His Constellation's Chance

by stereokem

Summary

If equal affection cannot be, let the more loving one be me. (COMPLETE)

In the first half of the video, they staunch the flow of bloody from Harry’s head. They shave the side of his head carefully, neatly, debriding and cleaning the area of the wound. In the old days, and even in some special cases now, we would leave bullets in the body; a stationary bullet does no harm, but taking it out can do very serious damage. They remove a small, shiny object from the side of his skull. In the second half comes the pain-staking process of sewing him up. They wipe him down with antiseptic, inspect the wound from which the bullet was dug. Then there is only the glint of a long, curved needle as it dives in and out of his scalp. They wrap him in bandages, pristine white gauze; they have done well to stop the bleeding; they won’t need to change it for another few hours.

I keep holding my breath at various intervals. I don’t know why—I know the outcome, but I feel the suspense tightening like a metal wire inside me, shrieking with potential energy and electricity.

In the end, he lives. They secure his bandages, and wheel him gently out. Harry Hart lives. Barely.
Fair warning: this is going to hurt.

-----------------------

Reviews for "His Constellation's Chance"

"Gripping and appalling" - colinfirthfanart

"I can hear Merlin. I can honestly hear him. In a way that makes me think and feel that these are the exact words that would run through his mind. Like, he wrote this himself. It's not Mark Strong I hear, it's Merlin." - FandomShuffle

"The narrative depth of this story is stunning." - Arlessiar

"The first person POV both evokes Merlin's emotionally straight-jacketed view and makes us readers try to peer around the corners, guessing at what's really happening." - SpicySweet
There are security cameras everywhere around our headquarters.

Most of them are not immediately obvious. We are the most technologically advanced spy organization on the globe, and have evolved all method and manner of undetectable security measures. The cameras sprinkled throughout HQ—in the hallways, offices, training rooms, etc.—are discreet. Many resemble nothing more interesting than thumb-tack, stuck randomly up in some high corner. If you don’t know what you are looking for, you won’t see it. Once you become aware of what they are, however, you see them everywhere.

In my youth, when I was an agent-in-training, I found this particular security measure moderately unnerving. I joined Kingsman in the late eighties, having been recruited from the sheltered environment of Cambridge. It was an odd sensation to become used to, knowing that I was being watched—or that someone had the ability to watch me at any given moment. Within these walls and on these grounds, I nor anyone else could make a move without being held under potential scrutiny. At the time, it seemed to show a remarkable lack of trust in personnel. It was as if Kingsman expected its agents to become turncoat.

It was only later that I understood that the security cameras are in place to catch not agents, but outsiders. Granted, outsiders make their way into UKHQ about as often as agents go rogue—perhaps once every three decades. HQ is a veritable fortress and nearly undetectable; it is a living thing, growing and constantly being improved upon. As for agents, our interview process ensures that anyone with a weak character is weeded out. With these measures in place, having an excess of security cameras seems unwarranted; however, we prefer to err on the side of caution, and so the cameras stay.

As with anything else, one grows accustomed to them. As a trainee, I put them out of mind, and paid them next to no heed. Now, having been in the service for over two decades, they are almost a comforting fact.

There are security cameras everywhere around our headquarters.

There are cameras in the medical division. There are cameras in the operating rooms.

Even here, I can understand the necessity. They serve much the same purpose as the inter-room windows, the large expanses of bullet-proof glass without curtains or blinds that allow doctors, nurses, and surgeons unfettered views of their patients. Perhaps this does seem in excess. However, as little privacy as there is anywhere else, there is absolutely none and no illusion of it in the trauma ward.

When you give yourself to Kingsman, you give up your privacy. Kingsman becomes the only private thing about you, and it is kept private from the outside world. Within our organization, however, everything about you is exposed. This is especially true for agents, for Knights. As a Knight, your body, for however long it functions, belongs to Kingsman. All intimacies are irrelevant in the face of loss of life and value as an asset.

So, yes, I understand the necessity. And it is both a blessing and a burden; because it means that, later, when some frail sense of order has been restored and I am sitting in my office alone, I can pull
up the camera feed from Operating Room 4. I can pull up the video from six hours earlier and watch when a team of medics wheel a bandaged, bloody, and deathly still body into the room.

There is not much to see. A battalion of doctors and nurses form a wall around him, all moving to-and-fro, frenetic like a group of piranhas attacking a small carcass. Everyone has a hand on something, in something, holding something, handing something off. Someone changes gloves every few minutes. There is a great deal of blood.

I know the call—I saw it happen, through his very own glasses. *Gunshot wound.* What I did not know until now: *non-fatal.*

We had . . . we had all been so certain that he died. I had been certain. There was blood spattered on his glasses and all the readings I was receiving from his vitals had flat-lined. He died. I saw him.

But he didn’t.

We can thank divine providence, I suppose, that Valentine was a bloody awful shot—or perhaps just gunshy. I’ve read the medical report; Valentine couldn’t have been looking right at him. The bullet entered next to his temple, and instead of penetrating into his cranium, the trajectory lead it in a stuttering, swerving path along the outside of his skull, stopping just a few centimeters behind his left ear. Intracranial bleeding, some swelling. Neurological damage, if any, undetermined.

Fuck. While I was flying a jet to the Swiss Alps to let two children save the world, Harry Hart was lying prone in an operating room in headquarters, bleeding out.

It was the right thing, I know. Rationally, I know. Had we not gone to stop Valentine, it would have scarcely mattered whether or not he lived. We unquestionably did the right thing, the necessary thing. We had no reason to believe Harry was alive; an extraction team had been sent to recover his body, and that was that. We couldn’t have known. We did the right thing.

I watch the entire operation. I play it back at a speed only slightly faster than normal, and it takes me less than an hour.

In the first half of the video, they staunch the flow of bloody from Harry’s head. They shave the side of his head carefully, neatly, debriding and cleaning the area of the wound. In the old days, and even in some special cases now, we would leave bullets in the body; a stationary bullet does no harm, but taking it out can do very serious damage. They remove a small, shiny object from the side of his skull. In the second half comes the pain-staking process of sewing him up. They wipe him down with antiseptic, inspect the wound from which the bullet was dug. Then there is only the glint of a long, curved needle as it dives in and out of his scalp. They wrap him in bandages, pristine white gauze; they have done well to stop the bleeding; they won’t need to change it for another few hours.

I keep holding my breath at various intervals. I don’t know why—I know the outcome, but I feel the suspense tightening like a metal wire inside me, shrieking with potential energy and electricity.

In the end, he lives. They secure his bandages, and wheel him gently out. Harry Hart lives.

It is that kind of movie, after all.

Chapter End Notes
I'm going to do my best to update this story weekly or biweekly, but I'm going to let you know ahead of time that this schedule may not hold. I'm interviewing for graduate schools this upcoming month, and it won't leave me a whole lot of time for writing/editing. But cheers in advance to those of you who will remain patient.

Also, you should totally check out my music and tell me how weird I am.
www.soundcloud.com/lexcience
Composition of Care

It’s a madhouse.

Kingsman is a beehive, a nest full of drones and workers, all frantic bodies moving back and forth, signaling to one another, trying to function as a cohesive unit. We are trying to pick up the pieces of a world that has been shaken by a certain degree of genocide, by a brief flash of violence, and by the sudden deaths of many powerful leaders. Countries and nations are at a loss, and it is our task to help right the world, to be an unseen hand.

I am in the thick of it.

I am glad to be so busy, frankly, even if it means the world has run amok. It’s comforting, in its way. I have always preferred to be preoccupied with almost more than I can handle, rather than be teetering on the edge of boredom or lassitude; in this case, the chaos is a benediction, and not because I dread ennui.

I am corresponding directly with the head of the French office. I made contact with France almost immediately after landing, knowing full well what we were walking into—what I was walking into.

Though our UK office is the original branch and thus command central, there are seven principal satellites of Kingsman dispersed around the globe. UKHQ is the only office that maintains the Round Table system, and so there is only one Arthur who is, for all intents and purposes, King and Control. However, the directors of the other satellite offices act as councilmen to Arthur, especially in times of distress. In extreme circumstances, a unanimous vote among the directors can overrule Arthur or remove him from office.

It seems a precarious system, to be sure, and it would most certainly be thus if Kingsman were any other agency. But we only recruit the best, the most dispassionate, logical, egalitarian thinkers. We have flukes, occasionally, such as Chester King; but, for the most part, our leaders operate under the strict rules of harmony, and dissent is rare. Arthur has never been removed from office since the inception of this agency because the directors understand their role, understand Arthur’s role, and know that the balance of power should not be over-turned unless in dire circumstances.

These, as it happens, are dire.

This is partly why I have requested assistance from France. According to protocol, when Arthur passes or retires, the most senior Knight takes his place. This would have been Gawain the 4th; however, because Gawain died during the V-Day fiasco, the title then fell to Galahad the 5th, Harry Hart. This is where the line stops. After the second most senior agent, it is the resident Merlin who takes command as Acting Arthur.

In Kingsman, undue promotions are never a good thing.

Furthermore, I knew better than to put myself in that position, at least immediately. The technicalities of being Arthur are no mystery to me; I know all protocols in and out, and can even emulate the way another Arthur—Chester, Gawain, or Galahad—might think. I am not partial to leadership roles, at least not ones with so much power, but I am capable.

Generally.

Given all that has happened, however, I am trying not to overestimate my ability to maintain.
So, I contacted France. They are the oldest Kingsman satellite and, consequently, the closest office to us. I am in nearly constant communication with the director, a man in his late fifties who goes simply by Demarais. Demarais acts as my deputy: I am doling out some responsibility to him, and I consult with him on matters that I deem necessary. By a technicality I enacted when I gave Demarais this responsibility, the authority (though not the title) of Arthur now is now shared by both Demarais and I. Consequently, the French office now also shares the status of mothership/flagship of Kingsman. This feels somewhat strange, for the London office to no longer be the only command centre; however, it is necessary for the moment, and to me a welcome reprieve. For the moment, it is easier for me to act as Arthur knowing that I have another mind tackling the same problems, from whom I can seek perspective and council. It is not nearly ideal, and sometimes creates disagreement that is not readily settled; but Demarais respects me—immensely, if reports are to be believed—and will defer to my judgement when I choose to put my foot down.

It is the second day after V-Day, and I am taking long strides down one of the first-floor hallways on the east side of the building, listening to a stream of French rushing through my ear-piece. Demarais is relaying his intentions to orchestrate a bombing; he has a flat way of speaking that belies his years of military training. I listen carefully, nodding assent to myself. Demarais is good; he is efficient, which would make for a decent Arthur, but excessively harsh in some ways, which wouldn’t. It is, perhaps, exactly what we need right now. For my part, I am thankful at least once every half hour that my own French is impeccable, as Demarais sometimes slurs his speech when he is speaking too quickly—which is to say, basically all of the time.

I turn a corner sharply and give the affirmative to Demarais, after which I convey that I am coming out. I do this just as I pass Kay. Codename Kay (real name Andrew Waite) is a well-coiffed young man with ghostly blonde hair and a perpetually icy (if still subservient) expression. He was a ballistics technician and clerk in R&D before Chester defected (and died). I made him my personal assistant yesterday. He’s taking to the change in position rather well.

(At least someone is.)

Still signing off with Demarais, I hand Kay my tablet and sign to him instructions. The young blonde man nods and is gone in another instant.

It is only when I am exiting the elevator on Basement Level 1 that I am able to finally take my ear piece out. There is a sigh hovering in my lungs; I know that if I let it loose, I will feel it in my entire body. Fucking Christ, I’m tired.

This is all such a terrible sodding mess. The world has almost literally been torn to pieces and I am running around like a madman, getting no sleep, eating little, trying with every moment to put things to right. I have dispatched agents all over the world, have sent them on assignments that ask them to work against their natures. Since its inception, the mission of Kingsman has been to steer the world towards better—by preventing things from happening. We prevent war, prevent assassination, prevent massacre, prevent deals from being struck and despots rising to power. We send agents out to kill people, to flip switches, to cause accidents, to gather intelligence, to alter the course of history in the making away from disaster.

Alas, here we have disaster, though this catastrophe is different from anything we had predicted. This requires us not only to prevent things from happening, but to encourage them as well. I have agents around the globe encouraging peace talks, setting up alliances, diplomacy, and, in some cases, causing strategic disagreements between parties that should not be making peace. Some of this is definitely outside of our element; I have to wonder how badly we are botching it.

There are times when I think that we should withdraw, simply let the world battle it out, establish a
new normal on its own.

That would never do, though. Oh, the world would continue to turn, surely—the world doesn’t need Kingsman. Civilized society, however, does. Like it or not, realize it or not, civilization as we now know it depends on Kingsman the way babes depend on their mums.

So, we will continue to pull strings, act as the metaphorical unseen puppeteer for this joke of a marionette show—but that isn’t quite the metaphor, is it? Our aim is not to control the world, like a puppet-master, but to ensure those that do won’t make a complete muck of it.

In this way, I suppose we’re more like a set of training wheels on a bicycle, or bumpers in a bowling lane, mainly here to prevent teetering or gutterballs.

And, with that criterion, one has to wonder: how do we know we’ve failed? What qualifies as a gutterball?

The most prominent example I can think of is lying unconscious in the infirmary, seventy meters from me.

Kingsman medical department is located on Basement Level 1 and is designed like a reptilian heart, three-chambered. Down the left hallway is the trauma and emergency medicine wing, relatively quiet today. Down the right is the outpatient ward, for biannual physicals and physical therapy for those who need it. And down the center hallway is the inpatient ward and non-emergency operating rooms.

It is this hallway that I stride down, my footsteps quick and sharp on the high-gloss flooring. There is no reason for my brisk pace except that this is how I always walk now, the first few days after Valentine’s debacle having thrown everyone into overdrive. I walk quickly because that is the speed at which things need to be dealt with; but not this.

There is no “quickly” in this.

B029. The penultimate door on the right, currently ajar.

As I approach, a figure clad in a white coat steps out and closes the door gently behind. The figure turns; it is Caffrey, our chief neurologist. Caffrey spots me and waits for my quick stride to bring us close enough for speech.

When I draw near, I can see Caffrey’s expression perfectly, and I know exactly what it means.

“Bad news first,” I say in lieu of greeting.

Caffrey appraises me with quiet hazel eyes. We need no greeting. For all that we profess to be gentlemen (and women), this is an agency, not a charm school. In any case, Caffrey has seen enough of me in the last three days that we could very well be on a first-name basis—but I haven’t used such a thing in a very long time. It seems especially useless to start now.

“His intracranial pressure hasn’t fallen as much as we’d like,” Caffrey relates evenly, “I’m recommending putting him in a medically-induced coma.”

I think my blood must freeze in my veins. Coma. God.

“Is that . . . ” I swallow hard. Fuck. “Is that the best course of action?”

Caffrey nods once. “In my professional opinion, yes. We’ve put him on mannitol, but there is still an
alarming amount of swelling, considering it’s been forty hours. If we induce a coma, it will put less stress on his body as a whole— and it will matter less if his brain cannot get an adequate supply of blood. From there, we can try to get the swelling under control. I’d rather not have to cut into his skull; it’s sustained enough damage as is.”

I know. I looked at the x-rays, saw the tiny bits of bone that were removed from his skull. He was so lucky. So lucky.

So bloody foolish.

“And . . . the good news?” I am almost afraid to ask.

“The rest of his vitals are decent. We’re keeping the wound very clean, so he has no chance of infection. We’re also preparing to implement the new polymer technology to graft more bone-like tissue onto his skull so that he doesn’t have a weak spot; the polymer has adhesed remarkably well in clinical tests. I believe there is still hope for him.”

That last sentence clings to the air like taffy, sticky and almost offensive; but I find myself unable to say anything in response to it. We aren’t in the business of hope, though I know that I don’t need to remind Caffrey. In his youth, Caffrey had been a field medic with the RAMC; now, as a matured physician with hair greying into white, his rank and specialty emblazoned on the upper-arm of his coat, there is no mistaking him for a tenderfoot.

His optimism, however, is somewhat damnable. Perhaps it’s simply a facet of his bedside manner.

I incline my head at the door to B029. “I suppose it won’t matter, then, if I go in and have a sit?”

Caffrey clicks a pen idly in his pocket and the corner of his mouth turns almost imperceptibly downward; he is not a fan of my thinly-veiled pessimism. When he replies, it is as if he heard an entirely different question.

“No stopping you, certainly—but you’ll have to tolerate some company.”

Caffrey smiles at me then, and it’s supposed to be a smile of shared knowledge, of indulgence towards something or someone. Maybe it is even supposed to be warming. For me, all it does is cause a heavy weight to sink to the bottom of my empty stomach.

I nod once. “Thank you.”

Caffrey returns the nod and moves past me to walk down the hallway. I don’t watch him go, but wait until his footsteps have faded somewhat before I take those last few steps, punch in my access code, and open the door.

-KM-

I stay only for a few minutes.

I would linger—I want to— but I don’t. Being alone in a room with Eggsy is not easy for me at the moment. Nor is it advisable.

When the door opens, the boy lifts his head up from where he had pillowed it on his folded arms, on
the bed. The bed where Harry’s body lies, warm but still as a corpse.

Looking at Eggsy is not easy for me, but looking at Harry even less so; I choose the lesser of two evils.

Eggsy has barely left the room for days—three days. All the days since Harry had been brought in by emergency medical evac team (KEME), barely alive but for a faint heartbeat and breath that seemed slip its own accord in and out of his lungs. When they wouldn’t let him into the room directly after Harry’s surgery, he waited around outside, slumped up against the wall next to the door. I’m surprised anyone let him in at all, actually. I never gave sanction. If I were a crueler man—or, rather, if times were different—someone would have lost their job over this. Perhaps more. It makes my skin crawl with anger.

Eggsy’s eyes are bloodshot and glistening. There are tiny pinpricks of red under his brow, burst capillaries, and his face is white. He’s got a bit of stubble rowing and his hair looks a dirty, oily wreck. His clothes are rumpled—good god. He’s still wearing the same tuxedo.

When he raises his focus to me, Eggsy’s mouth twists into a facsimile of a smile, a sad and almost slightly demented thing that is only ever toed out by those who are trying to be chipper but know they are failing miserably at it.

I can’t even make my mouth twitch in response.

The parody of a smile slides from Eggsy’s face. His mouth quivers, as if he is about to speak, but he says nothing.

My feet feel leaden. I am having trouble taking any further steps into the room.

I disguise this failing by stepping to the side of the door and leaning against the wall. I cross my arms. Eggsy needs to leave. I want him to leave. What good does he think he is doing, wallowing here next to a man who is all but dead? Why is he crying, why now? Why now, and not before? He could go bum a princess without conscious when he thought Harry was really dead, but now that he is alive Eggsy is holding vigil by his bed and weeping. I have so many questions to this, accusations, but I won’t dare utter any of them. That would be cruel.

(I can be. Cruel, that is. If I need to.)

Eggsy turns his gaze back to Harry. I know that if I allow myself to go completely still and quiet, I would cease to exist. I would become one more of the long shadows cast by the single lamp, would blend into the wall. There is an expression on Eggsy’s face, a look in his eyes, one that I recognize very well. I have been trying not to recognize it, attempting to not acknowledge it. I don’t want to know.

(But I do. I do. It cannot be helped.)

Before I leave, I say to Eggsy:

“I’m going to ask the nurse to ring some food in. Please eat it.”
I have slept about four hours in as many days. It is starting to wear on me.

I can almost feel myself beginning to come apart. I drink my fifth cup of coffee that day (excessive, yes) and try not to pay attention to the little electric shocks that ping through my nervous system and make my fingers twitch. It feels as if I am short-circuiting. My mind feels surprisingly clear. I am lucid, or at least I feel as much. But my body is threatening to give out on me.

I need rest. A solid six hours of sleep, some proper nutrition. A bit of exercise wouldn’t hurt. A shower, although I just took one seven hours ago.

I need to slow down. Take a breath. Close my eyes. Stop.

There is a light tapping on my desk.

I snap back to attention. My errant cup of coffee has frozen half-way to my mouth; I look up past the cup, blinking blearily.

Kay is standing before me, pocketing his mini-tablet and stylus. He looks concerned, and it’s an unusual expression on the normally gelid young man. When he sees that he’s caught my attention, he signs to me.

Are you all right, sir? Do you have anything else for me?

I sigh and set down my cup so that both my hands are free to sign. Though Kay can hear perfectly well, I try to sign with him when the time and situation permits; it seems polite.

I am fine. No, that will be all for now.

Kay nods in that short, definitive way he has. He looks as if he is about to leave, but then makes several quick gestures with his hands, almost unsure.

Will you be going home today?

“No.” The reply exits my mouth so fast I forget to sign it.

But Kay only inclines his head without changing expression, as if this does not surprise him. You should at least get some sleep.

I must look devastatingly awful if my assistant is telling me to get some sleep. Christ. . . . though I suspect there have been many people with whom I’ve interacted today who were itching to say the same. Kay has simply been the only one ballsy (or simply uncaring) enough to voice the thought. If anyone else were to comment, it would be a taboo; for Kay, it is only overstepping a slight boundary.

Thank you, I sign, I will.

Kay looks as though he doesn’t believe me in the slightest, but he nods as if the act of making a false promise is enough. He turns heel and lets himself out of the office. The door closes behind him without a sound.

Once again, I wrap my fingers around the handle of my coffee cup. I bring it to my mouth, swallow mechanically. I must have awful breath, tannins fermenting in my mouth for hours, for days on end. I’ll have to brush and rinse for ages to get the taste out of under my tongue. For now, however, it serves a purpose: to keep me awake, to pucker my taste-buds and make my pulse quicken, call my overtaxed body to attention.
A wave of exhaustion hits me just after the initial rush of my caffeine high. Vertigo accompanies, sweeping through my body like a sudden gust of icy wind on a summer day, discombobulating; I am sure for a solid minute that I am going to be ill.

The minute passes, though, and I am left staring at the green and black screen of my computer, my eyes scanning over the small type there. I admire our organization for making the transition away from paper; a scant few parchmented items cross my desk. Everything else is in my tablet, in my computer, on my mobile. It makes for a much cleaner workspace, though it is deceiving. If I could turn all of the work currently on my computer into paperwork, it might halfway fill this office. It is the peril of having two jobs, it seems.

Currently, I am looking at a mission briefing prepared by our chief of staff in Logistics. I’ve read it twice already. It isn’t a particularly complicated assignment, but it needs to be acted upon soon. I ought to put an agent on it straight away, someone with enough wit to handle things if they went south—a Knight, preferably.

I know, though, that all Knights are currently preoccupied with other assignments. I have none to spare.

Well... no. I think this so fiercely that it surprises even myself. The ferocity is warranted, though.

I cannot send Eggsy out into the field. Not in such a state.

“He’s technically not even a Knight.” This I mumble to myself, as if I need further convincing. I don’t. Though Eggsy did save the world (or at least part of it), I cannot simply condone handing over a Knighthood, or even unquestioningly welcoming the boy into the fold.

Oh, yes, lad saves bloody human existence as we know it and you can’t offer him a job? Because he didn’t pass his tests? Good show. God. It sounds so callous and martinet-minded even to me, but it’s more serious than that. I cannot ignore the simple fact that Eggsy failed. He failed the last test that all Knights have to pass. It is something so-called “progressive” minds might go a few rounds with me over: the test is archaic, it’s unnecessarily cruel, it’s barbaric. Failed candidates have indeed attempted to argue this point with me before; to all of their contentions, I can merely offer one answer:

Each test, each hurdle that must be passed in the Knight training program has a purpose, a specific characteristic or skill that it is meant to assess. You don’t get partial credit, and you don’t get do-overs. The threshold for a passing grade is one-hundred percent and no less. That being said: there is a very good reason why we have that test, and why it is the last.

They should all consider themselves lucky. In the old days, you actually had to kill the bloody animal. There were no blanks.

-KM-

Eggsy is still in the infirmary when I come by to visit later that evening.

The mere sight makes me grit my teeth—but only for an instant. I do not know whether I force myself to relax so much as I am too exhausted to maintain the tension; in any case, the moment
passes.

I pause before entering, gazing into the window that looks into the room. I can see that Eggsy is no longer wearing that blasted tuxedo; he has changed recently, not back into street clothes but into a comfy dark green cardigan and grey sweats. He looks like a different person in these clothes, out of place in himself. His hair gleams as it did before but darker than its normal hue, looking more damp than oily. He must have showered, then.

When I open the door, Eggsy turns to look at me immediately. His shift in attention is so much more sudden than before, so much more natural. Looking into his face, I can see that he’s gotten at least a few hours’ shut-eye. Some of the shadows have receded from his features, and his eyes are no longer rimmed with an angry red. He doesn’t look fantastic, but he looks somewhat better than when I left him.

There is a small yip from Eggsy’s lap, and it is only then that I realize someone has taken the trouble to bring in JB.

Someone has been checking in on Eggsy. Someone made him change, made him shower, shave, eat, sleep. Someone brought JB in, or had him brought in, to keep Eggsy company. Someone has been taking care of him.

I can’t be responsible for every man and woman in this organization—that isn’t even a question. I am accountable for the lives of my agents while in the field, but beyond that, the personal lives and inner turmoil of Kingsman agents aren’t my concern—haven’t been, anyway. As acting Arthur, I have slightly more responsibility in that arena, but not much. We have counselors and caretakers for that sort of thing. It isn’t something I should feel guilty about.

And I don’t feel guilty about neglecting Eggsy—if you can honestly call it neglect—I really don’t. I do not feel as though I let him down. But I do feel as though I should have been the one keeping after Eggsy, checking in with him, asking him if he’s all right. I should have brought in his dog, brought him a change of clothes, made him shower.

I know why I feel this way.

It goes beyond my own partiality for the boy—because, in light of everything, and despite everything, I have become . . . very fond of Eggsy. And this fondness is a contributing factor, but not the sole cause. I said before that I don’t feel as if I’ve let Eggsy down, and I don’t. I’ve let someone else down.

It’s because of Harry.

I should have looked after Eggsy for Harry.

Eggsy is Harry’s. . . .

It sounds strange to phrase it like that, to think it like that. Eggsy is Harry’s. Harry’s what? His candidate? His friend? His protégé? His . . .

. . . perhaps, I should stop thinking about it.

I settle my shoulders back and do my best to dredge up a smile— but I only manage to fix up one side of my mouth. It hangs on my face awkwardly.

“Hullo, Eggsy.”
“Merlin,” Eggsy replies. His voice is a bit scratchy as though he’s had a cold. He gives me the missing half of my smile, and though it is small, it seems to be the genuine half.

I look him over; I can feel my throat beginning to constrict, and I swallow against it.

“You look better.”

“You don’t.”

I cannot help the snort that escapes me, though whatever humor I find in Eggsy’s bluntness is short-lived. It is difficult to shake how strange it feels to be talking to Eggsy like this. The room is not so small as to make it feel cozy, but it does feel like we are too close together, the several meters between us notwithstanding. I think it is the fact of Harry that makes it feel strange.

Harry.

It is then that I turn my gaze to really look at him.

I will myself to see only a man sleeping in a bed. A man with brown hair and a few days’ worth of stubble decorating a usually fastidiously clean jaw. A handsome man, with laugh lines around his eyes, smoothed out now in sleep.

Only a man. A man I might not even know.

Christ, I can’t do this.

I bring my gaze back to Eggsy; he is looking at me with some concern. Shit. Am I showing anything? I’m not tearing up, I know—that would be ridiculous. I have at least that much control. I purse my lips and rearrange whatever my current expression is into something more stony. I would settle for just about any expression under the sun if it would cause Eggsy to stop staring at me so.

Though, now that I think about it, perhaps Eggsy’s expression is directed less towards any emotional display of mine, and more towards my general state of being: run-ragged, nearly falling where I stand.

This thought is corroborated by the next thing that comes out of Eggsy’s mouth.

“Maybe you oughta get some sleep, ay bruv?”

Something hot and sour ripples through me. There is a snarky response sitting on the back of my tongue about being ordered around by a child—but I lack the willpower, vitriol, and necessary muscle strength to dislodge it. It would be a pointless barb. I know that Eggsy means well.

(The road to hell and all that.)

I grunt noncommittally in response. I look around the room briefly for a chair to sit in, something that I can pull up to the other side of Harry’s bed. There isn’t one. Eggsy is occupying the only chair in the room, has more or less laid permanent claim to it. He takes up the space unapologetically, unthinkingly. He’s been sitting in that chair so long that it has probably molded to fit the contours of his perfectly-formed arse.

I find myself shaking my head once, a small and private gesture that goes unnoticed. Eggsy is truly amazing. He isn’t something I’ve encountered before. I’m not referring to his looks or physique. Even if I were not so inclined, I can see that Eggsy is plainly attractive; on his better days he is mischievously handsome, and he has more than his fair share of a desirable figure. But pretty faces
and tart derrieres are a dime a dozen. It’s not what I mean when I say Eggsy is something I’ve never encountered.

He has a certain grace about him. There is something in his smile, in his deference to other people, in his altruism. He is almost categorically selfless. Eggsy has the qualities of an archangel: smooth-cheeked, fierce, clever, tender, defender of the meek, willing to put himself first on the line to protect others. All of these qualities cumulate in him in a sort of aura. It’s not something he realizes, nor pretends not to realize—he truly is oblivious.

_I’d rather be with Harry, thanks._

I had heard that—the last bit of audio-visio feed from Chester’s glasses. Chester hadn’t been wearing them, had set them down upon the table when Eggsy entered; they had still been recording, though. I heard their conversation, and Eggsy’s words. His voice, so sure and hard, so determined.

_I’d rather be with Harry._

We all have an Achilles’ heel of some sort, I suppose.

As faults go, this is not a particularly terrible one to have. I don’t know that I can even consider it a true fault. I certainly cannot blame Eggsy for it.

Much as I dearly want to.

Eggsy has been occupying this room for the past four days. He hasn’t left, save perhaps to shower. He has been here the entire time, sitting in this chair, scarcely leaving Harry’s side.

And this is where Eggsy’s altruism, his brazen selflessness, fails. He cannot see past this. All he knows is that Harry is here, injured and unconscious. It has not once occurred to Eggsy that someone else might want a moment alone with Harry.

This is what happens when you care about someone so deeply. You lose sight of the needs of others. You lose perspective.

_This is what happens when you l—_

I shut my eyes; it’s such a slow blink and I am so tired, I’m afraid I might not be able to reopen my eyes.

I do. It’s not really a relief.
Tracing Orbits

Chapter Notes

First off, my apologies for the long delay in updating. To be perfectly honest, I don't anticipate being able to update regularly. However, that does not mean that I am not working on the story regularly. This one . . . this will take some time. I can't explain it yet, but this story is very important to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next day, I call Eggsy to my office.

That he deigns to obey at all is encouraging. He shows up five minutes early, twitchy and a look about his eyes like a mistreated animal; but he makes his appearance, nonetheless, and I am thankful. It saves me the trouble of having him forcibly dragged out of the infirmary. It is no stretch of the imagination to fathom how well that would have gone.

He walks in slowly, dragging his feet across the burgundy carpet as the little pug dances with unwitting playfulness about him. Though not up to normal standards, I can hardly be annoyed that he brought the dog; all other things being equal, I do not believe that Eggsy would have come without him. I wait until Eggsy has seated himself in the chair across from me and JB has settled by his feet before I speak.

And when I do, I tell him without preamble that I am sending him on assignment.

It is not the assignment I had been looking at the previous day, the one I had wanted to send a Knight on. No, I bumped that assignment to the top of Bedivere’s queue, and he will be departing later today. The role to which I am delegating Eggsy into is for a smaller assignment, though no less essential. Most importantly, it will put him out of the country for at least three days.

Eggsy is surprised at first. Confused. Unwilling. He wants to stay, though he doesn’t say it explicitly. He asks if there are other agents that can be sent, and is crestfallen when I assure him there are not. He does not plead with me, but he plainly wants to. He wants to be close to Harry. He doesn’t want to leave Harry’s side in case he wakes up. In case he . . .

I do not tell Eggsy that he isn’t aiding Harry by just sitting here. I do not say that Eggsy’s presence is not helping or hindering, that it doesn’t matter whether he is here or not. I do not convey that sitting here, staring at Harry’s still form is a useless endeavor.

I know there is only one way I will get Eggsy to comply, and there is no point in trying to call it anything other than manipulation.

I need Eggsy to obey. I need Eggsy to leave.

So, I say to him quietly but unyieldingly:

“As much as I believe Harry would appreciate your company, Eggsy, I am also equally certain that he would rather you be out there, putting the world to rights. If you stay here, you can do nothing but wait.”
“But what if he wakes up?”

Eggsy asks with a tone that is almost desperate. Not desperate to prevent himself from leaving, but desperate to believe that Harry might wake. It would be heart-breaking; but I have not the time for sentiment.

I do take a long pause before replying, however, because—as much as I detest it— this is difficult for me.

“He won’t . . . not while you’re gone.” Pause. “I spoke with Dr. Caffrey; they’re going to induce a medical coma.”

When I glance back up from the polished wood of my desk, Eggsy looks as though someone has just placed a bullet through his lung. His face goes impossibly pale. And, god, is he fucking young. He’s not ready for this, for any of it. For all of his maturity, his boldness and precociousness, he is not emotionally ready for this. He still needs emotional comfort, needs someone to be here with him, to reassure him. Eggsy is strong but he needs someone stronger than himself to hold onto. This is something he has done without for most of his life but, now that he has had a taste of it, it’s crippled him. He has been broken open: he’s so new and fresh and malleable, a sapling that still needs scaffolding in order to not wilt into the ground.

It is, damnably, my natural instinct to want to comfort him. I want to tell him that a coma is not a death sentence, and to say that it will be all right. I’ve never been particularly inclined to mother-hen anyone, but I almost feel that need with Eggsy. I want to comfort him for the same reason I felt guilty about not looking after him. He is experiencing pain on account of Harry, because of his attachment to Harry, and I feel responsible. I can feel the words dancing on the tip of my tongue, the platitudes of “he will be fine” and “this will work itself out”. I want to give Eggsy that kindness.

Pragmatism stops me, as it often does. For what kindness would those words be if they turned out to be a lie? We have the best doctors in the world working for us, but even they cannot give us absolute assurance of Harry’s safe passage from near-death into life.

Hope is something to be discouraged, in this profession. Purpose is a sleeker and better defense to wield.

“He wouldn’t want you to wallow here, Eggsy,” I tell him. My voice is barely above a murmur, rippling through the eerie stillness of my office. “He would want you to help.”

Eggsy looks down and stares at my desk. He gazes for a long while, almost as if he does not hear me; but his eyes begin to glisten, and I know that he has. He bites his lower lip, but no tears fall from the wells of his eyes. He refuses to cry. He only nods sharply and gently strokes JB with one, barely-shaking hand.

If I feel for him a sudden stab of fondness, it is not something I can help.

“I need you to go home, Eggsy. Go home, and get some proper rest. You will report to Field Prep in the morning, 0700 sharp.”

And it is surprising indeed, the speed with which Eggsy stands. I expected some amount of resistance, physical or mental, that would make Eggsy’s rise from his chair slower, more laborious. Not so. When the he stands the movement itself is not swift, but it is without hesitation. He stands with resolve.

He tucks JB under one arm and turns to me. His green eyes appear dark in the relative brightness of
my office, seldom English sunlight streaming in through the windows. In the natural light, he looks both more haggard and more comely; it’s an attractive sort of vulnerability. He is tired but his strong jaw is set determinedly. He nods once again at me, more slowly this time.

He exits my office without another word.

-KM-

I pull up the HQ security feeds on my tablet. I watch Eggsy make his way through the hallways and down the stairwells of the large, sprawling building; I watch him until he pours JB into a cab, clambers in himself, and the driver pulls away from the curb.

I make sure he is out of sight before I stand and make my way to the infirmary.

As soon as I am inside, I turn and shut the door behind me, almost pressing myself against it as if to deter anyone from coming in after me. I stand there for a moment, my back to the room, one hand braced against the door, the other gripping tightly upon the handle as I listen to myself breathe. It is unnervingly quiet. Even the hiss of machines is almost nonexistent.

Slowly, I turn around.

It is dark save for the small amount of light spilling in from the hallway window and the few lights on in the room. There is a set of them behind Harry’s bed; they cast downwards, their beams not penetrating any corners of the room. Just a small backlight to the bed, just enough to see by. The room is sparse save for the bed, a few monitors, the visitor’s chair, an x-ray board, and a desk. A small clay pot sits on top of the desk, empty. Flowers, perhaps, or just some shrub. A vine, maybe. Something green to spruce up the room. But the clay pot is empty. It’s like a coffin.

It’s an irrational thought, but one that sticks in my head as I continue to stare at the small, forgotten object. An empty casket. Something that used to hold life, now empty. Cavernous. I draw my eyes away.

In the shadows, the room feels both larger and somehow more confined. My heart is thudding in my chest as I look around, looking at the tiled floor, at the chair, at the monitors. Looking at anything but Harry.

I have wanted to be here. I’ve wanted to be here since I discovered Harry was alive. For the past four days, my every spare thought, any second I had to myself, I thought about coming here, to this room. To sit here, in silence, with Harry.

But now that I am, the silence seems nearly unbearable. It’s like a tangible thing, a weight in the air, pressing down upon my skull.

My lungs feel like they are shaking, tiny little tremors inside my chest. I should probably leave. It didn’t help for Eggsy to sit here, and it certainly won’t help for me.

But I’m here, and I don’t know when I will have another chance at this.
I keep my eyes floor-wards as I shuffle across the room; I sit down in the wooden chair, and it is hard and unyielding. Not molded to Eggsy’s arse, then.

Minutes tick by. I sit there in that chair and lean over my knees, staring at my hands which are clasped together in front of me. I eye the contours of my own anatomy: the cleanly-kept nails, the long dexterous tendons, the ropes of blue vein beneath my wrists.

I can feel the moment when it becomes both too much and too ridiculous; and suddenly, I can’t do anything but look.

A small sound—a cross between a sigh and a sob—lurches out of my throat before I can hold it back. It is swallowed up immediately by the silence of the room, and I snap my mouth shut to prevent further utterances; the noises build up at the back of my throat. They hurt; but I remain silent.

This is not the first time I have seen Harry in such a state. If it doesn’t kill him, though, I hope it will be the last.

He is so serene-looking, far more than he ever was awake. An alert Harry Hart always had something troubled about his eyes, something cynical and exacting—except for when he smiled. It had become a rarity of late, but when Harry Hart smiled all the darkness dispelled itself from the room and if you had any cares in the world, you could scarce remember them.

I look upon him, the smooth curve of his cheeks; there are lines that contour them, that tell you exactly how his face changes when he smiles. The same goes for the tiny crow’s feet at his eyes: they are a telltale of how his eyes crinkle in laughter, and how dearly he has loved to laugh. Looking at him like this, you might not guess that his profession was espionage. He has the look of an entirely different person.

He certainly doesn’t look like the sort of man who could wreck such carnage in a small, rural church in Kentucky.

I nearly sigh, but stop myself at the last moment and let it out in a long, noiseless stream of breath. I could spend ages detailing Harry’s face. I know it intimately. I ought to. He has been my closest and best friend for long enough. I can tell you that he has the barest hint of a cleft chin and it becomes more pronounced in certain facial expressions; I can tell you that his eyes are hooded, that they always have been, even when he was young; I can tell you about the scar at his left temple, on the opposite side of the bullet wound, a small white line that hides near his hairline; or about the scar on his upper lip, also invisible to the casual observer; I can tell you exactly how many days it has been since he’s shaved, judging by the stubble on his cheek and jaw; I can tell you about the miniscule lines on his forehead, or the nearly unnoticeable vein just beneath his right eye. I can tell you about his mouth and exactly what its every slight turn and tilt mean—

A muscle near his eye twitches and draws my attention. His lids are flickering ever so slightly; he might be dreaming.

I wonder what he will dream about when they induce the coma.

That shouldn’t feel like such a terrible thought, but it is. He won’t look much different than he does now. He may be less tense, so I am told; they won’t need to keep him nearly as numbed with painkillers, especially once the swelling ebbs. He will be able to rest peacefully.

His sleep as it is now is not fitful, but not easy. He twitches minutely, the way someone in pain does. One of his hands is outside of the duvet, and its fingers tense at odd intervals, never really clenching but threatening to.
It takes less effort than I predicted to reach out and take his hand in my own. His hand is warm and
dry.

Harry doesn’t stir fully; he doesn’t necessarily know he’s being touched.

But I watch his face, and it relaxes minutely. His mouth smooths out into something completely
expressionless, and his hand goes limp in mine, not a trace of tremor.

I stay there for a long while.

-KM-

I fall asleep at some point; I wake up several hours later, with my head pillowed in my arms, resting
on the edge of the bed.

When I check my watch it reads 0648, and I blanche. Good lord. I had slept for fourteen hours. How
the bloody hell did I manage that?

My first thought is panic: people would be looking for me, would be wondering where I was.
Demarais and I were supposed to have a meeting this morning. No one could find me. They would
be panicking.

My second thought (which sliced uncaringly through the first) is that Kay, at least, knows exactly
where I am – which was precisely the reason why no one was looking for me or had disturbed me.

With some difficulty, I push myself up from where I had been slumping. I sit back in the chair (god,
I’m stiff) and reach into my pocket to pull out my phone. There are 283 messages in my inbox. It’s
not nearly as bad as I expect.

Almost as if he knows I’ve awoken (which he might), a new priority message suddenly appears. It is
from Kay.

Sir. I held session with Demarais this morning. We reviewed the briefing you and I prepared
yesterday. Green light.

The rush of relief and gratitude I feel for my assistant is more powerful than any emotion had a right
to be just after waking. The lad was bloody competent, and that was the least one could say about
him. When I had originally brought him over from R&D, there had been several nay-sayers. But Kay
—Andrew—has been indispensable to me, and I don’t know that I can quite manage without him.

I pick out a quick reply. Thank you. I will be in shortly.

My phone dings a response moments later. You haven’t anything on until 9. Caffrey is coming in the
room at 7 to put Mr. Hart under.

It does not escape me what Kay is doing. He is subtly trying to tell me to not come in until nine. To
take the time to be with Harry when he goes under, and not come in directly after. At any other
time, I might have found this annoying; I am, after all, his supervisor, not the other way around. He
should not be giving me direction.

I am too tired to be annoyed, though. Much too tired.
I reply more slowly than before:

*Thank you. I will see you at 9.*

It is just as I am slipping my phone back into my pocket that the electronic lock system on the door gives a small beep and the door opens. I look up to see the silhouette of Dr. Caffrey, with two other less distinguishable figures behind him. I cannot tell what his expression is while he takes me in, but I’m far from caring what he thinks.

“Dr. Caffrey,” I acknowledge, rising from the chair.

“Sir,” he simply answers in reply, inclining his head. He and the other two figures step out of the hallway and into the room. The other physician I am then able to recognize as Dr. Buchannan, the chief anesthesiologist. The nurse I do not recognize by name, only by face. Their expressions are clearer to me now that they have stepped into the room. If any of them are surprised by my being here, they hide it well.

Though, really, there should be no surprise. It has never been a secret that Harry and I were once as thick as thieves. And, though as we got older we were less inseparable, we were still considered the best of friends. . . .

*We are* friends. Not were.

No one has died yet.

Caffrey and I stand in silence whilst Dr. Buchannan fusses over the cart that the nurse had brought into the room. I watch with an almost chilly detachment as Buchannan and the nurse don gloves and prepare a bolus of pentobarbital. Once Buchannan has the injection needle prepped, the nurse sets about fussing with Harry’s IV. Dr. Caffrey, who has been standing directly opposite me on the other side of Harry, takes a step back and Dr. Buchannan takes his place.

Dr. Buchannan looks up at me, needle held up with the cap still on. His eyes are cool; this might as well be a routine dosing for him.

“The bolus will ensure enough of the barbiturate enters his bloodstream to deeply sedate him,” Dr. Buchannan states calmly. “After the loading dose takes effect, we will put the barb into a new IV. It will be easier for us to maintain the dosage that way.”

I swallow past the dryness in my throat. “And how long do you expect him to be under?”

Dr. Buchannan and Dr. Caffrey exchange looks.

“Ten to twelve days is the ideal,” Caffrey responds finally. “Two full week at most. During that time, I encourage you to visit him. People in comas are often vaguely aware of what is going on around them.”

I nod. I know. He isn’t the first coma patient we’ve had.

I do not say another word as I watch Dr. Buchannan administer the needle, depress the syringe, release the injection into the median cubital vein of Harry’s left arm. The nurse watches Harry’s vital readings and murmurs to Dr. Buchannan, who nods almost serenely. It seems to take ages for him to remove the needle and apply pressure, but in reality I know it was less than a minute.

I listen to the steady beep-beep of Harry’s heart monitor, slowing down gradually as the drug permeates his circulatory system. His expression does not change. His breathing slows almost
imperceptibly, coming in a tiny, inaudible whistle through his nose.

My departure must seem abrupt, but I take it without explanation. I incline my head to Caffrey, perfectly stony-faced, and then turn heel. It takes me all of four long strides to exit the room.

The long hallway of the non-emergency ward is quiet. A pair of nurses walk side-by-side about seventy paces from me, their backs turned, their dark scrubs rustling. I look down at the polished floor, my shoes coming into view. They flop like sleek black fish on the floor. I think . . . I think my legs are gelatinous. I feel wobbly, but at the same time have the intense urge to begin sprinting. My heart—Christ, my heart picks up pace in anticipation—

I stand still for a moment. The urge quiets; then dissipates.

My walk to the elevator is even and measured, if stiff.

-KM-

The day is long, after that.

Once I am in the elevator, I make a tactical decision and press the button for the fourth-floor. I cannot see myself tremble, but I feel as though I am shaking, internally. My very organs are thrumming in my body with more than their usual nervous activity. I haven’t had proper exercise in almost a week, and there is half a hope that the physical exertion of a run will drive my body into submission, into subsiding from the shaking.

The running does me some good. It always has. I was never a runner, per say—boxing was my sport, when sport was all it was—but it often cleared my head. Something about repetitive motion, performed almost without thinking, the only real task being to pay attention to the scenery. The ground being eaten up beneath my feet. The number of laps I’ve taken around the track. The physical exhaustion afterwards.

I run for an hour. Then I go back to the locker room, shower. It is empty save for me. While I was running, Kay had brought in a fresh suit for me, and it hangs neatly in my plane of view. Since becoming Arthur, the standard of my appearance has risen. I can no longer hide in my soft but functional jumpers and simple trousers. I wear the armor of all the rest of the Knights. It reminds me of being back in the field, when I was younger and being considered for Safir’s position. We did things a little bit differently, back then. We promoted from within our ranks, rather than outside. Youngsters like myself were recruited for ordinary agent positions; you never wanted a Knight to die but, if they did, it meant you would have a shot at the title.

I remember the first suit I was fitted for, the way it felt to clothe myself in something made completely and absolutely for me. Sleek and grey, completed by a green pocket square. I had never owned anything so luxurious. I had almost felt as if I didn’t belong in it. I remember standing in the fitting room, nervously running my hands down the lapels.

But Harry had been there with me; and when I stepped out of the fitting room and revealed myself, the grin upon his face assuaged all my fears of inadequacy.

Aside from that moment, suits have never felt entirely right to me. Even now, as I wear the mantle of Arthur, the suit feels strange. It feels less like I am presenting myself, and more like the suit is preventing me from being seen. The suit isn’t easy to miss; the man inside of it is.
At nine I have my meeting with the director of aviation. This is followed by a hastily eaten lunch, more meetings, and going through cyberwork.

And perhaps the few hours of sleep I got at Harry’s bedside finally weakened the dam on my exhaustion, because I am tired. It is Friday and weekends have meant little to me for several years now, but by the time four rolls around, I want little more than to leave and sleep.

My haggard state does not go unnoticed. Kay watches me out of the corner of his eye when I pass by his desk. He deftly refills my cup of tea before I find myself able to ask. He takes things out of my hands. He knows I’m going to leave the office today. He is trying to make it easier on me. He is trying to tell me, Go, we can handle it.

And so they can. I know they can. I have agents all over the globe taking care of the world’s problems, and they can spare me for about ten hours.

At fourteen minutes after five, I stand from my desk. I am right in the middle of replying to a memo, but I cannot be bothered to finish it. I have to go.

I have no briefcase to collect; I simply go to Kay and ask that he bring the car around. I nod to him as I walk out the door. He signs nothing.

- KM -

My flat is quiet and dark when I arrive.

I deftly disarm the alarm system, my fingers tiredly plucking over the number pad in the front hallway. I place my thumb in the middle of the fingerprint reader, and the tiny shrieking of the alarms dies out. The silence that follows in its wake is just shy of unnerving.

Not that it should be; it is almost perpetually silent in my flat.

I hang my overcoat and then step through the hallway into the main living area. It is the one room of the place that I think may look slightly homey: there is a brown leather sofa, a matching comfy chair, and the walls are lined with rows upon rows of shelves laden down with books. A small built-in bar is positioned cozily in one corner. Everything has a fine layer of dust upon it; I will need to clean.

My jacket comes off as I walk through, ending up over the back of the sofa. I fumble to loosen my tie, and undo the top button of my shirt as I walk through the door into the kitchen.

