, and part of him, and nothing can ever change or erase it.

The first sob escapes from his mouth like a prison break, desperately vying for freedom. He’s held everything inside for so long, it’s a violent flood. Tries to choke it all down, his own palm smothering the desperate sounds, but the tears and snot mix along his fingers in a disgusting mess that Eggsy can’t seem to control.

Doesn’t even want it to stop now, can’t let it stop yet. He needs to let the worst of it out before he faces Harry Hart and whoever else first. Needs to take the edge off so he can fold the rest up into a tiny, neat little bundle and store it away somewhere under his skin. Where no one can see it. Where no one can get at it.

So no one will ever know what he is.

Finally, his cries transition to dry heaves, and his body goes limp. He’s fucking exhausted from bleeding so much emotion all over the ground. Allows himself to tremble for some minutes as the numbness washes back over him. Then, ever so slowly, he drags the pieces of himself scattered in that alley back together, and does his best to cobble them into a jagged semblance of normalcy. Practices smiling, using the rubber stretch of his skin as a guide to find the right pose. Practices laughing until his voice no longer grates on his own ears. Stands up and reviews his stance (not to vulnerable, not to paranoid), his walk, his trademark wink.

He slowly pulls the Eggsy suit back on, and zips it up tight. Hopefully the flaws won’t stand out overly much. He just needs to keep it together for a little while until he has a moment to himself. Then he’ll tear himself open, cut out the undesirable pieces of himself, and sew something better into those cavities. He’ll burn his old self at the stake, and become something new. Something better.

He just has to get through the day. He can do this. He can.
When he’s ready (he’ll never be ready), Eggsy brushes his clothes off, and walks back out of the alleyway with casual indifference. His steps tell the lie I belong here. I walk these streets everyday.

The closer he gets to Saville Row, though, the more raised eyebrows and superior glances he receives. Eggsy feels about three inches tall by the time he reaches the bespoke suit shop. A lovely bell chime announces his arrival and he’s greeted by a pair of very pleased eyes belonging to one Harry Hart.

Eggsy’s heart does that annoying thing where it jumps and tries to hover midair. Christ.

“Ah, Eggsy, excellent. Right on time.” There is a note of praise fluttering about in Harry’s voice. Something in Eggsy’s chest perks up in interest, and responds. Immediately, Eggsy tamps down on that warmth with extreme prejudice. That’s a dangerous road, and as much as he likes his soulmate, Eggsy isn’t dumb enough to think he actually knows who Harry Hart is.

This isn’t that kind of movie.

“Yeah. I wasn’t sure I’d show up, myself.” There’s an awkward silence for a moment, and Eggsy almost asks what kind of surveillance equipment Harry put in his apartment. Stops himself at the last moment—he’s not sure he wants to know. Instead, he shoves his hands into his pockets to still his own fidgeting.

Seated in a mahogany chair that probably cost more than Eggsy’s rent, Harry looks up at him with a half-smile. “I’m very pleased you did. Shall we get down to brass tacks, as they say? Your job interview begins shortly.” Harry stands, buttons his suit jacket, and gestures behind him towards the back of the shop.

Eyebrows raised, Eggsy shrugs and moves to follow. “You don’t waste any time, do you?” Drawing even with Harry, he does not flinch when his soulmate places a guiding hand on his shoulder to steer him towards dressing room number three.

Harry smirks. “I’m afraid we don’t have the luxury of time to waste today.”

Once they’re both ensconced in the private room, Harry shuts the door behind them and turns a wary Eggsy to face the long mirror occupying the opposite wall. Harry steps up close behind him, and Eggsy can feel the faint traces of Harry’s body heat.

“Tell me, Eggsy, when you look into the mirror, what do you see?” His voice is softer now, and eyes genuinely curious. The question strikes a chord in Eggsy. The differences between them are so terribly obvious when they stand side by side like this—a chavy bloke with cuts adorning his throat and a posh gentleman with impeccable cuticles. What Eggsy sees is someone polished and amazing—one he’ll probably never get to have—and a kid who’s pathetically desperate for someone he doesn’t even know. Add in the Soul Mark mess…well. Does he or doesn’t he? Will he or won’t he?

“I see someone who wants to know what the fuck is going on.” It’s both a brush off, and an honest answer in the grandiose sense.

Harry smiles in mirth at his answer, but Eggsy likes to think he saw some small bit of disappointment at his impersonal response. Harry changes tactics. “Did you see the film ‘Trading Places’?”

Eggsy tilts his head to the side. “No?”

“How about ‘Nikita’?”

Quirking an eyebrow, Eggsy slowly shakes his head ‘no’.
Harry casts his gaze around the room, as though he might find his point hiding in a corner. “‘Pretty Woman’?”

Eggsy frowns in confusion. “…what?”

Waving a hand, Harry pushes the conversation forward again. “Never mind that. My point is that the lack of a silver spoon has set you on a certain path that you needn’t stay on. If you’re prepared to adapt and learn, you can transform.”

Mouth forming a silent ‘oh’, Eggsy grins. “Like in ‘My Fair Lady’, right?” If he’s hinting to Harry, it’s his own damn business.

Harry’s eyes widen, and that smile softens his face in delight, tempered by that veneer of propriety. “How…surprising. Yes, like in ‘My Fair Lady’.” Eggsy’s heart thuds in his chest. Harry’s hand burns through his clothing. Could that mean—but Harry puts on his ‘gentleman face’ again, as Eggsy is starting to call it. “And in this case, I’m offering you the opportunity to become a Kingsman.”

Eggsy pulls an incredulous face at Harry’s reflection. He asks “A tailor?” in a dubious voice because it’s expected of him, all the while pointedly not looking at the umbrella hooked on Harry’s elbow.

“Not a tailor. A Kingsman agent.”

That’s more like it. “Like a spy, then.”


Eggsy answering grin contradicts the levity of his words. “You know I’ve got nothing to lose.” If the gentle squeeze on his shoulder is anything to go by, Harry gets it.

“In that case…” He stretches his hand forward, leaning further into Eggsy’s space, and presses his palm flat against the mirror. Little lights dance into existence along the mirror surface, but Eggsy is distracted by the hot puffs of Harry’s breath on his neck. His shiver is disguised by the room shuddering and jerking to life, and the floor starts to lower. Eggsy stumbles back into Harry, who grabs his shoulders to steady him. He can feel the blood rush to his cheeks, and does his best to shake it off.

Once the floor stops moving and Eggsy is steady on his feet again, Harry carries on the conversation as though there was never any interruption. Something about war and the depleted aristocracy leaving all their silver spoons to this covert organization. Eggsy wasn’t really paying attention, what with the giant, private underground subway system out of a science fiction novel.

“…suit is the modern gentleman’s armor, and the Kingsmen are the new knights—“

“How deep did that fuckin’ elevator take us?”

Harry stares at Eggsy, nonplussed. “…deep enough.”

And that’s the way things progress. They board the underground shuttle and they’re off to the Kingsman HQ. Harry talks to him, and there are times when he smiles at Eggsy like he’s pleasantly surprised, and Eggsys thinks ‘what if’. But then the moment passes. Harry will turn back to the window, and his body language will even out again, and the space between them becomes professionally distant and untraversable once more.

He hangs on every word that passes from Harry Hart’s lips, even enjoys the conversation from time
to time. Despite his vague distance, Eggsy finds himself making a sassy comeback, or a legitimately excited remark. Still, the world is sliding by in that strange stretch that comes about whenever Eggsy hunkers down for cover, emotionally speaking. He still feels the phantom hands, just pressing up under his flesh, but it’s controlled, for now.

Eggsy tries to stay focused on the here and now, but everything is blurring together. Distantly, he recognizes this as one of his usual defense mechanisms—it allows him to lose time but still retain the information of what happened. Like putting the world on mute. He gets more than a few concerned glances from Harry when he’s quiet for too long.

He’s barely hanging onto himself by the tips of his fingernails.

Sooner than he’d prefer, the shuttle is screeching to it’s inevitable stop, and the doors slide open. Disembarking from the underground transport is like stepping between worlds. Where the shuttle is all steel and bolts, the center of Kingsman operations is all walnut paneling and silk brocade curtains.

“Swanky digs you got here, guv.”

Harry gestures for him to follow. “Indeed, though you will find the recruits dormitory isn’t nearly so accommodating.”

Eggsy nods his head in response, trails along behind Harry, and gawks at his surroundings as discreetly as possible. After a couple flights of stairs, the two of them are greeted by a tall scottish bloke who gives Eggsy an incredulous once over. He returns his gaze to Harry with raised brow, and Harry shoots back a bland smile that is so very contrary to the sassy jut of his chin.

“Merlin, this is Eggsy Unwin. Eggsy, Merlin. He will be taking care of things from here.” Without giving Merlin a chance to respond, Harry has turned on his heel, wished Eggsy ‘good luck’, and high tailed it out of there.

Eggsy looks at Merlin, and Merlin stares back. He pulls out his sarcasm for this illustrious introduction. “Well, he sure knows how to run without looking like it, don’t he?”

Merlin snorts. “Harry Hart does not run.” Quirks his lips into a vicious smirk. “He strategically retreats.” And just like that, Eggsy and Merlin find a delicate not-friendship formed from the affectionate mockery of Harry Hart. Eggsy is finally regaining his bearings a bit, and if he can smooth his way with a guy like Merlin, then maybe the rest of this ‘job interview’ won’t be so bad. He’s actually starting to feel a bit better about this whole thing, and starts to view it as more of an adventure rather than a last resort.

Merlin, as it turns out, is an efficient, no-nonsense, type-A personality. Eggsy has barely changed hands and Merlin is already gesturing with his clipboard towards a door. Merlin mutters “brace yourself” as he herds Eggsy through the doorway into a military style living unit.

There are rows of beds along both walls, and a communal shower area just beyond that. It seems the only privacy afforded them are the short doors on the bathroom stalls. A gaggle of young men and women are congregated at the center of the room, and all eyes turn sharply to Eggsy and Merlin as they enter.

Merlin stops a bit before the group and Eggsy continues forwards to join his peers. He’s wary of all of these posh wankers, and there’s a small something niggling at the back of his mind. Before he can figure it out, Merlin starts describing The Most Dangerous Job Interview In The World. He ends his creepy sermon by having them all write their personal information on a bloody body bag, and he does it with vindictive relish.
Once he’s done speaking, Merlin stalks out of the room with his clipboard (which Eggsy suspects is a thing) and abandons the group to their own devices. Leaves them with more questions than answers too, the berk.

The recruits split into smaller splinter squads, like calling to like, as though their personalities and social standings were magnetized. Handshakes are traded as easily as thinly veiled insults, and the political instincts of the upper echelon show themselves in the making of temporary alliances. Eggsy doesn’t expect any overtures of friendship from these people, but he didn’t expect any enemies on the first day either. That’s exactly what he gets anyway.

The small crowd of bodies shift, and Eggsy’s gaze is caught by a pair of brown eyes alight with a burning, outraged disbelief. His breath stalls and the blood drops from his face as though it turned to mercury in his veins. Eggsy knows that guy—he’s seen him play pool at least a half dozen times. He recognizes him, and the other boy recognizes him too. And well he should, considering how many discreet once-overs he gave Eggsy while his companions propositioned him.

“My, but they let anyone in these days.” The brunette scoffs loudly to his two friends, and jerks his chin towards Eggsy. “This place is certainly going to the dogs if this is their standard. And look here — calculating eyes lock onto Eggsy’s—“a mutt. However is that pedigree coming along?” His companions smirk, and laugh, and agree in the slick way yes-men always do. They don’t realize the double meaning. His words say one thing, but his eyes say I know what you are, and I’ll expose you.

Two can play at that game. Eggsy swallows his trepidation, and heads the guy off at the pass. Rolls his shoulders in casual menace. “Coulda’ swore I knew you from somewhere. Standards must be slipping then, yeah mate?” Eggsy may have dealt drugs to this arsehole, but he’s not the one who snorted stardust. The guy straightens immediately, and stalks forward, wielding height and proximity to intimidate. Before Eggsy can respond in kind, a blonde girl stomps forwards and pushes the brunette away from him. “Back off, Charlie. He has as much right to be here as any of us. He was proposed too.”

Sneering, Charlie slowly steps back from her. “God only knows why.” He drifts away and reluctantly occupies himself with some of the others, though he shoots Eggsy a heavy look before doing so. We aren’t finished, it says. Message fucking received.

The blonde girl turns to face him, and is childishly happy to note that he’s at least taller than her, even if he’s shorter than everyone else in the room. She sticks her hand out between them. “I’m Roxanne, though I prefer to go by Roxy. You are?”

Blinking in surprise, he slowly grasps her hand to shake. "Eggsy."

“Charlie’s can be a bit, well, tasteless at times.” Her eyes crinkle sweetly when she smiles. “So anyone who can get under his skin is in good company with me. What did you do to rile him up so quickly?”

I refused to fuck him and his friends after I dropped off their cocaine. He doesn’t actually say it aloud, but it’s a close thing. He smiles sardonically. “I didn’t do anything.” It’s not even a lie. “That’s usually how it goes with bastards.”

Roxy winks at him. “So say the rumors, at least.”

Eggsy is startled into laughter as Roxy turns back to her previous conversation. Smiling, Eggsy follows the groups example and starts to make ready for bed. Roxy seemed like a pistol. And she stood up for him…shook his hand like he was worth just as much as her. Good people.
He turns to the supply bag on his bunk to sort through the provisions. Eggsy is halfway through when the sound of the first couple showers echoes through the dormitory. Freezing in his tracks, he looks over to the shower area.

Two of the guys are naked, soaping up, and a couple more are stripping down for their own bathing ritual. There are no privacy walls. The loos are the only things with a stall, and those stalls are only a couple feet tall—barely enough to preserve decency. Not nearly enough to hide a Soul Mark in such an obvious place as Eggsy’s.

Quickly, he takes a seat on his bed, and starts fiddling with the shower supplies, digging deeper into the satchel as a distraction. He wants time to think, and he doesn’t want to be obvious about it. Takes a slow breath to keep his cool.

Okay. Okay, first things first. Harry bloody Hart. His soulmate. His soulmate who doesn’t seem to reciprocate. Maybe he has a matching Mark, maybe he doesn’t. Either way, Eggsy isn’t going to be pitied. And he definitely isn’t going to be one of those bastards who uses their Mark to guilt someone into a relationship. He’s not Rotti, and he’s not Dean.

All he can do it wait and see. Which is going to be a huge problem, because this dormitory? No privacy. Wouldn’t put it past that clever wanker Merlin to have everything wired up like the CCTV system from hell. He certainly had that half-mad scientist vibe hanging about him in spades. For God’s sake, the mirror’s along the back wall are probably oneway so he can watch them all like labrats.

And honestly, manner maketh man? If ever there was a catchphrase, that’s a shining example. It probably wouldn’t take Merlin, who seemed pretty chummy with Harry now that he thinks about it, that great of a mental stretch to figure out just who Eggsy’s soulmate is.

He has to hide it somehow. Sorting through all the supplies he has to work with, he comes up empty handed. Nothing of use, whatsoever.

Looking back towards the showers, Eggsy knows he’s out of time. He doesn’t want to end up on display as the only one showering, and it would look weird if he didn’t shower at all. Especially looking like he does, covered in dirt, blood and bruises. Speaking of which…. Grabbing the small first aid kit along with his shower supplies, Eggsy makes his way over to one of the sinks, staring at his reflection.

Tell me, Eggsy, when you look into the mirror, what do you see?

Harry’s curious voice floats up from his memory, and he can almost imagine the comforting weight of a hand on his shoulder. He sees a beat up kid looking smaller than the clothes on his back. Eggsy’s esteem of Roxy raises a few more points, considering she took his side while he looked this rough. Then again, she could just have a penchant for damaged things…he certainly looks that pathetic.

There’s a small split at the corner of his mouth, but his face is relatively untouched. Unsurprising, really. They’re always hesitant to mark my face, Eggsy thinks bitterly. A blue shadow traces the corner of his jaw, vivid red painted across his collarbones, and his neck is decorated with three crisscrossing cuts, blood thankfully scabbing over.

Turns his haunted gaze from the mirror, and shucks off his pants and outer layers. Steps towards one of the free showers, and turns on the water spray, waiting for the warm water to kick in. Snags the soap and shampoo from his spot on the counter, and prepares to execute a maneuver. The best plan he has going for him is to be quick, and ‘casually’ block the view of his Soul Mark with arms, soap
suds, and his towel, all the while hoping for the best.

He needn’t have bothered.

Eggsy pulls off his undershirt and gapes in shock at his chest. Turns to the mirror in poorly concealed horror.

_Tell me, Eggsy, when you look into the mirror, what do you see?_

There’s a bloody twisted rainbow of color across his chest and abdomen. The last few days…must have been worse than he’d let himself think about. When he showered at Jamal’s place, the aches were still pink and swelling, only a little discoloration present. Now, the blues and greens and yellows have blossomed like a garden of wildflowers, petals scattered across his body where fingers and knuckles dug in.

_When you look into the mirror…._

Eggsy can barely keep the horror out of his expression. The dark places inside himself yawn open and Eggsy can feel the pull of every problem he’d buried there to be forgotten. It hits him, right there, in a room full of people, the full truth he’s kept from himself.

_…what do you see?_

An abused kid. He sees a dirt poor boy who was treated in ways he shouldn’t have been. Eggsy’s always known it, but he’d never let himself…he was always _above_ it all. Old hat at it, and he made it, not alright, but acceptable, because he was aware of the situation he was in. It was acceptable because he knew it was happening, and he made the choice to stay.

But he didn’t, did he? Not really. This kind of damage…it tells another story. It describes a child who thought he had it under control. Who was in deeper trouble than he’d thought he was in. Who believed he could _manage_ the abuse, like balancing a checkbook.

He was wrong.

And he’s not a child anymore. He’s an adult for God’s sake, and he doesn’t have any excuses. He fucking well knows better. And still he fell for it. Feels tears welling up in his eyes, threatening to fall, so he tosses himself into the shower. If Eggsy cries, no one can tell for the water cascading down his face. At least he doesn’t have to worry about anyone seeing his Soul Mark. It blends into the red and blue as though it was never there.

And here Eggsy thought he’d never be grateful to Dean for anything.

Chuckles in bitter self-loathing, earning himself some questioning glances. Does his best to school his features again, and quickly lathers up the soap to scrub himself down. Eggsy doesn’t linger in the soothing heat, hating the discreet glances at this injuries. Jesus, there’s still finger marks at his hips. What they must think of him.

And here Eggsy thought he’d never be grateful to Dean for anything.

Charlie has the audacity to catch his attention, _deliberately_ looks at Rotti’s fading handprints, and smirks at him suggestively.

Face heating up in humiliation, he wrenches the handle to shut off the water and wraps a towel around his waist with fast efficiency. Turns back to the mirror.

_Tell me, Eggsy…._.
Never. He’ll never fucking tell anyone. Eggsy can feel the mortification just from the thought of Harry ever knowing. Of anyone knowing.

Unscrewing the twist top of the rubbing alcohol, he goes about disinfecting his cuts, using the burn to center himself.

The thing about abuse is that, usually, it’s not very quick and it’s not constant. It’s like a sinusoidal wave of violence that fluctuates between the calm and the storm. You learn the pattern—the ebb and flow of it—and you acclimate. A small piece of yourself is taken in each turn. Sometimes it’s dignity, sometimes it’s self-respect, and sometimes it’s just a nerve ending. Small sacrifices, here and there, that you don’t notice until it’s far too late. It’s murder by a thousand tiny cuts, and it seems like the most normal thing in the world.

Eggsy knows all this. Knows it in his bones, but that’s not what hurts (much). What terrifies him is that he knows and still fell for it. How easily he might fall into that trap again. Especially competing for a job that encompasses all the violence he’s trying to run away from.

Takes a deep breath. Wrestles his thoughts back under control. Shoves it all back into the dark spaces and slam the doors shut again.

It’s getting harder to keep them closed.

Eggsy is the last to pull on his night clothes and climb into bed. He’s also the last one to turn off his lamp.

Staring at the shadowed ceiling, Eggsy starts to drift off into fitful slumber. He imagines his bed flexing and his mattress turning weightless, gently sliding side to side. His blankets fluttering around him, and turning cold…and wet? Icy fingers dragging themselves up his neck startles him awake.

Sitting up, it takes him a moment to wrap his mind around the situation because there’s fucking ice water filling the room, and the liquid level is rising!

“Wake up.” His voice comes out as a whisper. Tries again. “Wake up!” He stands on his bed, and yells, “Everyone, wake the fuck up!”

Other voices join his, and raise the alarm. Eggsy looks around at what’s available to him, but there’s little he can grab that would help. He sees his shampoo bottle floating next to him from his still-open supply bag. In a spark of inspiration, he grabs it, unscrews the cap, and empties as much of the soap from the bottle as he can. The water is rising too fast—his feet have long since left the bed—and all he can do is replace the cap on the shampoo bottle and grab one large lungful of air before there’s no other oxygen left in the room.

Looking around the room, he sees a sight that would have been amazing if he wasn’t so short on time. An entire room flooded with water, clothing, blankets and other personal belonging floating in three dimensions. Everyone is swimming around in confusion, while Eggsy kicks his way over to the door. His lungs are already uncomfortably compressed by the time he grabs onto the handle. Placing his feet against the doorframe, he does his best to pry open the entrypoint, to no avail. There’s too much hydrostatic pressure for it to budge an inch.

Contorting himself around to see what the others are doing, he’s shocked to find them all crowded around the toilets, having dismantled what looks to be the shower hoses. The fuck?

He swims towards them, and stares. They stare back, and none of them seem inclined to share their knowledge (or toilet bowl) with him. Fuck them all.
His lungs are aching now, and he’s starting to panic. Casts his eyes around to find something, anything that could get him out of this. Catches his reflection in the mirror. Maybe, if he’s lucky, and right for a change, maybe….

Swims as fast as he can to the sinks. Reaches the mirrors, and his lungs are on fire. Snaps open the cap on the shampoo bottle, and breathes in the last lungful of soap-scented air he may ever have. Lets the bottle float away, grabs the faucet and braces his feet on the counter.

And then he punches the bloody mirror.

_Tell me, Eggsy, when you look into the mirror, what do you see?_

He sees a stupid arse who’s going to die because he thought he could be something better.

Punches again. And again. Lungs are hurting again from the physical exertion. Gives it another go, and sees a small series of cracks webbing from the impact point. Hope surges through his veins.

Fuck them, but he sees a stupid arse who’s going to survive just to spite them all. Gathers the last of his strength, fueled by adrenaline, and punches as hard as he can. Feels the glass give way beneath his fist, and a strange moment of slow suspension, before he’s pulled helplessly forward with the rest of the surging water.

His stomach leaps into his throat at the sudden drop, and finds himself cast upon the ground, sliding to a sopping wet stop at someone’s feet.

Coughing and gasping for air in a decidedly unattractive way, Eggsy slowly looks up from the polished shoes and wet trousers to the disbelieving face of Merlin. The man raises an eyebrow, and smirks. “You _would_ destroy the mirror as a solution. Clever job with the shampoo bottle.”

Eggsy lets out a half laugh, half sob. “Well, it was that or breath through a toilet. No bloody thanks—” Blinking in surprise, he sees a fine line of powder blue along Merlin’s jaw line. Words in small, angled script: _Lancelot, sir, reporting for duty._

Frozen there, kneeling at Merlin’s feet, Eggsy feels something wither up and die. His hope, probably. He never let himself believe he _really_ had a shot with Harry, but the romantic in him had hoped, never the less. And yet, there upon Merlin’s flesh, is a death knell.

If his soulmate had been the recently deceased agent, Eggsy highly doubts he’d be here training the replacement. Judging by his years, Merlin will undoubtably find his Lancelot among his recruit batch. On one hand, if he gets the job, it means he’s Merlin’s soulmate. It means that Harry probably doesn’t wear a Mark corresponding to Eggsy’s, and that’s just about the worst thing he can….oh God, the handwriting does look close to his.

And if that _isn’t_ his Mark on Merlin…it means he might not be the next Lancelot. It means he’s to be tossed back to the streets, to Dean, to his mother and sister empty-handed. Damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t.

He’s honestly not sure which would be worse.

It’s another point of great interest amongst the scientific community—cataloging Marks in order to predict the future. While most are mundane, there’s a Mark that turns up every now and then with some profound implications. And they’re never wrong, only the interpretation. And Merlin’s Mark is pretty damn clear.

He should have been expecting it, really. He’s never let himself expect a happily ever after, but with
the whole Kingsman thing…well, it was the stuff of fairytales, so why not a happy ending?

But those pale blue words have wiped it all away.

Eggsy raises his eyes to Merlin’s again, only to find Merlin staring at his chest. At his Mark. Thank God it’s illegible behind the bruising--not even the handwriting is discernible. Merlin finally meets his eyes, and there’s the burning question he expected. Are you my soulmate?

Tell me, Eggsy, when you look into the mirror, what do you see?

He doesn’t know anymore. He just…doesn’t know.

Chapter End Notes

Polls Are Now Closed! Final Tally:

Fuck You. : ⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣⅣ (40)
Go to Hell! : Ⅱ (2)
I don’t know his name! : ⅢⅢ (6)
Picture of an egg. : Ⅰ (1)
Cut me some slack, it's been a horrifying couple of days. : ⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢ (10)
You can't be in debt when something is freely given. : ⅢⅢⅢⅢ (9)
Oxfords Not Brogues : Ⅰ (1)
Oh, like in My Fair Lady? : ⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢⅢ (37)
Mini-rant about classism. : Ⅱ (2)
I'm Eggsy. : Ⅰ (1)
Never met a tailor before, but I know you ain't one. : ⅢⅢ (4)
You should really go now. : ⅢⅢ (4)
A mixture of a love declaration and insult after Harry 'died'. : Ⅲ (3)
How deep does this fucking thing go? : Ⅱ (2)

WINNER IS: Fuck You!
Chapter Notes

Okay, I cut the chapter short and moved some scenes to the next in order to post it sooner. Sorry for the long wait!

Edits will probably occur at a later date.

Please excuse the artistic license I took with respect to the breed of Charlie's dog.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(10) Charlie Hesketh

The flood test was a jarring wake up call. The girl, Amelia, died, and it brought the severity of the job interview home to roost. Six of the recruits were made to fish her body bag out of the wet mess, and load her corpse into it. Merlin glared at everyone as he closely monitored their actions to ensure the proper respect was paid. “This is real. She needed help, and you all chose to let her die.”

No one was allowed to sleep. Eggsy himself had a quiet freakout the rest of the night while they all cleaned up the dormitory. If he died chasing the Lancelot job, there would be no one to look after his family.

The next morning arrives at a snail’s pace, and it finds the exhausted group lined up on the dew-chilled lawn in still-damp uniforms. They are greeted by a grumpy Merlin and a tower of puppies, of all things.

“As I desperately hope you will have learned last night, teamwork is paramount here at Kingsman. We’re here to enhance your skills and test you to the limit.” Merlin waves his arm in the general direction of the puppy tower. “Which is why you’re gonna’ pick a puppy. Wherever you go, your dog goes. You will care for it. You will teach it. And by the time it’s fully trained, so will you be, though I have serious reservations.” He smirks malevolently and drums his fingers along the spine of his clipboard. “Those of you who are still here, that is. Choose your puppy.”

Everyone surges forward, vying for their favorite breed. Eggsy peruses the animals until a tiny, shivering creature catches his eye. It’s smaller than all the rest, and has big eyes, and Eggsy feels his heart do a bellyflop for the little beast. It looks like the kind of puppy he imagines Daisy would be fond of. And he always was a sucker for the underdog.

Roxy falls in line beside him, and, glancing down at his choice, raises a disbelieving eyebrow. Eggsy returns the favor, but with exaggerated incredulity, because he just knows it’ll burn her up and Eggsy finds that amusing as hell.

“A poodle, Roxy? Didn’t take you for the sort.”


“Oy! Tea cozies are serious business.” Roxy relaxes a bit at his words, now that she’s caught onto
the game. “Besides, is’ a bulldog, innit?” He knows it’s not—BBC’s ‘Mansfield Park’ taught him that. Still, Roxy seems to think it’s funny, if her face is anything to go by. “It’ll get bigger, right?” She shakes her ‘no’, biting her lips to conceal a smile. “Shit. Well at least—”

Eggsy’s words are cut off by Charlie crashing their shoulders together as he passes by, his own larger breed of dog following dutifully behind. Both he and Roxy glare at Charlie’s back until he’s fallen into the line a few people down. Roxy sneers, and mumbles, “Looks like someone needs a tea cozy shoved up their arse.”

Snorting, Eggsy tries to stifle his snigger by pressing his fist to his mouth. If Merlin’s piercing stare is an indication, he’s utterly failed. When Merlin finally calls them back to order though, he pointedly ignores Eggsy’s Choking noises and Roxy’s victorious smirk. It makes him feel a bit better about the whole thing.

From then on out, their training starts in earnest. It’s brutal, and it’s unending, and Eggsy’s having a bloody marvelous time. Everything in this place stretches him to his very limits, except there’s a sense of pride waiting for him at the end, rather than shame. He and Roxy have sort of teamed up, too, which makes everything that much better. She actually keeps up with him.

Unfortunately, so does Charlie. The git has been dogging his heels since the first— is even training his damn mutt to growl at him and snap his jaws in aggression. Eggsy has noticed that Merlin tries to pair him with Roxy most of the time, so he suspects Charlie’s bullying isn’t as discreet as he’d like to think. They’re the only two people who can curb Charlie’s nastiness, but he can’t be teamed with Roxy or under Merlin’s direct supervision all the time. There are still plenty of opportunities for the bastard to make a nuisance of himself. Eggsy does his best to ignore it, all those years of dealing with Dean’s goons finally paying off. Still, even an annoying prick like Charlie can’t rain on his parade, because the rest of his training? It’s with Harry.

He’d never expected to get so much face time with his soulmate, but it’s been granted to him in excess. Most evenings, he spends about three hours sequestered away in Harry’s townhouse for lessons. Most of it’s boring, like learning the difference between western and french service at the dinner table, or the proper art of conversation preferred among the aristocracy. But then Harry likes to show mercy and teach him how to make the best Old Fashioned Eggsy’s ever had, and then talk for an hour. They always start turned towards one another on the opposite ends of the couch. By the end of the night, inevitably, they are pressed thigh to thigh, shoulder to shoulder, hunched over some book or nicknack, and Eggsy revels in the heat swirling between them.

And another thing—Eggsy can sometimes surprise Harry with his knowledge of the humanities. Granted, it’s patchy at the best of times, but he knows so many obscure facts. Eggsy can’t tell Harry much about Pablo Picasso’s artwork, but he does catch him off-guard with the fact that the artist was once arrested as a suspect for the theft of the Mona Lisa.

He’ll get this tender look about him, like Eggsy has completely disarmed him, and it makes Eggsy hope. So he makes a game of it—surprising Harry, that is. When Eggsy was still obsessed with imitating the BBC historical dramas, he would spend the really bad days perusing the local library. Whenever Dean was on the warpath, and it was too nasty outside to freerun, the library was a safe, quiet, and warm retreat. Of course, that was all in the Pre-Daisy era. Post Daisy, Eggsy didn’t get to do much for himself at all.

Still, he’s been keeping tally on how many times a session he can stop Harry in his tracks, and it makes him feel really good about himself.

These shared evenings aren’t one-sided, either. He knows more about Harry than he ever thought he would—his favorite color is red (though he doesn’t like to wear it), his favorite juice is orange (but
he doesn’t like to eat the fruit), his favorite artist is Magritte (“Because nothing is ever as it seems, Eggsy. His art is the truest imitation of life, and vice versa.”), the fact that he hates .22’s just because he can’t reload them (despite Kingsman’s unending supply)—all kinds of bits and pieces of who Harry is. Eggsy keeps them squirreled away in the lockbox of his heart, like beach glass or something. He has quite the collection, now.

All in all, things are going well, and Eggsy thinks he might be catching up with the rest of the class.

What a fucking stupid thought. There’s an etiquette angle to Merlin’s lessons, and he instigates Formal Dinner Friday. Every week’s end finds all the recruits seated at a round table (the Arthurian references saturate everything in this place). That first Friday, Eggsy is fool enough to think that he won’t be too terribly far out of his depth.

What happened, well, it was bad. He was tossed in the deep end of the pool, and…he doesn’t even want to think about it. God, but he was a dumb little thing to believe that BBC could teach him anything about manners that would put him on equal footing with his competition. The other recruits grew up with this crap, from the cradle and probably to the grave. And the worst part, of course, was Charlie, always seated across from him, and always making comments.

“What are you enjoying the ladyfingers, Eggsy? Funny, I would have expected you preferred something sweeter, with powdered sugar, perhaps?”

If it wasn’t jibes about cocaine, then it was subtly pointing out to everyone when he used the wrong damn fork, or mistook the ‘palette cleanser’ for dessert, or any other million little pointless things Eggsy didn’t know about.

Well, he certainly knew it now. Who the fuck thought it was such a brilliant idea to make eating so complicated?

God, and at the end of that first dinner from hell, when Harry came by to get him, Eggsy saw Merlin talking to Harry, and managed to hear his name dropped before their whispers ceased. Even Merlin must have thought he did poorly enough to warrant a special chat with his proposer.

So yeah, Harry is keeping his head above water on the non-violent training, but only just. Because these little chats about him between Merlin and Harry? They don’t stop. Every other day, he catches them together, his name on their lips. Even after Harry starts in on the etiquette lessons. Merlin always looks frustrated beyond belief, and Harry always seems, oddly enough, guilty and angry at the same time. He doesn’t want to believe he’s regretting putting forth Eggsy’s name, but the thought lingers.

The second Formal Dinner Friday goes better, because Eggsy makes less mistakes, but it still sucks like a vortex because Charlie just shifts his emphasis onto the drug-related insults. And he does it in such a way that no one can really call him on it.

Honestly, Eggsy can’t believe than nobody’s picked up on the hints Charlie keeps dropping. He’s been lucky so far, but it’s only a matter of time before someone (namely Merlin) figures out the theme, and it’s been making Eggsy well beyond paranoid. It just adds to his unease regarding the many muttered conversations between Merlin and Harry. Eggsy’s becoming overly sensitive to what others say to him, certain that someone else will start in on it too. He constantly feels like he’s walking a tightrope, muscles clenched to the point of pain, fatiguing from the slow and continuous movement required to keep himself from falling. It’s fucking exhausting. Has no idea how he’s going to get through the rest of the job interview, and it’s only fourteen days in.

It’s a tuesday night, and he’s late meeting Harry at the front door. Charlie had strung his shoes up
from the ceiling light earlier, forcing Eggsy to enlist Roxy’s help to retrieve them. She’d sat on his shoulders and quietly cursed with him the entire time, shooting glares at the others as they filed out the door to find their own mentors.

As soon as his laces are unhooked from the light, Roxy is out the door and Eggsy is hopping along behind her, shoving his trainers on his feet quick as he can. “Charlie is such an arse. You’d think he has better things to do with his time.”

“Just ignore him, Eggsy, he’s only hurting himself. You heard Merlin talking about teamwork—“ Her lips twist unflatteringly. “Charlie is obviously not a team player.” Roxy’s face melts into smug satisfaction. “This latest stunt will definitely have been caught on surveillance.”

Eggsy snorts in disbelief. “Merlin can’t be watching the camera’s all the time, can he Rox?”

Sighing, Roxy bumps there shoulders together. “No, I don’t suppose he can.”

It’s easy for Roxy to say ‘ignore him and he’ll eventually get bored’. She has no idea why Charlie has him so on edge all the time. He’s a ticking time bomb, and Eggsy will have to handle him very carefully lest he set him off. Sometimes Eggsy contemplates fessing up to Roxy, just to see what she’ll do. He likes her, and she’s stuck by him despite his lack of standing, but he does wonder just how far that ability to overlook his flaws stretches. Which secret would it take for her to turn her back? The drug dealing? The car theft? Dean? His twisted relationship with Rotti?

They’re approaching the front hall when Roxy interrupts his thoughts by raising her hand and making a fist, signaling him to halt. Puts her finger to her lips, and then taps her ear. Now that he’s paying attention, he can hear fierce whispers beyond the open door leading to the HQ foyer. Slowly inching to their right to increase their angle of view, the two of them can make out Merlin and Harry beyond the doorjamb. Merlin is leaning in towards Harry, shoulders tense, grumbling to him with obvious anger. Harry is looking off to the side, as though he’s heard Merlin’s litany a thousand times before. Eggsy can only make out about a third of the words.

“…not normal…can’t ignore this—”

Harry whips his head around at the last bit, face hard and eyes flashing. Bites out a sharp, “I’m not ignoring it. He won’t thank me for….”

At this point, Merlin starts jabbing his fingers on his ever-present clipboard, swipes two fingers on the surface as though enlarging an image, and then thrusts it under Harry’s nose. “This is…more than….much worse than you think, you stubborn…!”

Eggsy would pay a thousand quid to know what’s displayed on that clipboard, because whatever it is makes Harry bloody Hart turn pale as a ghost. At Merlin’s final hiss of “…or I will”, he exchanges a bewildered look with Roxy.

“If the two of you are done lurking about, I believe you have places to be?” Merlin’s voice, now at normal volume and uncommonly thick with accent, breaks their silent communication. Surprisingly, he doesn’t seem angry with them. He just seems tired. “Ms. Morton, Percival is waiting for you, though I doubt you could see him from your hiding place.”

Sheepishly, Eggsy and Roxy harmonize a ‘sorry, Merlin’, making him smile a bit. Briefly places a hand on Eggsy’s shoulder as he walks past them, though his eyes linger on Roxy longer than strictly necessary. Eggsy notices Roxy following Merlin’s retreating figure with her gaze, and grabs her attention before someone else notices. “See ya’, Rox. Save me a seat at breakfast, yeah?” Blinking,
Roxy quickly returns his strained smile, equal in his discomfort, and they both head into the foyer to rendezvous with their respective proposers.

Harry is waiting for him with his usual aplomb, though his eyes are disconcertingly troubled. “Ah, Eggsy. Shall we go now?” Clearly, he’s still unsettled by whatever he and Merlin were arguing about.

Eggsy nods, and moves into place next to his soulmate. Harry places his usual guiding hand on the small of his back, but hesitantly. This is one of the few times Eggsy has ever found Harry to be uncertain in his actions. He bites the inside of his cheek in an effort to keep his face from changing expression. Dread gathers heavily along the underside of Eggsy’s stomach. He’d bet his last pound that Merlin was upset about him, and passed his ire onto Harry. That shoulder pat from Merlin—was it supposed to be comforting, or something more sympathetic of impending bad news?

Eggsy climbs in to Harry’s car on autopilot, thoughts racing. Is he truly doing so poorly that he’s the next recruit to be cut? Oh God, is Harry supposed to tell him tonight, while pulled aside from the others?

The car ride lasts until just this side of forever and is just as tense as it is silent. He tries to casually ask after Harry’s obvious dispute with Merlin, but Harry shuts that line of questioning down straight away, citing unfair advantage over the other recruits should he tell Eggsy. It’s the first, and quite possibly the only, time Eggsy ever hears Harry tell a lie and know it.

They reach the townhouse and the muscles along Harry’s back unwind as he hangs his umbrella by the door. It calms Eggsy to see this, though he still instinctively keeps a close eye on Harry’s hands. Years of conditioning make it difficult to shake old habits, after all. If Harry notices, he has the decency not to mention it.

“How was your day, Eggsy? What did your training entail? Tuesdays are focused on marksmanship, are they not?”

This is Harry’s territory. This is a safe place. “Yeah, started in on advanced wind calling.”

The couch cushions whisper against Harry’s suit. “How did you find it?”

Focus on adding the correct amount of dry vermouth to the gin, Eggsy lets his mouth run away a bit. “Did alright. Rox and I scored second, but that’s just because Charlie screwed around with the gage, and it set us back a tick. Shot sub MOA once the damn thing was calibrated right.”

He adds a splash of olive juice, then another for good luck, because he likes to think Harry enjoys a very dirty martini, and moves on to the cocktail shaker. “Ah, yes, Merlin mentioned something of a rivalry between the two of you.”
Eggsy snorts in mirth even as the rest of his tension drains away. “That what you and Merlin were on about, then? Nah, I wouldn’t call it a rivalry, since it takes two. I’d just as soon he leave Rox an’ me alone.” Pours the martini into the classic tall glass, and garnishes it with three olives.

“I’ve been informed it’s progressed to violence.” Eggsy turns to face Harry, drink in hand, and meets the skeptical gaze with his own raised eyebrow. Shrugs his shoulders in a ‘what can you do’ gesture.

“I suppose we’ve had it out a bit during the sparring sessions.” Eggsy walks around the low coffee table to stand in front of Harry.

“Merlin said you were injured.” His heart warms at the concern lacing Harry’s voice.

“Bruises’ll heal up just fine.” Eggsy holds out the drink for Harry to take, smile relaxed and open. Harry wraps his long fingers around the stem of the martini glass, and meets Eggsy’s eyes with a look as intense as a police search light.

“And the fingermarks on your hips?” Eggsy tries to hide the tremble of his hand, and quickly relinquishes his own hold of the glass. Harry watches him intently, darkness lurking behind the edge of his gaze. “Will those ‘heal up just fine’ as well?”

Oh, fuck. Eggsy is silent for the duration of a heartbeat before his brain kicks into gear. “What are you talking about—”

“Eggsy. Merlin has pictures. He showed me.” And of bloody course Merlin shared it with Harry—he shares everything with Harry. You’d think it was Harry fucking Hart who ran the whole organization, rather than Arthur.

Harry moves to touch his shoulder, but again, he hesitates. That, more than anything else, is what prompts Eggsy’s next words. “Weren’t nothin’ I didn’t ask for, Harry.” Tosses Harry that trademark wink (he’d actually learned it from an escort who lived in their building—“two out of three guys”, she’d said, “hand to God”). “I appreciate the concern, but don’t worry so much.”

The whole ‘I don’t want people to look at me differently’ schtick is a cliche’d reason for not telling the truth. But at the end of the day, once you say ‘I was almost raped’, they look at you differently. Your family, your best friend, a complete stranger—it doesn’t matter who they are to you. It becomes part of your definition. Eggsy Unwin likes curry and freerunning, was nearly raped, and hates vacuuming. When others know, they turn it into a monument.

Even a man like Harry Hart.

So Eggsy sits down next to him, and lies. Better to be a slut than a victim, and besides, Rotti stopped, and he got away from that awful house (even though, sometimes, he feels like he didn’t). Bad situations to be sure, near misses that scared the hell out of him, but misses none the less. So he wasn’t…he wasn’t…it’s different. He’s not like the rest of the numbers. He’s not a fucking number.

Looking up into Harry’s eyes, Eggsy can see stark relief. It eases the tightness in his chest, and he knows he made the right choice. Knows, in that moment, how much Harry would have torn himself open, and is pleased to spare him. Maybe it should have been harder to lie to the spy, but Harry wants it to be true just as much as Eggsy does. Maybe even more so.

The dark, manipulative voice in the corner of his mind points out the benefit to himself. If Harry believes his suspicions were wrong, he’ll have no reason to look closer at his history. He’ll never uncover the more unsavory tidbits Eggsy would like to keep under his hat.

Eggsy can’t help but agree with that voice, though it’s with a guilty conscience. It’s better this way—
they’ll both be happier with the ruse.

Harry, being the diligent gentleman that he is, asks more questions to reassure himself. Eggsy plays it off well, now that he’s gotten the ball rolling. Phrases like ‘what, you mean positions and stuff’ or “embarrassing, innit, my sex life on the table, no pun intended’, seem to do the job of shutting Harry up just fine. By the end of the night, Eggsy is congratulating himself on one hell of a performance.

“I apologize for prying, Eggsy. I had to ask, for my own peace of mind, considering the circumstances under which we met.” And he looks sorry, too. Looks just as heart melting as JB when he’s chewed on Eggsy’s shoelaces.

“S’fine, I actually appreciate it. I’m glad that…” Oh, but he’s going straight to Hell for this. “I guess it’s just nice to know you care.” And Harry smiles at that, completely unguarded, straight up to his eyes. Eggsy wants to shoot himself because he’s smiling at a lie. He’s plucking every heartstring his soulmate possesses, and he’s doing it to hide his dirty secrets.

Harry gently takes hold of his wrist, and squeezes affectionately. “Of course I care. I…care a great deal.” They’re leaning in towards each other, now, and it’s such an intimate moment—obvious where it’s headed…Eggsy looks down at their hands to break the eye contact. He’ll do a lot to keep Harry from his worst sins, but he won’t let their first kiss be based on deception.

Removing his hand, Harry leans back and straightens his tie, gathering his decorum in that inimitable way of his. An obvious return to the senses. He clears his throat. “I’m not certain how to approach this, but I fear if I don’t ask this now, I never will. You know I am aware of your home situation, and I find I cannot help but wonder…” Harry pauses, as though casting about for the right words. “Why did you wait so long to call the number on the medal?” Eggsy hears ‘why didn’t you call me sooner’ clear as a bell.