The lights flicker on, pale blue halogens giving the grey granite countertops and white floors a ghostly glow. Though all the necessary utensils and crockery are hung and seated in obvious places, there is little about this kitchen to suggest that anyone has ever cooked in it. It is immaculate nearly to the point of forbidding mess.

(It wasn’t, always. At one point, my flat had the air of being almost studiously lived-in. It’s not a charade I bother with anymore.)

I am not hungry. I haven’t been truly hungry in about forty-eight hours, but I know I need to eat something.

I set the kettle on and open the fridge. Almost bare. A check of the pantry is slightly more fruitful. Thank mercy for canned goods and their ridiculous expiration dates.
I am heating up a can of soup when the kettle boils and clicks off. I cross the kitchen to the side lined with cupboards and open a cabinet. A row of pristine white ceramic plates and other dinnerware greets me; everything is stacked neatly and spaced evenly. It looks like a display in a store, almost.

A row of simple white coffee cups is to my left. I reach for one, and pulling it from the shelf reveals its neighbor, whom it was trying to hide:

A single colored cup amongst the whitewash, shaped differently than the rest and a deep red.

This cup represents a trend in my home. I would call my style of living Spartan, if not for the fact that the flat is much too large to be of functional use to a single man. An extravagance on Kingsman’s part, to provide its most dangerous and doomed agents with the most worldly luxury. But almost everything in my flat is plain, pristine, deliberately-numbered, symmetrical, even. Almost everything, save for the few items littered in various places, items that have no match or meaning or seemingly a reason for belonging here:

A red cup in my kitchen.

A gold lapel pin on my dresser.

A single red tie amongst my assortment of black and grey.

A few slim volumes of poetry hidden between pilot manuals.

An unframed photograph.

Two unframed photographs.

Evidence of human life, I suppose. Remnants of personality. Inevitable, even for me. I have no penchant for knick-knacks or mementos; I prefer to keep my living accommodations as impersonal as possible. The only material possessions I have in abundance are books, and even these are functional in a nature, about science and history and a multitude of other serviceable subjects. These rare items have ended up in my life by chance. Almost by mistake, it seems.

I could get rid of them; but I won’t.

The soup and tea sit warm in my stomach as I climb up the stairs and lug myself down the hallway. I walk past the door to my study, just another room with a desk and chair and too many books about things the majority of the world is too ambivalent or ignorant to care about. There is another door at the end of the hall, for the unused guest bedroom; and then there is mine, just in front of me.

I open the door and begin shedding the rest of my clothing. Waistcoat and tie are dismantled and set upon a simple wooden chair by the door. I sit in the chair and unlace my shoes, toe them off. I wander to my dresser and exchange my trousers for comfortable wool pajama bottoms. The gold lapel pin glints at me in the near darkness.

Out of habit, I check the sights on the telescope set up in my bedroom; it’s an older SCT, but in good shape, positioned by the large north-facing window. It seems almost silly to have it; living in London, with all its light pollution, it is difficult to see much. One does not require a telescope, however, to see constellations.

True night is just beginning to fall. The ever-present stars of Cepheus and Draco wink out from the dark.

I close the curtains and turn away from the window.
My bed hasn’t been touched since I made it last about a week ago. I pull back the covers and they come away from the bed stiff, as if with sleep. I slip beneath them and shiver at their coolness.

There is one more oddity in my house. As I settle into bed, I can see its faint outline on the wall opposite me. A shadow box, containing a collection of four pinned insects: *Greta diaphanus*, *Corinea sylphina*, *Cithaerias andromeda esmeralda*, and *Greta oto*.

Clear-winged butterflies.

The next time I blink, my eyes won’t reopen. My eyelids feel as if they are weighed down by sandbags. There is a faint humming in my ears, in my head, but I think it’s just the sound of silence; no cars bustle down the street outside; the house does not creak.

I can’t remember ever feeling more tired.

Sleep comes quickly. Too quickly for me to hope not to dream.

- KM-

“So, so quiet, Alec.”

*It sounds like it should be a question, but it’s not.*

We’re at Cambridge. I recognize the color of the stone wall you are leaning up against. Your head is tilted back, eyes closed. Your young neck is pale and smooth and speckled by the afternoon sun.

A slight breeze tickles past my cheek. Soft autumn sounds pervade the air around us: birds warbling, leaves rustling, wind chimes clinking delicately in the distance. You aren’t referring to the scenery.

“I’m always . . .” it could be a complete thought on its own, but I trail off as if I cannot think how to finish it.

Your sleepy eyes blink open. You look at me through slanted eyelashes, both serious and almost coy. Your mouth is twisted ever so slightly with curiosity, the way it used to in the early days, when you were still learning how to read me.

“Are you angry with me?”

I look down. There is a blade of grass in my hands, twisting, twisting. “I’m wondering . . . if this is you trying to push me away.”

I hear your shift, straightening yourself. “It’s not. You know.”

I smooth the blade with my thumb. “I don’t.”

“I suggested you for the job because you’d be bloody good at it,” you say, voice tinged with a feathered edge of irritation, and this is the first fully fluid and coherent thing either one of us has yet to say. I touch my tongue to my lip and taste your words; they do not smack of a lie.

But we’re spies. We know of the gulf that spans between lies and truths.

“I just want you where I know you will be safe.”

I laugh, a harsh bark that startles me.
Ah, Harry. You are tender, tender, and so full of shit.

I look up at you then. You are fully studying me, not just looking at me; you are not bothering to hide it.

"Safety is only an illusion," I say. "But you know that."

You smile. "Yes. Yes, I know."

You close your eyes again, and I think about Eggsy. Eggsy, on the outside. Are you trying to keep him safe? Push him away? Is that why you are sleeping, so dark and so sound?

After a while, I ask you about it. You don’t open your eyes. You say nothing.

When I wake from the dream, my throat is dry and my eyes are stinging.

I lean over to my right and reach towards my bedside table, for the glass of water I had placed there about a week ago. It is still half-full. It tastes stale in the clean, clear way that only stagnating tap water can taste. It helps.

I lay back in my bed and stare up at the ceiling, letting my eyes adjust to the near complete darkness. It’s early morning, perhaps four or five; too early for any trace of sunrise. It’s a contemplative sort of dark that I find myself in, both oneiric and alert.

I don’t dream often. When I do, it is typically quite mundane, almost always work-related. I have not dreamed of Cambridge in a very long while.

I close my eyes briefly, reveling the added darkness behind my eyelids. I can still see the last fading images of my dream, ghostly and familiar.

It was real. The conversation, that is. I had said some of those very things to Harry, once upon a time — though certainly not while at Cambridge. These things had come later, after we had both been inducted into Kingsman as junior agents. Again, things were done differently back in those days. Candidates for Knighthood were selected from a pool of fieldmen. This had changed when Chester became Arthur—some small effort to prevent rivalry among the ranks, I was told. Perhaps even to prevent nepotism (which, given Chester, is laughable). We were all so eager to be Knighted; it was a time when young ambition was highly encouraged, and we would have done anything and befriended anyone to rise up.

Those of us who are left are much wiser, now. It’s not a game. It never was.

You would have never known, though, the way Harry and I played. So fearless. So reckless.

He had been promoted first. It made sense: he was older than me by almost five years, had been in Kingsman longer, had proved himself as one of the most promising junior agents in the pool. He became Galahad at twenty-seven, only a year after I myself was inducted into Kingsman. He took me under his wing then, just as he had done at Cambridge. We went on missions together, he as the principal and me as back-up. A dynamic duo of sorts. Upper management was impressed with our mission success rate, impressed enough to consider me for the next available Knight position, despite
my age.

It was Safir the fourth. I remember distinctly. He was the first Kingsman in history who lived long enough to retire. His place was up for grabs; it seemed likely to be mine.

But I was passed up.

It was not that I failed a test. I was never allowed to take them. I was not selected for that round of Knight training. I was not given the chance.

I still wonder, to this day, how much influence Harry had in that decision. I could be giving him too much credit; then again, I could not. At the time, he was the most junior of all the Knights, but Harry always had a way of getting what he wanted.

I never directly accused Harry of sabotaging my chance at a Knighthood. A part of me does not want to believe that he is or was capable of something so presumptuous or patronizing—to decide my future for me, as though he knew better than I.

Never mind the fact that he had been deciding my future from the moment we met.

I lie in bed for another hour or so, unable to fall back asleep. Around 0630, my phone vibrates. A message from the office in Brazil. I am needed.

-KM-

It is at the end of this very long day that I find myself back in the infirmary, sitting once again in the chair next to Harry.

I take in his face, unchanging in the artificial light of the room. I wonder if he is dreaming; dreams as I have dreamed.

Chapter End Notes

It came to my attention (just now) that the first two chapters got swapped somehow. I've fixed it.

Also, an SCT refers to a Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope. It's a good one for amateur astronomers.

Lastly, please do look up the butterflies mentioned, because I cannot really describe to you how beautiful I find them.
The Trappings of Sentiment, Part I

I return, because I cannot help it. I return the next evening to Harry’s bedside. And the next.

For the most part, I simply sit in silence. I can speak to him—I should. Caffrey and Buchanan both have informed me that coma patients can often hear and sometimes remember what is said to them whilst they are under. It’s been shown that keeping them company, talking to them as if they were awake . . . it helps. It will help Harry, if I speak.

Every time I open my mouth, my tongue feels heavy and my mind fills with nothing.

Does he know I am here, despite my silence? Can he tell that it is me? Does it comfort him? Does he know what my voicelessness means?

These things I want to ask him, have been waiting to ask him. I am at liberty to say anything I please, now that Eggsy has been ensconced to some other purpose and has (at least temporarily) ceased to haunt this room. Anything I want to utter will be in fullest confidence. Anything I want to ask.

I keep my silence. It’s easier.

The stubble lining Harry’s face has begun to resemble more a true beard. It grows into the edges of his face, softened somewhat by middle-age; the hair contours his visage, gives it new lines and definition. I find it unsettling; Harry never appreciated facial hair much on himself. For a brief time at Cambridge he had his artful stubble, and for a spell in Morocco he had cultivated a small beard; but both times, he had quickly tired of it. He found that he preferred to be clean-shaven; he said it made him look more honest.

It seems unfair that he should have his honesty taken from him while he is powerless to defend it.

On the third day since Eggsy left, I bring a shaving kit with me to Harry’s room.

This is another old ritual for us. It is not one that Harry is aware of. Or, then again, perhaps he is. I often suspect (and often find) that Harry knows more than he lets on; this particular ceremony might be yet another reason why he looks at me with laughter in his eyes, but without an explanation in his words.

For you see, a proper friend will make fun of you mercilessly to your face. Your eccentricities and idiosyncrasies will be laid bare and you will always know exactly against what you are defending yourself or being playfully derided for. But we are more than proper friends. Our mercilessness comes from making the other guess about what they are being teased.

Though, if I’m being honest, Harry has always done more of the teasing.

I am left with the feeling that no one really understands why Harry insists upon teasing me. In basic training, I developed the reputation as being something of a cold fish. The Ice Man, the other junior recruits called me, sometimes with comradery, sometimes with disdain. I grew up poor in a rough part of town; I imagine it is this experience which has made it difficult to garner any sort of reaction from me. After a few weeks of mandatory joking and generally mild hazing, most of the lads gave up.

Not Harry. He persists. His approach is more subtle, granted, often taking the form of little more than a sly comment and a particular look sent my way. The sort of looks and gestures only people who have known each other forever can get away with.
He teases me about this, I’m sure. He simply never says anything about it.

I push open the door with my right hand, the shaving kit tucked in the crook of my left elbow. The door automatically closes behind me. The room is dark; the lights are set to keep in place a natural circadian rhythm, and it is almost always night or near dusk when I arrive. I usually leave the lights off, preferring to sit in darkness, or by the light of a single small lamp. Today, however, I reach up and flick the switch on.

It has become easier for me to look upon Harry’s face, and I keep glancing over to it as I set the kit down on the nearby table and unload its contents: shaving cream, a brush, a comb, clippers, a straight razor. As I lay out my tools, I think about his face, how it is to be handled.

I begin first with the clippers and comb.

It is a small but necessary task, to clip away the longer strands of hair from his face. His hair grew the most the first few days he was in the infirmary, the growth slowing down the longer his body lay prone/unmoving. The beginnings of a beard are only just long enough to exceed the scrape of what a blade can handle. Once his beard is trimmed down to more resemble stubble, I prepare the cream and bristle. I apply it gently to his face; it is cold, and I can see the minute twitching of Harry’s skin, the slight and unconscious discomfort. I continue to watch his face for movement as I strap the straight razor.

It is very difficult to shave a sleeping man. Not necessarily for fear of waking them, which isn’t a consideration in this circumstance, but because there is angling and maneuvering, the deliberate pulling of skin until it is taut. It takes enough concentration for a conscious person to perform upon themselves. To do this for another unconscious person is considerably more difficult.

Fortunately, I have had a great deal of practice.

Once the blade is as sharp as I would like, I recline Harry’s bed until he is lying completely flat; I lean over and slip my left hand behind his neck, pulling up just slightly until the skin under his chin is taut.

And then, I begin.

It is a painstaking process, but soothing. I handle Harry gently, my eyes tracking every slow and careful swipe of the blade across his skin. His skin is not as young and firm as it used to be, but I know it so well that there is no chance of my leaving a blemish. Tilt his head left, right, hold his jaw carefully in my hand as my other armed appendage makes its slow way across his stubble, clearing the path. I work deftly around the oxygen tubes near his nose, lifting them on each side where they bisect his face. I pay special attention to all the curves and angles of his face, his jawline, his chin. Even some of the angles that aren’t pertinent: the high arch of his cheekbone, the ridge of his brow, the bow of his lips.

In my periphery, his heart monitor blinks.

-KM-

Just as I am finishing up, my phone buzzes. It is Kay. News of Eggsy.

I set my phone on the sink counter and read the briefing as I rinse the blade, bristle, and bowl.
Mission success. Eggsy has passed on relevant information; he will be leaving the country tomorrow, returning to Britain the following day.

A short respite, then. But probably for the best.

As I wash my hands, I think of Eggsy. Was it wise to send him away? He has performed well enough, yes, but what has it done to him, being afar? What has he thought about, these past few days? Has he let himself think at all?

I turn slightly to look back at Harry, sleeping, clean-shaven. Yes. Yes, of course Eggsy has been thinking. He’s an emotional boy. He’ll have been doing little else.

My gaze shifts from Harry to the single visitor’s chair that occupies the room. It sits in an almost accusatory stillness, as if tacitly chastising me for sending its one constant companion away. Christ. It’s a bloody chair.

What else was I supposed to do, though? Let him sit here and wallow? But then, how can I really claim to know what is best for Eggsy? Was it really any of my business to begin with? That question is more difficult to answer.

It wasn’t healthy for him. That much I can be sure of. It was not healthy for Eggsy to sit here, day and night, barely eating nor sleeping nor moving. Yet another interesting dichotomy about Eggsy: self-preservation seems to be always his motive, but he also has a self-destructive streak a mile wide, and it comes out most when he thinks he has put a loved one in danger or in pain.

I feel something icy settle in the pit of my stomach. Christ. The mission. This is why I should have never sent him out. He had plenty opportunity to do something rash, something stupid, something that could easily end his life—

But, no. He hadn’t. He had behaved, he had maintained. He was on his way back.

He’s safe.

I close my eyes and brace myself against the sink, breathing slowly. He is safe, I tell myself. He is safe.

For the time being.

Harry’s eyelids flicker, and it sends a jolt through me before I remind myself that this is not unusual for coma patients. Something like disappointment settles in my chest as I slowly make my way back to the side of the bed, to the chair. I sit down once more.

Why . . . why is Eggsy reacting like this? Why this time? When we had first thought Harry dead, the young man had been surprisingly calm, surprisingly mission-minded. Perhaps he had been a bit taciturn on the jet ride to the alps, but so were we all. Infiltrating Valentine’s hideaway, preventing V-Day, he had exhibited all the cocky assurance and vibrant finesse of a young man on the cusp of greatness. Not at all a young man who had just lost his . . . what? Friend? Father figure? L— well. I won’t speculate. But, point in case, he had been so level-headed and professional about it, I have to wonder what has changed, if anything. If Harry had really died out in Kentucky, would Eggsy have eventually come to grips with it as he is now? Once the world had been saved and we returned to business, would he have eventually devolved into this sessile, teary-eyed mess that I have been finding him in lately? Perhaps.

I think that this is Eggsy coming to the realization that mortality is not, in fact, not just something for other people.
It is a difficult lesson to learn. We don’t tend to fully comprehend death or loss until it happens to us, or someone we love. Eggsy’s own father died when Eggsy was very young, too infantile to fully understand; he didn’t know, until now, what it is like to lose a father—though I think it is more complicated than that.

No. I know it is more complicated.

Whatever the relationship between Harry and Eggsy, it is a moot point right now.

But, if Harry . . . if Harry dies. . .

I don’t want to think about what that might do to Eggsy. But I feel as if I already know.

-KM-

I am in the room when Eggsy returns.

It is getting late. 10:47 pm, by my watch’s count. I should have gone home already, but I stayed. Possibly because I knew Eggsy would come. This would be the first place he would go.

I am not disappointed. At three minutes to eleven, I hear the sound of the security pad on the outside of the door being activated, and the click of the door’s lock. I look up from where I sit in that lonely chair as the door opens, spilling in light from the outside.

Even Eggsy’s silhouette looks exhausted. He hangs upright as if someone were holding him up by hooks sunk into his shoulders—little more than nylon puppet strings.

He notices me immediately, which is marvel. I know this not because I can see his face or his eyes, but because he stiffens slightly, and turns his body just a fraction. I can feel him consider me for a moment. Then he closes the door and shuffles the rest of the way into the room.

I let the lights go out around sundown; the only thing I have bothered to keep on was a single backlight behind Harry’s bed. It casts long shadows across the room, illuminating little. However, when Eggsy steps closer, it does allow me to see him properly; and— Christ, he is still in tactical gear. He hasn’t shaved since he left. His eyes are bloodshot, almost crazed, but, more than anything, he looks physically and emotionally exhausted.

Mission success. What toll that took on his well-being, I had no way of knowing. I feel guilty, all the same.

Eggsy pauses for a moment a few paces from me. My full attention is upon him, and we watch each other in silence. There is an air of anticipation about him. What, I wonder, does he expect me to say? Perhaps he is waiting for me to vacate the chair—it is still the only one in the room, and it would be the polite thing to do, given his condition. But I am not inclined to give it up just yet.

Almost as if he hears me think this, he gives a small sigh. He then moves around the other side of the bed. With a muffled groan, he hoists himself backwards onto the small desk, propping his back up against the wall. He props up one knee, wincing slightly as he does. Whether the wince is due to stiffness or an injury, I cannot say.

Following next is a motionless moment that waits for one of us to speak. Given that I am not the
intruder, I do not think this task falls to me. Anatomy of a scene beside, I do not necessarily have anything to say to Eggsy.

(Except, perhaps, *Leave.*)

“He looks different.”

The comment is quiet. So quiet that I could have pretended not to hear; but I respond before I can think not to.

“He shouldn’t.” He has not moved. His breathing has been steady and unperturbed these last five days. Nothing has changed.

As if hearing these thoughts and disagreeing with them, Eggsy shakes his head. “He’s shaved.”

I look up sharply though Eggsy, blessedly, keeps his eyes fixed on Harry. He doesn’t look up at me, does not see whatever scant emotion flickers over my face.

“The nurses . . . one of the nurses saw to it.”

Eggsy’s eyes do flick to me then. It is only fleeting, only enough to catalog whether or not I have any kind of expression on my features. He is a few seconds too late, though, and his eyes return to Harry without having deciphered anything.

After a long moment, he speaks again.

“He ever have a beard?”

My mind immediately vacates the dark, antiseptic room, and flies back nearly a decade, to the hot sands of Morocco. I think about nights holed up in our shitty rented room, listening to the neighbors shout at each other in Turkish. Watching from my cot as Harry performed his ablutions by the sink, back turned, the small and irregular-shaped mirror reflecting a slice of his face. He trimmed his beard carefully. During the day, he wore it underneath the same dark, distrustful eyes as everyone else. It helped him blend in, better than I. It hid his mouth from me; I could scarcely tell when he was smiling. It was a relief when he shucked it off once we were back on the island.

I tell Eggsy this. I tell him about Morocco, describe the air in its musky, dry heat. I tell him about the mission that brought us there. I tell him about Harry’s beard. I don’t know why. It is none of his business. I should be reticent of sharing anything with him.

But I think I’ve been waiting to talk about Harry for a long time.

So I go on. Eggsy asks, I tell. Between us, Harry breaths.

-KM-

I depart at 2 am, leaving Eggsy to stay. Before I leave, however, I make demands on his health. I ask him to go home, see his mother, to sleep, to eat, to shower. He is too sleepy and exhausted to do anything but agree.

I do not go home, but utilize the couch in my office. Like much of the furniture in this bloody building, it wasn’t necessarily designed for comfort; but I have slept on rocks and sand and wet forest
floor. It is nothing to fall asleep on an unyielding piece of furniture.

When I next open my eyes, it is nearly six, and the first thing I see is a tray upon the coffee table, bearing a steaming pot of tea, a cup and saucer, and a plate of toast, egg, and jam. As I stiffly sit up, I see that a fresh suit has been laid out for me across the other end of the table.

I think, as I fully right myself, that I may never be accustomed to this sort of thing. I don’t mean being catered to—although I suspect it will be a long while before I become comfortable with that as well. What I mean is that, while never actually a Knight, I was, for a time, a fieldman of the most formidable caliber. I was sent on missions where the chance of death was almost certain, where constant vigilance was the difference between being compromised and staying aloof. I learned how to sleep in chairs, on stone, in alcoves of windows, underneath trains, in coffins; I learned how not to sleep for stretches of twenty-four, thirty-two, forty-eight hours. I trained myself to be aware of every detail of my surroundings, to wake at the slightest of human noises. Most of those instincts and abilities I still retain. I’ve startled, worried, and angered more than one companion for my intensity.

Though how Kay can tip-toe around and set this up without waking me is completely uncanny. His silence, in all its aspects, is almost supernatural.

At times, I have the urge to tell Kay that this is not in his job description. It is one thing to prepare and present my daily attire—ironic as this is, three-piece suit selection is not my forte—and quite another to . . . well, care for me. It almost seems like too much.

It would feel like a faux-pas to mention it, though; so I don’t.

When I emerge from my office half an hour later, fed, washed, and dressed, Kay is sitting at his desk, typing madly away. He looks prim and proper as always, the collar of his shirt stiffly starched, his back ramrod straight, pale face blank except for concentration. He looks up immediately when I enter the outer office, abandons his typing, and begins to sign.

Demarais would like to hold a meeting with you and the Director of the American office, he signs, hand movements crisp and sharp. Also, our liaison for Parliament has prepared a brief on spin-control for the assignments next week that needs your approval.

I nod and sign in reply. Schedule my meeting with Demarais and Donahue for this afternoon. Why is my approval needed for the press brief?

The missions are high-profile targeting. Members of the House of Lords will be pilloried.

I only just repress a sigh. Very well.

Kay reaches across his desk and picks up my tablet, handing it to me. When I unlock the screen, the day’s agenda and the topmost pressing paperwork items are presented. I hear a succession of taps, and my meeting with Demarais and Donahue appears on the screen for 2 pm.

Kay allows me a moment to look over the list before raising a hand to get my attention.

Mission reports from Lamorak, Lancelot, Unwin, and Lizann are being finalized. Their reports will be ready for you by 3 pm. Lamorak is in hospital, Lancelot is taking a reprieve of one day before going back out, Unwin is also in hospital but unharmed, and Lizann is taking reprieve to continue his Knight training.

Lamorak in hospital? Concerned, I sign back to him, What is the problem with Lamorak?

Kay shakes his head, as if seeing my concern and dismissing it, even though my expression has not
changed since we started conversing. Two broken ribs, slight concussion. Expected to make a full recovery.

I let out a slow breath that is not a sigh. Good. Pietro Varonikov, Lamorak the Fourth, is currently one of the only agents we can send into Russia to work with the Russian office, and it would be inopportune to lose him now. In Kingsman, as in anywhere else, no one is irreplaceable; however, at the level of Knight, one does become invaluable.

Good, I sign. Anything else?

Kay lifts his hands and then stops. I do not think I have ever seen him hesitate before in my life, and the fact that he does so now is truly alarming. His face, generally blank, takes on a hint of distaste.

The deputy director in Berlin wishes to speak.

This time, I do not bother hiding my displeasure. Again? About what? I sign.

He has found fault with your direction regarding reconstruction efforts in Belgium—

Has he run this by Director Ulrich? I demand, interrupting Kay with a bilious wave.

Kay shakes his head once. No. He believes you and he should speak personally.

I feel the hot edge of irritation pierce my skull. The deputy director of the Berlin office, Karl Lauterbach, has been nothing but unhelpful since I took over as Arthur. He has challenged almost every directive I have thrown their way, almost always without consulting Ulrich, whom I am beginning to wonder about. The impertinent little shit seems intent upon discrediting my authority, one dull meeting at a time. Personally, I have no patience for this.

Tell Lauterbach that if he has issue with my orders, he must take it up with his immediate superior. Then, and only then, will it be discussed.

Kay nods again. He does not look as though he has anything else to say.

Irritated, I roll my neck to the side until there is an audible pop. I am shutting myself in, I sign, not to be disturbed.

Kay’s features smooth out into a plain of polite stoicism. Lunch? he signs.

Have it brought at 1, please. Something light.

-KM-

I spend the morning ensconced in my office, door firmly shut and bolted. While Kay knows when I am to be left alone, other people do not, and I have no time for interruptions.

I focus my efforts on going through paperwork for the Research and Development division as well as for the Armory and Intelligence divisions. As Merlin, running these departments would have been my primary tasks; in my present role, I have been forced to delegate leadership to individuals within those specific departments, giving them as much direction as I am able—which is much less than I would like. The acting department heads—Morrison, Hathaway, and Gainsley—are doing well, given the circumstances; but progress in all three departments has been slow-going. We are
constantly running to put out the next fire, instead of taking proactive steps to prevent them; even once activity quiets down, I am not sure that this modus operandi will change. It is not sustainable; that much is clearly evident, even in the few weeks—week and a half?—that our world has been changed. I need to find a replacement.

This is something that I am admittedly reluctant to do. I do not want to be Arthur but, more than that, I do not want to give up my title as Merlin.

I am not the only one whom this worries, it seems. Others are against it as well. For some, the transition between calling me “Merlin” and “Arthur” has been seamless. Percival and Bedivere, for example, did not bat an eye and have called me Arthur since the day I took over. For others, such as the technicians and project managers it was formerly my sole duty to oversee, the M of “Merlin” is still the first thing that attempts to roll off their tongue. Some, like Kay, compromise by merely addressing me as “Sir”—though Kay, at least, I suspect does this not because calling me “Arthur” makes him uncomfortable, but because he perceives that it makes me uncomfortable. He’s a clever boy. Almost too clever.

Alec. That had been my name. Alec Mathers. If you were to ask Harry, it would have been Alec “Oissian” Mathers; he was always unreasonably fond of that little nickname. Regardless, I have not been called any part of that name in a very long while. I am simply Merlin. I have been for the past two decades. You see, unlike the Knights, I have no alternate identity. Merlin is not my codename, but my true name, the one I was born to fulfill.

When Lancelot the Fifth was killed, I had been at Kingsman long enough that only two people knew my birth name.

Now, almost a year later, one of those people is dead.

The other might as well be.

It is harsh to think this way, I know. But Harry Hart is laying in the infirmary, unmoving, in a coma. He was the last person to know I was human; and, if he dies, he will take the last of that humanity with him.

-KM-

I do not want to return to the infirmary, but some irreconcilable force draws me there anyway.

Eggsy is there, unsurprisingly. What is surprising, however, is the way he looks at me when I walk in. Or that he looks at me at all.

Previously, when Eggsy entered or inhabited this room, god help anyone that tried to draw his attention away from Harry. Now, however, as I slide into the room, jacket folded over one arm and tie loose, he actually stands from his chair and turns his body to look at me.

And his face . . . his expression is unusual. Hopeful, almost.

“You’re back,” he says, somewhat lamely.

I nod. I survey him once, carefully: he is no longer wearing his tactical suit, but a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved grey t-shirt. He looks as though he has bathed, and I surmise that he has eaten, but he
still looks exhausted. There is something distinctly different about him, though, in comparison to our recent interactions: he seems a little more alive, I think. A little more vibrant.

“You went home?” I ask. My gaze flits over to Harry. Nothing has changed.

Eggsy nods. He swallows, and I see his throat bob, watch the movement of a single dark beauty mark on his neck.

“Yeah,” he says. “Saw me mum. She was. . . . ”

He does not need to finish. “And Daisy?”

Eggsy’s face brightens a little at the mention of his sister. “Gettin’ so big, she is. Still can’t get over how much she’s grown since I been ‘ere.”

“I imagine they were glad to see you,” I say evenly.

Eggsy gave a grin, the first of one I have seen in a long while. It looks so familiar, yet so foreign. “Yeah. Mum was in a right state. Fussed over every’fing, she did. Made me sit down and eat a proper meal, practic’lly followed me into the shower to make sure I washed up.”

“To be fair, you were rather rank.”

The comment slips from my mouth before I can stop to think about it, and it hangs in the air for a moment like a new baby bird, unsure how to fly.

Eggsy’s expression is surprised, almost taken aback. He stares at me for a moment, speechless.

I am about to consider beating a hasty retreat when, finally, he laughs. It is not harsh or even forced, but a genuine, good-natured laugh. It is full, but short-lived, a room like this not being capable of sustaining anything so jovial as humor. But even when it subsides, Eggsy’s face has softened, has the lingering hint of a smile.

“Right charmer, you are,” he says, and there is a hint of teasing in his tone. His eyes, though tired, give a mischievous glint, and it stuns me how readily this particular thing grips at the roots of my person, what a visceral reaction I have to it.

This does not show on my face, of course. I have long since schooled myself to betray next to no emotion involuntarily. Only Harry was ever able to discern when I was consternated, afraid, delighted, anything. Only he was able to see past my perpetually unimpressed veneer. Eggsy does not possess that insight.

As I stand there, trying to parse out my own reaction, Eggsy’s expression shifts again. The humor drops from his face, and he looks more like he did when I first entered: expectant, almost anxious. He watches me closely, taking in my attire, my stance, my stoic expression.

“You stayin’?” he asks.

I slide out of my reverie and look at him again. His hands are curled slightly at his sides, not fists but anxious almost-clenching. I let my eyebrows drift down to emulate the beginnings of a frown.

“No,” I say, finally. “I am going home tonight.”

“Ah.” It sounds disappointed. “Well, I . . . ”

“Yes?”
“I just . . . I enjoyed . . . last night. I liked hearing about . . . about Harry.” Pause. “I was hoping that . . . well, maybe. . . .”

I almost sigh. I come so bloody close.

“Did you sleep last night?”

“No.”

I adjust my jacket where it hangs over my arm and nod my head to indicate behind me. I turn heel.

“Come along, then.”

I do not look behind me. Eggsy wordlessly gets up and follows me out.

-KM-

A black Kingsman cab is waiting for us at the curb when we step outside the front doors of HQ and into the night. My driver, Agent Dailey, gets out and opens one of the passenger doors for us; he makes no comment as I gesture Eggsy to proceed me inside. Dailey thinks this is strange, I know, but it is not his place to say. Like Kay, Dailey had originally come from another department – in his case, Asset Extraction— but was plucked for this position when the world shifted. It was unfair to him in many respects; though he was a former body guard and accustomed to this sort of work, he was a true fieldman if I ever saw one. We had worked closely on several assignments, and he was previously accustomed to exchange words freely with me.

Not so now. His expression is as silent as his voice as I instruct him to take Eggsy and I to my flat. We pass the ride in silence. I pull out a small tablet and stylus from my pocket and check my inbox. Kay has already sent my schedule for tomorrow, and I make notes. Eggsy stares resolutely out of his window.

Dailey pulls up on my street, just three doors down from my flat, as required. He lets me out and Eggsy follows. I nod once to Dailey, sure and solemn, and he understands me immediately. Eggsy and I stand still on the pavement and watch as Dailey drives away.

I wait until the black cab has rounded the corner before looking down at Eggsy. He is not uncommonly short, but I am rather tall. Looking down at him is inevitable.

I did, after all, have to bend down to whisper my threat into his ear.

Eggsy turns his head from where he too was watching the car roll down the street and out of sight. He turns again to look up at me, but I have already shifted my gaze. I step away from him deliberately, and walk briskly down the row of houses until I arrive at my door. I both hear and feel Eggsy come up behind me.

I let us into my flat, disabling the alarm with practiced ease. In the entry-way, I shrug off my jacket, which I had donned once again before we entered the Kingsman cab. I pull out one of the many coat-hangers from inside the entryway closet and place the jacket there, knowing that Kay will send someone by tomorrow to retrieve it for care. Reach up with one hand and pull at the half-windsor of my steel grey tie, loosening it. Eggsy is still standing behind me, hanging back it seems, not quite at
ease in this space. I turn my head and look over my shoulder at him briefly. He is examining his
reflection in the hallway mirror, as if not accustomed to seeing it. It occurs to me that this could be
the first time he’s looked in a mirror for days.

I face forward again and wander from the hallway into the living room. I pass the rectangle of neatly
arranged matching sofas and walk over to the built-in bar. Though I do not generally make use of
this feature of my home, I keep the bar stocked. The shelves for liquor are glass and paneled by a
mirror. I consider our options for drink, and find Eggsy in the reflection.

He has shuffled out of the entry hallway slowly. His expression, as he surveys the room before him,
is one of intense curiosity; I can almost see the machinations of his mind as he takes everything in,
processes it, draws conclusions. The neatness of everything. The shelves upon shelves of books. The
scant furniture, all the same style. Unlike the majority of people, I do not decorate for the benefit of
others; I don’t know that I decorate at all. Decoration implies a certain frivolousness to design, an
ornamentation. There is almost nothing ornamental in my home. Everything has a purpose, is useful,
and is merely arranged to be accommodating. There is no real color theme; the floors are wood, what
can be seen of the walls is white, and the sofas are a dark, blue-grey. The bar is black marble. The
slice of kitchen that can be seen from the living room is white.

On the whole, I have been told that my residence looks stark and uninviting.

This is not a sentiment I share; but it is, presently, too quiet.

I reach up and grab a box of long matches from one of the top shelves. I twist around and the
movement catches Eggsy’s attention. I toss him the box and he catches it easily.

“There is a log in the grate, and yesterday’s paper on the coffee table,” I tell him, nodding to it. “Start
a fire.”

Eggsy hops to, and I turn back to my selection of liquors. Eventually, I choose an Irish whisky,
filling two glasses with about two fingers of the stuff each.

I take the glasses with me to the middle of the living room. I set one down on the long, dark wooden
coffee table and set back onto one of the long couches arranged in an incomplete square around it. I
watch Eggsy kneeling by the grate, poking at the fire and tending to the wood.

After a minute, Eggsy rises from his crouch, satisfied, it seems. The wood has begun to catch and
small flames are curling at the edges. The murmur of the fire is fine, but it will strengthen soon
enough. Eggsy turns to me, and I gesture at the drink sitting on the coffee table.

“Ta,” Eggsy says, voice tired and a bit rough. He snags the glass with the tips of his fingers, and
wanders over to the other side of the coffee table, settling down on the sofa directly across from me.
An interesting choice. It is a less intimate arrangement of our figures, with the expanse of dark wood
between us, but also more so. It requires us to look directly at each other.

I do so, unwaveringly as Eggsy takes a drink. His throat bobs, and I spy that small beauty mark  from
before. I wait for a beat of silence after he swallows before speaking. And there is no pretense in my
words, no beating around the bush. It is late in the day, and subtlety does not suit me.

“What do you want to know?”

Eggsy lowers his glass so that he is holding it in both hands. He turns it once, watching the liquid
rolling around.

“Everything. Anything.”
I consider this request. I had expected as much. Though telling him everything is beyond the question for a multitude of reasons, I understand that limitless information is not necessarily what he needs. Eggsy came here because he wants someone to paint a portrait of Harry Hart, full and shining and nuanced. He needs someone else to talk about Harry, to talk about him in a vibrant, vital way. He wants a living, breathing history.

I tilt my head, lean back in my seat. My long body stretches, and I shift my legs so that they cross at the knee. It does not escape my notice that Eggsy catalogs the movement, eyes shifting over my form briefly. I hum low in my throat, more for his benefit, as if I am thinking; I am not. I already know what I will tell him.

“Has Harry told you about Argentina?”

We converse long into the evening, though not as late as I expected. I ply Eggsy with drink, eventually just bringing the bottle of whisky over to the coffee table. Around ten, his eyes begin to grow heavy, his blinking prolonged. By eleven, he is swaying in his seat, nearly nodding off.

I finish the rest of my drink and set my glass down on the table.

“I think it’s time you went to bed.”

Eggsy merely nods sleepily, slowly. “Yeah . . . yeah, all right.”

I stand and move over to where he is sitting. Without pausing to think whether or not it is necessary, I lean down and grip him gently but firmly by the arms, hoisting him up. He rises without protest. He is fairly limp and languid as I arrange one of his arms over my shoulders, and put a hand around his waist.

It is this way that I guide him up the stairs to the second floor of my flat, down the hallway and past the master into the guest bedroom. It has been unoccupied for quite some time and, like the rest of the house, it has been mostly unattended as of late. There is a faint sheet on dust on the east-facing window sill and the single, unadorned desk; but I changed the bedclothes recently, and they are clean.

Eggsy is completely complacent as I pull back the bed-covers. I contemplate, for a moment, making him shuck his trousers and shirt—but quickly dismiss the idea. Instead, I simply push him back until he is sitting on the bed, and then kneel down to tend to his shoes. He makes no comment as I undo his laces and slip his trainers off one-by-one. He is probably nearly asleep, so close to the edge that he cannot make sense of his being or surroundings; he probably doesn’t even realize what I’m doing. And he probably won’t remember.

I can’t shake how terribly intimate it feels, though. I hold one ankle and gently pull off a trainer, setting it beside me. I resist the almost innate urge to put my hand under the arch of Eggsy’s foot.

Like a lover’s touch.

It’s actually difficult to explain exactly how taboo that would be.

Once his shoes are off and placed neatly together by the bed, I help him hoist his legs up onto the bed. I lean over him and retrieve the edge of the comforter from where I had thrown it back, drawing it back over him. His eyes are closed when I bring it ‘round his shoulders.

I look down at him, in the moon-lit dark of the bedroom. His face, restful and exhausted, finally having lost all trace of expression and relaxing into a deep slumber.
Instinctively, I reach out my hand and gently touch my fingers to his cheek. I cannot berate myself for the gesture; it’s simple, affectionate. Unguarded. My fingers are dry, lithe and long, skimming over young, smooth, warm skin.

I am about to draw my hand away, when Eggsy shifts suddenly. He does not open his eyes, but turns his head so that his full cheek falls into my open palm, leaning into my touch. His mouth twitches, and it can feel it against my palm as he nuzzles at it.

I stand there, frozen, for a few solid seconds. My heart goes frighteningly still in my chest.

Then, deftly, as gently as I can, I withdraw my hand from his cheek.
The Trappings of Sentiment, Part II

Chapter Notes

I know “skullcap” is the common name for a flowering herb (Scutellaria lateriflora), but I’ve heard it once used to refer to someone with a shaven head. In any case, that is the context in which I’m using it here.

Posts, as per usual, will not be regular. I am starting up my graduate studies, so I don’t expect to have a lot of writing time. Editing time is also in short supply, I'm afraid. Please be patient. I have this entire story planned out, so I know where it's going, it's just a matter of fleshing it out properly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My body rouses me early the next morning.

My mind isn’t ready to wake up, still intent on following whatever dream it had been chasing; but my body stirs with an almost electric force. My eyes snap open. I am slightly disoriented.

The dark contours of my bedroom soon become clear enough, however. I look at the digital clock on my bedside table and see that it is just after six. High time to wake up, really.

Even as I rise, pulling myself from under the covers, I can feel my mind rebel, creaking as if stiff. I am tired. Exhausted, even. I slept for at least six hours, which is more than I had slept in the first days of my being Arthur; only now, though, does my exhaustion seem to weigh upon me fully. I do not want to get up. I do not want to stand, to move around and put on my clothes.

I want to get back into bed, close my eyes, and . . .

The realization of my own moroseness livens me instantly, and I blink once, hard.

After that, the morning is simpler. In the dark, I walk to the window and press my hand against it, testing the outside temperature. Then, I find a shirt, a worn hooded jumper, and a pair of jogging shorts. I let myself out of my bedroom, into the hallway. I spare a glance down the darkened end of the hallway, towards the guest bedroom, but do not bother to check beyond that; the door is still closed, and it is not difficult to imagine that Eggsy is still sleeping.

Once downstairs, I pad in socked feet to the kitchen and pull down one of the plain white mugs from where it sits on the shelf. I fill it about a third of the way with water and drink it quickly, washing away the stickiness of sleep from my mouth. From the kitchen, I walk into the living room, towards the coat closet by the front door. It is nearly bare but for two large overcoats, a wind-breaker, and a pair of worn trainers. These last I put on, lacing them carefully before letting myself through the front door, outside.

It is still dark, the streets of London only lit by lamps at every third residence or so. It is slightly chillier than my inspection of the window led me to believe, but it will cease to matter soon enough.

I turn to the door and shove a small, nearly paper-thin piece of wood between the door and the frame; an old spy trick, something no one had yet bothered to teach the younger agents. Once I am
assured of its inconspicuous and sturdy placement, I straight and direct my gaze down the street. There is a company car parked conspicuously at the curb a few flats down. I deliberately and give it a single nod, then jerk my head to the left.

After a moment, the driver-side door opens, and a figure in all-black steps out. He approaches with a deceptive air of casualness, his step even and congenial, as if walking up to meet a friend. As he draws nearer, I can see the haloed shine of his blonde hair as illuminated by the streetlamp.

“Gov,” the young man says as he approaches.

I give the smallest of nods at the code address; this young man has never been on my security detail before, but he’s been given the proper instruction, it seems. More to the point, I recognize him. When he stops about two meters from me, I look him over. Compared to his severe black-on-black attire, I feel rather underdressed in my jogging gear; however, I do not let that undermine my authority as I address him in turn. “Agent Lizann. I wasn’t expecting you. Are you not meant to be in training?”

Agent-in-training Mark Lizann nods. “Yes, sir. But Agent Kubesnick has taken ill, and Commander Thornton thought this would be a good exercise.”

“I see. Then I assume Commander Thornton has appraised you of protocol?”

Lizann nods again. “Route winding through the park, roughly 13 kilometers. Don’t be seen. Takes you about an hour and ten.”

“Try not to be seen,” I correct. “And well shall see about that ten minutes.”

-KM-

When I return to my house an hour later, there is still no indication that Eggsy has stirred. The small piece of wood is still wedged in my door; nothing in the living room or kitchen has been moved.

It would not have bothered me, I think as take off my shoes and set them by the door, if Eggsy had left while I was out. It wouldn’t have even bothered me if Eggsy had gotten up and began poking through my possessions. When I went out the door, I had barely given a thought to leaving Eggsy in my house by himself. There was next to no danger in him snooping: I kept nothing work-related there save for an emergency armory. Of myself, there was nothing to find.

I make my way back upstairs, taking care to tread quietly, although I suspect that Eggsy is the type to sleep through nearly anything. That deep, unconcerned sleep that the young have; sleep is still a passion they can throw themselves into. It is not yet a regular refuge from the world, or a queer, almost resentful obligation.

I don’t want to assume too much but, even in light of recent events, I doubt that Eggsy knows what true insomnia is like.

I return to my rooms and have a perfunctory shower. I shave the scruff away from my neck and jaw, and then take to the task of smoothing out the gritty hairs that have begun to peek through my scalp. It used to feel ridiculous to me, shaving my head, almost vain. Now, it’s merely ritual. It is another thing that defines me amongst my peers at Kingsman—although now I am, officially, peerless. Still; it is an identifier. Who is Merlin? Easy. Tall, severe-looking bloke with the skullcap. Few other agents cut such an unnerving figure: I am not concerned axiomatically with the niceties of being a
gentleman, nor preoccupied with the pretense of gentility or softness. It sets me apart, not necessarily in the best of ways. It keeps me from looking too human.

An organization such as ours, in a time like this, does not need a leader who is overly human. In this way, I sometimes think that I may be the only suitable person for this job at present. I am unparalleled in the realm of compartmentalization. I know that, at the end of the day, the purpose of this organization is to save civilian lives, and to keep hidden from them the true extent of the world’s ugly insanity. We do the work that MI6, CIA, and intelligence agencies the world over cannot or will not. And someone needs to make those calls.

Having Demarais by my side has been good, in this short timespan. He has been exceedingly helpful; but I cannot continue to make such extensive use of him. The French office is suffering without his full attention; and a beast with two heads is a better thinker, but a clumsy hunter. Now that things are settling down—and I can finally say that, yes, things are settling down just slightly—it would be feasible to let Demarais step down. I will need to do it, eventually. The current question is simply one of “when”.

When, indeed.

Eggsy does not wake while I shuffle about my house and prepare myself for the day. When I am about to step out the door at seven-twenty-five, I give one last glance back into my abode.

The books sit silent on their shelves. Only stillness peers back at me.

I close the door. In deference to Eggsy, I lock the manual lock, and set the digital ones to allow the exit of one more person before sealing up for the day. I do not replace the woodchip, but set it beneath my welcome mat, for later use.

When I approach the curb, a black King’s cab is already pulled up to meet me. A glance down the street reveals the back of a blonde head ducking into a similar unmarked car.

-KM-

I do not see Eggsy all day. He does not report in, and no access point registers him entering. The containment and clean-up of a sudden and unexpected bombing in Brussels takes the brunt of my attention all day; but the thought of Eggsy weighs heavy at the back of my mind. It’s unprofessional of me. I tuck the niggling concern away and focus on the tasks at hand.

I had intended to go and visit Harry that evening, but it is late by the time the crisis is mostly contained (contained enough, at least, for the rest of the world to handle it reliably). The hour rounds one a.m. by the time I leave my office. I told Kay to go home at ten, but by the looks of things, he may have just left; and, of course, he will be here the moment or well before I myself get here in the morning. I really need to talk to him about his hours. It isn’t healthy in someone his age.

Tucking this thought away for later, I call the garage and ask for my car to be brought around. Dailey is sitting stoically in the driver’s seat when I exit the building.

“Gov,” he says, stepping out to open the door for me. It’s ridiculous, this level of decorum; I am no delicate lady. Still, tradition, I suppose. I purse my lips briefly, but reply all the same. “Agent Dailey.”
“To the London Nest, then?”

The “London Nest” is the code name that Chester called his own flat in the city. Where Dailey picked up the phrase, I’m not sure. It’s another irritatingly remnant of the old Arthur lineage, another posh nuance. I haven’t figured out how to break Dailey of this particular tidbit yet.

“Please,” I said cordially, settling myself in the back.

Dailey nods and climbs once again into the driver’s seat. He must think it odd, me returning to my flat so late. Generally, I don’t see the point; any other night, I would have simply kipped in my office. It seems important to return tonight, though.

Dailey pulls out of the drive and begins the journey towards London. Through the partition, I can see his eyes shifting in the rearview mirror. They flick back to me once, then affix firmly to the dark road ahead.

“Pardon my asking, sir, but the lad all right?”

The question surprises me, on some level, but I am too exhausted to appreciate it fully. I try not to slump into the back seat. Though the query is completely out of the blue, there is no question as to whom the “lad” is.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “We shall see.”

-Eggsy is no longer at my flat.

I can tell immediately, even before I walk through the door. Empty houses have a certain stillness to them. A quietness only mimicked by the dead. It probably goes without saying that I am familiar with this state in both houses and people.

I enter, flicking on the light. Everything in the entryway and sitting room looks exactly as I had left it. No books have been removed from their place on the shelves; the ashes from last night’s fire still sit in the grate; the two, conspicuous and empty tumblers still sit on the large, low coffee table.

I lay my suit-jacket over the back of one of the leather sofas that frames the coffee table, and walk around to retrieve the glasses. I pluck them up deftly and take them to the kitchen to be washed.

When I arrive at the kitchen, however, something makes me pause in the doorway.

Everything is pristine, as per usual. Everything stark, grey, black and white.

Everything, save for the single red cup sitting on the counter.

-I do not expect to see Eggsy the next day. So, it is to my surprise when Kay knocks once, and then-
enters my office to announce that Unwin is here to see me.

The temptation to arch my eyebrow is great, but I school my features. I had been made aware of Eggsy’s presence in the building: I have the system set to where I am given notification of certain people entering and exiting. Eggsy had crossed the threshold of the east entrance at ten that morning, presumably here to see Harry. There was nothing in the queue for him as far as assignments went. Perhaps that was what he wanted to see me about?

He should have made an appointment, I think, just a tad irritably. Eggsy, though he is humble, has always thought himself above the rules that govern other people. It is sometimes not a conscious decision that he makes, to disregard protocol, nicety, or law. Eggsy acts according to his own moral code which, while fairly rigid and commendable, gives him considerable leeway to disobey the general rules by which the rest of the world operates.

And, sometimes, he acts out of emotion, for which there is no logic, and therefore no rules.

This, I know even before I see him, is the latter.

Kay is watching me intently, hands at rest by his sides. I have taken a long pause. Longer than necessary. Long enough that Kay’s hands give a single twitch, and I can see that he is considering whether or not to restate the message he has just conveyed.

Deliberately, I put down the stylus in my hand, setting it on my desk parallel to the tablet I was using it for. I shut down the screen, and turn my attention back to Kay. In lieu of signing my reply, I make a simple beckoning hand gesture.

Kay shows his acknowledgement, then turns sharply and steps back out. A moment later, I see his small, pale hand pushing the door open wider to admit the distinctly more burly form of Eggsy Unwin.

As Eggsy steps into the room, I make an obligatory appraisal of him. For once, I cannot say that he looks poorly. He looks fresh, his face washed, his hair combed. He is wearing civvies, the same sporty kind of outfit he’d been wearing the very first time I’d laid eyes on him. Smart polo, breathable zip-up, jeans, sort of clunky white trainers. I do realize he wears this sort of things because he is very comfortable in it and because it lets him hide—both of these traits are immediately apparent in his postures—but the clothes aren’t doing him any favors. He looks very young.

In fact, he has the air about him of a schoolboy called into the headmaster’s office. He looks chagrinned, as if he was caught flicking boogers at a classmate. He does not look up at me until Kay closes the door and, when he does, there is the barest hint of a flush at the edges of his cheeks.

I struggle with keeping my eyebrows still. In my veins, my pulse picks up just a beat.

Eggsy shuffles closer, crossing the carpeted expanse of the room with a strange kind of meandering purposefulness. It isn’t as believable without JB yipping around his ankles.

Eggsy stops when he is two meters from my desk. Then he looks up. Deliberately.

“’eyy,” he says, blandly.

If I had been expecting any particular kind of opening statement, it certainly wasn’t that.

“Hello.”

The greeting, I think, comes out a bit cold. Something in Eggsy’s eyes dims a little; if he looked
unsure before, he looks subtly edgy now, as if he thinks he’s made a mistake. Fortunately, my good manners save us both.

“How are you?”

Eggsy blinks, his light green eyes bright. “Okay, actually,” he says. He takes a step closer.

“And Harry?”

I watch the set of Eggsy’s shoulders tighten slightly, watch his supple mouth purse. “He’s . . . he’s okay. Same.”

It is my turn for some platitude, but I let the pause hang instead. It gives me a moment to consider what this conversation (or lack thereof) might be about. It seems unlikely to me that Eggsy would stop by for no reason, even though one is not forthcoming. There is something he is dancing around, some objective he won’t yet yield to.

Being the adult in this situation, I suppose I am obliged to make this easier on him.

“Did you mean to ask me something, Eggsy?”

I manage to modulate my voice into something that is not irritable. The question comes across smoothly; it elicits a very minute shift in his posture. He looks up at me furtively, then glances back down. A very light blush creeps across his cheeks.

“I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind some company for lunch, actually.”

The silence that ensues then is not calculated.

I open my mouth once, and then close it. My brow creases slightly. I open my mouth again, and this time something sensible formulates, albeit slowly. “That . . . that is kind of you to offer, Eggsy. But I am afraid I have a tight schedule today.”

Eggsy’s eyes widen a fraction and he flushes fully. He shrinks back into himself, shoulders hunching. “Oh. Right, ‘course— erhm—”

He stops. For some reason, he is humiliated. I don’t understand.

Eggsy licks his lips and tries again, already moving to leave. “Perhaps, if I—“

“However, if you would like to talk, I anticipate being finished at a reasonable hour today.”

The words leave my mouth before I can fully consider them. It’s an uncharacteristic outburst, and I cannot say where it came from. Why would I freely offer Eggsy my time? A part of me feels as though I owe him something, certainly, but another part of me feels that I am crossing a very fine line. Is this wise?

If it isn’t, I cannot take it back now.

Eggsy looks up, first surprised, then hopeful. “Yeah?”

I nod. There is nothing for it. “Nineteen-hundred hours. I’ll be out front.”

-KM-
Eggsy is already there, waiting for me when I step out of the building that evening.

He stands by the cab that I ordered some five minutes ago. His hands are shoved into the pockets of his zip-up, head tilted downwards. Next to the plainly but impeccably dressed Agent Dailey, who stands stiffly beside him in what is almost parade-rest, Eggsy looks uncomfortably out-of-place.

It occurs to me as I approach them that scenery is sometimes everything, and this would not have looked at all out of place along certain streets of London at night.

I send both men the barest of nods before sliding into the back of the cab. Eggsy walks around to the other side and opens the door, climbing into the seat next to me. Dailey sends me a look through the rear-view mirror as he settles behind the wheel.

“The Shoppe, please.”

The journey to London is, once again, silent. It allows me to further wallow in the trepidation that has been plaguing the back of my mind all afternoon since Eggsy departed my office.

To my credit, I did not allow myself to ponder over it much; but I did allot a few minutes between meetings to consider what, exactly, I was doing. What I might be encouraging. In the end, I came to no real conclusions—except for the decision to meet on relatively neutral ground. Inviting him back to my flat seems unpropitious; what transpired the night before was not, in the strictest sense, inappropriate. Unadvisable and unprecedented, yes. But not wholly inappropriate.

It was a human response, on my part. I was responding to his grief, hungry thing that it is. I am still responding to it. Such a wretched emotion is often magnetic, even more so when the afflicted person hands you their vulnerability on a silver platter—a meal in return. This time, however, I am endeavoring not to feed either of our hungers. I do not want to be a source of relief from something deemed so immeasurable. For one, I don’t think I can. For another, it would be unbearable.

And so, we go to the shoppe. I reason that, from here, one of two things can happen: after a drink, I can concede to more not-wholly-inappropriate behavior, and we can walk to my house—it is only a few blocks—or we can go our separate ways. I use my keys to unlock the front, and my biological credentials to gain access to the back rooms. I feel Eggsy behind me as we climb the stairs together, his distance measured. Despite his reckless nature, it seems that he too is willing to bow to a sense of precariousness.

The street outside has some light foot traffic, but the interior of the shoppe is completely still. I wordlessly cut around the displays of materials and accoutrements, leading Eggsy to the stairs behind the counter. At the top of the stairs is a landing with three doors. The door to the right leads to the main chamber—the “Round Table”, as it were. The door across the narrow hallway on the left side leads to a slightly smaller room, with a proper desk for Jonathan and his bookkeeping in one corner, and a liquor cabinet in another corner. It is this room that I lead Eggsy into, gesturing for him to sit in one of the chairs by the window while I make our selection.

I make the deliberate decision to pour us each a single drink, and leave the bottle in the cabinet, though the cabinet itself I leave open. I only intend one drink but, well: it’s nice to have options.

When I turn to face the rest of the room, I see that Eggsy has deposited himself into one of the comfy chairs that sits by the window. He accepts the snifter of brandy with a misleadingly insouciant grace.

“Ta, ‘fanks.”
I hum in my throat. There is a similar chair almost catty-corner to Eggsy’s; it’s too close, I think, but I don’t want to make a show of moving it. I sit down, and arrange my legs so that our feet are not in danger of brushing.

Outside the window, a streetlight flickers to life. It’s not fully dusk yet, the sky still smoky orange from the slowly setting sun. The light is angled to cast iridescent rays across Eggsy’s chest.

“Fanks for letting me stay over last night.”

I swill my drink. “You are welcome.”

“It’s just . . . it’s been hard and I . . . I appreciate that. You.”

I hum again, softer this time.

Across from me, there is a flash as Eggsy’s snifter shifts in the sun’s setting rays. He considers the liquid momentarily then sips. The series of gestures is so refined, they look faintly ridiculous on him. He stares again into his glass.

“You’ve got a nice place.”

“It’s not very personable, I’m told.”

I know immediately the question that leaps to life in Eggsy’s eyes, the one he wants to ask and the one he (miraculously) manages not to. Instead, he recovers and shoots me a grin; it’s wry, teasing slightly. His eyes crinkle slightly at the corners. “It’s you, innit?”

I tilt my head at him. He either doesn’t realize what he’s said, or he doesn’t realize the full implications of it. “It is.”

“I like your red cup, though. Bit unexpected, that color. That don’t seem like you,” he muses indulgently, “what with all the white. Is it for when you’re feelin’ cheeky?”

I feel something like a prickle of heat creep up my neck. There is something in his smile . . . unless I am imagining it. I’m not prone to doing that, though. Falsely interpreting another’s emotions is very dangerous, in this line of work. I have learned not to make that mistake.

It is unexpected, however, and therefore confusing. I am not sure where it came from; it seems incongruous with the rest of the feelings and intimacies he has shown me. I anticipated that this would be a solemn conversation, continuing the pattern we have thus far established; and it is very subtle, more subtle than I would think him capable of. I could overlook it. I probably should.

I narrow my eyes just slightly, letting my mouth take the ghost of a smile. “I’m always cheeky.”

This response seems to please him. He gives a soft, throaty chuckle, taking another drink of brandy. The amusement in his eyes dims, however, as his gaze moves to the window, peering into the settling dusk. “Say, Merlin?”

“Mm?”

“How many of Harry’s stories do you know?”

I feel myself stiffen at this, although I would be lying if I said I didn’t see it coming. I create a pause for consideration, before lobbing a question back at him:—

“Why?”
Eggsy continues to look outside. The light has yellowed further, and lights the golden flecks in his hair, makes his eyes seem an unearthly color. “I’m interested, is all,” he says, softly. “I want to hear more of them.” He turns to look at me again; when he does so, he shifts his legs, bringing them in closer proximity to my own. I watch his left foot come within centimeters of my right ankle, though he seems not to notice. “How d’you know? Was you with ‘im, all those times?”

“In some form or other. Usually on the comms.” A flashback from the night before, unbidden, rises to the surface of my mind. I remember putting him to bed, his limp, helpless form, everything about him made sweet with sleep. My hand at his ankle, milky white with soft curls of dark blonde hair.

“You ever do missions together?”

I shift my ankle away. “In our younger days.”

My tone is slightly clipped, my answers direct and unembellished. When I was telling him stores by firelight the other day, I had no qualms about my intently detailed narrations; somehow, in this moment, I feel protective of those stories. I shared them too easily before, and now Eggsy is eager to take them all from me. Something about this exchange has made me uncomfortable, and he can see it.

He leans over, and set his drink down on the floor. Then he puts his elbows on his bent knees, lacing his hands in front of him as if in supplication. He levels a serious gaze at me. “Look. I didn’ want to talk about anything in particular. We don’t ‘ave to talk about Harry. I just want to talk to someone who isn’t a nurse or a head-shrink.” He plucks up his glass again and leans back. “That guy was a load of shit, by the way.”

A snort of laughter escapes me. “I’m fairly certain that quality isn’t listed on his credentials.”

Eggsy snickers, grin blooming anew. “See? You can be right pleasant to talk to when you’re not bein’ a sour git.”

I roll my eyes. “What charming words.”

The curve of Eggsy’s smile sharpens. He wets his lips in an unconscious gesture. “I can be fucking charming.”

I swallow, and tap the rim of my glass with a long finger. “I’m sure.” Pause. “Don’t you talk to Roxanne? I understand you two are close.”

Eggsy’s mouth twist into something fond and winsome. “Fucking love Roxie, but even she just looks at me with sad eyes nowadays.” His expression clouds. “I don’t like feeling shitty all the time. Don’t do me no good. But I can’t help it—most of the time, I just ‘appen to feel like shit.”

“You’re grieving.”

This I say without thinking, matter of factly. It is evidently the case; but Eggsy’s eyes flash at the words, and his brow threatens.

“I’m not— I’aven’t given up on him—!”

I hold up the hand that is not cradling my brandy, a universal gesture of placation. “It’s still a loss, of sorts,” I tell him levelly. “It’s fine, Eggsy.”

“It just helped me. To hear you talk about Harry. To hear about him, so full of life. Made it easier to look at him, lying there, still as death. Didn’t seem so bleak, thinking about those stories. . . .”
He looks away again, unable to meet my gaze. This is an admission, I can see, albeit a tacit one. He can freely say that he wants to hear more; he cannot openly admit that he needs it.

He does not have to, though. It is a unique thing that one finds in Eggsy. Despite his circumstances, his upbringing, his hardships, he is still so emotionally raw. He is a superb liar, but a terribly actor; he can adopt a false truth so readily that one might even think he himself believes it, but a false emotion? It hangs around his neck like an albatross, a burden evident to everyone. He feels everything intensely. It must be wonderful. It must be terrible.

It is terrible for me. Because, though he hasn’t actually asked me for anything, the request, the desire is there, burning and needy, as if he was on his knees begging me. I could refuse it, certainly, refuse to indulge him. It would be wise, given the twists and turns of this exchange. I don’t need to be spending any more time in Eggsy’s company than is strictly necessary. I don’t know that it would be good for him; I doubt it would be good for me.

There is only one person I can blame my response on.

“I can tell you more.”

-KM-

This concession on my part does despicable work.

Eggsy’s face lights up, a tormented mix of hope and anxiety that I can barely look at. It’s such a wretched cocktail of emotions, one I was once familiar with, and I am sick with knowledge that I put it there.

So, I have to temper it. “But not tonight,” I tell him, and watch him deflate like a punctured balloon. I keep my voice as even as possible, when I amend further. “Tomorrow, perhaps.”

Though he obviously wants this conversation to continue, Eggsy shows some restraint. He concedes to wait until tomorrow, but he makes sure to schedule a time and location. Evening. He offers up his residence, the flat he lives in by himself. This, again, is something I should refuse, an intimate setting. I am tired, though. I cannot maneuver out of it. The curse of a delicate situation is that the fragility cannot be openly acknowledged, and so all things must be done clandestinely. I cannot tell him the setting is too intimate without acknowledging that there is already something like intimacy between us, and I am trying to preclude the growth of it.

When we finish our drinks, we rise together and head out of the shoppe. Dailey is standing around on the pavement when we exit the front doors; he drops and digs at the butt of a cigarette with his heel before standing to attention. Another Arthur might have admonished him for that; I, on the other hand, would have liked a drag before he set the bloody thing out.

I turn to Eggsy once more. “Do you need a lift?”

Eggsy shakes his head, pulling up the zip of his black jacket. He puts his hands in his pockets. “Nah, ‘fanks, gov. I need a walk.” He gives me a wan, but pleased smile.

I rest my hand on his shoulder, giving it a small squeeze, allowing myself this one paternal gesture.

Eggsy gives a tiny shiver. It’s something I would have rather not noticed.
Once I have watched Eggsy walk down the street, I turn back to Dailey. “HQ, please.”

His dark brow raises, but he says nothing.

I sit in the chair, staring.

Harry is sleeping. At least, I think his mind is not as awake as during the day. I don’t think he is ever truly asleep or truly awake, but in daylight hours the doctors have told me it is safe to assume that he is at least vaguely aware, even if his vitals do not seem to change.

But it is late, just rounding eleven. He is, most likely, as asleep as he’ll ever be. So I do not feel rude or self-conscious about sitting in the single, hard plastic chair in his room, and simply staring at him.

Facial hair grows more slowly when the rest of the body’s metabolic processes have been retarded; but there is a whisper of a five-o’clock shadow around his jaw. I wonder how long it will get before I feel the need to tend to it again.

My lips are dry. I lick them once.

“Is this what you want?”

Silence.

I was not expecting a response. I wasn’t. That would be utterly ludicrous.

My hands tremble. I clasp them together.

“Is this how I am meant to take care of him?”

The light of his heart monitor blinks, a steady red dot.

“What should I do?”

Harry’s eyelids flicker.

I slump forward. Let out a shaking breath.

I don’t know why I’m here. Why I’m asking these questions to someone who may not even hear them, much less be able to answer.

But it’s been a very long time since I’ve felt this unsure about anything, since I have been this desperate for advice, for reassurance. I feel it, almost like a physical burning, somewhere behind my sternum. I feel I need it, and there’s no one to give it to me. I can’t talk about this, obviously, not with anyone else. I have no confidants.

This is what it means to be the king. You have no peers, and therefore no true friends or intimates. Yet, from this place of removal, it is your duty to hear the confessions and concerns of the people who look up to you. In this instance, I must give spiritual guidance without the luxury of receiving any.

I think about Eggsy, sitting in that room with the setting sun pouring over him, the subtle shift of his expressions as he mulled over his amber drink. The way the light gave him a halo, casting his already handsome features in an even more flattering light. His skin, smooth and blemished only by those small, secretive little moles. I think about the downturn of his mouth, his reddened chapped lips, the
glint of a stray tear at the corner of his eye when a sudden emotion struck him.

I’ve said it before: there is something angelic about Eggsy.

There is even something angelic about his self-absorbed grief. It’s so pure. So unfettered and direct. He seeks out solace in me only as an afterthought, though I’m almost flattered by it—that I’ve made it into his limited attention. I don’t think he’s even talked to Roxie as he has to me.

Though Harry is not gone from us—and with any luck, he won’t be for a long time—I was right to call Eggsy’s suffering grief. He is grieving; it is a loss, of sorts. And such grief cannot be contained. It’s natural that Eggsy wants to share with someone. Preferably someone who was as close to Harry as Eggsy imagined he might, one day, be.

You see, it’s true: what Eggsy nearly lost when Harry was shot was great. I don’t even know if I can put a name to it. Not right now, at least. What was Harry to Eggsy? Everything?

If that is true, then, yes: Eggsy nearly lost everything when Harry was shot.

But so did I.

What else do you call a soul who has been by your side, fighting the good fight with you for twenty-odd years? Who has seen you grow up and grow old, who has begun to grow old with you? Who has met your sarcasm with wry humor, who has returned fire for you, who has both stitched you up and endured you playing nurse-maid, who has fed you when you couldn’t feed yourself? Who has spent many nights with you, waiting for movement, and many more pouring over snifters of amber drink and a quiet fire, saying nothing but with the best of company? Who has had many lovers but has never had another one of you? Who has known you better than anything or anyone, better than God?

What else would you call that?

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator much?
Trinary System

Chapter Summary

I'm not dead! First semester of grad school was rough.

“You've been busy.”

The wind whistles quietly over my scalp from behind, lapping hot at my neck. A bead of sweat trickles down from behind my ear. The street below is quiet, the stalls shut up, the bazaar having closed shop right around sunset.

Harry steps up close. I can’t see him properly—it’s too dark, and he is just barely in my periphery—but I can feel him.

There is movement in the street below. A person—a woman—moves like a charcoal-grey ghost down the length of the street, hugging to the walls. A dog barks in the distance. Another whip of wind rushes my faces, fills my nostrils. We’re in Bukhara.

Harry laughs, and it is low, warm. “Busy, selling all my secrets.”

I shift my shoulder. There is a gun holstered there, Kingsman’s version of a Winchester bolt-action. An itch has begun in my right shoulder, somewhere behind my scapula. It’s familiar, the same itch I always get when I know my shot is coming up.

I crouch down. The stars above us glow like white-hot pinpricks against the ghastly fabric of black sky. There is a sliver of a crescent moon hanging low, sharp as a sickle. I un-shoulder the gun and begin setting up, getting into position.

Harry crouches too. His knee brushes the back of my thigh.

There is movement further down the alleyway. It’s caught my eye. I load the gun, and peer through the telescopic sight to zero in on the movement.

A shadow. Or so it seems, until it moves again.

Harry’s hand is on my shoulder, grip firm and somehow hot. His voice is so close, lips against the shell of my ear. “Careful. Easy.”

I don’t respond. I can’t. All my attention is refocused on the movement, the slip of a shadow that ebbs and flows as it moves down the street. It’s darker than the woman, with no real shape. It’s darker than the darkness, like an inky black puddle moving across the ground. I track it, moving the sight of my rifle with its silent progress. The crook of my index finger rests on the trigger.

Harry presses a kiss to my ear, just a dry brush of lips. “Steady.”

A shiver rakes through my chest despite the heat, but my hand doesn’t shake. My eyes are firmly trained on the moving black mass.

“Now.”
—and suddenly, it’s daylight.

_The night is ripped from the scene like a shroud, exposing the blinding sun. I want to shy away, by my eyes are still fixed on the ground._

_It’s not a shadow. Not a liquid, moving blackness._

_It’s a boy._

_It’s a little boy, not more than six or seven and not a stitch on, just naked limbs splayed out in the dirt, pale English skin smooth and splattered with blood. Too much blood. Much more than a single gunshot would produce._

_“Eggsy.”_

_I turn. Harry is on his feet, looking down at the body below. His face is gone. He has no eyes, no mouth, but he is looking and screaming and screaming—_

_“EGGSY—!”_

---

_The sound of shuffling wakes me._

_In truth, I was not really asleep. I awoke in the infirmary around 3:30 am, the dream burned into my retinas, and couldn’t go back to sleep. I couldn’t sit still. I left Harry and went to the natatorium, swum laps until I was ready to collapse. Even after that, I couldn’t convince my body of the rest it needed. I showered. Shaved. Went to my office and changed into one of the many pressed suits that Kay keeps in the closet by the door._

_I am sitting in a chair in the farthest, darkest corner of the room with my eyes closed, listening to the steady, dumbing thump of blood through my skull. It’s less of a shuffling and more a bare whisper of a sound that snatches my attention._

_When I open my eyes, it is still to a dark room. The blinds have been drawn since yesterday and so, though it is about a quarter past seven, no daylight spills in. I am sitting in complete shadow, my black suit shielding me further._

_There is movement about five meters to my left, at my desk. A figure, fine-haired and slender, is leaning over my desk._

_I clear my throat. “You don’t have to do that.”_

_I recognize my mistake before I have even finished speaking. The figure—Kay—whirls around with ridiculously fast reflexes and, before I can say anything further, draws a gun seemingly from thin air and has the sight trained on me with unshaking aim. Because of course my secretary has a gun._

_Bemusedly, I raise my hands. I incline my head. My voice, when I speak, betrays none of the apprehension I feel—that I would be foolish _not_ to feel because, secretary though he may be, Kay is a fully-trained agent and former ballistician, and I have every confidence that he would shoot me if I gave him a good reason._
“Andrew.”

The young man’s form shifts, and he bends over my desk to turn on the lamp.

The light that it casts is minimal outside the small circle it shines on the desk surface, but evidently it is enough to illuminate my face. As recognition flits across his face, Kay lowers his firearm; he does not look the least bit chagrinned, though polite apology gives his pale blonde eyebrows a slight slant. He flips the safety back on the gun and returns it to his shoulder holster, seamlessly hidden under his trim suit-jacket.

Now that I am not in danger of being perforated, I lower my hands. *I’m sorry to have startled you*, I sign to Kay.

*I’m sorry to have almost shot you*, Kay signs back, and there is a hint of wry humor in his ordinarily expressionless mouth. *I wasn’t expecting you; I thought you went home.*

I shake my head, unable to contain a small, tired smile. Managed to give you the slip for once, did I?

It is entirely too dark for me to see much color, but I could have sworn that, in that moment, I saw Kay blush. He drops his eyes briefly, long blonde lashes catching the lamplight.

I feel my eyebrows raise fractionally before I master my expression. I reach into my breast pocket and pull out my personal device, navigating to my office controls. I slide the bar to turn on the lights.

When I look back up at Kay, I see that he has reverted back to his effortlessly stoic demeanor. As he is standing near my desk, my eyes are drawn to see what he was doing before pulling a gun on me. My desk is seldom actually “messy”, but it does become akimbo at times; half of the desk has been straightened back to its pristine order, presumably the shuffling I heard. There is a neat stack of three tablets on the side of my desk closest to Kay.

I rise from the cushioned chair in which I had been sitting and mulling over my thoughts in the dark, and approach my desk, reaching out to pick up one of the tablets and then looking to Kay—who, to my slight surprise, appeared to be watching me with more care than usual.

*Archival materials you requested, sir*, Kay signed. *Second tablet is the new weapons blueprints that R&D would like to have back as soon as possible. The most pressing design is for a biochemical agent; I have annotated the document so that it is easily readable. There is also a budget request to outfit the extraction team with upgraded tactical gear. The third tablet contains mission reports from Safir, Bors, and Gaheris. Director Tthiswaka has a special issue to discuss, sent via email and encrypted attached. Additionally, you have received a formal request for Unwin to continue Knight training and—*

Almost involuntarily, I divert my eyes from Kay’s hands, and do not see the rest of his sentence; my eyes instead fix on the stack of tablets, a cold pebble of apprehension dropping into my stomach—

But the feeling subsides almost as soon as it sets in. Really, this is not a surprise. I have been expecting this.

When I look back to Kay, he has stopped signing; I make an apologetic gesture for him to continue.

*There is also a memorandum from Deputy Director Lauterbach. It seems he has lodged a formal complaint.*

Wonderful. I pluck up the tablet in question and unlock it, swiping through to the taskboard, which shows me the most pressing issues as Kay has described them. I find the memo and open it. One
might see it as courtesy that Lauterbach sent me notice of his launching a formal complaint to the board of directors, but I see it for what it truly is: petty spitefulness. How that man ever made it into Kingsman would be utterly beyond me if it were not for the fact that Chester had been such a prick.

Smoothing out the snarl of dislike that threatens my mouth, I look back up at Kay. Though I make a point to sign at Kay whenever possible, we’ve been working so closely together that our communication sometimes transcends structured language. I do not know whether it is that we are both adept at reading people, or that we are simply well-suited to read each other, but I’ve been utilizing it more and more as of late. I tilt my head at him, and the meaning is not lost: Anything else?

Kay blinks his long blonde eyelashes at me. His expression appears blank, but to me his pensiveness is clear. There is a moment of hesitation, lasting only a second or two. Then, as if thinking better of something, he shakes his head.

You are scheduled to tour the naval facilities this afternoon and inspect the new submarines. There are a several more minor items, but they are all on the taskboard, Kay signed. He looked pointedly at the office door, indicating his intention to leave through it. Do you require anything?

I considered. If you could ring the mess for a fresh pot of tea, that would be wonderful.

-KM-

When Kay leaves the room, I sit behind my desk and finish reorganizing where he had left off. It does not take much, a simple straightening of my desk-set. It gives me a few moments to collect myself before I dive into the list Kay has left me with.

Ordinarily, I start my day with the most taxing items and work through to lesser matters, if it can at all be helped. However, I have the beginnings of what promises to be a rather unpleasant headache, and decide to wait for warm, caffeinated beverage to arrive.

I pick up the first tablet and navigate the taskboard. The blueprints from R&D look promising—as in, difficult to parse through but not likely to cause me any undue pain. This particular task is actually a vestige of my duties as Merlin; Arthur generally does not attend to the minute details of R&D planning. In fact, I do not know that Chester ever really knew what our science and technology divisions were up to; he barely glanced at the blueprints and budgets I vetted and sent his way for formal approval.

However, given that my replacement as Merlin is, for the time being, temporary, I still take it upon myself to retain some of my duties and I take full responsibility for Research and Development, as well as its sister departments. As such, I take my time vetting the new designs, including the proposition for the biochemical agent, during which time Kay brings in a tray with a fresh teapot.

Not taking my eyes from the screen, I nod my thanks as he sets the tray down. It is only once he has left the room that I happen to look over the top of the tablet and notice the other items on the tray, which I had not asked for: toast, jam, and a small covered bowl that I discover, upon further inspection, contains oatmeal.

Reaching over, I pour myself a cup of tea and eye the food somewhat doubtfully. It is not that I don’t appreciate the gesture—I do—I simply do not feel hungry. I should be, given my rigorous exercise this morning, but my appetite is elusive. The dream is still sitting at the back of my mind, and every
time I barely graze it with my conscious mind, it sends a shiver of revulsion through me.

However, I do need to eat. That much is apparent.

I finish reviewing and making comments on the R&D blueprints and send them along. Between tasks I accept my fate and (somewhat grudgingly) select a slice of toast and spread jam across it. The sweetness of the jam makes my mouth water unpleasantly, like the precursor to vomit; but I swallow determinedly, and do not return to my work until I’ve eaten the whole slice.

This small morsel of food settles uneasily in my stomach as I approve budgets and go through mission reports. I almost get the impression that real hunger may be imminent; however, the feeling is vanquished immediately when I decide to have a look at Eggsy’s request.

I turn to my computer and pull up the document on the larger screen, trying not to grimace. The last time I saw one of these forms, I was in training for the Merlin position and it was on paper. It was one of the few forms that I was not required to know in explicit detail. The old Merlin, a perpetually cross-looking fellow with distressingly small eyebrows, asked me to look over the form, be familiar with its existence, and move on. There was no reason, he said, to know it well. Requests to resume training were almost unheard of, principally because failing any part of the Knight examination resulted in immediate and uncontestable dismissal. Truth be told, the form was mostly a formality. A person, if he felt wrongly rejected, could contest his (or her) dismissal, but there were never any grounds for real consideration. For one, there was usually only ever one Knight position up for grabs; two . . . well. I have yet to hear an argument that effectively combats the word “failure”.

It is this word that flashes through my mind as I review Eggsy’s request. He’s had help with this petition, I can tell. Not that Eggsy couldn’t fill it out to par by himself, but I recognize the writing of someone who is familiar with the system. Key words. Things to look for. Technically, the petition needs to be vetted by two officials before it reaches Arthur, including a Knight with tenure, and—ah, yes. I see he’s got Ector.

This comes as a slight surprise. Ector is no pushover. He would not endorse Eggsy unless he truly thought the lad had good reason to petition. Commander Thornton has also given his signature.

I scroll through the rest of the document, my chest tightening. I have known, somewhere in the back of my brain, that this would eventually come up; I have been biding my time, hoping every day that there would be enough to occupy Eggsy so that this request would not come. Now that it has, it puts me in one hell of a conundrum. In ordinary circumstances, I would reject Eggsy’s request outright. But, with all that has happened . . . things are slightly more complicated.

I concede that this is partially circumstantial, and partially my fault. Circumstantial, because of the whole Valentine business, with Eggsy and Roxie being the only two who could be relied upon to help at the time. I could have called in other Knights, but several had gone into deep cover some weeks ago, Ector was in America, and Percival in Estonia. Eggsy and Roxie were closest at hand, and so they were my slapdash team to save the world. This could not be helped.

However, my allowing Eggsy to stick around is problematic. In the crumbling world we came back to, the idea of not using every able-bodied person at my disposal seemed preposterous. Of course, I sent Eggsy out on missions, missions adequate of his skill level. I let him behave as a Knight without actually bearing the title of one. I allowed him freedom above his clearance and rank, and now it has come back to bite me.

There is another problem with my rejecting Eggsy’s request, a political one. By allowing Eggsy to behave as a Knight, I have (perhaps, unwittingly) given him the opportunity to form an alliance with other Knights and high-ranking agents. Granted, it has been only a couple weeks, but I am not blind
to the fact that Eggsy has curried considerable favor; he was doing so even during his original training stint (sometimes unconsciously because he could not see all of the people who were observing him). Of course, there would always be those who maintain that rules are rules and that, while rejecting Eggsy would be unfortunate, it would be in line with protocol. We have several martinets among us who might even see this as an affront, or an act of giving Eggsy special treatment. On the other hand, my refusal would crush Eggsy, and this could put me in bad standing. I would not expect an outright revolt or resistance from other Knights and agents; they know their place. And while they do respect my judgement, my hold on the Arthurship is still tenuous. No one but Lauterbach outright disrespects my position, but I would not want to give others any reason to.

I pause in my reverie to take up my cup of tea. It’s gone a little lukewarm, but I drink from it anyway. Somewhere outside my window, a warbler starts making a racket.

I could cite the paucity of open positions as a way of rejecting the petition. After Roxanne took up the mantle of Lancelot, all Knight positions were filled, and I refuse to take away Harry’s title of Galahad while he lives and breathes. It would feel like giving up. In any case, I doubt Eggsy would take it, much for the same reason. There is a position coming up—Ector’s, actually. This is another reason for me to be concerned of Ector’s endorsement. At fifty-seven, Ector put in a request for his retirement some four months ago; he is scheduled to retire in six months’ time, after which he will become a wetworks trainer. However, I have no intention of giving his position to Eggsy. I have someone else already in mind.

I could create another title, to be sure. It is within my range of power to do so, and we have a plethora of Arthurian names to choose from. The Knights at our round table usually number between 10 and 14 (depending on deaths and vacant positions). In the past, Kingsman has had as many as 15 or 16 Knights for short periods of time. In the 40s we even had a Morgana and Mordred, though they were strictly black ops. So, yes, I could create a position, just for Eggsy—but I won’t do that either. To create a position specifically for one person, and not because an extra was needed, would require merit beyond measure by that individual. Eggsy does not meet that qualification.

It may seem that I am being overly harsh. After all, Eggsy had a direct hand in stopping Valentine’s plan, and he essentially saved the world (or, at least a good 85% of it). His training record was nearly impeccable, except for the last test.

It seems like such a small thing, no? He would not shoot a dog. It speaks to the quality of his heart, of his conscience. Surely, that sort of thing should be rewarded. After all, according to some, the test is archaic and barbaric.

But, as I said: there is a very good reason why we give that test, and why it is the last.

Eggsy didn’t shoot the dog. Roxanne did.

Which is why, when Eggsy showed up at headquarters after having killed Chester, training a gun on him was the first thing Roxanne did. Friend or no friend, she was more than prepared to shoot him.

That is the purpose of the dog test. To see how well a person can shunt the influence of emotion. To see how well they follow orders. To see how they make a decision based upon a given order, an order that they vehemently dislike and disagree with. In the past, some trainees have attempted to shoot the dog peripherally, wounding it, but not killing it; as if that were merciful. When Roxanne aimed her weapon at her poodle, she aimed for right between its trusting eyes.

I have heard several people in our organization jokingly refer to our Knight as “Double-O” agents. The analogy is only accurate up to a certain point. Yes, these are our prized agents that perform the majority of our espionage and wet works. However, Knights are not the “blunt instruments” that
MI6’s agents are. They are almost independent; while they take their main directive from Arthur, they also pursue their own lines of investigation and work. Furthermore, they act as Arthur’s in-house council. I cannot, in good conscience, make Eggsy a Knight knowing that he would have to do these things.

All agents have their strengths and weaknesses. I will not deny that. Ector is probably the best marksman we have at the moment, but programming is not his strong suit. Tristan is a hobbyist cryptographer, with a knack for mathematics and languages, but she absolutely despises honeypot missions. The list goes on. Not every agent is exemplary at everything; but there are certain qualities we cannot compromise on. The ability to emotionally compartmentalize is one of them.

This is Eggsy’s most damnable flaw. I simply cannot make him a Knight with that on my conscience.

However... 

I set down my cup, now empty; my eyes wander from the screen and I turn in my seat to look out the window. My office has a view of the training green, and I see a group of black-clad figures running suicides back and forth.

Accepting this request to continue training is not the same as assuring him a Knighthood. I am not giving him anything by letting him train. Hope, perhaps, but there is nothing promised. Ector would have told him that. He will be competing against a handful of other men and women in our corps who have been deemed worthy to test for Knighthood, only that. I am not simply granting him the privilege.

This is not a real solution to the problem. It is just another way for me to bide the time until I am forced to tender Eggsy’s real rejection. It is not ideal, but it will do, for now.

Even having made up my mind thus, I sign the petition with grim reluctance. I have a feeling this, too, will come back to haunt me.

However, I resolve to put the matter aside, as there are more pressing matters to deal with.

I send the document along to Kay for final processing, and move to the other items on my list. It is by chance that I happen to pull up the email from Director Tshiswaka next.

The oddity does not really occur to me until I am opening up the email. This missive is, no doubt, in reference to the video conference that she, Kay, and Lauterbach had yesterday. The meeting was regarding an operation taking place in Africa in the next week, wherein we were sending one of our own and someone from the German office to help the African office. Ordinarily, I would have been in attendance myself, but I had been pressed for time that day. There had been an emergency in the field, and Mission Control had called me in for consultation, and for my expertise as Merlin. Director Ulrich had been in a similar bind, which is why Lauterbach was scheduled to attend the meeting in his place. I informed both Lauterbach and Tshiswaka of my decision to have Kay represent me. I had given Kay detailed notes about my wishes, and thought little more of it. Kay provided me with the minutes of the meeting, and I was satisfied with the outcome, so I am not immediately sure why Director Tshiswaka would feel the need to email me personally about it... 

The actual content of the email is minimal, only a few sentences instructing me to decrypt the attachment, but there is something about Director Tshiswaka’s clipped language that gives me unease. I run a decrypting program on my computer, and do not have to wait long for my feeling to be confirmed.
Tshiswaka’s attachment includes notes and documentation of a report filed with HR. And it contains a video clip.

And once I have finished viewing both, I am absolutely livid.

I sit back in my chair. I can hear the blood rushing in my ears and my skin feels hot. I stare at the screen.

I turn my head to look at the door of my office. It’s closed, but I know Kay is sitting on the other side, dutifully, stoically.

Fuck.

I should wait. I should make myself calm down before I take any action.

I don’t. Instead, I snatch up my phone and bark for the Berlin office.

It takes all of five seconds for the dispatcher in Berlin to connect me to Lauterbach’s office. He picks up, answering with a lazy, unconcerned greeting:

“Herr Artur, what may I ask—”

“Ungentlemanly behavior,” I seethe. I don’t even recognize the sound of my own voice, it’s so strangled with anger. “And that was Director Tshiswaka being delicate.”

There is a pause on the other end of the line. I almost think it’s surprise or chagrin, until Lauterbach continues, his voice snide. “I think you and the Director are overreacting—”

“Halt den Rand. Director Tshiswaka has filed an open complaint on you to HR. I have half a mind to fire you at this very moment for such blatant disrespect of another officer.”

There is something that resembles a scoff on the other end of the line. “He is my junior and inferior in every way, and he was unfit to stand in for you at that meeting—”

“Agent Kay is perfectly capable of anything I ask of him,” I say, and I am nearly spitting the words. I take the briefest of pauses, drawing in a breath. Christ, calm down. “Your opinion of him, Herr Lauterbach, matters little to me, as long as you keep it to yourself. Frankly, I am disgusted.”

“You sent in a lame little lamb to discuss a mission of great importance in your stead,” Lauterbach retorts, sounding bored. His flippancy ignites another spark of fury, but I tamp it down. “I and Director Ulrich expected more from—”

“I would be wary of bringing your Director into this conversation unless he gave you explicit permission to do so,” I warn coldly. “Rest assured, I will be speaking to him about this.”

“I imagine if a complaint has been filed, he already knows,” Lauterbach drawls.

“Yes, but he does not know from me,” I retort with no small amount of malice. “You will not belittle my secretary or anyone else for their disability, Lauterbach. I can tolerate you occasionally overstepping your bounds as Deputy Director, but I will not tolerate such gross misconduct—and in front of another Director! I realize you were brought into Kingsman during an era of archaic social norms, but you are mistaken if you think you can carry on with such airs. I will be giving Director Ulrich a chance to handle the situation himself, but I have no problem dismissing you myself, from Kingsman or from existence entirely. Do I make myself clear?”
The last word rings out clear as a gunshot across a frozen lake. There is a pause. It has the odd character of sounding half insouciant, half worried.

“Are you threatening me, Herr Artur?”

I feel my lips curl up in a smirk that resembles a snarl. “Hardly. But take care if you ever come across my secretary in person. He has a twitchy trigger finger, and don’t think I won’t give him permission to shoot you on sight.”

- KM -

It takes me a good fifteen minutes to properly calm down enough to give Ulrich a call. I go through the proper channels this time, dialing Kay and asking him to get the Berlin office for me. I listen to Kay’s response to my request, polite and efficient as always, and wonder if he heard anything. My office is sound-proofed, of course, so it is unlikely; but, one never knows with him.

The conversation with Ulrich is unpleasant. If Lauterbach’s appointment to Kingsman is a bafflement, Ulrich’s is completely dumbfounding. The man is less like a director or general and more like an absent-minded professor—a professor who hasn’t been funded in the last ten years. Not that Kingsman cannot make use of such people, but certainly not in leadership positions. Ulrich is harried, unaware of current events, disinterested in my irritation, and I keep hearing the sound of paper shuffling in the background. Before I disconnect I ask him to keep a tighter leash on his deputy. His response is verbally affirmative, but prosodically noncommittal.

I set down my phone and lean back in my chair, turning once again to stare out at the green. With leadership like that, it’s no wonder that Lauterbach behaves as he does. He wasn’t afraid during our conversation of being fired; he was right not to be, at least for the moment. I had hoped to give that task to Ulrich; but Ulrich seems entirely disinterested in the conduct of his deputy, and they both seem disenchanted with me.

I sigh. This is only additional kindling atop an already burning fire. My authority in Kingsman as Merlin was nearly unshakable; my authority as Arthur, not so much. It is not as though most people directly question or disrespect me, but the doubt in my ability to run this organization is palpable in every meeting that I have with the directors. They see what a shambles we have fallen to; and while most of them sympathize with my position and respect me immensely, they cannot help a small stab of doubt or ambition that they, or someone else, could do the job better.

It’s sort of funny, actually: at London HQ, all of the officers and agents in my care show nothing but the highest respect from me. This is because they knew me as Merlin, reliable, steadfast, committed to this organization and all the personnel in it. It is only the Directors of foreign offices that have any palpable doubt for my abilities. This is understandable, possibly: they have only ever known me as Merlin, silent right hand to Arthur but no one to be much concerned with. It’s natural for them to have doubts, and natural for them to (albeit unfairly) correlate the current state of Kingsman with my leadership. None of this is helped by Lauterbach’s blatant disregard, and the murmurs he spreads behind my back: Puppet-king. Place-holder king.

I bring a hand to my eyes.

After another few hours of going through reports, schematics, and budgets, I call Kay and ask him to set up an appointment with Demarais later this week. And then, because I need to do something with
all my pent-up trepidation and rage, I walk out of my office just before two and head towards the naval bay. I give Kay a single nod as I head out, but say nothing.

-KM-

My tour of the submarines is relaxing in a way I had not expected it to be. The entire inspection takes two hours; Officer Warricka dutifully accompanies me as I traverse each vessel, acting as my guide. Warricka is everything I could want in a Chief of Naval Operations. She’s a sailor, a mechanic and tinker, and bloody brilliant to boot. Not only does she have full command of the fleet, she can tell you anything you want to know about every single vessel. She does not shy away from any of my questions, though they are shrewd and numerous. I find myself enjoying the whole affair, my firing question after question about specifications, Warricka supplying answers and engaging me in some interesting discussion about improvements and future projects. She even teases me a little at one point, throwing a sharp remark at me with a twinkle in her eye. I lobby back with my usual dry sarcasm, and it surprises a bark of laughter from her. I cannot help but be immersed in the details, in the banter; it’s almost as if things have returned to normal, and I can once again be myself.

Once again be Merlin.

Towards the end of the inspection, I receive a text alert from Kay. The message makes whatever pleasant feelings I have vanish immediately into thin air:

Caffrey and Buchanan called. It’s been 2 weeks. Intending to try and bring Hart out of coma. 10 am tomorrow, in your calendar.

I stare at the message for a moment, swallowing past a dry lump in my throat. I text back a quick thank you before pocketing my phone and finishing the inspection. The thought sits in my head the entire way back to HQ like a large wet stone.

-KM-

When I arrive back at HQ around five, Eggsy is in my office.

I know this without actually seeing him, because Kay looks mildly distressed when I breeze into the outer office. He stands up immediately and begins to sign, I’m sorry, sir, he simply wouldn’t—and I didn’t want to—

“Didn’t want to shoot him?” I ask lightly. “You would have been welcome to.”

Kay looks at me uncertainly. I sign and shake my head. I shift my coat to the crook of one arm so that I can sign.

Forget I said that. How long has he been there?

Kay’s mouth twitches in disapproval. 20 minutes.

I consider this. The next time he doesn’t respect what you say, you have my permission to make him
sit down. I look at Kay seriously. That goes for everyone.

Kay looks down. He nods. I turn away before I can see him blush.

After entering the office, I turn to shut the door behind me with a quiet click. I use the precious few seconds to mentally brace myself before turning back around.

The room is dim, save for the early evening light spilling through the window near my desk. The rest of the curtains are drawn, and no other lights are on. However, I can easily make out the silhouette of Eggsy, sprawled on the small, mostly unused sofa. He makes a mock solute.

“Guv.”

I nod, shifting my coat on my arm slightly. “Eggsy.”

He considers me for a moment. Then he leans forward, plucks something off the floor, and sets it with a clunk on the table in front of him. A whisky bottle.

The sight of it makes something warm begin to stir in my belly. It also makes me immeasurably tired. Pointedly, I look down at my watch. “It’s barely five.”

“So?”

“We can hardly start so early. Or on an empty stomach.”

It’s strange. As soon as I mention food, my hitherto uneasy stomach sends an almost painful wave of hunger through me. I haven’t eaten a proper meal in at least 24 hours. I’m famished.

Eggsy shrugs, and hands me the tatters of a lopsided grin. “So, come over. I’ll make you dinner.”

I give a short laugh, and I think it surprises us both.

“No. I’ll make you dinner.”
Eggsy claims he has the makings of a proper meal at his flat, and laughs when I show skepticism. I consider stopping off at a market for supplies, but decide against it: it would, no doubt, be stupendously awkward. I can barely fathom the picture of domesticity it would make, Eggsy and I walking down aisles at the grocer, a small basket on Eggsy’s arm. Dailey, trailing like a silent, ominous ghost or forgotten child behind us. Instead, I ring a courier from the kitchens and ask them to deliver several items to Eggsy’s address.

Dailey needs no direction or instruction to find his way to Eggsy’s flat; after Eggsy rattles off the address, Dailey merely nods and pulls out. After this brief interaction, Eggsy falls silent. Though the purpose of this evening is conversation, he does not now attempt to engage me in any way. He doesn’t even look at me as we cruise through to town, at least not for any length of time. He mostly stares out the window, fingers tapping on the neck of the bottle of whisky and every now and then sliding a furtive glance my way. I pretend not to notice. I have a tablet out, and am swiping through messages.

Perhaps it is Dailey that makes Eggsy uncomfortable. Speech does not feel as free with a third party present just through the partition. Or, perhaps, he is nervous. I would rather not think about what.

Dailey pulls up to Eggsy’s address just as another Kingsman car does. My pulse jumps for a moment before the driver steps out wearing courier insignia on his lapel and bearing a neat brown paper bag. The courier gives a nod and slight bow to me and abruptly hands off the package to Eggsy, who is so surprised he nearly drops it.

I turn to Dailey, who is standing at attention right next to the cab. “Go home,” I tell him. “Send someone from night watch.”

Dailey nods. That he looks grateful might be my imagination.

Eggsy’s flat has the same stately elegance of all Kingsman properties, though it barely looks lived in. Each flat comes with a minimal amount of standard décor—a mirror here, a table there— but Eggsy has yet to add much of a personal touch. I gave Eggsy a flat right after the Valentine fiasco, and a separate one for Michelle Unwin and his younger sister. Normally, only Knights and other high-ranking agents received agency-appointed living quarters, and Eggsy was technically neither. I suppose the move was sentimental; Eggsy couldn’t continue to live in the squalid little flat his mother kept. It was simply unsafe, for his family and for the secrecy of the job.

In any case, it was something Harry would have insisted upon, had he be conscious to do so.

As Eggsy leads me through his barely-used living space, I think about Harry’s flat, with its cream and warm beige tones, the curious artifacts and pictures mounted onto the walls, his office with the framed front pages of The Sun. The sheer eccentric coziness of the place. I think about the damn dog. The red dishware he favored. The sitting room, with its large, plush sofa and the comfy chair. The walk-in closet on the first floor he had turned into a library. The way the morning sun pours honey-golden through the north-facing windows.

I think about the butterflies.

Eggsy’s kitchen has at least some semblance of life. There is a mug of coffee in the sink, an unopened bag of crisps on one counter, and someone (presumably Michelle) has affixed a few pictures of smiling people to the refrigerator. As Eggsy sets the courier’s bag on the counter, I move
over to take a closer look at the photographs. The topmost one depicts a little girl with white-blonde hair, smiling widely and showing off a gap in her teeth. The second photo shows the same little girl in Eggsy’s arms—it looks like they are at the zoo. Eggsy is grinning and there is a small blue stain on his shirt, attributed to the drink the little girl is clutching in both hands. The third picture is of the three of them: Eggsy, Michelle, and . . . Daisy? I think that is his sister’s name. It looks like an outing to Hyde park; they are all sitting on a bench, the little girl in the middle with Eggsy’s arm slung over the back. It’s obviously the oldest picture: they all look younger, freer. I know Eggsy’s life was hardly all peaches and roses in the years after his father’s death but, if I can make any judgements based on this picture, Michelle’s involvement with Dean made things much worse.

“’Ey, guv.”

I straighten and turn to look at Eggsy. He has taken everything out of the bag and laid the items on the counter: shoulder steaks, chard, and onion. He gestures. “What first?”