He leans back himself, putting the proper space between them once more. Shrugs halfheartedly. “You have to admit, it was sort of unbelievable. Mysterious numbers, and pass codes, and things. Straight outa' James Bond.” He pauses, and tries to find a proper answer for Harry. After everything else this evening, Harry at least deserves to know this. “I dunno’ Harry, I didn’t really need it at the time.”

Harry’s eyebrows fly up to his hairline. “Your stepfather held a knife to your throat, and threatened to kill you over a bar brawl.” Harry waits a moment to let the words sink in, hands twitching, and Eggsy can tell that he’s carefully holding himself still. “That level of violence in the home doesn’t escalate over night.”

Exhales, and runs a hand through his hair. Sprawls back against the couch with an air of practiced indifference. “Look, it’s just, a pattern, see? A routine. Get up in the morning, shower and get dressed, play with Daisy at breakfast, maybe get slapped around a bit for something or other, then go buy milk and cigarettes at the Tesco. It just wasn’t a big deal, Harry. It was a part of the furniture. You just, caught us at a bad time. Not like there were daily death threats or nothin’.”

It does if you lose his drugs, cost him his best clients, and lay out his entire gang in the span of a few days. Eggsy doesn’t actually say this, and concedes the point. He doesn’t have a leg to stand on, because it didn’t happen over night. It built up on itself over years of systematic conditioning.

Exhales, and runs a hand through his hair. Sprawls back against the couch with an air of practiced indifference. “Look, it’s just, a pattern, see? A routine. Get up in the morning, shower and get dressed, play with Daisy at breakfast, maybe get slapped around a bit for something or other, then go buy milk and cigarettes at the Tesco. It just wasn’t a big deal, Harry. It was a part of the furniture. You just, caught us at a bad time. Not like there were daily death threats or nothin’.”

It’s so terribly obvious what Harry is thinking—it’s written all over his face. If only Eggsy had called sooner, if only he’d checked in before now, if only….the list goes on. When it looks like Harry might ruin their evening by actually putting voice to any of that, Eggsy heads him off at the pass. “It wasn’t ever your job to fix my life. You were there when it counted.” All Harry can do is nod in acceptance. What else is there to say?
Eggsy refuses to meet Harry’s eyes for the rest of the evening. They call it a night early, and the ride back is as silent as it was on the way there. The wordless gap between them is wide, but not uncomfortable. There’s nothing Harry could say that wouldn’t seem callous, and Eggsy wouldn’t welcome the words anyway.

Ignores the throbbing ball of hurt in his throat that’s grown since the start of this awful conversation. He’s got it on lock down, but he’s ready to burst at the seams.

When he finally climbs into his bunk that night, he thanks every deity he can name for letting him get away with this. Figures this entire incident has been permanently put to bed, and there’s enough plausible deniability that Harry won’t listen to anything Charlie has to say on the matter. Not after Eggsy made himself so vulnerable by sharing something so raw. And whatever Harry believes is passed onto Merlin by proxy.

He goes to sleep that night choking down a knot of sour upset and wondering if this is how it feels to have dodged a bullet. Eggsy had thought it would feel better.

The next morning, Eggsy wakes up on the wrong side of the bed. He may have averted disaster the evening before, but it still pisses him off that it came up at all. The last thing Eggsy wanted to do was talk about his feelings, and his family drama, and lie to Harry. So when Merlin comes in to make sure everyone is rising with the sun, Eggsy is snippy and utterly frigid with him. Tries to conceal that he has a problem with Merlin, but it bleeds through never the less. Merlin responds in kind. Thank God Wednesdays are sparring days.

He’s completely silent during the warm up run, and even Roxy keeps her mouth shut during stretches—just pulls on his arms to deepen his foldover, and trades dubious looks with Merlin. Eyebrow raised, he briefly wonders when the two of them got to be so chummy.

In the end, Eggsy chooses to ignore it all, and concentrates on taming the seething anger swirling around inside him like a swarm of blood-scented sharks. This is all Merlin’s fault, Eggsy thinks bitterly. Why couldn’t he just leave well-enough alone? Eggsy’s life is none of his damned business—had no right to, to pity him, and then to drag Harry into the thick of it. And it wasn’t just, ‘oh, Eggsy had some concerning injuries, so you should look into that’—no, Merlin had to show Harry a very specific picture evidencing the worst day of his life.

It doesn’t matter that Merlin had good intentions, or that it was maybe even Merlin’s job. Eggsy isn’t quite ready to let it go, just yet.

His day gets worse from there.

Charlie must have woken up on the same side of the bed as Eggsy, because he’s laying it on thick. The irritating little shit does his best to trip Eggsy up during the run, and lewdly eyes him up while he stretches (always, always while Merlin’s back is turned). Charlie’s expressions make it obvious what he’s imagining Eggsy could do with his flexibility. It’s violating in a way, and Eggsy just doesn’t have the thick skin for it today like he usually does.

After two hours, the recruits are lined up along the mats, and partnered together at random. Sparring, Eggsy thinks, is the worst. He’s spoiling for a fight to exorcise his aggression, but he knows he probably won’t be granted even that much. He’s partnered with a red-haired boy he doesn’t know the name of (and doesn’t really care to), and knows from prior experience that he has no intention of actually hitting Eggsy.

Everybody saw the bruises that first night. Everybody knows. It’s not a fucking secret. A handful of
them follow Charlie’s line of thought and believe he’s a prozie, and a few think he’s in a gang. But then there’s Roxy and the majority of the recruits who’ve pretty much figured it out.

The point of the matter is they’re showing the same soft signs as Merlin, and have been treating him with kid-gloves. They pull their punches, they don’t grab him or grapple with him, and none of them go near his hips. Eggsy understands it on a rational level—they’re trying to be respectful—but all it does is shine a bright spotlight on the crap Eggsy wants to forget. It pisses him the fuck off past all rational thought. Merlin, to an extent, is allowed to meddle if it doesn’t bleed into the training (as much as it irks Eggsy to begrudgingly admit that). The others sure as fuck aren’t.

It gets to the point where he’s starting to prefer Charlie and his two lackeys, if you can believe it. Clearly, he’s told his friends that his injuries came from turning tricks and the drug trade, so they have absolutely no sympathy whatsoever. If Eggsy could, he’d trade the redhead for Charlie himself to fight with.

Merlin whistles for everyone to begin, and Eggsy doesn’t hesitate. Goes straight in, hard and fast, planting his fist into his opponent’s stomach. He’s angry, he feels pathetic, and he wants to hurt, but this guy isn’t giving him anything. Eggsy drops his guard to give Red a clear shot to his floating ribs, and he doesn’t take it. Instead, let’s his blow glance off of Eggsy’s arm. Tries again, but the guy steadfastly ignores the window of opportunity. Won’t grab his thigh to flip him onto his back, won’t pinch the nerves near the hips…it’s rubbing salt into every little emotional wound Eggsy reopened last night, and that’s it. That’s the line.

Eggsy pulls out every trick he learned from Rotti, and fights a bit dirty to make his point: I’m not fucking broken.

*He presses his opponent until he has no choice but to defend himself any way he can. Tries to grab Eggsy’s throat before he’s elbowed in the nose, punches Eggsy dead center in the chest before he’s kicked away. They both ignore Merlin’s whistle signaling them to stand down, and keep going as hard as they can. Slowly, Eggsy can feel himself unwind. The taunt chords wound tightly around his muscles relax one by one, and the anger and frustration dissipates into his thrumming veins.*

Eggsy wins the fight by a small margin, and grins at the blood shared between them and the mats. Helps the guy up, and they shake hands amicably. Glancing around at the sea of spectators who abandoned their own sparring to watch, Eggsy knows they got the message. Doesn’t think he’ll have to worry about kid-gloves anymore.

Merlin makes him and his partner (his name turns out to be Garret, but Eggsy still calls him ‘Red’) spend the rest of the day cleaning the gymnasium. Eggsy doesn’t even mind. Riding the wave of his victory, he thinks to himself with vicious ferocity that, no, he isn’t broken, and he’s finally starting to believe it. Kingsman may be hell right now, but it’s rebuilding him.

*During the cleaning spree, he and Red get to see some of the official knights train together, which is an event unto itself. Where the recruits are boxy and forceful, the knights are elegant and lethal, curved in their administration of harm. There isn’t a single wasted movement, and the magnitude of just how far Eggsy has left to travel before he can be close to their level is staggering.*

And when Harry Hart walks into the room dressed, not in a suit, but sweatpants and a thin white t-shirt, Eggsy vows to try his damnedest to make it. When Harry notices him there scrubbing the mats, and smiles at him, Eggsy actually believes he can make it.

*There’s a moment where Harry’s eyes dip to Eggsy’s collarbones, where fresh bruises are starting to blossom, and he frowns in concern. Eyebrows pinched together, Eggsy knows Harry is less than pleased and will be fussing at him later that evening. Especially after Merlin tattles on him. It doesn’t*
even phase Eggsy, though, because nothing can bring him down right now.

Besides, he needed to renew the bruising over his Mark anyway, and he was tired of brutally pinching his skin at night.

Things take a turn for the better, after that. The next month has an unshakeable routine. Charlie’s little group is comprised of asshats, but he’s made his peace with the rest of them. Merlin still keeps an eye on him, but they’ve formed an unspoken truce, tense though it is for various Mark-related reasons. Harry and he are closer than ever, to the point where Roxy makes fun of him for it. “You don’t see Percival and me swapping jokes, or telling each other how our days were. It’s weird how close you are. I half expect you two to share a tea cozy collection.”

Eggsy looks down his nose at her for a few moments. “Merlin.” Roxy turns pink, and he knows he’s nailed it right on the head.

She sticks her nose up like the posh bird she is, “I have no earthly idea to what you are referring.”

“Right.” Eggsy drags the word out, just to make her turn a darker shade of scarlet.

The truth is, Merlin and Roxy really weren’t all that obvious. Roxy was far too driven to cast her performance into question by fraternization, and Merlin was completely professional. It’s just…their eyes lingered. Every time he noticed it, Eggsy could feel a shadow slither up the back of his neck, because there was no good ending for it.

It brought everything he was doing into question—his training, his, dare he say it, friendship with Roxy, his tentative thing with Harry, and whatever the fuck he and Merlin had going on…because Merlin watched him, like he watched Roxy. His touches lingered, like they did with Roxy. Merlin was softer with them than he was with the rest of the recruits.

Eggsy’s cynical side wonders how Merlin is hedging his bets. Is he tempted to pick his favorite, and induce a bond, or let the cards fall as they may? Merlin is many things, but he never struck Eggsy as passive man. Perhaps making his own Mark illegible is keeping Merlin honest.

He’s a bit ashamed to admit it, even to himself, but Eggsy isn’t above sneaking peeks at Roxy in the showers to search for a Soul Mark.

Like he’s doing right now. He’s turning off his shower while Roxy is still in the middle of hers, shaving, and is amazed with how poised she is while bathing in a roomful of guys. Eggsy had thought the communal showers would be weird, and during the first week, it kind of was. Now, though, that initial awkwardness has faded away (along with his more embarrassing bruises), and most everyone ignores each other. The others still ogle Roxy when they think she’s not looking, but he can’t exactly claim to be innocent on that front (though at least he has an excuse).

Roxy catches his eye, and he grins cheekily at her. “Just thinkin’ about how much it must suck to be a girl—at least guys don’t have to shave all the time.”

She smirks right back at him, and doesn’t even miss a beat. “Some of them really should.”

“Mate, you ain’t lyin’.” They share a laugh and turn back to their own tasks. Eggsy is toweling his hair off and already turning away from her when he sees it. Roxy drags the razor up her inner thigh, and for a moment, he sees a flash of gold lettering before the soap suds slip back down to obscure her skin.

So she does have a Mark. He isn’t sure which he wants more—for Merlin’s match to be him, or to be Roxy. He really can be such a fickle person, can’t he?
A throat is cleared from across the dormitory. Speak of the Devil. “Eggsy. Get dressed, you’re coming with me tonight.” Merlin looks decidedly uncomfortable, what with both him and Roxy buck naked, right next to each other.

“I ain’t meeting Ha-Galahad tonight, then?” Tries to keep the disappointment from his voice. Roxy turns back to her shower with a quiet snort. He’s guessing he failed.

“You are, but a little later.” Merlin purses his lips. “Arthur wants to see you, first.” And if that isn’t ominous, Eggsy doesn’t know what is. He sends a questioning look to Roxy, who raises her eyebrows to silently convey I have no idea.

“Alright. Be just a tick.” He agrees amicably, even though they all know he doesn’t actually have the option to decline. Wraps the towel around his waist and heads to his bunk. He pulls out a t-shirt and his trademark black-and-gold sweater, but Merlin walks up behind him and plucks it out of his hands.

“Don’t wear that—here. Just put this on.” Merlin fishes from the bottom of his bedside drawer the grey, long-sleeved turtleneck and cargo pants issued standard to all the recruits. Dumps them on his head. “I’ll be outside the door.”

Five minutes later, he’s dressed respectably in Kingsman garb. No one would be able to tell where he came from based off his clothing. Merlin is tense and typing some gibberish on his iClipboard (as Eggsy has lovingly named it). His strides are long, and Eggsy practically jogs to keep pace with him.

“Merlin—”

“I have no idea what he wants with you. This is unprecedented, Eggsy, do you understand? Traditionally, proposers aren’t allowed access to any recruit other than their own.” Merlin stops abruptly, and snags Eggsy’s elbow before he can run right past him. Starts fiddling with his clothing, straightening the lines and such. When he leans close to tuck in the shirt tag that was never sticking out in the first place, Merlin murmurs in his ear, “I’ve sent for Harry. He’ll be here soon, so just hold it together for a bit.”

Once he’s satisfied with Eggsy’s state of dress, he nods once and leads him down a richly furnished hall. They stop outside of a mahogany door that’s most definitely bulletproof, and Merlin sharply raps his knuckles against the wood. Mutters to Eggsy, “try not to insult him the second you open that mouth”, pushes the door ajar and nudges him through the entrance. Eggsy has only a moment to steel himself before he’s staring down a sophisticated grandad wearing a six thousand pound suit who could probably snap his spine with his little pinky.

Thank God he’s smiling...except for the nasty edge, like he’s politely ignoring the dog shit under his nose or something. The man is seated in a wingback chair, complete with a red folder laying innocently in his lap. “Ah, Mr. Unwin, why don’t you join me?” Arthur raises one hand and regally gestures to the twin seat next to him. The gold signet ring on the man’s middle finger gleams with a sinister light—he’s keenly aware of how dangerous that little contraption is.

Eggsy takes his time slinking around the coffee table, trying to waste as many seconds as he can until Harry can come get his arse out of whatever sling he’s stepped into. It’s a novelty, Eggsy briefly notes, to have someone to rely on for a change.

He gingerly sets himself on the edge of the leather chair, back ramrod straight and face as bland as porridge. “Thank you, sir.” Caution and valor, as Harry liked to remind him.

The red folder is opened with care, and Arthur makes a big show of pulling out a pair of reading
glasses from his breast pocket with a flourish. Once they’re perched on the end of his nose, Arthur clears his throat and begins to list off every bit of information that Merlin has collected, extrapolated, and hypothesized about Eggsy.

His heart sinks with every word read aloud. *Fuck, not this again.* Eggsy holds back a powerful sigh. Damn it all, but he thought this was over with already. The only saving grace is that Merlin hasn’t dug up any of his few remaining secrets. If the suspicious fingermarks are cataloged, it isn’t mentioned. Eggsy hopes it’s because Merlin had some discretion on that particular matter. This whole meeting is becoming a poor echo of the night Harry roughly dragged these truths out of him, and it just makes him *tired.* Like, there’s no living it down. He’s doing his best to move past it all, so why can’t anyone else?

Once the litany of his sins is finished, the red file is closed and set on the end table between their chairs. Arthur taps a wrinkled finger on it. “Quite the colorful background you have, Mr. Unwin.”

*Bristling,* Eggsy shrugs in that insolent way he knows pisses Merlin off. “Yeah, well, we don’t all start out in the same place, do we? Some of our silver spoons were counterfeit, see.” As soon as the words escape his mouth, he kicks himself. Probably isn’t the best of ideas, brazing the top brass just this moment.

There’s a subtle tick in Arthur’s jaw, but he offers a tight smile anyway, poorly concealed victory glinting in his eyes. Eggsy would have preferred it if he’d yelled—probably would have been a happier omen than this passive aggressive muck they’re wading through.

“You make an excellent point, one that touches the heart of the reason I’ve asked to meet with you now.” His voice has that soft, paper quality that the elderly always seem to posses. The man leans forward, eyebrows crowding together in a dance of sympathy. “Your unfortunate origins are of concern to me. Kingsman cares for it’s own, and I deeply respect the sacrifice your father made in service to this organization. It is my profound wish that your stepfather, a fiend if I’ve ever heard of one, and his depraved manner towards your family had come to our attention sooner.”

Blinking, Eggsy stares at Arthur’s face, twisted in a sorrow far too ‘sincere’ to be real, and wonders where the fuck this is leading. Arthur has taken this conversation down a rickety road, and Eggsy really isn’t sure how he’s going to handle it. The moment his father, *his father,* was brought into this….Eggsy’s fingernails are biting into his palms, thankfully hidden from sight by the chair arm.

*Arthur continues his monologue, unaware of the simmering ire scratching along the seams of Eggsy’s flesh. “I would like to make amends. Your stepfather could be arrested tomorrow morning, as would be his just desserts, and your mother and sister moved to a more appropriate apartment. Of course, a limited stipend would be provided to aid with the move, incidentals and such, to get you all back on your feet....”*

*White noise fills Eggsy’s ears and he zones out on the rest of Arthur’s words. A silver platter. A silver bloody platter with a fix-all solution and Arthur isn’t even done talking. Slowly, his fingers uncurl from the fist he’s been making, and stares at the persian rug under his boots.*

He should take the offer, now, because it’s the best he’ll ever get. An actual *guarantee.* There’s a strong chance that he won’t make it through the Kingsman trials—and if he doesn’t get the Lancelot slot, he’ll be back with his mum and Dean, and *Rotti,* doing his best to shield Daisy from the worst of it all. They’ll still live in that dirty little 2/1 apartment on the wrong side of the tracks. Arthur is offering a way out, and it may be the last one coming his way.

*Arthur’s next sentence pulls his attention back. “It’s been reported that you have a Soul Mark.” Eggsy’s stomach folds itself in half. “Kingsman could, should you desire it, access the Registry and*
search for your match. Unofficially, of course.”

Eggsy’s eyes snap back to Arthur’s at the mention of the Registry. A world catalog of Soul Marks, it’s basically the holy grail for the Marked masses. Most countries have instated mandatory registration laws, despite access being restricted for everyone who didn’t have a PhD related to the soulmate phenomenon and a security clearance a mile long. The officials claim it’s to simultaneously further research and protect individual privacy, but everyone knows its because no government is willing to shell out the money to maintain a worldwide interactive network. Or give up those hints about the future.

Arthur’s offer to, well, hack the system, comes with a set of implications, both good and bad for Eggsy. On one hand, if Arthur is offering to find his soulmate, then Eggsy would lay down good money that no one has been able to read his Mark. It’s too obvious of a phrase to be mistaken for anyone other than Harry Hart.

On the other hand, it means Eggsy might be outed as Unregistered, which is highly illegal. His Mark appeared just days before Lee’s death, and his mother couldn’t stop crying whenever it was brought up, so he stopped talking about it and never got registered. If Arthur goes snooping and finds that he isn’t in the database, he could turn Eggsy over to the authorities, and he’d be right back in a jail cell with some pretty hefty fines on top. This kind of crime is never let off easy—there have been too many national incidents predicted off of Soul Marks.

Again, Eggsy’s pulled from his thoughts by Arthur gently touching his shoulder. “You’ve had a violent life, son. Are you certain you want to undertake such a violent career?”

Ah. So that’s how it is. Such a lovely offer, but weighted with heavy implication: drop out of the program. He probably should, it’s very unlikely this competition will turn out in his favor. It’s just that…Kingsman has been the best thing to ever happen to him.

He’s finally becoming strong. He’s finally—as he said to Harry in the Black Prince—owning all his mistakes. Even if he doesn’t get the Lancelot job or Harry Hart, he’s found victory over himself.

He leans back and subtly shrugs Arthur’s hand off his shoulder. Tilts his chin up, and look him dead in the eye. “Nah. I ain’t going nowhere. Thanks for the offer, though.”

Arthur withdraws his hand, clearly agitated. “Are you quite certain? Perhaps you’d like to sleep on it—” That thin, tissue paper quality to his voice tears to reveal a peek at the steel underneath, and Eggsy has to repress a shiver.

A sharp knock slices through the tense atmosphere, and the door is pushed open before Arthur can grant permission. A bold action, making it quite obvious who’s on the other side of the threshold. Harry Hart strides into the room, face polite and eyes thunderous. A bubble of heat blooms in Eggsy’s stomach—few people have ever been angry on his behalf.

“Ah, Eggsy, there you are. I see Arthur has made you late for our appointment.” His words are directed at Eggsy, but his eyes are locked dead on Arthur.

Unruffled, Arthur relaxes back into his chair, one arm propped on the edge like a Bond villain. “Do excuse me, Galahad, I’m afraid I lost track of the time.”

Harry dips his head in polite acknowledgement. “It happens to the best of us.” His voice sharpens. “Though I must admit my surprised. I was under the impression that other sponsors weren’t allowed to approach my protege without my express permission. Don’t you have your own student, Arthur?”
That bubble of heat becomes electrified at the possessive words, and Eggsy makes a point to brand this little scene into his memory. Arthur, however, is less than impressed. “My apologies for the oversight.” The flinty switch in his voice shows just how much he isn’t sorry. “I was merely trying to correct an error made in the wake of Lee Unwin’s death. Weren’t you the agent responsible for contacting the family?”

Eggsy’s eyes dart to Harry in time to see him flinch. That barb certainly scored a hit. Arthur looks back to Eggsy. “Do think on the matter, Mr. Unwin. I would hate to see you blindly lead by Galahad, as your father once was. His heart can overtake his judgement, at times.”

Those words are both a threat and a brutal punch to the gut. Eyes narrowing, Eggsy makes it clear that he knows this offer wasn’t made out of the kindness of Arthur’s shriveled little heart. “I don’t think so, bruv.” Eggsy stands and quickly crosses the room to stand next to Harry. “We done here, then?”

Harry clears his throat, and raises an eyebrow at Eggsy’s insolent tone. Rolling his eyes, Eggsy tacks on a “sir” to appease his Proposer.

“Yes, quite finished.” Arthur’s voice could cut through diamond, and it stays with Eggsy long after he and Harry have left the room.

As soon as the door closes behind them, Harry clamps a tight hand on his shoulder, as though worried he would pull away. His pace is quick, and yet he manages to keep his air of propriety. Unlike Eggsy, who is stumbling all over his short self to keep up. “Harry, what’s the rush? I know it —“

Harry cuts him off, absently. “A gentleman does not rush, Eggsy. He moves with intent.”

Eggsy rolls his eyes, because of course Harry would have a little saying, even now. Murters dubiously, “I bet trim don’t interrupt other people, either.” Harry briefly tightens his grip in warning, but refrains from commenting.

They turn the corner at the end of the hall towards the front entrance, and find Merlin lurking a few steps away. He looks busy, cataloging something in one of the cabinets lining the room, but the look he exchanges with Harry proves him to be anything but.

Eggsy sends Merlin a wounded look, because why the fuck not? He gave all that information to Arthur. He understands reporting the facts, but Merlin wrote everything down—including his guesswork on Eggsy’s home life. Some of those speculations were wrong, but they’ll be taken as scripture now because it was Merlin who wrote it. He even posed questions regarding the depth of his mum’s involvement with Dean’s abuse, or whether or not she was a fit guardian for Daisy. Christ, but Arthur had clamped his jaw onto those tidbits.

Merlin, at least, has the decency to look mildly contrite. Eggsy wants to say something, but Harry gives him a little push to get him through the front door. Talks right over anything he might have tried to say, “Come along quickly, we’ve much to go over tonight.”

He pulls the front door opens and the balmy summer night rolls over Eggsy’s skin like silk, smoothing the jagged edges of his anger. The car is waiting for them in the roundabout, and he’s ushered into the passenger seat. Harry opens the car door for him, and his hand settles onto Eggsy’s lower back to help him in. The hand is placed on the borderline between sweet and inappropriate, and Eggsy tries very hard not to read into it. Of course, he fails.

Soon enough, they’re both strapped in and the engine turns over to start their trek to Harry’s
townhouse. Eggsy opens his mouth to start the impending conversation, but Harry places a finger against his lips. The rough skin on the pad of Harry's fingertip is oddly satisfying. “We’ll be there shortly.” Eggsy nods his understanding, and settles against the door to watch the play of street lights on Harry’s face.

Soon enough, Harry’s throwing the parking break on outside of his home. They both exit the car on their own, but as soon as Harry is within arm’s length of Eggsy, his hand returns to the small of Eggsy’s back. Still straddling that same edge of impropriety, he ushers his student into the privacy of his territory.

Both make their way to the sitting room without words. A small smile tugs at Eggsy’s lips at their choreography. They spend enough time together here to have a routine, and Eggsy clings to that realization to further calm himself. They’re a team, and Harry’s on his side. Taking ‘his spot’ on the couch, Eggsy turns to find Harry’s eyes already on him.

“We may speak freely in here. I routinely ensure that there is no surveillance equipment in my home.”

Eggsy smirks at the imperious tone. “By that you mean you bribed Merlin to take em’ all down, right?” At the mention of Merlin, Eggsy’s lips involuntarily curl at the edges. Fucking Merlin. His train of thought must have been written quite plainly, because Harry makes an unhappy sound. “You mustn’t blame Merlin. He has no control over Arthur’s actions.” His voice is pitched in his ‘instructor’ tone, but his eyes hold understanding. It doesn’t make Eggsy feel any better, though. Harry doesn’t know.

Eggsy tells him as much. “Have you read what he put in my file? He wrote some really bad things, things that aren’t true!” Eggsy hands flail about to make his point. “It’s not like he collected the facts—he put down what he thought might’ve ‘appened, and what he thought of it all, and how he bloody felt about it, like some bird’s diary or somthin’. And I couldn't say a damn thing against it, because it was bloody Merlin’s word, so of course it was gospel—“

“Eggsy—"

“And that’s not even the long of it, Harry.” Eggsy widens his eyes and stretches his eyebrows up to make his point. His hands are flying about in agitation. “Arthur didn’t even get all the way through it. God only knows what else is—“

“I understand you’re upset, but this is an excellent lesson.”

The words tumbling out of Eggsy’s mouth come to an abrupt halt. He examines Harry’s face for any sign of sarcasm, and comes up empty handed. “You’re taking the piss.” Harry was supposed to be on his side.

Leaning back against the couch, Harry drags a tired hand down his face. “I assure you I’m not.” He pins Eggsy with a tough look. “Momentarily ignoring how far Arthur overstepped his boundaries, you do need to become accustomed to this. Every Kingsman makes enemies over their career, and our history is examined with a fine-tooth comb. While in the field, or under interrogation, you must be prepared to have this used against you time and time again.” Harry softens his gaze a touch to gentle his next words. “This isn’t going away, Eggsy. You’ll have to deal with it if you want to make it through the program.”

A knee-jerk retort is on the tip of his tongue, but Eggsy pulls it back at the last second. Harry, in a way, is right. He’s gone soft around the edges. This never would have shaken him pre-Harry. But
now he actually cares what someone outside of CPS thinks about him. It’s unnerving as hell.

*He’s not letting Harry have that, though.*

Eggsy takes a moment to plan his response and drag this conversation back into his arena. “You think...that I’m upset because Arthur talked about Dean beating me?” His tongue feels heavy over the word ‘beating’, because he’s never spoken about it aloud in such blunt terms. “I’m not upset because he knows I was abused.” Ye Gods, but it sounds so stupid to say it aloud like that. But he’s making a point to Harry, so he has to own it as obviously as possible. Saying it aloud is textbook.

The phrasing works, because Harry’s veneer of nonchalance is cracking, and he’s already leaning forward instinctually. Eggsy wants to simultaneously throw his arms around Harry’s neck and break his nose.

Instead, he plays his trump card. “He used my Da. As a *poker chip***. Right on cue, Harry’s lips purse together and his hand clenches the woodwork gracing the top of the couch. His entire form becomes rigid.

Eggsy may be using this as a get-out-of-jail-free card, but it makes Arthur’s actions no less upsetting. He had *used* his father’s memory. Perhaps it shows a certain thinness of skin, but...his mother still won’t bare the mention of his father. It’s a taboo subject, and has been for years. Not even Dean dared to tread on that hallowed ground.

*For Arthur to use his father’s death as a leveraging tool...Eggsy can’t even think of an appropriate analogy to depict the true depths of depraved manipulation. Harry seems to be in complete agreement with the sentiment.*

“What, precisely, did good Arthur have to say on the matter?” Harry’s voice is level, and Eggsy would have thought he’d asked after the weather if it weren’t for the murderous body language.

Eggsy looks away to study the intricate pattern of the wallpaper. He knew he’d get a reaction—counted on it, in fact—but he wasn’t expecting *this* Eyes sliding back onto Harry’s face, Eggsy almost shrinks in on himself. He’s met with a quiet rage—dignified and terrifying in equal measures—that says Harry could take apart a man, bone by bone, with his bare hands, and enjoy it. Wonders what would happen if Harry ever went rogue, what he could do with all that power and skill tempered with decades of experience....

A warm hand set heavily on his shoulder jars him from his wandering thoughts.

“Eggsy. I asked you a question.” The tone is so authoritative, the thought of disobeying Harry doesn’t even cross his mind.

“Didn’t really insult him or nothin’. Just, brought it up, and said how *sorry* he was for it all. Da, I mean. Wanted to give me and mum some kind of post-mortem pension or something.”

*Harry’s voice takes on a higher, open tone, and eyebrows skyrocket to his hairline. “He actually offered your family money?” His voice trails slightly, in thought. “You realize there are no benefits for surviving families, due in part to the secret nature of our organization, and the fact that most Kingsman are fairly well off on their own.” Harry furrows his eyebrows. “For Arthur to authorize...” His voice drops off, and looks sharply back to Eggsy. “What did he want for it?”*

Lips twisting into a bitter smirk, Eggsy half sneers in bitterness. “The short? For me to naff off.” Exhales, and mumbles the rest. “Flat for me mum an’ Daisy. An’ me.” Harry breathes in as Eggsy continues, face inscrutable. “Stipend so she wouldn’t have to work so hard. Dean—” Eggsy waves
his hands to make finger quotes. “—taken care of. Everything wrapped up with a pretty bow.” Eggsy’s hands fall to his lap as dead weight.

*Harry is very still, and staring intently at Eggsy. He leans even closer, the kevlar fabric of his suit rustling softly. Braces a hand on the arm of the arm of the couch, caging Eggsy in. “You turned him down.” There is no questioning inflection. The words are a stone-carved statement of fact. That wicked smirk sneaks onto Harry’s face, and he says in an undertone, “There is some good in this.”*

*Distracted by Harry’s lips, Eggsy replies absently in the same register. “What’s that, then?”*

*Harry’s breath tickles his cheek. “Arthur believes you’re a contender. He wouldn’t have bothered, otherwise.”*

Eggsy angles his head up and sees the smug satisfaction bundled in the corner of his mouth. A short burst of gold blooms behind Eggsy’s heart, because he put that look on Harry’s face. He’s looking at Eggsy right now like he’s worth something, like he’s finally been proven right. A grin slowly stretches across his face in answering mirth, accent thicker than syrup on his tongue. “Welna’, wouldja’ lookit’ that.”

Wearing devious delight like armani, Eggsy mentally likens the pair of themselves to clever villains who’ve plotted the world’s end together. They’re nose to nose, eye to eye, and Eggsy is trying his damnedest not to read into any of this, but come on. This isn’t how ‘just friends’ behave. This isn’t how ‘just a mentor’ touches his—

Eggsy couldn’t say who moved first. He leans in as a hand wraps along the nape of his neck, tugging him forward to close the last remaining inch. Harry’s lips are warm and slightly chapped, and they make Eggsy’s toes curl in his boots. Silver streaks are spiraling relentlessly up his spine and snaking into the nape of his neck. The pressure is intense, just shy of too much, and it’s utterly perfect.

*Harry Hart kisses like he owns the earth: deliberate and unhurried. His hand slides around Eggsy’s throat, pausing to trace Eggsy’s racing pulse. Harry braces his thumb under Eggsy’s chin and slowly shifts the angle to just how he likes it. God help him, but Eggsy likes that too. His skin is pulled taut, and it makes him vulnerable to Harry in a heady way—the hand that has hurt many gentling itself for him.*

A tongue traces his top lip, and Eggsy is eager to meet it with his own. He presses himself wholly into their first kiss and runs his hands through Harry’s thick hair. Eggsy is positively giddy at mussing up that clean style—he can touch Harry in this moment in ways he can’t in others. Eyes closing in blessed relief, because fucking finally, a moan escapes his mouth as he leans forward into his soulmate. It’s perfect, and after so long and so much confusion, Eggsy feels like he’s come home.

*Hands stop tugging on him and start to push him away, like some form of human polarity was suddenly reversed. Eggsy’s eyes fly open as his back hits the cushion, and Harry is on his feet faster than can be tracked. He extends a hand towards Harry, trying to placate whatever has Harry spooked.*

He can guess, too. Harry will say it’s not right to take advantage as his sponsor. “It’s alright, I wanted it.” Still wants it so badly. “You didn’t take advantage.” Next, Eggsy figures he’ll try to comment on the age gap, on his sponsorship, maybe even kids. Eggsy has imaged this moment over and over, with every possible scenario. There’s literally nothing he can think of that could dissuade him. “If it’s because your’e older than me, I don’t care. Always preferred experience, and you are the most attractive man I’ve ever seen.”
Harry, still silent, looks pained at the words. Eggsy checks it off the list and moves on to the next possibility. “Then it’s the Kingsman Trials, right? Cuz’ your my Proposer? I’ll wait for you, I’ll win for you.” If ever there was a time to play coy, Eggsy thinks, this sure as fuck ain’t it.

Blinking in surprise at the fervor of Eggsy’s declaration, Harry opens his mouth to respond. Nothing but silence.

Standing now, Eggsy presses on, desperation nipping at his heels. “Is it the whole shared-life issue? Because I’m fine without having kids—I basically raised Daisy myself, so I’ve had that experience. And if you do want kids, I would do it all again. With you.”

That seems to strike a chord in Harry, and for a moment, Eggsy believes he’s won. Steps forward, hands still extended palm up. “I’ve wanted you since I saw you outside that police station, and it hasn’t gone away. I don’t think it will.” And isn’t that the truth? Eggsy wants to touch without apology. Wants permission, wants the right, wants—.

Harry blurts out “I have a soulmate.”

The silent ‘and it’s not you’ stands as a barricade of broken glass between them. Eggsy’s arms collapse to his sides, and he takes several steps backwards.

There’s no finesse in Harry’s character now. He’s breathing hard, a red flush is peeking from beneath his shirt collar, and his eyes are wide with regret. It seems like those words tore everything strong from him.

And Eggsy…he feels like he’s been slapped in the face. Feels a wave of cold destroy those delicate silver spirals, and the horror of what he’s just done and what this means closes in on him. Like that terrible second when you realize you’ve brought a lead pipe to a gun fight.

He thought he’d prepared himself for this. Jesus, a short while ago he was telling himself he’d be fine if they ended up as ‘just friends’, but…goddamn it. All those little ‘what if’ moments…Eggsy has to face it now. He’d never truly thought…he’d realized they might never be romantically involved, or that his soulmate might already be married or something, but not this. Never this. He’d known about the Unmatched, had pitied them even, but never once did he think he’d be one of them.

He can barely hear himself over the hammering of his heart. “Is it Merlin? It’s Merlin, isn’t it—” Eggsy bloody well knows it’s not Merlin, but he needs to hear it.

A short bark of crazed laughter lunges out of Harry’s chest, making Eggsy’s eyebrows shoot up in indignation. “No, God no, it’s…” He wipes the manic smile off of his face in light of the current topic under discussion. “It’s not Merlin. I don’t know who, yet.”

The last, delicate surviving flicker of hope is smothered. All those times when Eggsy though that maybe he’d said the right words, that magic combination that would tie Harry and him together, were false. It’s a known fact, too, that the longer you know a person without hearing those special words, the less likely you are to hear them at all.

And…they’ve shared so many beautiful moments with each other already, surely one of those would have been it, if it was going to happen. What did ‘first meaningful words’ constitute, anyway?

Harry looks utterly destroyed. Taking a step forward, he spreads his hands in a helpless gesture. “I am so sorry, Eggsy. I should never have…not when I’m waiting for….” Head jerking to the side, Harry lets out a frustrated sigh. “It was not my intention to put us in such a…situation. I-you’re not alone in this. I also feel an attraction to you, one I should not have acted on, in light of the
circumstances.” He drags a hand through his hair to smooth it back in place, and looks back at Eggsy, finally at a loss for words.

Eggsy licks his lips, and takes a deep breath. “So what? We could make a go of it, anyway.” Christ, he can’t believe he’s actually saying this. “There’s no guarantee that soul mates will meet.” He’s such an arsehole. “You might never find them.” Hates himself for saying to Harry what all of his enemies have said to him. “But you and me, we could be happy.” Rotti’s words in his mouth, and he’s going to be sick.

With every syllable, Harry seems to grow more and more conflicted, more pained, more…just more of everything bad in the world. It seems to take everything he has to respond. “I’m sorry, Eggsy.” His voice falls flat. “I know I participated in this, it isn’t your fault. It was a moment of weakness that I hope you can forgive me for—”

“Please, Harry. You’re…you’re….” Eggsy trails off, biting the inside of his cheek until it bleeds. He wants so badly to play this card. Knows he could have Harry with it, even if just until his real soulmate turned up. All he’d have to do is tell him about his own Soul Mark.

Harry’s eyebrows cave in together. “I’m what?”

The moment of silence is stretched to the breaking point. Crowding against his lips is the phrase ‘You’re my match’.

“You’re everything I’ve ever wanted out of life.” In the end, he knows he won’t force Harry. Won’t trick him, or blackmail him, or make him feel sorry enough to do it out of pity and honor. He’ll only ever want it if Harry chooses to give it to him freely. Life, loyalty, and love—the only things that shouldn’t be bought, even if they could be.

The words teeter on edge between them. Harry offers a small, melancholy smile. “You’re young yet. There will be others, for you.” But not for me, rings clear in the silence, unspoken though it is.

There’s only you, Harry. It’s only ever been you. Still, Eggsy nods his acceptance with as much grace as he can manage. Ignores his ribs crumbling to ash, and ignores his beating heart as is falls underfoot. Knows intimately how doggedly determined people are about soulmates. He spares Harry and doesn’t voice his thoughts.

He’s said enough, as is.

He vaguely remembers telling Harry he’d rather walk back to HQ. His sponsor put up a token protest, but they both knew an awkward car ride was the last thing either of them needed. He turned down the offer of a taxi, too.

Drags his feet as much as possible. For a few bitter minutes, Eggsy kicks himself for not taking Arthur up on his deal. He turned down a miracle, and got a first and final kiss for his trouble. As unforgettable as it was, it won’t keep Daisy safe. He’ll have to win the Trials now. It’s his last chance.

Inevitably, he makes it back to the barracks. The lights were already out, and he takes his shower alone, in the dark. When his head finally hits the pillow on his bunk, he falls asleep to the same thought that’s echoed in the back of his mind since he left Harry’s: What do you do when the person you’ve waited your whole life for is waiting for someone else?

Eggsy doesn’t see Harry for three days.

Three days since The Incident, and he hasn’t smiled once. Not even Roxy’s most creative insults for
Charlie can drag one out from the vault of Eggsy’s jaw.

When Roxy first woke him up that morning after at zero dark thirty, she immediately knew something was wrong. It must’ve been scrawled across his eyeballs in neon marker or something, because she’s been extra attentive during training ever since.

Three days since The Incident, and Charlie has upped the ante—he’s moved on from harmless taunting to outright bullying. He feels dumb for being so bothered by it—bullying seeming so small after surviving something so much bigger. Perhaps his skin really is wearing thinner than ever. He’s gone all soft (because of Harry).

Three days since The Incident, and JB has changed overnight from being stubborn as a miniature mule to acting fairly obedient (out of pity, Eggsy is certain, and only in front of others).

Three days since The Incident, and Merlin doesn’t notice a bloody thing. Eggsy isn’t sure yet if it’s a blessing or a curse (or an act).

Three days since The Incident, when Eggsy’s world came crashing down, and yet the world continues on as though nothing has changed. Its just another long day of training, and a chilly one at that. The air is aggressively cold and damp—the kind that makes your bones throb and ache at their cores.

“At least it matches your mood.” It’s Roxy’s only comment on the matter, and Eggsy loves her just a little for being such a guy about emotions.

The sniper series continues to be the subject at hand, and Merlin hovers in their vicinity. Eggsy figures that pairing him and Roxy together for the third day in a row is Merlin’s way of apologizing for the massive fuck up that was his tete-a-tete with Arthur.

First combo finds everyone on their bellies, learning to shoot with shivering fingers. His leg is tossed over Roxy’s, and he’s on scope for her. Roxy cradles the rifle with her hands and shoulder, still and unyielding to the temperature as iron. Windcalls follow.

“East wind; holding two mils.” Roxy’s teeth are chattering, though the rest of her body is under strict control.

“On scope.” Eggsy mutters in her ear. He’s glued his eyes to the six-inch steel target a thousand feet down the range.

“On target.” Roxy replies, voice steady and determined.

Eggsy sharpens his focus and tries to be as unmoving as stone. “Send it.”

A heartbeat later and the air is cracked open by a gunshot. The kickback rocks into Roxy’s body and through Eggsy’s leg before finally dissipating into the ground. Eyes still on target, Eggsy reports the shot. “Low, dial on half a mil.”

Roxy makes the necessary adjustments to her scope, and they go through the entire procedure again. And again. Over and over until there’s a pile of empty shells scattered to their right.

Eggsy loves the marksmanship training—it’s his favorite part of the Kingsman Trials, and he’s especially grateful that it’s today. He doesn’t have think about Harry, or his kiss, or his rejection, or anything that isn’t a six inch circle of steel. And Roxy can’t ask awkward questions for the same reason. Every thought and outer stimuli is whittled away until all that’s left is the wind on his skin and a pinpoint picture beneath a mil dot reticle.
Merlin calls out his next instructions. “Bolt up! Safety on! Prepare to switch. Snipers, carry your weapons with you. Spotters, police the brass and prepare your rounds.”

The shooters amble downrange after Merlin to examine and swap out targets while the spotters prep for their turn behind the trigger. Eggsy eyes the recruits marching down the lanes. He swallows a lump in his throat when Roxy throws an extra swing into her step, dragging Merlin’s eyes along with her hips. Chances aren’t looking very good right now, and Eggsy is hyperaware of it.

“Sad to see your girlfriend sniff after another man?” Charlie’s voice is smooth, if extremely haughty.

His voice would be sort of nice if only he wasn’t such a classist arsehole about everything. Eggsy sneers at his nemesis in contempt, and returns his attention to collecting the brass shells around his perch. Maybe if he ignores the annoying berk, he’ll disappear. Preferably into a dark bottomless pit.

“Nothing to say, Eggie?” Charlie’s boots enter Eggsy’s line of sight. “And here I was naively thinking you’d defend her, despite her panting after Merlin like a bitch in heat.”

All the collected casings clink in Eggsy’s clenched hands as he stands up. Shoulders past Charlie to dump the shells in the nearby bin. “You’d better I hope I got nothin’ to say. If I let this slip to Roxy, I’ll be helping her dump what’s left of you in a shallow grave.”

Wiping his hands off on his cargo pants, Eggsy turns away from the brass collection to prep his space, but stops abruptly when he finds Charlie has crept up behind him. Eggsy jerks back in surprise at the close proximity. “The fuck—it’s called personal space, Charlie.” Huffing at the brunette’s audacity, he moves to walk around the body in front of him. His path, however, becomes blocked by Charlie’s arm braced against the collection bin.

“I admit, I expected more chivalry from you, despite your…well, everything.” Eggsy tries to escape out the other direction, but Charlie shifts in front of him again. Leans his face in closer, smirking. “Or is it not the bird at all?”

His eyes dart up to meet Charlie’s, and Eggsy could just kick himself for the tell. The berk is getting too close to the truth for comfort. Tries to sound threatening, and pulls his accent out a little further. “Outa’ my way, Hesketh. I ain’t gonna’ ask you again.”

Smirking with all the vindictive pleasure of a wild dog tearing into a smaller animal, Charlie drops his voice low. “Mayhaps you’re distressed that Merlin is panting after another.‘‘ Gives Eggsy a quick once-over that heavily implies he’s been found wanting, and twitches his eyebrows. “If you were gagging for it so badly, Unwin, I could always—“

Eggsy roughly shoves Charlie away from him by the shoulders before he can get another despicable word out. Charlie ends up sprawled on the ground, Eggsy standing menacingly over him. Spits out, “If you think you an’ Arthur can screw around with me—“

This time it’s Eggsy who’s interrupted. “Unwin! Stand down!” Merlin yells at him from several feet away. He’s beaten the recruits back, who are still trudging their way back to the firing platform. Striding to the pair of them, Merlin’s anger becomes obvious. Snaps out a harsh “Hesketh, return to your work”, before grabbing Eggsy by the elbow to drag him back to his own station. His next words carry to, embarrassingly, all the recruits. “You’ll be spending the evening cleaning my office with a toothbrush, Unwin. Your sponsor will be hearing about this. Attacking a fellow recruit outside of sparring is strictly prohibited. Report to me directly after.”