“Do you have an apron? No, of course not,” I answer myself when Eggsy’s face takes on an apologetic look. “No matter.” There are two tall chairs at the breakfast bar, so I unbutton my jacket and take it off, laying it gently over the shoulders of one chair. From where he is standing, I can feel Eggsy’s eyes tracking my movements, taking in the slope of my musculature beneath my crisp white shirt and waistcoat. I then unbutton each of my cuffs and roll up my sleeves to mid-forearm, revealing cords of muscle and several scars. The largest is a thick, snake-like white tendril that curls from left wrist to the outside of my elbow.

I’m not fond of my scars. I know that some people wear them as badges of honor, as evidence of battles fought and won; to me, they are merely signs of sloppy work. I remember Harry teasing me about them; “rugged” he called them, laughing when I grimaced in reply. . . .

I snap back to the present. Eggsy’s stare is like a stone weight. He coughs. “Erm, should I—?”

“No,” I say, before he can finish. “I am cooking you dinner. You are talking.”

Eggsy glances at the whisky bottle, which he had set on the counter next to the ingredients. “Can I drink and talk at the same time?”

I wander over to a set of cabinets near the pristine electric stove and open one; for a wonder, it contains the saucepan I had been hoping to find. “Better pour two.”

- KM -

Conversation comes moderately easy after that. Eggsy begins chatting aimlessly while he opens up a cabinet and takes down two glasses; he makes his drink on the rocks and mine neat, and when he hands mine off to me, our fingers brush briefly. I get the impression that this is deliberate, although a blush skirts across the tops of his cheeks. An accident then? Or surprised by his own boldness? I hold his gaze when I take my first sip.

“This is decent,” I remark, judging the aftertaste the drink has left in my mouth.

Eggsy grins crookedly. “Glad your Highness is pleased.”

I roll my eyes and make a shoowing motion at him with one hand.
Obediently, Eggsy hops up on a spare bit of counter where he will be out of my way. He crosses his legs beneath him and nurses his whisky, watching me work. I am no great cook, but there are a few things I know how to throw together well. Steak and sautéed vegetables is both hard to fuck up and elegantly simple. It’s easy to listen to Eggsy chatter and work at the same time.

Eggsy tells me about his visit with Harry that day. It’s less painful for him to talk about Harry now; in fact, there are even points when he describes the experience as being pleasant. He has a soft smile on his face as he stares off into space. He never seems to tire of describing the way Harry looks: how peaceful, serene, even with his rapid eye movements.

“Hair’s getting long,” Eggsy notes after a slight pause. “Beard’s growing back in, too. I reckon I should ask one of the nurses about it.”

I shake my head, transferring the meat to two plain white dinner plates. The smell makes my mouth water, and I am reminded of how hungry I am. It nearly makes me dizzy. “I’ll take care of it,” I say.

“Do they normally shave people? Or is Harry a special case? Only, they didn’t shave him last time he was in hospital.”

Yes. Harry’s stint in the infirmary following his explosive chat with the climate scientist. That feels like a lifetime ago. I shake my head, poking at the greens. I put them on just a minute before the steaks would be done, and they are almost ready. “What makes you think it’s a nurse and not Alphonse?” I ask, side-stepping the question.

Eggsy leans his head against the wall. It opens up the line of his neck, exposing the ropes of tendon and muscle, showing off his constellation of alluring birthmarks. “It’s a neat job, yeah. It could be Alphonse, but I don’t see him running around medical wiv his kit and all. Plus, I asked him last time I had a cut.”

I say nothing. The greens waft their perfume up at me, and I move them around with my wooden spoon.

“I’d like to know who does it,” Eggsy says after a moment, taking another drink. His glass is nearly empty. It would have been long ago, had he not been trying to pace me.

“I have no idea,” I say. I pick up the pan with my right hand and begin to spoon the limp, butter-infused greens onto each plate next to the steaks. Out of the coroner of my eye, I see Eggsy straighten a bit, curious.

“Don’t you?” he asks.

“Why should I?” I turn the knobs on the stove to switch it off, and turn to look at him. The question makes me uneasy, but I don’t let it show.

Eggsy fingers the rim of his glass, looking at me. It’s a calmer, more evaluating expression than I’ve previously seen him wear. His eyes take me in, moving up, down, and to the peripheries of my body, as if there might be some detail in my comportment that would give me away. “It’s just . . . you’re the details man. Seems like something you would know—something you wouldn’t be fine with not knowing.”

It feels uncanny to be scrutinized so, even if Eggsy is only clawing at the surface. “Well, you aren’t wrong. But, given the circumstances, I can hardly be responsible for all details, can I?” I nod at the plated food. “Shall we?”

Eggsy takes both of our whisky glasses, grabs some silverware, and leads me into the living room. I
carry a plate in each hand, and set them down on a large oak coffee table positioned in front of the sofa. I am somewhat surprised by Eggsy’s choice of setting—the dining room seemed the more obvious choice—but I see very quickly the reason. While sitting in the living room gives a sense of coziness that might be overdoing it, eating in the dining room would lend an unnecessary austerity, especially considering it is not decorated in the slightest.

When I set the plates down, I make sure to position them so that we are side-by-side but not necessarily cozy. They seems perfectly placed until I send Eggsy back into the kitchen for the bottle of scotch and two glasses of water, and I further analyze the situation. What would be an appropriate distance apart? One in which there would be no chance of us touching, I should think. Though another part of me thinks that nothing about this is appropriate. I shouldn’t even be here.

Truth be told, I have a rather ominous feeling about all of this.

I do not end up moving the plates farther apart before Eggsy comes back into the room bearing two glasses of water in one hand and the bottle in the other. He sets the bottle down with a thunk on the table; he then places one glass near his plate and hands the other directly to me.

Predictably, our fingers brush again.

Eggsy continues to look at me as I set my glass down on the table, looking for something in my face that would give him an indication of my thoughts or mood. I am careful to show him no such thing.

Then, without a word, he goes over to the fireplace and pulls down a box of long matches from the mantle above it. There is already a log on the grate, prepped with newspaper and all. He begins to kindle a fire; within a minute, it is strong enough that he can leave it to fend for itself.

I am both suspicious of and grateful for this. Having dinner with Eggsy, in such close proximity, in the echoing silence of this house . . . it would feel too intimate. The silence would be too raw. Every lull in conversation would be marred by it. The fire, at least, provides some source of distraction, visual and auditory: the dance of the flames, the soft crackle of wood burning. I am skeptical, however, because he appears to be setting a mood.

Which makes all of this feel like one long prelude to the inevitable. And it isn’t.

I am determined that it shouldn’t be.

Finally, Eggsy sits down next to me on the couch. We are far enough that, reaching for drinks or utensils, we won’t be in each other’s way; but close enough to easily initiate contact. Eggsy leans forward to reach for his glass of whisky, and the move causes him to reveal to me the back of his neck. His hair has gotten a little long, and there is a hindlock that draws one’s eye to the suggestion of his supraspinal notch.

When he sits back up, he raises his glass to me. “Cheers,” he says, almost dryly.

I raise my glass in turn. “Cheers.”

After this, we finally begin to eat. The steak is decent—a decent cut, decently seasoned and decently cooked—but I imagine that it tastes much better to me for being so famished. For a minute or two, I am so engrossed in my food that I do not notice Eggsy slowly chewing and staring at me contemplatively.

“What’s your name?”

The question is asked casually and innocuously enough, but I nearly inhale a piece of my steak all
the same. I managed to force it down my throat without coughing, and take a drink of water before answering. “What do you mean?”

This is a very cagy response, but Eggsy doesn’t seem perturbed by it. “I just mean that, well, I’ve been thinking of you as Merlin, but you’re not, really. Not anymore. You’re Arthur. But it’s weird to call you that, too.” He stabs at another piece of steak and continues, “So I was wondering what I should call you . . . and I realized I didn’t know what your real name was. You’re the only one whose real name I don’t know. I don’t know what to call you.”

I almost reply, “You can call me ‘Sir’”, but it sounds suggestive even in my head. And while I’m not derailing Eggsy’s every attempt at closeness—I did submit to his attempt at closeness—I don’t want to encourage what might be construed as flirting. That would be extremely unwise.

But this leaves me in a conundrum; because, if I cannot deflect the statement, I am left with no choice but to answer it, and I find that I really don’t want to. I do not want to give him my name.

It’s ridiculous, I know. I haven’t been that person in so long, it hardly matters. It is only a name, a mostly empty one at this point. Even so, given names are meant to be out in the open, to be spoken. But this . . . this admission would feel uncomfortably intimate. No one but Harry knows my name. In that light, it feels like a privilege, one that Eggsy does not deserve. In fact, if anyone were to tell Eggsy my name, it seems like it should be Harry.

That sentiment is not ridiculous. It is something else I don’t quite have a name for.

“Alec.”

“Alec,” Eggsy repeats, smiling a little. “You mind if I call you that?”

“Well, it is my name,” I say, which isn’t an answer.

The silence that follows is not necessarily awkward, but Eggsy diffuses it as if it is, carrying the train of conversation away from me and back to a familiar subject: Harry. Eggsy ventures off into a story about the time Harry attempted to teach Eggsy proper table manners. It’s actually fairly hilarious; it’s also evident that Eggsy became very well-acquainted with Harry’s deadpan look of mild disappointment, because he imitates this expression with uncanny accuracy.

During all of this, Eggsy gets up once to stoke the fire; and, when he sits back down, he repositions himself on the couch so that he is now slightly farther away from me, but can more easily look directly into my eyes. The effect is more unnerving than I anticipated; whereas before Eggsy spoke to his food, or to his glass of bourbon, he now looks at every small part of me as he talks. His green eyes watch the last small morsels of meat as they are speared onto my fork and delivered to my mouth. He watches the slow, careful slide of my jaw as I masticate. When he says something I find odd, his eyes immediately track the trajectory of my upraised eyebrow. When his easy waterfall of language slows to a halt, I take a sip of my own bourbon, and he watches the bob of my throat. I ease the tension by saying something dry and witty, a trick I picked up from Harry. Eggsy laughs. The cycle continues. And all the while, Eggsy seems to lean in closer, his eyes becoming a little more hooded, slightly more dilated.

It’s strange. It’s the kind of seduction I didn’t think Eggsy capable of: subtle, forward but not aggressive. It’s almost as if he doesn’t realize he’s doing it. He might not. He never makes any real move to fully close the distance between us, but his body leans into it, the way all bodies do when they want something.

Something concrete does occur to him, though, as I finally decide that the hour is late, I don’t need
another drink, and it is time for me to go. When I rise from the couch and head back to the kitchen to reclaim my suit jacket, Eggsy trails behind me, drink dangling almost loosely from his fingers.

He leans almost indolently in the doorway and watches me unroll my shirt cuffs and put myself to rights. I had half-expected him to be slightly forlorn at my leaving, but not so: the predominant feeling he gives off is one of self-surprising calm and a curiosity that has no name. He is considering something which had not occurred to him before.

He takes a drink of his bourbon as I slide one of my arms through my jacket. “You could stay, you know.”

This comment causes me the most miniscule of stutters as I put on my jacket, an all-but-imperceptible pause as the garment slides over my shoulders. I almost say, “Don’t be absurd.” But, seeing him like this, looking at me with that expression, this seems harsh. “Don’t be silly,” I say instead.

Perhaps it’s the alcohol, but his eyes make no secret of the long drag down my body. It isn’t necessarily lascivious or even deliberate, but I feel it keenly. That curiosity turning into something else. I can feel myself warm under the attention; I need to get out of here. I look down at my watch and press the touch screen to alert my night-driver. He’s been circling the neighborhood for the past few hours, and is about three blocks away.

“‘You could,” Eggsy says again, pushing off the door frame and walking up to me. He pauses just before me, not quite in my personal space, but bordering on. He looks down briefly, a flutter of dark blonde lashes. “It’s the least I could do, what wiv you lettin’ me kip at yours. There’s . . . I’ve got room.”

His word choice in that offer is not a mystery to me. He has room, but not necessarily another room. Involuntarily, my gaze sweeps up and down Eggsy; he was wearing a sporty jersey-jacket earlier, but he took it off at some point, leaving him in his jeans and a simply white shirt. The jeans do little for him, but the white cotton is thin, and his musculature evident. This close, I can almost smell him.

I shake my head once, and give Eggsy an almost pointed look. “I don’t think so.”

Again, a blush skirts across the tops of Eggsy’s cheeks, and he looks down. I’ve embarrassed him.

I do something, then, that every fiber of professionalism and self-preservation in my body screams at me to not do: I touch Eggsy.

My hand reaches out and cups around his head, resting for a moment at the top of his skull before gently pulling down in a long graze. The strands of his dark blonde hair pull through my fingers, and I can feel Eggsy’s skin jump as if with electricity beneath my touch. When my hand reaches the base of his skull to his neck, I squeeze gently, meant to be reassuring, but Eggsy shivers.

And then, he looks up at me, his green eyes wide, pupils absolutely blown. His lower lip is full and pink, as if he had been biting it. He looks so vulnerable.

I don’t want to, but it’s all I can do in that moment not to kiss him.

Deliberately, I trail my hand from his neck until it lands on his shoulder. This I squeeze also, and the effect is more what I had originally intended: reassuring.

“Get some sleep, Eggsy.”

Before he can say anything in reply, I turn heel, walk out the kitchen, stride out the front door and into the street.
A black car idles by the curb. I almost throw myself in.

- KM -

I don’t dream that night. I barely sleep.

Instead, I lay awake in bed, staring at the far wall, at the ghostly skeletons of four small butterflies.

- KM -

“Would you like me to explain the procedure?”

I blink. I’ve been staring too long, looking blankly at the serene contours of Harry’s face. When I turn my head to the right, I see Dr. Caffrey, who is watching me with patience and no trace of pity; I am grateful for this latter quality. I clear my throat.

“Yes. Please.”

Calmly, Caffrey narrates the scene as it unfolds before us. His voice washes over my dulled senses, clinical and monotonous. In the world outside of Kingsman, coma patients are left to recover on their own; attempting to revive a comatose individual presents an unknown level of risk, and the comatose state is not understood well enough to make any serious attempts to awaken individuals from coma. Some ten years ago, however, the medtech department of research at Kingsman began experimenting with drugs designed originally to subtly augment states of arousal. What evolved from this experimentation was a new set of drugs, specifically designed to arouse people from medically-induced coma. The drug is delivered via IV, and begins to take effect within fifteen minutes. If successful, the comatose patient will come-to gradually, as someone waking from a deep sleep. This gradual resurfacing is monitored closely by electroencephalography recordings.

“If unsuccessful?” I hear myself ask, watching a tech attach the last of a series of recording electrodes to Harry’s scalp, nestling them in the thicket of his plentiful but fine hair.

Dr. Caffrey folds his arms over his white coat. “The patient will not fully awaken, for starters. We may see some changes in the EEG recording, but it won’t be indicative of wake. If pharmacological manipulation fails, it would be risky to try again. We would have to let him attempt to wake on his own, or wait another week. However, the longer he stays under, the greater the probability that he may have suffered substantial brain damage that we can’t detect with EEG or other imaging methods.”

“Do we actually know the full extent of damage?”

“Well, you’ve read all of our reports.”

“I have. You haven’t given me a prognosis regarding his mental functions.”

Dr. Caffrey gives a slight sigh tinged with exasperation—not, I think, directed at me, but at the situation. “To be perfectly honest, sir, I do not feel comfortable giving you any kind of estimation.
When he was brought in, CT scans revealed extra- and subdural hemorrhaging, and a few small skull fragments lodged into the temporal lobe. That gives you physical brain damage right off the bat, but we have no way of knowing how mild or severe while he is comatose. He could very well have only minor deficits in cognition, but I simply cannot say for certain. There was no major ischemic event, which would have resulted in even more widespread damage. The initial swelling could have caused a herniation, but we dealt with that before it could become worse—"

“By inducing the comatose state.”

“Yes.”

“From which he now cannot awaken.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Caffrey bristle just slightly. “He may yet.”

I bite my tongue and watch as Dr. Buchanan prepares a small syringe full of clear liquid. My throat is dry, and when I swallow it’s like the pull of rubber against rubber. “What is the success rate?”

“With laboratory animals, 77%. However, this procedure is relatively modern, and has only been used on a handful of human patients. At this point, he has a three in five chance.”

“Either way, he changes the odds.”

Caffrey nods. “He does.”

I cast my gaze once again to the EEG technician, who has connected the bundled electrode cord to an amplifier, which is then routed to a laptop perched on top of a rolling workstation. She begins navigating the laptop screen and, within a minute, has a steady stream of EEG data rolling forth at a leisurely pace across the screen. When Buchanan looks up at her, she gives him a single, efficient nod. Buchanan then turns to Caffrey and myself.

“We are ready, gentlemen.”

My pulse picks up as though I have been given a shot of epinephrine; it causes my fingers to jump, twitching spasmodically. Self-consciously, I relocate them to my pockets.

Caffrey turns his body slightly towards me, and asks: “Sir?”

I swallow thickly, and nod. “Go on.”

Buchanan looks to the analog clock on the wall, which reads 10:23. He tracks the second hand with his eyes and quietly begins a countdown, holding the needle to the IV. At one, he depresses the needle, and the clear liquid joins saline seamlessly.

The next fifteen minutes are the longest of my life.

- KM -

10:40.

I stare.
Harry does not stir. He lays as serenely as he has for the past two weeks. Completely unperturbed. Nearly lifeless save for his steady breathing.

No one has spoken a word. We have barely even moved. The silence that has settled around us is brittle and solid as glass. I feel as if I’m looking through it—through a pane of glass at a completely different scene out of someone else’s reality.

Slowly, three pairs of eyes turn towards me.

I stare at Harry, my eyes beginning to prickle and sear in my skull. Move. Move, damn you. Please, Harry. Just—

It is Caffrey who speaks first.

“I am sorry, sir.”

My neck feels stiff. I will it to nod, but it will not bend.

“We can try again in a week, sir.”

My mouth tightens. My hands, still sequestered in my pockets, are sweating.

“Arthur?”

I inhale, and it is a sharp pain in my chest. I nearly choke on nothing:—

“Thank you.”

I do not wait for a response. I turn heel, and push open the door. I leave the room. I walk down the hallway, my footsteps loud and leaden.

I wait until I reach the men’s room at the far end of the wing before vomiting.

- KM -

When I arrive back at my office, I ask Kay to cancel all my appointments. During this exchange, I am once again immensely grateful for that young man. No doubt, he can see it in my face; but he does not ask a single question, nor do his eyes show any pity. There is a hint of concern, probably due to my clammy skin and ghostly pallor but, even to this, Kay makes no comment. He simply tells me—does not ask but, very plainly, tells me—that he is going to call for tea in an hour. I nod my thanks. Then shut myself in.

The rest of the day passes in a slow ache that throbs in and out of my conscious perception. I am distracted to the point of being utterly otiose; what little work I manage to complete is only manageable because it is so rote, so mindless. I miss three self-imposed deadlines because I cannot make myself examine anything that requires more than an eighth of my attention. I spend most of the afternoon thinking about Harry, and telling myself to not think about Harry.

I don’t understand this. This crippling . . . oh, let’s call it what it is: fear. I do not understand why it is so potent now. This is hardly the first time Harry has been at the brink of death, hardly the first time I have seen him supine and nearly lifeless, day after day in the infirmary or wondered if I would ever speak to him face-to-face again. I remember early missions, right after I was taken out of the field and
given the position of Merlin, when all communication would go silent and I would stare at an empty computer screen, wondering if I would ever see him alive again. Perhaps, the memories have been dulled by time, but I don’t remember my sense of dread being so overpowering then. I don’t recall any emotion ever being so overpowering.

Save for love. But even that I have tempered with time and necessity.

Stewing in toxic emotions is hardly the most pleasant way to pass the time. For someone as ordinarily stoic and disciplined as myself, it is especially grueling and humiliating. I am almost relieved when Kay buzzes me at around six and tells me what Eggsy is here to see me.

Eggsy pushes open the door and walks into my office with the same casual swagger as he did yesterday. He isn’t holding a bottle this time. It doesn’t matter; his intention is perfectly clear.

I should consider this. I should remember last night and understand that to say yes would be encouragement. I should send him away. I should rebuff him gently. . . .

I sigh, but it is more for show than anything else. “Are we going to make a habit of this?”

He shrugs, and flashes a brief, wry grin. “Got an objection?”

I shake my head. I rise, gathering my coat from the back of my chair. This is a bad idea. But, if anything, I could use a drink.

“Lay on, Macduff.”
Gravitational Collapse

Chapter Summary

Gravitational collapse: the contraction of an astronomical object due to the influence of its own gravity, which tends to draw matter inward toward the center of gravity.[1] Gravitational collapse is a fundamental mechanism for structure formation in the universe. Over time an initial, relatively smooth distribution of matter will collapse to form pockets of higher density, typically creating a hierarchy of condensed structures such as clusters of galaxies, stellar groups, stars and planets.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the fact that updates take so long, but here ya go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few days resemble nothing so much as a blur.

The hours I spend in my office flow together seamlessly. It feels as if time moves both fast and slow. Moment-to-moment, my full attention is with me, trained to the task at hand with exacting precision; but suddenly it is several hours later, and I have the scantest memory of what filled my attention so completely. The only real slices of clarity I have are in the evenings, all of which are spent with Eggsy.

The evening of Harry’s . . . of his failed awakening, Eggsy and I had drinks, once again, at his flat. No fire to set the mood this time, but Eggsy did put on some music: classical music, I think, or what could pass for classical. I had no idea who the composer was; my knowledge of such things was always abysmal, particularly when compared to Harry’s. He was the coiffed, cultured one.

We discussed that a little: Harry’s aestheticism. It was interesting, though not surprising, to find that both our experiences with it were very similar. Eggsy, living in the slums and having a miraculous meeting with this well-dressed, sharp-tongued, well-mannered gentleman of all things. He must have been awestruck. I certainly was.

At this admission, Eggsy looks up at me from his glassful of whiskey, half of his mouth tilted up in a grin, his eyes intrigued. “Where did you meet him? You never said. Was it before Kingsman?”

The question is hardly incisive, not so probing that I should feel as if I am being picked apart; all the same, I feel myself shutter and begin to close up. This is my past. This is the past that I have shared with Harry. And I haven’t spoken to anyone about that. Ever. It is one of many stories I have no wish to share, selfish as the desire may be.

And, yet, confession is good for the soul.
“We met at university. I had gotten into Cambridge on scholarship at sixteen. Harry was a senior at the time.”

Eggsy’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Sixteen? Fuck, you must have been smart.”

I toss him a look over the rim of my glass just as soon as he winces at the “must have been” remark.

“Oh, just—keen to get out of house,” he amends quickly. The music—maybe a concerto?—ends, and a fiery piano piece starts up. Eggsy leans over to grab his phone, which he has wired to the sound system, presumably to change the song. Perhaps it doesn’t fit the mood he’s trying to create.

While he searches for something suitable, I contemplate Eggsy’s words. True, I had been very smart—still was if rumors were to be believed. Then again, perhaps I was simply tired of being an orphan. I was ready to belong to something.

It is only the long stretch of music-less silence that lets me know I have spoken these last two thoughts out loud.

I do not blush. Merely stare at the glass in my hands, nonplussed. I never made admissions like that. To anyone.

In the periphery of my vision, Eggsy leans back into his seat once again. He has still not put more music on. When I turn to look at him, there is an expression in his eyes, so tumultuous and swimming with different emotions it is difficult to suss out. There is a sadness there, an empathic bitterness, a quiet anger, a wonder. In the dim light, his green eyes flicker. Unexpectedly, his expression begins to close up but, as he blinks several times and lowers his eyes, I see it: he is fighting not to cry.

Dread creeps up my spine. I can hear the questions, feel them tugging at Eggsy’s tongue as if it were my own. I can taste the scrutiny, the desire to know—

But then, Eggsy does something that surprises me.

He tells me about the first time Dean hit him.

-KM-

And so it goes. Day after day, I put in my time at headquarters. I sign off on requisitions. I have meetings. I devise new missions to take care of new problems, and hand them out to Knights and other personnel. I move through the day as if in a fugue. By evening, I have forgotten myself, and time.

And, night after night, I spend with Eggsy. Sometimes at his flat, sometimes at mine; one evening, we even simply met up, almost by happenstance, in the infirmary. We talked and watched Harry sleep, both of us admiring the freshly-shaven face that I had seen to that morning whilst no one was around to bear witness.

Every time we see each other, Eggsy unravels himself to me, piece by piece; in return, I carve off pieces of myself and feed them to him.

Of course, all of our conversations are, in some form or another, about Harry. Or, rather, even if they are not about Harry, they consist of Harry. He is an ever-present specter, sometimes an elephant in the room, sometimes the open topic of conversation; but, whether we are talking about him plainly or
not, he is the reason Eggsy suddenly finds me so interesting.

I wonder again, as I sit on his couch, watching him discreetly over the top of my glass, whether or not he is fully cognizant of his . . . interests. Eggsy’s file, when he was originally brought in for training, said that he had only ever engaged in heterosexual activities. Perhaps that is an odd piece of information to have on hand, but Kingsman leaves no stone unturned when it comes to its own personnel, Knights especially. Or anyone in consideration for Knighthood.

Which, honestly, as far as I am concerned, Eggsy is not. At least, not anymore. I have not asked him about his training (remedial training, as I think of it), because I do not want to have that conversation. I do not want to know. If I do not have any first-hand knowledge of how well he is doing, it will be that much easier for me to deny him Knighthood when the time comes. Now, especially, I feel granting him Knighthood would be perilous. He could very well be the most agile, most street-smart, most promising trainee we have ever had, and I still would not give him the title. His emotional state was weak before; now, it is utterly compromised.

It is . . . well, not funny, but perhaps ironic that the person most convinced of Eggsy’s worthiness is also a major source of his instability. Harry wanted—wants—Eggsy to be a Knight almost desperately. At first, it was about giving a chance and new opportunity for life to the son of the young man who had once saved Harry’s own life; as Eggsy progressed through training, Harry came to think of it almost as Eggsy’s birthright. As the days passed, he became increasingly convinced that Eggsy would be the one chosen for Knighthood. He had every confidence in Eggsy.

Harry and I spoke about Eggsy, during his initial training. It was only a natural topic of conversation for two such old friends. Certainly, I could see that Eggsy had skill and potential; but I never quite understood Harry’s surety, or even what seemed like his natural fondness. None of the other Knights seemed to feel any particular way towards their candidates, though Percival was a little defensive and proud about Roxanne being the only woman. The others were simply convinced of the superiority of their pick; they helped their candidates train, sure that they would call this young person a colleague in the future. Harry, on the other hand, seemed to take the entire thing personally. Had he been this way with the elder Unwin? I could scarce remember.

Even still, Harry had held no illusions about Eggsy’s weaknesses; he saw that Eggsy’s emotionality, his rashness, his foolhardiness, could be drawbacks. He said so to me explicitly. “He will have to learn.”

Then why hadn’t Harry prepared Eggsy for the dog task? I mean, certainly not tell Eggsy about it explicitly, but at least correct for that emotionality that he had so keenly cited as a hindrance. Why didn’t Harry see that Eggsy was not ready?

Well, Harry Hart, for all the esteem that I hold him in, is not perfect. He has missed shots. He has killed where he ought to have let live, and let live where he ought to have killed. He, like anyone, has made mistakes. And, sometimes, it is all the more difficult to see faults in others when we ourselves possess the very same imperfections.

What am I saying?

Eggsy and Harry, for all their disparate backgrounds, are very similar in many ways. I know that Harry saw—sees—a great deal of himself in Eggsy; he never said so outright, but it was heavy in our every conversation, during Eggsy’s training. When we look at people and see ourselves—a version of ourselves with which we are not in competition—our sense of empathy towards that person is amplified; we want, seemingly without reason, to provide the best for them.

Am I saying that this explains fully Harry’s fondness for Eggsy?
I sit in my office behind my wide, polished wood desk, staring at the computer screen. Staring, but not quite seeing. Staring, and cursing myself. Because, god, am I a fucking idiot.

Eggsy and I went to an actual pub last night, for drinks. After our firelit dinner and his . . . advances . . . it seemed best to suggest meeting in a public place. Meeting for drinks seemed the only reasonable middle ground, though one has to wonder if we’re not turning each other into alcoholics.

We went to the Black Prince, a favorite old haunt of Eggsy’s. Before we stepped inside, Eggsy pointed at the spot in the street where he had driven donuts in some young thug’s car. As we sat down in a booth (which, too, seemed to hold special significance) he recounted Harry’s impressive display the first day he and Eggsy met (because, let’s face it, it wasn’t a fight; it was showing off). I didn’t bother telling Eggsy that I knew all about it, having seen first-hand from Harry’s vid-lenses; it seemed important to let him tell the story.

I remember that we had a few pints, and that our legs kept knocking together gently under the table, a curse of my having long legs and Eggsy’s unmannerly sprawl. Neither of us deliberately repositioned, though, so we ended up rubbing ankles or knocking knees most of the night. After the first pint, I started noticing the looks that Eggsy and I were attracting from around the room, furtive glances that vanished as soon as they were returned. It was sometime later into the evening when Eggsy’s foot seemed to almost deliberately scrape against the bank of my calf that I wondered: What in god’s name am I doing?

“We should go,” I remember saying, standing abruptly. I dug into my pocket for my wallet, in which I keep an alias civilian ID and other cards in that name. I dug out a few crisp bills and dropped them on the table, enough to cover the beers and then some.

Eggsy had looked up at me, a little startled and beer-hazy. To my surprise, he did not retort or put up an argument. He simply blinked at me once, looked down at the remaining contents of his beer, and drained it before standing up to join me.

The patrons of the bar watched us as we walked out into the night. It felt almost as if they knew something I didn’t.

Outside the bar, Eggsy had turned to me. I expected him to ask me what that was all about, but instead, he said, almost much too casually, “Fancy a nightcap at mine? It’s a short walk.”

He did not look at me as he said this, but gazed instead into the darkness of the street. The implication in his words was heavy, like a plume of cigarette smog between us. I opened my mouth —

Before I could reply, the black Kingsman cab pulled up to the curb. Eggsy eyed it over my shoulder, his expression going from carefully mild to plainly irritated. I cleared my throat.

“I think not. Let’s just get you home.”
I remember sliding into the cab with Eggsy, and Eggsy emanating a sullen silence all the way to his flat, a marked departure from his comportment in the bar. I kept stealing glances at him as we weaved through the short series of streets.

When Dailey pulled up outside Eggsy’s flat, I had the most ridiculous urge. “I’ll walk you in,” I said, as Eggsy unbuckled himself from his seat.

Eggsy didn’t even pause or turn to look at me, just continued his peevish exit from the car. I followed him, climbing the small flight of steps up to his door.

Once inside his home, Eggsy turned to me abruptly. He jerked his chin over my shoulder at the closed door. “The black car treatment always necessary, guv?”

Unsure how to respond, I tried for self-deprecation and flippancy. “One of the many perks of being Arthur, I’m afraid.”

Eggsy stepped closer. At that distance, I could smell the aroma of beer on his breath and the faint smell of sweat permeating his clothing. Heat and fermentation; it was the smell of drunks the world over, yet, oddly, I did not find it unpleasant. He looked up at me through blonde eyelashes, eyes swirling in a confounding mixture of emotions that I was too hazy to interpret.

“I feel like we’re never alone.”

The words came out quiet, like a confession, like something he could only say while this inebriated. I inhaled sharply, and the scent of Eggsy came over me again. I recognized this time why it was not unpleasant: it was wanton.

I swallowed.

“We are alone right now.”

Eggsy looked at me for a long moment. He wavered where he stood, as if teetering between possibilities. My breath grew shallow in my chest as I realized, with startling clarity, that we were invading the moment which I had fled so desperately last time. Here we were again, on the crux of something both sweet and regrettable.

Cautiously, he leaned forward.

Without conscious effort, my right hand reached out and caught him by the shoulder, the gesture stopping him mere centimeters before our lips met. My grip was gentle but firm, and betrayed none of the rapid pattering of my heart or the way my head was beginning to buzz. The reprimand that issued from my lips was nearly transferred to him directly, our faces were so close.

“Eggsy.”

Eggsy made some small strangled noise of frustration, but closed his eyes when I moved my hand from his shoulder to his neck, applying gentle, reassuring pressure. A part of me marveled that this was the second time I had found myself in such a precarious situation with Eggsy, but it was a small part. I was too wrapped up in the moment to really appreciate its meaning on a grander scale. I struggled to pull some rational thought out of my head.

“You—you’re drunk, Eggsy.”

He shrugged under my hand, and then pushed it away. He looked up at me in earnest, eyes flashing determinedly. “Yeah. Don’t mean I want it any less.”
One should seldom argue with or ponder over the semantics of a drunk man; but I was also a little intoxicated, and I could not help but notice the lack of pronoun: it, not you. Further evidence to bolster my suspicion that he does not want me, but something I can offer. What? Not merely sex. A distraction? An anchor? I was thinking about it so much that I failed to notice his right hand reaching up to tangle with the fingers of my left hand.

The gesture caught me off guard and, before I knew what I was doing, my fingers were curling back into his.

As soon as I regained my wits and pulled my hand away, I practically fled. It was undignified, but it put us both out of danger.

And now, here I am, at my desk, unable to think straight.

I flex my fingers, remembering the feel of Eggsy’s warm digits curling into them. The intimacy of that gesture. The pads of my fingers feel twitchy, like the new, raw skin underneath a severe burn.

A knock at the door pulls me resolutely from my thoughts.

“Wellcome.”

Kay enters, holding two tablets to his chest. In precise, efficient steps, he comes to stand just before my desk, and places the tablets down side-by-side. He points to the first.

For your tour of the armory this afternoon, sir. And then to the second. Ector’s retirement request. All necessary documentation has been provided. There is also a progress report from Agent Lizann’s training. He took a step back. It was evident that he meant to say something, but he seemed almost hesitant, taking a moment before signing:

Drs. Caffrey and Buchanan want to attempt a second enervation of Mr. Hart. They think enough time has passed that a second attempt would be advisable.

I hold back a sigh, dropping my eyes briefly. I know this. The message has been sitting in my inbox, asking for permission. I have yet to reply.

Kay looks at me with his pale eyes. Do you have a response for them, sir? They need your permission.

Yes, they do. Because, if this attempt fails, then there is next to no chance of them trying it a third time. The chances of Harry waking on his own are, at this point, slim-to-none. All of this is outlined in the email. Which is the primary reason I have not responded.

Yet, I know that I must. We have a very narrow window of opportunity here. Harry has been in a coma for almost two-and-a-half weeks, and the longer he stays under, the smaller his chances are of waking up. We must act quickly, if there is to be any chance at all.

This is a hope that I rationally walk myself through, but do not believe.

I do not think Harry will wake up.

I look at Kay. Please tell them to proceed, I sign.

Kay nods. Do you wish to attend?

I shake my head without hesitation. Of course I want to be there, but I don’t want to expose myself
again to such devastating disappointment. I do not want to watch his life hang in the balance, only to tip the other way. I don’t know if I can bear to witness that again.

My eyes, which were drifting down to my desk again, flick up just in time to catch the last part of Kay’s signed sentence: —tour is set for 3 pm. Commander Faulkner will be waiting for you at the armory entrance. Is there anything else, sir?

Again, I shake my head. No, thank you, Kay.

Kay nods his acknowledgement, and performs his very precise heel-turn. He is almost to the door when, as if compelled by some force outside of myself, I find myself calling after him:

“Kay.”

At the sound of his name, he halts abruptly and turns around. He looks at me expectantly.

I know what I want to ask, but hesitate before signing, as if considering my words. They come out slowly, my hands forming the question as if with difficulty.

What do you think of Unwin?

Kay’s expression does not change. He is implacable as ever, though he does tilt his head slightly. A strand of blonde hair passes like a clock hand over his forehead and settles at a strange angle. His fey grey eyes are completely blank when he signs:

I think he spends a lot of time with you.

I think I must physically wince at this, because Kay’s eyes flicker just slightly. However, he does not give any indication that his is embarrassed by his own forwardness. In fact, I would almost characterize his expression as expectant, as if he is waiting for a rebuke, a rebuff, a defensive remark.

None are forthcoming. I simply stare back at him, unable to say anything.

For the first time since he entered my employment, Kay does not wait for his dismissal. He simply exits the room.

-I-  

I intentionally work late that evening. I review and sign Ector’s retirement documents. Performing such a task, while a rarity, is ordinarily quite dull. There are pages upon pages of dizzying text in which the retiree must swear to keep the secrecy of Kingsman; several pages devoted to the conditions for retainment of Kingsman weaponry and technology; retirement pay, living accommodations; and, finally, special requests and instructions.

Ector’s paperwork is fairly straight forward. He is due to retire in approximately six months—one month after Eggsy completes his Knighthood training. This, it seems, was done deliberately.

I sigh. I do not want to think about this. I do not want to deal with it, childish as that notion is. However, I will have to, at some point; I am going to choose Mark Lizann over Eggsy.

I send off Ector’s retirement documents to Human Resources, and once again pull up Lizann’s progress report and service record. It is impeccable. Former Marine, has been working in the Asset
Extraction division of Kingsman for the past three years. All of the reports from his superiors have been glowing, and his Knighthood training shows that he is a young man of great potential. He has but two tasks left to pass. He will be finishing about a month ahead of Eggsy. It makes my decision all the more facile and obvious.

I have next to no doubt that Lizann will pass the dog test. One might think that, having worked in the organization for several years, he would be aware of the task, putting him at an unfair advantage; this is not the case. Knighthood training is the most clandestine of efforts; all trainees and all Knight are sworn to utter secrecy. But, even without prior knowledge, I am confident that Lizann will pass. Unlike Eggsy, he knows how to take orders.

That, though, was the attractive thing about Eggsy, and perhaps about his father too: they were wildcards. They could follow rules when suitable, but were just as likely to throw them out the window in the event of extenuating circumstances—as are all the Knights, but “extenuating circumstances” means different things to different types of people. Eggsy is more prone to follow his own judgement. It’s both a strength and a weakness. Ultimately, while it may have served him well so far, it makes him unreliable.

I don’t know why I’m walking myself through this. I don’t need any more reasons to dismiss Eggsy’s petition to retest for Knighthood. I have already made up my mind. Do I feel guilty, perhaps?

Maybe. Things between Eggsy and I are becoming more complicated than I had imagined they would.

I feel emotionally connected to him. I cannot deny that.

With a small groan, I lean back into my chair and look upwards at the ceiling, the sense memory of the previous evening rushing back to me. I can still see Eggsy’s lips, smell his breath, feel his warmth. The sweet anticipation.

I think . . . I think he has wanted me for quite some time, and has finally made up his mind to do something about it.

My job, as the adult and his superior, is to convince him otherwise.

-KM-

I had not seen Eggsy all day; when I finally leave that evening, he still does not make an appearance. The next day, I wait for him to come through the doors of my office, but he never shows.

I am beginning to wonder if he is avoiding me, perhaps out of embarrassment or a need to sort himself out. However, when I exit the building for the evening, I am finally accosted.

I have only taken a single step down the small flight of stairs that leads from the front doors of HQ to the round-about where a black car is waiting for me, when I notice movement off to my right. I pause in my step, and turn to see Eggsy, leaning against one of the large stone pillars that flank the front of the building. He is wearing a white t-shirt, faded jeans, and a worn leather jacket. He’s smoking a cigarette, which he throws to the ground and stubs out with his heel as he approaches me.

I am half-expecting some measure of awkwardness, of fumbling or maybe an apology; but Eggsy
walks right up to me, gives me a deliberate once-over, and says: “‘Evening, guv.’

I nod at him slowly. His stance and greeting are almost stand-offish. “Eggsy.”

Eggsy looks at me intensely for a moment, then casts a glance back at the vehicle where Dailey is standing patiently. Though he is watching us, he is not necessarily within earshot. Eggsy turns so that his back is facing Dailey, and says in a low voice:

“I want a word.”

I raise my eyebrows, and the look I give him is somewhere between incredulous and expectant, as if to say, *Then talk.* Eggsy gets my meaning instantly, and it makes him huff a breath, something between laughter and frustration.

“I mean in private. Over a drink. It’s our habit, innit?”

His voice is the epitome of casual, the chav drawl curling almost obscenely around his lips. He is projecting a very devil-may-care attitude, but there is something else beneath it all: a certain amount of invitation. A certain amount of fear. It’s his custom to hide such things behind a façade of bravado; he’s only just unfortunate enough that I can see right through it.

“I’m reconsidering the advisability of that,” I say slowly. I should have been more direct in my rejection, because Eggsy only fires back immediately:

“Meaning?”

I look over his shoulder briefly. Dailey is still standing by the car, though presently he has the good grace to pretend that he is not keeping an eye on us—on me, I should say. Eggsy is none of his business unless the boy begins to threaten me.

Which he is, though just not in the way that would warrant combative action.

I turn my gaze back to Eggsy, who is looking at me expectantly. It’s dark out, but the lights of HQ shine from behind me, giving the edges of Eggsy a dark, golden glow. I can still smell the cigarette smoke that is clinging to his clothes, and the scent is not unpleasant.

“I think we should stop this, Eggsy.”

This time, the rejection is deliberately spelled out, though Eggsy is no more discouraged for it. In fact, my resistance seems to embolden him. Eggsy takes a step closer so that we are but a pace apart. He deliberately lets his eyes drop to my throat. “Stop what?” he asks, his voice soft and low.

I wonder, faintly, if this was how he seduced young women during his tenure as a neighborhood ruffian. I also wonder at this show he’s putting on; this doesn’t feel like Eggsy—that is, it feels like a *version* of Eggsy, but not the young man I have come to know over many evenings spent in his company. Let it never be said that Eggsy is not genuine; but this version of him is not someone with whom I am well acquainted.

Before I answer, I let my lip curl into something like a sneer.

“Fraternizing.”

Eggsy blinks, slightly taken aback by my subtle ridicule. Something changes in his face, and when he speaks next, he sounds more like himself, the self that I am used to.
“Maybe we just need to do it properly.”

I throw his question back at him. “Meaning?”

Eggsy shrugs. “Come back to mine. Have dinner, a drink. Stay late. Maybe the whole night.” His gaze flickers down briefly at that, before coming back up to meet mine again. There is the faintest hint of a blush beginning to show at the tops of his cheeks.

I will not allow myself to entertain the idea that he means what he says. I will not.

“I don’t think you know what you’re asking.”

“Don’t I?” He raises an eyebrow in challenge. Involuntarily, my hand twitches.

The question burns. This is my cue to reprimand him further. He is giving me an open invitation to fight with him, though god knows why. Perhaps he enjoys it. Perhaps he thinks he will win by sheer stubbornness and force of will. A different me, a younger me, might have continued to play this game, this battle of wills; but the me existing in this moment is becoming irritated. I side-step Eggsy, and utter a very pointed “Good night, Eggsy,” as I brush past him.

Eggsy turns with me, trying to keep me engaged. When I begin to descend the steps, he speaks up behind me, not bothering to keep his voice low.

“This is bullocks. You gonna avoid me now, tha’ it?”

I stop at the bottom step and turn to face him once more. “No. But, tonight, I am very tired.” He opens his mouth to protest, but I interrupt him by continuing, “If this is something that you feel really warrants a discussion, we can talk about it tomorrow.” What? What am I saying? We are not going to talk about this—

Eggsy looks at me seriously. “I’ll hold you to that, then.”

“See that you do.”

Once I have thrown myself into the back of the Kingsman cab and it is speeding away from HQ and where I left Eggsy standing on the steps, I look at Dailey in the rearview mirror and speak across the partition.

“I’m going for a run tomorrow morning. Please have Commander Thornton send Agent Lizann along.”

-KM-

Harry and I were both athletes at university. Nothing terribly competitive, mind— we were both at Cambridge for academics, not sport, though some of the Dons highly encouraged participation in the latter. Strong body, strong mind and all that. I was a wiry, scrappy thing at that age; boxing seemed natural, and I took to it with aplomb. Harry, however, was a runner.

I will never forget the first time I saw him run. It was the very start of term, before I really knew anyone, and only knew Harry Hart by reputation. It should surprise no one that he had one; Cambridge is a small school, and rumor makes legends of us all, but Harry had all the particular
qualities that made him someone-to-know. In any case, it was some early morning in September, mildly chilly and grey but with the promise of sun later. I saw him come swiftly and gracefully around the track, the leader in a herd of shirtless runners. Sweat glistened on his skin, and his lean figure cut through the air with both speed and elegance.

(I remember thinking that he looked like nothing so much as a swan. And then feeling ridiculous for it.)

I had never really liked running. With my build, I was always told I would have been good for it. But it seemed a wasted effort to me—boring, even. I never really understood it, I suppose.

As he would with many other things, many times over, Harry took it upon himself to educate me.

I remember, about a month into our tentative friendship, we were parting ways one night after dinner in one of the common dining halls. He looked at me very seriously, eyes fixed determinedly on me, and said, “I’m coming by your rooms tomorrow at 6 am. Wear running shoes.”

This morning reminds me very much of that first run. I do not know why, specifically. Maybe I’m just feeling nostalgic. Truth be told, I think about Harry a lot when I’m running. It’s about the only time these days when I allow myself to dwell on him for too long, save for when I am in the infirmary.

I started off this morning a little later than intended, and the sun is currently breaking the horizon, spilling orange-gold light in all directions. It’s becoming a bit blinding but, fortunately, I am at the half-way point in my run. When I come upon a small pond with a fountain that bisects the dirt path of the park, I loop around and begin running in the opposite direction, sun now at my back. As I do so, I pass Agent Lizann, who has paused and is pretending to take a stretch break. The rising sun gives his blonde hair something of a halo, and I can see sweat where it gathers at his hairline. I don’t acknowledge him as I pass, and neither does he seem to notice me. Lizann is an excellent tail: he stays far back enough that our running does not look synchronized to bystanders, and is able to convey enough of a sense of being inside his own head that no one would suspect him of following me. Most importantly, I find that I don’t have to think about him while I run. I can, for moments at a time, forget that he is there.

And I cannot help but reflect that this would not be the case if Eggsey were the one tailing me.

This is not entirely Eggsey’s fault, though I cannot help but think that this is yet another reason why giving Eggsey a Knighthood would be ill-advised. Specifically, it is ill-advised to put two people with emotional ties to one another in the field together—much less for one of those individuals to have power over another.

I have emotional ties to Eggsy. There is no denying that at this point, much as it shames me to admit it. What I had been clinging to—a removed fondness appropriate for a quarter master and mentor—has become something else entirely. I allowed it to become something else. I saw what was happening and I simply let it. I am guilty of complicity—worse than Eggsey’s sin, which was only to seek comfort. There are no rules against this specifically; but Knights, for all intents and purposes, are considered emotionally celibate. They do not have girlfriends, boyfriends, partners, spouses, children. They do not form attachments. That is the price of putting the good of the world in front of your own life. No, we do not form attachments, and certainly not with each other.

I know this as well as anyone. After all, it is the reason why I stopped going on assignments with Harry.

He was the reason I went into training for the Merlin position.
At the time, it did not feel like an honor or a promotion. It felt like a reprimand for a wrong I was unaware of committing. It came suddenly, swiftly: one day I simply received notice that I was being removed from the field in order to train for the quartermaster position. In those days, there was more respect for absolute authority; you did as you were told.

It was hard for me to understand, at that moment and at that age. Harry and I were considered something of a dream-team in the field: alone we had brawns and brains to spare, but together we were unparalleled. I was never a Knight, only an agent-in-training; but warm bodies were somewhat scarce at the time, and it was obvious that I could pull my weight. Harry was the one who had recommended my recruitment to Kingsman; when I joined, he requested me as back-up on missions, which I took to eagerly. Attempting, I thought, to groom me for a Knighthood, he utilized me far more extensively than most Knights use ordinary field agents. I was his right hand. We were absolutely formidable.

I remember going to Harry’s flat to tell him about it. He had been sitting in his red-walled study, then more sparsely covered with the Sun front pages, listening to some American blues music and inspecting one of his insect display cases. He didn’t look up as I walked in. Only when I told him what happened did he finally lift his gaze from the butterflies and look at me.

“I know. I recommended you for it. Cheers.”

That had stung— not that he said it with any cruelty or malice. In fact, he had given me one of his rare but trademark soft, fond smiles. It’s an expression that moves between proud and sad so fluidly that I could hardly tell which emotion was predominant. He did not offer me an explanation. I did not ask for one. At the time, I assumed it was because he was trying to put distance between us. Needless to say, it wounded me. But, over time, I came to appreciate his decision and his reasoning. The promotion came at a tenuous time in our friendship. We had grown very close, nigh inseparable. And Harry, being the older and wiser of the two, saw that this would be a problem.

He wanted to protect me. He wanted to protect himself against losing me, or doing something stupid because of me. And he wanted to protect me from the same.

He was trying to put distance between us. Rightly so.

And now, this is what I must do with Eggsy.

I cannot make him a Knight while he is emotionally shipwrecked. I cannot make him a Knight while I feel compelled to protect him. And I cannot make him a Knight whilst I am Arthur.

As I turn the corner onto my home street, I feel a strange sense of calm wash over me. Calm, and something like resolve. I need to be up front with Eggsy. I need to tell him that he will not become a Knight, and I need to tell him why.

I need to tell him today.

-KM-

Once I have showered, shaved, and shoved myself into a navy three-piece suit, I exit my apartment to find that Lizann has gone. It is instead Dailey who greets me and drives me silently to HQ. Kay is there to meet me at the door of my office when I arrive.
Your meeting with Director Demarais is in one hour, he signs.

I nod. “He’s holographing in from the French office?”

Kay responds to this question with a nod in kind, then says: Drs. Caffrey and Buchanan will be with Mr. Hart at 11. Assuming your meeting is not too long, you would have time to make it. Are you certain you do not wish to be there?

I don’t waste any time in responding. “I am certain. Simply have them notify me of the outcome when they have finished.”

I lock myself into the inner office for the next hour, reading over reports whilst I mentally prepare myself for the conversation to come. Demarais has been briefed on the nature of this meeting, but I do not expect that small no expect a sincere amount of resistance. Not because he desires to keep his power as co-leader of Kingsman; Demarais was brought in during the era before Chester took power, meaning that he is the sort of man for whom the job means nothing, but the work means everything. He doesn’t care about titles or power; he cares about getting things done— which is exactly why I expect resistance.

He respects me, but he also worries about my handling this job alone, while still overseeing operations as Quartermaster as best I can. He doesn’t think it a good idea.

Indeed, he tells me all of this, in his brisk, French accent when he holographs in. Demarais is not known for being the most diplomatic of directors; he is, at times, quite brusque; but, in our conversation, he is the most diplomatic I have ever seen him be. He does not directly say that he doubts my ability. But he urges me strongly to reconsider.

“I have considered,” I say evenly. “And, while I understand fully your concerns and have them myself, I feel that it is imperative to consolidate my authority. I’m sure you have heard about the incident with Ulrich’s deputy.”

Demarais nods solemnly, thin mouth drawn into a tight line. “Yes. Disgusting.”

“You see my predicament. I am worried that he is just one in a long number of upstarts hired in Chester’s day. I don’t need anyone to second-guess that Arthur’s authority is absolute.” Barring extreme circumstances, I mentally add, suddenly struck with a mental flashback of Eggsy’s exchange with Chester. “The stability of this agency depends on order. I fear that we may be losing just a bit of that.”

Demarais is silent for a moment. His face works through a series of mild contortions, not looking at me but off into the middle distance as he mulls over our conversation of the last forty minutes. Finally, he gives what could almost be a sigh.

And he agrees. He agrees, against what is clearly his better judgement, to yield all authority to me. In reply, I thank him, and tell him I will have the necessary forms sent to him immediately. We make arrangements to have a formal meeting the next day with the board of directors. And that was that.

The call terminates, and I am left sitting alone in my office once more.

I thought I would feel some sort of relief once Demarais “surrendered” to me, as it were. I suppose a part of me was half-expecting him to actually oppose my decision—to fight me. I thought I would feel relieved to have won him over.

All I am left with, however, is a sense of emptiness. Emptiness, and the realization that, yes: now I will be handling this all on my own.
My meeting with Demarais concludes earlier than I expect. Therefore, it is at least another hour before Kay messages me with the news.

I stare at the short missive for a long moment.

I stare without blinking until my vision begins to blur. I close my eyes. Breathe. I make myself wait several minutes there, at the desk, just breathing and listening to the quiet sounds of my body carrying out its quotidian functions. Heart-beat steady, not even slightly elevated.

Then, when it seems enough time has passed, I rise from my desk, and walk across the room, exiting into the outer office.

Kay looks up immediately from his typing when the door opens. He cocks his head slightly in an intimation of: *Sir?*

I shake my head once. I’m not sure why. It just seems like the thing to do.

“*I am stepping out for a moment,*” I say woodenly.

Kay acknowledges with a nod. Then, with an uncanny degree of ease, he turns his entire attention back to his typing. His eyes don’t even flicker towards me. He simply goes about his work, almost as if he has forgotten my presence.

Almost involuntarily, my legs carry me out of the room.

I don’t know how they then know exactly where to take me. I have deliberately tried to be ignorant of Eggsy’s comings and goings lately, to be unaware of his schedule and habits. Alas, somehow, I know precisely where he will be. I feel pulled towards him, as if by a wire.

He’s in the west wing’s indoor shooting range. He is one of two people occupying the twelve rows of fire. He’s at the station on the far side, and I walk towards him with all business-like authority. I should be wearing ear-protection, but the sound of gunfire seems both echoing and muffled, as if it were a long ways off. I approach Eggsy from behind, and wait until he has finished unloading his clip into the paper target before tapping him lightly on the shoulder.

He turns around, lifting up one of his earmuffs as he does so. His eyes behind the safety goggles undergo a flurry of emotions, and his mouth twists, first in the beginnings of a smile, then a grimacing frown—as if he had just remembered that he was supposed to be cross with me. Thinking of last night, then. But as soon as I tell him in a hollow voice that I need to tell him something, his expression shifts again, this time acquiring the blush of confusion.

As we walk behind the mostly empty stalls towards the door, the sounds of the lone shooter unloading his weapon raining down upon us, it occurs to me that this is a bad idea. I should have called Eggsy to my office. I should not do this to him in a public place.

But I have no choice now. We are standing in concrete anteroom with its morgue-like lighting and off-white paint and single small table in one corner, and Eggsy is looking up at me with an expression of growing concern. It takes me a minute to realize his mouth is moving, and then another for his speech to register with me:
“... going on? What’s happened?”

I stare into his eyes. They are so green, so lush. You could easily forget yourself in those eyes.

“Merlin?”

I can see why Harry thought he was special. What had he seen, looking into that handsome young face, into the depths of those wet, rainforest eyes?

“Alec?”

“He’s not going to wake up.”

They are not the words I mean to say, but they feel true enough. The attempt failed. Harry’s ability to awaken on his own is slim-to-none, chances not even worth hoping on. I watch Eggsy’s face change. He looks nothing so much as like a Picasso, the tectonic plates of his features shifting, subsuming, overcoming one another as I explain to him. I explain everything. I even tell him that this had not been the first time the doctors tried to revive Harry. In every conversation I have with Eggsy, I am always holding back, keeping things to myself; it feels greedy, most of the time, but I’m not bothered by it. Now, however, I feel that Eggsy deserves this. He deserves to know.

And he deserves to be in as much anguish and misery as I am.

I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t want him to hurt. No, he doesn’t deserve that. He’s only a boy—he’s already lost so much—I should be trying to keep him safe, to keep his heart safe—

I won’t deny it, though: it is, sickeningly, almost gratifying when I see his eyes begin to redden and tears begin to form.

And the anger. The sheer, indignant anger in his eyes, in the set of his jaw, the way his cheeks pinken. Peripherally, I see the hand that had been holding the gun twitch, and then ball into a fist.

He’s going to scream. He’s going to throw a tantrum. He might even punch me.

My hands are at my sides. I will not raise them.

I will simply wait for the blow.

-KM-

In the end, Eggsy does not hit me.

He does not even scream.

Perhaps it is because time is moving differently for me right now. Perhaps I am just slow. But what he does, he does so quickly I barely see it.

It seems to me that I blink, and the next thing that registers is the door swinging shut as he exits.

It takes me a minute to get going, to react. I go to the door leading towards the rest of the west wing, and open it.
Eggsy is running. He is running at full-sprint down the hallway, causing agents and administrators to jump to either side to clear a path. It is only a few seconds before he clears the distance of the hallway and turns the corner at the end.

-KM-

It takes me a while, but eventually I return to my office.

It feels as if I am walking around in a bubble, and in that bubble lives a silent storm cloud. As I walk back down the same hallways and corridors, I am uninterrupted by passersby. People that would have ordinarily saluted, nodded, or otherwise interacted with me keep their gazes straight ahead, only flicking their eyes towards me when I have almost passed. When I re-enter the anteroom of my office suite, Kay looks up, but says nothing. I walk past him smoothly, and shut myself in. I go to my desk. I don’t bother turning on any of the lights. I simply sit there in the semi-darkness, penetrated only by the grey light that spills in from the windows.

What I had just done was very cruel. I should have waited to tell Eggsy, waited at least until my own emotions had settled and I was able to approach the issue with some amount of calm. Instead, I hadn’t even been thinking, just sought him out, caught him unawares, and unloaded the entirety of the bitter truth upon him. And I had showed him my betrayal of his trust by revealing that this was not the first attempt. I had let him know that I wasn’t being honest with him from the beginning. I never lied, but I am still guilty of the sin of omission.

And the look on Eggsy’s face when he first saw me—the beginnings of a smile that had liquidly morphed into consternation, irritation. It was so fucking telling. His initial reaction—some amount of pleasure at seeing me—betrays his true feelings. That he . . . is fond of me. He was almost happy to see me. And then, his second expression—he thought I had come to him to discuss the other night, as promised.

I press the palm of one hand into my eyes until tiny geometric shapes start to form on the backs of my eyelids. God, when had this gotten so complicated?

I think back to those first evenings I spent with Eggsy, both of us sitting in the silvery quiet of Harry’s hospital room. Conversing somewhat haltingly, quietly, so as not to disturb the man laying prone between us. It hadn’t seemed wrong, to speak with Eggsy personally, not then. He had needed it. I had needed it too, perhaps.

That was what this all came down to, in the end.

Harry.

Eggsy and I would not be in this situation if it were not for Harry. No, I am not laying the blame at his feet—Eggsy and I are both adults and can discern right from wrong, and advisable from inadvisable. As much as I am loathe to admit it, we have, to some degree, known what we were doing this whole time. But, if it were not for Harry lying there in the hospital, Eggsy and I would have never entered into this sick little dance.

It would have never happened, because Eggsy would have continued to pine after and hang around Harry. And Harry would have been flattered, would even maybe let it go on for a short while, but would eventually deter Eggsy, possibly even steer him in a more suitable direction. It was Harry’s
modus operandi, after all. If Harry were awake, Eggsy and I would have absolutely no reason to be alone, to share confidences, intimacies. If Harry were awake, I would not feel so unmoored. I would not have made half the bad decisions that I have done. Not because Harry would have admonished me for them, but because the very thought of what Harry might think would have stopped me.

But that is not the position in which I find myself.

I don’t know what Harry is thinking now, if he is thinking at all. I do not know if he will ever think again.

-KM-

I work. I turn to my computer and pull up my ever-expanding task-list, and set to tackling each item, one-by-one. I review schematics, blueprints, treaties, mission plans, mission reports, progress memos from other departments, other offices. I respond to messages. I arrange meetings, or have Kay arrange meetings. I keep myself busy. I only realize it is late when I finally look up and my gaze is drawn to the window and see that the sun is setting low on the horizon.

I feel a vague stab of panic. I am not ready to leave. I can’t bear the thought of leaving, returning to my large, tidy, lonely apartment and lying in bed, staring endlessly at my skeletal butterflies. I simply cannot.

I have no friends and no family. It has not been a sore spot in a very long time, not since I went to university; but feels like one now. A civilian—or, even, a person who could claim to be remotely normal—would have either, or both. Confidants. I only have Kingsman, and the work it provides.

An hour goes by, then two. Kay comes into the office at 7:20 to give me an update and run through the next day’s schedule with me, after which I firmly send him home. He looks dubious about leaving me, but he is obedient. He shuts the door behind him.

Kingsman is never empty; but on such occasions, it does become deathly quiet. By 8 o’clock, the personnel monitor tells me that I am one of the only people left in my wing, save for patrolling security. By 9 o’clock the wing is even emptier, and I am beginning to wonder how much longer I can keep myself here when there is a knock at my door.

My body, previously lulled into an exhausted but languid stupor, immediately tenses. There is only one person whom this could be.

Eggsy slides in without a word. The office is dark, save for my desk lamp, and Eggsy looks like nothing so much as a shadow. And, like some dark, unworldly thing, he I cannot make out his face. His head is tilted down, his overgrown blonde fringe shading his eyes.

He says nothing, merely closes the door behind him and slumps against it. There is a thump and a small clink, and I see now the glint of a glass bottle in one hand.

I swallow and feel my throat click. Bone dry.

“Eggsy.”

From the dark shape that is Eggsy comes a sound like a muffled scoff. His voice, when he speaks, it scratchy.
“Eyy, guv.”

Silence ensues. Eggsy seems to find this funny because, after a moment, he emits the same scoffing sound and brings the bottle up to his lips to take a pull.

“Put that down.”

He does, but only because he is done with his drink. The bottle goes back to rest by his side.

It feels as though something has taken over me, and it has: survival mode. I am slipping into the person I become when faced with immeasurable pressure and strife: logical, methodical, pragmatic. My entire body is still rife with tension, but I am playing the part of quartermaster, reigning in a rogue, and my voice is smooth and without inflection. “Put that down, and come here.”

For a moment, he does nothing. Then, he slowly walks forward, depositing the bottle with a clunk on an end-table.

I rise from my desk just as slowly and walk around to stand in front of it. Eggsy does not still his slow approach. He comes forward until he standing just two paces from me. His face is downcast, and the light from my desk lamp does not illuminate him. Still, at this distance I can see the dried tracks of tears on cheeks, and a glimmer of wetness on his full lips from where he had pulled from the bottle.

“Eggsy.”

He will not look at me. He stands before me, harrowed, and he will not look at me.

What can I do?

Well, there is only one thing to do.

I close the distance between us and raise my hand to his cheek. It is warm in my palm, soft young skin punctuated with the scrape of stubble. I can feel him trembling. He is crying, but there are no tears.

There are times when I have felt that I have no heart. I go through life like an automaton. But, as I look at him, I can feel my heart aching for him. He is so vulnerable.

I want to protect him. And I want him.

I raise my other hand to his face, cradling it. I say his name again, softly, tenderly. He shakes in my hands.

And then, I do the unthinkable. I do what I should have done ages ago, and what I should never done.

I lower my head and kiss him.

It is both sad and sweet, long and gentle. In it is all the affection I feel for him, for this boy whom Harry adored so much. Eggsy responds immediately by tilting his head up, deepening the kiss. His lips are full, lush, and they taste of salt where tears have dried. His mouth has the bite of whiskey, and I taste it too on his tongue when it slithers languidly across my lips.

Almost abruptly, I pull away, holding him by the chin. I do not know why. I simply have to look at him.
His eyes are locked on mine, dark as a forest, wet and hazy. His jaw feels breakable in my hand, and its contours are cast in sharp relief by the dim light. His eyelashes are golden, almost angelic. And his expression is a mixture of defiance, desperation, and fear.

If I were a better man, I would stop this. I would push him back, and I would make him lie on the couch until he had slept off the booze. Then I would send him away, from me and from Kingsman for good. I would give him no choice but to go and live a normal life. I would make him be a lotus-eater, and I would make him be happy. I would not continue to stand here with him now.

But I know fully well that I am not a better man.

So, I take pity on Eggsy in the only way I know how.

-KM-

The next kiss is not so gentle.

It turns from forceful to furious in the span of time it takes me to bite Eggsy’s lip. He groans and immediately presses against me, pushing me back against the edge of my desk. His hands are beneath my suit jacket, rucking up my perfectly pressed shirt, then reaching up to tear at my tie. If he were any less skilled or anymore desperate, he might have choked me in his eagerness to get it off.

He is pressing his mouth against my jaw, working his way down to my neck and pulling at the buttons on my shirt when I decide that this is enough.

Eggsy makes a noise of surprise when I take hold of his wrists and twist to switch out positions. However, he goes along willingly when I replace my hands underneath his thighs and lift him so that he is sitting on the desk. I cursorily shove away the clutter behind him, clearing a space. I am dangerously close to shoving my computer off the desk to make room, and I hardly care. It is worth it to see Eggsy’s eyes go wide and dark when I firmly press my hand to his chest and make him lie back.

I had felt his erection against my thigh when he was flush against me, and now the outline of it strains against his thin jeans. I push his shirt halfway up his torso, exposing pale, pale skin and a dark blonde treasure trail. I lean down to mouth as his navel, and his skin jumps beneath my ministrations.

I do not bother removing his jeans entirely. I simply unclasp the button, pull down the zip, and use both hands to pull them down so that they are low on his hips, and I have access to what I want.

It has been a long time since I’ve done this. But not so long that I’ve forgotten how.

Eggsy’s breath stutters when I take him into my mouth. His hips jerk involuntarily, and I reposition one hand so as to better hold him still while my other spans the taught skin of his navel. He feels like a livewire beneath me, more alive and vibrant than I had ever seen him these past weeks. He feels beautiful.

I press at his hips and swirl my tongue, making him moan softly. His fingers scrabble for purchase and find it by gripping the edge of the desk.

I do not take my time with him. Instead, I use him expertly, almost savagely, pursuing him until he is groaning incoherently, a babbling mess shaking loose and coming unraveled beneath me—
His orgasm, when it arrives, makes his entire body quake. He cries out, a sound that is strangled and almost painful and utterly arousing all at once. It rings in my ears as I swallow him down.

When he has finished and lays quiet, I pull away, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand. His cock lays limply against his hip, and I cannot help but nuzzle it before mouthing my way back up his navel, which rises and falls with every shaky breath.

Though it was not me who orgasmed, I feel foggy and unsteady, breathing hotly against his skin.

It takes me a moment to realize that Eggsy is crying.

When I look up, he has turned his head to one side with one arm draped over his face. But there is no mistaking.

It takes some coaxing and my prying his arm away by the wrist before Eggsy rights himself and sits up once more. I expect him to be shy and downcast, but instead he just leans forward and kisses me, mouth hot and greedy. I can feel the tears where his cheek brushes against mine.

“Take me home,” he whispers.

It isn’t a question, and I don’t say no.

Chapter End Notes

I refrained from making this fic a hard R, because I didn't feel that an overly-explicit sex scene would do a service to the fic.
Blue Stragglers

Chapter Summary

blue straggler: a main-sequence star in an open or globular cluster that is more luminous and bluer than stars at the main sequence turnoff point for the cluster.

Chapter Notes

LONG chapter, but probably just as well because I was on a LONG hiatus. Warning for semi-unsafe wound play and sadism/masochism undertones. More sex. Also, I was rewatching “Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy” this weekend and realized how Jim Prideaux/Bill Haydon this all is.

Other notes:
**If you've ever taken a world history class, you know that Australia seldom comes up, which explains their attitudes towards it. 
**Prisons in Poland are not that great, from what I've read.
Not beta'd. However, while referencing previous chapters for consistency, I did notice that I have this weird obsession with couches/sofas (if you don't believe me, go read "He Blames the Upholstery"), and I have described the one(s) at Merlin's flat in multiple conflicting ways, so sorry.

When I wake the next morning, it is all at once.

I blink up at the smooth white ceiling, pale blue in the pre-dawn light that streams through the window. I know instantly that I am not alone. The smell is different. The bed is warmer. And I have just become aware of an arm thrown casually about my waist.

As if subliminally sensing that I have woken, Eggsy’s body shifts beside me, nestling further into my side. His legs are tangled with mine, and he moves one of them ineffectually against me.

Almost involuntarily, I huff out an amused breath—because what else can I be, at this particular moment?

I think about last night. The way Eggsy hadn’t looked at me, and then the way he had. The way he trembled. The way he cried.

The moan he made when he came.

I look over at Eggsy. His is little more than a crown of messy, dark blonde hair. I can feel his even breathing tickling my flank, his head resting in the crook of my arm and shoulder. The limb has begun to tingle unpleasantly from being pinned so long, but I cannot find it in me to move. He looks,
for once, quite peaceful.

Stealthily, I raise my left arm to look at my watch. 06:14. Ordinarily, I would be up and about my business already; but it is a Saturday, I have a warm body in my bed, and a strong desire to— at least temporarily— avoid the repercussions of that last fact. I resolutely close my eyes.

I awake less than an hour later to find that Eggsy is also blinking into bleary-eyed existence. I give next to no indication that I have woken, save for the change in breathing, but he looks up at me sharply regardless, as if just realizing where he was and who he was with.

A tendril of apprehension begins to curl its way up my spine as I look back at him; but it only lasts a moment.

Because, at that moment, Eggsy leans closer and kisses me.

What follows is the kind of slow, lazy sex I had previously thought to have left behind in my youth. Eggsy, seemingly still half asleep, kisses me soundly, with a filthy kind of sloppiness that can only be deliberate as he rubs himself against me. I kiss him back, fucking his mouth leisurely with my tongue, reaching down underneath the sheets to lay my hands on his arse and squeeze, encouraging. God, but it feels good.

Eggsy gives a little moan into my mouth, his rutting against me growing more frantic, his lithe body molding against mine. He pulls away for a moment, ducking his head, and it’s unclear to me what he is doing until he spits liberally into his hand and brings it between us. I cannot help but smirk at his wantonness—

And that smirk is quickly turned into surprise as he begins to stroke both of us together.

It must be the surprise that brings me to full arousal, that brings me to the edge so quickly. I come just moments after Eggsy shudders and cries out against my throat.

I lay dumb in my astonishment, absentmindedly stroking Eggsy’s hair. Last night, I had been deliberate in taking on the role of dominant partner, dictating the rules of engagement. I knew that Eggsy had never done this before, and I was not under any illusions about his willingness to proceed stemming from a burgeoning rediscovery of his sexuality. For all I know, he may not even remotely consider himself bent. Men, young men especially, make exceptions for all sorts of things. Anything that Eggsy consented to while emotionally capsized, I could not hold against him. More importantly, what I did was more about him than it was about me; I did not expect him to reciprocate, or even engage beyond taking his pleasure. I still don’t.

Beside me, Eggsy punctures my musings by making a make a small sound of disgust and discomfort, followed by an even more pronounced, though still very quiet, “Ew.”

I look at him, and immediately see what he is referring to. We had kicked the sheets partially down our bodies, so that his body above the hips is exposed. I have to hold back a laugh when I see that Eggsy, somehow, managed to get the majority of our cum on his own belly. I, miraculously, am nearly completely clean.

Shifting carefully, Eggsy maneuvers his way out of bed and pads stark naked over to my bathroom, giving me a spectacular view of his derriere. I allow myself a moment of appreciation as he slips into the bathroom before my thoughts turn sober once more.

I hear the sound of water running for a moment, and then Eggsy emerges once more, cum-free. His taught belly shines in the dim light, water still clinging to his skin where he washed it.
“There is an assignment coming up,” I hear myself say as Eggsy meanders back over to the bed. “I think you might enjoy it. Two days out in Australia. Interested?”

Eggsy snorts and kneels back down onto the bed. He amazes me with how little he seems to care about his nakedness. “Australia? Since when do we care?”

He has a point. Australia is the only continent we have not bothered to set up offices in. Teaming with mischief it may be but, until the last two decades, it has mostly kept to itself. “Historically, we don’t. But we believe there is a stronghold of sorts for an international arms-smuggling operation. We need someone to do general reconnaissance, give us the full situation.”

“Don’t we ‘ave agents there already? I’d be a sore thumb.”

I shake my head. “It’s the last continent Kingsman has yet to colonize, so to speak. As for sticking out, I want you mostly watching and listening, playing the simple-minded English tourist. I imagine you will find that a walk in the park.”

I say this in absolute deadpan, though there is some humor in it, meant to be encouraging. Eggsy looks unconvinced. (He also looks like he needs to be dragged back down into the sheets and fucked within an inch of his life, but I decide that this is not wisest course of action.) His eyes flicker from the rumpled bedsheets (almost as if hearing my thoughts), then back to me. “You want me to take it?” he asks finally.

“I think it would do you some good,” I reply carefully.

I watch as he considers these words; he does not bother shielding his thoughts from me, and I watch them run, one-by-one, across his brow. Before he can come to some unhelpful conclusion, I give a deliberate sigh, and add:

“I simply think it would be therapeutic to . . . get your hands dirty, so to speak.”

As if he hadn’t been thinking anything to the contrary, he nods instantly in agreement. “Eh, yeah, sure. I’ll go on your little raid of the Outback.”

“Not a raid. Just reconnaissance.”

“An errand, then.” He says this almost sardonically. He suspects me of deliberately using him wastefully, intentionally giving him the menial tasks.

“It’s not—”

He cuts me off. “I know.” He pauses, looking down at the sheets between us. Then, he turns around so that he is sitting on the edge of the bed. He reaches down and plucks his pants off the floor. “Look, I gotta run. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

I lift my eyebrows in surprise. “Certainly.”

I do not move from the bed as Eggsy completes the ritual of putting his clothes back on. There is always something of an all-too-deliberate nonchalance about the way people dress after a shag. It’s almost as if they are embarrassed to be seen putting their clothes on, the way they might, in other circumstances, find their nakedness embarrassing. With Eggsy it’s slightly different: there is still that faux-nonchalance, but he also makes an intense study of his clothing that is not faked and, underneath it all, there is a certain hostility that speaks louder than embarrassment ever could.

To be perfectly honest, I am not sure what to do about it, so I do nothing.
At the end of the ritual, when Eggsy is fully dressed from head-to-toe in clothing that is rumpled from having slept on the floor, he mumbles, without looking at me, that he will see himself out.

I surprise myself with a gesture that feels both cold and regal, just a wave of my hand, as if to say, “Be my guest.”

For the first time since he got out of bed, Eggsy looks up at me. His expression is unreadable.

And then, he’s gone.

I lie in bed for a few minutes after I hear the front door open and shut. All of this seems suddenly very surreal. What had just happened?

I should feel jaded, I know. The young man I had taken to bed has just left with barely a word, with coldness that is left unexplained, but is also rather pointed. I should feel jilted, somehow.

Instead, I feel relieved.

I permit myself a few more minutes to lie in bed, thinking and not thinking. Then, I give a put-upon sigh that is meant for no one and nothing, and head for the shower.

Despite the unusual night I had (and the even more unusual morning), I manage to be in the office just before 7:30. And then, my day begins in earnest.

-KM-

It is nearly noon by the time the last foreign director closes their holo-channel, leaving only Demarais and I.

I watch as the green projection of the French director sits back and heaves an unadulterated sigh, tinged both with weariness and irritation. He looks over at me and gives a grin that is really all grimace.

“Well? Not so bad.”

I barely conceal a snort. The meeting had, for a wonder, been rather short—less than an hour, though the time was not without its difficulties. For me, most of it had been spent defending my decision whilst receiving many silent looks full of doubt. It wasn’t the most uncomfortable I have ever been in my life, but I cannot say I enjoy being judged so thoroughly, and to be found so sorely lacking—at least, by some, if not all members of the directorship.

“Ulrich fell asleep,” Demarais says, after I fail to give an adequate response.

“He didn’t.”

“He wanted to,” Demarais replies, voice both amused and exasperated. “Oui, he said not a word. I have never seen so much apathy. No wonder his deputy is such an ass; I would be clawing at the walls too.” He pauses. “Do you think he is . . . well?” He raises his index finger and taps his head.

I consider my answer, taking a drink from my glass of water. The German office had just concluded its round of what the officers refer to as “Spring Cleaning”— a review of the entire office that includes yearly mandatory psychological evaluations. Who is privy to psych evals follows the chain
of command, meaning that only Arthur is allowed to see the evaluations of the directors (and no one, for a wonder, sees Arthur’s; I actually think that this mandate was before Chester’s time but, as things stand, I don’t intend to change it). Director Ulrich’s psych evaluation came back positive for symptoms of depression; however, it would be unorthodox for me to share this information with another member of his rank. “I have considered the possibility that he is unwell,” I reply woodenly. “I would like to be sympathetic, but I simply cannot afford to.”

“What would you do? Replace him?”

“Perhaps. I have—” I stop myself short. If I am not willing to discuss Ulrich’s mental health with his equal, should I really be discussing this? It isn’t that I distrust Demarais or think he will be indiscreet with any information he obtains but—

As if sensing my thoughts, Demarais puts down the cup of tea that he had been drinking from. “Monseur Arthur, though I may not be assisting you directly in an official capacity, you may continue to count on me for assistance and council, if you so choose.”

I remain quiet for a moment, thinking on his words. Orthodoxy aside, I knew I could rely on Demarais utterly. He had spoken several times during the meeting to vouch for me, convincing others on my behalf, without actually making it seem that he was coming to my aid (an unprecedented display of subtlety). Though the doubts of the other directors were not entirely assuaged, having Demarais defend my decision made a significant difference, in the attitude of the meeting if not the outcome. Everything Demarais does, he does in the service of Kingsman; helping me now and moving forward is simply an extension of that.

Relenting, I continue: “I have been thinking about tapping the head of the German office’s strategic planning division. Joli Adolfa. Her service record is impeccable, and she seems to display great capacity for leadership.”

Demarais nods and hums. “A good choice. But you will make the Deputy Director angry. He does not like her.”

I just barely stop from rolling my eyes. “He doesn’t like anyone.”

“That is not true; he likes himself.”

I snort in response.

Just then, there is a quiet, but precise knock at the door, and Kay pokes his head in. He does not sign anything, simply looks at me with an expression that could almost be pointed.

I check my watch. Almost noon. “Director Demarais, if you will excuse me.”

Demarais nods. His green holographed image winks out.

I remove myself from the large conference room adjacent to the outer office. On my way to my own office, I pass Kay, who is busy at his desk. He looks up when I stop, and I sign: Please send Lizann right in when he arrives

Kay gives a sharp, short nod, then returns to his typing.

I settle into my office and pull up the files I had been perusing the day before when I had arranged this meeting.

After no more than two minutes, the door at the other end of my office opens, and Mark Lizann
enters the room. He is wearing a black jumpsuit with the Kingsman insignia in white over either shoulder, and black combat boots. His blonde hair is lightly tousleled, and his angular face is slightly flushed, but calm. Likely, he has just come from training.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” he says, with all due respect in his voice.

“Yes. Please sit down.”

As Lizann approaches my desk, I regard him in his entirety. He strikes me as nothing so much as a modern Achilles: tall, carefully-built muscles, blonde, with a regal nose and sky-blue eyes. He was a multitalented athlete at university, a gangly sprinter and long-jumper, but it was his tenure in the military that had filled him out. He was training as an infantry-man when we recruited him. Achilles, indeed. Though this young man displayed far more humility than any half-god. More humility than Eggsy, certainly.

As Lizann sits himself down in the chair across from me, I glance idly at my computer. I know everything that is in his file, all the training reports and so on. I refer to it now simply for effect. So that he knows I am looking over his information. I begin speaking to him without looking at him.

“Commander Thornton tells me you are progressing remarkably well in your training.”

Lizann nods and replies without a trace of hubris or self-congratulation: “Yes, sir.”

I scroll, again idly, down through the last report I had received from Thornton. His record is, thus far, impressive, though I do what I can to not let on as much. “You have passed all tests and examinations with what some would call flying colors.”

“I do the best I can, sir.”

I stop scrolling and pretend to examine some detail. “You are being considered for the Knighthood,” I say without expression. It is only after I have said this that I turn once again to look at him fully; his expression is carefully neutral, though something has changed in those robin’s egg eyes. I lean forward, placing my elbows on my desk and crossing my arms on my desk in a candid gesture, and continue:

“Ector is due to retire in six months’ time. If all goes well with the remainder of your training, I am prepared to name you Ector.”

There is a flicker of surprised and excitement behind Lizann’s eyes; but, beyond this, his face betrays nothing. He’ll make an excellent undercover operative.

“Ordinarily, we would never be having this conversation,” I continue. “However, assuming that you pass your final examinations, you will be the only qualified candidate for this position. I am not telling you this to prematurely congratulate you. I am telling you this so that you can decide for yourself if it is truly what you want.”

“Sir?”

“Having never been a Knight myself, I cannot tell you firsthand all that it entails. However, I can say that it is both a great honor and a great sacrifice. I simply want to make sure that you are absolutely ready for that.”

The words were thought up carefully enough, but they felt trite as soon as they left my mouth. It was a farce, that statement. There was no way he could ever be absolutely ready. We are never truly ready for anything; we simply find out along the way if we can handle what is thrown at us.
Across the desk, Lizann merely lowers his head briefly and replies, “I would be honored to have the position, sir.”

And, for whatever reason, right then, there is a flash of a moment in which I wonder if I’ve made a horrible mistake. But it passes as soon as it arrives, and I am left to levelly return Lizann’s gaze. I nod.

“Consider what that entails over the next few months. As I have said, you are currently the only qualified candidate. If you decide otherwise, I need to know immediately so that I can select another — for ‘grooming’, so to speak. Naturally, you are not to discuss this with anyone. Is that clear?”

Lizann nods. “Sir.”

I hold back a sigh that arises in my chest unbidden and seemingly without reason. Placing my hands on the desk, I stand and motion for Lizann to do the same. I make my way around the desk and proceed towards the door, Lizann following. I open the door and hold it for him. He stops at the threshold, and turns to me.

“Thank you, sir.”

I am about to reply with some platitude when I notice something out of the corner of my eye. I orient my head immediately, and a stone drops into my stomach.

Kay is at his desk, typing away and looking especially prim, his expression slightly tight. I can only presume that this is because of the person sprawled in one of the chairs around the room: Eggsy.

Eggsy meets my gaze and his face begins to light up with a smile—and then his gaze travels to Lizann, and his expression clouds with unsubtle confusion.

I turn my head back to Lizann and give him a firm nod. “Agent Lizann.” I gesture through the door.

Lizann crosses the threshold into the outer office and walks across the room towards the door that leads into the hallway. Eggsy stands as Lizann passes, and they exchange looks, Lizann’s merely one of recognition, Eggsy’s somewhat unfriendly. Eggsy watches Lizann exit before turning his green eyes back on me.

Kay ceases typing and looks between us. He raises his hands a fraction, as if he means to say something; then stops and lowers them back to his keyboard. The typing resumes.

I return my attention to Eggsy, who has risen from the chair. “Eggsy.”

It occurs to me, just as I am uttering his name, that I have seldom addressed Eggsy by anything other than “Unwin” or “Agent Unwin” in front of other members of Kingsman. In fact, I seldom address anyone by their first name, unless we are in a private meeting. I look over to Kay to see what his reaction is to this faux pas; the last few weeks have left me the distinct impression that Kay is not fond of Eggsy, and even less fond of the amount of time and attention Eggsy seems to demand of me. However, at this moment, Kay’s eyes are dutifully and studiously affixed to his computer screen and he gives every impression of ignoring us entirely.

“Guv.”

And only then do I see the slightest downturn of Kay’s mouth as he pauses over a word. It’s a small lapse, almost undetectable, and he resumes his stoicism immediately.

I look back at Eggsy, and have the urge to sigh.
“Eggsy. Come in.”

-KM-

“Why you meetin’ with Mark?”

Once the door is fully shut, I turn and give Eggsy a shrewd look, one that says, *You really ought to know better than to ask.* “That is none of your business, I’m afraid. And,” I continue before he can pursue the subject further, “I am fairly sure that is not what you came to talk to me about.”

Eggsy snorts, though he dips his head as if in chagrin. The tips of his ears go momentarily pink. “Yeah, fine.”

“There is plenty that goes on in this organization that you are not privy to.”

Eggsy lifts his head up. “I know,” he replies somewhat testily. Then he dips his head again, leaving me to look at a small slice of his face that isn’t obstructed by dark blonde hair.

I purse my lips slightly in consideration. Whatever it is that Eggsy means to say—and I have some idea of what that might be—I will not stoop to coax it out of him. He will have to have to utter the words of his own accord. Turning from his sullen form, I walk over to the long, polished coffee table, which is flanked by two equally long sofas, and set myself down upon one of them. It only takes a moment for Eggsy to look up from his sulk and make his way over to sit opposite me. I look at him expectantly.

He can only hold my gaze for a moment before he drops them again. He reaches a hand up to scratch at the back of his neck and gives a sigh. “Look,” he says to the table, “I wanted to . . . apologize for the way I acted this morning. Leaving in an ‘uff, an’ all.”

I remain silent, waiting for him to continue.

“I just . . . I don’t feel like I’m *useful* lately, you know? I’m not a Knight. I don’t have any kind of title or nothin’. I’m just some errand boy.”

“You’re not—” I interject.

“I know, but that’s what it *feels* like,” Eggsy replies. “And it’s— it’s not doin’ right by Harry if that’s all I amount to. I want to do Harry proud, and it feels like I’m stuck in this rut and can’t figure out why . . . .”

He trails off, his face reddening. He still hasn’t looked at me. It’s a good thing, I think. The weight of his scrutiny in this matter would be almost unbearable.

I knew this moment was coming. Its inevitability has weighed on me constantly, especially these last few days. The only question now is whether he will come outright and ask me the question I have been dreading, or if he will leave it to me to give name to his anxiety. And, as I look upon him, at the way he desperately tries to master his expression into something that is not on the verge of tears, I am tempted to leave it up to him. He will come out right and ask me. He won’t do it now, that I know for certain, and that is the tempting part; if I let him decide how we have this conversation, he will dance around it endlessly until frustration and anger overtake him. If we do this on his terms, the issue will simmer in silence until he yells for an answer—and that yell would take time to well up.
We could go on like this for some time, talking around it, not talking about it.

But, if I leave it up to him, I will have no control. Over the situation, or over him.

And that is something I cannot allow.

The only question remains is: do I prevaricate? Or do I lie outright?

“Eggsy,” my voice is gentle as it can be, while not letting go of the sternness that he needs more than he knows. “You are serving Kingsman. That is what Harry wanted of you. You are doing him proud.”

“But—” Eggsy chokes, and I tense for a moment, thinking that he might start sobbing. “I’m not—I’m not a Knight.”

Read: not the Knight that Harry had wanted him to be.

I breathe deeply. Fuck.

A lie it is.

-KM-

I am not proud. But it accomplishes what I need. Just enough dishonesty to keep the storm at bay. The best lies are always half-truths.

(What did you expect? I am a spy. Lying is what I do.)

What I tell Eggsy is this: I tell him that he is being championed as a candidate for Knighthood. This much is true, per Ector’s recommendation. I then tell him that there are technical difficulties associated with moving Eggsy directly into a Knighthood, difficulties that would not be best served by brute force, given my position. This is also largely true and, as much as it pains me to do so, to make reference to my current situation with the board of directors does add much-needed gravity to the situation. In the end, I am able to give Eggsy every impression that I am working to my best ability to give him what he wants.

And, really, that is all he wants to hear.

He lapses almost instantly into a watery smile when I finish my explanations. He looks absolutely pathetic. It’s so disturbing that I cannot even reprimand myself for making the assessment in the first place.

He practically sniffs as he tries to pull himself back together. “Right. ‘fanks.” He straightens out his shirt needlessly and puts his hands into his pockets. “Christ.” He offers me another weak smile.

I nod. Christ, indeed. Pitching my voice low and gentle, I ask: “Do you feel well enough for your assignment tomorrow? You need not take it.”

At this, Eggsy rolls his eyes, and a flush sweeps across his face. He’s embarrassed. “Fuck, Alec, I’m fine—I’m just being a prat, is all.”

I can feel myself stiffen at the use of my real name. It happens every time he says it, even though
these instances have been few. I had never given Eggsy permission to use it, but had not forbid him either. The sin of omission is a double-edged sword, it would seem.

“No more a prat than myself,” I answer. “I should have made it clearer to you what was going on.”

Eggsy shrugs. “You’ve been busy.”

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door, and Kay pokes his blonde head in. He does not sign to me, only gives me a pointed look before closing the door. Next appointment.

Rising from the couch, I refasten a single button on my suit jacket, and beckon for Eggsy to stand as well. “And so, too, will you be.” I begin walking towards the door, and gesture for him to follow. “I really do think this will be good for you, Eggsy.”

I place my hand on the door handle, but Eggsy stops me, covering my hand with his own. Startled, I turn to look at him. His face no longer looks so tear-ready, but his eyes still glisten, and his full mouth trembles slightly.

Slowly, he rises to the balls of his feet, and gently kisses me on the lips. It’s sweet at first, but as soon as I lower my head and begin kissing him back, he deepens the kiss, snaking his tongue into my mouth and pressing himself against me wantonly. It feels illicit, and makes my entire body alight with heat.

I pull away slowly; Eggsy does not protest, per se, but seems to chase my mouth even as the distance between us increases. He relents only when I stand to my full height, too tall for him to reach.

Eggsy looks up at me fully, unabashedly, pupils dilated so that there is only a small rim of green on the outside. Strange, how it is this, more than the kiss, that causes a real surge of lust to run through me.

Eggsy licks his lips. He does that often, I have noticed, both when he is nervous and aroused. Here, I believe he is both.

“Can I come over, later?”

This, perhaps, should be the part where I consider my situation, the consequences of my actions, the ramifications for indulgence. Despite the kiss, I could easily tell Eggsy, no, we cannot continue this, it must end. Nothing good would come of it. This is the part where I should be the bigger man, and put a stop to all of this foolishness.

But I don’t.

Eggsy does come over later. When the day is finally over, and I allow myself to go home, Eggsy is waiting for me, by my door. It makes Dailey uneasy, but I reassure him, and exit the car to join Eggsy. We go inside without a word.

We end up having sex on the sofa. We make the initial pretense of drinks and conversation, though every line of discussion falls flat, and eventually Eggsy grows tired of the charade. He begins kissing me, and leans me back into the sofa until he can lay atop me. It isn’t until his hands begin to encircle my wrists that I realize exactly what game we are playing at.

Eggsy actually puts up a struggle when I first attempt to change our positions, but it is only for show. Given his musculature and his training regimen, he is, without a doubt, stronger than me; all the same, he lets me wrestle him onto his back, lets me pin his arms above his head with one hand while I ruck up his shirt with the other. I have to let go of his wrists in order to begin stripping his jeans and
pants, and, he whines at this. In that moment, I do not know if his whining is due to his need, or my taking my hands from his wrists—or both—but I take the opportunity to remove my tie and bind his wrists together, all the while kissing him filthily.

I suck him off in that position, wrists above his head, jeans and pants discarded on the floor. His legs tremble around me as I press down on his hip with one hand, keeping him in place while I have my way with him. He comes quickly; it is gratifying, as is the way he shakes as I continue to mouth at his abdomen and the curve of his pelvis, long after he is done.

He surprises me, after that, by surging up to kiss me, unaffected by the taste of his own cum. Maybe he enjoys it. He continues to kiss me while offering up his wrists to be untied, and I oblige him. Once free, he fumbles with my trousers and manages to open them far enough to get his hand around my cock. He continues to kiss me while stroking me and leans us back once more so that I am fully lying down; he braces one hand against the arm of the sofa, keeping just enough distance between us so that his hand can work me unimpeded. I am groaning, gripping his firm flesh wherever I can grasp it. In that moment, I think about what it would be like to fuck him, how much I would like to—to fuck him rough, to fuck him slow and tortuous, to have him ride me until he shakes apart.

The thoughts are overwhelming. I haven’t felt this alive in years.

It seems heartless to send Eggsy home after that and, truthfully, I do not want to be alone. So, after we finish making a mess of the couch, we relocate to my bed, where we sleep. Inevitably, when I wake to find Eggsy’s morning wood pressed against me, I take advantage of the situation. We have sex again.

Once we are both sated and fully awake, I cannot help but ask Eggsy how he . . . feels about all of this.

“What d’you mean, ‘xactly?” Eggsy asks. His hand is resting on my thigh, his index finger tracing unintelligible sigils into my skin.

I swallow, trying not to immediately regret my line of inquiry. This is a conversation that needs to happen. Perhaps it was irresponsible of me not to have it before now. “You haven’t been with a man before,” I reply, “much less an older man.”

Eggsy looks up at me. His expression is halfway serious, but his hair is an absolute wreck, and takes away from the gravity. “You’re wondering if this is just an experiment for me,” he says.

“Well, it must be, to some degree.”

With an almost exasperated sigh, Eggsy sits up so that he can look at me properly. He even attempts to run a hand through his hair and tame it to a degree. “Look,” he says. He pauses, and drops his eyes, unable to hold my gaze. “This is gonna sound fuckin’ cheesy, but I . . . I like you a lot—”

I raise my eyebrows. My chest grows inexplicably warm. I was not expecting that. Before I can say anything, Eggsy climbs into my lap and straddles me, continuing:

“—and I find you attractive. Yeah, I’ve never been with a bloke before, but sex is sex. I don’t know if this makes me bisexual or what—I don’t really care. Maybe. . . .” he trails off, now lifting his eyes and giving me a slow, lascivious smile. He leans forward, and place his lips against the shell of my ear, whispering:

“Maybe I just like to be well-fucked.”
“He actually said that.”

On the bed, Harry sleeps on, as still and lifeless as ever. In my head, however, I can hear him saying in a slightly exasperated tone, *Of course he said that, Alec. He’s a pompous little prick and you let him into your bed. What did you expect?*

I find myself shrugging my shoulders, as if Harry had actually spoken. “Well, at least he was honest.”

*Apparently honest.*

I hum to myself at this, leaning back in the chair. I had been reticent to bring this subject up while visiting with Harry. My visits, more infrequent since the last failed enervation, are sacrosanct. I approach it both as a visit and confessional. I bring Harry news of the outside world, of Kingsman, attempt to relate humorous stories. I unburden myself, my doubts and sorrows. I ask him questions to which I mentally supply my own answers, or simply take his silence for. To talk about my sex life seemed, at first, crude. To talk about my sex life as it pertains to Eggsy, even more vulgar.

But, once I broached the subject, it all came tumbling out.

It is a small and uncommon gift of privacy that the security cameras in long-term care are not audio-equipped.

And so, here I sit, in Harry’s room, shaving kit put away, relating to the comatose figure of Harry Hart that I have been engaging in illicit sex with someone about two decades my junior. And his protégé, no less.

I would have never told Harry this if he were awake. I would be too cowardly to admit it to him. I would probably want to tell him, as I do now; but fear of rebuke would keep me silent. As it is, the only reprimands I must face are the ones I concoct for him in my own head. This is not to say that Harry doesn’t hear me; the reason loved ones are encouraged to talk to people in comas is precisely because, if the brain damage is not too severe, they *can* hear you. Harry can, perhaps, hear me and my despicable confession; but I do not believe he will ever wake, and so it matters little. He will never again have the strength to tell me off for it.

That the thoughts may torment him while he lies there, in his prone state, is something I try not to think about.

I spend only a little more time in the infirmary after my confession, mostly in silence. I am disgusted with myself.

Around 07:45, I take my leave, and make my way down the many corridors to my office.

At 8:10, I receive confirmation that Agent Unwin has been deployed for his mission.

And then, my entire day goes to fuck.
I intend to spend the majority of my morning going through various reports; I manage to make a courageous head start when, quite unexpectedly, Kay pokes his head through my door.

He does this without knocking, which immediately sets me on high alert. Kay considers bad manners a grievous affront to civilization as we know it. He *always* knocks.

I look up from my computer, blood already pulsing. I remove my hands from my keyboard and sign. *What?*

Kay looks distinctly uncomfortable, which is also an extremely bad omen.

*Deputy Director Lauterbach has deployed agents to Latin America, sir.*

As if propelled, I stand immediately. My heart has just skipped three beats, and my pulse is racing. I am so distracted I neglect to sign. “What?”

*The communication just came through. He sent three agents yesterday, and they are due to land in Paraguay within the next two hours.*

I continue to stare at Kay, almost not seeing him. Something very peculiar is happening in my body at the moment: I feel both icy cold, and immeasurably hot. My mind is almost entirely empty of a single thought:

*How dare he.*

*How fucking dare he.*

I do not know what look is upon my face, but even Kay seems apprehensive. He does not sign, simply stares at me. Remembering myself somewhat, I sign to him, trying to keep my hands from shaking.

*He did this with Ulrich’s approval?*

Kay looks as though he does not want to answer; but, dutifully, he does, simply shaking his head.

I am so angry by this point that I am practically shaking. I sit back down, trying to regain some composure. That little fucking shit.

*Thank you,* I sign, and then turn back to my computer.

I wait for Kay to leave before slamming my palm down against the desk. It does me little good, only makes me want to hit something else, something that would give under a punch. Like Lauterbach’s smug face, for instance.

I lean back in my chair, and let out an almost maniacal bark of a laugh. Fuck. You had to hand it to the man for having such audacity. What fucking balls. I had expressly told all the offices last week that the British and South American offices *alone* would be handling the situation in Paraguay, and that we were still *working* on a solution, that the situation was too volatile for us to jump in at this very moment. That hundreds of innocents could be put in danger if we acted too quickly or too rashly. As Arthur, it was my job and my right to dictate what offices handled what crises. I delegated as I saw fit, and my word was law. And Lauterbach defied me.

I spend almost fifteen full minutes sitting in my chair, staring blankly at my computer screen. Trying
to calm myself. Trying to think of what I should do.

In the end, there is only one thing I can do.

I patch a direct line into the comms of the agents en route to Paraguay. I tell them, in impeccable German and in no uncertain terms that they are to return to Germany immediately if they want to remain in Kingsman.

And then I fire Lauterbach.

Without warning, I call a full assembly of all directors and their deputies, and I fire him out from under Ulrich, without preamble and on the spot.

It is unpleasant. Latuerbach scoffs, then tries to explain himself, and then pleads. In the end, it makes no difference. He disobeyed a direct order, seemingly out of sheer hubris. I make that point very clear for all in attendance to hear.

Two guard appear next to Lauterbach, and haul him out of his chair. The space where his hologram had been is echoingly empty, as is the silence that fills the room. All eyes are upon me. Eyes both impassive and uneasy.

Before closing the comms, I tell Ulrich to find a new deputy.