Merlin’s eyes are stormy, and hard, and everything that makes Eggsy wilt when it comes to the few
people he actually likes. Eyes wide, he swallows. Jerks his head once in a acquiescence. “Yes sir.” Before Merlin has a chance to say anything else to him, Eggsy turns to Roxy and takes the rifle for his turn.

He spends the rest of the day with his eyes downrange, and doesn’t dare look to Merlin.

He can just feel the smugness emanating from Charlie down the line. As Roxy passes him a palmful of ammo, neither of them comment when her hand gently squeezes his.

When the daylight starts to dim and the bullets run out, everyone packs up their stations and starts ambling towards the barracks, grumbling halfheartedly about their backs and knees. Egssy and Roxy stick to the back of the crowd in mutual silence. They part at the entrance, Roxy heading to the showers after mouthing ‘behave’, and Eggsy following Merlin to his office (after very pointedly ignoring her).

Merlin doesn’t even check to see if Eggsy is tailing him as ordered. After four fights of stairs, Eggsy gets his first glimpse of the lower decks of Kingsman HQ. It’s walls and ceilings are high, metal, and leave exposed the industrial piping systems. The underbelly of the compound is a feat of engineering in and of itself.

Merlin’s office is not so impressive. In fact, ‘office’ and ‘basement’ are generous terms for what is basically a dim cave filled to brim with papers and disassembled gadgets. Eggsy wouldn’t be able to navigate through all the junk Merlin has stored here if he had a map and a digital catalog.

Choosing to make the first move, Eggsy tosses out a halfhearted “Nice digs you got here.”

All he gets in response is a flat look. Right then. Eggsy turns to peruse some of the nicknacks in the room while Merlin digs through his desk drawer. Adorning the nearest workbench are dismantled weapons, pieces of cloth in various patterns, and a pile of what appear to be lenses for eyeglasses. He reaches out to touch, but Merlin is quick on the draw.

“Don’t touch anything—I’ve got everything how I like it.” Merlin walks back to Eggsy and shoves something under Eggsy’s nose. “Take it.”

Jaw dropping open, Eggsy stares cross-eyed at the toothbrush in front of him. “You’re not fucking serious.”

Merlin raises an eyebrow higher than Eggsy’s ever seen anyone else do. “I assure you I’m not. You will start on one side of my office and clean to other side, one tile at a time. You’ll return here every evening until my floors are spotless. If you half-ass it, you’ll be doing it over again.”

Pursing his lips, he takes the toothbrush from Merlin’s hand and exhales. “All this for some stupid —“

“Yes, Eggsy, all this. Kingsman is training you to be lethal. You no longer have the luxury of casual brawling.”

“Charlie’s had the same training as I have. Even playing field.”

“It’s not about your skills versus his. Right now, I couldn’t care less what Charlie Hesketh can or cannot do. This is about you, Eggsy. A Kingsman always knows when to react with violence, and when to abstain.” Points to a cabinet on the far wall. “Soap and a bucket are in there.”

Shoulders slumped, Eggsy makes his way to the cabinet while Merlin sits at his control center. He retrieves the supplies and goes to fill the bucket at the industrial sink in the corner. Tries to make
small talk to lighten the mood. “Lot of computers for one desk, there.”

“All the better to watch you with.” Merlin retorts. “This is a punishment Eggsy, no talking.”

“If it were a fair punishment, Charlie’d be here to.” Once the waterline reached halfway up the edges, he turns off the tap and adds the soap.

Merlin wheels his chair around to face Eggsy. “I’m not in the business of ‘fair’. Charlie wasn’t the one who got physical.”

Eggsy snorts, and mutters, “Give it time.” Picks a place to start cleaning the floors, and gets on his hands and knees to start scrubbing. He grew up around idiots like Charlie, and knows how people like him operate. If Eggsy gives him an inch, Charlie will take a mile plus. They always escalate if they think they can get away with it.

Glancing over to Merlin, Eggsy finds that he’s still watching him. Raises his eyebrows to invite an explanation.

“What did he say, then? To make you react.”

Eggsy rolls a shoulder and focuses back on the soapy tiles. “Talkin’ shite, as usual. Some words about Roxy.”

“Eggsy.”

Sighing, he drops the toothbrush on the ground and sits back on his haunches. Eggsy’s face is screwed up in agitation. “What is it with you and Harry always sayin’ my name like that.” Merlin’s lips quirk in slight amusement. “It’s not a magic word that’ll get you any answer you want.”

Merlin leans back in his chair, silent. He keeps his eyes on Eggsy, making it clear that he’s prepared to wait this out until doomsday.

Eggsy rolls his eyes. “Christ on a cross. He called Rox’ a ‘bitch in heat’. Also, some nasty implications about you and her.” And me. “He was way too close to me and it was meant as a threat.” Among other things.

Nodding slowly, Merlin takes a few seconds to answer. “Your sentiment is appreciated, if a tad misplaced. It’s not your job to defend Roxy, or me for that matter. That responsibility is mine.” He tilts his head to side, eyes crinkling. “Next time, make sure no one’s around to see. Plausible deniability, Eggsy, is another lesson every Kingsman must learn.”

Despite himself, Eggsy can’t help but smile. That’s just such a Merlin thing to say—it reminds him of why he liked the guy in the first place. It’s enough to sway the split-second decision for Eggsy. “Merlin, I think you should know something.”

Eyebrows twitching, Merlin waves his hand for Eggsy to continue.

“Full disclosure. I think Charlie knows you have a Mark.” Merlin’s face becomes devoid of emotion. This is the first time either of them has ever acknowledged what they saw on each other during the flood test. But this whole Charlie issue…something as been eating at his mind since their confrontation. Takes a deep breath, and takes a moment to mentally scream about what he’s going say next. “I think he also knows I have one.”

Right on cue, Merlin’s eyes drop down to Eggsy’s chest. Frowning, he crosses his arms to block the view.
“What brings you to this conclusion?”

Shaking his head, he holds his hands palm up and shrugs. “Just, what he said, and how he said it. I suppose I could be misconstruing things, but I don’t think so.” Smiles sardonically. “Guess he already figured out ‘plausible deniability’.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate the head’s up, but why did you feel compelled to tell me this? What do you think he’s going to do with the information?”

I think he may want to knock me out of the running to better his chances, and— “I think Arthur is helping him cheat. Well, as much as you can cheat at something like this. I didn’t tell him about my Mark, and it’s been pretty well hidden. So is yours. Unless you told him, I think Arthur is letting Charlie read the recruits’ files, even yours as the trainer.” Speaking of which. “Thanks, by the way, for writing all that shit in mine.”

Merlin glares at him. “It’s my job to write all that shit down.”

Scoffing, Eggsy drops the toothbrush into the bucket with a splash. “Yeah, well, for your edification, me’ mum is plenty guardian enough for Daisy, and she never struck me a day in her life. Woulda’ cut off ‘er own hand ‘fore she ever raised it against me. That’s just one of the fuckton of things you got wrong.”

Standing to his feet, Merlin pushes his chair away and practically bolts his hands onto hips. “I keep personal files on every agent, recruit, and support staff I work with. Those are legitimate questions that, frankly, I’ve still not gotten any satisfying answers for.” He throws a hand out to gesture at Eggsy. “For God’s sake, you came in here day one covered in bruises in the worst places possible!”

Eggsy wildly spreads his own hands out. “So you drag Harry into it?! You should have just asked me! Harry never had to know!”

“Of course I told him, Eggsy! Harry’s responsible for your well-being—“

“Oh come off it! Don’t try to play this off as anything other than what it is! You don’t see Percival mothering Roxy or asking after her ‘emotional wellbeing’.”

Merlin snaps out his next sentence with vitriol. “That’s because Percival wasn’t friends with her dead father!”

Eggsy’s mouth flaps soundlessly in the wake of Merlin’s words.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Merlin groans, and steps forward to stand over Eggsy. “Alright, this is getting out of hand. I understand you anger at me, but I need you to understand my position.”

Deflating, Eggsy examines the floor tiles with interest. “I know. I’m sorry, it’s just…Arthur used all of it. He threw it in my face, even the stuff that wasn’t true. I know I have to get used to that.” Eggsy’s voice trails into a softer pitch. “The thought of Harry reading the same things….”

“Harry hasn’t read any of it. Those were my personal logs. No one else has access to them, not even Harry. But when Arthur asked for them specifically, I had to turn them over. I had to. Following orders is part of being a Kingsman, Eggsy.”

Eggsy nods reluctantly. “Even when he’s cheating?”

Merlin’s mouth pulls into a harsh line. “Even when he’s cheating.”
“Some friend you are.”

Merlin hunches over to look Eggsy dead in the eyes. “During the Trials, I’m not your friend, Eggsy. I’m your boss.” The hard planes of his face soften with his voice, and he places a hand and Eggsy’s shoulder. “I think you have good chances at winning, lad. I wish you luck, and hope we can settle our problems when it’s all over. Win or lose.”

Sighing, Eggsy quirks his lips into a half-smile. “Yeah, a’ight. You know—“

A knock interrupts his next words, and the door opens before either he or Merlin can say anything. Harry steps into the room, and freezes midstep, eyes wide as dinner plates.

“Oh shit.” The words tumble out of Eggsy’s mouth without thought. Realizes that he’s kneeling at Merlin’s feet, and Merlin has a hold of his shoulder like he’s about to guide Eggsy through sucking him off.

Harry’s face morphs into quiet shock. “I do hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, you’re—fucking hell!” Scrambling backwards, Eggsy knocks over the bucket with his thigh and promptly ends up sprawled on the floor, sudsy water seeping into his clothing.

Merlin intervenes. Well, he tries to. “Harry, I didn’t realize you’d be here tonight.” Unlike Eggsy, he doesn’t flail about. He just stares down at Eggsy as with a look that clearly states you’re the most ridiculous creature I’ve ever met. All Eggsy can do is roll his eyes, since he doesn’t really have a leg to stand on at the moment.

Face completely neutral, Harry observes their interaction with dark eyes and sharp jaw. “That’s quite alright. I received your message and came down to deal with Eggsy’s transgression.” Looks them both over with a bland look. “I can see you’re already handling it.”

“Harry—“

“Carry on.” Looks to Eggsy. “I’ll expect you tomorrow evening to resume our lessons.” Harry doesn’t appear to be in any rush—he’s as composed as always—but he’s out the door before Eggsy can blink. Well, hell.

Exhaling, Eggsy lets his head fall back against the floor with a ‘thunk’. Closes his eyes in exasperation, because this is just one more thing to deal with. Sooner or later, he and Harry are going to need to have it out, and, if nothing else, restore their relationship to it’s previous status.

Merlin’s eyebrows have scaled his forehead again. “Care to ‘full-disclosure’ what that was about?”

Eggsy props himself up on his elbows. “Not on your life.”

Merlin lets out an undignified snort, and returns to his Desk of Many Monitors. Eggsy picks himself up and starts scrubbing the floor since the water is already everywhere. Pauses as a thought strikes him like lightning.

“Hey Merlin, one last thing.”

“Hmm?” The man doesn’t even pause in his typing.

“Does Harry know about your Mark?”

The clack of the keyboard comes to an abrupt halt. “…Yes. He does.”
Swallowing, Eggsy takes a breath. “And...does he know about mine?”

A small length of silence. “I may have mentioned it in passing.”

Eggsy says nothing in return, thoughts racing. The bristles scraping against the tile and the keyboard clicks slowly start again in unison.

If Harry hasn’t heard his phrase yet, then he probably assumes that Merlin will be paired with Eggsy. Since he’s doing everything he can to help Eggsy win, he’s basically shoving Eggsy into Merlin’s arms. Then there’s Merlin waiting around to see who comes out on top, with Eggsy stuck between a rock and the ocean. The three of them are suspended in limbo together, each waiting to see who the others end up matched to. And there’s Roxy, and Eggsy would lay down good money that neither Harry nor Merlin know about that one. He only feels a smidge guilty about keeping it to himself—that dark voice in his mind whispers that it wouldn’t be good for anyone (namely, Merlin) to pick favorites if given half the chance. Just in case.

Eggsy ends up scrubbing the floor for six hours just to finish it in one go, and he stumbles into bed around one in the morning. His mind, though, still churns through possibilities, probabilities, and choices. If he wins Lancelot, then he’ll end up as Merlin’s other half, and he’ll never be with Harry. Harry lives by a million clever saying about honor and morality, so Eggsy’s fairly confident that ‘bros before hos’ is one of them. And so it turns into an either-or situation. He can’t have his cake and eat it too. But if he gives up the Lancelot job, and it turns out that he isn’t Harry’s Match after all, he’s fucked in a very bad way. His family too.

A new thought sweeps into his brain. There are more Kingsman personnel than just the Knights. A place like this can’t be run by the round table and Merlin alone. Maybe Harry could get a him a job....

But the option leaves a sour taste in his mouth. Perhaps it’s extremely selfish, but he doesn’t want to settle. He wants to be a knight. He wants to be like Harry—an equal.

Mid-thought, Eggsy finally succumbs to the pull of slumber. His sleep is fitful and full of sharp angles that leave him twisted inside. Milky white abstract shapes are tangled with each other against an endless black canvas in his mind’s eye, and cold tendrils creep along the planes. Ice water splashes into the dreamscape, and it shoves it’s way into his throat, choking, drowning, and he can’t breathe—

Crying out, Eggsy jerks out of his bed, stumbling as wet blankets cling to his legs. Gasping for breath, it takes a moment for the laughter to filter through to his awareness. The penny drops, and he’s tearing his way across the the dorm towards Charlie with murderous intent. “You’re fucking dead, Hesketh!”

Roxy is suddenly in front of him, palms gripping his shoulders none to gently, halting his motion. “You take a swing and you’re out, Eggsy! He’s not worth it.”

Charlie, leaning on Digby’s shoulder, bucket dangling from his fingers, jerks his chin at Eggsy. “Take a joke, Eggie. Listen to your girlfriend.”

Roxy gives Eggsy another push backwards, before turning towards the smug pair. “Oh fuck off Charlie!”

Charlie and Digby laugh harder on their way back to their bunks. Roxy just murmurs “ignore them”, and other similar sentiments, and helps him clean up his bunk.
Eggsy huffs and picks up a whining JB. “At least they waited till’ the morning.” Nodding, Roxy helps wrap JB in the blanket from her bed, and tucks him away next to her own puppy while they shower.

It’s a shit start to the morning, and it only gets worse from there. Today is a surprise test for their marksmanship abilities at long range, and it’s hosted by Percival instead of Merlin. Where Merlin is and what he’s doing, none of them can even guess. What they do know is that Percival is a stiff son of a bitch, and that he’s going to cut two people today. Eggsy hopes like hell it’s Charlie, even though he knows he’s not lucky enough for that to happen.

Percival barks out an overview of the test. “Team up, and ready your rifles. Six shots, one in prone, three in supported positions, and two on unsupported. You will then switch with your spotter, and go through the drill again. You will be graded on accuracy, precision, teamwork, and speed.”

Roxy and Eggsy are fast enough to grab their favorite vantage point of the sniper lanes. And of course, Charlie and Digby have partnered up and have staked a claim on the lane next to them. Where the fuckers proceed to cheat. They accidentally-on-purpose scatter their ammo supply, reflect light into their eyes off his compass, and a number of other horrible things that no one calls them on.

Despite their best efforts, however, Charlie and Digby utterly fail at washing him and Roxy out. In fact, they come in second. It galls Eggsy that they lost to the Charlie-And-Digby-Show, but it still feels pretty good to have done so well in the face of sabotage.

The training is ended early, and a quick clean up and stroll later, he and Roxy sequester themselves in the Kingsman library. They’ve taken to holing up among the isles of books to study for the random pop quizzes Merlin enjoys springing on them all. This is the only place Charlie hasn’t found them in yet, so it’s as much a safe haven from annoying nancy as it is educational. It’s a relief to have a quiet afternoon after the roller coaster week he’s had.

Eggsy spends it contemplating what he’s going to do about the clusterfuck he’s found himself entangled in with Harry and Merlin. Finally having some space from both of them today had helped immensely. He figures that he can dance around the whole who-will-it-be issue all he likes, but at the end of the day, it’ll come down to choice. It always does, and Eggsy is man enough to admit that he lost sight of that amidst all of the drama.

Instead of spinning his wheels wondering if his Mark will ever correspond to anyone, he should figure out what he wants.

And he wants to be a Kingsman Agent.

He’s going to tell Harry as much tonight. Eggsy lays out the conversation in his mind; he’ll make his case, and tell him that after he becomes Lancelot, he’ll approach Harry again with the hopes for a better answer. Until then, he just wants things to go back to how they were. He wants Harry to be around, in whatever capacity he’s willing to be.

Eggsy feels calm in a way he hasn’t felt since that first lesson on dirty martinis.

Before he knows it, it’s time for him and Roxy to split and meet up with their respective sponsors in the atrium. Percival is waiting for Roxy, as per usual.

Harry is not.

Glancing around the room, Eggsy doesn’t see hide nor hair of his Proposer. He said he’d be here. Deciding to wait, Eggsy takes a seat in one of the many leather armchairs available. He’s not there
long before Merlin enters the room, face like stone.

Stands in front of him. “Eggsy.”

Quirking a small smile, Eggsy responds playfully with his newfound peace. “There’s that name again. You and Harry, I swear.” Merlin’s lips don’t even twitch. The smile slips off of Eggsy’s face. “I’m waiting on Harry, so—“

“You won’t be meeting with him tonight. I’d like you to come with me.”

Eggsy nods cautiously. “Yeah, okay.” Heaves himself out of the chair, and tags along with Merlin, keeping three steps between them at all times. Just in case. He’s been around too many people who go volatile if the mood strikes them, even if he doesn’t actually count Merlin among them.

They end up in one of the private offices on the main floor. Just another door out of a thousand at the Kingsman HQ, and Eggsy half expects it to be some sort of stockroom for nuclear weapons. To Eggsy’s eternal disappointment, it’s a regular office. Completely ignoring the chairs, he hops onto the mahogany table and swings his legs back and forth to poke fun at Merlin.

Merlin doesn’t even rise to take the bait.

Nor does he beat around the bush. “Eggsy, this afternoon, Harry was sent out on a routine assignment and was injured.”

Legs halting immediately, Eggsy straightens up. “Is he gonna’ be okay? Can I go see him?”

Merlin hesitates for a moment. “I…we don’t know, Eggsy.”

Eggsy’s throat tightens like a boa constrictor strangling it’s prey. “Where is he? What do you mean you don’t know?! He slides off the table, every ounce of playful energy fled.

“There was…an explosion, and he hasn’t woken up yet. Our doctors are the best available, and they’re very optimistic—Eggsy, wait!”

He’s already up and moving past Merlin for the door. Our doctors means he’s in the HQ infirmary, somewhere, and Eggsy is going to find him. Merlin tries to grab his shoulder to slow him down, but Eggsy dodges. “I just want to see him.”

Exhaling in aggravation, Merlin stays hot on his heels as Eggsy stalks down the twisting hallways. “He wouldn’t want you distracted, Eggsy. He’d tell you to focus on the trials.”

He turns the corner into the medical ward, and stops in his tracks. Looks to Merlin. “Which room?”

“Eggsy, I know that—“

“You realize I’m just going to open every door until I find his room, right?” He’s drawing attention from the medical personnel ‘loitering’ in the area. Merlin has the decency to wave the (armed) doctors off, and places a hand on Eggsy’s shoulder to guide him down the hall.

“This wouldn’t be allowed, generally.” Merlin grumbles.

Eggsy shoots him a brief, albeit tense, smile in gratitude. “It’s like you said, guv. Most Proposers ain’t friends with their trainees dead fathers.”

Merlin winces, and mutters, “I could have phrased that with more decorum.” He leads him to a nondescript door, and lets Eggsy go in first. Eggsy pauses in the entrance for a moment, shocked.
Harry is lying on a hospital bed, glasses off, hair combed, and still as a statue.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Eggsy walks closer to the bed. Whispers, “It’s like he’s just sleepin’.”

Merlin steps up next to him. “He is, in a way. During the…incident, he was exposed to an unknown chemical. All we can do is wait.”

Eggsy pulls up a nearby chair and sits down, eyes never leaving Harry’s face. He looks relaxed in a way Eggsy has never seen before. The lines on his face are all but gone, and he looks like ten years have been lifted off of his broad shoulders. Wonders just how much stress Harry caries around with him all the time if this is how he looks when asleep. Eggsy is uncommonly bereft at seeing Harry unconscious…the stillness is so unnatural. Even when Harry holds himself motionless, he’s larger than life, but this person in the bed…isn’t.

Merlin murmurs into the silence. “I’ll just…leave you to it, shall I? I’ll be back in a few hours to make sure you eventually find your way back to the barracks. I won’t have you sleeping here.” His tone brooks no arguments, and Eggsy nods in silence.

Tracks Merlin’s footsteps with his ears until he’s disappeared down the hall. Leans towards Harry, and speaks sotto voce. “Harry?” Reaches a tentative hand forward to gently poke Harry’s shoulder. “Can you hear me at all? Or are you trapped in that head of yours?” No response.

He perks his ears up to listen for any movement outside the room. When Eggsy doesn’t hear anything, he leans forward to lightly run his hand through Harry’s hair. It’s as soft as he remembers. Skims his fingers over Harry’s forehead. Traces his eyebrows and the bridge of his nose. Pauses a moment, before gliding along the soft hills of Harry’s lips. Licks his own.

It’s so very tempting, this chance to steal one more kiss. Possibly one last kiss. He may never have another chance. Eggsy tips himself forward and braces an arm against the bed, face the closest it’s ever been to this man with his eyes open. Before, his eyes had been closed, but now, he could count the lashes on Harry’s eyes. If he wanted.

His trembling breath reflects back against his own skin, and he can almost taste those lips again. Flicks his eyes back to Harry’s to find them still closed. Lets out a sigh, and closes his eyes. Presses his lips against the peak of Harry’s cheek bone, instead. He lingers for one suspended moment, and then falls back into his chair, boneless. Inexplicably exhausted.

“You need to wake up soon, Harry. We got things to settle.” And they really do. He could kick himself for his foolishness. So wound up by the soulmate catch 22, that he forgot the most important part.

He’s in love with Harry Hart because he loves Harry Hart, not because he has a phrase tattooed on his body. “I don’t want a soulmate, Harry, I just want you.”

Eggsy loses track of how long he sits there, staring at Harry’s empty, peaceful expression. Slowly, he’s pulled under by the soft rhythmic beeps emitted by the heart monitor. Much later, Merlin shakes him awake, and foists him out of the hospital wing. Tells him he’s not allowed to return for 48 hours, but they both know Eggsy will be back at breakfast. And dinner, and again in the evening. He’ll be back every day until Harry opens his eyes again, even if he has to sneak in.

Without Harry there to teach him in the evenings, Eggsy finds himself with an abundance of free time on his hands during the next couple months. Merlin can’t step in, because he’s running the Trials, and none of the other agents are allowed access to him without Harry’s permission, which he’s in no state to give.
And Arthur sure as fuck isn’t intervening on his behalf.

Eggsy spends a good deal of it hiding in the library—partly to study, but mostly to hide out from Charlie. All the recruits have figured out that Galahad is out of commission. Charlie has taken that as a declaration of open season on Eggsy, and it’s only a matter of time before he figures out where Eggsy disappears to when Roxy is with Percival. Arthur has been ending Charlie’s evening lessons conveniently early, recently.

Tonight is one such night. The marksmanship course is coming to it’s close, and the live-fire exam is looming on the horizon. Eggsy is curled up in a wingback chair, located discretely in a cubbyhole, memorizing his bullet drop compensation chart and reviewing his notes on ghillie suit construction. JB is passed out by his ankles, snuffling quietly. They’re minding their own damn business.

His attention is immediately caught by the angry growling radiating from the isle. JB jerks awake, flipping onto his feet and backing up against Eggsy’s legs, whimpering pathetically. Charlie’s huge-ass dog is hunkered down in the only entrance to his nook, teeth bared and snout twitching. The owner himself is leaning against the shelves, arrogant smirk sitting on it’s usual smug perch. For a moment, Eggsy seriously contemplates scaling the shelves, though he rejects the idea directly. Damn mutt could probably jump as high as Eggsy is tall, and there’s no way he could grab JB in time.

Expelling a harsh breath, Eggsy sends a flat look to his rival. “Really, Charlie?” Fake it till’ you make it, Eggsy thinks with resignation.

Charlie tips his chin up. “What can I say, Eggie, he likes you.”

“Well it ain’t mutual. Call im’ off.” The dog snarls viciously, and Eggsy flinches back a bit. He pulls JB closer to the chair with his ankles.

Charlie tilts his head, and makes a grand show of stroking his chin in thought. “Hmmm…no. I don’t think so.”

Eggsy sends him the meanest glare in his arsenal. Just what the ever-loving fuck is up with everyone cornering him all the damn time?

Some harsh gibberish rolls off of Charlie’s tongue and the dog sits back on his haunches, though his teeth are still on full display. “Since your bird is away, we should take this opportunity to have a conversation on the way things are done.”

Raising his eyebrows, Eggsy leans forward and nods with an exaggerated ‘I’m listening’ hand wave.

Eyes narrowing to slits, Charlie straightens and takes a step closer. “Thing is, you’re a pub joke to Kingsman. A rude experiment that has no place in our ranks—”

Sneering at the taller man, Eggsy interjects. “If I’m just an experiment, your knickers wouldn’t be twisted so far up your arse.” Smirks like a trickster. “Nah, I think you’re worried that I might be better than you.”

Charlie scoffs. “Better than? You’re a plebe, Eggie, a number.” He makes a sweeping motion with his arm. “Take our dogs for instance. Mine, a purebred Rottweiler with excellent instincts. A winner.” His upper lips curls in distaste. “Then there’s your dog. A tiny, useless mutt with no innate skills. I mean, look at it’s jaw, there’s no way it has a pedigree.”

Lips pursed, Eggsy breathes harshly through his nose. Spreads his lips in a manic grin. “Well, I think it’s just adorable that you’re such a fan of pugs. Seriously, why do you know that?”
Rolling his eyes, Charlie snaps, “My family breeds champion show dogs. The point is that you don’t belong here, even if Merlin does pity you for being a whore. Those bred for excellence rise to the top, and the mutts like you would be smart to step aside. Before someone takes a shot at you.”

Eggsy’s eyebrows plummet. “Or you’ll do what? Cuz’ I ain’t leavin’. Not for you, and not for your sponsor.”

Charlie raises his hand shoulder height and sharply snaps his fingers. “Fass!”

A blur of gnashing teeth and vicious snarls explodes into motion. At first, Eggsy is certain that Charlie’s dog is lunging for him, but JB’s high pitched scream stops his heart in cold terror. The rottweiler clamps it’s jaws over JB’s shoulders and brutally shakes his head back and forth, flecks of drool escaping the folds of it’s lips. JB is jerked around like a tiny rag doll.

Eggsy yells out in panic, and throws himself to the floor. When asked later, he won’t be able to recount exactly what happened. He only knows two things. First, JB cried out like he was dying, and it sliced Eggsy’s heart in two. Second, he punched Charlie’s dog in the face as hard as he could and knocked it out cold.

After that, he cradles JB to his chest, ‘dodges’ Charlie by bodily knocking him into the bookcase, and sprints to the infirmary as fast as he dares. JB whimpers in his arms every step of the way.

The medical ward is a ghost town in the evening, and Eggsy doesn’t see more than a couple of people. He rushes by the small nurse station without a word. It doesn’t even occur to him to ask for help. He bursts into the nearest empty medical exam room and lays JB out on the table. There are deep teeth-patterned tears along JB’s neck and left shoulder that sluggishly bleed onto the surface.

Fishing through the drawers, he starts piling supplies next to his dog. Tapes, gauzes, antiseptic—

“What on Earth are you—what happened to that dog?”

Eggsy’s head snaps up to the woman standing in the threshold. Her eyebrows are up, and her mouth is shaped in a small ‘o’. Once her eyes roam across the unlikely scene, her mouth draws taut and she takes action. Gently pushing Eggsy to the side, she pulls on a par of latex gloves with practiced ease. “We don’t keep any veterinarians on staff, but I can patch him up.” The nurse softly feels along the slopes of JB’s body. The dog whines softly, but doesn’t move.

Swallowing, Eggsy tries to ask, “Is he….”

“He’ll be fine. I don’t feel anything really wrong—just the surface injuries. I’m not a vet, though, so…..” The nurse shrugs. What can you do? She proceeds to clean the wounds one at a time and tape him up. Eggsy keeps silent and leans against a nearby wall. Breathes while he can before the impending storm.

It isn’t long before Merlin shows up, of course, and then Charlie and his dog, and then Arthur. The whole thing is a fucking circus, because apparently, punching another recruit’s dog is Not Allowed. Who knew.

Charlie does the whole song and dance, as expected, and Arthur tries to muscle Eggsy out. Merlin, thankfully, listens to his side and intervenes. He tries to prove that Charlie prompted his dog to attack JB in the first place by repeating that foreign command, but apparently it’s too common a word to be definitive. As horrible a thought as it is, it really helps Eggsy’s case that JB came out bleeding.
Bottom line, Eggsy doesn’t get washed out, but neither does Charlie. Fan-bloody-tastic.

Finally, Arthur leads Charlie away, and Eggsy is allowed to gather JB up in his arms. Merlin tries to escort him to the barracks, but Eggsy isn’t having it. He walks down the hall and into the private room that he now knows like the back of his hand. Sits in his usual chair, cradles JB to his chest, and draws his knees up to cage them into the seat. Exhausted, he lets his head slump onto his shoulder so his eyes can rest on the planes of Harry’s face without effort.

After standing in the doorway for a few moments, iClipboard against his chest, Merlin nods and leaves the room, giving Eggsy a one-night reprieve from the barracks. Eggsy doesn’t know how long it takes him to fall asleep, but he spends the time leading up to it deep in thought, absently stroking JB along his spine.

He has no idea what to do about all this. If he runs crying to Merlin, it’ll be written down in his little diary, which will inevitably make it’s way into Arthur’s greasy hands. Eggsy’ll be damned if he lets that old bag of bones know how off-kilter he’s become. Besides, Merlin couldn’t do anything for him anyway, not really. Not with Arthur tilting the playing field in Charlie’s favor, the wanker.

God, but he wishes Harry would just wake up already (because he won’t even entertain the possibility that Harry might not). He could really use some of that excellent advice cloaked in ridiculous words. Because he didn’t expect this kind on attack. Not on his dog. Charlie may have been a jackass, but he’d never really gone past schoolyard tactics. Until now.

Also, fuck the universe, because how is it fair that Charlie ends up with a rottweiler? There couldn’t be a more heavy-handed parallel between his old life, with Dean and his ‘attack dog’ Rotti, and the new life he’s fighting so desperately to earn. The constant insults on him being a rent boy is starting to eat at him, too. Like he really wants to be reminded of the most disgusting memories he has.

And where the hell did his thick skin disappear to? Shit he would’ve easily ignored pre-Kingsman winds him up to the snapping point these days. It’s like Harry took it the day they met outside the police station—he skinned Eggsy alive and left him raw and exposed to the painful barbs of the world.

Eggsy has never been one to bitch about unfairness, but it’s not fucking fair.

He lets himself stew for the evening, and promises himself that he’ll be an adult in the morning. For now, he just wants to feel a little sorry for himself, and wonder what Harry Hart would do.

The darkness he slips into is an echo of ‘soft and warm’, and the surroundings squirm a bit. It’s... nice, for a change. He floats there until the walls twitch, and jerk about. An itch crawls along the back of his neck, and it slowly leads him back to the waking world. The infirmary room is still shadowed, silence broken only by the soft chirps of the heart monitor.

When Eggsy’s eyes flutter open, his gaze focuses on Harry’s face. His cheekbones are highlighted by the pale glow of the medical equipment, and Eggsy takes a moment to admire the sight. Traveling along those now-familiar fleshy roads, he finds himself under scrutiny by a pair of hazel brown eyes.


“My Eggsy.” Harry’s words are cracked around the edges from disuse, but his words are unmistakeable.

Shaking himself, Eggsy gets up, placing JB back on the seat, and hits the call button. Kneels by Harry’s bedside and brushes back the long strands of hair from his forehead. “Yeah, Harry, I’m
here. Stay with me.”

A tired smile pulls itself onto Harry’s cheek, and the hand by his side twitches. Eggsy enfolds the hand in his own, giving it a gentle squeeze.

They don’t have long. The night staff is already entering the room at a brisk pace, fanning out to the various bits of machinery. A doctor takes him by the shoulders and moves him aside.

Well, he tries, but Harry has found some reserves of strength to hold onto Eggsy’s hand. He refuses to let him go, and sends an icy glare to the doctor. In the end, to save time, they let him crouch down at the foot of the bed, arm stretched to the max so his fingers remain entangled with his Proposer’s.

Eggsy’s heart is constricted with electrified metal wire, sparking like crazy each second his gaze stays locked with Harry’s. Eventually, Harry’s eyes flutter closed again, and Eggsy’s stomach lurches. Tells himself not worry, because Harry woke up, and that means he won’t be down for much longer.

Turning to locate JB, he spots Merlin skulking in the corner, eyes intense. “…Merlin.”

“Go back to the barracks, Eggsy. It’s still two hours before training, and the medics will be some time, yet.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but Merlin just shakes his head. “You can visit him again in the afternoon.” Smirking, he tacks on. “You’ll need the energy, trust me.”

It turns out that Merlin wasn’t lying. Eggsy makes it back to the barracks, but he only has enough time to take a hot shower. Percival noisily enters the dorm and doesn’t waste any time. He just starts yelling for them to pull their lazy bodies out of bed and prep for field work. There’s no time for anyone else to shower, and they aren’t allowed breakfast. All they get is ten minutes to suit up and queue up on the green.

All Eggsy wants to do is sneak back to Harry’s bedside and hold his hand a little while longer. Wants to be there to make sure he wakes up again.

Instead, he’s seated next to Roxy in the windowless cabin of a large transport truck heading to only god knows where. Forty minutes into the drive, Percival hands out Kingsman glasses to everyone and explains the mission.

“Welcome to the Sniper/Counter Sniper Exam. You will be paired up and dropped off at the bottom of a Kingsman-owned forest.” A slightly sadistic smirk creeps onto Percival’s lips. “We aren’t going to tell you where, so I hope you’ve paid attention to the drive. Your mission is to make it to the top of the small hill. You might have noticed the numbers on your glasses. On top of that mountain are personalized targets to match. Both team mates must shoot their target. You only get four bullets per team, so use them wisely. If you fail to make your shot, you’re done.”

The tension in the steel box-on-wheels ratchets up to nearly unbearable levels. Static crackles in their ears before Merlin’s voice projects itself to everyone. “Oh, to make things a little more entertaining, if you’re seen by another team, you’re out. There’s a small button on the side of your glasses; one tap will send me a still image, and two taps will send me a thirty second video. If you spot another team, send me an image of them through your crosshairs to disqualify them. When you take a shot at your target, send me the video of your attempt. Bon appetit.”

He and Roxy exchange dubious glances. This will pretty much pit everyone against each other. They’ll have to be on guard, but they do make a great team—they have a good shot at this.
The truck shudders to a stop. Percival stands and gives his final address. “We’ll be dropping each team off at different locations—complete your mission and find your way back to HQ. Those back before nightfall without being disqualified will continue on to the next phase. The rest of you…I wish you a pleasant trip home.”

The first pair is kicked off the truck with a rifle, scope, four bullets, and a backpack. Immediately, the door is closed and the truck is back on the move. Pair by pair, recruits are siphoned from the transport. There’s only a handful of them left at the next stop. Roxy is called up and handed a rifle and bullets. Eggsy leans forward to step up, when Percival calls out, “Digby, you’re with Morton.”

Freezing in place, Eggsy quickly looks to an equally shocked Roxy, eyebrows dancing along hairlines. While Digby is taking the scope and backpack, both Roxy and Eggsy turn to the last remaining recruit.

Charlie is leaning back in his chair, unconcernedly, brow arched, and the usual smug twist of the mouth firmly in place. The door is shut on Roxy’s last, sympathetic look, and he’s left with Charlie. “Looks like it’s just you and me, Eggie.”

“Motherfu—“

“Unwin, Hesketh, your drop off is in two minutes. Gear up.” Percival passes out the equipment just in time for the truck to make it’s final stop. He literally shoves them both out the back, slamming the door shut with a finality to rival death.

The ‘small hill’ turns out to be a small mountain, tall trees and noisy underbrush everywhere. All the foothills around said tiny mountain are wide, sloping fields with no tall grass to be found.

Eggsy takes a moment to watch the truck pull away, before turning back to Charlie. His ‘partner’ is rifling through the back pack, scope already secured to his shoulder strap. “Looks like we have some basic supplies, but no food or water. Netting for two ghillie suits but without mesh. We’ll have to scavenge the flora. Huh. And two orange shirts.”

Eggsy shoots him a bewildered look. Charlie just shrugs.

Taking a deep breath, Eggsy crushes the instinctual animosity he wants to fling at Charlie and focuses on the mission. He speaks through a clenched jaw. “Right then, we should suit up quick inside the tree line, and get a move on. We’re too exposed here in the flats.” That’s all it takes to start working together like a team. This test is simply bigger than their feud.

Once they step into the forest, they spend some time cutting down small branches and bunches of leaves to tangle them in the netting. They smear mud and crushed leaves on their exposed skin, and tie pieces of the landscape onto their equipment. Twenty minutes into the trial and both males have disappeared into the Earth as though they had never arrived in the first place.

It feels…tribal. Raw.

The deeper they creep into the woods, the less sunlight filters through the trees and the cooler it gets. Silence surrounds them, broken only by the occasional rustling leaves. Stifled as it is, their own breathing echoes in their ears while they move in silence.

At various intervals, they hunker down together and pull out their team log book, sketching in a rough map of where they’ve been and some landmarks they’d identified. Twenty minutes in, they come across a tree with a steel circle nailed on one side. On the center of the plate is painted a red number four.
Eggsy sees it out of the corner of his eye, and freezes in his tracks. *Shit.* Quietly clicking his nails together, he directs Charlie’s attention to the target. Face paling, Charlie minutely jerks his head to indicate *get the fuck up out of dodge.*

Their target is number three. They’ve just stumbled at the base of an enemy bullseye, increasing their chances of being eliminated. Heart in his mouth, Eggsy follows Charlie away from the target at a snails pace, certain he’d be disqualified any moment now. They travel several hundred yards before Eggsy starts to feel safe again, relatively speaking.

Huddling together at the base of a copse of trees, they update their map to include the fourth target and the latest distance traveled. Charlie leans in close, murmuring into Eggsy’s ear, “we could have passed our target already if they’re all tacked on the sides of trees.”

Shrugging helplessly, Eggsy points in a random direction. “We should just pick a point and go. Nothing doin’ for it now.”

He starts leading them forward—what else it there to do—when Charlie shakes his head. “No, this way.”

Eggsy scrunches his face up. “How would you know?”

Charlie’s voice takes on an airy quality. “I’ve been fox hunting since I was very young. I’ve more experience in this sort of habitat than you, I’m quite certain.”

Mentally rolling his eyes, Eggsy thinks, it’s just like Charlie to be contrary over every pissant detail. But—and Eggsy will never admit this out loud—Charlie does have a point, so Eggsy just bites his lip and follows the ‘leader’.

He doesn’t question it.

They continue onward in the same search pattern for an hour, spiraling up the foothill, adding landmarks and two more targets to the map. Every now and then, they trade off the scope when one thinks they see enemy movement.

The constant itch on the back of Eggsy’s neck suddenly bursts into life, stopping him in his tracks. He makes a fist, halting Charlie’s movements as well, and then forms a flat hand, palm down. Both recruits slowly lower themselves close to the ground. Wiggles his fingers to prompt Charlie into passing the scope and watching his six.

Scanning the foliage around them, Eggsy feels the uneasiness on the underside of his stomach solidify into sharp determination. Searches for breaks in the patterns native to nature. Nearly jumps when he focuses on a familiar face, staring back at him through a scope.

Roxy.

He doesn’t breathe. Holds perfectly still. Her hands are both on the scope, and she hasn’t made any move to touch her glasses. He waits with bated breath for Merlin’s voice to echo in his ear that he’s been taken out.

It doesn’t come.

Releases a slow, silent breath in release. Blinks when he realizes Roxy is signing something. Hand hidden from Digby by her torso, she’s holding up her fingers to signal numbers. *Two. Five. One.*

Targets she’s already come across. Suppressing a smile, he subtly sticks up four fingers, and points
in the general direction they came from. It’s her team number, and it’ll get her through the trial that much quicker. They exchange a thumbs up, and turn from each other.

“All clear”, Eggsy whispers. “Didn’t see nothin’.”

Charlie accepts it at face value and they resume their trek. Eggsy subtly directs them away from where Roxy said the other targets were. Adds a small coded note in the margin of the map, for his own reference. About a half hour later, two gunshots cleave through the silence, and Eggsy knows that Roxy and Digby are on their way back to HQ.

For a foothill, the forest seems unending. If not for the map, Eggsy wouldn’t have any idea where he came from or where he was heading. All trees are repeats of each other, and the slow shift of the sun’s position strains their cartography skills to the max.

It’s utterly disturbing, sneaking around in a foreign place with only his enemy for company. He keeps Charlie in his periphery at all times, even as he searches for other things. Every second that ticks by, Eggsy has to remind himself that Charlie has just as much to lose as he does if he tries anything funny.

They pass the hours by in dead silence, frustration slowly mounting. They’ve been crawling all around this godforsaken terrain at a snail’s pace with very little to show for it but Charlie’s fast-thinning patience. The horror film level of silence they’ve maintained thus far starts to slip here and there—the snap of a twig from a careless boot, or a small stone nudged into rolling down the incline.

Eggsy hisses to Charlie, “watch where you step, idjit! Want the others to find us first?”

Returning Eggsy’s glare, Charlie shrugs the scope higher on his shoulder, knocking Eggsy in the chin. “Sorry about that, Eggie.” Nose raised, he watches past half-closed eyelids as Eggsy rubs his face, thoroughly unimpressed.

He sneers at Charlie contemptuously. “Fuck you. At least pretend like you don’t got two left feet.”

“Don’t presume to dictate to me how to walk—I was trained in hunting while you were still turning tricks.” Turns forward again, dismissively. “Speaking of, since you’re already on your knees, shouldn’t you be pulling my zipper down with your teeth?”

Whispers back as loudly as he dares. “Christ, back to that, are we? Focus on the mission, fuckwit, not your dick.”

Charlie doesn’t turn back, simply resumes the slow movement. “Oh, don’t mistake me as interested—you’re simply convenient.”

Eggsy tightens his grip on the rifle. “Oh, you’ve been aching for it since we met. You’re just pissed because you can’t buy me—“

Charlie raises a closed fist, and Eggsy’s jaw snaps shut. Follows his gaze up the mountain, waiting to see what pulled Charlie from their argument. Eggsy doesn’t wait for long.

A cacophony of underbrush repeatedly crushed underfoot fades in from a distance, and they both flatten themselves close to ground. Two of the recruits materialize from the grey-green surroundings. They stick out like traffic cones, as they’ve each pulled a garish red shirt over their uniforms.

Red shirts like the ones stored in their own supply pack.

A rough whisper in his ear. “Disqualified, do you think? They aren’t carrying their supplies.”
“Yeah, must be. Another team’ll be nearby.” He sees Charlie nod out of the corner of his eye. They fall silent and still as the two red-clad members pass by them a little too close for comfort. Sticks and stones are kicked in their wake, faces thunderous.

Once out of earshot, Eggsy mutters, “I guess they’re out.”

Charlie smiles. “Good.”

Callous, but Eggsy can’t stop himself from jerking his head in agreement. “If they’re out, they ain’t got use for their gear.”

Smirking, Charlie starts leading them in the direction the two redshirts came from. Throws in his two cents. “Or their ammo.”

They make quick work of the trek, spurred on by the promise of more provisions, of some breathing room for the task at hand. The trail of broken branches and boot prints is scattered with evidence of anger, and is all too easy to follow.

Eyes on the prize, Eggsy thinks about what equipment to scavenge, and what to weed out to limit the pack weight. “Charlie, the log book might be good, too, if they’re marking down targets like us.” Eggsy doesn’t get a verbal response—only an indifferent shrug.

It strikes Eggsy as odd that Charlie wouldn’t be as eager over the logbook, but his mind doesn’t give him a chance to question it. An idea jolts Eggsy like a bolt of lightning. Quickly grabbing Charlie’s shoulder, he pulls him down into a crouch. Kneeling close to each other, Eggsy breathes out his thought, almost too quiet to be heard. “Whoever tagged them out will have seen them drop their equipment. They’ll be nearby. Exposed and distracted.”