-KM-

I am in such a foul mood that I instruct Kay to cancel my meetings for the rest of the day. I spend the entire morning in a state of anger, fuming, unable to work.

Truth be told, I am not entirely surprised that Lauterbach did such a thing. It was only a matter of time, given his propensity to defy me and his lack of respect for authority. I had rather hoped that the situation would not come to this; but it seems it was inevitable. This thought is hardly consoling. Nor is the thought of Lauterbach’s fate.

Kingsman’s termination policy is bleak. Those who manage to reach retirement are given a comfortable pension and the assurance that they can contact the organization if needed, but they are essentially cut off from Kingsman, like a dead limb. They are allowed to retain two firearms, if they wish, but they no longer have access to any of our resources. Contact is minimal. This is for their own safety, as well as ours.

Forceful termination is less pleasant. Young trainees for the Knighthood program are generally let go without issue, the general consensus being that no one will believe them should they start spreading rumors about a secret international spy agency (and, if they do start blabbing convincingly, it is easy enough to discredit them). Very rarely, a senior office has been let go without serious consequences. However, veterans who are forcibly terminated may face a worse fate: life in prison.

It seems like a harsh sentence, perhaps; but it is stipulated quite clearly in every employment contract and negotiation, and so can hardly come as a surprise. This is another reason why the hiring process for Kingsman is so stringent; we want to hire people that we will not be forced to fire. And, to be fair, it takes an act of extreme negligence, treason, or disobedience to earn such a sentence. We prefer to take care of most of our discipline inhouse. And we do as much as we can to rehabilitate and retain wayward agents. But to be fired is to be cast out, from Kingsman and from society as a whole.
To be fired from Kingsman is to be labeled as threat to international security and a traitor to the organization. And it has been long since anyone was fired; I am setting a new precedent with Lauterbach, whether or not it was my intention.

That knowledge weighs heavily upon me. For what feels like the first time, it occurs to me that I have no idea what I am doing.

Of course, I don’t. It was never my intention to become Arthur, to become the law of Kingsman. I never wanted that kind of power. All I have ever wanted was to see the agents off, make sure they were equipped, support them in the field, and make sure they made it home. That is what a quartermaster does. We are not the brain of an organization, but the oil that keeps the gears sliding easily over one another. I am ill-suited to be Arthur.

I am beginning to fear that everyone knows it.

-KM-

I arrive at work early the next day to make up for my lack of productivity. There seems to be a distinct tension in the air, as if the news of Lauterbach’s firing has already made the rounds, and they’re all wondering who is next—but, perhaps it’s simply my imagination. It is becoming difficult to tell, these days.

At least from Kay I can expect nothing but stoic professionalism. He does not disappoint. He greets me with a nod as I walk in, as always; halfway through the morning, he brings me a tray of tea and toast, and reminds me of my afternoon meeting at two.

He has, of course, already heard of Lauterbach’s firing; as my assistant, he would be one of the first to know. I am somewhat tempted to ask him what he thinks of it—but kill that idea immediately, given his history with Lauterbach. I do not wish to embarrass him. I let him go without comment.

I spend most of the day attending to menial tasks. I receive updates on Lauterbach around noon—he has been transferred to a maximum-security prison in Poland. There is some kind of irony there, I am sure.

Among the droves of documentation and paperless paperwork I must complete, I attend to Lizann’s Knighthood application. There are only a few more pieces of documentation needed, and it takes less than half an hour to draw up the proper forms and have them sent off to Human Resources and Recruiting. The entire process feels much too easy. Finding replacement Knights is almost always a scramble and involves the kind of tryouts that Eggsy and Roxanne participated in. This easy succession almost feels like cheating; it certainly feels like I am cheating someone out of something.

That someone being Eggsy.

The betrayal, too, feels easy. Perhaps because I always intended to do it. I expected to experience at least a little remorse over this, but I find that I have none. It is simply the way things must be. Strange how, with just a few signatures, I can sign over one life or one career for another.

The only thing I honestly feel badly about is the idea of having to tell Eggsy.

I should do it immediately when he gets back; there is no question. I should be direct, should tell him to his face, honorably, without shame, and with all my reasons and rationale to back me up.
But I don’t.

Because when Eggsy comes back, he is a fucking mess.

He gets back from assignment on Tuesday, a day later than expected. When I was informed that Agent Unwin had not returned Monday night as he should have, I spent the whole of Tuesday on edge. I admit that I was worried. How could I not be? It is not unheard of for an agent to be detained or delayed during a mission, but this was a reconnaissance, for pity’s sake: there should have been no complications. That was why I gave him the bloody assignment in the first place: minimal risk involved.

In any case, he finally arrives back on Tuesday in the late afternoon. I am directly notified of his arrival only because he is taken directly to medical for an evaluation and “patching up”.

It is odd. How can one feel such a rush of adrenaline, of worry, and yet have such a feeling of resignation? I grab my tablet from my desk before I storm out of my office towards medical and open the debriefing report that had been filed just three minutes ago. I read it as I make my way towards the lower levels, something leaden taking over my limbs.

Mission success, by a margin. Eggsy had completed his reconnaissance and obtained useful information, but had gotten closer than instructed; he had ended up in a rather nasty brawl with two operatives who had caught him sneaking around. They thought he was British intelligence, and evidently decided to make an example of him. But for his training, Eggsy managed to incapacitate the two men and escape.

In one piece. But it is not the prettiest of pictures that greets me in medical.

Eggsy is sitting upright on his own at least. The nurse that crosses my path as I stalk towards his room informs me that he has multiple lacerations from what appears to be a boot knife, two of them deep enough to need stitches. Signs of attempted strangulation. A split lip, to add insult to injury. In other words, he is fine; simply foolish.

Somehow, this enrages me more than if he had been seriously injured. And it further reinforces the point that I have made to myself, over, and over, and over:

Reckless. Emotionally unstable.

I do not knock on the door, but rather open it quietly and enter wordlessly while the physician on duty continues to patch Eggsy up. She is currently stitching up a nasty-looking gash on Eggsy’s left bicep and does not look up at the intrusion.

Eggsy, however, does. He gives me a lopsided grin, his lower lip glistening with blood under the white glow of the exam room lights. He has the beginnings of a shiner under his left eye. I see the evidence of strangulation: dark, finger-shaped bruises that decorate his neck like some obscene statement. There is a trace of blood near his temple and it mats down a small patch of hair behind his left ear.

He is naked from the waist up, practically lounging on the examination table. His skin is pale, and his nipples are peaked from the cold. He is all but leering at me over the doctor’s shoulder, licking the blood from his split lip.

It is almost arousing.

Almost, but for the fact that another feeling entirely has taken over me. I cannot name it precisely: it
reeks of both anger and worry, but is cooler than both. There is a flavor of disappointment and relief that confuse the mix. All in all, it makes me feel distant, as if I am watching Eggsy from across a long hallway instead of the span of five paces.

He continues to watch me, almost grinning. He looks incredibly pleased with himself, much like the cat who ate the canary. Pleased by what? That he survived? That his foolhardiness and idiocy didn’t get him killed? That he disregarded his own safety and decided to break his mission parameters because he felt like it?

He is looking at me like he expects me to say something. Perhaps he expects me to berate him; I am sure my face expresses my disappointment clearly enough. Does he want to be reprimanded? To be verbally punished? My eyes flick to the doctor, who is halfway through her stitching.

I do not know if I have the energy to reprimand him. I certainly won’t do it here.

I turn slowly enough to catch his beginning look of incredulity before I walk back out the door.

-KM-

He arrives at my flat later that evening, as expected.

Expected less because I remembered that he asked to come over, and more because it seems to be our new status quo.

In a presumptuous move, I leave the door unlocked and so Eggsy simply lets himself in. When I hear the front door open, I glance at the clock on the mantle above the hearth; it’s just gone eight o’clock. Took him long enough.

I do not get up from my position in the comfy chair by the hearth. I took off my jacket and loosened my tie when I came home, and am currently leaned back, legs crossed, a glass of whisky in one hand. It’s my second glass of the evening; I went through the first entirely too quickly, and so have been studiously nursing this one for some time. There is a fire in the grate, which I lit only to prevent myself from sitting in complete silence and stillness.

Eggsy locks the door behind him, as indicated by the sound of the mechanism sliding into place and a small beep that tells me he has also set the digital lock. Strange, how familiar he is in my home. It isn’t right.

There was a point in time when I could have precluded this. I could have put an end to all of this before it even began.

I blink slowly one moment, and the next Eggsy is standing before me. He cuts a picturesque silhouette against the flames in the grate. His hair is dark and looks damp, as if he’s recently showered. He is wearing jeans and trainers, a plain white shirt. He looks very clean cut, save for the leather jacket hanging from his shoulders. That one garment makes the entire look seem put-upon, a sham. I have the sudden urge to sneer at his costume.

“Hey,” he says. I assume the greeting was meant to be nonchalant, but it hangs in the air lamely.

“Eggsy.”
He doesn’t respond for a moment, taking in the room and my position in the chair. He can sense that something is off, but he’s having trouble figuring out what—or maybe just having trouble deciding how to best provoke me. “You’re in right mood.”

“Am I?” He’s perceptive, but not overly so. I am indeed in a mood, but an ambivalent one. I have not yet decided if I am going to be angry with him.

“Yeah. I think you are. Wanna talk about it?”

I take a drink from my glass and consider him. He seems to be thrumming with pent-up energy, keyed-up and ready for a fight. Or something like it. I could probably diffuse him by refusing to play . . . but that would be dull. And, truth be told, I want to be a little angry. I put my glass down on the small end-table beside me and turn my gaze back to him.

“What do you want to talk about?”

He was not expecting me to be so cagey. He was expecting me to erupt—which I might yet do, but not immediately. He stares at me with an off-guard expression, eyebrows knitting together slightly. He doesn’t understand.

Poor sod.

“Oh,” I say, as if he has answered my question. “I see. You want to discuss your mission.”

He still says nothing, confused.

“What is it that you really want, Eggsy? Do you want me to congratulate you on a job well done? Do you want me to say how daring and courageous your actions were? Do you want to know that you did well, that did all I would expect of a future Knight? Or do you simply want to know why I haven’t yet berated you for your display of reckless, juvenile stupidity? Is that it?”

During this entire delivery, I do not raise my voice. If anything, it grows slightly softer, but the word “stupidity” is spit with every ounce of disdain it deserves. I am surprised to see him flinch slightly at its utterance.

“I . . . ‘m not stupid,” he says after a pause, and the retort is weak at best. He still doesn’t understand.

“You have yet to prove otherwise,” I say harshly. “I assigned that mission to you because it was simple reconnaissance. In and out. Easy. A trainee at the bottom of their class could do it. You had absolutely no right to get as close as you did—and for what? You did not manage to procure any further information than if you had simply stayed your distance. There was no reason for you to injure yourself. And, may I remind you, that, if you had been caught, you would have put not only yourself, but the entire operation in jeopardy?”

He is silent. This both is and is not the tirade he expected.

“I . . . ‘m not stupid,” he says after a pause, and the retort is weak at best. He still doesn’t understand.

“You have yet to prove otherwise,” I say harshly. “I assigned that mission to you because it was simple reconnaissance. In and out. Easy. A trainee at the bottom of their class could do it. You had absolutely no right to get as close as you did—and for what? You did not manage to procure any further information than if you had simply stayed your distance. There was no reason for you to injure yourself. And, may I remind you, that, if you had been caught, you would have put not only yourself, but the entire operation in jeopardy?”

He is silent. This both is and is not the tirade he expected.

“Imagine that you had been caught, that you did not manage to extricate yourself. What do you think would have happened? Rescue?” The look in his eyes tells me, yes, he assumes he would have been rescued. I hold back a humorless grin, and it devolves into a grimace. “Not with surety. We protect our own whenever possible, Eggsy, but that does not mean that everyone we send into the field will be recovered. Granted, Knights are a top priority: we have invested the most in them, and they will be extracted at almost all cost. But every Knight walks into a mission with no expectation of this: you are on your own. You cannot rely on the idea that, whatever fuck-up you make, you will be rescued. This is a dangerous business, and people die.” I pause. “Your father knew that well.”
Up until that last remark, Eggsy’s expression had been one of faint shock. At the mention of his father, his cheeks flush red and his expression twists into anger. “Don’t you fucking mention him. You don’t know nothin’ about my da—”

He realizes his mistake as soon as he says it. I almost pity him.

“I knew him better than you did.” It’s despicable of me to say, even if it is true.

Eggsy cannot seem to summon any words to throw at me. It occurs to me that he has never asked about his father. The man is a figment of memory, and perhaps it’s better that he stay that way. He means something to Eggsy, simply because he is his father, but not because Eggsy had any lasting emotional connection to him. He was simply too young. He has never asked me about his father. He only ever asks about Harry.

Make of that what you will.

“I’m sorry.”

The words surprise me. I look up at Eggsy; even though he is silhouetted and his features are cast into shadow, I can see that his eyes are wet. No tears have fallen, but they hang dangerously around his eyelashes.

It is the chance of tears more than this words that release the rest of my anger from my body. I simply don’t know if I can stomach him crying right now. I sigh and take up my glass of whisky. “So am I,” I murmur, before taking a sip.

He turns his head to one side, as if he cannot bear to look at me.

Slowly, I once again place my glass on the end table and rise from my chair. I do not feel like doing this. Physical compassion has never come naturally to me. Nevertheless, I step towards Eggsy, placing my hands on his shoulders gently. He lets himself be folded into an embrace, and I murmur his name soothingly.

He does not cry. He merely breathes deeply as we stand like that for what seems like minutes. His arms, which had hung limply by his sides, gradually reach up to find my back, his fingers pressing between my shoulder blades, clutching at and crumpling my shirt. His breath is a slow, warm brush against my neck; for a moment, it seems that this is all that will happen.

But it isn’t.

I cannot say that I am surprised when Eggsy begins nuzzling my neck. His breath shallows as he mouths at the skin there. He presses his hot, plush lips along the line of my jugular, then tilts his head to kiss my jaw and the sensitive skin behind my ear. One of his hands snakes down to my waist, squeezing; his body loses all pretense of a hug, and he presses himself against me, already aroused. He whispers something that sounds like my name in my ear.

I think back to all the other moments before this when I could have told him “no”. This is another such opportunity. And I know without deliberation that I will not take it.

I turn my head to meet his lips, kissing him properly. His lips are wet, as are his cheeks; it seems that some tears did manage to fall. But he does not think on them now, only kisses me back hungrily. I taste salt, and the coppery flavor of blood. I run my tongue over the split in his lip, contemplating. I take the lip between my teeth and massage gently, eliciting a moan from Eggsy. It must still be tender, the natural rosy color of the flesh hiding the bruise beneath.
“Alec,” Eggsy pants into my mouth. He removes his hands from me and begins squirming and shrugging his shoulders, trying to ease the leather jacket off. It’s stubborn, so I join in the struggle. It is halfway down one arm, and I am pulling at the other when he winces.

Ah. The stitching. I try again, easing on the sleeve more slowly until it comes away from his upper arm and is settled around his elbow.

My pulling on his jacket sleeve removed what little gauze had been plastered to the wound, and it is exposed utterly. The reasonable part of me demands that we stop at once so that we can redress the wound—it would be foolish to risk infection—but that voice of reason is quickly silenced.

I examine the stitching: the wound is a long, somewhat jagged line, about six or seven centimeters. I imagine the weapon that made the wound, a knife plunging downwards, just deep enough to cut through skin, just shallow enough to graze muscle. The stitching is impeccably neat, but the wound will definitely leave a scar.

I place my hand on his bicep, and carefully brush my thumb along the edge of the wound.

Eggsy inhales sharply. He struggles a little, but his arms are still trapped by the jacket.

I turn back to him, capturing his mouth again. With one hand on his neck and the other on his arm, I find again the place where his lip has been split open; I bite down, hard, just as I press my thumb firmly into the skin around his wound.

He moans, half in pain and half in lust; his hips buck against me, and he struggles to remove the rest of the jacket. When it falls to the floor, he wraps himself around me. I bite and press again, and he lets loose an “ahh” that is aching and wanton.

He begins kissing me in earnest, almost attacking my mouth; it’s such a distraction that I don’t quite notice him backing us up until the backs of my legs hit the armchair. When I stumble slightly, he pushes me down so that I am sitting again. I do not have time to be confused, as he is bending over me in an instant, kissing me again while his hands begin fumbling with my belt.

“Eggsy,” I say. I don’t know what I mean to tell him.

He gives me a last kiss before sinking down to his knees, spreading my thighs so that he can nestle between them. He begins to tug at the zipper of my trousers before I stop him, placing one hand over his own.

My heart is beating wildly in my chest. That I have enough self-control to stop us astounds me.

He looks up at me with wild, blown eyes, lips swollen and so inviting. I’ve reopened both of his wounds: his lower lip is bleeding slightly, and there is a trace of red on the hem of his white sleeve. I think about what he is offering, his bruised and bloody lips wrapped around me, supplicating, sweet. He has never offered this before. Has never reciprocated. The thought that he would do so now, inviting as it is, gives me pause.

“You haven’t done this before.” It isn’t a question.

He blinks up at me, mouth curling into a catlike grin.

“Teach me.”
Ingress

Chapter Summary

This chapter is dedicated to hepcatliz, SpicySweet, and ViolyntFemme.

Chapter Notes

Ingress: (astronomy) the arrival of the sun, moon, or a planet in a specified constellation or part of the sky; the beginning of a transit

Reviews are love. My goal is to post about a chapter every month (I got excited and am posting this one early). The next two are already written.

Also, I have decided that the theme song for this fic is “Bite” by Troye Sivan.

That night, after he has received the proper instruction and after I have dragged him to my bed to return the favor, Eggsy asks for another assignment.

I almost laugh at the audacity of him, but he makes his request both so quietly and so shamefully that I cannot. He knows he does not deserve another chance so soon. Yet, he asks me anyway. He wants to prove himself, to show me that he is not as foolish as he has led me to believe.

Instead of being the morally upstanding, reasonable, sane Arthur that I am supposed to be, I answer his recklessness with recklessness of my own: I give it to him.

It is another reconnaissance mission, this time joining forces with the African office. He is not strictly needed, but I communicate to Director Tshiswaka that Eggsy is a promising trainee in need of more field experience; she responds that she is perfectly amenable to letting him participate in the mission — “provided that he behave”. (I don’t know if this stipulation is a general one or testament to the fact that Eggsy’s reputation has gone international.)

I assure he that he will. It may seem like a gamble on my good word but, for a wonder, I am not worried. I know that he will, because I have told him, in no uncertain terms, that should he bugger this one up I will personally fire him. And, as much as Eggsy dislikes to play by the rules, he will do so to remain in the arms of Kingsman.

Before, I think he would have laughed off my threat as idle, but now he gazes at me very seriously when I deliver this ultimatum. He nods solemnly and says that he understands. I can only assume that he means it and wants to stay in Kingsman badly enough to comply.

I see him off the very next morning around 1000 hours. Just before he reports to the hanger where a jet is waiting, he turns back to me, and asks if he can see me when he returns.

Of course, I say yes.

That evening, I find myself in Harry’s hospital room, contemplating my answer.
All is quiet in the long-term ward. A brace of nurses were leaving the room just as I arrived, having finished caring for Harry, and he and I are utterly alone. Or, perhaps, I am utterly alone.

Something has changed in my perception. Before, when I came here, it was to be close to . . . my best friend. Now, I feel close to nothing. The body that lies, pristine and unmoving, in the stark hospital bed is both entirely familiar yet utterly foreign. Ostranenie. It has been nearly six weeks since his coma was induced, and he grows more wan with each passing day, losing muscle, essentially wasting away. His cheeks are hollowing out, and his skin looks thinner. I recognize every detail, every feature; yet, he seems to me now more a wax figurine than a person. The only time he feels completely real to me is when I find the need to shave him, to touch him; to feel that his still flesh is yet warm, yet alive.

As I sit there, staring silently at him, watching the monitors flash periodically, a warm, sickly shame grows in my gut. It feels as though I am slowly forsaking him, in this and in all things. Perhaps, I always have, and I am only just now coming to serious terms with it.

I want to ask Harry if this is wrong. All of it. My visitation, silent and without intent. My failure to keep him alive in spirit. My decisions as Arthur. My dalliance with Eggsy.

What would he think of this? Is it a betrayal? Am I worthy of blame?

I want to ask Harry, but I don’t. Before, talking to him provided me with relief. Tonight, the thought of talking is stifling. I should leave. Go home.

But then, I think about the red cup sitting in my cupboard. The butterflies hung upon my wall. I stay into the evening, only because sitting there in silence is only slightly less terrible than being alone.

-KM-

Two short days creep by. The atmosphere at HQ is somehow both no different than usual, and moderately tense. When people speak to me now, their voices seem to be pitched lower, with an additional deference that speaks of treading lightly. When I hold another meeting with the directors, they are all tight-lipped, and talk slowly and deliberately. The shockwaves of Lauterbach’s firing have yet to subside, and I suspect they may never. In certain moments, I even find myself second-guessing whether or not it was the right decision.

I speak with Director Ulrich privately, and advise him on selecting a new deputy. To my utter relief, he expresses himself the desire to retire in the next few years, which makes selecting a qualified deputy all the more important: he will need someone who can take over, and make the transfer of power seamless. I suggest Joli Adolfa and, even in his apathetic state, he seems satisfied with that proposal.

That evening, I am tempted to return to the infirmary. But the time I had spent there the night before left me with a sick feeling, and so I go home instead.

It seems oddly quiet to me, without Eggsy. In a very short time period, I have grown used to having regular company in the evening, though I have lived decades without it. Actually, now that I think about it, the only person who ever came by with any semblance of regularity was Harry—about once a month, for the companionable drink or two. I suppose Eggsy has replaced him in that respect as
Replacement. It feels like an ugly word, but let’s call things what they are. I am replacing Harry. And so is Eggsy, if we are being truly honest.

It feels no less disgusting, for all its honesty.

I don’t eat dinner—more and more lately, food is something that I have little interest in. (I think the only reason I continue to eat is because Kay ensures that I am sent proper meals during the work day.) Instead, I go upstairs to my bedroom. I ignore the skeletal butterflies in their glass case and turn to my chest of drawers, opening the top drawer and moving aside a row of socks. I press down on a raised panel of wood, and it pops open to reveal a hidden compartment. I remove the contents with more care than necessary.

It is silly to keep such things in my sock drawer. I should have them digitized—we live in the modern age, after all—but that feels somewhat sacrilegious. These are . . . precious to me. They require the trappings of nostalgia. I look at them in the semi-dark, reliving the memories they conjure.

What I hide there, at the bottom of my sock drawer in that ridiculous secret compartment, are a handful of photographs. I am in most, but not all, of them; the person who is in every shot is Harry.

I used to keep two of these photographs out in the open, sitting atop my dresser, divided by the golden lapel pin that hasn’t been moved in almost a year. The dresser itself looked almost like a shrine. When Eggsy’s visits became more regular (and his invasion of my house more familiar), I hid them away once more. These are not items I want to discuss with him.

Two of the photographs are from our university days, that one year we overlapped at Cambridge. He was a senior the year I matriculated, young even for my class. When I think back on it, it amazes me how quickly we became friends, despite an almost 5-year age gap—rather, it amazes me that Harry Hart deigned to befriend me. To my young, naïve 17-year-old self, he seemed the epitome of wisdom and class, something that I could never hope to achieve. When I first met him, I remember thinking that he seemed completely out of reach. I continued to think that, even well into the first year of our friendship.

But here is the proof. In one photo, we are sweaty, grinning, having just finished a pick-up rugby match. Harry has his arm slung around my shoulder, hair askew, a reckless look about him. In the second picture, we are lounging around what look like Harry’s rooms. Harry is lain on his stomach on the floor making notes on a text, jacket tossed aside, tie askew, a pencil stuck behind his ear; it’s a touchingly undignified look for him. I am a few feet away, tucked into an alcove next to the window which is propped open to allow my occasional cigarette smoke to waft through. I am reading intently. We must be revising for final exams. I don’t remember who took either of these photos.

The next picture is several years later. Harry and I are standing in the middle of the white K that had been sprayed into the grass, suited up, deployed and deflated parachutes surrounding us. We aren’t looking at the camera, but rather seem to be congratulating each other; I think the Merlin of the time, Patrick Gannys, took the photo. It was the most perfect landing on record for any trainee, and it has yet to be beaten (even by Eggsy and Roxanne’s daring and ill-advised landing). We’re grinning as if we already know this.

After this, there is what appears to be a photograph of only me. I am laying atop of what looks like a roof, dressed in a dark tactical suit, a sniper rifle set up before me. I have turned my attention from peering down the scope of the rifle to give the camera an exasperated look. If you examine the picture closely, you can see the reflection of Harry in my glasses as he takes the snapshot.
The last picture is the most recent, but only by a decade. It was taken by an event photographer, covering a fundraising gala.

It is exceedingly rare for Knights to be casually photographed, but it does happen from time-to-time. When it does, it is the responsibility of the quartermaster to make sure the images are tracked down and destroyed, whenever possible. In this particular scenario, it was almost inevitable that Harry would be photographed: he was on assignment, undercover as a party-goer. He had managed to avoid most of the photographers, but this one had caught him unawares.

I managed to get a hold of the entire memory card, and most of the photographs were portraits of guests, women in gowns, men in tuxedos, clutching at one another and smiling. The photograph of Harry was one of the only candid portraits in the lot.

The photographer, of course, had no idea who Harry was, but it is obvious why they decided to photograph him. He looks like a man of importance. The photograph is a shot of Harry, standing by the bar and surveying the room. He is dressed impeccably, perhaps too well for being undercover. Even in the photograph, there are several other patrons who have turned to ogle him.

He looks, in a word, dashing. His tuxedo is razor-sharp, inky-black on stark white, with a silk bowtie that seems to have a liquid shimmer under the lights. He is wearing his Kingsman glasses and, while he is no doubt cataloging the room and its occupants, his expression is carefully relaxed, a small, not-quite smile playing around his lips. He looks like someone to be reckoned with, yet completely mysterious. This is Harry, completely in his element.

I should have destroyed it. And I did, but not before making myself a copy.

I remember the night after that mission. It had been a good one, full of close-calls only to be avoided by sheer cunning. I was on the coms with him that evening, monitoring his progress and giving him updates. His assignment was to prevent the assassination of one of the attendees (some politician, I can scarce remember) – primarily by assassinating the assassin. While at a party, dressed to the nines. The entire thing appealed greatly to Harry’s personal aesthetic. He’d strangled the assassin with his own tie and dropped him from a 5th story window, directly into a garbage bin. The job was neat, and Harry had barely broken a sweat, but seemed all the more alive for it. He had called me on his way back, his voice sounding more exhilarated and pleased than I had heard it in a long while. He asked me if I wanted to get dinner and then swung by HQ to collect me, nearly dragging me away from my desk. We had gone to one of his favorite restaurants, had supped on sumptuous food and wine. I shared in his victory, basking in the glow of his satisfaction. His smiles had been so easy, so smooth, his eyes twinkling at me over the rim of his wine glass.

We had gone back to mine, after that, a pair of grown men nearly stumbling out of the restaurant, more giddy than drunk. I remember him pressing close to me as we walked down the street and hailed a cab, the spicy scent of his cologne evaporating in the cold London air. I remember exiting the cab and nearly falling through the front door of my house, laughing at one another. I remember standing in the small entryway, catching out breaths, standing so close that I could feel the heat off of him. I had been staring at his mouth when he suddenly leaned near to me and murmured, seemingly apropos of nothing: “Oh, Alec, you are a devil.”

There are dozens and dozens of such scenes hidden away in the recesses of my memory. Instances spanning two decades—the better half of my life, really. Precious objects that I seldom exhume to admire.

I stare at the photo until my eyes begin to burn. Only then do I replace it, and the rest of the photographs, in my sock drawer.

Feeling defeated, I close the drawer, go over to my bed, and cocoon myself beneath the sheets fully clothed. It takes me only a few minutes to fall asleep.

-KM-

The scent of black cedar fills my nose. Black cedar and juniper.

We are standing in a dark coppice of evergreens. It has snowed recently, the ground thick with it, and a few stray flakes drift by quietly, the last stragglers coming to rest.

He is standing before me, a hazy vision in dark red and black. He stands still, but his body keeps shifting, as if the molecules that make him cannot decide what form they should remain in. He almost wavers, the edges of him quivering in and out of focus. Even his face lacks its usual clarity: I cannot tell if he is smiling or scowling, cannot see how old he is. Only his eyes seem to be in focus, twinkling with some unknown thought.

My breath forms a fog before me. Though it must be cold, I cannot feel it. Something hot boils in my stomach, in my chest, searing me from the inside out. I cannot take my eyes away from him.

He approaches me, nebulous as a shadow. He makes no tracks in the snow, makes no sound, but is standing before me in seconds. Close. I am reminded that he is only an inch shorter than me, his breath warm across my chin. Even still, I feel small. I long to bury my nose into his sweater, to take in the scent of smoke I know clings there.

All is quiet in the thicket. Disturbingly quiet. The only thing I can hear is his steady breathing, and occasionally the frantic patter of my heart, weaving in and out of the scene. It makes my palms sweat. I swallow over a stone in my throat.

His eyes have changed colors, from soft, warm brown to burning blue; they are alien, but alluring. I feel myself drawn into them, drawing closer to him, as close as I can be. I am enveloped by him, taken in completely.

His mouth hovers next to mine, as if preparing to transfer a delicate secret between our tongues. His lips part, and he says one thing, softly, but it sounds deafening in the stillness:

“Alec. Alec.”

-KM-

“Alec.”

I open my eyes.

Eggsy is crouched over me, one hand on my shoulder, the other steadying himself. He is not merely at my bedside but in bed with me, one leg on either side of mine, as though he’d had half a mind to straddle me.

I sit up so quickly that he is forced to lurch back to avoid a head-on collision. I feel as though I’m too warm, as if I should be sweating. I stare at him, still sleep-hazed and uncomprehending.

“Eggsy?” and then, “What the devil are you doing?”
The forgotten “here” hangs in the air, completely understood. He has absolutely no grace to look chagrinnned or otherwise: he simply gives me a lopsided grin. “I’m back from assignment.”

I draw a hand to my face and close my eyes as I massage my temples. My brain is still waking up, and I am having trouble coming up with what sound like full, coherent sentences. “Obviously.”

Eggsy is silent whilst I continue to keep my eyes closed. He is waiting for me to say something else, so I perform a minor miracle by asking: “And why are you here?”

I remove my hand and see Eggsy shrug. “You said I could come over. After.”

“I did.” It isn’t a question but almost sounds like one. I haven’t forgotten. I just didn’t anticipate that he would be in my bed when I woke up. I have a moment of panic where I wonder if he has gone snooping through my things, but it fades quickly. He is brash, but not that uncouth—and he knows that, should he be caught, the punishment would not be favorable. “But I did not invite you to break into my flat.”

Eggsy’s face clouds just slightly. Now, he is concerned he’s overstepped. “But—”

“You do know that I have 24-hour surveillance and security? What if you’d been shot?” I want to be irritated with him. It is halfway working, but I am still sleepy. How had he gotten in?

He shrugs again, this time just the right shoulder. “I know. I talked to the guy on duty—Witman—before I let myself in.”

That sinks in with stunning and fortifying clarity. I am suddenly very awake. “Good fucking lord.” I bring my hand to my eyes again. Excellent. By tomorrow, the whole of Kingsman will know that I am shagging Agent Unwin. Utterly fantastic.

“You’re not worried about him saying anything, are you?”

I look at him. Despite my desire to be irritated with him, he looks stupidly attractive. He is wearing a rumpled grey t-shirt, black Kingsman tac trousers, and socks. He looks like he just got off duty. “Of course I am.” Spies are the worst gossips.

Eggsy shakes his head, and resumes his earlier position, this time settling his full weight to straddle me. “Don’t be. Wit’s a nice bloke— and I have dirt on him.” He waggles his eyebrows.

Without my realizing it, my hands had settled onto Eggsy’s hips, my thumbs gently kneading into the muscle just inside his hip bone. Eggsy is seated directly on my lap, making the tiniest of circles with his hips, and my cock begins to stir.

“Is that so?”

In response, Eggsy reaches down and pulls his shirt over his head. His small brown nipples are hard, and the smooths lines of his chest and abdomen undulate with his hips. He watches me take him in, and smirks. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

I look away from his face, to his arm. From this vantage point, I can see the outline of the stitching, the wound looking less irritated for not having been sabotaged by me. I am tempted to reopen it, just to spite him.

“Hey.” I turn my focus back to him in time to catch the kiss he delivers, his lips plush and warm. He places his hands on either side of my head to steady himself, and my fingers dig into his hips. Without thinking, I slide one hand down the backside of his trousers to grip his arse.
He momentarily tenses, then groans into my mouth. His response is so gratifying that I forget I am meant to be angry with him for breaking in. After a few seconds, however, the realization comes back; I bite down hard on his lower lip, just shy of breaking skin. I can still feel the scar from several days ago under my tongue.

He gives a small yelp and leans back, fixing me with a glare. He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, checking to make sure the skin is still intact. “Christ, you’re a sadist.”

“And you’re a slut for it.”

The words escape my mouth before I have had a chance to consider them. I surprise myself and feel instantly as though I should take them back. But I cannot, and it would be foolish to try.

Eggsy’s eyebrows raise, and he sits back on his heels. I push myself up so that I am sitting, as opposed to laying back in the bed, putting us more-or-less at eye-level. We consider each other warily.

I do not believe that I am a true sadist any more than I believe Eggsy is a true masochist; nevertheless, there is something inherently valid in the words we have both spoken. He recognizes that as much as I do but is less sure of what to make of it. It disturbs him, somehow.

I place a hand lightly on his stomach, and it flutters under my touch. I breath in the scent of him: warmth and mild stale sweat that is not unappealing. He is not dirty, per se, but he smells raw. Fuckable.

But he hasn’t given me permission for that.

“Go have a shower,” I say slowly, giving my voice the edge of command that will make even a veteran Knight stand-to. “Get clean. Scrub every inch of yourself, and then come back here.”

Eggsy tilts his head. He is still contemplating my earlier words. “Why?”

“I want to make a proper mess of you.”

He does not fully understand what I mean just yet, but he does as I say; and when he comes back, I flip him onto his stomach, pull his hips so that his arse is in the air. And I deliver on my word, teasing and then plunging my tongue into him until he is screaming and coming all over the clean white sheets.

-KM-

I hadn’t realized what time it was when Eggsy woke me. I only knew that it was night. Once he has fallen asleep by my side, I see that it is 04:21. The little bugger has robbed me of at least two hours of sleep, and there is no point in going back to bed now.

Instead I stand, dress, and take a prepped gym back containing swim gear to the front door. I pause before the door thinking: should I leave Eggsy a key and code access to my flat? He seems to be coming and going as he pleases already. I shake my head, thinking better of it. It is better that I maintain some pretense of distance. Giving him such access seems uncomfortably domestic.

Dailey is waiting for me outside, and gives me a nod as he opens the door of the Kingsman cab. He drives me to headquarters without a word, his customary silence a blessed relief.

I swim laps in the Olympic-sized training pool for nearly an hour. I have only one other companion at this hour, an agent whose name and rank I do not know. She uses the lane at the far end, and I the
other. She pays me absolutely no heed, taking her laps with measured practice. She is gone by the
time I get out of the water and head for the locker rooms.

By 06:45 I am sat at my desk in my office, a fresh pot of tea steaming at one corner. It was there
when I entered the office, and Kay was at his desk, studiously going through my schedule. I will
never understand how Kay knows when I am going to be in office; I have a sneaking suspicion that
he sometimes keeps longer hours than I do, just to be prepared for my comings and goings.

Gazing into my computer screen, I survey the task-list Kay has sent me and hold back a sigh. It is a
minor miracle that another mentally unstable bastard has not tried to assert his/her supreme influence
over the world in the last four weeks; I feel indebted to my own good fortune. There is almost no
way we would have survived another catastrophe in the state we are currently in. As a whole, we
manage to deploy agents into the world to keep order and do some good; but my personal every day
is spent with the wasted intention of attempting to rebuild and reaffirm. It seems that I do nothing but
put out fires as they arise. Progress is a slow, burning itch in my side.

I begin attacking the items in my list in order of ease with which they can be dealt. I approve a new
R&D budget for a specialty weapons project (they seem especially intrigued by traceless poisons
lately); give the official stamp of approval on several hires for various divisions; sign off on a
directive to market an outdated piece of equipment to the masses (well, outdated for us, and we have
to replenish our funds somehow—where do you think handheld MP3 players came from?); and
address the Division of Asset Extraction’s proposal for reorganization, an idea put forth after failure
to save multiple agents during V-Day. There was little they could have done in those cases, but I
appreciate the need to reevaluate and improve all the same. Once I have sent my initial comments
back for review, I set to my next task. I make a call to the Berlin office around noon.

Joli Adolfa answers me almost immediately, and I engage her in light professional conversation. I am
merely checking in. She was officially given the post of Deputy early yesterday morning and, from
what I surmise, has been receiving only perfunctory help from Ulrich. I want to feel sympathy for the
man and whatever he is going through, but I have none to spare. I have neither the heart nor the time.
Nevertheless, Adolfa seems to be adapting rapidly, and speaks to me with a surprisingly unproud
confidence. It is utterly refreshing. I encourage her to contact either myself or Demarais if she has
any concerns, and she promises to do so.

As I end the call, I allow myself to congratulate my decision in choosing her. She is an exceptionally
strong candidate, and does not appear to have any trace of petty rebelliousness or hubris. She is
exactly the sort of candidate Kingsman hopes for. She will transition into the Director position before
the year is out, and at that point I can breathe a sigh of relief. Possibly.

My next call is to Demarais. He answers me in a particularly harried tone, and seems to be in the
middle of almost forcibly pushing someone out of his office. I wait patiently through muttered
profanity in French until I have his full attention.

“Monseiur Arthur,” while his second attempt at greeting me is much smoother, he sounds irritated,
something which I have learned not to take personally. “It has been long since we last spoke.”

I allow myself a small snort. Demarais, in addition to being brusque and shrewd, has a very dry sense
of humor. The line he delivers is without any hint of sarcasm. “I am sure you missed me,” I reply.
“Do you have the list?”

The list for which I am asking, in theory, contains the names and positions of personnel within
Kingsman who could take my place as Merlin. This is the last step before I formally take on the
mantle as Arthur, and it is something about which I will admit I am conflicted. I do not want to give
up the title of Merlin—I still think of myself as that entity. I have almost answered to that moniker
longer than my own given name. It is a job that I was—am—damn good at, an identity that I am reticent to let go of.

But I must. Retaining the duties of Merlin, whilst still acting as Arthur, is completely untenable. But I cannot, by rule, hold two full offices at once. It is only permissible at present because I am Acting Arthur—an interim position, a placeholder for the next Arthur.

“Always. No, I do not. The candidate pool is quite large.”

I present an unseen frown. “Surely not.”

There is a distinct click on the other end of a lighter being struck. It has only recently come to my attention that Demarais smokes, possibly because he only does so under intense pressure. I hear him inhale deeply, and then exhale through his next words. “No. But finding your replacement requires me to conduct a global review of personnel, and will most likely involve pulling someone valuable out of a job that will also be difficult to find a replacement for.”

“I understand; but this does need to move along.”

“Oui. I cannot fathom how you are maintaining charge of both the offices of Merlin and Arthur at once.”

“ Barely,” I admit.

Demarais hums, thinking. He gives a quiet grunt. “Fuck.” He does not elaborate on that, but instead asks, “How is our new Deputy Berlin Director?”

“Remarkably well, it seems. I spoke with her just before you.”

Demarais pauses again. Then: “You know, the other directors are getting … twitchy.”

To hear him say so was no surprise, but it sent a cool, slimy lump to settle in my belly. “In what way?”

Demarais snorted. “In the stupid way that even the most rational of people get twitchy after new blood exercises power. Lauterbach was a connard* and we all know it, but seeing you fire him in such a manner has ruffled some goose feathers.”

“You think I acted rashly?”

“I think he got what was coming to him. But the way you did it was . . . disturbing. None of us knew what that meeting was called for—I had my suspicions, but for those not in the know, it was very spontaneous. Erratic, even.”

I sighed. Demarais was far from reprimanding me for my actions—he was only stating what was fact—but I felt something like regret anyway. Memos had been sent out after that meeting, describing in great detail Lauterbach’s main offense, and his minor offenses; there is full documentation, now archived, of how he betrayed this organization by defying my word, and unnecessarily endangered people. But I recognize that even this full written explanation could not temper the weight of what they had witnessed. I indeed must have appeared erratic, even despotic.

“You need to regain their trust. They know little of you—you spent so much of your career out of the spotlight, as is proper and required of Merlin. You have done very well in steering a sinking ship, and it seems we have patched most of the holes. If you can avoid another such outburst, I think you will be fine.”
“In other words, act with more decorum,” I say grimly.

Demarais gives a gruff laugh. “Amusing, for me to be telling you this. Personally, I think you handled it well. I would have strangled the little fucker.”

I laugh, despite myself, and it’s just as well. All conversations made over Kingsman lines are recorded, encrypted, and stored. Even if only for the sake of posterity, it is better to make the joke apparent.

Sobering again, I say: “Perhaps, try to have some names for me by next week? I cannot remain Merlin forever,” even as much as I wished to.

“Oui, Monsieur Arthur. Next week.”

The moment I end the call, a new message appears in my inbox. Merely reading the name of the sender melts my mood from decent and persevering to sickly sour. Caffrey.

I look at the clock in the bottom right corner of the computer screen. It is barely 14:00. If I open the message now, the rest of my day will be shot. It already feels as though my mind is closing in on itself.

I sit there for several minutes, contemplating. Waiting. Staring at the notification, and the title of the message:

*Update: Galahad.*

-KM-

In the end, I hide my messaging platform behind another window, and try to put the message out of my mind. It works, but barely. I manage to pass the rest of the afternoon in a lucid haze. I process more reports, and have Kay set meetings. Roxanne has requested to see me. About what, I cannot be certain, but I would bet a good deal that it is to do with Eggsy.

He has been spending all of his free time with me, of late. I think back to the single time that I forced him to spend his evening with his mother and kid sister—it seems so long ago—and think, too late, that I should have been firmer in making him . . . socialize. He and Roxanne were something like friends before this; I can only imagine what she must be thinking, noting his constant absence.

He’s a young man. He *should* be spending time with his family, his friends, people his own age.

I startle a laugh out of myself.

This is fucking ridiculous.

My phone buzzes at 17:03. It is Eggsy.

I ignore him. Instead, I unhide my messaging platform, and open the missive from Caffrey.

*Kingsman Messaging System [KMS]*

*Author: Drs. Richard Caffrey and Emory Buchanan*

Recipient: Arthur
Per our previous report (G5.232), two attempts have been made to resuscitate Agent Galahad (Harrison J. Hart) without success (reference: Medical Reports G5.229, G5.232). A third attempt has been deemed unfavorable. Historically, prognosis for assisted recovery from coma is approximately three (3) weeks. The patient has been comatose for approximately six (6) weeks, and his condition has been steadily deteriorating with no indication of recovery. Last EEG and MRI evaluations (reference: Medical Report G5.233) revealed a marked decrease in brain activity, indicating that patient may be entering a vegetative state.

Given the patient’s failure to respond to treatment and steady deterioration, it is our medical and professional opinion that spontaneous recovery is highly unlikely. Per Kingsman Protocol K58642, we recommend, at most, two more weeks of monitoring before euthanasia. Protocol has been attached, with relevant details filled out, pending your signature.

Signed,

Richard Caffrey, M.D., Chief of Neurology
Emory Buchanan, M.D., Chief of Anesthesiology
Of course, I didn’t go home.

How could I possibly, given what was in the message?

I stood from my desk immediately and exited my office. Kay looked up from his computer, pale eyebrows shooting up in surprise. I barely glanced at him, and he did not try to engage me.

The walk to the infirmary was a blur of long hallways and people whose faces I did not see. If anyone acknowledged me, or saluted, I did not see them. I strode stiffly, determinedly, curtly, until I reached my destination.

Once inside hospital room B029, I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. I was breathing heavily, and my panting seemed horribly loud in the soft silence.

And there was Harry. Still and expressionless as always.

I am now sitting in a hard plastic chair, my suit jacket discarded and thrown over the back. The chair I pushed up against the wall nearest the bed. Whereas before I might have moved it closer, so that I could sit closer to Harry, I now leave it where it is; and it puts three feet between me and the bed. I want to be near him, but not near him. The distance is welcome, and excruciating.

From this distance, I make a study of him. When he first went under, I had traced with my eyes every contour and feature of his face, reassuring myself with how familiar all of it was. I knew everything.

Thinking back on that early encounter and seeing him now, he is barely recognizable. He is gaunt, harrowingly so. His skin is unnaturally pale and looks waxy. It seems to have shrunken and tightened around his bones, which rise up and portray the simple skeleton that lays beneath. The scar on his left temple, which was before so miniscule as to never be seen, stands out, looks rougher than before. It has been nearly a week since I last shaved him, but the stubble that has grown out is short and sluggish. White bandages still cover the right side of his head but they are simpler dressings now, not the large half-turban they had dressed him in before. I do not know how the wound looks now—healed presumably, as much as it would ever be, the bandages a needless precaution. I want to stand, bend over and tenderly unwrap his head; to see what is left of the wound, to gaze upon the scar it has left him with.

Not that it matters. It is ironic, I think bitterly, that the wound may have healed and, yet, it will do
him no good.

“What would you have me do?”

They are the first words I have spoken since my arrival. Two hours have passed without my saying a word. My voice now sounds rough, gravelly.

“How long . . . ?” my voice fails me, breaking. I swallow hard.

*How long should I wait before signing your life away?*

I stare at him expectantly, impatiently, as if I have finished asking the question aloud. As if he were capable of giving an answer. It seems foolish to throw anger at a statue, but the ire rises within me all the same. It curls like something sick and ugly in my gut, and my very eyes grow hot just looking at his still, wax-like form.

“Say something, *god damn you*,” I hiss, a horrible and sickening flush rising up my neck. My skin has begun tingling, so full of blood and exasperation, fury rising in me like bile. I have to look away from him to stop from yelling. I sense a scream perched at the back of my throat, and I will do my damnedest to keep it from spilling loose.

It has been like this for the past two hours. I have gone through bouts of pure enmity and despair, my head checker-boarded with these twin emotions. One moment, I am so angry that I think I might tear the room apart; the next, I sink into a despondency so severe that even regular breathing becomes laborious. It is too much for me—me, Merlin, who is not supposed to encounter any emotion. I feel sick.

And foolish. I feel immensely foolish.

-KM-

Almost two hours pass before Eggsy appears.

I do not actually notice him come in. I am so wrapped up in my own blasted misery. I simply become aware, at some point, that I am not alone in the room.

He materializes in my peripheral vision, but it is slow, effortful, as if my subconscious brain does not want to recognize that someone else is here with me. Misery is so much easier to fully succumb to when one is alone. I am unready to let go of it.

Yet, I do. I lift my head from where it has been laying in my hands, and look at Eggsy.

It only then occurs to me that I have been sitting in semi-darkness, the only light in the room coming from the ones above Harry’s headboard. Eggsy’s entire figure is bathed in shadow, all of his colors muted. He stands just in front of the door, barely in the room. There is something off about him, but I cannot quite put my finger on it.

“Eggsy,” I acknowledge.

He looks at me. It is an odd gaze, almost . . . careful; but its subtlety barely registers with me.

“You weren’t at home.”

I sit back in the chair, almost sprawling, drawing my gaze back to our mutual Sleeping Beauty.

“No.”
“I waited around.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I got in touch with your secretary; he let me know where you might be.”

His voice is uncharacteristically flat. If I were in a mood to give a fuck, it might intrigue me. I continue to stare at Harry. “Kay is intuitive in that way,” I reply blandly.

I hear Eggsy shove his hands into his pockets. “He took some convincing to give you up. I don’t think he likes me much. In fact, I think he’s jealous.”

A ripple of irritation courses through me. The emotion is fresh, vibrant, and slices through my gloom with a keenness that brings me into the present moment. I dislike when people imply things about Kay, whether it is related to his disability or no. I feel protective of him.

“Don’t needlessly speculate,” I say sharply.

“Too late for that, guv. Been doing a lot of speculating today.”

I do turn to look at him then. The hard petulance in his tone makes it impossible for me to do otherwise. I am about to snap back at him when he steps further into the room, nearer to the meager light.

As he comes forward, I register that he is wearing the same kit he came over with early this morning, both his shirt and trousers rumpled. His dark golden hair is a mess and it appears as though he hasn’t shaved, stubble lining his strong jaw. His eyes glint dark green in the dim, and they are red around the edges as if he has been crying, or trying hard not to.

It is not his emotional state that unnerves me. Lord knows, I have seen him emotionally compromised (read: a wreck) before. I almost feel as if I have not known him in any other state. I have seen Eggsy tearful before.

I don’t know that I have ever seen him this angry.

His entire body is tense with it. Anger clings to him like a dark garment, making him shimmer and shiver. There is a searing look in those tear-reddened eyes that speaks of an emotion I am all too familiar with: a sense of betrayal.