That grabs his partner’s attention. Charlie smiles at Eggsy, eyes lighting up. “Then we will take them by surprise.”

His grin is strangely infectious, considering who he is, and Eggsy can’t fully fight down an answering smile. “They’ll never see it coming.”

Plan in place, they move off the beaten path and prowl along the edges. They move quickly, quietly, and alertly. More ground is covered in less time with a solid goal close at hand to push them.

It’s Charlie who spots the enemy team first, loading their packs with supplies taken from the fallen team. One signal to Eggsy, and they arrange themselves in prone positions a good distance away from the opposition. Charlie slings his leg well over Eggsy’s body, pressing himself in a hot line all along his side. Grits his teeth and ignores the fact that it’s not Roxy laying on half on top of him so intimately.

Charlie brings the scope to his eyes. “On scope. Spotter’s on the right—take out the sniper first. Approximately 600 yards.”

Fingers sliding along the turret, Eggsy turns it counterclockwise, counting the soft clicks. “Tailwind; dialing on 1.5 mils. No crosswinds. On target.”

“Send it.”

Eggsy reaches up to finger the corner of his glasses and pushes the button on the edge. So focused on the target in his crosshairs, he nearly jumps out of his skin when Merlin’s voice bursts to life in his ears. “Target down.”
The recruit he just ‘shot’ curses animatedly, and his spotter immediately jumps up and runs for the nearest cover. Eggsy leads the form in his sights as he weaves in and out of the trees.

Merlin keeps speaking. “Five seconds to reset. Four.”

Charlie chimes in, “Hold half a mil.”

“Three.”

Eggsy lays his crosshairs square over the mark. Barely hears, “You’ve got this.”

“Two.”

Taps his glasses.

“One—“

Click.

The target stops running, and yells out in frustrations. He’s too far to make out the words, but Eggsy would lay down good money that it started with an ‘f’.


Turning to glance at Charlie, they actually share a smirk. Clapping him on his shoulder, Charlie actually compliments him. “Two tagged, two to go. Nice shots.”

Eyebrows raised, Eggsy whispers back, a slight smile sneaking onto his lips. “That must be a bloody first. You ill?”

Charlie huffs in amusement, eyes alight and dimples—bloody dimples—on full display. For a split second, Eggsy thinks he sees why so many people cling to Charlie’s company even when he’s actively being a right bastard. He sees a child filled with joy and excitement before the money and aristocracy stripped it all away.

Eggsy blinks, nonplussed. Wonders who this stranger is staring back at him.

Charlie’s eyes drift down and stall on Eggsy’s lips.

Swallowing, Eggsy realizes how close their faces are and abruptly looks away. The image of JB, bitten and bloody, flashes before his eyes, immediately halting the budding camaraderie of shared successes. The moment is gone, and Charlie is once again the ruthless son of bitch who’s desperate to cut Eggsy loose. Who’s staring at Eggsy as though he’s a dog that’s performed a particularly clever trick. Look, the plebe thinks it’s people!

Gestures sharply to the distant figures, now dressed in red. “We should loot their stuff soon as they’re gone. There’s still one more team out there.”

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than two gunshots in quick succession echo across the curve of the foothill. They both freeze in place, ears at attention. Even the two disqualified recruits still their movements to listen. A minute passes before another shot rends the air apart.

Shaking their heads, the two tagged recruits resume their jerky strides down the terrain. Eggsy follows their path with his eyes. Hot breath tumbles over his ear, Charlie’s lips dancing uncomfortably close to the skin. “And now there’s only us.”
Jerking away, Eggsy dumps Charlie off of him, and stands. “Ain’t no need for subtlety, then, huh?” Firmly shakes off the dread welling up from Charlie words, and marches over to the abandoned rucksacks to start digging through them.

Charlie isn’t far behind. “Well, it will certainly be a cakewalk from here on in. Hand me the ammo, by the way.”

Rolling his eyes, Eggsy pulls out the four bullets from the stock pouch. “They should stay with the rifle.”

Scoffing, Charlie snatches the ammo out of Eggsy’s palm. “So they can conveniently disappear right before I take my shot? I think not.” He slips the bullets into his breast pocket and pats them in mockery. “I’ll just hold on to these for the time being.”

Eggsy lets the matter drop with a sarcastic sneer, and keeps fishing through the rucksacks. A niggling thought prods the backdoor of his mind. “You’d think they’d’ve equipped us all with silencers. Sorta’ tipping their hand a bit, yeah?”

Cocking his hip to the side, Charlie waits with ill-disguised impatience. “I couldn’t give a damn about it if I tried—their carelessness suits me just fine. Hurry up, will you?”

“I want the logbook, so calm your arse down.” Tosses the bag aside in frustration and pulls the second one to him. “And Kingsman don’t strike me as careless. Here we are!” Opening the front pouch reveals the dirt-stained logbook. Flipping it open, Eggsy turns straight to the range cards. There’s a detailed sketch of the terrain for the opposite side of the foothill, complete with landmarks. Except—

“No fucking targets. Worthless.” Looks up at Charlie. “Where’d you see the other team drop their bags?”

Charlie lets out a sigh worthy of broadway. Gestures halfheartedly to the other end of the clearing. “Somewhere over there.”

Straightening up, Eggsy traipses past his motionless partner to find the last logbook. “Why don’t I go get it? Wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.”

Charlie shoots him a bitch-face that deserves to be commemorated on a coin. Slowly ambles after Eggsy at a snails pace, keeping a stretch of land between them. “You want the logbook, you do the footwork. Dibs on the ammo.”

Turns to walk backwards and address Charlie. “How can you be so blasé about a possible treasure map to our target?”

“Unnecessary, I have an impeccable sense of direction. Do you ever shut up?”

Eggsy delivers an automatic “Fuck off.” Silence reigns for a few moments. “What about this—think they want to monitor how we respond to the changing parameters?”

Charlie’s eyebrows drop down together, before looking dramatically to the heavens. “Christ, are you still on that?”

Spinning on his heel, Eggsy faces forward again to pick his way into the brush. Charlie stays in the clearing, unwilling to follow into the thorny flora when Eggsy will clearly do it for him. Eggsy is forced to deliver his half of the conversation over his shoulder. “Ain’t you the least bit curious?” Finally finds the rucksack, and kneels down to dig through it. The rifle is no where in sight.
“I couldn’t care less.” Eggsy opens one of the pouches and finds the four bullets. Opens his mouth to tell, but Charlie’s next words stop him in his tracks. “I’m just pleased to know for certain that there’s no one else out here but us. No opposing teams left—we’re completely alone.”

Pausing, the words resonate darkly in Eggsy’s psyche. Pins and needles slowly start to line his vertebrae and that strange dread slithers back around his neck. He can almost feel the scales.

Charlie notices Eggsy’s stillness. “Did you find something?”

Shakes himself, and says, “Nah, just some matches and junk.” Discretely tucks the small pouch into his sleeve…just in case. Keeps rummaging around until he finds the logbook. “Here we are.” Flipping to the back, the logbook reveals a much more inclusive map. “Aces.” Eggsy stands back up, kicks the bag away from him, and wades back out of the brush to rejoin Charlie. “I got a general location for our target.”

Rolling his eyes, Charlie flicks his hand imperiously towards the sprawling mass of trees before them. “Yes, fine, good. Lead the way, then.”

Eyebrows pinching together, Eggsy marches to the front of the their two-man queue. The map, luckily, is well crafted and very clear on it’s landmarks. There’s enough detail to render a good approximation of just where the bloody hell target three is. They’ve been hauling a fuckton of gear around this godless scrap of land all day, so Eggsy should be over the moon about finding a map.

Except that he isn’t.

He can’t help but wonder why Charlie was so…so uninterested. In fact, he acted like Eggsy’s quest for a You-Are-Here sign was a complete waste of his time. Like a map wouldn’t do him any good, like—

Like he already knew where to go.

Gnawing on his bottom lip, Eggsy sneaks a discreet glance behind him. Sure enough, Charlie is diligently following, but seems entirely unconcerned. Wouldn’t he at least want to double check Eggsy and then crack some jerk remark about his map-reading skills? Checks on Charlie again, this time to ensure he isn’t paying Eggsy any mind, and scraps his thumb over the map page. The next landmark up ahead becomes smudged on the paper, illegible.

Coming to an abrupt halt, Eggsy holds up the logbook for Charlie to see. “They can’t draw for shit and I can’t figure this mark out. It’s all smeared up.”

Charlie briefly glances over the drawing and points out the correct direction. “That way, until we come across a group of boulders, or something similar.”

Nodding, Eggsy swallows past the sudden tightness in his throat. The test is obviously rigged in Charlie’s favor. He known how to find the target from the start, so Arthur clearly has a hand in it—

Dear fucking God. The lack of silencers. Was it put in place specifically so Charlie would know when he and Eggsy were the last ones? Has he been dragging them around the foothills until everyone else was gone, so that he could—

“Eggsy, I’ll take a turn carrying the rifle.” Charlie’s voice pierces his thoughts like a bullet fired at point blank range. Bites back the fight-or-flight drug releasing itself in to his veins, because he can’t yet be certain—he can be over vigilant about these things—but there’s no way in hell that Eggsy’ll willingly put a firearm in Charlie’s hands.
“Tha’s a’ight. Almost there anyway.” He tries to keep an even keel to his voice, but wonders if Charlie can’t see his racing pulse bulge out of his neck anyway. His heart is ticking like this and it must be so obvious—

“You seem agitated.” There’s an odd cadence to Charlie’s speech. “Is the Unwin Underdog finally cowering under the pressure?”

Charlie’s voice…Eggsy can’t quite put his finger on it…his words sound like the truth and a lie. Trying to track the something interwoven in those words, he responds absently, “Is that what you brats are calling me now?” Barely registers that they’ve reached the rocks. “Target should be somewhere in sight.”

Smirking, Charlie shrugs. “Among other things. There.” Pointing in the distance, Charlie starts setting up the scope again.

Eggsy follows suit and sprawls back down in the prone position. Flinches when Charlie once again presses next to him, leg weighing down Eggsy’s own. He spotwelds his cheek to the stock, eyes trailing in the indicated direction, and Eggsy locates the target. His glasses press into his cheek, reminding him that he still has Merlin supervising them. Eggsy releases a calming breath—Charlie can’t pull anything too heinous without Merlin laying down the wrath of god.

Prepares to take his shot and runs down his mental checklist. Safety off…round already chambered…no windage, overcast lighting…perfect conditions—

“How did you even get into Kingsman, anyway? You’re not exactly—“

“Shut it, Charlie.” Focus. Ignore him. Slight tailwind…

“Let me guess, you’re a charity case that affirmative action demands be given more than they deserved. No prospects, shite grades, and you’re still let in because your Mum’s a one-legged lesbian.”

“You know fuck all ‘bout my grades, now get on with it.”

“On scope, arsehole.” Charlie’s voice is sharp against the quiet.

Lays his crosshairs over the steel plate handing from the trees. “On target, fuckwit.” Taps the button on his glasses twice.

“Send it.”

Gently crooks his trigger finger and lets the recoil ripple through him. Immediately cycles through the bolt action sequence to set up the next shot. A twang reverberates in the distance—hit. Merlin’s voice crackles in his ear, “Well done, lad.” Exhales in relief, because he made the shot, he passed—

“My turn. Hand it over.” They trade equipment with jerky motions. The moment the rifle leaves Eggsy’s hand, he feels intense vulnerability, like he just handed his life over to an enemy. Merlin’s watching, he tells himself, stay calm, you’re almost through.

They position themselves for the next shot and Eggsy tosses his leg over the backs of Charlie’s knees, lips pursed tight as though biting into a lemon. Intimacy was not something he thought he’d ever associate with sniping.

Eggsy watches through his spotting scope, and of course Charlie makes his shot. He knew it was unlikely, but the knowledge didn’t stop Eggsy from hoping Charlie would miss.
They’re already kneeling together, collecting everything up when Merlin confirms the recording. “Excellent. Now start hea—“

Merlin’s voice fizzes in and out of grey static before popping out of existence entirely. Face dropping, Eggsy taps the glasses perched on his nose. When that doesn’t bring the contraption back to life, he whips them off of his face and starts rapidly pressing the button, flexing the frames… anything to bring them back online.

Eggsy looks at Charlie to see if he’s having the same problem, only to find him snapping his own glasses in two at the nose guard. He holds the pieces in front of Eggsy’s face, and lets them drop from his fingers to the ground. Charlie’s eyes are dark, with a quiet promise of violence on prominent display. “We’re really on our own now, Eggsy.”

The bottom drops out of Eggsy’s stomach because this isn’t a game anymore. This isn’t a test and it’s certainly not some monitored exercise.

This is life and death, and Eggsy has never seen the line between more crisp.

They lunge at the same time—Charlie swinging the rifle towards Eggsy’s skull, and Eggsy tackling Charlie just before the blow connects. There’s nothing graceful or elegant like during their sparring sessions. Instead, they’re a sharp mass of tangled limbs and spit, clawing at each other’s eyes and soft under-places.

Immediately, Eggsy knows he isn’t going win like this—to much of a size and weight difference, and Charlie knows the same tricks—but he’s fast and he knows he can outlast him if need be.

He stretches his fingers and manages to weasel them into Charlie’s front pocket. Grips the bullets he finds there and yanks. Rips them out of the uniform and kicks Charlie off, winding him enough to make him stay down for a much needed second.

Tears off like a rabbit into the woods. Doesn’t dare to slow down enough to look back.

A gunshot screams through the air and chips of bark explode in front of his face, the bullet burying itself into the tree trunk just inches from Eggsy. “Fuck!” Hunching his shoulders, Eggsy covers the back of his head with his arms and urges his legs to move faster. Zigzags between the trees and heads for what looks like a sloping valley to get himself out of Charlie’s sightline.

A stray rock sends him stumbling, and another shot skims so close it ruffles his hair. A choked yell breaks its way from Eggsy’s throat. Ropes of cold terror surge into existence, braiding deep into his sinews.

The sloping hill Eggsy’s been aiming for turns out to be a steep ravine and his momentum hauls him straight over the edge. Tumbling to the bottom, his rucksack is flung from his arms. The breath is knocked out of him when he lands smack on his belly. He can hardly breathe, but the fall kicks his brain back into gear.

To make those shots, Charlie wouldn’t have been chasing him—he’d have stayed on bended knee to lead the sights—and now Eggsy has a head start.

He has a chance.

Mouthing for air like a fish, Eggsy struggles to his feet. He quickly scrapes a trail up the opposite side of the ravine making as much noise as he dares. Then he backtracks.

Tiptoes along the basin as lightly as he can with the precious few moments he has left. He ends up
crouching low at the base of a group of spindly trees. He blends right in.

Soon enough, he spies a silhouette at the top of the slope. Shoves his fist into his mouth to stifle his panicked breath. From his vantage point, Eggsy can see Charlie crane his neck, searching the bottom of the gully. His gaze slides right over Eggsy like glass to finally trace the false path climbing the other side. Charlie doesn’t attempt to scramble down, to Eggsy’s unending relief. Instead, he starts jogging along the edge to go around, disappearing from sight.

One second…six…fifteen…half a minute ticks by at a snails pace before Eggsy lets himself breathe again. Tamps down on the hysterical thought he’s actually trying to murder me and puts the fear on ice. This isn’t the time for panic or nerves—he’s been training for this. He just needs to focus and take stock of the situation. Inhales deeply. Okay.

He’s bought some time in that Charlie doesn’t know where he is right now. Probably. But Charlie has the rifle and Eggsy doesn’t even have a knife. How many bullets does he have left? Twelve bullets total. Two shots on the steel targets and two shots at him leave eight. Opening his palm, he finds the two rounds he’d managed to snatch in the skirmish. Six. Taps his sleeve pocket and feels the contours of four bullets. Charlie only has two shots left.

He’s going to make them count.

Eggsy pulls out the two logbooks he’d managed to keep in his waistband. Fingers shaking, he opens them to the terrain maps. He’s no cartographer, but between his lackluster artistry and the others’ attention to detail, Eggsy’s able to plot a shaky path back to where he began. From there, he knows where the road is, and hopefully he’ll be able to retrace the truck’s turns back to HQ.

Turning his head upwards to look between the stretching branches, he can see the sun hanging unfavorably low in the sky. Sundown is coming fast, but there’s still a chance to make it back before nightfall. There’s still a chance to finish this if he pulls himself together.

Harry’s face flashes to life in his psyche from that first day in dressing room three. If you’re prepared to adapt and learn, you can transform. He’s been training for this for months—a sniveling prep-school bitch isn’t going to stop him now, not even with a rifle.

Studies the maps further. He has a thousand different paths he could take—Charlie’s too smart to waste his time in the thick forest—Charlie would never find him. But there’s only one place those paths lead to. Both maps have a starting point along the same stretch of foothill and it’s the only place Eggsy can go if he’s to have a chance of finding the road back to HQ.

Unfortunately, there’s a long stretch of wide open meadow between the safety of the forest and that road home. Charlie will most likely be waiting for him to make a run for it, and then he can take his sweet time to shoot him all the way out to twelve hundred yards. His resolve hardens like concrete. Tucks the logbooks back into his pants. He can’t cross the field until Charlie’s been disarmed, or he runs out of ammo.

Or until I kill him skulks along the edges of his mind, but Eggsy ignores it. He’ll just have to make Charlie waste his remaining shots. Tries to shake off the murderous intent, but the thought lingers, tantalizing. So many of his problems would disappear….

Shakes his head. The rucksack he lost during his fall snags his eyes. Eggsy climbs his way up to it, and stares. It’s situated halfway up the ravine wall, and there’s no way in hell he can travel quickly or quietly with so many pounds of survival supplies—

A breathy laugh escapes his lips and his forehead drops against his arms. Fucking Kingsman. The
exam is supposed to be completed by sundown, meaning they aren’t actually that far away from HQ. There was never any need for the fucking junk he’s been dragging around all damn day.

Merlin’s a twat.

Eggsy wastes no time in trading the contents of the bag for leaves. After a moments planning, he takes back the all-weather rope. Eggsy scales up the rest of the way, slowly peaks over the lip of the gully, and cautiously slithers over. Charlie’s nowhere to be seen.

It’s not a comforting thought.

He swiftly traverses the length of the ravine—tension and paranoia amping up again away from the relative safety of the gully—and he comes to an abrupt halt at a split in his path. One way, he sees the landmarks to lead him to the road. The other way, he sees a series of compressed leaves and a semi-snapped twig.

One way, he runs for freedom, but with a high chance of death from afar in one explosive cacophony of gunfire. Or he could go a different way.

With Dean and Rotti and their numerous goons, he always chased the end of the road—he tried to manage and survive the situation. It never did him much good. A strain of dark intent tangles itself among the fear. Perhaps it’s time to change the situation instead. Act instead of react.

Harry’s last words to him return, unbidden. My Eggsy. He’s going to win this time, and he’s going to return to Harry victorious, and then maybe…

Resolved, Eggsy chooses the other way, and starts tracking the footsteps.

If Charlie wants to play hunter hunted, well. Who is Eggsy to deny aristocracy?

Lips tightening, he lets the door inside of him open just a crack, just an inch, to let out a trace of the wailing darkness he’s kept locked away for years. He’s tired. Tired of reacting. Tired of enduring. Tired of being made a victim. He’s scared as fuck, panicked that he’s going to be murdered at any moment, but he’s focusing it. Narrows it all down, funnels the terror and anger and frustration into one purpose: hunt Charlie down like a rabbit and skin him.

He rips a good-sized piece of netting off his ghillie suit and hooks it around a group of short branches nabbed from the ground. Hooks it onto his shoulder and starts the stalk. Eggsy keeps a swift pace with an eye on the slowly dying light.

Searches like a hog after truffles for footprints, for snapped twigs, for crushed leaves and curved mud…any and all signs that say Charlie was here. Every step he takes empowers him, in a twisted way. The choice has been made, the path has been taken, and he draws closer to taking control of his life back with every inch.

Never before has he allowed this—to sue his enemies for himself—because there were always others relying on him, if not to make things better, than to at least not make things worse. But here, now under the shady privacy of an abandoned forest, he’s exploring that darkness now.

So yes, while Eggsy fully believes that this FUBAR situation is dire enough to warrant striking back, he’d be lying if he said he didn’t wonder what would happen if, one day, he just stopped holding it all in. He’s not terribly concerned about Charlie’s future, anyway.

Just this once. He wants to know what it’s like, just once.
Eggsy slows his breath to be more even keeled and begins his stalk with purpose. His heart rate settles into a dance macabre. He ensconces himself conformably into the cradle of predators; it’s like breathing in sync with the devil. Inhale. Exhale.

Falling into the primal rhythm, he carves his way through the brush and bush, speeding up whenever a stray breeze would cover the noise. The fingerlike branches frame his way as he tracks his quarry unrepentantly. Halfway down the foothill, Eggsy knows he was right. The open field barring his passage should be straight ahead, and Charlie has done exactly as predicted.

Finally, he reaches the last cool thicket of trees. It’s thick enough to block out all but the most determined of sunlight, and the air is an icy caress. As soon as he enters, the streaks of white misgiving knot at the base of his skull. There is no birdsong here.

He scans the area for the disturbance to nature. Bites his tongue till the blue-iron flavor of blood bursts to life. Not even a hundred yards left of him is Charlie, laying in wait at the edge of the glade, monitoring the open field. Time screeches to a grinding halt and Eggsy’s chest constricts.

This is it.

Part of him (the coward in him, he viciously scolds) shrinks back now that he’s standing right here. He half wants to turn back. Still, Eggsy grits his teeth and time rattles back to it’s natural speed. Tells his brain to shut the fuck up and let him work.

Silent as the grave, he sets his rucksack down behind the nearest tree. Loops the rope around the skein of netting and arched sticks and lashes it to the bag handle. Slow as he can, on the balls of his feet, he moves away from the tree, feeding the rope along the way so it lays behind him slack on the ground.

Once he’s reached the literal end of his rope, he tucks himself in to the surrounding colors and shadows, keeping one eye on Charlie at all times. Slowly pulls the slack out of the rope so not even the sliding is heard, and then gives a careful tug. The decoy is dragged forth a couple of inches, scraping the underbrush.

Charlie’s figure twitches, and looks around. Another short tug moves the bag forward another inch. Zeroing in on the general location, Charlie slowly rolls into position, bringing his rifle to bear. Chewing on his lower lip, Eggsy gently pulls the rucksack from behind the tree along the base of a bush. If he didn’t know any better, Eggsy too would believe it was someone in ghillie crawling along the forest floor—

Bang!

The sound of gunfire cracks open the silence and something in Eggsy hardens. If that decoy had really been him, Charlie would have put a round through his head. He didn’t even hesitate.

Eggsy watches with cold eyes as Charlie cautiously stands and approaches his ‘victim’. As soon as Eggsy trusts Charlie’s attentions to be well focused elsewhere, he discreetly changes location. Settles in a good way from his original post to keep watch. One bullet down, last one to go.

It doesn’t take long for Charlie to realize he’s been had. Eggsy can pinpoint the exact moment. Charlie’s spine snaps straight and his shoulders clench together. Turns to track the rope, and faces the direction of Eggsy’s last hiding place. Heavy anticipation blossoms in his lungs. As soon as Charlie trails the rope to it’s origin, Eggsy will be ready to attack from behind and disarm the petty bastard.
Charlie steps forward, and Eggsy shifts his weight onto the balls of his feet.

He stops short. Jerks his head up, and looks around again.

Eyebrows knitting together, Eggsy gnaws harder on his lip.

Charlie starts to back away, and Eggsy nearly growls in urgency. His nemesis keeps backing away between the tightly grown trees, and slowly disappears into the greenery. It takes everything in Eggsy to not charge forward and give away his location.

He doesn’t know if Charlie pegged him or not, but he can’t risk staying in the same place. Starts to back away himself. Clearly Charlie wants to catch him from behind, but it’s anyone’s guess which direction he’s going to take.

Alarm bells are reverberating through his bones as he moves. Keeps his ears strained for any sound to give him away, to give him an edge. He circles around for clues, but finds none.

A small *tha-thud* breaks through the tense atmosphere and Eggsy freezes. A tossed rock. A decoy? A lure? A distraction? He has no earthly idea. Charlie could be taking aim this very minute, could have his crosshairs center mass…sweat beads across Eggsy’s forehead, though he refuses to wipe it away. He can feel the devil breathing hotly into his neck.

Keeps moving. Glances in the direction he knows the field to be in. Could he make it? There’s only one bullet left…surely he has a chance? *But do you really trust a Kingsman recruit to miss?*

A twig snaps sharply to his right.

Swallows tightly and doesn’t react. And quick movements will give him away. He’s trying so hard not to lose his nerve. *This must be what it feels like to face the firing squad.*

Keeps moving. The field lies just behind that line of trees, and he can see the sunset is honey gold beyond the boundaries of this unfeeling place. So close to freedom he can taste it—

Darting movement on the left. A dark mass of sticks and leaves steadily rises from the ground, a veritable forest golem with a violent grudge.

Head snapping to, his eyes meet the barrel of a rife. A twig-adorned Charlie is braced against the tree, stock pulled in tight to his shoulder, and the weapon is trained on Eggsy with deadly accuracy.

Time stops alongside Eggsy’s heart. The world seems to widen and unfold itself before him in a thousand choices.

It’s like…the swoop of a pocket watch suspended from it’s chain—that perpetual, sloping path coaxing a fugue state upon him. Eggsy’s mind—strained, and kneaded, and frayed as it’s been—turns inside out. Thoughts turn off, instincts turn up. His brain twists in on itself and starts operating in the abstract, thoughts far too fast for words.

He takes action in the blur of a heartbeat.

No thought, only experience and *now*. There’s a heavy swing of a pendulum, the inevitable *gong* of the midnight clock, the oiled *click* of a handgun’s magazine, the bitter taste of slick gunmetal on the sides of his tongue.

The bloom of gunpowder in his nose.
He comes back to himself to find his hand wrapped around a rock, and he’s swinging it down onto Charlie’s head once, twice—

A gravely voice pleads “No, pl-please stop—“

—thrice, until he’s still. The stuttered words reach Eggsy’s ears belatedly, mental wheels slowly spinning back to life—

*The words scratched on Dean’s wrist are sick: No, please stop. That’s the kind of shit murderers have been known for. Eggsy sucks in a desperate breath and braces himself for the next painful strike.*

—he stumbles away from the limp body splayed before him. Landing on his arse, his eyes are a pair of saucers and filled to the brim with horror.

Charlie is sprawled on the ground before him, limbs akimbo and rifle flung carelessly a few feet away. His ghillie suit half hides his form, but half of Charlie’s face is visible. Pale flesh is in garish contrast with the blood streaking across his cheekbone.

“Oh, Jesus.” Eggsy breathes. “Oh, fuck. What did I do?”

Charlie is motionless. It’s the lax curl of the fingers that drives it home to Eggsy’s stalled thought. *This is what he’s done.* He chose to follow Charlie, and he did it with intent, regardless of how far he never meant to take it. Christ, he thought he’d…he thought—

It’s one thing to imagine it. It’s a very different thing to be faced with what you’ve done.

Tries to suck air into his panicked lungs, but he can’t seem to draw in enough. Trembling, he leans forward, and reaches out to shake him, to search for a pulse, to—

Eggsy yelps out in startled pain. His arm never reaches the body, dropping instead to hang loosely, twitching. The hot swirl of burnt agony throbs to life, emanating from his left shoulder, and there’s red, so much red, even through the layers of thick ghillie net. Whining, he pulls at the sticky material, to no avail.

He’s been shot. When the fuck…*fuck*!

With the adrenaline leveling out in his system again, the terrible ache spreads like sharp metal through his limb, through his muscles, through his chest. The rest of his body starts to hurt in sympathy, every fiber thrumming along with his pulse.

*I’m still bleeding.* He’s a little dazed, but he knows he needs to stop bleeding. The bit of first aid he’d taught himself through trial and error never covered bullet wounds. Eggsy manages to tear off another chunk of netting and removes his belt, MacGyvering a tourniquet together as best he can with one arm.

With a groan, Eggsy climbs to his feet, clutching at his shoulder. He’s unsteady but manages to stay upright. The blood flow has been stemmed a bit, but it still seeps slowly from under the makeshift bandage. He needs a doctor.

Looks back to the body before him. Swallows down the bile sneaking up his esophagus. There’s a brief note of guilt echoing through him at abandoning the corpse, but it’s overridden by the agony from his shredded flesh. Hauling a dead body isn’t going to help him any, and it won’t undo the damage.
Done is done. Even when you didn’t mean it.

Eggsy begins the jog back to the road. He makes it through the field and finds the gravel road. Uses the suns low position to guess the direction of Kingsman. The world slowly becomes hazy and slanting—like he’s going to slide right of the Earth’s surface.

His feet pounds against the ground in a matching rhythm to his heart, to the throbbing pain, to the cadence of what have I done repeating in his thoughts. The more distance grows between Eggsy and the deed, the more he thinks about it. He picks up speed.

The image of Charlie’s lax fingers chase him down the road. The heft of a rock remains a phantom against his palm. The sickly satisfying crunch of Charlie’s skull giving way—

With a wounded cry, he runs. He runs driven by wild desperation, like the devil’s own are hounding him. Runs with blood and madness on his tongue.

He doesn’t remember much after that. Remembers the stark relief of spying the green field with the white painted K. Remembers how beautiful the sunset was on the impressive compound, though he’s not sure at the time why it’s so important. He remembers Merlin, and white lab coats, and red-filled tubes. It’s so much like his drugged and desperate sprint across London that he welcomes the blackness with wide open arms.

When next his waking mind surfaces, it’s to find Harry sitting by his bed. Harry is in a garish dressing gown, and the room is so white that Eggsy wants to rips his eyes out. The world is still soggy and curled up at the edges.

“’arry?” His tongue is thick as a sponge and dry as mothballs, so he must be up to the gills with the good stuff. “How long…what’s—“ The acrid smell of gunpowder springs to life in his memory. Rocks. Death in a dark forest.

Harry gently pats his wrist, pulling him out of his jumbled thoughts. His eyes are warm and crinkled at the edges, and it’s possibly better than his mum’s mint hot cocoa. “Eggsy, you’re currently in Kingsman’s medical ward. You’re safe.”

’Course I am, “You’re here.” Eggsy has a sneaking feeling that half his words are escaping. Bloody criminals.

That half smirk makes an appearance on Harry’s lips. “Indeed. Do you know how long you’ve been out?”

Blearily, Eggsy checks his internal clock. It feels like he just put his head to pillow. “Jus’ a few minutes. Hour?”

“Not quite, Eggsy. It’s been fourteen hours. You needed a blood transfusion—“

Eggsy’s mind easily drifts away, chasing the thought of time. Fourteen hours since I murdered Charlie Hesketh. Starts adding the numbers in his head. Sixteen hours since I decided to murder Charlie Hesketh. Twenty four hours since the start of the exam. Twenty six hours since I last saw Harry Hart. His mind starts skipping like a CD at that note. Harry Hart lying in a hospital bed. Harry Hart finally waking up. Harry Hart taking his hand, and not letting go. Him saying—

“Are you listening, Eggsy? Do you remember what happened?” Harry’s voice gently cuts through his rambling trail of thoughts, and brings him back to reality.

Eggsy’s head rolls to the side to look wide eyed at Harry. “Do you?”
Blinking, Harry quirks his eyebrow. “Do I?”

“Remember, Me.”

Smiling, Harry nods. “Yes, I remember you.”

“Good. Your doctors said you might not.” Grinning, Eggsy turns his hand over to take Harry’s in his, tangling their fingers together. “Glad they were wrong.”

Harry says nothing, but stares at their joined hands, frozen. Slowly unwinds them, and pulls away.

Eggsy’s smile fades. “Harry?”

Harry looks at him in caution. “I remember sponsoring you.”

Swallowing, Eggsy asks, “what does that mean?”

Head tilting to the side, Harry’s eyebrows pull together. “The last month is still blurry. Some of the details have been lost.” Glances dubiously at Eggsy’s hand, and then back. “Are you—“

Cold floods Eggsy’s body, but his mouth moves smoothly on autopilot. “Tha’s a real shame, Harry. We got to be good friends.” Maybe it’s for the best. Head wounds, he thinks bitterly, are serious business.

Harry’s eyebrows pop back up and a pleased smile blooms forth. “Friends?”

Eggsy easily tamps down on the urge to scream, the pain meds keeping him conveniently distanced from his emotions. “Yeah, friends.” Christ, but it’s time to let this go. “Just friends. What did you think I meant?”

Harry lets out a small laugh, and once again takes hold of Eggsy’s wrist. “I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

His eyes settle upon where Harry’s flesh meets his. Intimate, yet not. It’s just Eggsy now, not his Eggsy—

“This is very important, Eggsy, and you can sleep afterwards, but I need you to focus.”

Eggsy nods.

“What do you remember what happened during your exam?” Harry’s eyes are intent upon his.

Eggsy nods again. He’ll never forget. “I…” His voice croaks, and his eyes suddenly become very watery. What’s going to happen to him, after what he’s done? At the time, he hadn’t even thought about the consequences. “Harry, I did something. Really bad.” Christ, but he sounds like a fucking child. Swallows the fear down and faces his actions head on. He whispers the truth. “I beat him with a rock, Harry, and I knew what I was doing. I killed him.”

Harry shrugs, unconcerned. “That is good.”

Jaw dropping open, Eggsy stares. “That…ain’t what I was expecting.”

Harry’s face is serious when he leans in closer, and his voice is kept low. “Kingsman must be prepared to defend themselves and others, whatever that may entail.” Glances down at Eggsy’s bandaged shoulder. “And I rather doubt you shot yourself.” Pats his cheek once. “However, in light of the circumstances, I suggest you keep that confession to yourself. Mr. Hesketh will be pointing his
finger soon enough as it is. Best not aid him in that endeavor.”

Eggsy’s thoughts stall. How can Charlie blame him if he’s dead?

“Mr. Hesketh is, in fact, alive.”

Did he say that aloud?

“Yes, you did. He woke up soon after he was found and is currently under observations a number of rooms down the hall.”

“…How?”

Tilting his head, Harry rolls his shoulder. “Ghillie suits are more padded than they seem. And sometimes people are just lucky when it comes to head wounds.” Taps his temple. “Just look at me. It also helps that our medical staff is cutting edge. Merlin swears to me they could fix a bullet to the head, but I’ll believe that when I see it.”

It’s like Eggsy can’t quite get past the idea of Charlie surviving. “So I didn’t kill him.” If he’s honest with himself, Eggsy isn’t sure if he’s glad for it or not.

Shaking his head, Harry leans in closer. “No, you didn’t kill him. But listen closely. Right now he is accusing you of attempted murder, and he’s claiming he shot you in self defense.”

At the news, Eggsy bolts upright in bed, collapsing almost immediately when his shoulder vehemently protests the action. “That’s not true! When the glasses stopped working, he tried to kill me! I ran, and had to hit him to get away later—"

Harry holds his hand up to demand silence. “I thought as much. Which is why you’re going to lie.”

By the looks of it, Harry is actually serious. “Lie.” Eggsy is having trouble believing this is Harry Hart sitting before him.

“Indeed.” Harry raises a single brow. “I assume you’ve had some practice?”

Before Eggsy can think of a response through the cotton of medical grade sedatives, the door to his room is opened to admit Merlin. He hovers in the doorway. “Glad you’re awake, Eggsy. Harry, wrap this up. Arthur is about to put up the lock down, and you still owe me paperwork.”

Harry shoots a magnificent glare over his shoulder. “I haven’t even been discharged yet.”

Unrepentant, Merlin just shrugs his shoulder. “The longer you wait, the more the details fade. Besides, your hands aren’t broken this time.”

Expelling a heavy sigh, Harry silently admits defeat. “I’ll turn in what I can remember tonight.”

That’s when Eggsy catches it, despite his medicated state (or perhaps because of it). A perplexed expression briefly flits across Merlin’s face before he schools himself. Harry’s lying.

“Of course.” His eyes jump to Eggsy’s form, and soften. “Feel better, Eggsy.” Merlin closes the door behind him with a soft click.

The two remaining turn back to each other and lock eyes. Harry remembers everything. Eggsy knows Harry lied, and that Harry knows that Eggsy knows it. Juts his chin up a bit, in challenge. “If I haven’t done anything wrong, why should I lie?”
Harry’s face gentles. “There’s a difference between truth and honesty. Sometimes, it’s best to lie, in the interest of protecting yourself or someone you care deeply for.”

Staring at the weave of his hospital sheet, Eggsy nods. The cards have fallen and not in his favor. What’s one more falsehood added to the pile? “Fine. I’ll lie.”

Harry’s unspoken so will I is heard loud and clear.

Shortly after, Harry is kicked out of the room, and told to refrain from further contact with his Proposed until their investigation is concluded. Eggsy is once again pulled under by the drugs in his veins and the exhaustion from his body healing itself. Sleep is fitful and disjointed.

Two more days are spent in isolation with only the medical staff for company. Eggsy isn’t allowed any personal electronics, or books, or anything with the remote possibility of passing notes to the ‘outside world’. He’s left with nothing but his own mind and shitty soap operas. Eggsy, therefore, spends those days in contemplation, as there isn’t much else to do.

His thoughts circle around his actions during the sniper exam. On one hand, the bastard had bloody well shot him, tried to kill him, and had spent months being a grade-A tormentor and saboteur. Eggsy has never questioned his right to defend himself. What bothers him is that he put himself in that situation to begin with. He could have gone the other way, made his way down the back of the foothill, and maybe still gotten back to HQ on time. Slim though it was, the chance had been there. No, he had deliberately followed the siren’s call of get-him-before-he-gets-you, which was something Rotti would do. And Rotti is not his role model.

And look at the situation he’s been put in now.

As much as he doesn’t like it, he might have to again, as a Kingsman. The difference, of course, would be doing it for a good and just cause. Eggsy wonders if that distinction will be enough.

A knock on the door tears him from his thoughts. Merlin, accompanied by his doctor, step into his room.

“You need to get ready. They’re asking for you.” Merlin looks stoic, and Eggsy wonders if Arthur will the axe quickly, or if he’s going to drag this out all the more.

The doctor is there to change his bandages, and Merlin is there to ensure he’s dressed in proper attire. Eggsy is steady on his feet, his pain med dosage having been lowered, and wriggles into the bottom half of a herringbone jumpsuit.

Having been fishing in the drawers on the sidewall, the doctor emits a frustrated grunt. “Nurses must not have restocked the bandages. I’ll be back in a moment.” Without waiting for a reply, he’s out the door, and Eggsy is alone with Merlin for the first time in days.

“Alright, quickly now. You’re to be brought to a conference room with all the knights presiding. This is your only chance to tell your side of the story. You’ve had days to think on this, so I assume you’re ready?”

Scoffing, Eggsy bites out a bitter, “What’s the point? It’s all a farce, ain’t it.” He doesn’t mean it, but it slips out anyway.

Wheeling around, Merlin eyebrows jump so high that Eggsy worries they might pop right off his head. “I beg your pardon, but I don’t think I heard you rightly.”

Gesturing sharply with his hand, Eggsy vents his frustrations. “There’s no way Arthur’ll let—“
Merlin just plows right over whatever Eggsy had to say. “I know I didn’t quite hear that, because otherwise you’d be throwing in the towel, fool that ya’ are, and insulting the integrity of an institution I hold a great deal of loyalty for.”

Wide eyed, Eggsy tries to backtrack. “I didn’t mean for it to sound…look, you gotta’ admit—oohff!”

Merlin yanks on Eggsy’s lapels and starts pulling off his hospital paper shirt with a firm twist of his fingers. “Even so, Arthur has no more power here than any other—not when he has a dog in the fight. When it comes to the trials, all knights have equal say. There must be a vote, understand? They’re going to ask you what happened, Eggsy. So tell me now.” He twists his mouth into a pleasantly bland, yet inquiring smile. “What happened?”

Could there really be a chance? Eggsy’s voice is hesitant. “I…don’t know?”

When Merlin’s eyebrows knit together, Eggsy knows that’s a wrong answer. “I was the one to recover Charlie from the field. His bruising, while extensive, matches that of a single, blunt force blow.”

Confused, Eggsy shoots Merlin A Look. “That’s not what happened, I—”


A niggling suspicion starts tickling the back of Eggsy’s brain, but he doesn’t dare put voice to it.

Rolling his eyes, Merlin mutters, “do I have to spell it out for you? I documented the evidence. I will also be presenting the medical logs. Now, boyo. Tell me what happened.”

_Holy fuck, Merlin tampered with evidence._ Clearing his throat, Eggsy tries again. “What I mean to say is, I don’t know how he fell, but he must have.” His accent thickens as he falls back into the well practiced routine of covering his tracks. “I found ‘im layin’ on the ground, bottom of a hill, head restin’ by a rock. Must’ve been a nasty tumble.”

Finally, Merlin nods in approvable. “Interesting. And your shoulder? How did that happen?”

Thinking hard, Eggsy pauses a moment before answering. “I ain’t got the slightest clue. Came out of nowhere. Never saw it comin’. Must’ve been Charlie though, right? By that time, we was the only ones left out there.”

“Good, now—”

“Alright Mr. Unwin, time to switch out those bandages, and you’ll be on your way.” The doctor comes striding in, lab coat flapping behind him. Merlin backs away so the man can work, and no more words are exchanged.

Once his wound has been cleaned, redressed, and Eggsy has had two white pills shoved down his throat, Merlin quickly escorts him out into the hallway. He keeps a hold of Eggsy’s bicep, and it’s comforting.

Eggsy is taken upstairs, where all the fancy furniture is, and he uses every step to steel himself against the inevitable outcome. The worst that can happen is that he ends up right where he started. He’ll walk in there, tell his story, and he’ll keep his upper lip stiff as board if they cut him loose.

Before he knows it, they’re turning into the hall. The door is right there, but sitting in one of the many ornate chairs lining the wall is Charlie bloody Hesketh. He’s in the same attire as eggsy, with
his head wrapped in a gauze. Purple and yellow mix under his skin and stretches out from under the bandages over his left temple.

A brief pang of remorse skips through Eggy. *I did that*

And then Charlie opens his trap to utter a scathing remark, and that remorse quickly turns sour. Strangely, it fortifies him against the coming storm.

At least, he thought it did.

Merlin opens the door and enters first, leaving Eggy to lag behind. The setup is intimidating as Hell. There’s a long table, and the two sides are filled with the knights plus Merlin. The head of the table, usually reserved for Arthur, has the only unoccupied chair. It’s obvious where his place is.

Slowly, Eggy lowers himself into the chair, and hates it immediately. Where it might have felt powerful before now only serves to make him smaller. Set apart. *Put on trial.*

The other end of the table is left open, leaving a straight view of a portrait that’s clearly one of Merlin’s gadgets. One of those hidden monitors. Christ, what the hell is this?

It’s Percival who speaks first. “Mr. Unwin, there has been some questions pertaining to the marksmanship qualifier. I’m certain this can be cleared up with a few simple questions. We’d first like to hear your account of the events leading up to your being injured.”

“Right.” His mouth is suddenly dry, but this isn’t Eggy’s first time before a firing squad, so to speak. Storytelling is second nature to him by now, and he pulls out all the stops. Goes over everything that happened prior to the glasses malfunctioning as a baseline, and then takes great care to stay true to that baseline when he starts lying. Not once does he look to Harry or Merlin for cues.

Once his statement has been taken, the real song and dance begins. The one to start the expected witch hunt is Arthur, of course. “A prior account is at odds with yours. The testimony of Mr. Hesketh states that you attacked him, attempting to strike him several times with a rock, after which he had no choice but to fire upon you. It is also stated—“

“Why would I attack Charlie with a rock when he had a gun?” Despite the dirty looks he received for interrupting Arthur, Eggy can see the doubt surfacing in most of the knights. Looks like Charlie wasn’t quite as convincing as he’d undoubtedly hoped to be.

Removing his glasses, Arthur puts on that familiar grandfather smile. “It would be understandable, young man, given your personal history. Growing up in such a violent household must have taken its toll on you….”

Flushing red, Eggy huffs. It figures he’d go there. Arthur tries to frame the issue around his living situation, and poses the possibility that Eggy reacted to the years of unresolved violence by attempted murder of a fellow recruit.

“…Gentlemen, it was only a matter of time before something like this happened. I question his capability to cope with the extreme situations a Kingsman encounters day to day.”

Harry, silent up ‘till now, tries to intervene. “Counterpoint. It is the fact that Mr. Unwin grew up in such a situation without compromising himself that convinces me of his ability to handle those day to day Kingsman disasters.”

And so the squabbling begins. It’s a new experience, listening to a group of people discuss his motives and drives and possible mental instability as though he weren’t in the room. Face burning, Eggy can’t keep quiet for long. “Please, I’m more than my *history.*” Wiggles his fingers for
emphasis. “Every single person in this room has more blood in their past that I have. What happened is over, and I'm over it.” He isn’t. “I’ve worked through it.” He hasn’t. “And I’m not going to break and become some mad dog killer or whatever else it is you’re thinkin’ of.” Except he’s already tried, rock in fist. He looks straight at Arthur. “I’m not the failure you want me to be.” …is he?

There’s a small breath of silence where all eyes are on him, sizing him up against his declaration. Merlin breaks the awkward silence. “In any event, a psych eval is beyond the scope of this investigation, currently. Perhaps we could move on.”

And that’s how it progresses. Various questions are asked, and Eggsy answers. Charlie got to them first, and used his time well. Eggsy is dancing on eggshells for the next ten minutes, and hopes like hell he can go soon. This whole farce is wrecking his nerves, and making him twitch like a bird. They’re skirting by so many of the thinks he can’t afford to talk about….

“There’s one final matter that requires attention.” Arthur again. “An accusation has been made that Eggsy attacked Charlie out of a desperate attempt to silence him.”

Murmurs quickly make the rounds, and Eggsy’s head snaps up at the words. Silence him? “What the bloo-I mean, what do you mean by that?”

The victorious glint in Arthurs eyes is chilling, and Eggsy knows. He knows what’s coming. Braces himself for the thing that will probably cost him everything.

He’d gambled and lost.

“Claims have been made that you, Mr. Unwin, are a narcotics dealer, an addict, and a prostitute. Mr. Hesketh believes that your motive was to ensure his silence on the matter.” Every word hits him like a bullet to the chest. Drug dealer. Addict. Prostitute.

The uproar is instantaneous. They’re all outraged, and voices rise along with their owners. Merlin is shouting to calm everyone down, and Eggsy is afraid to even look at Harry. Not even when his voice rings out, “What proof do you have to support any of these claims?”

Of course they do. Arthur fucking lists them. One: Charlie saw him dealing a few times at the pub frequented by his friends (never mind that he was a damn customer). Two: Charlie’s friends can corroborate that statement (because it’s true, eggsy is ashamed to admit). Three: Eggsy exchanged sexual favors to some of Charlie’s schoolmates for money (untrue, but not for lack of propositions).

Eggsy’s world is falling down, and the blood is rushing in his ears. He doesn’t look at Harry, can’t look at Harry, because he did it all to hide this crap from him. Eggsy doesn’t want to see the inevitable change. Every sin is trotted out before the knights (possible future coworkers, for fuck’s sake) and it’s terrible, and humiliating, and no one believes him.

As a final ‘fuck you’, Arthur directs all attention to the electronic portrait, and everyone at the table puts on their Kingsman glasses. The reaction is instantaneous. Dead silence falls on the room like a shroud, and Eggsy…well, he has no idea what’s on the screen, but he’s pretty sure he’ll want to eat a bullet after seeing it.

The knight all shoot looks between him and that damn portrait, looks varying between outrage, disgust, and pity. Eggsy jumps an inch off his chair when something cold and smooth nudges his hand. Looking down, he accepts the glasses Merlin has pushed towards him.

He settles the frames on his nose and wants to vomit. Wants to scream, wants to cry, wants to kill Charlie again and make it stick. The picture is of him, from his first night in the recruit barracks. He’s
naked, preparing for a shower, and his modesty is just barely preserved by the sink.

He can pinpoint the moment it was taken, because he’s seen that picture before. In the mirror. His body is freshly bruised, and the fingermarks on his hips from Rotti’s attack are fresh as can be. The look vulnerable look of horror in his face, the barely concealed tears in his eyes, that moment when he realized for the first time in his life that he’d been victimized. All commemorated forever because Merlin took a picture, and kept it. Documented it—

“—nwin. Eggsy.” Numbly, Eggsy looks back up at the array of eyes before him. Staring back at the blank faces of the Kingsman Agents is like watching a house burn. All the structures and safe pathways he’s built with his lies, his deceptions, are going down in flames. The castle of cards is falling before his eyes, and there’s nothing he can do about it.

There are no more lies for him to spin. No more misdirection to hide his worst secrets. Everything is exposed, and under heavy judgement.

And the most pathetic part is how much relief Eggsy feels. All the days, weeks, literally months of paranoia, dreading he’d be found out at any moment, are finally at an end. Over are the little pockets of fallout when some small secret of his was discovered, and the exhaustion that comes with damage control.

It’s all out of his hands now, and Eggsy breathes for the first time since he woke up in a room full of water.

Percival speaks for the group. “I think we’ve heard enough, unless there’s anything you’d like to add?” Eggsy slowly shakes his head ‘no’. “Please wait in the hall, then, while we all discuss this.” Eggsy nods mutely, and pulls himself out of his chair.

They don’t even wait until he’s out the door. He hears Merlin’s asking “This is a training accident for God’s sake, surely this isn’t neces—”

Arthur, ever the fucker, chimes in. “I’m afraid you don’t get a say in this matter, Merlin. We all know you aren’t impartial—” The door shuts behind him, and the sound is immediately cut off. He scans the hall to choose one of the antique chairs and spies Charlie still reclining on the same mahogany piece as earlier.

He looks up as Eggsy seats himself across from him. “Ah, excellent, you’re done with your statement. Perhaps they’ll reach a conclusion sometime today.”

In that moment, every minor scrap of guilt and bad feelings he had about trying to kill another human being flew out the window. The urge to hurt seeps through the numbness pervading his mind, and Eggsy can clearly envision himself wrapping his hands around Charlie’s head and twisting.

Eggsy knows this is stupid, but he just has to know. “Why. Just tell me why.”

Shrugging, Charlie stays slouched in his chair, eyes examining his cuticles. Purposely phrases his answer to suit the surveillance Merlin undoubtedly has wired to the nines. “The Lancelot job is expected of me. My family would disown me if I failed. Muck things up for my inheritance as well.”

Eggsy stares at him in disbelief. “What the bloody hell has that got to do with me? You’re leading the pack in scores—there was no fucking need for it, you sa—“

“Of course there was need.” Bitterly, Charlie scoffs, and glares at him. “I know you’ve seen Merlin’s Mark, you stare at it often enough. I know what it says, what it means.” His eyes drop down to Eggsy’s chest. “I know you’ve got one as well. So I have to do this if I want to win.”
It takes Eggsy a few moments to piece together Charlie’s meaning. Hisses angrily. “Fuck’s sake. You’re trying to induce a bond. That’s utterly *fucked* in the head!”

Waving his finger in the air, Charlie grins very meanly. “Ding ding ding, the winner is *fuck you*!” Drops the pretense. “Christ, it’s too late for him to find his soulmate now, considering how much younger they’ll be. And I’m not going to lose out on the opportunity of a *lifetime* just because I’m Unmarked. It’s not *fair*.”

Eggsy doesn’t say another word—doesn’t know what to say. Eggsy can see before him the cavalier attitude of someone who doesn’t understand, who can’t understand. There’s a streak of bitterness in Charlie too, and something so incomparably childish. It’s the last one that scares the piss out of him, because children can be so completely cruel.

Charlie’s motives are truly wicked, in the worst possible way, because he’s trying to induce a mark for all the wrong reasons, and it wouldn’t even be a full bond. This man wants to rob Merlin of his soulmate.

And Merlin knows it. Eggsy understands now why Merlin risked tampering with evidence. He doesn’t want to Charlie to win any more than Eggsy does, and with very good reason.

*I should have killed you*, he thinks. *I really should have killed you when I could*. Eggsy will never make that mistake again. With anyone.

He shares as much, voice flat and face devoid of emotion. “I wish I’d killed you.”

Charlie’s response is just as empty. “Not yet, you don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I cut the chapter short and moved some scenes to the next in order to post it sooner. Sorry for the long wait!
Okay, this is unbetta'd, but I figured it was well past time for an update. As always, comments are welcome, as is constructive editing! If you see an inconsistency, or if a part of this doesn't quite jive, please let me know so I can fix it.

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 11: Roxy

A tense silence is strung between them, broken only by the sharp ticking of the hall clock. As they await the verdict of the trial, Charlie stares blankly at a spot on the wall and Eggsy ruminates on the recent revelations. Charlie’s bitterness at being Unmarked has made him cavalier about destroying relationships, it would seem. Eggsy sees an empty place inside of him—something disturbingly inhuman. Then again, he’s always found most people to be fairly inhuman.

Charlie notices him staring, and sneers. “Enjoying a final look before you’re cut loose?”

Shrugging his shoulder, Eggsy fires back. “Nah. Just admiring your haircut.” His eyes trace the bare patch of scalp peaking from over the bandage where the nurses shaved Charlie to stitch him up. “Not the best look for you.”

Glaring through slitted eyes, Charlie leans forward and props his elbows on his knees. His lips part to deliver a scathing remark, but he’s cut short.

The doors open and Harry Hart comes striding out, stone faced and sharp. Merlin is hot on his heels. When Harry’s gaze inevitably finds him, Eggsy’s eyes widen at the fury he sees. Harry snaps out a tight, “Follow me.”

Eggsy hesitates, glancing to Merlin in question. This is, apparently, a bad idea.

“Now, Eggsy.” As soon as Eggsy stands, Harry takes hold of the back of his neck to speed him along. Flinching on instinct, Eggsy has to restrain himself from shoving that grip off of him. That’s where Rotti always—

No, this is Harry.

Even now, when so clearly angered, Harry is gentle. He’s not gripping his neck in punishment or digging his fingers into the pulse points. His hand is relaxed, and lightly draped over his nape as a guide, ever mindful of his injury.

As soon as they reach the end of the hall, away from the prying eyes burning a line up Eggsy’s back, Harry looks to their Scottish shadow. “Merlin, if you would be so kind?”


Jaw tightening, Harry jerks his head in a loose parody of a nod. Turning on his heal, he leads Eggsy
through the headquarters with haste, eager to reach his car. The ride to Harry’s townhouse is tense and the atmosphere between them fraught with jagged edges. Every bump sends a spark of pain into his arm, and it takes all of Eggsy’s willpower to not slump into his seat from defeat. The whole way there, he stares unseeingly at the cool glass of the car window, wanting nothing more than to press his head against it for some relief. As much as he’d like to avoid it, the impending conversation has been a long time coming.

The drive is shorter than usual, Harry’s foot having turned to lead in light of the circumstances. It’s not long before he’s shoving the key into its slot and twisting it like an enemy’s neck to unlock the front door.

Eggsy drags his feet over the threshold. The door is pulled shut behind him, locking them in. Harry’s words tumble forth. “Cocaine, Eggsy? What on Earth were you thinking?” His voice isn’t raised, but the anger is well evident. “At least tell me you had a half-decent reason.”

He knows he hasn’t exactly been upfront with Harry, but Eggsy bristles at the words nevertheless. “Not even gonna’ ask me if it’s true?” Sends a jab he knows will hit home. “Taking Arthur’s word now, then?”

Harry shoots him a narrow look. “You damn well know the answer to that. Do you deny it?”

Pinned to the spot in the entryway, Eggsy is struck mute by the question.

Exhaling, Harry turns away and retreats to the sitting room. “At least when you are silent, you are truthful.”

At a much more reluctant pace, Eggsy follows. He finds Harry standing at the wet bar, pouring a fingers worth of whiskey into a tumbler. Which he immediately downs in a single gulp.

“…Harry, it’s not…” Eggsy’s voice peters out, because he’s not sure where he was going with that. What can he say? It is pretty much what it looks like.

Harry proceeds to pull out a second tumbler, and fixes a whiskey sour. Eggsy’s drink is sans alcohol, out of respect to the pain killers he’s taking for his wound. “Arthur had proof, Eggsy, that not even Merlin could dispute. Pictures of you in trashy bars during hand offs. “Arthur had proof, Eggsy, that not even Merlin could dispute. Pictures of you in trashy bars during hand offs.” He pushes one of the drinks into Eggsy’s hand, and sips on his own. “Pictures of you picking up your supplies, and pictures of you turning over the payments.”

They both take a long sip of their drinks and Eggsy drops himself onto the couch. Harry follows suit. Closing his eyes, Eggsy knows he’s tanked. He can easily imagine what those photos showed.

Harry continues, eyebrows drawing together. “Pictures of you…of your clients pressing money into your pockets.” His upper lip twitches. “There were quite a few pictures.”

Eggsy drags a hand down his face. “I know you’ve heard this before, but I can explain. I didn’t want to do it, but Dean was…and with Rotti at my back…. He spreads his hand, helpless. Tries to find the words that might make this okay. “I didn’t dare say ‘no’.” Not to Rotti, at the very least. Never again to Rotti.

Harry’s eyebrow twitches, and Eggsy can tell he’s latched onto the weird phrasing. He doesn’t comment, but Eggsy knows that it’s sure to be revisited.

“The circumstances were never in question, Eggsy. Your choice to lie about them is. How could you not tell me something so important? I was blindsided today because you didn’t equip me with the knowledge I needed to counter Arthur’s claims. I could have spun it to gain some sympathy, or
countered if I’d been prepared. Instead, I am left with the embarrassment of my Proposed turning out to be a narcotics criminal when I had no idea.”

What little indignation Eggsy harbored dies on the spot, and a small wave of guilt takes it’s place.

“And then he buttoned it up with accusations of *prostitution—*”

Head snapping up, Eggsy blurs, “I weren't no hooker! I swear, Harry.” He’s leaning forward, imploring Harry to believe him.

Turning baleful eyes onto his protege, Harry quirks a single eyebrow. “How do I know you are not lying now?”

Lips parted in stunned silence, Eggsy has nothing to say. What *can* he say?

Harry’s tilts his head. “Do you see the problem, then?”

Eggsy nods. “I just didn’t want you—*them*— to know what I’d done. Plausible deniability, like Merlin said.”

“We are liars and killers, in the business of lying and killing, but that never meant you were allowed to lie to me.”

*I’m sorry* is on the tip of his tongue, but he bites it back. The spark of indignation that has crouched in the back of his mind since he faced the Kingsman Knights creeps forward. Quietly, “It was before I met you. It weren’t no one’s business but mine.”

Scoffing, Harry carelessly sets his glass down on the side table with a sharp clatter. His voice is burnished and dark. “I have a *right* to everything you have to hide!” The shiver that travels the length of Eggsy spine is…not unpleasant.

Harry continues. “None of our secrets stay buried for long. It’s not just your fellow agents combing your background, Eggsy, it’s your enemies, and you had better be prepared to have all the skeletons in your closet strung up on display! As your Proposer, everything to do with you is my business.”

Shoulders slumping, he continues in a softer tone. “As your friend, I had hoped you would trust me with this.” Pinches the bridge of his nose. “Especially considering the veritable *powder keg* it’s proven to be.”

Eggsy swallows thickly. Whispers out in misery. “So then I’m out? It’s over?” Of course it is.

Kingman might have let the training incident slide, considering the lack of hard evidence, but not when faced with a record like his.

Harry looks back to him, eyebrows raised. “What? Of course not, don’t be absurd.”

Staring, Eggsy can’t believe what he’s hearing. “How is that possible?”

A shoulder is raised, and Harry twitches a brow. “Well, to be honest, you skated by on a technicality. Everything they brought up against you happened pre-interview. As far as they know, nothing you’ve done throughout the process are grounds for dismissal, and only your Sponsor may withdraw you without reason. As for the marksmanship trial, the evidence is all circumstantial. Both your story and Charlie’s were plausible, and no conclusion could be reached.”

“No bloody way. But the gun…*I was shot.* Weren’t there ballistics or something like that?”

“Really now, Eggsy, you were *grazed.*”
Eggsy gives Harry such a bitchface. “It took a nice chunk from the meat of my shoulder.”

“Such is the risk and privilege of high powered munitions.” Waves a hand. “But I digress.” Harry continues his explanation. “It is not a question of facts anymore. It is about intent. The evidence could be believed both ways: either Charlie fired on you in attempted murder only to have the recoil knock him back down a hill where he struck his head, or you attempted to kill him and he fired on you in retaliation. Both are plausible based on the evidence submitted.” Harry bobs his head to the side. “It didn’t hurt that the vote was split. Merlin outdid himself evening the playing field.”

Some of the guilt lacing Eggsy’s psyche dissolves, giving doubt room to form. “Why did he have me lie?”

“Because beating Mr. Hesketh with a rock suggests a special kind of intent that everyone at that table would have recognized. These people…” dipping his head, Harry acknowledges the truth, “including myself, will never begin with the assumption of self-defense.”

Chewing on his lip, Eggsy hesitates for a moment. “Alright.” Takes a breath. “But if he was fine with hiding evidence, or paying off the medics, or whatever it was he did to pull this off…why didn’t he take it any further? Why not toss Charlie on his ear when he had the chance?”

He runs a hand down his face. “Things needed to be believable. Arthur is circling far too close as it is.”

Eggsy can see the subtle tightening of the flesh around Harry’s eyes. He never would have noticed it if he wasn’t keeping a sharp lookout. “That’s not all, is there?”

Harry looks up, hand dropping to his knee. “I beg your pardon?”

“I can tell when you’re not sharing something. Why didn’t Merlin do more?” Eggsy flinches at how his words sound. Merlin didn’t owe him anything, and it’s not his place to demand more of him. But that isn’t the point—this is: “Now who’s lying to who?”

“Whom.” Harry’s voice is soft, the correction made out of habit. He sharpens. “And that would be Merlin’s business.”

Shaking his head, Eggsy gathers his anger. “It’s my business, too!” Doesn’t mention Merlin’s Mark, pink elephant that it is. “Tell me why he didn’t get rid of Charlie when he hates the idjit more than I do.”

Harry takes measure of Eggsy, and swiftly regains his advantage. “If you wish to be trusted, then become trustworthy. Explain everything to me. The dealing, the trafficking, the…. ” He clenches his fist in his lap. “…the rest of it.”

Throwing a hand up in frustration, Eggsy finally loses it. “Why does any of it matter?!” He hadn’t wanted to do any of it in the first place. “It’s done with.” He just wants to forget. “It may as well have never happened.”

Silent and unmoved, Harry stares him down.

Eggsy lets out a shaking breath and drops his eyes. He doesn’t have a leg to stand on, and it’s an insult to pretend otherwise. End of the line.

Nodding, Harry gestures to Eggsy’s drink with his hand. “Knock it back. Lets begin with your stepfather.”
The carbonation burns the back of his throat, and Eggsy doesn’t remind Harry that his ‘drink’ won’t do anything to fortify him. “Okay…okay, so Dean.” The words die, again. This is probably a good thing, Eggsy thinks. He’s known for awhile now that he probably needed to talk to someone. He just hadn’t wanted it to be Harry.

Now that he’s finally staring down this inevitable conversation, he can’t figure out where to start. Harry helps him along. “He’s a dealer, correct?”

Eggsy snorts. “Yeah, he was, until he started moving up the chain. Now he’s like, middle management, or something. Supply and circulation.” Takes a breath, and pointedly looks anywhere but Harry’s face. “That’s when he pulled me in. The drugs were his idea, not mine, you understand?”

“I surmised as much.”

Eggsy smiles a bit at that, though it’s quick to die. “Yeah, thanks. I didn’t want to, I fought him on it, but he…was determined. Wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Harry prompts him to continue. “Why did he insist on involving you?”

Silence. Eggsy fiddles with his glass. Watches the play of refracted lamplight on the rug. “You know…I never really thought about it. Convenience? I lived with him, so that became my rent. He could keep an eye on me, I guess. Keep me busy.”

After some moments, Harry’s quiet voice brings his focus back. “Did he threaten your mother? Did he hurt her?”

Instinctively, Eggsy grabs the convenient lie. “Yeah.” Except, this is Harry. He backtracks almost immediately. “No, actually, that’s a lie. He did, but that’s not…he wasn’t always terrible, Harry. You know?” Eggsy glances up, to find Harry’s dark stare. Tears his eyes away immediately. “He was good, sometimes, to Mum. And he never hurt Daisy—there were times he threaten her, to keep me quiet, but he never followed through.” Squeezes his eyes shut. “I went along with it because I didn’t want him to hurt me.”

Opens his eyes, and sets his glass down before he breaks it. “Dean had Rotti to back him up, so I was always outnumbered. Rotti was right in that I had to pick my battles.” His fingers are twisting around each other like snakes in a pit, making the small joints ache from the torque.

“The dealing was one of those small concessions?” Harry surmises. His tone is bland, and Eggsy has no idea how Harry feels.

His lips are dry and clumsy, and his tongue darts out to moisten them. “No, not at first. I said I wouldn’t.” His stomach is tightening, because this is the part he hates most. “But then these clients came to our apartment to meet Dean, and took a shine to me.” He can still feel the pinstriped man plucking at his shirt collar. “They liked that I could blend in with the rich kids, given the right clothes…and I should have know better.” Eggsy fists his hands, and knuckles crack sharply. “When he touched my shoulder and called me pretty…I should have fucking known.”

Harry shifts on the couch, and the rustling is like thunder to Eggsy’s ears. He doesn’t look up. He doesn’t want to see.

“But I was stupid, and I thought…” Thought he had everything under control. Thought he’d managed to manipulate the situation. Thought he was so much smarter than everyone else.

Eggsy’s lost track of his story. Skipped some things, but his mind always always always ends up
back in that pretty, ivy-covered house, with suits and hands that weren’t right. Shakes his head, and picks his narrative back up. “I thought I could keep Dean at bay, but Rotti was a bit of a wild card.” He’d never in a thousand years thought Rotti would pursue him. Then that thrice-damned Mark of his appeared and he actually felt a little bad for the guy, despite everything. Mutters to himself, “Didn’t see that one coming.”

Clearing his throat, Harry asks the question Eggsy’s been waiting for his entire life. “Why didn’t you tell anyone? Why not go to the police?”

Scoffing, Eggsy shoots a sardonic look from under his lowered brow. “Right, and what good would that do me? Should I have done it just because it was the right thing to do?” Sneers. “Please. That wouldn’t have helped me sleep when my sister was cold and hungry, with Mum working two jobs.”

“When did you get the Mark of his appeared?” “Dean would have been in jail.” Harry points out. There’s a strange pitch to his voice. “You wouldn’t have been hurt anymore——”

Eggsy cuts him off, indignant. “Where do you get off? Do you think I never thought about it? I’m not some battered idiot who stayed because Dean didn’t mean it.” What, did Harry think he stayed for fun? “But fine, let’s lay it all out. Say I went crying to CPS. Dean’s taken away, great. And then, they turn their eyes to my Mum, who, lets face it, wouldn’t last five minutes under their scrutiny. She’s good with Daisy, but she’s no Mary Poppins. Daisy ends up in the system, because I would never be allowed custody either. I know kids in the system, Harry, and I’m not letting Daisy grow up like that.”

Rubs his wounded arm in agitation. “Or I could have gone to the police, right? Turned him in as a supply linchpin, and, best case scenario, made a deal that let the rest of us walk. Dean ends up in jail, but there’s no way the coppers’ll manage to nab all his bloody goons, so they’ll be after us. Dean’s not high enough on the food chain to warrant protective custody, and we’re too poor to move very far away.”

Trying to alleviate some of the pain, he presses down harder on the hot and raised flesh sounding the torn skin. “Mum would need to find a job, and how do you do that with a toddler? And I’d try for a job, by my reputation is shot to hell, so I’d be stuck doing questionable work anyway.” His fingers are rubbing circles into his temples now, and his brain finally catches up. Eggsy realizes he’s getting worked up and angry because his arm is one massive ball of throbbing pain.

Harry takes notice, and sighs. “When was the last time you took your pain medication?”

A burst of air escapes Eggsy’s lips as he pulls a small bag from his pocket. “Too long.”

The bag contains two white pills and draws a questioning look from Harry. “Is that all they are handing out these days? When I——”

“It’s all they give out to known dealers.” Eggsy cuts him off quickly, tone carrying a strong suggestions to drop the topic. “I have to pick up a new set every day. You know, so I don’t sell ‘em, or OD if I’m an addict too.” It was utterly embarrassing when the nurse came to him the day after he was patched up to confiscate his bottle of meds. Tone vicious, he spits out, “Arthur worked fast on that one.”

Harry has the decency to treat it as though Eggsy commented on the weather, and doesn’t respond.

Eggsy swallows his pills dry, and carries on. He’s eager to get this over and done with. “Point is, there’s no good solution until Daisy gets older. And, he never did more than Mum could handle.” The angry part of Eggsy, the part he’ll never put voice to, blames her for staying with him after the
first time. “He’s never once been rough with Daisy, though. He liked to talk big, but I knew.” His lips twist in jealously. “He was always softer around her.”

Harry’s hands travel back and forth between his face and the back of the couch, as though he doesn’t know what to do with them. “So he mainly went after you.”

Eggsy nods. “And that was okay. I had it under control.” He doesn’t have to look to know that Harry is fighting to hide his disbelief.

“If everything was under control, how did you end up in police custody?”

“Stole Rotti’s car.” He smirks, because he’ll never forget just how good that felt. Flourishing his hand, Harry prompts him to continue.

“He was going to take me back to Dean.” Swallows, because that memory isn’t as pleasant.

Harry’s hands are fists, completely at odds with the even keel of his voice. “I take it he’d done this before?”

“Yeah. Dean’s faithful attack dog.” Eggsy laughs bitterly, and smiles sardonically. “Keeps me in line for ‘im.” The thought of Rotti sends a painful ache through the muscles of his heart. He’s still not ready to untangle that particular Gordian Knot.

“What made that time different? For you to attempt to avoid it so emphatically….”

The part he’s been avoiding arrives. “I lost his drugs.” Takes a deep breath. “See, Rotti trained me up, where I would deliver the orders and collect the cash. I cleaned up nice, though, so I could go where Rotti couldn’t. Richer clientele, and the high-brow neighborhoods and such.” His mouth is drier than cotton. “A bunch of them thought…they like a bit of rough.” Rotti’s words in his mouth. “I turned ‘em all down, but, I guess that’s where the photos came from. The propositions.” Runs a hand through his hair, and brings it to rest on the nape of his neck. Conceals his face behind his elbow. “I was supposed to do a job, but it was different. I was just dropping off, because the goods were prepaid. Nice neighborhood, and I mean really nice. Old money.”

From the corner of his eye, Eggsy sees Harry pick up his glass again and down the rest of it’s content. “Rotti wasn’t with me—he stuck out like a sore thumb. He’d dressed me up to blend in.”

The back of the couch creaks under Harry’s fingers.

“They let me in. Put a drink in my hand.” Draws in a shaky breath, because this next part is why he hates himself. “I drank it.” His fingers twist painfully in his own hair. “I knew better, Harry. I knew something was wrong, when I recognized them as the men from before. The ones who liked how I looked.” He tries to justify, to explain why he ignored every red flag. “But Dean had laid into me recently, and it was a bad one. I didn’t want him to do it again so soon, if they complained to him. So I fucking drank it.”

Harry’s fingernail is tapping on the crystal glass in his palm. His voice is tight. “It was drugged.”

Eggsy nods, his hair rubbing against his forearm. A light tik-tatink sound reaches his ears, and Eggsy peeks out from around his elbow. The glass beneath Harry’s fingers has feathered fractures running throughout like spider silk. “Nothing happened. At least, not what you’re thinking.” Unfolding himself, he leans back against the couch. “That’s why this is so stupid, see. They felt me up a bit, but I got out of there before…it got worse. I really don’t know why I’m making such a big deal out of it, but anyway. I forgot my bag there, and it had more orders for later that day. A lot of lost product.”
Setting the cracked glass on the coffee table, Harry’s movement holds an exaggerated gentleness, as though it’s all he can do to stop himself from throwing it against the wall.

“What they did was not ‘nothing’, Eggsy.” Harry’s jaw is clenched. “Their actions were entirely foul, and it is alright to feel.…” He trails off when he sees the vacant expression on Eggsy’s face. Keeps it straightforward. “It was not nothing.”

The words ease something in Eggsy’s chest that’s been stretched tight and aching since that day. He understands the message Harry is trying to convey: It’s okay if you feel violated. It’s okay to let yourself hurt. It’s okay to let it be a big deal for a little while, because it was a big deal to you.

It’s okay, because it's going to be okay.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I hear you. The corner of Eggsy’s lip twitches up, and he lets out a whoosh of air, chest compressing into a concaved plane. “Anyway, I ran off to a friend’s place to lay low. And then I bumped into Rotti. I was just so fed up with everything...I didn’t even realize what I’d done until I was already behind the wheel?” Drumming his fingers on the seat, he shrugs. “Then I crashed the car to avoid a stupid dog and got picked up by the cops. You know the rest.”

Silence falls as they both mull over the conversation. When Harry doesn’t speak, Eggsy’s gaze starts fluttering about the room for a distraction. His eyes land on a clock. “It’s late.” Christ, it's been hours and he hadn’t even realized. “I’ll need to head back to headquarters soon.”

Shaking his head no, Harry gets to his feet and Eggsy leans forward. “Technically, you are banned from training for another day or so. I’ve a guest room you may use.” Stepping forward, he stands next to Eggsy and drops a warm hand onto his shoulder. Those strong fingers are reassuring. “All will be well, Eggsy, I promise. I will sort everything out tomorrow.”

Eggsy has no idea what to say to that, so he nods and stands to follow Harry up the stairs. The guest room is dated, yet elegant, with its dark damask wallpaper and pale accents. But of course, everything Harry Hart does is stylish. There’s an ensuite with a small shower that he’s permitted to use. Harry disappears for a minute or so, and returns with pajamas in hand.

“You may borrow these tonight. Just leave them on the bed in the morning, and I will take care of them later.”

An award silence depends upon the room.

Harry points to the bathroom. “There are soap and towels in the cabinets.”

Taking the clothes from him, Eggsy smiles weakly. “Ta, mate.”

Another stretch of silence.

“Yes. Of course.” Harry waves a hand through the air, in a vague gesture. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Once Harry slips through the archway and the door clicks shut, Eggsy sags against the bathroom doorframe. It’s like they don’t know how to be around each other any more. How can one conversation change so much?

Running his fingers along the cloth in his hands, he raises it to his nose and inhales. A smile curves his lips. It’s faint, but it smells unmistakably of Harry. A thought strikes him, and he moves to investigate the armoire. He pulls out three drawers before he finds what he’s seeking: a folded, pristine set of brand new sleepwear. Harry had gone out of his way to deliver his own set for Eggsy to use.
Spirits raised, he takes advantage of the first private shower he’s had access to in months. The hot water is a balm to his muscles, though his wound burns during the first minute. Slouching against the wall, he lets the water flow over his chest in contrast with the cool tile against his shoulder blades.

The soap he finds in the tray is the same one Harry uses, and Eggsy doesn’t hesitate to lather up with it. He doesn’t even make it through soaping up his chest when he realizes just how long he’s been denied his privacy.

He hasn’t jerked one off since the incident—hasn’t wanted to—but here, surrounded by steam and scent, Eggsy thinks it might be nice. Hand drifting down his belly, fingers trailing through the white suds, he tries to summon up a fantasy. Of course, Harry drifts into his thoughts, but it somehow seems underhanded. Maybe something different he won’t have to feel guilty about tomorrow when he meets a certain pair of eyes.

Eyelids drifting shut, he gently encircles the base of his length, head leaning back in pleasure against the tile. Soap slicking the way, he gives himself a few tentative strokes. His legs widen for better access and—

*Pinstripe-sleeved hands pull at his knees to spread his legs.*

Teeth clenched, Eggsy’s eyes snap open. The memory of that awful house has crept out of the shadows of memory, and he violently shoves it back in it’s box. Quickly conjures up a different vision, a dark-haired billboard model he’d found particularly striking. Imagines him tall and pressing close, skin to skin, wet to wet, cocks trapped together hotly between hips. Huffing, Eggsy head lols to the side, and he can almost feel the lips lightly nipping at his throat—

—*ah! Stop…* Lips have found his neck instead. *“Don’t!”*—

No, lips are on his *shoulder*, and he likes it. Pictures teeth dragging down his pectorals to find his nipple, light suction bringing sparks of electricity spiraling into the rest of his body—

*The hand toying with his nipple pinches and twists—*

The specter would hike one of Eggsy’s legs up. Hook it onto his elbow, brace his hand, and lean in to open Eggsy up—

*Pinstripe leans in, whispering dirty-good things. A growing sickness twists inside his stomach. Not like this. Not with them—*

Arousal flagging, Eggsy lets out a low growl. God dammit, he’s *not* letting that dictate when he can and cannot masturbate! He gives himself a series of sharp, twisting strokes in rapid order, fanning the flame. Dives back into his fantasy with vigor.

Bent leg propped up, stretching his flexibility to the max, his partner would undulate against him, with him, all over him. Sliding together with sinful decadence, the heat would draw up from the corners of his body to pool in one burning line along the underside of his cock.

Squeezing his lips together, he barely holds in a groan as he plays with his sac, rolling his fingers around and around until he’s almost dizzy from the sensation. His would-be lover would take them both in hand, palms rough with calluses. The smooth band of his ring would be a streak of cold along his shaft, flesh tensing maddeningly in it’s wake. Harry would—

Biting sharply on his lip, he casts his mind around for anyone else. Rotti’s face pops into his head, and is banished just as quickly. Eggsy isn’t ready to touch on that one with a ten foot pole. His mind strays back towards Pinstripe and the rest of his ilk again, and he knocks his head back against the
Utterly vexed, he speeds up the repetitive motion. Tossing away all pretense, Eggsy abandons the plan of a leisurely session and races towards the finish line. Bowing to the demands of his traitor body, he allows Harry’s face to blossom behind his eyes.

The hand holding both of them together is firm, confidant, like it’s owner. Slicked pulls certain and—

—a mouth lightly captures his, softly biting at his lips while the other continues to spout terrible/tempting words—

“That’s it, Eggsy, so good for me, so close....” Harry buries his face in the crook of Eggsy’s neck as he draws them along the lascivious road.

“We’ll look after you. You’ll like it here.”

Rakes him across the coals of lust, and he’s powerless to do anything but submit in the wake of Harry’s hands—

“Keep you warm, well fed, full and well fucked...”

Harry runs his hands—

Pinstripe hisses into his ear “…there’s enough of you to go around.”

There’s no lovely building of heat and lust to culminate in a final crescendo of ecstasy. No, by the end, it’s only fast and filled with dirty and shameful pleasure to finish in an angry toccata of release. For no better reason than to prove to himself that he still can.

He doesn’t feel any better for it. All the joy of the act had fled, and he’s left empty and unsatisfied. Finished he may have, but it’s a hollow a victory. Abruptly shutting off the water, he lingers in the steam and lets the air dry his body.

It’s not fair, it’s just…not bloody fair. He can’t seem to escape that fucking house, and not even the thought of Harry can completely override it. Months stand between him and the incident, and yet he can’t even jerk off without hearing them whisper, or feeling them touch him, or have his stomach twist from the sense-memory of drug-laced scotch.

Toweling off the remaining liquid, he steps out of the shower to rummage around in the cabinet under the sink. Finds a first aid kit, and sits on the toilet to change out his damp bandages. Slowly, he peals off the waterproof top layer and then starts working the bottom gauze pad loose. The warmth of the shower had softened it enough to make it manageable. Finally, his wound is revealed, and Eggsy takes his time to closely examine it for the first time.

The bullet had indeed grazed the outer meat of his shoulder, but it still took it’s pound of flesh. A crater had been made along the back curve where the round had ‘exited’, and, by the looks of it, the nurses had just barely been able to pull it closed for stitching. Once it healed, he was going to be stuck with a small, indented valley of flesh for the rest of his life.

Inhalas and exhales, once, twice, three times before he can get his shaking under control enough to redress his injury. Deliberately avoids thinking about the consequences if he’d been shot just another inch over. I’d never be able to use my arm again.

Eggsy glances forlornly at the pajamas lying innocently on the sink. Imagines pulling them on and sleeping in Harry’s house. Waking up in the morning and sharing a stilted conversation that says
nothing in order to avoid the obvious. An awkward drive to HQ. An even more awkward goodbye at the front door.

He can’t do it.

Eggsy pulls on the same clothing from before, and proceeds to sit on the bed. He spends the time listening to Harry finish up his own shower. Tracks his footsteps and imagines that he can hear the rustle of his own sleepwear. Finally, he hears the tell-tale sound of the mattress compressing, and waits for twenty more minutes.

Unbeknownst to his slumbering Sponsor, Eggsy slips out of bed and down the stairs. Harry’s house is odd without said owner standing next to him. The once welcoming sitting room is one long stretch of squeaky floorboards and rug edges to catch the toes of the unwary. Eggsy figures he’s got a fighting chance, considering how many hours a week he spends here.

So, of course, the first step proves him wrong.

In the wake of it, Eggsy tosses caution to the wind and scurries across the floor. He pauses by the coffee table for a short moment, when the glass Harry had cracked catches his eye. On a whim, he picks it up and takes it with him out of the house.

Harry doesn’t wake up. Or if he did, he let Eggsy go undeterred.

Faced with the bite of a cold night in London, Eggsy goes to where his mind has been all night.

Home.

It takes him a good hour to drag his feet across the neighborhoods. Gradually, the roads become more littered with garbage and graffiti. The closer he gets to his destination, the more people he comes across on street corners, either baring their legs or bearing cash.

When he crosses paths with a hooker he knows by name (her real one), Eggsy knows it time to take to the high roads. Wouldn’t do to have a rumor floating around that he’s back. Backtracks a block to use the stair step fire escape that would be the gentlest on his shoulder, and takes to the roofs. His neighborhood is packed together like sausages, so it's not terribly hard on him to move between buildings with short hops.

Eventually, he finds himself sitting on a ledge, legs dangling in the air, gazing into the window of his apartment across the way. The room is dimly lit by the flickering lights of the telly. His mum is fast asleep on the couch, Daisy, just as out of it, is cozily tucked between the arm of the couch and his mums ribs. Dean’s nowhere to be seen, thank God for small blessings.

He stays for a good while, until Daisy starts to fidget. Instinct dictates Eggsy to go to her, and he bites back on that hard. Next to the telly, the door leading to his room slowly opens, and Rotti sticks his head out.

Sharp bits of grit dig into Eggsy’s palms from clenching at the bricks. Leaning forward, he watches as Rotti approaches his sister.

Out from behind his back, Rotti reveals his hand. Held between his fingers is a little stuffed bunny Eggsy’s never seen. He can’t take his eyes from the sight of Rotti bobbing the stuffed animal from side to side in the air, as though it were dancing. Daisy reaches out for it, and Rotti hands it to her.

Eggsy has to swallow the lump in his throat, because the proof is in front of him. Rotti is looking after his sister while he’s gone. Eyes watering at the sight, his chest unclenches and his entire body relaxes in the way it refused to during his shower. This moment, right here and now, allows Eggsy to forgive him everything.
He stays until Daisy falls back asleep and Rotti slinks back off to bed. Waits until his mum wakes up, turns off the telly, and clears her and Daisy out of the room. Spends the rest of the night strolling along various rooftops, watching the comings and goings of the gutter clutter, and rolling that cracked glass in his fingers.

Morning finds Eggsy back at headquarters, without any sleep. He swings by the barracks and stows the glass in his rucksack. Dawn is barely peeking over the horizon by the time he drops himself into a chair in the mess hall. Apparently Merlin didn’t sleep either, because he walks in just minutes later. Almost immediately, Merlin’s eyes find him and he strolls on over, iClipboard in hand.

“What brings you here in the wee hours, lad?”

How does he even begin to answer that? Pauses, considering the conundrum, and then decides it’s just too early. Dips his head towards Merlin gadget. “Could you just let Harry know that I’m back?”

An eyebrow is raised, and Merlin looks at Eggsy down the length of his nose. “Tell me you didn’t run off first thing.”

Slowly, Eggsy quirks one side of his mouth up. “Nah. Just last thing.” The smiles dies when he thinks back to that soul sucking conversation. It just fucking figures that the first person to hear all about his dirty laundry is his soulmate.

Merlin is still giving him a Look. Eggsy lazily throws his hands up in the air. “Of course you already bloody know everything, don’t you? Did he send you footage, or come in early this morning himself?”

Doesn’t even miss a beat. “He just left my office a few minutes ago, actually.”

Eggsy whistles a low note. “Fast work.”

Merlin nods to himself, as though coming to an unspoken decision, and then sets his iClipboard onto the table. “I cannot, of course, show any preference to any one recruit. I am therefore going to unintentionally leave this PAD on the table, and go grab some coffee. If you just so happen to look at the open file on said forgotten PAD, it’s through no fault of my own.”

True to his word, Merlin lays it on the table and strolls towards the kitchen. Gently, Eggsy picks up the iClipboard to find it already on and opened to a video. A closer inspection reveals it to be a video feed of the closed door discussion from his trial. He presses play.

“—the contrary, I find him to be of exceptional character.” Harry’s voice carries through the speakers as he addresses the knights around the table. “None of this information is new to me, as Eggsy has confided all of it to me in confidence. His strong sense of ethics led him to disclose his actions to me prior to inducting him into the trials, and I fully endorse his place in Kingsman.”

A little warm ball spins to life in his heart. There Harry is, defending Eggsy's halfwit self, without flinching or hesitating.

Some of the other knights, including Arthur, start speaking all at once. They call him every shade of fool there is, and call for him to remove his Proposed from the trials.

Harry stands tall though everything, and stares them down till silence reigns again. “My Proposed has every right to compete, and it’s shameful for this table to say otherwise. My student has been attacked. My student has systematically been singled out. And through all of this, he remains in the top percentile.”
The video plays on in a similar manner, for several minutes. The general theme is that Harry believes in him, and Eggsy can do no wrong. He softens to see his soulmate defend him so rigorously, without a single doubt in his heart.

And he’s ashamed that he hasn’t been living up to Harry’s claims.

Eggsy jumps when the iClipboard is snatched from his hands. Merlin closes it down and tucks it away under his arm. “Nosy brat.” His voice is snarky, but his eyes are warm. A beeping noise emits from Merlin’s technology, and he nods to Eggsy in farewell.

Murmuring his thanks, he watches the man leave before scavenging some breakfast from the kitchens. He picks at his food, mulling over the video he had just seen, but he hardly has an appetite. Instead, he just eats the bare minimum of what agrees with both his stomach and his pain medication, before heading outside.

To untangle his mind, Eggsy explores the grounds for a bit, kicking stones and focusing on breathing. Uses the time away from all the distractions to rebuild his shields, thicken his skin, and shoves the narrative he delivered to Harry last night back into it’s many little boxes. Hides them in his flesh and sinew once more, until he’s forced to open them again; something he’s certain is inevitable.

Everyone will know about the trafficking by this afternoon. And the other, more lascivious accusations. Some of them suspected, but now they’ll know, and Eggsy will have to face them. The trials may have been closed doors, but this place is worse than a knitting circle when it comes to gossip, and Arthur and his pet aren't looking to do him any favors.

He can finally admit to himself that hiding his past was a fools errand. It was never going to stay hidden forever and this isn’t the last time he’s going to face the choices he’s made, regardless of whether they were right or not. For the rest of his life, he will have to live with this dogging his steps. All of his lies—

*Son of a bitch.* A thought bursts brightly to life: I never asked about Merlin and his tampering. The question has been burning inside of Eggsy all night: why not eliminate Charlie when he had the chance? Seeing the fucked up shit that people, including himself, have done to secure their match, Eggsy finds it very odd that Merlin didn’t trounce the idiot. Even with the scant knowledge he has about Merlin’s personal limits, Eggsy can tell his actions are out of character. He’s missing something.

Since the lying and snooping hasn’t done him much good lately, Eggsy decides to go straight to the horse’s mouth, and sets a course for Merlin’s office. He passes two of his fellow recruits upon reentering the building, and they each give him a long, sneering once over. *Yep, everyone knows.*

Letting out a sigh, he avoids the mess hall, where most recruits would be gathered at this hour, and takes the scenic route. Shortly, he finds himself on the basement level, and follows the industrial piping to Merlin’s cave. As he approaches, he can hear voices echoing into the hall, and stops short of the entrance to listen.

“Then where is he?” Roxy’s there, he’s surprised to note. “If everything is—”

Merlins cuts her off. “Ah, Mr. Unwin.” Merlin’s tone is drier than a desert. “Perhaps you might stop skulking in the shadows and help me assure Ms. Morton here that you were not, in fact, taken out back and shot. Again.”

Sheepishly, he slowly peeks around the threshold. His heart stumbles a moment in it’s rhythm. Harry
is there, reviewing Merlins clipboard, and Roxy is there badgering them.

All eyes turn to him, and he swallows down his nerves as best he can. Roxy’s body jerks in an aborted movement to rush to his side, and he shoots her a tight smile. “Hiya’ Roxy.” His tone is questioning.

She nods and graces him with a smile. “Hey Eggys.” The twisting in his stomach is quelled at her friendly response. She’s still with him, despite.

Eggsy addresses Merlin, “Can I talk to you?” His eyes drift to Harry, who is studiously flicking through pictures on the PAD. “Alone?”

The Scottish lilt is prominent. “Of course. I’m engaged all afternoon, but if you’d like to return this evening prior to dinner?”

Eyes remaining on Harry, Eggsy nods. “Yeah, that’d be fine. Thanks.” Silence descends upon the room, and it’s so bloody awkward. Harry won’t take his eyes off the PAD and Eggsy won’t take his eyes off him. Merlin and Roxy are suddenly quite interested in the random pile of junk on the many work tables. “Okay then.” Flaps his arms helplessly at his side. “I guess I’ll be going. See you later, Merlin.”

Roxy blurts out, “I’ll walk with you!” Desperate to break the strange tension.

Both Eggsy and Roxy move to the exit, when Harry finally speaks up. It takes everything Eggsy has to not exhale dramatically in reassurance. “Have you taken your pills this morning?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Harry finally meets his eyes. There’s a strange hardness in them, but the tilt of his brow is more concerned than anything else. “Not yet.”