“I woke up late,” he says, his eyes locked on mine. “Almost noon. Too late to make a real day of it, and I had nothin’ to do. So I just . . . hung out. At your place. I don’t think I’ve ever been there in the daytime.”

I am watching him carefully now. My breathing has slowed. Eggsy only looks at me. He does not dare look at the bed.

“I was sittin’ in your kitchen, thinkin’. I’d made myself coffee. You only have one red cup. It looked queer, sittin’ with all those white ones. You’ve a lot of queer things in your place. Things that don’t seem like you.”

I say nothing. Somehow, it had never occurred to me that he snoop, or even notice.

“It’s fuckin’ hilarious,” he says bitterly, looking down at the floor. “I never noticed the butterflies before. Not once, in all the times I’ve been in your bedroom, did I think about ‘em.” Deep breath. “Only today, when I was thinking about that red cup, did I go back and look at them.”
He stops his perusal of the floor and looks back at me. The accusation hits me even before he speaks.

“Harry collects butterflies. He has frames ‘n frames of them. But none like yours.”

No, none like mine. They were gifts, taken from his collection. He felt no need to obtain more specimens for himself. (“If I want a look at them, I’ll just pop by,” he’d said, giving me that crooked smile.)

Then, Eggsy raises one of his hands and I see, for the first time, that he is holding something. Something very familiar.

“I was snooping around your books, too. You’ve got all these pilot manuals and technical pieces, textbooks and other shite. But I also found small nook with a bundle of poetry,” he spits the word. “I’m not much one for poetry— can’t make sense of it. Funny thing, but you don’t seem like the type either.”

He takes another step towards me and now I have to look up at him. I wait.

He drops the book in my lap. It is a slim hard-cover volume of AE Housman; its pages are yellowed and corners worn, and it still bears the mark of the Cambridge library from which Harry had nicked it. It was the first book of poetry Harry had ever given me. A stolen gift. I don’t need to open it to know that, interleaved with pages of typed rhyme are thin pieces of graph paper, bearing almost illegible scribbles, mad ramblings, and the occasional stroke of what can only be described as calligraphy.

It should be no surprise from whose hand these inscriptions came.

Even if he has never seen the like, Eggsy isn’t stupid.

“It’s got Harry’s writing in it.” He says this slowly, then pauses. “They’ve all got his writing in them.”

I can see it now. Before he got here, he was still piecing it all together. He was not quite sure of himself, or what he had found in his little snooping venture. I have schooled my face into a blank mask, but he can already see that he was right. And me— I can see all the pieces falling into place in his mind, edges snapping together into a full, craven picture. He has connected the dots, rationalized the clues, pulled this group of stars into a damning constellation.

We stare at each other. I cannot think of what to say.

“It’s not the nurses, is it? You’re the one who shaves him.”

I nod.

“What is he to you?”

I look over at the prone form on the bed.

“A friend.” It’s not a lie.

“I don’t fuckin’ believe you.”

“It hardly matters.” The words come out hollowly.

He steps to stand in front of me, blocking my view, putting himself between me and Harry. I have no choice but to look up at him.
“It does to me,” he nearly spits. “What are you hiding?”

I stand up, so suddenly that it startles both of us. Now, I have the height advantage, and it is with some absurd satisfaction that I look down upon him to snarl, “It really isn’t any of your bloody business.”

He won’t be deterred. He stares right back up at me, his youthful face reddening with ire. His next words are shouted, and its sounds utterly deafening in the sterile stillness:

“I bloody well think it is!”

“Why? What do you care?”

“Because I—” Eggsy stops. A bright blush creeps across his cheeks and he looks down, unable to hold my gaze. The tops of his ears have grown pink as well; at first, I think this is from embarrassment. But, when he speaks next, I know he is crying.

“I think I’m in love with him.”

He makes his admission, quietly, brokenly. The words freeze the blood in my veins and make my ears ring: I hear them echoing in the ceiling of my calvaria, once, twice, before dying in the flat silence that follows. This, deafening, but not a surprise. I have always known this. It was apparent to me from the first time I saw them together: the way Eggsy looked at Harry, the respect and awe and wonder and admiration. When Harry first brought Eggsy to Kingsman to take part in the Knighthood selection process, I knew. Hearing it now changed nothing. It did not floor me, merely confirmed something that I had always known to be true, no matter that I wished otherwise. All the same, hearing it drove a knife through me in a way I had not anticipated.

What Eggsy doesn’t know is that he never stood a chance: there was no not falling in love with Harry Hart.

It takes me a moment to realize he has begun shaking, a stuttering sort of shiver that seems to shame him even more deeply. His head hangs so low that I can see the back of his neck, which has also bloomed an irate pink.

A wave of emotion floods me. In that moment, I want nothing so much as to put him out of his misery.

So, I reach out, and bring him to me.

He folds into my body easily. I wrap my arms around him tightly and he presses against me, his hands clawing at the back of my shirt. I feel his shaking keenly now, feel the way it wracks his body as it slots against mine. He buries his face into my neck, his breath and lips scorching, his tears dripping down onto my starched collar. I curl myself around him protectively, wanting to shelter him. Despite myself, something in me breaks for him and his grief. God, this beautiful, blasted boy.

Eggsy’s entire body is hot, and his warmth seems into me through our clothing. Gently, I bring a hand up to place on the back of his head and bury my nose in his messy hair. He still smells clean, but I can still pick him out through the fragrant shampoo, both masculine and boyish. He still smells faintly of sex. I stroke his head gently; eventually, his sobbing subsides into intermittent sniffling and his breathing evens out. He continues to clutch at me, and I find myself swaying us slightly, stroking the hair atop his head.

When he swallows, his whole body moves with it, as if it is painful. He licks his lips close to my neck, readying them to speak:
“He . . . he hasn’t . . .” his voice breaks. “He isn’t going to wake up, is he?”

The knife in my heart twists, and I cradle him more tightly. “The doctors do not think so.”

Eggsy lets out a broken sob, and his tears begin anew; this time, however, they are quieter, less angry and more despairing.

“But—but he might—” he says weakly, but there is almost no hope in it.

I shake my head. The report from Caffrey had been damning. Two attempts to resuscitate. Two failures. Kingsman housed the brightest and most dedicated physicians, the best possible standard of care, and, most importantly, unparalleled advances in science and technology in nearly every medical field. And still, we cannot save him. At two weeks, they had thought his recovery likely. At four weeks, they had remained optimistic. Now, at six, he was slipping away from us.

I think back on that moment, when Caffrey suggested the medical coma. It had seemed like there was no other choice. Now, I wonder.

Vegetative. A wave of bile rises in my throat.

“But, people can be in comas for years,” says Eggsy, stubbornly hopeful, yet still crying. “Decades, I’ve ‘eard—”

“Eggsy,” I say his name gently, because I do not know if I can bring myself to say the rest; and, yet, I must. I have shared little enough with him about Harry’s prognosis. He doesn’t even know about the attempts to re-enervate.

“The doctors have given him two weeks before. . . .”

I trail off, distracted by the way Eggsy has gone eerily rigid in my arms. He pulls away so he can look me in the eyes. His face is red, though the color is quickly draining away into something pale and still. His mouth is plush and wet from his tears, tears which also cling to his dark blonde eyelashes and bathe his green eyes, dark as forests in the dim. There is a cold look in them now, wary, hunted.

“Before what?”

Protocol K58642. Euthanasia. It is considered a mercy. There was a point when I would have felt disgusted with myself for even considering it; now, it seems like a cold inevitability. Is it indeed a mercy, or have I simply become that heartless?

Words tumble like stones from my mouth: “We cannot keep him like this. The doctors say—”

With more force than is necessary, Eggsy pushes himself out of my embrace, stumbling backwards. He looks at me with disbelief and horror. “No.” He shakes his head.

My arms feel empty without him. “Eggsy—”

The anger in him flares swiftly, flushing his cheeks once more. “NO! How could you—how could you even think that? You? His friend?” He spits the word back at me, his animosity growing with every second he looks upon me. “Get out.”

“Eggsy—” I step towards him.

“FUCK OFF!”
Outside in the hallway, something crashes. I look towards the door in panic. A shadow moves across
the shutters of the one window as a figure rushes past.

I nearly knock over the nurse who has come to investigate as I barge out the door. I do not have the
decency to apologize before all but running back down the hallway, towards the elevator.

How could you—

His friend.

-KM-

There is nothing for it. I go home.

Dailey drives me this evening. The ride is completely and utterly silent. He does not even bid me
good evening as he drops me at my house. As if he knows not to speak.

I drop my jacket just inside the door, uncaring. I walk past my living room with its dark hearth and
many shelves, everything looking fairly undisturbed for having been snooped through. I go to face
the stairs, and every step seems so heavy that I am exhausted when I actually make it to the top. I
enter my bedroom and walk to the shower, heedless shedding clothes as I go.

I turn the shower as hot as it will go and step under the scalding spray. I let the water wash over me,
though it cannot cleanse me no matter how much I wish it to.

I think I’m in love with him.

The words cycle endlessly in my head. I think I’m in love. I think I’m in love. I’m in love. I’m in love.

The words are perilous, even in everyday life. Among us, even more so. To admit to such profound
affection was damning, dangerous. To show your heart is to show your hand, as Harry would say.
There is little that is more dangerous for a spy.

It seems that Harry never got around to telling Eggsy that.

I think about this, about Harry and Eggsy, as I stand beneath the spray, slumping against one wall of
the shower. I think back to the interactions between them I had witnessed, and to the ones I had
watched through his glasses’ feed. After he had been shot, I had gone back through and watched all
the footage from the last three weeks—under the pretense of work, of looking for clues and other
such nonsense, but mostly out of my own morbid curiosity. I had rewatched some of the video feed
from our own inhouse security cameras as well. It seems compulsive, now that I think about it.
Almost creepy. But I was curious.

Harry had . . . a particular deference towards Eggsy that I have not seen elsewhere. He had a sharp
tongue for when Eggsy was being petulant, but it always came from a place of wanting what was
best for him. He had nurtured Eggsy like a father, had praised him and given him those soft, pleased
smiles that he reserved like special treats. He had seldom touched Eggsy save to shake his hand or
occasionally rest his hand on Eggsy’s shoulder. And, now that I think about it, these movements
almost seemed incomplete, as if Harry was holding something back. I think about the way Eggsy
would look at Harry, as if he hung the moon.

And the way Harry would look at Eggsy, as if seeing the stars anew.

There are no strict rules around fraternization among and within our ranks; but Harry has strict rules
around his heart. He will not get involved with someone he has to work with and who might die on
the morrow; more eminently, he refused to put anyone through losing him (which is unequivocally ironic in the present situation). But the heart is a fickle thing, with a will of its own, no matter how we tamp it down and beat it into submission. I know that as much as—or, perhaps, more than—anyone.

Was it possible that Harry had . . . reciprocated?

My chest tightens painfully at this. It almost feels like the beginning of a heart attack.

It wouldn’t matter. It simply wouldn’t. It would be a moot point. Perhaps Eggsy was special, in some way. But not enough to make Harry break his one rule.

He hadn’t broken it for me.

Why should Eggsy be any different?

The question haunts me. Eventually, I close my eyes and let the water run over me, washing it away.

-KM-

I do not even bother with the pretense of sleep. When I step out of the shower, I do not pull on sleepwear, but instead a pair of dark grey trousers, a shirt, and a soft black turtleneck. I go downstairs to my living room, start a fire in the hearth, and pour myself a glass of scotch. I spare half a thought for opening a book to read at leisure, but know I will be too distracted; so, I retrieve my pad from my seldom used office, sit myself down upon the sofa, and begin going through the memos and reports that have been piling up in my inbox. I only get up to refill my scotch.

It is nearly gone 11 before a sound makes me stir. I look up from my pad to see that the fire, having not been tended, has gone low.

Leaving the pad on the couch, I go to the door and open it without checking the cameras. I know who it is.

Eggsy stands there on the darkened stoop, looking much the same as he had earlier: rumpled, sleepless. His eyes are raw red and his face is still flushed. His shoulders are hunched and his head bowed. He looks an absolute wreck.

Behind him, at the bottom of the steps leading up to my door, stands my personal security for the night, the aforementioned Agent Witman. He had obviously abandoned his unobtrusive perch in some lofty shadow of the street in order to escort Eggsy to the door. He is dressed in dark, casual clothing, looking like a bruiser. Whatever rapport he and Eggsy had before is not considered in the present moment: Witman is giving the back of Eggsy’s head a look full of hard misgiving. One of his hands rests on a bulge inside of his jacket, reaction to a perceived threat.

I raise my hand to Witman and shake my head once. Witman lowers his hand but does not step back.

“Sir,” he says. Not a question.

“We are fine here, Agent Witman,” I hear myself say, just as Eggsy wordlessly pushes past me and goes inside. I do not spare a moment to see Witman’s reaction before I also turn and close the door behind me.

Eggsy is already striding across the living room by the time I turn back around. He does not wait or spare a glance for me, just climbs the stairs at the end of the room. Wordlessly, I follow.

He storms directly to my bedroom, pushing the door open forcefully. Anger is infused in his every
movement, and I can see it radiating off of him as I follow him in.

He stands next to the bed, keeping his back to me. Angrily, he kicks off his shoes, his socks, and pulls his shirt over his head. It is only then that he turns to look at me.

I have barely a moment before he is on me, pushing me until my back hits the wall, surging up on the balls of his feet to deliver a fierce, bruising kiss that has the unmistakable bite of junipers and ethanol. Gin. He’s been drinking. I can smell it on him too, now that he is this close, can smell it on his breath and seeping out of the pores in his skin.

But he is kissing me and touching me with the sort of unadulterated hunger I had previously never experienced from him. It is only now that I realize how restrained he had been before. His hands, normally content to grab for purchase and stay put, are roving, his fingers scrabbling to get underneath my shirt and touch the skin there, on my stomach, my back, up to my chest. It’s as if he is desperate to touch every inch of me. He assaults my mouth in the same manner, using his tongue in a way that is absolutely filthy— until I gain control of the kiss, and return the favor. Most tellingly, he presses his hips against mine, and I can feel him hardening through his trousers.

“I want you to fuck me,” he pants into my mouth.

My hands, which had been circling around his waist, freeze momentarily. My brain, which had been inactive for the past several seconds, kicks back into gear with frightening clarity. I try to pull away but Eggsy leans up to kiss me again, stealing my objection from my mouth. The smell and taste of gin is somehow even more potent now. He is drunk, or nearly. He must be.

I manage to pull back enough to pant, “Eggsy—”

He pulls at my turtleneck and undershirt so that I have no choice but to lift my arms or be stuck. I choose the former, my speech somewhat muffled by the fabric passing over my head, “You don’t—”

“I do,” he says, and can I detect a slur? I don’t know. I am not drunk, but I have had two glasses of scotch this evening and it is enough to impair my judgement of someone else.

“Eggsy, I can’t—”

He pushes me then. Hard.

My back connects with the wall, making a loud thunk. I push myself off, but he shoves me again, this time causing my head to bang against the wall, and he is winding up to do it again—or to hit me? – but I do not give him the chance.

I catch one of his wrists and swiftly twist us so that I can bring his arm behind him. It is now I who have him up against the wall, though he is face-first, head turned so his cheek is cheek is against it. He flails, the muscles in his body working to throw me, but I bring his arm up higher in warning and he grunts in pain. I catch his other wrist and pin it to the wall. He struggles, twisting and cursing angrily, and I press the weight of my body against his in an attempt to still him. If he were sober, he could escape this hold, but he is made powerless by his intoxication. I have him. And, as if sensing this, he stills.

For a split second, it seems that this altercation might end here. But then, Eggsy gives a whimper that is equal parts wanton, despairing, and furious, and all sense leaves me in a rush.

I tighten my grip on him and bend my head to nuzzle briefly at his ear, which sends a shiver through him. And then, without warning, I bite him.
The sound he makes is intoxicating. My cock stiffens at the sound, and I bite down even more forcefully. Eggsy groans, his knees buckling slightly. He sags against the wall, and pants, “Please, please fuck me, please fuck me—”

I maneuver us away from the wall, wrestling him towards the bed. Once close enough, I give him a hard shove so that he falls back onto it, looking dazed. His eyes are slightly glassy, from booze or lust or both.

He tries to prop himself up, but I shove him back roughly. I bend to undo his trousers and pull them off; his briefs follow and then he is completely naked, splayed before me.

Christ, he has a stunning body, all smooth, pale skin and supple muscle. And his face, atop it all— so pure in his handsomeness, so boyishly beautiful. All of his lovely skin is flushed, his toned stomach rising and falling rapidly with his breath. His cock, jutting from a nest of dark blond curls, lays heavily against his hip. He looks absolutely edible.

I strip off my own trousers and briefs efficiently and kneel on the edge of the bed. I crawl until I am over him, and he surges up to kiss me again, sloppy and with plenty of bite. He nips at my lower lip while one of his hands strays down my stomach towards my cock.

I slap his hand away and lean my full weight against him. I use one hand to frame and grip his jaw, squeezing at the joint axis so that his mouth opens and I can plunder it mercilessly. He whines deliciously, helplessly, hands moving to grip at my thighs on either side of him. I bite his lips to return the favor, and am gratified to feel him shudder beneath me, a mix of pleasure and pain as I nearly break the skin yet again. His nails dig into my thighs, dragging, and I know there will be nice rows of welts there tomorrow.

“Alec,” he whines into my mouth. “Please—”

I hate the way my name sounds in his mouth, the way it tastes between us. I should have never told him.

In a flash of unwarranted anger, I manhandle him until he is flipped onto his belly. I lean over him, pressing myself into his back, rubbing the length of my cock against his arse. He squirms beneath me, first uncomfortable, then pushing back into me.

“You want this,” I growl into his ear, my voice sounding harsher than lust. “You want me to fuck you.”

He nods emphatically, groaning. “I— god, fuck, please—”

It should take me more convincing than that. But it doesn’t.

-KM-

This is not how I imagined I would take him him.

Of course I have thought about it. How could I not? He has been flaunting it in my face for ages, been egging me on with it, even while I refused him. In this moment, I cannot recall exactly how I had imagined it; but it was nothing like this.

He brought lubricant with him. He directed me to his trouser pocket, and I find there a small blue bottle, brand new. It looks like he might have picked it up at a drugstore on his way here. Right after he had finished downing his gin.
(And, God. How premeditated was this? What am I doing? If I think about this too long, I won’t be able to go through with it. And I’m not sure what Eggsy will do if I don’t.)

All my good, common sense tells me to go slowly, to be gentle. To take my time with him. But he set the tone of this encounter when he barged through the door, and every small attempt I make to turn this into something gentler is sharply rebuffed. He curses at me, tells me to get on with it, tries to rise up and grapple with me. I shove him back down onto the bed, hold down his wrists, and press against him once more until he stops twisting and bucking. When he stills long enough, I place two slicked fingers against his hole and stroke. He moans, and it sounds broken.

He doesn’t want me to do anything as sentimental as “make love” to him. He does not want me to take my time. He wants to be used. To be well and truly fucked.

And so, I do.

I place a pillow beneath his hips to raise them to my liking. I still take time in preparing him, slicking him up, inserting one finger, then two, working my way up to three. It is rough enough that he doesn’t complain, seeming to take the discomfort and little sparks of pleasure both in stride. All the while, I toy with him, reaching underneath to pinch his nipples, give a teasing stroke to his cock. I listen to him, to the keening sounds he makes, his soft, stupid sex noises. I have to squeeze the base of my cock from time to time to relieve the mounting pressure.

Most people do not come their first time doing this, but I make it my job to get him so riled up that he doesn’t have a choice.

When I finally do enter him, I take it slowly. He does not protest this: my fingers a long and thin, while my cock is not, and it causes him obvious strain to take me into him. He squirms and pants and, though I cannot see his face, I can imagine the expression there. His body betrays every inch of his inexperience. I distinctly feel the head of my cock push past the first ring of muscle. The pressure is intense and, combined with the heat of him, makes me light-headed. I have to stop several times. It has been a long time since I have done this.

By the time I enter him fully, Eggsy is noticeably shaking from the strain. He is on his hands and knees, his back hunched. I trail a hand down to his cock and notice that it has flagged somewhat. This, more than anything, cements me in the present moment, gives me a sense of determination.

I begin to ease in and out of him in slow, shallow thrusts. It becomes easier each time, his body relaxing fractionally against the burn and stretch. He is silent for the first several strokes, and I think he may be biting his lip. I make the mistake of looking down at where my cock disappears into his body, and my hips snap forward involuntarily, making Eggsy gasp. I do not want to hurt him, but I do want to fuck him.

Each thrust now has me buried to the hilt, and Eggsy has begun making those soft, whimpering noises again. I take the moment to reposition him, pressing the flat of my hand against his upper back and coaxing him to fold his arms beneath him so that his arse is in the air—

When I fingered him open, I had purposefully avoided his prostate; I wanted to save it for when I fucked him. I know that I’ve now hit it when he yelps. His body jerks like he’s been shocked, and his surprise turns into a moan of pleasure.

That sound causes something to snap inside of me. I begin to fuck him in earnest, my hands grasping his hips hard enough to bruise. My strokes turn merciless and rough, but I’m careful not to change my angle, unerringly hitting that same sweet spot. His body thrums around my cock, and I don’t know that I’ve ever felt anything so perfect. Eggsy makes high, keening moans every time I drive in,
and it isn’t long before he is practically sobbing, his body shaking with the strain and the pleasure.

“Oh my god,” he says between gasps, sounding desperate “oh— oh fuck, you’re—” his words are drowned by his own sob.

I can sense the tension in his body building, any sense of discomfort having given over to pleasure. I myself could come at any moment.

And I want to. God, I want to.

My hips snap into him and I reach one of my hands down to stroke his cock. I barely need to touch him before he gives one final cry, and his body convulses as he spills into my hand. His orgasm ripples through every inch of him, and it is the feeling of his body squeezing me in that most delicious way that finally brings me over the edge. I grunt, spilling myself into his arse and nearly collapsing on top of him.

My hands loosen on his hips and, with nothing to support him, Eggsy’s legs give way. He slumps down onto the bed in a slick mess of sweat and come, breathing heavily.

I press my forehead to the middle of his back, my hands stroking up and down his flank. My head is hazy, as if I’m floating, and I have to take several centering breaths to ground myself. Christ.

We lay there like that for what seems like a small eternity. Eventually, Eggsy starts to squirm beneath me, and I pull out, wincing slightly. I push myself up and off him, rolling to the side.

He turns his head to look at me. His face is still flushed, and his expression is soft, distant, sleepy. Sad. There is an unmistakable sadness in the line of his mouth, the corner of his eyes.

Without thinking, I reach a hand forward. I cup his face, stroke his cheek gently, and he closes his eyes against the touch. The gravity of what we’ve just done has not hit either of us yet. It is almost nice to be suspended in this state of limbo.

After a moment, I get up and pad to the bathroom. I run warm water over a wash cloth, wring it once, and return to the bed. I clean up, being more gentle than necessary with him. He makes soft murmurs as the cloth brushes his arse, his thighs. He had spilled mostly into the pillow I had propped beneath him, so I simply throw it and the cloth from the bed. Maybe I’ll just burn it. Later.

Though he seems fairly content to not move for the rest of eternity, I manage to coax Eggsy to move just enough so that I can pull the soft down comforter over us.

Sleep takes me almost immediately.

-KM-

My slumber is fitful. Harry is there in my dreams. He stands in the middle of a deserted street in the predawn or twilight, hospital gown replaced with his impeccable suit, but the bandages around his face remain. They are bloody and unraveling to trail stained white tendrils behind him as he walks. In his right hand he holds not a gun, but an empty dog collar.

Why would you do this to me? he asks.

I cannot answer. There is only smooth skin where my mouth should be.

-KM-
To my slight surprise, Eggsy is still there when I wake, still in my bed. He is laying on his side, half of his face pressed into a pillow, one green eye open and looking at me. It seems like a black hole in his face, dark and consuming. In the blue, predawn light filtering into the room, his pallor is eerie and his expression almost utterly lifeless.

I return his stare with one of my own. I don’t know what to say. The remnants of pleasure still cling to every nerve in my body, at odds with the cold heaviness in my head.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Eggsy says quietly.

A wave of shame washes over me. Shame at what I have done to him. Shame at having slept at all, however restlessly.

He looks smaller than usual, all wrapped up in my sheets, curling in on himself. Small and vulnerable and blue. My sad, blue boy with his dark, soul-eating stare.

I lean over and kiss him. The eye shuts.

-KM-

I don’t fuck him again that morning. I don’t know how he is feeling, physical or emotionally, and do not really want to ask. Instead, I touch him softly, ceaselessly, being overly gentle as if to make up for the night. I place my mouth on every inch of skin I can reach, press soft kisses in every place I find a bruise, a welt, a scar. He has a series of birthmarks along his neck, and I pay attention to each in turn. I play and suck on his nipples, and stroke him until he turns to butter and spills into my hand, keening in the smallest, most desperate voice.

He does doze then, eyes growing heavy and hazy. I leave him in the bed whilst I get up, shower, get dressed, and go to work.

I spend the entire day in a semi-daze. It’s a dangerous state to be in, but I cannot seem to shake it. Kay looks at me with concern and asks, in a skillfully roundabout manner, if I would like to reschedule some of my appointments for later in the week. I nod gratefully and shut myself in my office, asking not to be disturbed.

It is, at first, difficult to pinpoint what I am feeling. It seems as though I am halfway underwater, almost as if I am drunk. I go through my tasks methodically but without real thought; my mind is still at home, tangled up with Eggsy in my bed.

I took advantage of him. There is no getting around that. I touch a hand to my lips and remember the taste of gin on his tongue, the sharp, clean bite of it. He had been drinking. Perhaps not drunk, but he’d had enough to make his thoughts a little hazy, his inhibitions lowered to past the point of giving a shit. All that besides, he had been emotionally unstable. Either factor alone was enough to make his giving full, knowledgeable consent blurred; together, they were damning. I saw all of this and fucked him just the same. He had goaded me, certainly, practically begged me, but that did not make my actions any less reprehensible. I had wanted to fuck him: in that moment, yes, but long before also. I did think fleetingly about what it would mean if I did, but it wasn’t enough to stop me.

Had I raped him? The question leaves an ugly tangle in my gut, but I cannot deny the possibility. By all accounts, I had sex with someone who, for all intents and purposes, could not give real consent. Jesus fucking wept, we hadn’t even used a condom. He had been acting brashly in the moment, not thinking, just dangling this temptation in front of me and hoping I would bite. And I did.
But you’ve been toeing this fine line for some time now, I remind myself, thinking back to previous flirtations, encounters. What makes this time any different?

I almost laugh aloud. You know why.

I took his virginity—not the one that most of the world cares about, but possibly the one that he will care about for the rest of his life.

He will regret this. Maybe not now, maybe not even tomorrow; but, someday, he will regret what we’ve done.

I give up on the pretense of work around 15:00 and go to the shooting range. It is cleared out for me, a courtesy that I previously thought was unnecessary, but now I am grateful for.

Before I was assigned Merlin, and after I knew that I would never become a Knight, I had thought that I might be assigned a position in the Knight Support Corps as a sniper. I had the marks for it and the aptitude. Some jobs are quick: we know exactly where the mark is going to be and when, and so it is simply a matter of timing. Other jobs require vast amounts of patience, waiting, and being accustomed to the staleness of solitude. This, I never minded. I was good at waiting, being patient. But, mostly, I had a sniper’s judgement. I knew how to learn the wind, how long to wait once the target was sighted, when to rest my finger on the trigger, when to take the shot, when to wait for a better one. I was sent out on quite a few black ops missions in the early days. And then, without warning, I landed behind a desk—in a position with a lot of freedom, but behind a desk nevertheless.

Harry would occasionally ask me if I missed it. And then, inevitably, we would end up at the range.

I start out with the Guinevere 96: the standard Kingsman semi-automatic pistol, and the gun most typically carried in Knight’s shoulder holster. However, I eventually spare a few rounds to pick up our version of the Winchester bolt-action. The shape and heft of the rifle still feels all too familiar in my hands. It’s practically pointless to use indoors—the shooting range is only 33 yards long, and the effective range of the weapon is 900 meters. (Truthfully, most of the snipers from London HQ are trained in the Scottish moors). Still, I send the target to the back of the range and settle in for a bit of point practice.

I begin by carefully shooting a crown on the target’s head. I then proceed to shoot off the fingers—or where the fingers would be—one-by-one. It is a completely frivolous exercise, but the care and precision needed to make the shot takes my mind temporarily off the matters at hand.

While reloading, I catch a glimpse of myself in the plexiglass separating the ranges. I abandoned my jacket when I first came in, as well as my tie, and am left in just a white shirt and waistcoat. Inexplicably, I find myself missing the soft, wool sweaters I used to wear, the bomber jacket that had since been relegated to the back of my wardrobe. The clothes of Merlin.


An overwhelming sense of anger overtakes me. I stay at the range until my arms and shoulders grow sore from the recoil.

-KM-

When I go home that evening, Eggsy is not there waiting for me. This results in both blissful relief and twisting concern. Where is he? He did not check into HQ all day—though it was a Sunday. Perhaps he had gone somewhere, just to get away. Perhaps he has gone to visit his family—or
Roxanne, but I haven’t heard him mention her in weeks.

He does turn up, eventually. My doorbell rings at 7 P.M. sharp, and I go to answer it with mixed emotions.

He looks clean. He’s showered since this morning, put on a nice button-up shirt and dark grey trousers. Even his hair is combed and styled. I’ve never seen him make such an effort for anyone but Harry. I doubt that he dressed smartly for me. He must have been with his mother and Daisy. Perhaps they went to church.

I remember, in that moment, once thinking that Eggsy seemed angelic. The thought had not occurred to me for a while but comes back fresh, seeing him like this in his Sunday best.

His eyes are clear when he looks up at me. His breath smells clean, no trace of alcohol.

“May I come in?”

I look over his shoulder to the street. Dailey is my guard tonight; he stands on the other side of the street, leaning casually up against a streetlamp. Watching.

I raise a hand to him, and usher Eggsy inside.

I’m not sure what I expect from him, but it certainly isn’t the frankness with which he says:

“I want to talk about last night.”

We are standing in the living room, the scene of many of our . . . escapades. He is standing near the hearth, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched in slightly; and though he shrinks somewhat into himself and his cheeks are a shallow pink, the look he gives me is determined.

I have a fleeting but distinct urge to pour myself a drink, but think better of it only because it would be rude not to offer Eggsy one, and we’ve had enough alcohol-infused conversations for the time being. I brace myself.

“I don’t know what came over me,” he says, now breaking his gaze and looking down at the floor. “I don’t . . . I don’t know if I should apologize or not.”

I only just manage to hold back a hollow laugh. Apologize? It is I who should apologize—and yet, I keep silent. I am interested in what he has to say without my interference.

“I don’t think I knew what I was asking for.”

Ah, there it is. The words hit me like stones, albeit small ones. I had mostly prepared myself for this. I steel myself and make myself say the words:

“I took advantage of you.”

That gets his attention. His head whips back up so fast I hear it crack, and the expression on his face is completely bewildered, as if such a notion was far outside the realm of possibility and had never occurred to him.

“You didn’t.”

I purse my lips. “I think you’ll find that I did.”

“You didn’t. I fuckin’ threw myself at you. I wanted it.”
“You—”

“I didn’t come here to accuse you of anything,” he interrupts, almost annoyed. “Honestly. I just—” he pauses, making a frustrated noise. “I’m just fucking confused.”

I cannot help the relief that floods me, though I can feel disgusted with myself, and I do. Dubious as his consent may have been, he does not view it in that light. He does not feel violated or used. I do not have to live with the guilt of having taken him against his will or better judgement.

And he still wants it. Something in me knows this with utter surety. Why else would he be here?

(But he wants other things from me as well, things that I am less willing to part with—though he is not thinking of them, just now.)

In consternation, he runs a hand through his hair, disrupting its orderly shape. “I was so bloody pissed at you—still am. You’re a right fucking bastard. I don’t understand you. How can you just give up on him like that?”

His voice is beginning to shake, though he seems resolute. His accusation stings but dully; he doesn’t understand why I might entertain the idea because, as he said, he does not understand me—nor does he understand what Harry means to me, and I to him. He does not understand the history and confidence and trust between Harry and I, nor the loneliness, agony, and heartbreak I have endured since he was shot. Eggsy does not understand that I am at the edge of my emotional rope, that I have almost nothing left to give, and that letting Harry go would bring the both of us—the three of us—peace. Though trying to explain all of this to Eggsy seems, at the moment, both a Sisyphean and Herculean task.

But I must try. I have to say something.

“I did not ‘just give up’ on him,” I say in the most measured voiced I can manage, the words still coming out with a sharp edge. “This is not a decision I would make lightly. I have suspected this might be his fate for some time. The prognosis for his recovery was never good, and it has been deteriorating with every passing day he spends in a coma. Every report I have had back from his doctors is worse than the last.”

“Doctors can be wrong,” Eggsy insists stubbornly. He crosses his arms over his chest, giving me a hard look. “And, frankly, I don’t think it’s your decision to make.”

I have the sudden and almost overpowering urge to backhand him. My hand clenches into a fist from the effort of holding back. The fucking nerve on this boy.

“Doctors can be wrong,” Eggsy insists stubbornly. He crosses his arms over his chest, giving me a hard look. “And, frankly, I don’t think it’s your decision to make.”

I have the sudden and almost overpowering urge to backhand him. My hand clenches into a first from the effort of holding back. The fucking nerve on this boy.

“It is, if only by a sheer technicality,” I half-sneer through gritted teeth. “As for any claim you might hope to have: forgive me for saying so, but the sheer expression of sentiment does not give you rights over his life.”

Sometimes, I forget how cruel I can be. It is oddly refreshing to be surprised.

Eggsy is stunned into silence, warbling at me for a moment. His face goes from utterly pale to a furious shade of red in under a minute, after which he finds his voice again: “You fucking bastard—”

(In the back of my head, I hear my own laughter. And here I had thought we were going to talk about sex.)

“If you’re intent on brawling, verbally or otherwise, I will have you removed,” I interrupt, stepping closer towards him, using all of my height to seem more imposing. “And if you are going to behave
this irrationally, I will have you banned from Kingsman premises as well.”

I did not intend to make the threat before it came out of my mouth, but just as well because *that* gets his attention. He looks stricken.

“No—no, please. Don’t, I— look, he just needs more time,” his voice turns instantly submissive, pleading. “Can’t you just give him more time—”

The words reverberate in my head. *He needs more time. Just give him more time.* Though Eggsy knows it not, he is not referring to Harry; he is referring to himself. This is not about Harry; it is about Eggsy.

He needs more time to say goodbye.

Though he had managed until this point to hold back to his tears, he is on the verge now, his voice breaking ever-so-slightly: “Please, please. Please don’t. . . .”

I sigh softly, my head suddenly growing heavy. I do not have the energy to fight with him on this, not now. And he need not plead me to refrain from something that I am already reticent to do. I do not need convincing.

“I won’t.” My voice comes out rough; I clear my throat. “I won’t . . . give the order. Not for another four weeks, at least.”

He looks up at me sharply, his reddened eyes burning angrily. He opens his mouth to protest, but I cut him off—

“It is the most I can reasonably promise out of respect for him,” I say. “He would not want to remain this way.”

This much is unequivocally true, and Eggsy realizes it as soon as I say it—and the look on his face tells me that this is the first time since Harry went under that he had stopped to think what Harry might want.

We both think, in that moment, of the Harry Hart we hold in our heads: strong, sure, charmingly sarcastic, effulgent, incomparable. He bears almost no resemblance to the one lying prone and motionless in a hospital bed. Perhaps the real Harry is already gone. In any case, he would not want to have his body languish endlessly, secured by a fragile and thin thread of hope. He deserves better than for us to keep him so, only to watch him waste away.

And I, for one, do not think I can bear it much longer. Unlike Eggsy, I have no hope left to hold onto and if Harry . . . *when* Harry does die, it will give me some sense of closure.

As things stand: keeping him alive is slowly killing me.

I give him four weeks, and it is as much for him as it is for me.

I watch Eggsy’s face as he thinks this over. He knows he can brook no real argument against me now: he cannot put his own emotional claim before Harry’s wishes. Harry should not have to sacrifice his dignity for Eggsy, and Eggsy knows it. He is still angry, but there is also a glimmer of defeat in his eyes. It makes him look immeasurably tired.

I both pity him and am jealous of him.

Wordlessly, I go back into the kitchen and draw a glass of water from the tap. I bring it back to the
living room and hand it to Eggsy, with the silent instruction to drink it. He does so methodically. When he is finished, he hands the glass back to me, and our fingers brush. How such a small thing can stir me is unfathomable.

I glance down at my watch. It’s only twenty past seven. I haven’t eaten, and I presume Eggsy hasn’t either. Though the topic of conversation has done little to spur my appetite, I feel the need to do something other than stand around arguing. Something comfortingly banal. Like eating.

“How hungry?”

Eggsy gives a dignified sniff and rubs an errant tear from the corner of his eye. He swallows. “Yeah. Yeah, actually.”

There is a small Indian restaurant several blocks from my house. We walk there, Dailey tailing us discreetly. He does not enter the tiny establishment with us, but stays posted outside, allowing us a modicum of privacy. Not that we need it. We take a corner booth and eat in almost utter silence.

It is only once I have paid the bill that Eggsy speaks.

“I did mean to talk about what happened last night.”

I take another drink from my water glass. “You mean the sex,” I say blandly, my stomach tightening.


My stomach unclenches, though only halfway. “Do you.”

In answer, Eggsy slides himself across the booth, closer to me. He props his elbow on the table and makes a show of leaning in as if to talk in confidence; his other hand reaches under the table and, very deliberately, palms me through my trousers.

I spare a glance for the rest of the room—there are only eight tables in the whole place, but it is dimly lit, and everyone is so concerned with their own food and drink that Eggsy’s move had gone unnoticed—before fixing Eggsy with what I hope is an unreadable expression. The rest of my body, however, is currently an open book.

“I do,” Eggsy says softly, my cock hardening against his hand. He licks and then bites his lower lip: a completely curated move, but it works all the same. I swallow back a grunt.

“Truth is,” he murmurs, “I wasn’t expecting to like it so much. Turns out I am a slut for it after all.”

He is trying to manipulate me, and it’s working. It is hard to believe that, less than an hour ago, we were arguing. Lovers’ quarrel, so easily mended and all that? No. This is different. An hour ago, Eggsy was using me for emotional release by talking to me about his feelings; now, he is attempting to use me for emotional reprieve, through sex.

It is only when his hand flicks up to tease at my belt that my own dives under the table and stills him. “Eggsy.”

“Alec,” he replies mockingly.

Just then, the waiter comes by to refill our waters. I stiffen, but she only gives a bland, unseeing smile and moves on.

I shove Eggsy’s hand away and reach again for my own glass, taking a gulp. Christ. Eggsy resumes
his casual leaning on the table, smirking. That smirk belongs to a young man who has no cares in the world, who is merely enjoying his youth and the opportunity to pursue sex. That smirk does not belong to Eggsy.

“Come back to mine?” he asks casually, assuredly.

I should just play along and enjoy the charade. I should be grateful that he is not asking me questions about my decisions, my apparent heartlessness, my . . . relationship with Harry. I should let him have this, have me, in whatever way suits him in the moment. I should allow him to forget, just for an instant, exactly why he is seeking me out.

I am the substitute. I am his desperate coping.

“This doesn’t solve anything. I’m sure you know that.”

The smirk falters, dissolves into an almost unreadable expression.

“Don’t spoil it.”

-KM-

When we exit the restaurant, I beckon Dailey to me. He approaches warily, all the while eyeing Eggsy, who has the sense and decency to stand slightly away, pretending not to listen.

“Take the rest of the night off,” I say. “You won’t be needed.”

Dailey gives me a grave look. “Sir—”

“It’s fine,” I cut off his argument before he can begin. “In the unlikely event that we meet trouble, I am sure Agent Unwin would be more than happy to get into a scuffle.” Before he can try again, I say: “That is an order. I expect to leave my home for HQ tomorrow at 7 am sharp.”

There. At least I now have the pretense of seeming like I am not staying the night at a (very) junior agent’s flat.

Finally, Dailey gives a slow nod. With one last look at Eggsy, he turns and heads down the street.

Eggsy steps closer, and we watch until Dailey has turned the corner. Then he tugs on the hem of my jacket.

“C’mon.”

His Kingsman appointed flat is only a few blocks from the restaurant. We walk in silence. It only then occurs to me, as I glance over at him, that Eggsy had betrayed none of the typical signs of soreness from our encounter the night before. He was not walking stiffly, and had only taken a modicum of care when lowering himself into his seat at the restaurant.

Warm and slightly ugly relief settles in me. So, I had been good to him. I had prepared him adequately, had not been too rough. Thank god for small favors.

Eggsy catches my eye, and smirks, leaning in to bump shoulders.

Once we arrive at his flat, he opens the door for me and beckons me to step inside. I enter, remembering the last time we were here.

I turn back to him as he closes and locks the door. He faces me, tilting his head. “Don’t suppose you
want a drink?"

Instead of answering, I step into his space, press him back against the door, and kiss him.
Occultation

Chapter Notes

Occultation: (astronomy) when the moon or a planet passes directly in front of a more distant planet or star

Sex fixes nothing. It only changes the mood from one moment to the next.

I stay over at Eggsy’s that evening. We do not fuck, but only because I refuse: despite what he thinks or projects, I know it is not a good idea to take him again so quickly. I make him take the time to recover. He groans and coaxes and for a moment I wonder if he will resort to rough handling as he did the night before; but he has convinced himself to be in a playful sort of mood, and merely has a deep and disapproving pout for my rejection. I do my utmost to make sure that he enjoys himself regardless, and he has no complaints for me afterwards. I leave him early in the morning and go back to mine, shower, and change in time to be picked up by Dailey. As per usual, he does not say a word except to greet me; I try not to think what must be running through his head.

That day, I notify Drs. Caffrey and Buchanan that I am respectfully and temporarily rejecting their advice to move forward with euthanasia. I tell them we will wait for four more weeks. Caffrey replies within minutes, simply acknowledging my request. I try not to speculate what he thinks.

But now, we have a deadline. Four weeks.

-KM-

“It seems both like too much, and not enough.”

I study the soft rise and fall of Harry’s chest for a moment, then tilt his head back and bring the straight razor across the skin beneath his jaw.

“I don’t . . .” I lick my lips and wipe the blade before striking another strip of stubble from his face. “I don’t know how I should feel about all of this, Harry.”

I can hear his voice answering, measured and calm. You feel relieved, don’t you?

I press my lips together. I do. I feel relieved to know that there is an end in sight. The idea of doing this for much longer is more than I can bear. As horrible as it is, I honestly feel a sense of liberation, thinking about his death.
But it is also marred with a horrible, stomach-twisting guilt.

Harry may already be dead; but I am the one who is, in all matters of fact, killing him. I am giving the order for his death.

“I have too much power over you.”

It shouldn’t belong to me, this influence. I do not feel equipped to wield it. And, at the same time, I would not have it be bestowed upon anyone else. I alone am responsible for Harry. It is under my purview as Arthur, and it is my duty as his friend. It is both my right and my burden to bear.

More to the point, it is protocol, and part of Harry’s living will. I am doing the right thing.

Unsurprisingly, that thought does not console me, or perhaps there is nothing to console. I feel surprisingly empty, since having made that decision. Deceptively hollow.

I turn his head one way and bring the blade to the edge of his cheek to scrape away the last bit of stubble there. I then gently wipe his face of any remaining lather.

Unthinking, I allow one of my hands to brush along his jaw, fingertips trailing upwards to his lips. His mouth bears the signs of his age, as does the rest of his face. Over the years, I have watched these fine lines manifest into being, blooming out of once-smooth skin. Some men do not wear their age well, but he only ever looked more handsome for the lines.

And I have never been the only one to think so.

My touch becomes more reverent as I reminisce. In all my conversations with Eggsy about Harry, the one subject that had seldom come up was his romantic history. Maybe he did not want to know. Or, maybe Eggsy merely assumed Harry didn’t have much of one to speak of—which only proves how well-crafted Harry’s persona was. He wanted people to think him untouchable, after a fashion; it was a defense mechanism of sorts. He simply seems like the kind of man who is devoted to his work and has no time or patience for dalliances outside. Diversions, yes; romances, no. I adopted the same affectation.

This is, of course, a fabrication, at least up to a point. While true that Harry had been mostly solitary in the past five years, he’d had a string of lovers over the course of his career. He never mentioned them to anyone but me, and always confessed, in a self-deprecating and somewhat pained tone, “I suppose it’s the romantic in me”. As for myself, I also have had my share of affairs. Brief, torrential things, pursued mostly to prove a point. To prove what point and to whom, I sometimes wonder.

We seldom discussed the details of these affairs with one another. In fact, Harry never definitively told me when he was seeing someone. He might off-handedly mention a restaurant he had taken a “friend” to last week, when suggesting that he and I go. Occasionally, if I stood close enough, I could catch a hint of some foreign perfume or cologne on his person. For the most part, he was discreet. He did not brandish his affairs in my face, and it was understood that neither of us would ask about them.

The only thing I knew for certain was that these were, in fact, more akin to hobbies than romances. They were ordinary people with ordinary lives that he wined, dined, and occasionally slept with. He seemed to collect them like his butterflies: a fascination, and a way to pass the time, but not something he would give himself up to entirely. He was like a god moving among mortals, marveling at their beauty and fragility, but never allowing himself to fall in love with them.

It seemed to satisfy him for a time. However, in the past several years, he had become more
withdraw, more the mask he had made for himself. He engaged fewer lovers and seemed to grow increasingly cynical and reserved. I remember being partially pleased by this, because it meant that he came around more often; but the new sternness in him disquieted me.

I think again about Eggsy. If Harry had not seen Kingsman potential in Eggsy, would he have taken him as a lover?

Would things have been different with him?

The thought makes me withdraw my hand from Harry’s face.

I pack up the shaving kit and tuck it under my arm. I give Harry one final look.

“Say hello to Eggsy for me.”

-EKM-

Eggsy and I develop a new routine based on old rhythms. He spends his days in training, working himself with physical intensity that can only be to ground him in the moment, to keep himself centered. In the late afternoons, he goes to visit Harry; and while his visits before had been fairly regular, the knowledge of exactly how little time he has left makes him carve out time each day. (It is the same for me. I visit Harry in the mornings before I go in, not wishing to intrude upon Eggsy’s time.) I am notified whenever Harry has a visitor or appointment, so I know when Eggsy is there; I could even watch, if I so desired, though the very idea is perverted and there is nothing to see. I simply ask to be informed of when he arrives, and when he leaves. Sometimes, his visits are long, lasting into the evening; sometimes, he stays less than an hour.

And then, he comes to see me.

The length of time he spends in Harry’s hospital room is directly correlated to Eggsy’s mood when he arrives at my residence. If he spends long and arrives late, he is quiet or melancholy. If he arrives early, he is by turns snappish, tearful, or wanton. He sets the mood for the evening, and I am more often than not obliged to go along with it.

The sex is much like the training: meant to ground him in the here and now, to keep him from thinking. It works both ways: if I am preoccupied with Eggsy, I cannot think about the terrible things I am about to do as the clock winds down.

I go to oversee his training every so often. I think of it as my walk of the battlements, those moments when I cannot sit still at my desk any longer. The need to stretch my legs often leads me to prowl around one of the gymnasiums from the watch decks, situated on the floor above. Several meters of glass walls that allow one to look down at the combatants, the trainers, the trainees. I watch the way Eggsy exerts himself, the way he grapples with the other young agents, shakes their hands when the sparring is done, spots them at the barbell stations if the need a hand. He chats amiably with the instructors and other Knights, notably Ector, Bors, and, of course, Lancelot. He’s certainly popular, and being in his physical element makes him glow with a vigor that I rarely see in him when we are alone.

However, I am not disappointed when I have seen him thus and find that he comes home a different person. I cannot blame him. I try to take him as he is and allow him to get from me what he needs.
I start keeping more regular hours because of him. I am home by seven-thirty at the latest and am usually making dinner or ordering takeaway when Eggsy knocks. (I do not, generally, feel interested in food, but I feel obligated to ensure that Eggsy eats.) We eat, sometimes we drink. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we simply sit in silence. The end is, more or less, the same.

So I let him dictate the mood but I take charge of the rest. I can see that he likes being handled, ordered, told what to do, even if he sometimes is petulant about it.

For example, three nights after our . . . fight, I suppose, he comes over in a foul mood. When I attempt to ask him about it later, he merely mutters that a vague something had happened during training; he’d been beaten (badly and repeatedly, it seemed) by another agent, though he refused to say who. And he is early, meaning that his time with Harry had been short.

He comes through the door and begins tugging at my clothes without so much as a “by your leave”. I am wearing a particularly sleek three piece today, something Kay had selected for me: a dark, stormy blue with a pocket square that had miniscule but vibrant yellow accents. I’d had a meeting with the full panel of Directors and had wanted to convey, in my comportment and sartorial choices, that I was not to be fucked with. I wanted them to know that I was capable, that I could handle the burden and privilege I was asking them to bestow upon me. The meeting had gone reasonably well: I was one step closer to officially taking the mantle of Arthur. All that remained was finding my replacement Merlin, and the paperwork.