“Be certain to stop by the medics soon. I don’t want you hurting.”

Eggsy’s heart clenches, and the image of a cracked crystal glass drifts though his thoughts. Manages a nod before he slips out of the room, Roxy on his heels. She’s silent until they hit the elevator.

“What’s up with the two of you?” Roxy’s tone is light, an airy smile gracing her lips, but Eggsy’s lived with her for months now. He can tell what’s she’s really asking. What did Harry do last night? Are you okay?

Shrugging, he responds just as casually. “Don’t know what you’re on about.” Nothing happened.

Snorting, Roxy pans out a sassy remark. “Oh please, you two were exchanging glances like currency in a bank.” Liar. Give me reassurance.

“We had a heavy talk.” Dips his head in a small, jerky movement. “Long time coming, honestly. Things are better this way.” Waggles his eyebrows at Roxy, and pulls out his posh accent. “Besides, I’ve your beautiful self to keep me company now, so all is made well again.”

Roxy rolls her eyes. “Whatever. So, the infirmary for pain meds? Why didn’t they give them to you at your discharge?”

Eggsy considers lying to her. It’d be easy—he could use the excuse of the trial fiasco. But he stops himself, and considers. Every one of his lies has gone round and bit him on the arse. Maybe the universe is trying tell him something. “Policy. They don’t doll out pills to drug dealers or addicts.” He can feel her gaze burn into the side of his cheek. “And which are you?”
Pursing his lips, he gives her a sidelong look. “Seriously?”

Huffing, she concedes the point and the subject is dropped. Once they round the bend, the nurses station comes into view. The elderly woman who attended him last time recognizes him on sight, and is already setting the day’s allotment on the counter.

“Come back tomorrow morning for a refill. Also, clear your schedule next Monday morning. You’ll be checked over by your physician to prepare you for your return to the training schedule.”

Roxy, as it turns out, is outraged. “Only a week?” She points to Eggsy’s arm in a swift, sharp motion. “You do realize his shoulder is no longer the same shape as his other?”

Eggsy shakes his head in disbelief. It figures that she’d notice the new contour. “It’s fine, Roxy.”

The nurse looks down her nose at them unsympathetically. “You’re young and can still heal well. The trial will take our notes under consideration, of course. But it’s also a demonstration of action while wounded in the field.” Turning her attention back to the desk, she starts shuffling files around in obvious dismissal. “There’s one every trial.” She tacks on rather carelessly.

Roxy and him exchange dubious glances. “And, did any of those others ever pass?”

Glancing up, the nurse’s silence is all too revealing.

“Righto, then.” Eggsy claps his hands together in false cheer. “Rox, shall we?”

They leave the ward behind, and Eggsy heads for yet another flight of stairs. Roxy looks to him, eyebrows raised to her hairline.

Eggsy answers without looking at her. “You want my story or not?”

The best thing about Roxy, he contemplates in their mutual silence, is that she takes everything in stride. If she likes you, she gives you the benefit of the doubt. Not once during their trip to the medical ward did she press Eggsy to explain himself. It’s more than anyone’s done for him since this whole mess began, and that includes Harry and Merlin.

That, more than anything, is what leads him to volunteer the whole sordid tale.

He leaves out Merlin’s little bit of involvement, and the soul marks since he still doesn’t know where he stands. But he does tell her about everything else. And ye Gods, it’s cathartic in a way that telling Harry was not.

It’s as though the previous night was a warmup round; a way to gather his thoughts. Because this time? His story is actually coherent. Repeating it again when he was tired of it let him cut out the unimportant bits, the bullshit, and get straight to the heart of what actually mattered to him.

When he finishes his litany of sins, Roxy doesn’t get all weepy on him, thank Christ. She doesn’t even try to console him by saying it’s not his fault. She’s well aware that Eggsy knows which parts were his own doing, and which parts were done to him.

Instead, she goes tit for tat.

“I get it. My mother…she wasn’t nice either.” They’re sitting side by side, heads tucked together to hide sound and lip shape from the surveillance. “My father was away often.”

Eggsy offers her the same curtesy by not offering useless platitudes. “What ‘appened, then?”
A vicious smirk twists onto her face. “He came home early. And mother never came home again.”

There is a heartbeat of time strung between them, frozen. Eggsy isn’t quite sure what to read into that, because that could mean something very good or very bad. Time restarts with a tha-thump, and he says the first thing to spring to mind. “Good.”

Eventually, Roxy is forced to join the recruits for the afternoon gym session, and Eggsy is banished to the study hall. A long week of boring classroom work is ahead of him, where the most stimulating activity will be avoiding moving his arm as much as possible, and that long-ass week starts now.

He spends that afternoon going over in his head what he was going to ask Merlin, how he was going to ask it, and planning several responses to the imagined responses. Why didn’t Merlin make his ‘innocence’ undeniable? There was more to it than just keeping up appearances, especially when he had so much riding on the outcome of the trials. Why not incriminate Charlie when he had the chance? What could be more important than protecting your soulbond?

The questions roll round and around his thoughts without providing any satisfactory theory. In fact, the only good thing to come of it all was the leg-up on Charlie his injury provided, of all things. Hesketh’s head wound is recorded as less than it actually is, making him less physically capable than the competition. Eggsy will have the advantage in scoring.

Perhaps, he thinks for the first time, Merlin was more crafty in this than he first thought.

The unfortunate side effect of having a leg up on his fellow injured recruit is that Charlie is banished to the study hall as well. They keep their distance, and sit at opposite corners of the room. Glares are exchanged every few minutes to check that the other hasn’t moved, or pulled out a gun. Evening can’t fall fast enough.

Eggsy tries not to dwell on the fact that he has a week of the very same to look forward to. Either way, he’s exhausted by the time dinner rolls around. He may have been able to avoid people during breakfast and lunch, but the dinner is inevitable. There are four recruits left other than Roxy and himself. Their eyes don’t leave him for a second.

He allows himself to be chased away early. As eager as he is to speak with Merlin, he’d be lying if he claimed the constant scrutiny didn’t bother him. Bitterly wonders when the he-fucked-his-way-into-the-trials rumor will start circulation. If it hasn’t already.

Back to Merlin’s cave, Eggsy is ready to fire off his first question. He’s meticulously planned this conversation to get the answers he wants. And then Merlin fucks that plan right up by asking the last question in existence Eggsy wants to hear.

“Who really gave you the bruises on your hips? The ones you came here with.” Merlin’s fingers are skating the surface of his iClipboard.

Eggsy brings his hand up in the universal signal for ‘halt’. “I don’t need to see that fucking picture ever again. Christ, I’m not even through the door yet.” To demonstrate, Eggsy takes a slow and exaggerated step across the threshold.

Merlin cocks his head to the side. If there’s one thing Eggsy sucks at, it’s the waiting game. He always loses.

“I was roofied and they felt me up.” This is the third time he’s told this part, and it’s slightly easier to distance himself. “Already told Harry all about it. Which means you already know about it, too.”

Nodding his head, Merlin acknowledges the point. “Indeed. Still, it’s rare for those kind of marks to
form from being groped, even forcefully.” His words are blunt and unexpected.

Eggsy looks away under the pretense of inspecting Merlin’s many projects. Walking around, he puts one of the workbenches between them. Pokes around at some odds and ends to distract himself. “You got a question in there somewhere, gov?” He knows there is.

“Did they get further?”

“Jesus, Merlin, no.” Even though he was expecting it, the question is still a shock to his system. Why does he, and Harry, and everyone in Kingsman think he wants to pour his heart out? Why do they think they have a right to ask these questions?

“Eggsy, it’s important to talk about it. You can’t just keep it bottled away inside.” Tone clinical, Merlin starts organizing some random junk on his desk.

He’ll never admit it, but Eggsy is grateful he’s turned his eyes away. There’s been more than enough scrutiny as of late. “I already said they didn’t, so let it go.”

“Harry may not be well-versed enough in this sort of thing to spot the inconsistency—”

“But I suppose you are?”

Merlin locks eyes with him. “Yes, in fact, I am.”

The declaration freezes Eggsy’s lungs.

Merlin’s voice drops an octave. “Take it on good authority that shoving the memories into those little hidden spaces in the back of your mind will do you more harm than you know. They won’t tolerate a cage forever.”

Staring each other down, Eggsy is the first to break. “So, what, you offerin’ to be my unofficial therapist?”

Merlin shrugs as though it’s a question he gets every day. “If that’s what it takes.”

Maybe it’s shitty of him, but never let it be said that Eggsy let a golden opportunity slip from his grasp. “Alright, but there’s a condition.”

Spreading his arms open, palms up, Merlin raises his eyebrows in mute inquiry.

“You gotta’ tell me what the bloody hell is going on. Whatever problem you and Harry have with Arthur, it’s dragging me down with it, and I need to know why.” The spark behind Merlin’s storm colored eyes tells Eggsy he’s onto something. Once he’d taken a step back, it became clear that the issue went beyond the Eggsy vs. Charlie show. That left the only other common thread to be Arthur.

After examining him for a few tense seconds, Merlin agrees to Eggsy terms.

So they end up sitting in front of each other, knees to knees. Eggsy draws the short straw, of course, so he goes first. And, funny thing, once he starts talking, he can’t seem to shut up.

“They wanted to keep me, see. Pass me around until I was used up, and then…” Shivering, Eggsy lights upon a question he hadn’t thought to ask: What would they have done once they’d gotten bored with him? Toss him back to the streets, or…something more permanent?

Judging by the sinister cant of Merlin’s features, he’s asking himself the same question. “Give me the address.”
Opening his mouth to respond, Eggsy pauses. Wracks his brain for the location, but he can’t seem to shake it loose. “I don’t remember where Rotti took me.”

“Can you remember anything about the neighborhood? Was it forested? Were the streets paved or cobbled? Did—”

Eggsy waves his hands between them. “No, I mean, I don’t remember the street, but I can give you a district. You got a map on that iClipboard of yours?”

His fingers dance across the screen, but Merlin still manages to multitask, and scrunches his face at Eggsy. “iClipboard?”

Flushing red, Eggsy raises his chin in defiance. “You got a better name for it?”

Smirking, Merlin doesn’t stoop to giving a response. Instead, “Who is this Rotti bloke? Harry mentioned he lived with you?”

Eggsy doesn’t let his mini heart attack show on his face. “Yeah, he was one of Dean’s.” Shrugs like it’s nothing. “Did some errands, dealt some blow, kept me in line. Did you know, this one time, Dean and his boys went—”

“You’re good, Eggsy, trying to distract me with other distressing details. But you haven’t answered my question, and I’ll not let it slide if someone hurt you in such a manner.” It feels like Merlin’s eyes could bore straight into his soul. “Don’t let them get away with this.”

And…he's tempted, he really is. So easy. It would be so easy to point his finger at Rotti, and—wait. “Are you wanting to actually do something about this? Like, arrests?”

A wave of confusion washes across Merlin’s countenance. “Of course. Eggsy, if the culprit remains free, they’ll just do it again to someone else. It’s important that you speak out.”

Oh shit. Oh, shit. Biting his lip, Eggsy’s heart actually starts pounding. “Look…I told you what I know about the Suits, but…” Steels himself, and cuts through the crap. Honesty, remember? “Okay, fine. You got me. Those particular bruises weren’t from those men, and we both know it.”

And Rotti had hurt him. Had truly struck terror into his heart during the worst of it, but…he keeps thinking of him with his sister last night. Big, strong, scary Rotti brought a fucking stuffed bunny to make a toddler smile. Looking after her while Eggsy’s away. Keeping her safe and happy. It’s enough.

“I’m not going to tell you who, or how, or why. Just know that it was a one-off.” Because Eggsy knows why he did it, and he gets it even if he doesn’t condone it. “A repeat with someone else is very unlikely.”

The sick thing is, Eggsy would almost be jealous if Rotti went after someone else like that. It’s been bloody war and peace betwixt them—a private affair—and it would be a slap in the face to involve another. It’s their’s.

With pursed lips, Merlin looks like he’s about to argue. At the last second though, he just shakes his head. “Alright then. If you change your mind, you know where to find me. I urge you to rethink.”

Eggsy nods his head vigorously, eager to let the subject drop, finally. “My turn, then.” Leans forward in anticipation. “Tell me everything.”

At long last, Merlin lets Eggsy in on the action, and it’s…well, he figures it’s about par for the fucking course. Apparently Arthur has been making questionable choices for about a year now. Nothing too overt, but enough to end up on Merlin’s anal-retentive radar, and, through the transitive
By the end of it, Merlin is rubbing his eyes behind his glasses. “A few months ago, there was a kidnapping in Iceland—let’s just say it was of political importance—with which Kingsman failed to intervene.” He crosses his arms. “I know Arthur had something to do with it, I know it.”

Eggsy catches on. “But you can’t prove it.”

Huffing, Merlin grants Eggsy a half smile. “Course not. He’s accounted for.”

There’s a pause where Merlin stares at Eggsy with a meaningful look. “What?”

Merlin rolls his hand, encouraging Eggsy to engage his brain.

The penny drops. “So someone, or someones, is helping the bastard.”

“And some of them have to be our operatives. We just don’t know which ones.”

Eggsy closes his eyes, and his chin drops to his chest. “The vote.”

Smirking, Merlin spreads his hands. Ta-da! “Every knight would hesitate to eliminate Arthur’s recruit, out of respect for his station. But a chance to eliminate you? That’s a chance Arthur wouldn’t pass up.”

A black wave of resentment swells in Eggsy. “And I was acceptable collateral damage.”

Shaking his head, Merlin’s fingers move to his temples. “Hardly. You’re taking this too personally. Without my help, you didn’t stand a chance. The circumstances I put forward wouldn’t even have required a vote ten years ago. Innocent until proven guilty. The honest ones would never vote to cast you out. But as we now know, Arthur has quite a few knights in his pocket.” His lips stretch in a frown. “We didn’t actually believe there would be so many.”

Eggsy sniffs. “So we both dodged a bullet then.” He’s still miffed, and it’ll take some time getting over it, but he does understand desperation. He hides it well, but Merlin? Something in him is very desperate. “I just need to know. Why would you even risk Charlie winning? He flat out admitted to me that he’s trying to force you into an unwanted bond.”

There. There it is again, that dark something crouched behind Merlin’s eyes. “Some things are bigger than ourselves, Eggsy. Kingman is sacrifice and service.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Besides, I believe that God does not, in fact, play dice with the universe.” Pats Eggsy’s knee, before climbing to his feet. “Things will work out, lad. You’ll see.”

Merlins voice is convincing enough, but Eggsy sees it in him. He saw it when they first met and he sees it now. Maybe God doesn’t gamble, but Merlin does, and Eggsy is certain he’s somehow stacked the deck.

Eggsy stands as well, and Merlin rests a hand on his good shoulder. “I know you feel burned on this one Eggsy, so let me offer you this.” His tone softens to a low hum. “Should anything else happen during training, I’ll be in your corner, completely. As will the evidence. We got all that was needed from the vote.”

Eggsy stares at him in disbelief. Did he just…. “Are you asking me to—“

“I’m not asking you to do anything. Accidents happen. Especially around Mr. Hesketh.” Merlin gives him a meaningful look. “Do whatever is needed to stay safe.”
If Eggsy didn’t know better, he’d say that was Merlin’s version of *Try, Try Again*.

“Off to the dorms with you now. Come back tomorrow—I’ll have some pictures for you to look at.”

That would be his dismissal. Except. “Ain’t I meeting Harry?”

Merlin’s already turned from him to play with another project. “Ah, no, not tonight. He’s detained on business.”

Lips pursed, Eggsy leaves. It just figures that Harry would avoid him now, of all times.

The next few days are the most boring he experiences at Kingsman. He and Roxy eat meals together, but then they go their separate ways. Roxy gets to run the obstacle course, and spar, and shoot guns while Eggsy is stuck in the study hall with Charlie bloody Hesketh.

To be fair, though, it’s sort of fun to watch the berk massage his head every few minutes. Charlie must be feeling pretty damn bad to leave Eggsy to his own devices. Eggsy makes a valiant effort to limit the smug swell of victory, but, well, he never said he was perfect.

Evenings belong to Merlin this week, as well. Their next meeting involves a series of pictures depicting various houses in the neighborhood he’d pointed out before. After forty or so, Eggsy identifies the house. The night after that, Merlin moves on to people, starting with the house’s owner and frequent guests.

Eggsy isn’t stupid. He knows why Merlin’s doing it, and he has a good idea of where these men will end up once they’re identified. They’ll get what’s coming to them and they won’t be able to do the same thing they did to Eggsy to anyone else. *And that, Eggsy figures, is that.*

Except it’s *not*.

Merlin starts in on the rest of his life, and Harry is fucking MIA during it all. He likes to lull Eggsy into a false sense of security with talk of Harry, gadgets, and his training. And then *bam,* he’ll hit Eggsy up with questions about his past.

“Was there anyone else?”

“Was Dean ever inappropriate with you? Beyond the usual, I mean.”

After the first few times, Eggsy just stops answering, but that doesn't prevent Merlin from gleaning the answers from his face. Eggsy will always be mixed up toward Rotti, having seen the best and worst of him, and Merlin zeroes right in on it.

“Who is this Rotti fellow? You’ve mentioned him a few times.”

“How did he help Dean ‘keep you in line’?”

Every question drove him closer to the truth, until one day, Merlin strikes gold.

“Was it him to give you those bruises?”

Eggsy’s face does this little spasm, and Merlin starts touching the screen of his iClipboard. That man is like a dog with a goddamn bone.

“Leave it alone, Merlin, I swear to God. Don’t you dare put that shite anywhere in you file for Arthur to use.”
Merlin gives him a tight frown, but sets his PAD down anyway. If it’s not written down, it can’t be read at your funeral, or, in his case, trial.

Things look like they’re heading towards another argument that’ll end with Eggsy cleaning the floors with a toothbrush, when Harry finally turns up. He walks in without knocking, nose buried in a file. “Merlin, do you have a moment to spare? I may have a lead—oh, hello Eggsy.”

Raising an eyebrow, Eggsy waves in greeting.

“How is your arm holding up?”

God, but he’s missed that lilting baritone sound. “Just fine, ta. Better.”

Harry smiles at that, “I am very glad to hear it.” Turns back to Merlin. “I’ve a lead on the chip implanted in Professor Arnold.”

Nodding, Merlin starts pulling up files on the screen. “Eggsy, you’re excused for the night. I’ll see —”

“Let him stay.” Harry shoots Eggsy a conspirators smirk. “It will be good for him to observe.”

Smiling back, Eggsy drags his chair closer to the main screen. Trembling relief rushes through him, to see Harry treating him normally. Never will he admit it aloud, but the thought of Harry looking at him like he’s, well, someone else, is a fear he’s been carrying. It’s held his tongue hostage all this time, and it’s nice to be proven wrong.

Merlin brings forth a university profile of an older man, one Professor Arnold. “This is the man who died while Harry interrogated him.” Another, more recent picture is pulled up focused on the side of his neck. “We can see from this footage a small incision below and just behind the ear.”

Harry pipes up. “This has been determined as the source of the small explosion—”

“Wait, his fuckin’ head blew up?” Because that shit only happens in bad spy movies.

“Quite spectacularly so.” Christ, but Harry says it like he’s complimented a particularly nice meal out.

Relinquishing a jump drive into Merlin’s custody, Harry starts his rundown of new information. “There’s evidence here of the Swedish Prime Minister having the same volatile implant. You’ll see the scar by his ear in the images contained on that drive.”

Merlin opens the files, and Harry starts navigating the jpegs. He settles on one depicting a black man in pristine hiphop garb. Eggsy half expects to see the price tags still attached, his clothes are so new. “And this man?”

Harry points to the screen. “This is the common denominator: Mr. Valentine. I know he’s met with both the good professor and the Swedish PM. Can you look into this for me? Who does he associate with, what are his political affiliations, what’s he doing to have met both of these men?”

Eggsy looks between his two mentors. “You’re taking the piss, right?”

Both men turn to him, expressions blank.

Gesturing to Merlin’s iClipboard, he elaborates. “Valentine’s a genius. He’s been doing a lot of charity work, too. Real popular in my neighborhood.” Merlin finally relinquished the PAD into
Eggsy’s eager hands. “Check this out.”

Pulling up a youtube video, he plays for them Valentine’s latest lisping announcement. *Free calls. Free internet. For everyone. Forever.*

Clearing his throat, Merlin takes his PAD back. Harry’s eyes are unfocused, deep in thought. “A philanthropist then.”

Snorting, Merlin throws in his two pence. “A philanthropist who is also suspected in numerous kidnappings.” He pulls up a list of names onto the big screen, many of which Eggsy recognizes from the news. Foreign dignitaries and leaders, and—

“Iggy Azalea? Really?” Because really?

“Indeed. Well, it seems some of the legwork is done for you Merlin. Can you work on corroborating this?”

“Of course. In the meantime, try not to do anything foolish.” Merlin’s eyes are flat lines.

Harry looks affronted. “Is that truly necessary? I’ll only be having dinner with the chap. Speaking of which…?”

Merlin rolls his eyes. “I’ll set it up. In the meantime, brush up on these topics.” Picking up a stack of overly full manilla folders from his desk, Merlin takes malicious joy in slapping them into Harry’s palms.

Dutifully, Harry starts flipping through them.

Eggsy shifts his weight from foot to foot in the sudden silence. So then…they’re done, possibly? “Hey Harry, can you spare some time tonight? There’s this bit about IEDs I don’t really get…could use your help.”

Harry doesn’t even glance at him. “Not tonight, Eggsy. I’ve some fieldwork to finish. Perhaps in a day or two.”

“…’a’ight. That’s fine.” Logically, Eggsy knows that Harry has an actual job outside of training him. Still, it stings. He shakes it off and slinks out of the workshop. Ignores the murmurs emanating from the office and heads to bed.

After that, once again, Eggsy doesn’t see Harry for days.

The status quo holds, and he keeps attending Merlin in the evenings. He tries to pry about the Valentine issue, but Merlin isn’t in the same sharing mood as his sponsor.

“It’s being taken care of. You’ll probably never have to deal with it. I’m certain it’ll be wrapped up before the Trials even finish.”

Then he’ll sidetrack Eggsy with more pictures. Somehow, Merlin ran down Pinstripe and the rest of his despicable company. He hasn’t asked what’s to be done about them, and Merlin hasn’t offered. Nevertheless, it’s clear something’s going on. In light of everything that’s gone down the past two weeks, Eggsy opts to keep his trap shut and waits for the other shoe to drop.

He doesn’t have long to wait.

“Do you recognize any of these men?”
Swiping through the photo collection on the iClipboard, Eggsy realizes that yes, he knows all of them. “Why do you have pictures of Dean’s goons?”

“So these men worked with your Stepfather? Are there any that we’ve missed, to your knowledge?”

Eyebrows knitting together, Eggsy studies the long series of photos. “Daq…Rooter…Nobs….” Face after face is viewed and swept aside. There must be over thirty profiles here. “I dunno, these three here seem familiar, but I never talked to them, so—why is Rotti’s profile here?” A sneaking suspicion whispering in his ear, and cold dread starts to pool in his stomach.

Merlin doesn’t meet his eyes, but his fingers, holding the edge of his workbench, turn white. “Was he not employed by Dean? You’ve mentioned him multiple times in conjunction with illegal behavior—”

“To which I was also party.” Eggsy snaps out.


Pinching the bridge of his nose, Eggsy sighs. “I told you to drop it. Leave Rotti out of it—it’s between us.”

Merlin’s mouth is a hard line. “Unfortunately, lad, nothing is ‘personal business’ in Kingsman. Your right to privacy is essentially nonexistent. That man should be held accountable.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not your call to make.” The second the words trip off his tongue, Eggsy regrets them.

A slow blink. The shoulders broaden. Eyes stare out from beneath an avalanching brow. “Really now?”

Eyes lower. “I just mean I won’t testify against him, or give a statement or anything. So, it would be pointless to drag him in to a trial.” Because that’s where this is all going. The pictures, the late night ‘field work’….

“Eggsy, what makes you think there will be a trial for any of these people?”

The bottom drops out of his stomach and Eggsy experiences the strangest sensation of vertigo in reverse. “There has to be. Due process. They have a right to seek council and defend themselves.”

“Not when it comes to you. But you were right about one thing, boyo, this isn’t my call. It's Harry’s.”

His heart flutters, against his will. Swallows nervously. “Merlin, you can’t let him do this.” Eggsy doesn’t know precisely what ‘this’ is, but he does know one thing: “It ain’t right.”

“It’s already done, and I can’t say I disagree.” Smirking, Merlin chuckles, and Eggsy sees that Merlin is a might wee twisted at times. “Frankly, I don’t think he’s overly concerned with right and wrong when it comes to his…people.”

“It’s already…” His thoughts are stalled. “What did he do?” Because it almost sounds like Harry’s on some kind of mission of revenge. For him. That spiteful pit inside of him purrs in devious delight at the mere thought. No one has ever thought he was worth defending, worth avenging. He likes it.

Merlin doesn’t skip a beat. “Neutralized a threat.” Like it’s nothing.
Abruptly, Eggsy experiences a crashing realization: these are not gentle people. Between the romance of adventure and a dashing cast of James Bond characters, he’d forgotten just who they are and what this job entails. Merlin and Harry are not ‘nice’. They are just, and they are good, but they are a far cry away from forgiving, law-abiding citizens. They are members of an unsanctioned militia; unlawful combatants that will be labeled as mercenaries if they’re ever caught.

Urgency bleeds into his heart. “Bloody hell. I want to talk to him, Merlin, where’s he at?”

Raising his hand, Merlin tries to calm him. “I’m certain he’d be glad to discuss this with you in the morning.”

Shaking his head, Eggsy stands. “I’m going over to his flat. This can’t wait.”

He starts walking to the exit when Merlin calls him back. “He’s not there. He’s afield, tying up loose ends.”

“Loose ends.” Of course, because Merlin’s been prying about anyone he might have missed in his digging. Merlin’s voice echoes in his mind: Are there any that we’ve missed, to your knowledge? “You’re picking em’ up tonight, then. Wanted to know if you had em’ all.”

Merlin tries to placate him again, but Eggsy’s already on the move. God help his fool self, but he wants Rotti kept out of it. He just…he just does.

He needs a phone, and there isn’t one at Kingsman he can use without seven different operatives eavesdropping. He’ll need to leave the grounds and find one. Harry’s out, so his car will be gone, leaving the underground tram to Saville Row as his sole option.

Surprisingly, he’s alone in the tunnels, and the man running the tailor shop doesn’t even blink when he exits through the dressing room. Eggsy makes his way through the sartorial jungle until he finds the door back to London. The little bell signals his return to the city, and he casts his mind about for a solution.

A mad dash over and under the city isn’t the answer now. If what he suspects is true, and Harry is overseeing a raid of his neighborhood tonight, then he doesn’t need to be caught in the net. It takes minutes to remember that payphones do, in fact, still exist. Eggsy digs his hands into his pockets, and the absence of jingling coins exposes the monkey-wrench in the works.

Doesn’t hesitate to sink back into his old mindset, when his child self had mapped the best scavenging grounds for dosh. Jogging through the city, he keeps an eye out for the badges, and doesn’t see a single one. This isn’t a good thing—it means they’re congregating—three guesses where.

By the time he reaches his destination, the sun has dipped below the horizon, and he finds himself turning down a narrow, cobbled back alley. Yellow light pours through a glass storefront, and Eggsy is welcomed by a familiar warm rumble. Glances to the sign above the door before entering.

Blue Bubbles Washateria: Service All Night.

He can’t help but smirk at the worn, familiar words. Once inside, he tosses a nod to the old woman who owns the joint, grabs a spare hanger from a wire cart, and stalks down the first row of dinged up washing machines. Settling down onto his hands and knees, Eggsy presses his cheek to the floor and scans under the washers for coins. Three washers and one dryer later, he’s got a handful of pence for the payphone on the street corner.

On his way out, he gives a sheepish wave to the owner, who simply rolls her eyes. She’s known him
long enough to give him a pass.

Outside is a biting drop in temperature, his body having warmed up amidst the running machinery. Still, he shoves himself into the little box and picks up the black plastic handset. Punches the numbers in a familiar pattern. The ringing on the other end trills once, twice, three times—

“Lo’?” Rotti’s voice is lazy, and Eggsy’s words die on his tongue. In the background, he can hear the soft hum of the telly and gleeful babbling of his little sister.

He swallows. “Rotti?”

Shifting cloth and couch springs signal Rotti’s abrupt straightening. “Eg—hey. Hang on.” Eggsy can hear him get off the sofa, and the background noise fades away. “Where the fuck you been? Dean’s on the warpath. Got everyone lookin’ out for ya’—”

Eggsy cuts him off. “I don’t have much time.” He’s only got so many coins. “Listen to me. You need to get out of there. Now.”

Just then, a little bell-voice echoes through the earpiece and stabs straight into Eggsy’s heart. “Rah-dee!” His sister. His little, baby sister. When he left, she’d had nothing but gibberish on her tongue, and now, the first word he’s heard from her lips is Rotti’s name. A surge of jealously threatens to drown him.

Rotti must have heard Eggsy choking on bitterness across the wire, because he’s whispering quickly to her. “Daisy, go back to yer Mum.” Clears his throat uncomfortably. “She’s, uh, she’s walkin’ now.”

Eggsy nearly bites clean through his bottom lip. He missed her first steps. *He missed her first steps.*

“What’re you on about, then?”

Eggsy almost hangs up on him. He considers letting whatever Harry’s plans are play out to Rotti’s detriment. Those precious memories of first words and first steps are *gone*, and Eggsy wants to blame Rotti as a dirty lousy thief because of it.

Brutally, Eggsy reminds himself that it was him who walked away, however good or bad his reason. “If you don’t want to be arrested, you’ll go somewhere else for the night.” As an afterthought, “Across town, don’t go to any of your ‘friends’.”

Voice urgent, Rotti whispers “Where are you?” The whisper of a jacket bleeds through the mic, and Eggsy knows he’s on the way out the door.

“Eggsy, we…we gotta talk.”

Deflating, Eggsy nods to himself. They really do. “Got any dirty laundry?” Hangs up the phone before Rotti can respond.

He returns to Blue Bubbles and leans against a running dryer in one of the aisles. The heat burns through his herringbone jumpsuit and the vibration soothes his muscles. Even his injured shoulder starts to relax into the impromptu massage.

Sooner than expected, the little bell above the laundromat door jingles, shortly after which Rotti finds his spot. Without a word, the older man joins him on the floor, back to the dryer.

Eggsy’s never been good at the awkward silences. “You always came with us.” Because looking
back on all those years when they didn’t have a washer at home, Rotti joined him and his mum on laundry day. He didn’t do shit, just watched him hunt for coins and sort the socks, but he was there. But then, Rotti would have been a teenager around that time, wouldn’t he? Most teenagers were angsty, and unhelpful.

Rotti shrugs. “Was there for a lot of things.”

Now that Eggsy has some distance on the situation, he sees that yeah, he really was. On a whim, “Did you do it to feel like part of the family?” He’s always wondered, and this is the first time he’s had the guts to just ask.

Upper lip curling, Rotti bites out a tired “Shut yer’ mouth.” It’s half-hearted at best, and Eggsy knows he’s hit the mark.

Silence again. This time, Eggsy waits it out.

“So what’d ya’ do now?”

Eggsy rolls his head to the side to stare at him. “Seriously?”

“Oy, don’t gimme’ that look. Any time there’s trouble, it’s ‘cause Eggsy dropped the merch, or Eggsy’s been actin’ out, or get Eggsy back in line. Whacha’ do this time?”

Typical. Rotti was always good at turning things ‘round. Though, as much as Eggsy hates to admit it, he has a point. The only reason he was brought in was because Eggsy was making trouble for Dean. He never really thought about the effects his actions may have had on Rotti.

“Ah-hem.” A pointed cough comes from the aisle opening, and they both turn to see the owner. She raises an eyebrow at them and points to the sign posted on the far wall. 

No loitering. No exceptions. 
Paying customers ONLY.

Rotti and Eggsy exchange a glance, and then nod to the Blue Bubbles matron. They both pull off their boots, and strip the socks from their feet. Rotti hands his off to Eggsy and then scrounges under the machines for pence.

Making a show of it, Eggsy opens the unoccupied dryer across from them and tosses their socks in, one by one. He can’t help but notice the difference: his socks are thick and tightly woven while Rotti’s are threadbare and torn. Not to long ago, his socks were like that. Mind flashing to the golden, illegible Mark on Roxy’s inner thigh, he thinks they may be yet again.

A loud ratcheting sound jerks him from his thoughts. Rotti has paid the machine, and punches the button to start the longest, low heat cycle. The matron, satisfied, walks away with an amused smirk.

The two return to their seat on the ground, hidden from view of the store entrance.

Eggsy picks up where he left off. “There’s a…sweep going down. Picking up everyone, so you need to lay low till’ it’s over.” He spills the absolute minimum. When he sees Rotti start to finger his cell phone, Eggsy shakes his head. “Don’t call anyone. Don’t warn anyone. It’s time for us to walk away.”

Rotti purses his lips. “You’re asking for a lot.”

Glaring hard, “You owe me a lot.”
He flinches, and reluctantly slips the phone into his pocket. They both know the *lot* Eggsy is referring to.

Licking his lips, Rotti’s eyes turn onto the tumbling socks in the dryer window and stay locked on, as though looking away might bring death. “What I did…was fucked up.” Runs a hand through his hair. “I weren’t myself.”

That old rage rears his head again alongside Eggsy’s breastbone. “Oh, come off it, Rotti.”

“No, listen, that day—”

“It wasn’t just that day, though, it was, it….” Eggsy trips over his tongue in his rush, and he has to clamp his mouth shut to get back control of his words. Like herding bloody cats. “That whole time. You knew what you were doing. At least on some level.”

Reluctantly, Rotti nods, eyes perpetually forward. His face falls into even more grey, and his form slumps lower against the metal backing.

Looking away himself, Eggsy exhales. Expels some of the roiling ire. “Look, I get it.”

Rotti turns a bit towards his voice.

“It’s the same reason I always jump straight to being pissed off, before any other reaction.”

Rough around the edges, Rotti’s voice finally surfaces. “We reflect our parents, don’t we.” Eyebrows pitch down. “Even though we hate ‘em.”

It’s as much as an apology as he can expect. Snorting, Eggsy bumps his good shoulder into Rotti’s. Perhaps he’s rougher than strictly necessary, but when it comes to each other, they’ve never been kind. They’ve just *been*. “A-fucking-men.”

They sit amidst the hum of laundry, wordless, watching their socks spin around and around. Their mutual quiet is shattered by the chirping of Rotti’s cellphone. Pulling it out of his pocket, Rotti checks the caller, Eggsy glancing over his shoulder.

*Caller unknown.*

Flipping it open, Rotti asks gruffly, “Who’s this?”

The stiffening of the body next to him alerts Eggsy that something is wrong. Rotti turns to him, strange look twisted in his rough features, and holds the phone out towards him. Hisses out a repeat of his earlier question. “The fuck ya’ done now?!”

Eyebrows scrunched up, Eggsy takes hold of the phone with some trepidation. Raises it to his ear. “Hello?”

“I certainly hope you have prepared an explanation as to why you are away from headquarters and with…him.”

“*Harry.* What the fuck. You scared the shite outa’ me.” The clench in his guts relaxes at the familiar voice. Somewhat.

“Indeed Eggsy, as you say. *What the fuck.*” That posh accent positively curves around the word ‘fuck’, and Eggsy offhandedly decides it’s his new favorite thing in the world.

Sucks in a breath. “I asked you to leave ‘im out of it.” Steels his resolve. “I’m not telling you where
he is.”

Harry tuts. “Oh, Eggsy. Look outside the storefront.”

Creeping forward on his knees, he grasps the edge of the dryer and peers over the top. Well, shite. There’s Harry, perfect suit and hair, standing in front of the Washateria. He may have a phone to his ear and an umbrella on his arm, but his legs are spread apart a shoulders-width as though prepared for battle. Doesn’t ever realize it when he breathes out his anthem as of late. “Fucking Merlin.”

“I should hope not, considering he is grading your performance.”

Eggsy mutters a petulant “Not if you paid me”, which Harry politely ignores. Things are going better so far than Eggsy had expected, so that’s something.

“Time to return, Eggsy.” As soon as the words are spoken, Harry’s eyes drift slightly and darken to…to be honest, Eggsy’s never seen that look before, so he doesn’t know exactly what it means. He just knows that it’s not good. Following Harry’s gaze, he finds Rotti peeking over the dryer as well. A lightbulb goes off in his brain: hatred.

Harry hates Rotti.

Quickly, Eggsy shoves his hand in Rotti’s face and pushes him back down out of sight. Spits out a low “Down, idjit!”

Rotti snarls at him, but acquiesces.

Harry’s voice, tight as drum leather, sounds in his ear again. “Come out of there, now.”

God, but it’s all Eggsy can do to resist the pull of that command. Takes a moment to gather himself. “You’ll leave Rotti, yeah?”

Eggsy can practically hear Harry grinding his teeth through the speaker. “We may discuss it.”

Chewing on his lip, Eggsy glances to Rotti, who wears a thoughtful expression. “Yeah, I’m comin’ out. Lemme’ get my socks.”

Hangs up the phone, cutting off Harry’s baffled query, “Why aren’t you wearing your socks—?” Ducks back down.

He yanks open the dryer, cutting short it’s cycle, and blindly grabs two of the socks. Shoving them on his feet, he starts speaking quickly. “I’ll try to get you a head start.” Pushes the phone back into Rotti’s pocket. “Go out the back, get in a cab, and leave your phone in it. They’ll trace it, see? Find a place to stay for a few days while I talk him down.”

“That him, then?”

Eyebrows drawn to together, Eggsy mutters a distracted, “What’s he?”

“Your gentleman. The one you been waitin’ on.” Gestured vaguely towards the front of the store.

“That him?”

Wide eyed, Eggsy looks up at Rotti like a dear in headlights. “Yeah, Harry. My soulmate.” The word forms funny in his mouth. This is the first time he’s told anyone, and it’s to Rotti of all blokes. The world just loves to fuck with him.

Rotti exhales, eyebrows jumping. “No wonder he’s pissed.”
Snorting, Eggsy spits out a pained, “Hardly.” At Rotti’s questioning look, he elaborates. “You were right, he doesn’t…” He bears his teeth. “You were right.” That phrase burns in his throat like stomach acid, and it hurts to admit it.

Rotti pulls on his own socks and shoes. “You sure ‘bout that?”

Eggsy gives a disgusted bark. “Just be ready!” He moves to stand, but his shoulder is caught in a tight grip, and is pulled back down.

Rotti gives him a shake, making Eggsy meet his eyes. “He’s the one roundin’ everyone up, right? I’m jus’ sayin’ he’s gone to a lot of trouble, and that’s not nothin’.”

It’s quite possibly the kindest thing Rotti has ever said to him.

Nodding, Eggsy stands and brushes his jumpsuit off. He casts about for words equally nice, that might mark the occasion.

Rotti brutally shoots that down. “Those duds make ya’ look a right twat.”

Eggsy sticks up two finger. “Naff off.” Smiles lurk near the corner of their lips, just for the moment. That’s more like it.

He marches to the front of the building, bracing himself for the inevitable fight and preparing to drag it out. A frown tugs at his lips. Lately, they’re always fighting.

The little bell announces his departure, and then he’s standing before Harry. His soulmate is drenched in the glowing light, all clean cut and lethal edges, and this is Harry in his natural habitat. On the job, a manhunt, running his enemies down, and completely in control. He’s more right now than Eggsy has ever seen.

This is the side of Harry that isn’t quite so nice.

Eggsy shifts from foot to foot. “So…fancy meeting you here.”

The look Harry gives him is less than impressed. He waves his hand towards the street’s end. “My car is this way. I refuse to discuss this in the middle of the road.”

But that’s exactly what Eggsy needs, to keep him here before he has a chance to do something slippery and clever. Like text Merlin to track Rotti through the CCTV or something. “What, like ‘ruffians’?” Dramatically points to his own chest. “Guess what Harry, that’s what I am. It’s where I came up from—”

“You are foolish if you believe I don’t recognize your stall tactic.” Harry’s face doesn’t even twitch. Eggsy sputters, off balance from his bluff being called so soon, and so casually.

Harry doesn’t roll his eyes, per se. It’s more like the gentleman equivalent of beseeching Heaven. “You know well and good that I don’t give a damn about your origins. Which leads to the conclusion of a distraction while your…” Harry’s jaw clenches, and a tick appears in his cheek. “…your whatever sneaks out the back.”

Out of options, Eggsy tries to explain Rotti away to him, but it’s complicated, and it hurts, and, God help him, he feels sorry for the guy. “Look, there’s more to the whole ‘Rotti Situation’ than I’ve explained. The circumstances were pretty extreme, so…”
That certainly gains a reaction. The anger defined in his whipcord muscles finally reflects onto his face. “Extenuating circumstances?” His hand chokes up on the umbrella and he closes his eyes tightly for a brief second.

The slight wind from earlier picks up and whistles it way through the alley, and Eggsy shivers. “Promise me you’ll let this go.”

Harry open lets out a slow breath, struggling for his composure. “You once said to me that I had no idea why you do the things you do.” Harry’s eyes are harder than Eggsy has ever seen, and they’re turned on him. “You were right.”

The sudden downturn makes Eggsy feel a stranger in his own territory. Dramatic shadows flicker in the alley, and the towering storefronts leaning above them become unwelcoming, egging them on. Eggsy wets his lips, shoves the shock-hurt into the quiet place, and tries again, “Promise me.”

Silent, Harry stares him down.

Frustration starts building up, because he isn’t listening. He refuses to hear him out. “Harry, promise me.” The desperation saturates his voice.

“They are all criminals, you said it yourself. And what that man did to you was inexcusable. You’ve yet to produce sufficient reason—”

The anger wells up disturbingly fast, because Harry isn’t hearing him. “Because Rotti was trying to bond with me!” He’s half crazed when the words come bursting out after being held back for so long.

Shellshocked, Harry steps back. “You have a Mark?” His eyes flit over eggsy’s body instinctively, searching.

Doesn’t that just fucking figure. “This is what you take from that?” The sting of tears is getting harder to ignore.

Face dropping, Harry sounds disbelieving. “He’s your soulmate.”

Swallows the lump in his throat, and ignores the burning in his eyes. “No, he’s not.”

Eggsy has to hand it to him, because it doesn’t take long for Harry to reevaluate the situation and realize what’s been done. The look of utter horror rocks Eggsy’s very foundation.

“He tried to force a bond on you, and you want to let him walk away?” The disbelief is palpable, and quickly turns coat to vexation. Harry tosses an arm out. “What he did was more violating than those men who drugged you, and yet you’ll absolve his actions? How do you—“

“Yes, okay?? Yes, I forgive him!” Eggsy’s voice echoes off the brick walls. “He was so fucking desperate for his Soulmate, Harry. He would have done anything to make them accept the bond, and I was the same way.” A half choked breath rushes out of him, and Eggsy looks to the sky for a way to make him understand. “Look, we were in a fucked up situation. He grew up the same way I did, and everything that almost happened to me, actually happened to him.”

Harry’s face is unforgiving. “My sympathy for his experience, but that does not excuse him.”

“Maybe not.” Flaps his arms as his sides. “I don’t know what to tell you. He did some shite.” Purses his lips in thought. “But so did I. And now I’m standing in the cold, in some dirty back street, explaining myself when I don’t have to.”
And it is cold, bitingly so. His nose is running over his top lip, and his eyes are watering. He dabs at his face with his sleeve. “Gross.”

Harry seems to pull back his ire. Pulling out a handkerchief from thin air, he offers it to Eggsy. “Why don’t we continue this somewhere less chilly.”

Nodding, Eggsy walks side by side with Harry down the road. Harry places a guiding hand between his shoulder blades, as he’s wont to do, and Eggsy leans into the familiarity.

He keeps talking as they go, because this is important. It’s important that Harry understand. “You remember why I didn’t go to the police to turn Dean in?”

Slowly, Harry nods. “You felt it would be too dangerous. Retaliation is a legitimate concern—“

“No. Those were the excuses I told myself when the house of cards started collapsing. It’s what I said to my friends when they begged me to turn him in. It’s…” Closes his eyes, and forces himself to say it. “…the reason my mother gave to me for staying, after Dean had punched her and gave me the first honest-to-god beating to keep me down.” Christ, but he’d thought he was so much smarter than her. He turned out to be just as much a victim as his Mum. Opens his eyes and drives his point home. “I didn't tell anyone because it didn't even occur to me to ask for help.”

“Eggsy….” Harry is hesitant.

“It was normal, do you get that? You get tunnel vision, Harry. Your world becomes small, and structured with ridiculous rules that you impose to see yourself through. After awhile, Dean didn’t even have to remind me. I reminded myself.”

Eggsy shrugs, helplessly. “Rotti was pretty much in the same predicament. He had his role, and I had mine, and we couldn’t see beyond the prison we locked ourselves in. I can promise you, it didn’t even occur to him that what he was doing was wrong—it was just the way of things. To his mind, I’d be better off with him than with Dean. He wanted, so he took, and he saw it as a brutal kindness.”

Harry is not unmoved, but neither is he convinced. “It sounds as though he cannot differentiate between right and wrong, you realize. This is not helping your case.”

They’re at the mouth of the alley now, and they pile into the parked car. The engine rumbles to life, and they’re off.

Weakly, Eggsy pushes forward. He’s not entirely sure why he’s fighting so hard for Rotti, but they’ve always existed together in the grey areas. They’re just not done yet. “It’s not that he doesn’t know right from wrong; he just doesn't think to ask.” Leans forward into Harry’s space. “Do you think I asked myself if it was right to steal his car? He didn't call the cops, Harry, it was my own foolishness that got me caught. I don't ask if it was right to steal clothing, or toys for Daisy, or cigarettes and tea from the Tesco. I didn’t even think about it, because that’s the world we lived in.” Cuts straight to the heart of the matter, because maybe-kinda-sorta he’s taking this a bit personally. “And in the end, he did it because he thought his Soulmate would never want him, ever. And I know exactly how that feels, and what you’ll do to make it stop hurting.” Glares across the space straight into Harry’s eyes, temporarily turned from the road. “That's why he gets a pass.”

Maybe he’s just grateful to Rotti for looking after his sister. Or perhaps Eggsy has found a stroke of mercy within himself. Maybe he just wants to see what Rotti will become once freed from their common Devil. Or, the darkness inside of him whispers, tantalizing, perhaps he just wants Rotti to owe him.
“Harry, I’m asking you for this. Do this for me.”

For a moment, Eggsy isn’t sure what he’ll do. But then Harry gives a jerky little nod, and the matter is settled.

In the end, that’s all it takes. Eggsy asks, and Harry does.

They don’t exchange anymore words. Harry pulls the car around to the front of the Kingsman Headquarters to let Eggsy out. Before he manages to slip through the door, Harry leans forward to grab his hand. Nothing is said, but the gentle squeeze tells Eggsy all he needs to know. *I did this to protect you.*

Merlin is there to intercept him on his trudge to the barracks. “You’ll be pleased to hear that Harry’s little roundup project was a success, with one notable exception.”

Running a hand through his hair, and resting on the back of his neck, Eggsy slowly nods. “Good. Now for the fallout.” A hand on his shoulder stalls his movements.

“I’ve got my eye on it, lad. Your family is not undefended.”

Sagging into himself, Eggsy lets the relief freely flow through his being. He hadn’t realized just how tightly strung he’d been, and he’s just grateful.

Merlin presses a small packet into Eggsy’s hand; the pills he forgot to get earlier that evening. A spark of warmth lights his heart at the thoughtful act. Mumbles out a soft “Ta, mate” before splitting ways again.

Swallowing his medication beforehand, he takes a long shower that night, soaking his shoulder in warmth. The creeping ache is dull, thanks to the cotton effect of the painkillers. Crawling into bed early, Eggsy makes a point to get a full night’s rest, because tomorrow he’ll be back in training full stop.

As expected, his physical goes well, and he collects his discharge papers in the morning. On a happy note, his custody over JB is returned, who also has a clean bill of health and scarred shoulder. They match.

Things go back to normal, after that. It completely blows Eggsy’s mind that so much could happen overnight and the next morning still be business as usual. Merlin and Harry act like Eggsy’s life wasn’t altered forever, and greet him with the usual smile and smirk duo.

Except, of course, when Eggsy tries to bring it up. At least Merlin will give him small updates: *they’re being processed, none too gently, or your mother and sister have received support from the local church, Eggsy, isn’t that a lucky happenstance?*

Harry, on the other hand, breezes straight by the topic and turns left. It’s not that he’s pretending nothing happened, but he certainly avoids the topic with admirable finesse. Naturally, that means his opinion on Eggsy’s choices is made crystal clear without actually saying what he means.

Harry’s violently hateful of Rotti, that much is obvious. Eggsy supposes it’s actually a good thing. And, looking back with a cold eye, Eggsy admits that his defense of Rotti had sounded more like justification. Like he thought what Rotti tried to do was okay. But fuck all if Harry would even talk to him about it. Whenever the topic is even implied, he shuts that shit down with distracting, tantalizing bits of information.

One such misdirection is a pamphlet. Harry flips it into his hands like a ringmaster and poses to him a
question. “I found this in Valentine’s estate the evening I dined with him. Tell me, why did it catch my eye?”

Glancing at the program, the shocking title jumps out at him.

**CHURCH OF TRUTH**

_Sinners and Whoremongers Unwelcome_

“What. Because it’s completely mad?” Tapping the paper, Eggsy raises his brows. “Ain’t these the crazies who wave signs in your face about hellfire and gay sex?”

“They are indeed.”

An impish grin tugs at Eggsy’s lips. “Right, well, you ask me, they just need to mellow out with a good buggering—”

Cutting him off, Harry fights down an echoing smile. “What else? Why is this, in particular, on it’s own, suspicious?”

He scans the rest of the cover page. “Kentucky? Isn’t that in the states?”

Harry nods, keen eyes locked onto him.

“Even if Valentine is American, why would he have this brochure here in London—and the man’s black! This church would never let him in.”

Satisfaction settles into the lines of Harry’s face. “Exactly. So what is he doing with it?”

And that’s how it goes for the next couple of weeks. Harry swoops in, teaches him something useful and interesting, and remains pointedly mute on other subjects. Merlin keeps him abreast of the pertinent details, and Roxy helps him struggle through physics of all things.

“The fuck do I care about 32.2 feet per second for?” Eggsy grouses, holding his textbook upside down. JB snuffles in agreement from his spot on the ground, next to Roxy’s dog.

“Because Merlin says so.” Flipping her hair, Roxy takes his textbook and turns it right side up.

“Teachers pet.”

“You know, this is probably going to end up on a test or something, and then you’ll have to hear me say ‘I told you so’.”

Three days later, much to Eggsy’s eternal irritation, she’s proven right.

As with the marksmanship exam, they’re all rousted out of bed at an ungodly hour. No shower, no breakfast, and no opportunity to bitch about it. Percival herds the six of them through the corridors and down into the belly of the building—even deeper than Merlin’s little cave dwelling. Finally, they come to a halt in front of a row of lockers.

“Welcome, recruits, to the freefall exam. Please open the locker in front of you and put on your flight suits.” As per usual, Percival’s tone is smug as fuck.

Everyone steps forward in tandem to don on their uniform.

“We’ll be taking you all up to fifteen thousand feet, directly above the Kingsman grounds.” A particularly sinister smile splits across Percival’s face. “Then we’ll be kicking you out.”
Zipping up his own suit, Eggsy glances to his right, just in time to see Roxy fumble with her own. Interesting. Discreetly looking to the other four recruits, he notices Charlie also eyeing Roxy’s unusually graceless motions. Frowning, Eggsy shifts his body to block the view, and starts to shrug on the provided parachute. He makes a point to keep an eye on Roxy’s progress, making sure she hooks the harnesses on correctly.

Once everyone’s squared away, they’re led through a door into a giant, industrial atrium. The room is several stories high, and many football fields could be chalked out on the concrete floor. Right smack in the center is a bloody private cargo plane.

Eggsy can’t hold back his grin. Seriously, he knew this operation was well-funded, but it’s straight out of a comic book. He elbows Roxy in the ribs, trying to get her to smile with him, but she only manages a wavering line. Mutters to her, “S’matter with you?”

Her mouth flaps for a moment before she manages a whisper back. “I’m not too fond of heights.”

Nodding, Eggsy closes some of the space between them. “Stick close to me then.” It’s a funny role reversal, Eggsy muses. Normally, he keeps close enough to Roxy that if she wore an apron, he’d be clinging to it.

They board the plane, Eggsy like a kid in a candy shop, and Roxy like she’s in a funeral procession. The machine roars to life, and the creaking of thick steel slabs reverberates through the atmosphere. There are no windows to look out of, but Eggsy would bet his teeth that the ceiling itself was opening.

Vertigo marks their takeoff, and everyone holds onto one of the straps bolted to the ceiling.

Standing closer to Roxy than strictly necessary, he keeps an eye on her face. She’s valiantly trying to keep a straight face, but her nerves keep bleeding through the facade. Eggsy moves to place a comforting hand on her elbow, and is promptly shoved right into her side. They both end up stumbling against the wall of the plane, sharp joints knocking into each other’s ribs. Glaring vindictively, Eggsy wishes for the millionth time that he had some bitch-be-gone spray.

Charlie slips both of his hands in his pocket, and slants his chin to arrogant angle. “Sorry about that, gents.” He glances to Roxy through slitted eyes to rub his point in. “Turbulence, you understand.”

Eggsy bares his teeth, but Roxy runs her hand over his shoulder. She nods her head to the side, and Eggsy follows her gaze.

Percival is giving Charlie the evil eye.

Vicious satisfaction settles between Eggsy’s ribs. Finally, someone else calls Charlie on his bullshit.

Charlie himself doesn’t bat an eye. He simply grins, brings his hands up in an I surrender gesture, and moves to stand on the other side of the cargo hold next to his pals.

Percival pushes on again, explaining the rules of the test. “Your performance will be graded first on accuracy, then on height. This means whoever lands on the target, will pass. If you miss it, you wash out. Of those who are successful, points will be awarded to whomever opens their parachute last. Good luck.”

As his final words are spoken, the back of the plane drops open, and the air wildly whips around the space. Light rushes into the plane, temporarily blinding everyone. “Gentlemen, and lady, it’s time for you to disembark!”
The six of them shuffle towards the opening, but no one jumps.

Roxy calls over the sound of the torrent, “What’s the target look like?”

“It’s the large white Kingsman emblem on the grass! You can’t possibly miss it.”

Eggsy and Roxy are near enough the drop-off to peek over the side. There’s the training field, the headquarters in the middle of nowhere, and a tiny white spec the relative size of a quarter. Roxy breathes into his ear. “Oh fuck.”

Heart racing, Eggsy can’t help but to grin ear to ear.

“Your time to exit is running out.” Percival is offhand about it, but his eyes are locked on Roxy.

The four others jump out one by one, Charlie last. Eggsy moves to go next, but the sudden space at his side makes him pause. Looking back into the hold, he sees Roxy standing stalk still, eyes wide.

He holds out a hand to her. “C’mon, Roxy, let’s go. Simple jump and pull. Easy as pie.”

Pursing her lips together, she shakes her head emphatically. Rolling his eyes, Eggsy steps towards her, and grabs the front of her suit. Dragging her forward, Eggsy barely has time to notice Percival’s wickedly amused expression before he’s tipping himself backwards off the mouth of the plane, Roxy brought helplessly along for the ride.

The second the toe of his boot disconnects with the platform, Eggsy’s world and his location in it completely invert. It’s like missing a stair step, but forever. The very air pressed along his back like a lover, and his heart beats out of time.

But there’s no fear here. There’s sky blue freedom.

Eggsy can’t help but cackle hysterically from a combination of the stomach-churning free fall and Roxy’s comic flailing about directly above him. He still has a hold of her suit, just in case, because he’s a good friend and it’s time to return the favors he owes her.

It takes a few seconds, but Roxy finally gets a grip of herself, and spreads her arms and legs for a more controlled fall. Eggsy does the same after righting his orientation, and joins hands with her.

Eggsy yanks on the Orange Apple to start his parachute’s barometric altimeter, and sees Roxy do the same.

The expected mechanical ticking signaling activation never happens.

Looking over, he can see Roxy frantically yanking at it, until the orange disk comes loose in her hand. Horror lights up her face, and she lets the plastic object slip through her fingers to drift away.

Merlin’s voice crackles to life in his ear. “I think by now you’ll all have realized that your altimeters have been disabled. Manual deployment will be necessary.”

He squeezes Roxy’s gloved hand. It’s okay. They’ve been trained for just this type of situation.

Both he and Roxy catch up to the rest of the group. Roxy’s holding it together admirably, though everyone is exchanging uncertain glances. Finally, Charlie breaks the quiet tension by letting out a chuckle and doing a pirouette midair.

One by one, the other three follow example and start to experiment with the air resistance. Eggsy joins in with a holler and does a series of flips, because when will he get another chance to
experience something like this? Slanting her hands like rotor blades, even Roxy makes herself spin like a tossed pizza.

The feeling of weightless suspension makes him giddy, and fills him with a childlike glee. Eggsy’s never even flown with an airline before, and now he’s swimming through a rushing stream of air. And the view…he’s never seen anything like it. There’s green for miles, and the roads and streams are winding threads of color. As a born and bred Londoner, he’s never seen this much grass in his life.

The group’s joyful whooping and carrying on is interrupted. “Since you’re all having such a grand time of it, let’s see how you handle this next bit.” Chuckling darkly like any self-respecting Bond villain, Merlin drops the lead weight. “One of you doesn’t have a functioning parachute.”

The uproar is instantaneous and all at once.

“Fucking hell!”

“Is he bloody joking?!”

“Who is it? Who’s the one?!”

Voice’s fight for dominance across the wire, and the carefree attitude is flipped to panic in moments. A hand clutches at his wrist, and Eggsy finds Roxy rejoining hands with him. The iron band around his stomach loosens slightly. Only one of them is missing a parachute, so he and Roxy will be fine, no matter what, as long as they stick together.

The lightbulb above his head flickers on. Calls out, “Everyone, pair off—”

“I’m not dying for this! I’m not dying like this!” Rufus is hysterical and yanks on his ripcord like it’s a grenade pin. The canvas blossoms behind him, and he’s jerked away from the group to float in the sky.

“No, you idjit! Now we’re an odd number!” Eggsy yells out in frustration. “Everyone, make a circle! Hold onto each other!”

The ground, though still and peaceful, has broadened a bit, closer now. It’s not as easy as one would think, controlling your location in a free fall. Any slight shift of your body, even moving one of your feet, will generate drag and pull you in that direction. It takes the group longer than Eggsy would have preferred to get themselves assembled. Long enough to get his heart racing. He’s trying to focus on preventing any of them becoming bloody sticky pancakes on the Kingsman lawn, but cobwebs in his mind are shuddering. What if it’s me? What if I’m the expendable one?

A hand grabs tightly onto his free wrist, and Eggsy finds Digby spreadeagled next to him. Looking to Roxy, he sees Charlie has a death grip onto her. Gritting his teeth, he fights down the thrum of unease the sight instills in him.

Get’s down to brass tacks. “Alright, we’re gonna’ go one at a time.” His eyes stray to Charlie, and their gazes lock through their goggles. Eggsy tries to take the opportunity. “We’ll start with—”

“Digby.” Charlie’s voice cuts in. “Everyone is responsible for the person on their left.” Even with the metallic ring of technology, Eggsy can hear that smug superiority complex riddled throughout Charlie’s words. “Digby, pull your ripcord.”

Like all good lapdogs, Digby obeys, and his chute bursts to life behind him, leaving Eggsy to be torn away from his grip. It’s a strange reversal—Eggsy feels like he’s the one that is still, and Diby is the
one that is suddenly forced to motion, when it’s really the other way around.

Swiping his free arm in a swimmer’s stroke, he drifts over to meet the next bloke in line: Hugo. As soon as they’ve joined hands, and their diminished ring is stable again, he pulls his ripcord, and he too is stalled in the sky. The rest fall past him with the sickening sense of vertigo. Eggsy happened to be exhaling at the exact moment, and the sight of a body seemingly flying into the sky pulls the breath straight out of his lungs.

His chest compresses awkwardly. There’s only three of them left. The numbers are ticking down, and the probability of ‘being it’ is rapidly growing. He doesn’t know if he’ll have it in him to forgive Merlin if he chose Eggsy. Doesn’t even know if he’ll hate him more or less if it’s Roxy instead.

The adrenalin is building, thrumming along his muscles like vibrations down a wire pulled taut. Merlin checks in, updating them on their location. “Four thousand—fe—t.” His words are spotty at best, and can barely be made out over the roaring air currents. Eggsy keeps an eye on the ground, which has picked up speed on its journey to meet them.

A jerking on his wrist alerts him to possible trouble, and Roxy’s flurry of motion in the corner of his eye confirms it. Charlie has lunged forward to pull himself along Roxy’s shoulders. His hands are scrambling to the straps of her parachute in an attempt to pull her ripcord early.

A surge of urgent energy rolls through Eggsy, and he starts to pull himself along Roxy’s arm towards their skirmish. Reaching across her torso, Eggsy tries to push Charlie off—

—an elbow collides with his mask, and he’s suddenly bereft of any solid surface. He’s twisting through the sky in a sickening, disorienting path, vision rapidly switching back and forth from gleaming sun to darkened ground. Every turn shows Charlie and Roxy locked in a mass of flailing arms and kicking legs.

Stretching out in all directions, he slows the spin until he can keep track of himself and the Earth sufficiently. There’s nothing but air to provide leverage, and it leaves him floundering, helpless to do anything but watch Charlie and Roxy go at it.

He needn’t have worried, because Roxy fights back like a scorned harpy with a raging case of PMS. There are choppy grunts and half-words over the comm underlining the inelegance of their struggle. Finally, Roxy puts an end to it by swinging her arm wide and then slamming the heel of her palm onto the side of Charlie’s helmet over and over again. The sound of flesh slapping wetly against the thin plastic reaches even Eggsy’s ears.

Charlie starts to lose steam, and his head lolls from side to side, body loosening in clear discombobulation. Roxy grabs his straps, curls up to bring her legs between their bodies, and kicks him away from her. Clever one that she is, Roxy grips his ripcord while she does it, forcing his parachute to open and drag him away, effectively ending the fight.

Their victory is short-lived, as the realization hits that it’s one of them who is doesn’t have an operational parachute. They start to swim towards each other, groundrush signaling their impending landing if they don’t hurry the fuck up. The ground is closing in on them, eagerly rushing to meet them with proverbial open jaws. It stretches in all directions, bafflingly so, as the mind and body fail to rectify their differing interpretations.

Their dizzying fall is punctuated by Merlin’s half-drowned calls for them to “open your ‘chutes, damnit, you’re going to die!”

He and Roxy look to each other and reach out their arms as far as they can.
“A thousand feet.”

Eggsy can feel the strain in his fingertips from his desperate stretch. It’s a deathspin.

“Eight hundred feet!”

Their hands meet.

“Six hundred feet, can ya’ even hear me?!”

They pull close to each other, and Eggsy latches tightly onto her body like a limpet. “Pull it!” Doesn’t give her the opportunity to try his parachute first, because he knows.

“Five hundred feet, Gods.”

A flash of gold on her inner thigh—

In his gut, he knows it’s her.

“Four hundred feet, do it now!”

Because it’s never been him.

“Three hundr—”

She yanks the rip cord.

The spring loaded dyragchute is fired out of her pack, pulling along the rest of the canvas. It’s spreads like wings from behind her, and the air is forced from his lungs as they’re jerked to a slower speed.

“Oh God!” Roxy chokes out, just as breathless.

Eggsy cries out in a primal mix of rage and sadness, excitement and utter relief. His skin feels like it’s peeling away, and the blood in his feet weights a ton. He can feel each of his toes as though they were lead.

“Fuck.” The swear word is muffled, and Eggsy would bet dollars to donuts that Merlin was cradling his head in his hands.

Grits his teeth, and bites out a sarcastic comment, because that’s who he is at heart. “Give ya’ grey hair, bruv, if you had any.”

There’s not much time to get in more than one pithy comment, because the grassy field is still coming to meet them. They land hard, legs collapsing beneath them from the force, and they cling to each other. Inhaling, exhaling, gulping down enough oxygen to feel each other’s ribs expand and contract, they wait for reality to stop churning.

When the ground stops spinning, Roxy loosens her arms and rolls off of him. Shoulder to shoulder, they pull off their helmets and take stock of their surroundings. Cheek turned against the cool grass, Eggsy starts chuckling.

Chalk. White chalk fills his nose, and Eggsy knows they’ve landed smack dab on the target. Turns towards Roxy, who returns his grin upon seeing the white smeared across Eggsy’s nose. She wipes his face off with her glove. “Eggsy?”
Raising an eyebrow at her leading tone, he puts forth a cautious “Yeah?”

She smirks. “I told you so.”

“Shut up.” Snorting, Eggsy looks back up to the sky. Just in time, too, for them to scramble out of the way of Charlie’s own landing.

Of. Bloody. Course. The fucker would make the target.

He stands up, shakily, and pulls off his helmet just in time to fall in line with them, as Merlin comes striding to greet them. Charlie, Eggsy notes, is swaying a bit, eyes dazed. Roxy must have really done a number on his head wound.

Though his expression is passive, Merlin’s spine is ramrod straight and his forehead has a distinctive sheen. He’d sweated their landing.

“Congratulations are in order. The three of you have passed the exam.” His upper lip twitches unhappily. “Roxy and Eggsy. The two of you in particular deserve laudations, as you’ve set a new record for opening your parachute at the lowest altitude of any recruits.”

Resentment simmers beneath Eggsy’s skin at the reminder. If Roxy hadn’t fallen with him, offered her hand to him, he’d have been a smear of blood and sinew on the soil.

Both he and his two fellow recruits stand silent.

Nodding to himself, Merlin gestures towards the barracks. “Take the rest of the day. You’ve earned it.”

Charlie stalks off without a word. Roxy, a little slower, looks back at Eggsy questioningly when he doesn’t trot off after her. He glances away, signaling for her to go on ahead.

Looking to Merlin, he finds the man’s gaze tracking Roxy across the field. Eggsy swallows, and feels a shudder from the child curled up among the cobwebs of his heart. Merlin’s eyes are appraising, as though he’s pleased with what he finds in Roxy.

He feels the isolation start to close in like rolling fog.

Once they’re a sufficient distance away to provide the illusion of privacy, Merlin raises his brows in an invitation Eggsy is all too happy to accept. “So, did you draw lots, or just pick your least favorite to be the sacrificial lamb?” Arms flapping, Eggsy glares up at the taller man. “Why was I more expendable? You said you’d be in my corner!”

And Merlin had said that, hadn’t he, the last time Eggsy ended up bearing the brunt of a Kingman exam.

“Oh, no, you’d don’t talk to me like that.” Merlin taps the ridge of his ear. “If you have a problem, you come over here and whisper it to me.”

Pursing his lips and filled to brim with righteous indignation, Eggsy marches right up to Merlin, invading as much space as he dares. This close, Eggsy can hear unintelligible mumbling from Merlin’s earpiece. He isn’t given time to spare more than half a thought on it.

Merlin leans in real close, eyes locked dead onto Eggsy’s. “You’ve got a chip on your shoulder, lad, and you need to brush it off.” Underlining his words, Merlin flicks imaginary dust off of Eggsy’s jacket. “There was never anything wrong with your parachute.” With a dramatic flourish, Merlin
yanks the ripcord on Eggsy’s parachute.

Nothing happens.

Merlin’s eyes, well…it’s like watching a car crash. His face morphs from triumph to confusion, then touching on disbelief before horror settles in for the long haul. There’s a racket emanating from that earpiece again, and Eggsy is knocked back as Merlin suddenly overtakes him.

Hands roughly spin him around and start pulling at the parachute strapped to his back. The clasps are undone at his shoulders, and the pack is torn from him. Turning back around, Eggsy finds Merlin on his knees, inspecting the pack. Examining the outer flaps, he lets out a long string of curses. Touches the edge of his glasses. “Someone’s sewn the dragchute closed.”

Cocking his head to the side, Merlin listens to someone on the other end of the Kingman glasses, and nods absentmindedly. Stands, useless parachute dangling from his fingers, and clamps a hand on Eggsy’s shoulder. “Come along.” His voice is heavy, gate stilted and anxious. If Merlin holds him unusually near while they walk, Eggsy doesn’t mention it.

In fact, Eggsy is entirely speechless. He let’s himself be directed in a numb daze. It’s one thing to suspect, even deeply, but it’s another thing to know that Death had just kissed you on the cheek. If it weren’t for Roxy…he’d be dead now.

Slight trembles sneak their way through his body, and Eggsy does his best to suppress them. Adrenaline is still spiking it’s way through his veins, and his heart is galloping in his chest. This isn’t the first time he’s brushed close to the end, and it won’t be the last. He should get used to it. What was that old saying again, the one his father was so fond of? It’s better to be dead lucky than good and dead.

At least, Eggsy thinks with a resined sigh, Merlin seems shocked. So at least there’s that. Drawing in a shaky breath, Eggsy tries to distract himself from the inner turmoil by focusing on outward things. “So…the dragchute, right? How did that happen?”

The fingers on his shoulder spasm. Merlin’s voice is low. “Sewn with heavy string, on the inside. Once they’re packed, the dragchute is pinned closed and won’t be inspected until the next service life.” They enter the Kingsman building through a side door, and start walking down one of the many lavish hallways. “Someone took the opportunity.”


“I presume the first two won’t count?”

Snapping his head forward, Eggsy lays eyes on the speaker rounding the bend in the hall. “Harry.” Suddenly, all he wants in the world is a stupid hug. A solid embrace from someone stronger than him and his enemies; a protector.

Harry meets them halfway and immediately takes custody of Eggsy. He’s wearing his usual well-styled suit, but it’s wrinkled, which is unusual. His hair is falling out of it’s coif in messy strands, as though he’d been running his hands through it incessantly. Jaw set like stone, as are his eyes.

Eggsy is pulled to Harry’s side, out of Merlin’s reach. “Take care of this, Merlin.” Even his voice is granite.

Merlin opens his mouth to respond, gesturing to the parachute with his now free hand, but Harry clearly doesn’t want to hear it.
“This does not happen again. Fix it.”

Wisely, Merlin keeps his mouth shut, nods, and leaves on his own steam.

Taking charge, Harry steers him through an entirely new wing of the building, even more opulent than the rest of the joint, down to the antique vases. Heirlooms are mounted on the walls; daggers, obis, a german luger, and even some framed letters.

Harry notices his curious glances. “Souvenirs.” He mentions distractedly. “From various missions that have since been declassified.”

They end up facing a nondescript door, without label. Harry reaches forward, and places his hand on the center of the door. A low beep emits from the wood, and a soft click follows. Pushing the door open, Eggsy is brought into a warm office, decorated with old landscape oil paintings and rich curtains artfully draped to the floor. There’s a desk in the corner, covered in stacks of paper and a laptop, and the wall behind it is a floor to ceiling bookcase, quite overfilled. The front of the office has a small sitting area, not unlike Harry’s house, with two deep burgundy wingback chairs.

Eggsy stands in the entryway, and leans a hip on the edge of a narrow hall table as he examines the room. He does his best to seem nonchalant, but he’s still a twitching pile of I’m-about-to-die nerves. He wants to hit something and crumple in on himself at the same time. There’s a spring inside of him, born of the drop, and it’s overflowing into a river that wants to fill him up and drown him messily. It’s boiling inside of him, hot and burning in the points of his ribs, and it wants out out out in any way—

Harry steps in front of him and invades his space. Annexes and takes that ground as his own, wrapping an arm tightly around the small of his back. Harry’s other hand snakes along the nape of his neck to cradle the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair to draw him against that solid chest.

A sudden urge overtakes his self control, and Eggsy finds himself banding his arms around Harry’s torso in return with deep-seated urgency. He doesn’t stop until he’s squished against him, forehead pressed into the curve of Harry’s neck. For the first time in God only knows how long, Eggsy feels safe.

Small trembles emanate at the meeting of their skins, and it’s a shock to find that they aren’t coming from Eggsy.

“I almost lost you.” Harry’s voice is as sharp as ever, but brittle, and the words echo across Eggsy flesh in guilty delight.

Absently, Eggsy murmurs, “I’m right here”, utterly distracted by that calloused thumb sneaking under his jaw. The slight press into the soft flesh underside his chin tilts his head back.

Eyes opening, Eggsy’s breath catches, and his heart becomes trapped in his throat like a bird flapping it’s frantic wings in a cage. His soulmate is not calm, as he’d first assumed. He’s filled to the brim with a tightly roped frenzy.

Harry is right up in his space like it’s his god-given right, a lean and hungry look about him—a thing Shakespeare named as most dangerous—and he wants. Eggsy doesn’t believe Harry realizes that he’s whispering his thoughts aloud. “Just once, God, please, at least once.”

And fuck, but Eggsy can get behind that. Casts the words between them, making him shiver. “Just this once.” They’ve been on this, this collision course for awhile now, haven’t they, and now he’s
been given permission. His voice is scratched with desperate, pathetic hope. “It might not be me. I might not be his.”

“You’ll win.” Dead certainty lines Harry’s words, and Eggsy hears the unspoken You’ll end up as his. His voice drops a shade. “But not yet.” His hands are unrepentant.

Eggsy has enough tact to not voice his cruel thoughts. Another knight could die, and the trials would be held yet again. Even if he does win, he might not be Merlin’s.

“Not yet.” And Harry seals their lips together hard enough to make the blood flee, and Eggsy stops thinking entirely. All the stress and adrenaline come rushing out of him into his Other, and now, finally, there’s a direction for that violent, desperate current.

They crash into each other like waves. It’s nowhere near gentle—because this has been anticipated for far too long—but it’s good, better than good…Eggsy is pressed against the side table, flush against that suit-clad form. Strong hands travel along his neck and shoulders, play along his ribs like piano keys, and settle on his hipbones. Thumbs sneak into the valleys of muscle, tightening enough to send sparks up the network of tendons between his legs and abs.

He’s falling, again, for the second time that day, when he’s forcefully lifted and settled to sit on the table. Giddy pleasure rushes along his body from being put where his partner wants him, and his legs are split apart as Harry steps between them. His skin gains a mind of it’s own and is determined to climb into the sky. But Harry, strong, solid, dangerous-to-everyone-but-him Harry, is an iron anchor to the earth.

Lips begin to explore his throat, alternating between tickling sparks and bites that make him arch his neck even more. Eyes open, he registers the room over Harry’s shoulder. Richly decorated without any of the soothing personal effects, the room bares a striking resemblance to that horrible ivy-covered house filled with powder and pinstripes. The similarities scratch at the edges of Eggsy’s thoughts, regardless of how harshly he tries bury them. They are insistent.

There’s a body above him, suited and eager, and he can’t see Harry’s face—And fuck that. He tamps down brutally on the rising unease, because Eggsy is not letting that taint this experience or dull the pleasure. This is not another rendition of his shower show, and he won’t let this moment be ruined. He just won’t.

He gently pushes against Harry’s chest to back him up. They’re both breathing hard, and Harry’s face is flushed red, hair every which way. It’s the hottest fucking thing Eggsy’s ever encountered.

Slides off the table to stand.

Harry backs up, adjusting his tie, clearly jumping to the wrong conclusion. “Of course, I…we shouldn’t—” Eggsy does not let him finish that idiotic sentence. Bats Harry’s hands away, and works the tie from it’s full windsor knot, practically ripping it from Harry’s neck. The tag on the underside is partially torn in Eggsy’s rush. Because, you know, he’s never seen him without a tie, and what better opportunity?

Eggsy starts in on his own apparel. Gloves and boots are painfully pulled off, the unlacing skipped over for speed. He tugs off Harry’s blazer to add it to the growing pile. Eggsy starts in on Harry’s shirt buttons, but only gets the top three open before Harry’s hands start in on his jumpsuit.

Even so, Harry offers him a last out. “Are you quite certain?” Eggsy appreciates the gesture, really, but it’s sort of undermined by the fact that Harry’s eagerly throwing the jumpsuit to the side. He’s in
nothing but a t-shirt and boxers, while Harry is still unfairly dapper.

Playfully tosses out “Shut the fuck up” before Harry has the opportunity to snap out of it and start acting like a gentleman again. As soon as the words are loose in the air, Harry gets this look of utter need on his face. Eggsy herds him insistently towards the wingback chair and pushes him down into it.

“I want you.” Harry says, voice strangled.

Smiling, Eggsy climbs onto his lap, bent knees straddling Harry’s thighs. “Yeah, me too.” Because he feels the liberal ropes of the muscle flexing under that suit, holy fuck.

Harry shakes his head, even while pulling on the back of Eggsy neck to bring him closer. “No, I want you.”

Eggsy nods, breathing hard, though he doesn’t understand the point Harry’s making. What he does understand is ‘want’ and ‘Eggsy’ rolling off of that fucking tongue in the same sentence. Harry’s hands find their way to his lower waist, fingers rhythmically flexing on his skin.

When it looks as though Harry is going to speak again, Eggsy grinds down onto his lap to shut him up. Head falling back against the cushion, a low, feral sound crawls from Harry’s mouth and raises the hair on Eggsy’s arms. Eggsy is pinned by the dark gaze regarding him from beneath slitted eyelids, even as his own pleasure rolls all the way up to his scalp.

Looking down at Harry, Eggsy realized that yeah, this is better. This works. He’s on top. He’s in control. Mainly because Harry lets him be in control, but that’s kind of the point, isn’t it? *Harry lets him.*

He pushes the phantom of Pinstriped hands from his mind, and Eggsy knows it’s for the final time today.

Because Harry? Harry commands his full attention. Pushing his hips up from the chair in a sharp motion, Eggsy cries out at the sudden friction and melts lower around Harry’s lap. Arching at his lower back, his spine, bendy at even the worst of times, bowes back.

One hand firmly supporting the arch, Harry drags his other hand around Eggsy’s torso, slipping under the cotton cloth, resting warmly over his navel. His hand is hot against Eggsy’s flesh as he slowly runs it up along the centerline of Eggsy’s chest, inch by tantalizing inch, circling bruises and lighting up the nerve ending on the way. One long, burning trail up to the base of his throat.

Eggsy swallows, adams apple bobbing against Harry’s fingers. He copies the action, and draws his hands from Harrys shoulders to the exposed skin peaking from beneath the top three undone buttons. Harry may have a decade and change on him, but he didn’t spend that time idle. The muscles beneath the skin are hard and well shaped, earned honestly, used daily. Fingers trace along the protruding collarbone, over slopes and valleys, to rest palm down over his beating heart.

Harry mirrors every exploratory move, and when his hand lands on Eggsy’s heart, Eggsy’s mark, obscured though it is by the broken blood vessels coloring his skin…his heartbeat skips.

Flushing pink to his ears, Eggsy bites his lip. But then, mere moments after, Harry’s heartbeat *speeds up* in answer. God, he must look like such a ridiculous fool to be grinning so widely. He might’ve been bothered if Harry wasn’t smiling in devilish delight as well. God, but it makes this right in a way nothing else ever has been.

The ropes of warmth woven from mutual movement are settling in coils in the basin of his belly.
Eggsy rocks forward again, blue static sparking pleasure in his groin, through his chest, in the dip of the small of his back. The hand at his hip starts guiding him into a slow rhythm that makes his blood quicken none the less.

He lets his spine loosen so every thrust rolls up through each vertebrae, because the stretch feels utterly decadent and makes his hips widen in a deliciously sinful way. Harry drags his hand from Eggsy’s heart to splay across his pectorals, feeling out the dramatic pulsation of muscles. Each flex of the hips seats him firmly onto the bulge straining against the cloth of Harry’s pants. The open desire written starkly across Harry’s face makes him feel hot, and beautiful, and powerful….

Eggsy is more than happy to let Harry take lead. When Harry’s hands start eagerly grappling with his belt, all Eggsy can do is gasp heavily at the spiking anticipation. Somewhat nervous, Eggsy can’t quite bring himself to take his hands off the broad shoulders before him, and it turns out not to matter, because—sweet fuck—Harry’s hands are more than enough.

Somehow, there’s lube, and Eggsy has a moment to ask himself where the fuck Harry was hiding it before he’s bucking up into the slick hand around their lengths. Can’t help himself from moaning like a slut from every hip snap, the strong veins a stimulating ripple against his own burning member.

The cushion whispered every move they make, and the embarrassing rhythmic creaking still has his blood galloping though his veins, lava hot. Is it possible to feel completely helpless and totally in control at the same time? The rapid pumps and twists drag him along to the lip-biting precipice, and then pulls back to an agonizingly slow pace, keeping Eggsy suspended on the edge.

A whine escapes his mouth, and Harry devours it. He’s got Eggsy’s lower lip between his teeth, sharply tugging at it before running his tongue across the blood warmed skin. They’re both breathing far to harshly to really map each other, but the taste of mint and silver needle tea still spreads like wine on pale silk.

Muscles suddenly tighten, and hands, quick and tight and slippery, drag Eggsy’s pleasure over the ledge like a lead weight. Legs spread as wide as possible of their own volition—he couldn’t stop if he wanted—Eggsy rides the cresting wave right on through the crash. Eggsy bites so hard on his lip, he tastes blood, and Harry follows him quickly with a primal growl.

Beads of sweat dot his forehead, and Eggsy feels as though he’s been folded and creased like an origami crane, and Harry’s tight hold on his hip is the only thing grounding him to reality. Holy. Fuck.

Harry keeps a locked hand on his hip, and reaches forward to fetch a tissue from the coffee table. Dabs at their stomaches before tossing it in the bin. He settle back, and they breath in silence.

Muscles trembling, and sticky warm, Eggsy counts the ticks from the second hand of Harry’s watch. Idly wonders if he’s supposed to get up now, or say something, or—

“You are the most beautiful sight I’ve ever beheld.” Harry breaks the silence first, eyes tender and wondering, and it squeezes Eggsy’s heart to a standstill. “I have scaled mountains. I have dived with fish shining of colors never seen on land. I have even discovered a hidden hot spring in Yellowstone. But it is still you.”

Eggsy stops breathing, because what do hell do you say to that?

“Fuck.” So he’s not as eloquent, sue him. “I—” love you, “—want to jump out of another bloody plane sans parachute if this is what happens.”
Eggsy doesn’t get a verbal response to that, though the body under him tenses to the consistency of concrete upon hearing him. Harry isn’t a man of many words—at least, not when it comes to fear—but the way he crushes Eggsy to him, nuzzles into his neck, and breathes deep is more telling than words could ever be.

Eventually they pull away from each other, and slowly dress. Once their shoes are back on, they stand before each other. The awkwardness they’d avoided thus far begins to appear, and Eggsy takes the opportunity to really *look* at the room he’d only paid cursory attention to.

Seeing this, Harry carelessly flicks his hand towards the rest of the space. “My office.”

The inflection of Harris’s voice is offhand, but there’s a decidedly careful quality to it. Eggsy has come to recognize it as his misdirection voice. “You have an office here? I didn’t know.” Which is stupid, in hindsight, because of course Harry has got one at headquarters. All the knight probably do. Which begs the question, “Why didn’t we ever meet here, before?”

Instantly, he regrets the observations, because Eggsy doesn’t want to meet here. He wants to keep going to the warm intimacy of the Hart household. This place is strikingly bare of personal effects.

Harry falters. “If you would prefer to meet here in the future….”

“No.” Eggsy is blunt. Pretty pointless to be shy now. “I like being in your house.”

Drawing him forward, Harry smiles, and kisses him, long, languidly, lips torqued in a smile the whole time. “Good. I like your being in my house.”

And that, as they say, is that. Harry keeps him through lunch. They don’t talk about Kingsman, or training, or Harry's vengeful little side project. The definitely don’t talk about Merlin or jumping out of airplanes.

They eat sandwiches and drink Silver Needle tea (Harry’s favorite, for now). Harry tells him stories from when he was very young, and had a troubling habit of sneaking live animals into the house (his mother broke the china tea set in shock when a doe walked through the living room). Eggsy, in turn, tells him the funnier stories from his graffiti days (he and his friends once tried to outdo Banksy, and that landed them pantsless, covered in pink paint, stranded in Hyde park during the 5AM rush).

He’s never seen Harry laugh so…lively.

It’s a nice turn. Eventually Eggsy is sent on his way, but not before he’s pinned to the door like a dried butterfly and has the air sucked out of him through his mouth. Which is wonderful.

He walks through HQ like he’s floating on clouds. Finds his way back to the barracks for a shower and a change of clothes, whistling the whole way. Idly, he wonders when there’ll be another rendezvous, because there will be, if that parting kiss was anything to go by.

But hopefully not in the office. Lavish though it was, there was an emptiness—the kind that comes from catalogs—and impersonal furnishing chosen to please the guests, rather than the owner. So very similar to an ivy-covered house he’d been trapped in once.

But not even the memory of Pinstripe can bring Eggsy down. He realizes that this hangup of his isn’t going away, that he’s going to figure a way to live with it, but he now knows it’s not going to control him. He has to laugh at himself though. A part of him had hoped that the bodice rippers from thirty years ago had some truth to them—that the cure for a cancerous memory was the love interest’s amazing dick.
Unfortunately, while Harry’s cock is awesome, it’s not a fucking magic wand.

It’s on the tail end of this thought that Roxy finds him toweling off in the dorm. “May I speak with you?”

 Throws her an impish grin over his shoulder. “Course. Sounds serious, though, should I be worried?”

She laughs, though there’s an odd note floating in the tone. “No, I just… wanted to thank you. Can we go somewhere?”

Eggsy raises a brow, because she’s really asking can we go somewhere without Merlin’s hidden ears. Shrugs a shoulder. “Sure thing, Rox. Give us a tick.”

He’s dressed in under a minute, and the two of them head back outside and, through unspoken agreement, carefully avoid the side with the landing grounds. Now that they are outside of the building, there’s only a fifty-fifty chance of them being overheard, which, sadly, is a vast improvement.

Eggsy waits her out.

“Look, I just wanted to say thanks, for pushing me out of the plane. You could have left me behind, and I would have failed out of the trials.”

He waves her off. “Weren’t nothing. Was the right thing to do. And, as it turns out, I would’ve died if I hadn’t hauled your arse over the edge, besides. We’re friends.” He’s dead serious, too. Eggsy may be making light of it, but this comes from a very deep place. Roxy is not his soulmate or his sibling. She should, in all honestly, be his bitter rival in these trials, and yet….

And yet, she’s his friend. Roxy has looked out for him, defended him, and stood by him. She’s his companion despite having every reason not to be.

Eggsy stares her down, so she doesn’t miss this. “You saved my life, Rox. Where ever you are, whatever you need, I’m yours.”

She nods, and has the decency to not make a big deal out of it. “Still. It means more than I can say.” Roxy scratches absently at the top of her thigh.

Gold flashes briefly through Eggsy’s mind.

Eggsy keeps talking, because Roxy hasn’t made any move to return to headquarters. He hasn’t yet struck the topic she’s dancing around. “It was clever, what you did. Smackin’ him on his head like he’s been asking for all year.” Eggsy grins broadly at her, nudging their shoulders together. She returns his smile, but it’s…off, somehow. Now that’s interesting.


For half a minute, they walk in silence, Roxy sneaking glances at this face every few seconds. Finally, she admits “He told me to do it.”

For a split second, he doesn’t get it. But then, it all clicks into place. “Merlin told you Charlie’s head
injury is a little more severe than what’s been reported.”

Roxy nods in the affirmative, chewing on her lip. “He told me to hit him, and to aim for that specific location, if I had the chance.”

Eggsy doesn’t miss her wording. _If I had the chance_, instead of _If Charlie tries anything_. Still. “Charlie had it coming.”

“Did he ever.” Roxy hesitates a moment. “Did Merlin ever say anything to you? Like what he said to me?”

20

To this day, Eggsy hasn’t the foggiest idea what prompted him to blurt out “I tried to murder Charlie.”

She’s not as shocked as Eggsy would like her to be. “…and Merlin asked you to?!”

“What? No! Charlie tried to shoot me, during the whole Sniper exam, so I, you know, stopped him.”

They come to a standstill, and Roxy turns to face him. Echoes his own words back at him. “Charlie had it coming.”

Smirking, Eggsy does the same. “Did he ever. But here’s the thing. Afterwards, Merlin did give me some advice.”

Twitching, Roxy visibly braces herself. “And what was that?”

“He basically told me...if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

They share a significant look, without comment. Both of their faces reflect something that could resemble, in a very specific light, _amusement_. Because Eggsy has to wonder. What would happen if all of Merlin’s competitors started talking to each other?

Roxy has just provided him with proof for a suspicion he’s been entertaining as of late, which only leads to so many more questions. Just how much does Merlin manipulate the trials? Is Charlie the only recruit Merlin’s laid his crosshairs over?

How many Lancelets had Merlin found wanting, and then cast away? How many Roxy Mortons had there been? And how many Eggsys?

God. Swallows a sudden concrete lump in his throat.

How many _Unwins_?

These questions linger along the edges of his brain over the next few weeks, though Roxy and Eggsy don’t speak of their conversation again. Partly because Merlin is the _last_ person on Earth they want to find out about their suspicions, and partly because the trials are coming to a close. With only three recruits left, the choosing pool has grown very shallow, and only one of them can win. Needless to say, while Roxy and Eggsy stand united against Charlie, they themselves start pulling away from each other. Ever. So. Slightly.

Like a strange, distorted mirror, the tension subtly growing between Roxy and Eggsy is reflected in Harry and Merlin. It’s not obvious, _per se_, but Harry did steal Merlin’s coffee one morning (and all the beans in HQ), which, on the surface, doesn’t seem like such a terrible transgression between
friends. But in retaliation, Merlin kept Eggsy late for four days straight at the gym to work on his flexibility, which meant Harry didn’t see Eggsy for that entire time. Subtle though it’s been, the two gents, apparently, have a private war going on.

This is, as expected, a problem for Eggsy, because his time with Harry is severely limited. After their private session of Thank-God-I’m/You’re-Alive hanky panky, they don’t have the chance for anything other than kissing. Which is still good, but, as they say, business is business, and the training is kept wholly separate.

Also limited is the time he intended to use in order to track down Rotti for a sitrep. Between Merlin and Harry, there’s no time for a walkabout in London and no way to get to a (somewhat) secure phone. All Merlin tells him is that Rotti is back at the house with his mum and Daisy, and that Dean is still locked up. Otherwise, his lips are sealed tighter than Fort Knox, leaving only one avenue for information. Which means Eggsy’s going to have utilize every ounce of cunning he has to wrangle a straight answer.

He catches Harry alone in the dining area, making himself a cuppa. “Hey Harry.”

A pleased smile bloom on Harry’s lips. “Eggsy. How are you?” The man looks so peaceful while fiddling around with the teapot, Eggsy almost feels guilty that he’s about to put a brutal end to it.

They exchange the customary niceties while Eggsy fetches the Oreos hidden in the back of the cupboard. Roxy had mentioned craving them three weeks into the trials, and they magically appeared in the snack zone. While it could have been Percival, Eggsy’s money is on Merlin and his creepy tendency to spy on everyone.

Sliding into the chair at the small table, he watches Harry’s back as he puts the kettle on. Eggsy starts his verbal finessing. “You ain’t been tracking Rotti down, or anything, have you?” See? Total subterfuge.

Harry, standing at the stove, turns baleful eyes onto his protege. “I’ve kept my word. He’s not a target.”

Shrugging nonchalantly, “Well yeah, but, you wouldn’t, say, be keeping tabs to catch him on some other technicality, would you?” Opens the package of Oreos, and selects a cookie that isn’t cracked or broken.

Harry’s enunciation is sharp as knives. “I’ve no control over his actions, Eggsy. If he chooses to break the law, and he’s caught, that is a dilemma of his own construction.” Heat turned up on the stove, Harry takes a seat opposite of Eggsy.

“Righto.” Twisting the top layer off the Oreo, Eggsy scuffs the floor under the table with his boot. “Figured.” Scrapes the cream filling off with his teeth, savoring the sweetness. “Could you, perhaps, stop looking for reasons to destroy his life any further? Maybe?”

Cue the disapproving eyebrows. Harry doesn’t even need to say anything to communicate his utter obstinance on the subject. In retaliation, Eggsy makes a childish show of popping the top wafer into his mouth and loudly crunching it with his teeth.

The two sit there in a stalemate; Harry waiting for the water to boil, and Eggsy defiantly munching on Oreos like a toddler. This lasts for several long minutes, until the kettle’s whistle pierces the silence.

As soon as Harry’s back is turned, Eggsy continues making his case. Very casually, “He’s been
Opening a cupboard, Harry pulls down two tea cups and the canister of Earl Grey. “Of course he is now. He's been caught. What he does now is a feeble attempt to make up for what he’s done for years.” Harry sets a steaming cup of sweet-smelling tea and cream before Eggsy, and sits down with his own. “Perhaps he is trying to become a decent man now, but it is certainly not good enough. Can you tell me one thing that will convince me he was even a shadow of a decent man when you were still young enough for it to matter?”

Eggsy doesn’t answer immediately. He thoughtfully chews on the last wafer, grabs a new Oreo from the package and offers it to Harry. Pleased though he is when Harry accepts the cookie, he is soon horrified when Harry simply bites into the damn thing. “Don’t you know how to eat an Oreo?”

His expression must have been something, because Harry is staring at him with naked incredulity. “Excuse me?”

Rolling his eyes, Eggsy grabs another cookie. “You only eat it whole if you have milk. When it’s dry, you twist it apart, like this.” Eggsy demonstrates the movement, much to Harry’s amusement. “Use the top to scrape all the filling into a ball so you can eat it.” Again, he is magnanimous enough to show Harry the proper way. “Then you eat the wafers.” Shrugs a shoulder. “Or give them to Rotti if you don’t want them. Weirdo doesn’t like the sugary filling, can you imagine?”

Exhaling, Harry looks at him from beneath his brows, though a small smirk tugs at his lips. “Clever tactic.”

Widening his eyes, Eggsy projects on the very image of innocence. “What? He was the one who taught me the right way to eat an Oreo cookie.”

“He was an arse.” Harry deadpanned.

“Yeah”, Eggsy laughs a bit, “he was. But he was an arse who always had an ace up his sleeve. He taught me how to deliver a killer zinger comeback, too. And how to kick the shit out of the bullies in my year.” Granted, Rotti’s advice had been based on prison rules, encouraging Eggsy to put him on the ground and kick the kid in the balls till he stopped moving in order to send a message to the rest of the student body. Harry probably didn’t need to know that little detail, though. “I learned how to sneak into a bar from him. And how to cheat at cards….”

“My, he sounds like a paragon of virtue.” Harrys drawls.

Sighing, Eggsy delivers a charming half smile. “Look, those were the things that made me so cool with the other kids my age.” Waving a hand in the air, he searches for the words to describe the currency of youth. “It got me some friends, who turned out to be pretty indispensable later on. And it kept everyone else from looking too closely at my home life. It’s stupid, and small, but it made me normal in the eyes of my peers. I was never shunned, and I lay that at Rotti’s doorstep.” His eyes beseech Harry. “That made a helluva difference.”

They don’t say anything else, but Eggsy can tell Harry is turning this story over in his thoughts. So, Rotti should be okay for a while longer—at least until the trials conclude. Probably. Either way, it’s a gentle reminder of Harry’s promise.

Tea finished, Eggsy thanks Harry and stands to leave for the gym. A hand on his elbow stops him. “I’ve arranged a change of pace for today. Interested?” And doesn’t Harry just look like the cat who caught the canary and hid it in the master’s shoe?
Harry refuses to say a word more about it, and Eggsy is nearly dying of curiosity by the time they reach the underground bullet train. He won’t stop guessing at where they’re going, and for what reason. They step into the tailor shop and are greeted by the old chap running the joint.

“Ah, Mr. Hart, Mr. Unwin, right on time.”

Blinking, Eggsy drops his head to his chest, grinning. “Mate, you had me going! This is the big secret errand?”

Harry exchanges a smug glance with the tailor. “I assure you, your excitement is not misplaced.” Sweeping his hand forward, the tailor is granted access to Eggsy, who is led right back into dressing room number three.

Eggsy smirks at the reflection of Harry, watching them from the doorway. “This looks familiar.”

Smiling, Harry keeps quiet in a very telling way.

Quickly, Eggsy is divested of his sweater and pants, and is told to stand before the mirror in his t-shirt and boxers. The tailor produces a cloth tape measure from out of nowhere, and starts recording the distance from shoulder to shoulder, shoulder to wrist, even between his bloody shoulder blades. Harry keeps up a running commentary the entire time. “An excellent, bespoke suit is the modern gentleman’s armor.”

Reaching around his chest from behind, Eggsy can feel the tailor’s breath on his neck. He can’t help but twitch at every gentle gust.

“Of course, a Kingsman-made suit confers more than just high social standing. It is the sartorial equivalent of a kevlar vest.”

Eggsy does his best to ignore the tailor, and focus on Harry. “Do you mean to tell me the suit you’re w-wearing is—bloody hell—bullet proof?!” Tongue tripping over itself, Eggsy takes in a deep breath. The tailor is measuring his waist, and all Eggsy can see are hands reaching around his hips, clad in pinstripe sleeves. Violently stomping down the recently developed instinct to retaliate with extreme prejudice, Eggsy wants nothing more than to turn around, face that poor bastard, and punch his lights out—

“Andrew, would you mind bringing in some cloth samples? I will finish up here. Blacks and Navys, I think.”

The tailor, Andrew, withdraws his hands. “Very good, sir.”

Andrew disappears, the dressing room door clicking shut, and Harry replaces him by Eggsy’s side. He doesn’t ask Eggsy ‘are you okay’, because he’s fucking fine, obviously.

The tape measure slides between Harry’s fingers with a quiet hiss. Eggsy tracks him in the mirror as he moves to his back. There isn’t any unease slinking around his vertebrae as there had been with the tailor.

Harry taps on Eggsy’s elbows, indicating he should raise his arms to grant access to his waist. When Harry wraps his arm around Eggsy, taking note of the numbers, Eggsy exhales and leans back. As always, Harry is warm. Eggsy doesn’t even try to stop himself from turning his head and pressing his lips to Harry’s in a chaste, lingering kiss.

Arms tightening around him, Eggsy drops his hands onto Harry’s. Something settles inside of him, uncurling from a jumbled ball and stretching out to lay flat and still. For the first time in a very long
while, Eggsy feels at peace. He feels content in a way he’s only read about.

When they finally break the kiss, Eggsy focuses on their reflection. Every square inch of his heart trembles at the sight they make, because they look...right. They look good together. They’re a fucking fairytale made flesh; a veritable prince and pauper. A drive that’s been slowly creeping into his mind since their tryst begins to solidify it’s foothold among Eggsy’s thoughts: he’ll die before he let’s Harry go.

Harry makes short work of the rest of the measurements. Eternally polite, he doesn’t comment on Eggsy’s blush when he gets on his knees in front of him to slowly measure the inseam. Instead, he wordlessly smirks up at Eggsy, making him flush even deeper at the unspoken promise of later.

By the time Andrew returns with some swatches, Harry is back on his feet. One short deliberation later, and an order has been put in for a lovely double-breasted midnight suit with a tapered waist. The tailor disappears again, silent as a ghost.

“Are we done here, then?” Eggsy asks, pulling his pants and jacket back on.

“Not quite.” Harry saunters over to the clothing hooks by the mirror, and gives one of them a solid twist.

Grinding gears meet his ears, and the mirror is lifted off the ground, while the wall panels spread outward to reveal a hidden room. Harry guides him into the suite with a hand on his shoulder. “I think you will enjoy this immensely, Eggsy.”

And damned if he wasn’t right. The hidden armory of dressing room three is tastefully lit, and every item contained therein is lined up as though on graphing paper. Frankly, it’s some of the best organization porn Eggsy’s ever seen in the whole of his internet search history.

“What is all this?”

“The Kingsman arms depot. One of them, anyway.”

Bulletproof suits lined the top sections of the vault, below them stood the umbrellas concealing both firearm and shield. Noticing where Eggsy’s eyes land, Harry smiles. “Those you are already familiar with. You may like the pistols to the right, though.” Gestures to the section of wide-barreled handguns.

Eyebrows shooting up to his hairline, Eggsy lets out a low whistle. “Never want to stare down those barrels from the wrong end.”

“Indeed. Standard issue for every agent, of course. Slightly big as you’ve mentioned, as it also fires a shotgun cartridge for use in messy close-range situations.”

A grin splits Eggsy’s face in half. “Ah yes. Very, very nice.”

Pointing to another section, “You’re going to need a pair of shoes to go with your suit. An Oxford is any formal shoe with open lacing. This additional decorative piece is called ‘broguing’.”

The proverbial lightbulb flickers on above Eggsy’s head. “Oxfoards, not brogues.”

“Words to live by, Eggsy. Words to live by.” Harry selects a pair in his size, and hands them over. “Try a pair.”

As Eggsy sits to lace them onto his feet, Harry reviews the other items in the inventory. And that
inventory? It’s the stuff of wet dreams. Signet rings that deliver 50,000 volts of electricity straight into your enemy. A pen that emits a fast acting poison. A *fucking lighter grenade*. Eggsy makes a mental to not to palm one on his way out the door, because…because it’s a grenade. That looks like a lighter. Who the fuck wouldn’t steal one?

Shoes on tight, grin undying, Eggsy stands before Harry expectantly.

“How do they feel?”

Bouncing on his toes a bit, “Yeah. They feel good.” Doesn’t bother to ask how Harry knew his shoe size.

“Now do your very best impersonation of a German aristocrat’s formal greeting.”

Biting his lip, Eggsy goes for cheeky, because really, it’s his natural state. He holds his finger to his top lip like a mustache with his left hand and imitates the Nazi salute with his right.

Harry huffs in amusement. “Not quite what I’d had in mind.” Demonstrating, Harry snaps his heels together, and a small blade shoots out of the toe of his right shoe.

“Okay, now that—” Eggsy clicks his heels together “—is wicked cool.” He stares at the little blade for a few seconds. “Uh, how do I put it back?”

“As the blade is coated with one of the most powerful neurotoxins in the world, very carefully.”

Using the leg of the bench, Harry slowly pushes the blade back into the toe of his shoe.

Eggsy emulates him to a T. “Sick.”

Nodding, Harry mistakes the slang. “Yes, it is, isn’t it? But very handy when you’re in a bind. Particularly when you’ve been captured.”

Harry tone is leading, and Eggsy’s spent enough time around him to know what that means. “I take it this outing isn’t just about getting a weaponized suit.”

Dipping his head, Harry concedes the point. “Percival and Arthur are also speaking with their Proposed today. Now that the trials have whittled down the recruits, you’ll be schooled in the more…unpleasant side of the business.” Waving his hand, he gestures for Eggsy to take a seat on the bench. Harry joins him.

Turning to face his sponsor, Eggsy braces himself. “Dare I ask?”

To Harry’s credit, he doesn’t try to sugarcoat it. “Torture resistance.”

He’s brought up short, because what the fuck? Eggsy isn’t surprised at the topic—he’s shocked that he hadn’t considered it. I mean, torture…that’s what happened to soldiers caught behind enemy lines. Prisoner of war, who get purple hearts when they come home. If they come home.

He hand’t really considered it might happen to him.

Harry continues, voice notably professional. “The trials, thus far, have been testing your endurance, your ability to think under pressure, and facing your own mortality. Because you have lasted this long, and, “ Harry voice warms momentarily, “I might add, done remarkably well, it is assumed you have accepted that you may die in the line of duty.” The somber tone returns. “It is now time to consider what may happen if you don’t.”
What follows is the most chilling conversation Eggsy has ever had. Worse even than that time Dean revealed his Mark. “If you are held captive, out of contact with your handler, and unable to free yourself, proceed under the assumption that no one is coming for you.”

Harry’s voice is positively bland. “Of course, there is always the option of self-incapacitation. If your tormentor seems easily angered with limited self-control, then you might anger them enough to hit your hard enough that you lose consciousness. This is not the healthiest of choices, clearly, but it can be useful.”

“First, and most important, is this: everyone breaks under torture. Everyone. It is simply a question of how long.”

He instructs as though the subject is how to make toast. “If it’s information they are after, they will never believe the first thing out of your mouth, so lie. Be sarcastic. Be obvious. Let them hurt you until it escalates. Once they start cutting off body parts is when you start talking.”

His face is peaceful, like this is old fucking hat. “Layer your lies. Choose small truths to give up, things that will not compromise the overall mission, but that will corroborate the lie you’ve chosen.

“For example, I once surrendered the details of a covert assault on the Faizan-E-Madina mosque that I knew would have already been carried out. These details were confirmed at no loss to Kingsman, and so they believed the false coordinates of another operative were true as well. This led to their downfall.”

Not even the details of his own nasty experience seems to phase him. “It bought me time to find an avenue for escape. Note that the information you do give up should be carefully selected. If they believe they have everything they can get out of you, they will execute you.”

Eggsy wonders if there will ever come a day when he can be casual about interrogation resistance. “Every knight is tracked, of course, and you want to stay alive as long as you possibly can. But it is very much a race against the clock, as they say. There comes a point when there isn’t anything you can give to your interrogator that won’t damage your fellow operatives, and you must prepare yourself for that possible eventuality.

By the time Harry concludes his hour long lesson, Eggsy is white as a sheet. “We all hope it never comes to it, and Kingsman will do everything it can to ensure it never happens. Sometimes, though, a bloody death is the only option. Prepare yourself for the possibility.”

Eggsy will not be attending dinner tonight.

Now that Harry’s words have tapered off, Eggsy takes the time to digest his words. A little shaken he is, but deterred he is not. “I take it if I…whoever wins Lancelot will get more exacting training for this?”

Harry nods.

Right. Probably simulations, even. Eggsy takes a deep breath. Okay. I guess, it’s worth the risk. And honestly, having had a firsthand look at Kingsman’s technology, if Eggsy ever ends up in such a hopeless situation, then there’s probably bigger things to worry about. Like, the world is about to suffer an epidemic of mass killing sprees, or something.

One thing has stuck in his brain, though. Everyone breaks under torture. Honestly, it kind of makes him feel better.

Clearly, he’s let the silence stretch for too long, because Harry is looking at him with that wary look
in his eyes. “This isn’t meant to…the trials require this lesson to educate you on the more brutal possibilities.” He’s obviously reluctant to voice his next thought, but he does anyway. “This is the last chance for a recruit to withdraw from the Trials voluntarily. If you decide you don’t wish to continue…..”

The air rushes out of Eggsy’s lungs, and he quirks his lips at Harry’s disinclination to offer him an out. “No, I’m not withdrawing. I was just…relieved, if you can believe it.”

Eyebrows knitting together, Harry tilts his head to the side. “That is certainly not the reaction I was expecting.”

Shrugging, Eggsy casually tosses out “Well, you know how Dean was.” As though it explained everything.

Harry shakes his head. “You’ve never spoken of anything specific.”

“Well, I mean, he used to have these, like, sessions with me.” A spark of satisfaction flares upon seeing Harry’s hands close into fists. Sick, he knows, but it’s nice to see that his history is starting to bother others more than it bothers himself. “It was always when I made myself too much of a thorn in his side. I guess I was always a little ashamed, when I backed off afterwards, like he wanted.”

But if everyone broke under torture, then maybe he wasn’t being totally weak. Maybe he was being smart about it, because he never stayed down for long. Just long enough to heal.

Harry seems to know where his thoughts are, because he nods in agreement. “Eggsy, you withstood years of systematic abuse. The shear fatigue alone would have broken anyone, and yet you came out of it a good, strong man. A man I’m proud to count among my friends.”

Eggsy doesn’t say anything in response. Simply bestows a kiss unto Harry.

Breathing into Eggsy’s ear, Harry murmurs “If you ever feel the need to speak to someone, Eggsy, I hope you will come to me.”

He whispers back. “Thanks, but I think I’m finally ready to stop chattering about it.” Finally, he’s tired of revisiting his Tragic Backstory all the fucking time. He’s not even annoyed because it hurts to explain. It’s because he’s almost bored with the topic.

Eggsy smiles to himself. It just doesn’t have as much of a hold over him as it used to. For the first time, he realizes that he’s actually moving on. Learning to live with it. All that dumb crap that self-help books are ridiculed for.

“So, what’s next on the lesson plan?”

“We are finished here, actually. Shoes off, they stay in the armory for now.”

Bending forward, Eggsy begins unlacing the weaponized dress shoes. Harry stands, adjusting his suit to its usual pristine condition.

He stands and hands over the shoes. “You’re no fun at all.”

Harry don’t even dignify that with a response. He replaces the shoes onto the shelf, and that’s when Eggsy strikes.

Boldly pressing his body flush against Harry’s, Eggsy meets his lips eagerly, arms wrapping around his neck. Harry’s back is pressed against the shelving, and he pulls Eggsy impossibly close, licking
into Eggsy mouth with hunger.

Breaking for air, Eggsy asks, “Since I’m getting a suit, can I also have some bulletproof boxers?”

Noses bumping into each other, Harry laughs. “What on Earth do you need bulletproof underwear for?”

Eggsy shrugs, and goes in for another kiss. Hands gently pushing on his shoulders prevents him, though. Harry’s forehead presses against his own.

“Eggsy?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“What on Earth do you need bulletproof underwear for?”

“Eggsy?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Put the grenade back.”

Groaning, Eggsy replaces the gold lighter back on the shelf behind Harry’s neck. “Goddammit.”

“Excellent tactic though. Remember that for your next exam.”

“Wait, what? Seriously?”

Harry, however, is already on his way out of the dressing room, smirk firmly curled, and Eggsy hurries to shove his boots on and catch up. By the time he makes it out into the main area of the tailor shop, Super Secret Arms Depot closed tightly behind him, he walks in on a very tense situation.

Valentine and a beautiful assistant are talking with his soulmate. While his first instinct is holy-shit—that’s-Valentine, his eyes are continually drawn to the lady standing beside him. Her stance is gracefully curved, and she’s confident in her skin to the point of a hunting cat.

She stands like Harry Hart.

“I’ve been invited to the queen’s box at Ascot. I thought, when in rome, so here I am for the best bespoke suit in England.” Lisping, Valentine seems friendly enough on the surface, but Harry is Awake. The kind that Eggsy reads as battle ready.

“My congratulations on your invitation, and your most excellent suit.” Harry’s reply is stiffer than his spine.

Valentine’s eyes turn to him. “Ah, is this young man your assistant?” Extending his hand, “Richmond Valentine. Great to meet you.”

Taking his hand, “Eggsy. Likewise.”

Upon hearing his accent, Valentine’s smile widens considerably. “Ah, you aren’t from around this part of London, right? Born on the wrong side of the tracks?” He tightens his grip on Eggsy’s hand. “Me too.”

Eggsy reclaims his hand. “Nice to meet ya’.”

Wagging his fingers at his assistant, she places a little white card into his waiting hand. In turn, Valentine offers it to Eggsy. “Looks like you’re on your way up, kid. I admire that sort of perseverance. Give me a call if you ever need a hand. I like to give back.”

Before Eggsy can even touch the card, Harry steps between them, and takes ownership of the slip of paper. “Might I recommend a hat to complement your…fine suit.”
Smirking, Valentine takes the hint, and the shop recommendation, and leaves. His assistant follows, shooting them an enigmatic smile before she closes the shop door behind her.

Turning to Eggsy, “Please return to headquarters. You should be meeting Merlin and the other recruits at four pm in conference room two. Wear something dressy.”

Nodding, Eggsy takes the dismissal at face value, and starts his journey back to the barracks. Harry said to dress nice, and he hasn’t steered Eggsy wrong yet. He has enough time for a shower, at the very least.

Four o’clock rolls around, and Eggsy finds himself seated between Roxy and Charlie. Merlin is smirking in a swivel chair before them, and all he needs is a fluffy white cat to complete his image. Percival is in the corner, menacing glee written in every line of his body.

Crap.

“Your exam tonight will be graded on the time-honored tradition of the Honey-Pot mission.”

Merlin pipes up. “In other words, how is your seduction technique?”

Oh God, they’ve teamed up this time. Eggsy and Roxy exchange looks of dread.

Percival picks up the dialog without skipping a beat. “You have each been given a picture. The targets will be present at a nightclub this evening, and it’s your job to win a night of their affection.”

Dumbstruck, Eggsy blurts out, “You want us to score?”

Charlie cuts in with an arrogant smirk, “Well, I think I have this one in the bag.” He waves his picture in front of his competitors. A lovely young lady is displayed in black and white.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Eggsy holds up the same picture. “Sorry chav, but the ladies all love a bit of rough. I’ll be taking home the gold tonight.” Pointedly does not think of Harry, because his sponsor obviously knew this was coming.

Roxy, not one to be outdone, scoffs. “As though either of you know what pleases a woman.” Turning her own picture, she reveals that they’re all three after the same poor girl.

Charlie chokes.

Roxy is smug as fuck about it, too.

“Well then”, Merlin drawls. “Let the games begin.”

They’re made to walk to the damn place from the tailor shop, instead of being granted a ride like the other exams.

Riding the underground from headquarters to the shop is the most logical solution. It’s awkward though, now that there’s only three of them left. Eggsy and Roxy are sitting next to each other, muttering game plans to each other, while Charlie is isolated and icy a few rows down.

Walking the London streets is just as uncomfortable. They lag behind Charlie the entire time, arms linked, keeping him in their sights. Roxy leans closer to whisper in his ear. “Have you ever done anything like this?”

He shakes his head ‘no’, and tries not to think of the times he’s been treated like he did this sort of thing all the time. “You?”
“Never. I’m not sure I….”

“Yeah?” He prompts.

Roxy switches gears. “Have you ever had sex?”

Eggsy’s mouth flaps in the wind. “I, well…” Actually, has he? Technically, that time with Harry, he guesses. “Sorta? I mean, I’ve done hands, but I’ve never had a dick up my arse.” Biting her lips, Roxy’s eyes widen in surprise. He’s not really sure why, since he is in his twenties—oh. “I guess we haven’t talked about this yet, have we? I swing both ways.”

She breezes by it after that. “I’ve never had sex either. Penetrative sex, I m—”

“I know what you mean.” A heartbeat passes. “I don’t want to do this either.”

Her eyes are vulnerable in that moment, and Eggsy loves her for it. He’s not the only one having problems with this. Christ, he’d just started being okay again, with Harry, and now he’s supposed to fuck a complete stranger to pass a test. He isn’t okay with this at all. “But… I guess it’s just part of the job, huh?”

Neither of them voice that two out of three recruits will be doing something totally degrading tonight for no gain. They’re both thinking it, though, and they both know it. Only one of them can pass the exam. Unless….

He quickly looks to Roxy, searching for the appropriate words. Thankfully, she’s a step ahead of him. “There’s no reason we should, you know, do it alone.”

Eggsy tries to break the tension with a joke. “We could both score?”

Roxy raises an eyebrow.

“Points on the exam, Roxy, damn.” He hisses playfully. “What did you think I meant?”

The corner of her mouth twitches, though he doesn’t quite get the laugh he was hoping for. “I just meant….”

Eggsy takes her hand, and squeezes. “We’ve pretty much gone through this whole ordeal together. May as well see it through, no matter who wins. And, for what it’s worth, I don’t want to do this alone either.” Honestly, he’s not attracted to Roxy at all. They’ve lived together in a dorm where the toilet stalls had very limited cover. He’s seen the absolute worst of her, and vice versa. There’s no sunset or white horse in that future.

Finally, the club looms ahead of them.

The trio makes a unanimous decision to enter the club separately, in case the mark is already inside. Roxy is let in immediately because she’s smoking hot. Charlie slips the bouncer enough cash to look the other way. Eggsy climbs the drain pipe and sneaks in through the second story bathroom window.

The point is, they all get in successfully on their own steam. Of course, even the best laid plans go astray, because the target? She’s nowhere to be seen. Of. Fucking. Course.

They spend the next two hours wandering around the dimly lit club, drifting from conversation to conversation, never staying long enough to become memorable. Every now and then, Eggsy and Roxy check in with each other, and he can tell that this is not her favorite kind of scene. Neither is it
his.

And finally, she makes an appearance. As far as Eggsy knows, none of them saw her actually enter the club, but Roxy spots her on a sofa, so it’s on.

Charlie gets to her first, and signals one of the drink servers wandering around the floor to bring them something expensive. Roxy and Eggsy hand back for a moment.

“Wait here for a few seconds.” She whispers in his ear. “I’ve an idea.”

Roxy saunters on over to the couch, and sits down next to the mark. As a fellow female, Roxy is welcomed into the girl’s personal space. “Please tell me you aren’t going to fall for his utter crap.” As soon as Eggsy overhears her words, he realizes the brilliance in her plan. Roxy gestures to Charlie. “He does this all the time, and never calls in the morning.” Tilts her head in. “It’s enough to put you off the male population for a time, trust me.”

And it’s flawlessly executed, because she’s gained the instinctive trust of the target by making herself vulnerable, implying she had fallen for the same trick. Simultaneously, she’s discredited Charlie, and effectively put him out of the race in one fell swoop.

Time to make his entrance. “She’s right, you know.” Eggsy swings himself around and purposely sits between the girl and Charlie. “This one’s a dog.” Pulls on a depreciating look. “I know.” And just like that, the target smiles at him, and perks up at the prospect of a Gay Best Friend.

Sue him, it’s an in, and he needs to keep up with Roxy. If she starts out assuming he’s gay, she won’t bring her shields up from the get-go.

Charlie starts in on damage control and failing miserably, Eggsy is amused to see, when the waiter returns with several flutes of champagne. Roxy commandeers one, and Charlie snags two before anyone else can fetch the girl’s glass. Eggsy himself grabs the final flute in a purposely inelegant fist. Like Rotti always said, trim loves a bit of rough.

They all sip on the champagne, and Eggsy sneers at the bitter taste. Plays it up as just another charming blue-collar characteristic. Charlie continues being the odd man out. Roxy is all but pressed intimately against the girl, skimming fingers along her knee, and Eggsy is closing in on her other side. She plays with the hem of the target’s dress and leans in to whisper tantalizingly into an ear. Every now and then, the two will glance his way, cheeks rosier than normal.

Roxy has this one down, it seems, so Eggsy leans back and takes a longer sip from his glass. Barely concealing a grimace, Eggsy glares at the flute of champagne. He thought it would taste better, since everyone always made such a big deal about it. Instead, it’s really bitter and—fuck.

The bottom drops out of his stomach and he literally feels the blood fall from his face. Oh fuck, but he recognizes the bitterness burning the sides of his tongue. Christ, not again, his drink is spiked.

Looking to Roxy, he sees the mostly-empty glass in her hand and frantically tries to catch her eye. Concern etches her features, and she cuts off mid-seduction. Reaching out, she places the back of her hand on Eggsy’s cheek. “You don’t look well, are—”

“Not again. I’m not doing this again.” He’s panicking now, he can feel it rising up inside of him, uncontrollably.

Roxy is completely ignoring the girl now, and leans forward closer to Eggsy. “What’s going on? Talk to me.” Her voice is commanding, and it pulls Eggsy’s brain back together.
“I’ve been drugged. Is your drink sorta’ bitter?”

Her mouth drops open, and it’s all the answer he needs. She’s in just as much trouble as he is. Fuck the exam. He stands up, and the vertigo immediately hits him full on. Roxy isn’t far behind him, and she tries to copy. She lists to the side, though, and falls back onto the couch, wide eyed.

_Fuck._ Grabbing her hand, Eggsy hauls her up and flings her arm over his shoulder. They both stumble like drunks towards the door. “Okay, we gotta’ get up now, Rox, walk it off, get your system started and whatnot—”

Christ but that snuck right up on them. Hit them hard, and now they’re in so much fucking trouble—

They bump into someone, and Roxy is ripped from his trembling hands by a stranger traveling in the opposite direction. Hears a muffled “Eggs—”, and he does his best to push through the sudden crowd of bodies to give chase—

—lights are flashing in the club, and there’s a strong arm around his torso, pulling him through the throng. Tries to push him away, but his muscles aren’t responding well. Mumbles, “No. I ain’t doing this again. Let me the fuck go….”

The stranger tenses, and pulls him in tighter. Eggsy barely registers a prick in his side, followed by the brief uncomfortable sensation of liquid ice threading it’s way through his veins. The room spins, and darkens, and he’s pushed over the edge.

The last thing he hears is through miles of cotton, “My client had a bit much to drink…taxi to take him home…thank….”

_Fuck._ Should really know better than to accept drinks from suits.

With a jolt, Eggsy wakes to darkness and the smell of oil. The air has a wet stillness to it indigenous to sewers and abandoned subway tunnels. Flexing his wrists, Eggsy’s heart leaps to his throat when the rough cord binding his wrists cuts painfully into his skin. Pulse pounding in his ears, he keeps his eyes squeezed shut, because _he knows this_. He was lucky the last time, but he’s tied down this go ‘round, and it’s only a matter of time before they touch him. Before the sharp sound of zippers on cloth worms their way unerringly into his eardrums. Hands, careless hands, sliding down flesh where it shouldn’t, into his pants where _they aren’t allowed_—

“Open your eyes.”

He obeys the abrupt command. The voice is grating and sounds as though it was torn painfully from some poor body, but it yanks Eggsy away from his spiraling thoughts. His eyes land on a tall shadowed figure clad in trench coat and fedora. Glancing around at the scenery, he finds that his guess wasn’t that far off. He’s tied onto a set of tracks, and it’s just him and his abductor.

Swallowing thickly, Eggsy’s tense muscles settle, and he lets out a harsh burst of air in relief. Eyeing his captor, Eggsy can see the subtle jerk of his body, despite the clothing coverage.

“Something _relaxing_ about your predicament?” The words are hissed, and Eggsy swears he can see a pair of shaded eyes narrow in irritation.

Testing the restraints, Eggsy bites back a snarky remark about cliche renegade detectives. He needs to buy time until Kingsman can track him down. At the very least, Eggsy figures they’ll want to make sure he wasn’t off tattling to the motherland.

“Nah mate, just woken in worse places, yeah?” Voice low, Eggsy tries to inject some dark humor into the atmosphere, but his words still come out a little wobbly. Draws in a shaky breath. _Keep calm. Wait for a mistake. Get the fuck up out of here._
Gravel crunching beneath heavy boots, his captor steps closer. The man—because it’s obviously a man this close and personal—slowly pulls out a short knife. The blade, though little, gleams with wicked intent in the dim ambient lighting.

“Tell me about Kingsman.”

Eggsy blinks once. Twice. Leans his head forward in feinted confusion. “What are you on about, mate? I ain’t got a clue about kingsit, or —”

“Don’t try to lie to me. We know you’re working for Kingsman.” The man steps over Eggsy, crouching down to look him dead in the eyes. The trench coat drags along Eggsy’s body menacingly, flaring to make his capture seem hulking in size. “You were seen with a known member, Harry Hart.”

No. “Who the fuck is Harry Hart? I don’t know anything about what you’re talking about—”

The knife is pressed gently to his pulse, and Eggsy stops breathing. The blade tickles his skin like a lover, and if he so much as swallows, he’ll be cutting into his own neck.

Lowering his voice to a deeper register, his captor leans in even closer. Eggsy can feel his breath against his cheek. “Tell me what I want to know.” The man backs off the pressure put on the knife, softly sliding it down Eggsy throat in a deadly ballet of seduction and death. “Tell me, and I won’t have to ask the girl.”

Eggsy flinches. ‘Girl?’ Voice is barely above a whisper. “Jesus, you took that bird I was talkin’ up? I only just met her—”

“We know she works for Kingsman as well, and can direct these questions at her just as easily.”

In that moment, Eggsy considers it. He knows very intimately what monsters like this do to pretty things like her. They’ll take Roxy—who shines like crystal and doesn’t care how poor he is, or where he comes from—and make her into something dirty, something twisted, something like himself.

He’s going to die here. Tonight. In a filthy corner of London forgotten by rest of civilization. Knows it’s fucked up to feel like it’s the right death; the kind of death his life has been leading up to since that first time he sold blow. He’s dying, and it’s inevitable, but it doesn’t have to be so for her. He could spare her this. Eggsy opens his mouth to tell them everything. Instead—

“Fuck you. She’s going to eat you alive.” He delivers his words in a calm and steady manner that borders on otherworldly. Perhaps Eggsy is a cruel bastard, but Roxy signed up for this knowing the risks, just like him. Maybe she’ll do better than his sorry arse.

A slow rumbling grows in the distance, and Eggsy turns his head to see a small light shimmer into existence. Knife removed from his throat, Eggsy returns his attention to the man, standing again to tower above him. “Tell me what I want to know, or I leave you to be messily cleaved in two.”

Christ, he’s going to be run over by a train. Who fucking does that? “Please.” Licks his lips, holds himself together. “I don’t know anything, I swear, just let me go.”

The man takes a deliberate step back. The tracks to which he’s bound begin to tremble beneath him. A low whine calls forth from the tunnels, and Eggsy starts to shake in tandem with the pebbles. “I don’t know anything.”

Another step back takes his captor fully out of harms way, leaving Eggsy to feel strangely bereft.
He’s going to die alone, and no one but his enemies will know.

“You do! This knife could save your life. Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

The train is drawing closer, the vibrations growing in peak and frequency, but he just can’t bring himself to speak. His last words sure as fuck aren’t going to be him begging.

“Time’s running out. Is Kingsman really worth dying for?”

“Yes! Yes it bloody well is!” Voice is desperate, but he isn’t going out a snitch.

“Time’s up.”

“Fuck you!” He screams out the last words he’ll ever say with all the rage and hurt he’s kept bottled inside of him since his father died—every emotion that he caged in the dark places inside him; that were sharp and painful and cut up the underside of his skin with every breath. Throws it all at his murderer as though it might do a final harm.

The train is finally bearing down upon him, great and black and unyielding. There is a forceful wake of air driven mercilessly before the steel behemoth that strikes harshly at Eggsy, lighting up every cell in his body with adrenaline. His muscles tighten towards impossible limits, and he tries to roll away from looming death. The rope bites into his flesh and holds true. Shoulders and back cruelly angled and screaming in agony, Eggsy can practically feel his muscles flaking apart from the panicked struggles of a snared animal—

Abrupt vertigo. Stomach churning and dropping. Piercing light and screaming metal drill themselves into his brain. The deep thunder surrounds him, snakes over his skin intimately, rattles his mind, shakes his organs—

And then it’s quiet. The cry of steel against steel fades away as though it never was, though the scrape of the rails still echoes in his veins. Eggsy slowly opens his eyes, and peers up from what seems to be a ravine. The ground suddenly raises, a little too quick for comfort, and his muscles bark in protest as they clench again.

Platform jerking to a stop at the top, Eggsy sees his captor flicker like a scifi hologram to reveal Harry Hart, suit and all. He’s wearing a small, but proud smile on his face, and it takes a second for Eggsy’s brain to catch up.

Once he’s on the same page as reality, he slowly relaxes his complaining muscles. Harry bends over him to release his hands and legs, and then steps back. Eggsy doesn’t move. He stays very still for a minute, numb, trembling in the aftermath of the wildest adrenaline rush of his life. Feels like he was run over on the inside.

“You fuckin’ wanker.”

Harry chuckles lowly, and offers his hand. Grabbing the proffered limb, Eggsy is pulled to his feet. His legs are still unsteady, and Harry grips his shoulders to help stabilize him. “Well done, Eggys.”

Despite everything, the praise still forces a smile to Eggsy’s face. “Roxy?”

“Quite safe. She was up first. Passed with flying colors, as you just did.” Harry gestures to a space along the tunnel wall. The bricks flicker away, just like Harry’s villain-suit, to reveal Merlin and Roxy. She’s pale but smiling, and Merlin…he’s a strange cross between relief and dread. Eggsy smirks, though it is a little pained.
Turns back to Harry. “And…how did Charlie do?”

The slant of Harry’s mouth turns devilish, and Eggsy’s heart melts a bit. “His test is next.” Eyes flash with mischief. “Care to watch?”

Eggsy tries to keep decorum, but the evil grin splitting his face doesn’t quite live up to the attempt. Shrugs as nonchalantly as he can. “A’ight.”

He wanders towards the control room while Harry takes off his disguise. Percival joins Harry, carrying an unconscious Charlie, careful not to jostle him. They get him stretched out on the same bit of track Eggsy had been tied to, and start securing his wrists.

Next to appear is Arthur, who takes up Harry’s disguise.

When Eggsy walks into the room, Roxy immediately beams at him, and it’s like the sun is shining from that girl. Merlin places a hand on his shoulder, squeezing. They gather at the window, Roxy discreetly taking his hand, probably in gratitude for asking after her.

By now, Percival has disappeared again, and Harry joins them in the control room.

Arthur is waving a small canister under Charlie’s nose, who jerks a bit, and slowly blinks awake. Arthur, despite his age, is in full on gangster intimidation mode. It’s odd, watching this bit from the outside. Now that Eggsy isn’t freaking out over being killed by an oncoming train, he can see the little tells in Arthur’s performance. Distantly wonders if those same tells had been there when it had been Harry.

When the train blares out it’s proximity, Charlie starts gushing secrets like a nicked femoral artery. He screams like a child when he’s dropped under the train. Eggsy, admittedly, gets quite the vindictive pleasure in watching him fail utterly. He tries to keep his mean spirited feelings from showing, but doesn’t quite succeed.

Tries not to feel so horribly gleeful when Arthur relays just how disappointed he is in Charlie. If Eggsy thought he was becoming a better person before, he certainly can’t claim that now.

Harry comes up behind him, and rests both of his warm hands on his shoulders. Smiling up at Harry, Eggsy finally breathes easy that night. Things are starting to fall into place, at long fucking last. Not only did he not have to fuck some unknown girl for Kingsman, but he and Roxy beat out Charlie Hesketh. He and Harry are closer than ever, and—

Harry’s hands spasm. From the corner of his eyes, Eggsy catches a dark look passing between his sponsor and Merlin. Shite. There’s a moment drawn out between them like a finely braided cord, humming with tension as though plucked. The two stare each other down.

The cord snaps in two with a proverbial twang, and Harry ices over immediately. Looks down, and removes his hands from Eggsy’s body. Takes a step backwards.

Breath freezing in his lungs, a tendril of dread shoots through Eggsy’s chest. Harry knows all about Merlin’s Mark, and they’ve been brothers in blood and battle for decades. If Eggsy understands only one thing in this world, it’s loyalty.

Merlin had Harry’s loyalty long before Eggsy ever did.

What if Harry decides to pull another ‘hospital scene’, and pretend like nothing is happening between them? What if, out of deference to Merlin, he—
“It’s time to head back. Let’s—”

“I want to walk.” Eggsy blurts out, unthinking. “Can I walk back? Where are we?”

The others look at him with varying shades of what-the-fuck-is-up-with-you. Merlin is clearly about to shoot him down, when Roxy pipes up.

“Actually, I’d like to as well. It’s a very nice night. Rather rare, don’t you think?” A few soft words from her, and Merlin crumbles like carrot cake. He nods his consent, and gives them direction.

Roxy links her arm in his, again, and leads him out.

Harry pats his shoulder before he leaves. “Excellent job, both of you.” Looks him in the eye. “I’m proud of you.” Allows his fingers to sweep down Eggsy’s spine when he withdraws his hand. It calms some of the twisting tendrils of worry woven into his ribcage.

They both skirt by Arthur quickly and quietly, neither of them on the best of terms with the man. Several blocks later, they figure they’re probably on their own. The air is chilly, and they walk with their bodies curled into one another.

“So.” Eggsy breaks the silence. “We never did get to have that threesome.”

Sputtering, Roxy slaps him on the shoulder.

“Oh c’mon,” he continues, relaxing into the safety of humor. “Would’ve been a helluva first time, yeah? Years of waiting, only to pop it in a deviant orgy that most people only dream about.”

Lips fighting an answering grin, “Shut up, idiot.”

They fall into companionable silence for a few blocks.

“Hey, Eggsy, I’ve always wondered. Why are you participating in the Trials?”

And isn’t that the million pound question? Why the fuck is he doing this? Before, it had been his only option for getting himself and his family out from under Dean. He was fighting for a new life. But with Harry’s most recent vendetta, Eggsy’s fairly confident that his family isn’t going to be having problems from that particular job market anymore.

So why is he competing for a position that would most likely place him as Merlin’s soulmate, when he’s already becoming involved with his own?

“It seemed like a good idea at the time?”

Roxy gives him an incredulous look. He…can’t really fault her for it.

“Fine, it was for my family. I want to give them a better life. I think you’ve got an idea, from all the rumors, just where I’ve come from. Kingsman was my best chance.”

Nodding, Roxy looks at her feet. She nibbles on her bottom lip a bit, and Eggsy gets the sense that she feels guilty. “What about you?” He’s betting he already knows, what with how Merlin has been around her, and that gold mark on her inner thigh.

“My father is a knight.”

Drawing her to a halt, Eggsy exclaims “Wait, what the fuck? Seriously? Who?” Now that he didn’t see coming.
She gives him a defensive look. “Percival. My sponsor.”

Eggsy gapes at her. “How the fuck did I not know this?”

“But I didn’t want anyone to think I was getting special treatment, and if you think for a second—”

“Slow down, Roxy, I know that. It’s just, that bloke made a bird like you? He’s completely evil. Wait, he was laughing at you on the air drop exam! What the ever loving fuck?”

Roxy’s muscles ease. “It’s just his way.”

“So this is a family gig for you.”

“Yes.”

Eggsy quirks an eyebrow. “No other reason?”

“None whatsoever.” Her voice is a tad too airy.

“Nothing else you’re getting out of this?”

Roxy shakes her head in the negative.

Sighing, Eggsy turns to stand in front of her. He’d done wondering. “Look, I’m gonna’ ask you something, and I just really need you to be honest with me. What does your soul mark say?”

Her lips part in shock at his audacity. Even in this day and age, it’s considered extremely inappropriate to ask after another’s mark. Vulgar, even. But hey, it’s not like he grew up with the best role models ever.

“I think I have a pretty good idea already, Roxy, but…I just need to hear you say it. Please.” Fucking hell, just, he needs to know.

She definitely looks guilty now. Eggsy braces himself, because he know’s what’s coming.

“Congratulations, Lancelot, I’ve been waiting for you.”

Silence descends. All the wind rushes from his sails, though he’s not terribly surprised by the revelation. He’d suspected for awhile now, even if he didn’t admit it to himself until now.

He has to laugh at his own folly, though. Here he was, throwing everything he had into this stupid competition with Charlie, when there was no competition to begin with.

Eggsy…accepts it. Hardens his heart to it, because he understands. “I’m happy for you. I truly am.” Better her than Charlie, he thinks.

There’s not even the drive to be angry about it.

They don’t speak again that evening.

Later that night, he digs out the stolen crystal tumbler and rolls it between his fingers. Considers the webbed cracks across the face of the glass. How disappointed Harry will be. He’d wanted so badly for him to be Lancelot.
Okay, this is unbeta'd, but I figured it was well past time for an update. As always, comments are welcome, as is constructive editing! If you see an inconsistency, or if a part of this doesn't quite jive, please let me know so I can fix it.

Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!