Not that Eggsy knows any of this. He simply sees me in my expensive Kingsman-tailored clothing and thinks only how it is an impediment to him getting what he wants.

I push him off me, somewhat forcefully, and he stumbles back with a highly unamused, frustrated look upon his face. “What?” he snaps.

“You need to learn how to handle Kingsman merchandise with more respect,” I say archly, smoothing a hand over my jacket where his grip had rumpled it.

Eggsy scowls. “I’m not in the mood, Alec.”

I decide to teach him a lesson then, the lesson being that he cannot always get what he wants by simply applying force and being surly. And, as punishment for his rudeness, I decide not to touch him at all. I make him fix me a glass of scotch and get a chair from the kitchen. And then I proceed to sit languidly upon the sofa, sipping the scotch, whilst directing him to strip, sit in the chair, and touch himself.

He is resistant at first, and unsure; but the more I chide him, give him low and coaxing encouragement, the more compliant he becomes. It isn’t long before I have him sitting with his legs spread, one hand wrapped around his leaking cock while the other pinches a nipple. It’s a lurid show I make him put on, and his face flushes sweetly with effort. The scowl is nowhere to be seen.

“Look at you,” I can’t help but murmur over my scotch, leaning forward slightly. “Aren’t you just a picture?”

Eggsy lets his head fall back as he moans, fistling himself, letting his legs spread wider. It is not my custom to engage in what might be considered dirty talk, but something about Eggsy brings it out in me. I enjoy seeing his reactions to being told that he is doing well, that someone is pleased with him. His response to praise is almost pathological.

I cannot help but think of Harry then. How Eggsy must have glowed and preened under Harry’s tutelage, how he must have warmed to Harry’s heartfelt praise. The sheer pleasure he derived from it.
I recall scenes played through Harry’s video feed from his glasses. Harry teaching Eggsy to tie a Windsor knot, and then half a dozen others; instructing Eggsy on the finer points of table etiquette; teaching him to make a “proper” martini. All such small, now seemingly meaningless, tasks; yet I saw how Eggsy looked at Harry, his face yearning and hopeful and bright. How badly he wanted to please Harry.

It is a feeling I can relate to.

-KM-

Conversation seems distinctly perilous, now; however, when Eggsy comes over and wants to talk, I try to indulge him as much as I am able. I listen to him process his feelings, tell me about his family, his day, his visit with Harry. I provide verbal input where appropriate. Every once in a while, I dredge up an old story from Harry’s glory days and regale him with the tale.

This is always a precarious move on my part, because it naturally invokes questions that I have no desire to answer. Eggsy has not forgotten his discovery. In fact, he makes a point to flaunt some of it in my face. He repeatedly uses the red cup, and more than once I come home to find him sitting on the sofa, the books of poetry open in his lap, frowning down at the printed words and the inked scrawl, trying to make sense of it. The first time I entered the living room and saw him occupied thus, I felt my entire body stiffen; but Eggsy, almost apologetically, put the volumes away as I retreated to the kitchen to fix some semblance of supper.

I know that he wants to ask. He wants some kind of definitive answer.

*What is he to you?*

He only makes the mistake of venturing again into that territory once.

He begins by carefully prodding; then wheedling; then jabbing. I deflect him at every turn, my ire rising with his incessant attempts. He grows more desperate with each rebuff and by the time he is almost yelling at me for an answer, I am standing, my fist curling at my side. I can feel a vein pulsing at my temple and my lips are pulled into a snarl. A part of me wants to strike him; instead, I growl at him to get out and retreat to the living room. I sit on the sofa and stare into the crackling fire, breathing through my nose, trying to bring myself back to some semblance of calm.

For several long minutes, I think that he might have actually left; however, after a time, he pads quietly into the living room to stand before me. I look up at him, my anger not quite deflated.

“You are still here,” I observe in a sharp voice. “Once again, your inability to follow direct orders astounds me.”

Eggsy’s face twists up. “Stop it,” he says, his voice soft and hurt.

I simply tilt my head at him, eyes narrowed.

He sinks to his knees before me, shuffling forward to rest his hands on my knees. From this position, he is supplicating, looking up at me with vulnerable, pleading green eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he says. When I fail to react, he sighs and rests his forehead against my leg.

For some reason, the sight of him like that softens me. He is a puppy, sore from being scolded, trying to get back into his master’s good graces. I reach out a hand and place it gently upon his head, running my fingers through his hair.
Eggsy leans into the touch, turning his head so that my hand rests along his cheek. I smooth over the soft, young skin there, the tip of my thumb brushing his eyelashes, then moving further down. The pad of my thumb traces over the curve of his philtrum, the bow of his lips.

Without opening his eyes, Eggsy gives a tiny sigh. He opens his lips just slightly and flicks his tongue against my thumb. I crook the digit, and he opens his mouth more. He bites gently and sucks, laving his tongue against the tip.

The feeling of warm wetness, the tease of it, sends sparks racing up my arm and heat begins to pool in my belly. My anger does not dissipate, but it is tempered by the sweetness of lust.

Eggsy looks up at me then, eyes dark.

In the next moment, I am hauling him up and he is straddling my hips. He grinds down against me and emits a soft whimper as I kiss him greedily.

“I’m sorry,” he says into my mouth. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry—”

“And, for a wonder, he does.

-I-M-

I fuck him again that night. It is different from the first time; there is less hurry, and he doesn’t encourage me to simply take him and use him like I did the first time. What’s more, he takes the time and pleasure to explore me in turn.

It is a strangely unfamiliar feeling, to be studied so closely. Eggsy is by nature, for lack of a better term, a pillow queen. He is not passive, per se, but he prefers to be the submissive partner, to be on the receiving end of touch and attention. This time, as we climb into bed, he makes a point of keeping my hands away from him while he maps me out.

He begins at my throat, sucking bruising kisses into the skin that sits just below where my collar would be. He works his way down to my chest, running his fingers through my chest hair and lazily tonguing one of my nipples, then the other. He finds the entry site of an old bullet wound near my hip, finds a long line along my flank where a knife had nearly cost me my life. He kisses his way down my arms, tracing the scars there. He makes a particular study of the long, white one roping up my forearm. It takes every ounce of self-control I possess to not recoil, to allow myself to be studied so.

Eventually, when I don’t think I can take any more, I bring his face back to mine to kiss him. I retrieve a bottle of lubricant from my bedside table (new, bought with the almost guilty hope of being able to use it on him). He is straddling me, our bodies not quite touching save for the occasional brush of his cock against my belly. There is enough room for me to snake my hand between us, settle my slicked fingers between his arse and begin to finger him open. Before long, he is mewling and grinding down onto my fingers, fucking himself upon them.

I do not know precisely what comes over me or spurs me to speak; but I suddenly find myself telling him how he looks just then, how greedy he seems for my fingers. It causes a bright blush to bloom in his cheeks and creep down his neck, spreading all the way to his chest, and, look at you, turning pink
for me. Isn’t it nice, Eggsy? Oh, yes, it is, but is it enough? Wouldn’t you like something more?

My words have him moaning and panting, and before long he has abandoned my fingers and is seating himself upon my cock. I let him take his time, relishing in being able to see his face: the sweat-slicked look of concentration and want as he sinks down deliberately. His head falls back, exposing the column of his throat, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. I am so enthralled by the sight of him that I almost forget what torture this is for me, to having him mount me so slowly. I run a hand lightly along his lower spine and tell him how pretty he looks, and that alone causes him to stutter and squeeze around me.

He adjusts to the feeling, to the position, and begins to build his own rhythm. This is a more strenuous position for him, but it gives him more control over the movement—or, at least, the illusion of it. For, when I find that he is still seated shallowly and that the friction he’s providing is nowhere near enough, I caress his flank, his arse, and tell him that he can take more, can move faster. Soon, he is nodding in acquiescence, moaning and grinding down onto my cock as though he was made for it. I tell him so, and it only makes him more frenzied. How inexperienced he is, yet how wanton. He groans and whimpers with utter abandon, no trace of self-consciousness, his mouth filling up with obscenities and swallowed words—

I think, for a stupefying moment, that I hear something. A name. One that bears no resemblance to mine.

I let him ride me until he is coming, and then I flip him over and fuck him into the mattress until his limbs have turned to jelly, and I have taken my pleasure.

He is sore after that night; he cannot hide it nor deny it. He hobbles from my bed the next morning somewhat sheepishly, and I chuckle and begin running him a warm bath to ease his sore muscles. He insists that he does not need help bathing (“I’m not a kid, Alec”), so I leave him to it and go to work.

As I approach the front entrance of HQ, I think briefly of the infirmary. It is only 07:20. I have plenty of time to visit with Harry, if I wished. As my feet start towards the elevator to take me to the basement level 1, the memory of what Eggsy looks like atop me swims to the surface of my brain. Would I tell Harry about that?

My footsteps slow as I approach the elevator. I come to a dead stop, my brain rifling through options, scenarios. As I stand there lost in thought, the elevator doors open and an agent steps out. I vaguely recognize her, and return her nod without expression. The doors close behind her again.

I stand there for another minute. Then two.

Eventually, I turn fully around and proceed in the opposite direction towards my office. As I make my way, my own weariness sneaks upon me and hits me in a sudden rush. I am extremely tired. Unsurprisingly, I suppose. I cannot expect to keep rogering a nubile young man several nights a week, deal with his emotional outbursts, and not experience some exhaustion. Probably serves me right. I resolve to ask Kay to send for coffee once I have settled.

Kay is there when I arrive, as per usual. He is dressed in dark blue, his platinum hair combed impeccably, as ever. He lifts his head to give me his customary nodded greeting, and then signs to me that a pot of coffee is sitting upon my desk.

I cannot help but stop mid-stride to stare at him. I stare so long that I see a blush begin to form underneath his collar, skittering across his ever-so-pale skin.

Sir? he signs, and it is uncharacteristically timid.
I blink, shaking my head. *Nothing*, I sign; and then, after a moment where I nearly forget my manners. *Thank you.*

Kay’s complexion evens out into milky white once again, and he nods solemnly. *Of course, sir.*

I shut myself inside the inner office and walk to my desk where the promise pot of coffee sits. I pour myself a cup and sit down at my desk, opening up my workstation and beginning to look through my task list for the day. I respond to several messages whilst waiting for my brain to wake up fully.

I glance at the clock on my screen. 0735. There is no definite start to my work day, but there is still time to visit with Harry, if I wanted. I could go now, spend twenty minutes. I could spare that time for him.

Yet, even as I contemplate it again, something in me recoils. Whereas before the idea of spending time with Harry required little forethought, I now imagine something entirely different: not sitting companionably with the reassurance of his still-breathing form, but sitting in stoic silence next to the shell of a man whom I once . . . admired. The mere body of a man whose days were now numbered. I have no idea if there is any part of Harry still in there.

I think back to the last time I had shaved him. He had felt so utterly lifeless. Could it possibly be healthy to spend so much time and energy caring for and over a man who was, for all intents and purposes, already dead?

Is it callous of me to think this way? What would Harry do in my position?

I continue to think and stare at the clock. Soon, whatever time I might have had has run out.

My day is productive, if moody. I have meetings with the Brazil office; it is from them that Demerais has made his final selection for our replacement Merlin. The agent in question is one Carme Rocha Morais, head of the aviation division there. I can find absolutely no fault with her, and she receives a positively glowing recommendations from the Brazilian Director. I thank the director and make arrangements to have Rocha Morais approved to take over as Merlin in two weeks, though not without significant reticence. It is no longer my position, I know. I have no real right to it. Still, the idea of someone swanning in and replacing me—even someone that I have appointed—makes me uneasy and irritable. It also makes my transition into Arthur final, something that I realize I am still and steadily dreading.

It is nearly gone five when I realize that I have not yet received word of any visitors to Harry. I double check my messaging platform, and then message Kay to check with the infirmary. Nothing. With growing concern, I request Agent Gary Unwin’s status; Kay informs me that he has not checked into HQ today.

Minutes later, I am exiting my office and asking Kay to have Dailey bring the car around.

It seems to take longer than usual to reach my home. It does not even occur to me that Eggsy might not be there. I somehow know that he is. That he never left.

When I enter, the lights are all off downstairs. It is unnervingly quiet, not as of an empty space, but as of someone trying to remain unnoticed. I shrug my jacket off and lay it over a chair in the kitchen. I toe off my shoes, and pad upstairs.

The lights are off in my bedroom, though the setting sun is streaming through the window, bathing everything in gold. I do not have to look for Eggsy. He is sitting on the floor at the end of my bed, knees pulled up to his chest, staring at a space on the wall to my immediate right. I turn to see them,
still behind their glass case: Greta diaphanus, Corinea sylphina, Cithaerias andromeda esmeralda, and Greta oto.

Eggsy does not even look at me. His expression is lost, listless, his face pale. He is wearing grey sweatpants but is naked from the waist up. His hair looks darker than usual, though it may be a trick of the light. He is shivering just slightly.

I stand in the doorway, unsure of what to do or say.

“They’re pretty, aren’t they?”

I spare a glance for the rest of the room. It looks as I had left it this morning: slightly disheveled, but not unnecessarily so. The bed is still unmade. Nothing appears to have been tossed about.

“I was ‘avin’ a think, while I was in the bath. Just . . . thinking. Four weeks don’t seem like much time, does it?” His words come out slow, the syllables lolling from his mouth. He almost sounds drunk. He finally turns his gaze to me, and I see that his eyes are completely glassy, almost as if he doesn’t see me.

“No,” I reply slowly.

“It’s not,” he says, gaze moving away and back to the butterflies. “And we’ve already run one. How are they gonna do it, then?”

The question makes my blood turn to a cool sludge in my veins, but I answer him regardless.

“Overdose. Barbiturates.”

“Like fallin’ asleep.”

I press my lips into a line. “Yes. Like that.”

He nods absently. “I was thinking about that, in my bath. I just couldn’t stop. I think I sat there for hours. The water. . . the water got cold. I was freezing.” He shivers visibly then, a violent spasm that wracks his body.

I take a step towards him, then another. I kneel before him, gently place my hand on his arm where it is wrapped around his knees. His skin is cold, clammy. I touch his hair, and realize it looks dark because it is still damp. “Eggsy.”

He turns to me again. There are tears beginning to form at the edges of his eyes.

“I can’t stop thinking about him dying,” he chokes. “I can’t stop.”

I wrap my arms around him just as he begins to sob. He curls into me, not returning the embrace but leaning into my body. I wish, for a moment, that he was small enough that I could cover him completely, could wrap him up like a child. I want to protect him, but I know I can’t. I can only hold him, stroke his cheek, and cradle his head in my hands.

“I never knew no one like him,” he cries into my neck, his tears hot upon my skin. “He was so good to me, Alec. He didn’ want nothin’ from me, jus’ wanted me to succeed. He treated me like I was somethin’ special, better than anyone else ever had. He made me feel like—”

I shush him. I know, I know. I felt like that, too. He made me feel like that too.

“I don’t know why it hurts so much this time,” he says thickly. “When I thought he was dead before
—I was floored. Wiped. Couldn’t fuckin’ believe it. It hurt like hell, but not like this.” He pauses, dragging in a ragged breath, swallowing painfully past the lump in his throat. “I just—fuck, I just don’t think I knew? I don’t think I actually knew how much I—that I’m— that I’m in love with him— god— I feel like I’m gonna die—”

The sob that wracks his body then is so violent that I feel it, like a sharp pain in my own chest. Poor boy. God, this poor forsaken boy.

_God damn you, Harry. God damn you for doing this to us._

I sit there with him and hold him for what feels like hours. My mind grows numb and my arms and legs grow stiff, sore and tired, but I stay. I keep my arms around him, clutching tight. I cannot let him go. I cannot do that to him.

He does not fully stop crying, but his tears do slow, and his breathing does even out. The sun has fully set when I next peer at his face, and I see that his eyes have drifted closed, tears clinging to his eyelashes. The skin at the corners of his eyes is red and irritated, and I can see the dark circles underneath his eyes.

It takes some effort, but I manage to coax him into a standing position. I bring him to the edge of the bed and make him sit. I push him down against the pillows, drawing back the comforter so he can swing his legs under; then I bring the comforter back up to nearly his chin, tucking him in securely, as if he were a child. I watch his face as he settles, his tear-streaked features becoming smoother, more serene. After a moment’s hesitation, I press the back of my hand to his forehead, then to his cheeks. He is slightly feverish; yet, he still presses into my hand and emits a low, barely audible groan.

Leaving him for a moment, I go to my bathroom and place my hand on the mirror so that it can read my biosignature to unlock the medicine cabinet.

When I return to Eggsy’s side, it is with a glass of water and 0.5 milligrams of alprazolam. I convince him to sit up just a little to take the pill. “To help you sleep,” I tell him, and he does not argue.

Once he settles back and is properly tucked in again, I sit beside him at the edge of the bed. I stroke his cheeks, his forehead, his hair, my touch light and soothing. From time to time, I catch myself murmuring soothing nonsense. It does not take long before he is overwhelmed by the drugs and his own exhaustion. His face looks unnervingly peaceful, tear-streaked though it is.

I do not know what to do when he finally drifts off to sleep. I should stay with him and monitor his fever. I should be here when he wakes. But the thought of holding vigil at his side all night makes me cold. I will not sleep. Andi do not know if I can lay the entire night next to him, or even in the same house.

I need to leave. I feel like I’m suffocating.

I exit my house two minutes later. I’ve forgotten my suit jacket.

A light drizzle has begun, slick and sluggish. Agent Kubenick is there on the other side of the street, waiting. He approaches when I come down the steps to the street.

“Sir?” he asks.

“Take me to HQ.”

He says nothing as he pulls out his phone and maneuvers the car from where it had been parked two
streets over. He opens the door for me, then gets behind the wheel. We exchange no more words the entire way.

It is nearly gone midnight by the time we arrive. Though quieter than usual, HQ is by no means empty. Rather, it is more like a ghost ship, skeleton crews drifting back and forth down the hallways with muted steps. The long-term care ward, when I make it down there, is especially still.

When I enter Harry’s room, I lock the door behind me.

With the beep of the lock, my legs suddenly turn to water, and I nearly collapse on the spot. I stagger to the edge of the bed and it is only good fortune that a chair is waiting there for me when I do collapse. My arms fall heavy to the edge of the bed, my head with them. God, my eyes feel leaden, like they might drop from my skull at any moment. My breathing keeps speeding up and no matter what I do I cannot stop it. I feel like I might be hyperventilating. God, what—

I gasp, air pulling through my lungs painfully. I grip the sheets in front of me and twist so hard I hear something rip. Fuck, god damnit—

In front of me, Harry simply breathes. Serene. Oblivious.

(Vegetative.)

A strangled noise escapes my throat. Blindly, my hands scramble for one of his. When I find it, limp and dry and warm, I clasp it tightly in both of mine. I squeeze my eyes shut. My head pounds.

You fucking bastard. You’ve done this to us.

I press my cheek against his hand, breathing deeply, too fast. His scent, the very essence of him, is no longer there. He just smells like dry skin and clean sheets.

Why would you leave us here? How can you do this to me?

Harry—

I am crying. I can feel the tears stinging my cheeks, hot and acrid. I am shaking. My breaths are wet gasps muffled by his limp hand. I am exhausted, and I feel as if I am being stretched, tight and painful.

I want to crawl into the narrow hospital bed with him. I want to stand up and shake him until he wakes. I want to kiss him.

Just once more.

-KM-

I remember the feeling of exhilaration, breathlessness. The sense of invincibility that is merely a consequence of being young and in danger. We careened down the narrow alleys one after another, sprinting away from the shouting and gunshots that followed us. Harry ran ahead of me, and I could hear him nearly laughing through his heavy breathing. There was no fear. We were quickly outstripping our pursuers, and it would not be long before we found a more permanent way to evade them—
We took a sharp turn down another alleyway, this one narrower than the last and partitioned in the middle by a tall iron fence. Ahead of me, Harry shouted and pointed. I didn’t understand him, but soon he was breaking from his stride and jumping atop a bin, and then using the fence to help him scale the side of the single-story brick building. He scrambled up and managed to throw himself onto the roof, before turning and beckoning to me.

I followed him, moving with long-limbed ease. I was almost over when he reached out and grabbed my arm, hauling me onto the roof with him.

I fell almost atop him in a sprawl; he grinned and rolled us over so that he was on top, placing a hand over my mouth to muffle my grunt. We both stilled, listening for the sounds of our pursuers.

Shouting, coming closer, then growing more distant. They had passed us.

Above me, Harry let go a breath of giddy relief. He grinned down at me, his eyes twinkling.

But then, something in his expression changed. I don’t know what it was. Perhaps it was the way I was looking up at him, for once literally and not just figuratively. There must have been something in my expression that gave him pause.

The pressure of his hand over my mouth lessened. He drew his fingers over my face, and looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time. There was a question in his eyes, curiosity; and something more, something that was warm and also tender.

For the first time that night, I was afraid.

When he kissed me, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I could feel alarm crawling in my throat, in my stomach, but his lips were soft and the pressure was sweet, and he touched me with such reverence that I thought I was going to both melt and shake apart. I had never felt this way, so electrified and present and awestruck. It was like seeing God.

It was like I didn’t know I was alive until Harry Hart kissed me.
Chapter Summary

Aphelion: the point in the orbit of a planet, asteroid, or comet at which it is furthest from the sun.

A/N: I apologize in advance for using a female character (i.e., Roxy) as little more than a plot device.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I barely sleep, hunched over at Harry’s side. I spend the rest of the night trying and failing to pull myself together. By 04:30, I am so exhausted that crying any further would require much more energy than I possess. I go straight from the infirmary to my office.

Kay gives blinks at me when I enter wearing the same waistcoat, shirt, and trousers from yesterday, creased and slightly worse for wear. I have no idea what my face looks like—bloody awful, I imagine. I had attempted to wash my face in the sink in Harry’s room, but it could have done little to abate the redness around my eyes. I feel like shit warmed over. Raw, like peeled flesh. However, like the consummate professional he is, Kay simply asks what suit he should request for me, and nods when I give my answer.

I shower in the accommodations attached to my office. I shave perfunctorily, but do not bother with my scalp. My fingers are shaky from lack of sleep, and I do not quite trust myself. It will not kill me to sit through the day with stubble.

I do not expect to see Eggsy at all, so I am surprised when, as I am walking towards the biotech labs to meet with one of our technicians, he appears in the hallway and accosts me.

“Guv,” he says, falling into stride alongside me. I glance over at him. He is wearing Kingsman training attire, a grey athletic shirt and black combat trousers, hair combed. He looks surprisingly normal, as if nothing were amiss. As if he hadn’t been crying inconsolably in my bedroom last night.

“Agent Unwin,” I return. My voice is rough. Bedivere and Percival pass us and nod their acknowledgement; I do not miss the curiosity in their gazes as they take in Eggsy. Percival is discreet in his assessment, but Bedivere looks upon the situation with undisguised nosiness.

“I want an assignment,” he says as the two Knights pass out of earshot. We turn a corner into a hallway that is blessedly deserted.

I mentally supply the Sir that should have followed that statement. Any other day, I would chide him for being so rude and entitled. Today, I do not know what I can say to him, for fear of setting him off.

“No.”
“Why?”

We reach the end of the hallway. I stop before the door to the laboratories and briefly look around before replying.

“You aren’t well, Eggsy. You need rest, not an assignment.” Before he can open his mouth to argue, I hold up a hand, and press it to his cheek. He startles and takes a halting step back. My mouth pulls into a wry but sympathetic smile. He is still running hot.

“Yesterday, you were nearly delirious and running a fever, and you have not escaped the latter. You are exhausted and emotionally tapped. I want you to take leave. Four days minimum. Go spend it with your family. They must miss you.”

Though my tone brooks no argument, it seems for a moment that he might try. His mouth twists, and then settles into a defeated line. He then nods, turns, and walks away.

I have seldom known such an easy victory with him. Unsurprisingly, it does not feel right.

I receive a notification from Kay during my meeting that Agent Unwin has left the premises, and is not due back until Wednesday.

-KM-

The next day, I have an unexpected visitor in my office.

Unexpected, but not unscheduled. I am not sure how I miss seeing that appointment when I look at my daily schedule. It’s right there, plain as day: Meeting with Lancelot (Roxanne Morton), 14:15.

Fortunately, Kay sends me a reminder about ten minutes before she is scheduled to arrive; this way, when she does enter my office, I am spared the indecency of looking caught off guard.

She enters my office silently and shuts the door behind her. I am struck, as I am every time, by how petite she is; I think she might be the smallest Knight we have on record. Regardless, she has the bearing and countenance of a much taller (and broader) person. The suit only adds to the effect of something small and mighty.

“Lancelot,” I greet, extending a hand to her.

She takes it, and her grip is firm but not overcompensating. “Arthur.”

I beckon her to my desk and gesture to the seat across from me. She sits.

“You requested to see me,” I offer.

She nods. There is something about her expression that, at this distance, I can immediately identify as discomfort.

“Yes sir.” She pauses. “How is Mr. Hart?”

My expression does not shift an inch. “Not well. The chance of recovery is slim to nothing.”

She nods again. I am only confirming what she has suspected. She gives a sigh.

“I’m worried, sir. About Eggsy.”
I say nothing. Simply wait.

“He . . .” she appears to try and choose her words carefully, then gives a small huff. “He is underperforming. Noticeably. And I don’t think it has anything to do with his physical limits. I think it has to do with his state of mind.”

“Agent Unwin is on leave,” I say, as if that might settle it.

“And I’m glad to hear that, sir. It might do him good. But I was wondering if you could tell me if he . . . is all right. He hasn’t confided in me.”

I raise an eyebrow. “And what makes you think he’s confided in me?”

That makes her uncomfortable. She lowers her eyes briefly. “You have been . . . generous in spending time with him, sir.”

Now, it is my turn to be uncomfortable. Fuck.

“I suppose it was too much to hope that others would not notice that,” I say finally. It is the safest thing to say, before I know fully what I am admitting to. Surely Dailey had not been so indiscreet. Witman, I had no idea of, nor of Kubenick. In theory, they were all bound to silence by duty and honor, but it is as I said: spies are the worst of gossips.

“I don’t think anyone suspects you of favoritism, or anything. We all know that you were close with Mr. Hart—that you knew him best. It’s only natural that Eggsy would want to talk to you about it. And I don’t think that you can be blamed for wanting to help him, even if it does seem a bit. . . .”

Unbeknownst to her, I breathe a sigh of relief. The implication behind her words is innocuous enough, and she does not appear to be hiding anything. The thought makes me bold.

“Unprofessional?”

“Unorthodox,” she amends. Her pretty, strong face moves into an expression of contrition. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t ordinarily pry,” she reassures. “But Eggsy and I used to be mates of sorts. We would hangout, get drinks, have doggie play dates—do normal things. These days, I only see him in training and he’s been becoming . . . different. He still laughs and jokes, but it’s forced. He’s secretive, distracted. More aggressive, even. He makes mistakes where he shouldn’t and is always in a foul mood when he loses a bout or misses a target. And every day this week, he’s quit training early to go to the infirmary—to visit Mr. Hart, I presume. He always looks miserable when he goes. I’m worried about him. I was just hoping that you could tell me if he’s all right.”

“I am afraid I can’t give you any reassurance.”

This answer does not come as a surprise to her. Her brow creases, but it is in thought and concern.

“Mr. Hart’s going to die?”

I nod hollowly. God, I’m tired of talking about this. “It seems so.”

“He’s been dying for a while now, then. Six weeks it’s been since V-Day. That seems like a long time to pine over someone who won’t make it.” She pauses. “I don’t think it’s healthy for Eggsy. Actually, I think it’s doing him in.”

“What are you suggesting I do?” The question comes out with a whisper of desperation before I can stop it. She is perfectly right, and I might follow anything that sounded like good advice, at this point.
I have no more solutions of my own to offer. I am nearly at the end of my rope.

“I don’t know, sir. I just wanted to express my concern. At this point, I can’t imagine directly approaching Eggsy about it.”

I nod. I understand completely.

She stands to leave. I am walking her to my office door and seeing her out when she suddenly stops and turns to look at me again. Her gaze is curious.

“I know I’m not technically supposed to ask, but . . . will Eggsy be Knighted?”

I shift uncomfortably. I hadn’t expected that, though perhaps I should have. I reply carefully. “His request to resume training was approved. He is, technically, in consideration.”

She blinks. “But he failed the last test.”

“Yes.”

“It seems unusual.”

“It is.”

My reluctance to be forthcoming sours the line of conversation. She presses her lips together, small mouth growing smaller. “I think about it, sometimes,” she admits. “When I look at her—my dog. I think about that moment when I was levelling the gun right between her eyes. I was prepared to kill her. In a way, I did, even though she’s still with me, and still greets me when I come home every day. I did as I was I asked, and I proved myself. But sometimes, it seems rather monstrous.”

I am surprised by her candidness, especially in the face of my evasiveness. “What we do is, sometimes, a monstrous business.”

She nods solemnly. “Maybe it’s not for everyone.”

After Roxanne leaves my office I sit in my chair, fingers steepled, thinking. Her words play back in my head, and I am surprised how close to my own thoughts they were.

It’s not healthy. It’s doing him in.

Maybe it’s not for everyone.

She is perfectly right. What can I do, though? I certainly won’t ban Egssy from seeing Harry any longer. That would be cruel and possibly even more damaging. Eggsy will need some sort of closure for when Harry does die. But spending hours a day at the side of a motionless, speechless, almost breathless body is not, in any sense of the word, healthy.

I think about what Roxanne said also, about Eggsy’s training. I have deliberately been keeping myself blind and unknowing to his progress, as it will easier for me to deny him a Knighthood, especially if he was doing well. It is neither surprising nor gratifying to know that he is slipping even here. It isn’t that I want him to fail; I simply think it’s best if he does and, given his nature, given what all I think I know of him, I am not surprised to learn that he is falling short of expectation.

I begin to wonder at that. Should I preemptively tell Eggsy that he will not be given a Knighthood? Or should I simply let his natural failure take its course? I am not sure which would be worse: to lose
Harry and then be denied a legacy on principle, or to lose Harry and then be denied a legacy due to his own shortcomings. One option is easier for me; the other is more honest.

I should tell him. It was stupid for me to keep it from him in the first place, to give him that hope. I should tell him. I owe him that much, out of respect, if nothing else. But when?

Before, or after, Harry dies?

I think of the Eggsy I found yesterday, shivering at the end of my bed. The Eggsy who had sat in a bath for hours, thinking of Harry. Just the memory of him like that, so distraught and inconsolable, makes my chest tight. And the aftermath, my own horrible, pathetic, solitary breakdown.

That took a lot out of me. I honestly don’t know if I have it in me to do that again.

This has got to end. Harry would hate to see Eggsy like this, to see us like this.

I sit there for a long while, contemplating what to do. In the end, I login to my messaging platform, and type the following:

Agent Unwin,

I want you to take your leave seriously. I and others are concerned for you. Please be advised that I am restricting your access to HQ until your scheduled return, including access to the infirmary. Full access (up to your clearance level) will be restored Wednesday at 0800. We look forward to having you back with us.

I sign the missive Arthur, as it is through an official channel. I blind copy the hospital administrator and front-of-house security. It seems straightforward enough, but I end up pressing “send” with a significant amount of unease. I do not expect Eggsy to like this, but I do expect him to see the sense in it. And, hopefully, his irritation will prevent him from wanting to see me, which I had not expressly forbid. It will do him good to unplug completely, if only for a few days.

The message goes out at 15:20. I spend the rest of the afternoon replying to various messages, looking over reports and charts—all, what in retrospect, feels like an extraordinarily carefree state of mind.

The ruckus starts two hours later.

-KM-

The first thing I hear is a raised voice.

I look up from my computer. A shout. It is followed by silence and I think for a moment that I might have imagined it. Then I hear another. More shouting. And then a bang.

I rise swiftly and go over to my office door with a mixture of growing concern and irritation. My hand moves inside my jacket automatically to unholster my gun. I point the barrel at the floor as I shove the door open with one hand.

The sight that greets me is so unexpected that I almost blanche.

There are only two people in the outer office. One of them, expectedly, is Kay. He is on the other
side of his desk, back half-turned to me, appearing to have stood and moved so abruptly that his chair has fallen over. His pale face has an angry flush to it, and his eyes are narrowed lethally and determinedly. One hand is by his side, deceptively relaxed.

In the other, he is holding the pistol he keeps in his shoulder holster. He is pointing it at Eggsy.

Eggsy’s arms are up and his face also angry and red. I can see immediately what happened. It unfolds in my mind as if I had actually seen it. When I review the security footage later, the accuracy of my own prediction will nearly astound me.

Eggsy had come here in a temper and tried to forcibly make his way into my office. Kay had intervened. And, when Eggsy tried to shove him out of the way, Kay drew his weapon.

(Well. I did give him permission to make Eggsy sit down.)

A wave of heat rolls over me. I open my mouth before I can think to calm myself, snarling:

“What is the meaning of this?!”

Kay’s shoulder’s twitch, but he doesn’t turn to look, keeping his gun trained steadily. Eggsy looks over Kay’s shoulder at me and glares. His expression is one of pure contempt.

“I need to speak with you, sir.” His enunciation is unusually crisp, and he spits the honorific like a foul insult.

I ignore him and replace my gun in its holster. “Kay,” I say in a much more reasonable tone, “go home. I will handle this.”

Kay shifts just enough so that he can glance back at me. He looks like he would rather swallow his own pistol—or plug Eggsy full of holes.

“Andrew, please. I will see you tomorrow,” I say pointedly.

Reluctantly, slowly, Kay lowers his weapon. He slips the gun back into his holster and smooths out his grey jacket. Dutifully, he walks around to his desk and rights his chair. He and Eggsy watch each other all the while, each of their gazes equally disdainful.

With a final look back at me, Kay leaves the room. I hear the small beep of the lock being set behind him.

As soon as the door closes, I round on Eggsy.

“What the fuck?”

Eggsy’s glare is hot, green eyes seeming to dance with anger. “I’ll tell you ‘what’— your secretary fucking attacked me—”

“You ought to know better than that,” I interrupt, matching his anger with my own. I am so fucking sick of this shite. “I may allow you to take liberties with me when we are alone, but when you are here, you will behave or—”

“He fuckin’ started it—”

“I highly doubt that, nor do I give a damn. What is wrong with you?”

“Where the hell do you get off, telling me I can’t see Harry?!”
I stop, somewhat stunned. (I don’t know why I’m stunned; I should have seen this coming. Still, it baffles me. Four days restriction and he goes mental? I had anticipated that he would dislike and disagree with my actions, but I did not foresee him taking it this... well, badly.) “Eggsy, this is not meant as a punishment. It is only for a couple of days. Did you even read—?”

He cuts me off, stepping towards me. His face is dark with rage. My body tenses and I just barely stop myself from taking a step back. (Am I afraid of him?)

“You don’t have a fucking right to take that time away from me—!”

“I was doing it temporarily and for your own good.” He is hysterical, I dully realize. There is no point in reasoning with him. This is not a normal reaction and he is not in a right frame of mind. He is absolutely and utterly hysterical.

His face purples, and it is the most unattractive I have ever seen him. “My own fucking g—!?”

“This is not healthy, Eggsy!” my voice has risen of its own accord and the words seem to fly out of my mouth without my consent. I can hear the desperation in my voice mixing with the anger. “He’s dying. You need to start putting some distance between you and —”

“You jus’ wanna keep Harry to your fuckin’ self!”

That accusation stings like a lance.

(And later, when I think back on it, I realize that my first emotion was not self-righteous anger: it was fear.)

“Don’t be daft—”

It is then that I see Eggsy’s fist come flying out of nowhere.

It’s a wild swing, uncalculated and without clear intent. My arm comes up automatically to block. I deflect the blow with practiced ease, my body sinking swiftly back into old muscle memories. Grabbing him by the shoulder and the back of his shirt, I haul him around and practically throw him into the inner office.

He hits the door with a thunk and staggers past it into the room. I am quick on his heels. He regains his balance enough to turn around and lunge at me again, but I am quicker. I side-step him, catching his arm and using it to throw him to the floor.

I haven’t but a moment to breathe before something hits the back of my legs hard, knocking my feet from under me. I hit the ground with a grunt, my head just missing the edge of one sofa. Before I can react, Eggsy has crawled atop me, taking one of my wrists in each hand and pinning them beside my head. For a wild moment, I think he is going to headbutt me, but he hesitates, and I use the opportunity to buck and shift my weight enough to roll us into the opposite position. He is still gripping my wrists, holding them away from his body, which is pinned under my weight and caged in by my thighs.

“This has got to stop!” I shout between breaths. “This is bloody ridiculous—”

Eggsy makes a sound that is closer to a roar than anything else, and writhes wildly underneath me. We twist around on the floor for some minutes, fighting for dominance. A particularly wild buck has him unseating me, and I roll off and scramble to my feet. I see his hands before I see the rest of him, diving towards me as if to grab me—
I catch his wrists again and bring them down to his sides. He grunts, the change in momentum making him stagger forward into me. I stumble backward with him to maintain my balance and not fall to the floor. Thankfully, my legs hit the edge of my desk just as I fear I might fall—but then I have to let go of one of his wrists in order to brace and right myself.

If this were a real fight, and not the fucking farce that it is, it would have been a costly mistake. I am unbalanced and my other hand only loosely grips his wrist. He could hurt me, now. He has the opportunity.

He wrenches his other wrist out of my hand, and I tense up, preparing to be hit. It is only when he places his hands on either side of me, flat on the desk, that I realize my mistake. That, consciously or not, I have misjudged him.

He surges up onto the balls of his feet, leans against me, and presses his plush, wet mouth to mine. The kiss is hard, bruising, rough. I can taste his fury and his phrenzy, the two melding together in a metallic tang that reminds me of blood. His tongue strokes into my mouth hungrily, furiously, and he sucks and bites on my lower lip. Dimly, I feel one of his hands place itself on the flat of my stomach, then venture downwards. He begins to work at the clasp of my belt.

“Eggsy,” I manage between the rough, biting kisses. “Eggsy, stop—”

He doesn’t listen. He silences me by kissing me again. He undoes my belt.

“Hit me,” he says hot against my mouth.

I stiffen, push him back. “No.”

He growls, and shoves his hand down my trousers. I am already half hard, much to my shame. He leans in and bites my lip. “Hit me.”

I grunt as his hand squeezes around my cock. My fingers tighten around his arms. Fuck. “No. No, Eggsy, stop— stop—”

He doesn’t listen. He never does.

Instead, he then sinks to his knees, and proceeds to suck me off right there in my own fucking office against my own fucking desk.

By the time he has my cock in his mouth my protests have all but died upon my lips. He’s gotten good at this in the short time I’ve had to teach him. More to the point, he’s beginning to understand my body, know what I like, what drives me mad. He knows how to swirl his tongue, and how I appreciate the feeling of him moaning around me. He doesn’t ask me to hit him again, but he does give an almost grateful groan when my hands, having gone to his head, tighten in his hair. My grip is so tight that it must be painful, but it seems to only excite him. He briefly palms himself through his trousers with one hand, the other keeping the base of my cock steady while he sucks. It is all I can do in that moment not to hold him in place and fuck his mouth. The only reason I don’t is because, distantly, I think he would like that too much.

-KM-

Afterwards, Eggsy asks me to come over to his flat.
Coldly, I tell him no.

“You are on leave,” I say, straightening myself. “I will re-grant your access to the infirmary so that you can see Harry. But, as far as I’m concerned, you are also on leave from me. Now, get out.”

The look he gives me is inscrutable; but he does as I say, and leaves without another word.

I lean against my desk, pressing one hand over my eyes. Everything swirls before me. God.

-KM-

To my slight surprise, Eggsy manages to stay away from me for the remainder of his leave. I am vexed to find how utterly strange it feels to bear his absence for so long, but welcome the reprieve. I need the space to think.

I am unsure how Eggsy is feeling; I, for one, am deeply angry with him. Not for blowing me in my own office—I had done the same to him when we started this entire blasted affair— but for violating the sanctity of it. For threatening Kay, or making Kay feel threatened. For bringing his uncontrolled wrath into HQ and into my office, the place where I must be cool and collected and work. And then, yes, I suppose I am angry at him for sucking me off there. After I told him “no” repeatedly. I am not even angry at him for his apparent need to brawl, or his attempt to assault me. You see, Eggsy is not a violent person by nature. In fact, he’s very gentle. Kind to animals and to children. He would never attack someone or something he thought was defenseless.

But he is rough with me because he knows, somehow, that he cannot hurt me. Nothing he says or does can touch me. I am invincible, impermeable. He can hit me and curse at me, assault me and sexually use me, and I will not break.

It isn’t the sex or physical violence that makes me feel violated and wronged. It’s the fact that he doesn’t understand why his behavior is inappropriate and unacceptable. Or that he doesn’t care.

The truth is, I should not be surprised by any of this. He is reacting the way anyone his age might: badly.

I never forget how young he is in comparison to myself, but sometimes, such as now, it hits me with all the force of a freight train. What the fuck am I doing with him? When did I lose my sense and let it go this far? When did I become such a fucking fool and let this bloody child ruin me?

My anger does not abate; but it is now not entirely directed at Eggsy.

That does not, however, stop me from taking it out on him.

-KM-

After the encounter in my office, and after Eggsy returns to Kingsman, he appears more subdued. The afternoon of his return, he comes by my office.

Kay is less than pleased to see him but Eggsy behaves himself for once, and waits patiently in a chair until I am finished with work. He rises when I exit the office; I am not surprised to see him, but I do lift a single eyebrow at him.
He shrugs sheepishly. Unapologetically.

We go back to his flat that evening. We do not talk.

The next day, I leave his flat early. I go home and lace up my trainers. I go for a run, studiously ignoring the tail behind me. I run longer than I mean to and return to my house exhausted. Nevertheless, I pull myself together, washing up and dressing in the three-piece suit that Kay had selected for me the previous day. I go to HQ, to my office, and place a call to Demarais.

With him as my witness, I sign the final documents. These are added to the agreements containing signatures from the rest of the Board of Directors. I officially become Arthur. My authority is consolidated and solidified.

The first week passes.

Three more left.

-KM-

I have resolved to not visit Harry again. Not until the day before he is scheduled to be euthanized. There is only so much I can handle.

Eggsy keeps his regular visits. And then, every evening, asks to see me.

New patterns, old rhythms.

Sometimes, I insist we meet at his flat. Other times, I suggest we go for drinks, for dinner. The few times I do make such suggestions, I regret them quickly. Eggsy rarely seems to want to talk, and is by turns sorrowful, petulant, and sullen. I end up calling for the check half an hour in.

Once in a bedroom, his or mine, we devour each other. These days, the sex if often heated, almost angry. On one occasion, Eggsy demands to be fucked, and then leaves almost immediately after he’s come; he only does that once, but the message is clear.

He’s stopped asking about Harry, or about anything to do with me. He does not ask me how I’m feeling and does not volunteer his own emotions. When we aren’t fucking, he is often cold and aloof. He usually stays the entire night through, either curled up on the other side of the bed or wrapped firmly in my arms; he sometimes even stays for breakfast (a simple enough affair, mostly for his benefit) but does little more than slowly chew the food I present to him. His mood then is often not sullen, but indifferent. It’s decidedly worse.

Had he ever liked me at all? I wonder, watching him eat his toast and stare across the kitchen, looking anywhere but at me. Why is he here? Why did he come here in the first place? Perhaps all of this was just him looking for a piece of Harry, somewhere, and settling for what little he found in me.

His surliness and his silence only make me angrier at him.

And the only way I can think to pay him back, to bring him out of his dour state, is to punish him and humiliate him in the sweetest possible way.

It’s true, what he said before and what I pointed out to him: he is a slut for it. Every day, I find new ways to bring it out in him. Once, I make him hold himself open with both hands, exposing himself to me while I play with him and then fuck him. Another time, I make him come repeatedly, creating
a sticky, awful mess, and then make him clean it up. Sometimes, I tell him to lay on the bed, naked, and beg me for it while I slap his arse pink. Shame and anger both burn in his cheeks, but he does as he’s told and takes what I give him. I don’t know that he actually likes the humiliation, but he does get off on it. The same can be said for my part in it; and that is enough for both of us.

Or it seems that way in the moment.

When he has left or I find myself with a rare moment alone to think, I find myself thinking back to our first few encounters—before we’d actually had sex. I think of how sweet he had been, how flirtatious and tender and coy. I think of how protective I felt of him and how fond. I still feel that way. But there seems to be no room for that between us, now.

The second week passes.

Two left.

-KM-

I approve Eggsy for return to field duty that week.

It seems to be the right thing to do. For all the heated and fraught fucking that goes on between us, he seems to have taken on a much more subdued persona in the workplace. Not that he interacts with me there—after the incident in my office, he mostly steers clear from doing more than nodding his head at me as we pass in the hallways. However, I still take my walk of the battlements by the gymnasium to watch him and the other agents train, and I discreetly enlist Lancelot to update me on Eggsy’s progress and general mood. She agrees to give me nonspecific updates, and informs me that Eggsy’s marks have begun improving, that his attitude is more of an even keel, and that he seems to be, as she put it “levelling out”.

This is not reason enough by itself to give him field assignments. In fact, if I had it my way, I would keep him benched for much longer. However, the pace of work has picked up significantly, the world finally recovering from the aftermath of V-day and getting up to its old shenanigans. Most of the Knights (12 in total) are never home for more than 72 hours at a time, so frequently are they sent on assignment; I need all the warm, able bodies I can get.

And, truth be told, I feel the need for a break from Eggsy.

I half expect him to resist being put on assignment—it does, after all, take away his time from Harry, and his last reaction to such a suggestion was, shall we say, explosive. However, when I broach the subject with him, he merely nods, says, “Yeah, where d’you need me?” and that is the end of it.

On Monday, he is deployed to Italy. He comes back two days later tasting of tobacco and salt.

We end up making out like randy teenagers on my couch, rucking up each others’ shirts and being clumsy with lust. He bites at my shoulder and then sucks a bruise too high on my neck for my collar to entirely cover. I slap his arse for his insolence and he gives me a rare grin.

He asks, then, if he can fuck me. I hesitate only for a moment.

The familiar act now in reverse slows things down for us. It’s refreshing. Eggsy is anxious, and his fingers fumble when he goes for the lubricant. He’s done this with a woman before, but it’s much different with a man, with me: more intimate, somehow. He keeps asking for feedback, wanting to know if I like that, is he doing this right, and glows under the low, warm encouragement that I give him. When he kisses me, it is almost fond.
I insist on riding him and he doesn’t complain. It has been literal ages since I’ve done this but it is, as they say, like riding a bicycle. I pick up a rhythm that seems to please him and pursue it single-mindedly. He groans and keens under me in much the same ways as he did before, gripping at my hips and stroking my thighs; and it is only when he is nearly on the edge of orgasm that I see realization and surprise bloom in his eyes. Why I would insist on being on top, and in control. I may be the one with cock up my arse, but I am still fucking him.

When we finish, he curls up against my back, another reversal of our customs. He licks at the spot on my neck where the bruise is forming, and it makes me shiver.

He only asks to do this a few more times. He likes it, to be sure—what young man doesn’t like having his cock somewhere warm and tight? But he likes it less than being taken. He enjoys the feeling of giving someone else control, of allowing himself to be used and fucked and taken care of. And perhaps that is why he takes to humiliation so: the very idea that anyone would care enough to go through all that trouble, that anyone would pay such intense attention to him, call him filthy and then tell him how lovely he looks, gets him off.

(It's all very Freudian, when I think about it. I am a stand-in for Harry, who may be a stand-in for his father, Lee Unwin. All the praise and attention Eggsy didn’t receive as a youth, when he needed it most, now coming back to screw him.)

I am content to go along with whatever he likes. It is a means of placating him, of keeping tabs on him, of reassuring myself that he is, after a twisted fashion, all right. And, to be perfectly honest, I prefer to give rather than to receive with Eggsy; but on the rare occasions when I let him fuck me he is, for a while, almost affectionate. I am a fool for craving it, but I do.

I find that I miss him. I miss the way he used to look at me. I miss his smiles and his sardonic humor. His inherent sweetness and boyishness. I miss the way he would try to seduce me. The way he was curious about me. I even miss him asking me to talk about Harry.

But how can I complain about this? Eggsy is stabilizing. In the face of Harry’s certain death, he is—for once—holding himself together. He hasn’t had an outburst since that afternoon in my office—nearly two-and-a-half weeks. He isn’t happy, certainly: but he comes to work, and he goes on the small assignments that I give him, and he does his job. All of my sources and observations inform me that this is the best he has been since V-Day.

I have to be satisfied with that. Eggsy is doing better.

At least, it seems that way.

His newly subdued demeanor lulls me into a sense of security. I don’t see it coming.

And then, neither of us do.

-KM-

I am standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom attached to my office. My tie is undone and my shirt is open to the third button. It is nearly 08:00, and I am killing a small and precious amount of time ogling my own skin in front of the mirror.

I pull aside my collar to expose some of my clavicle. There is a dark contusion that bloomed there
overnight, an inflamed, rosy red. I contemplate the bruise thoughtfully, prodding it. It’s anyone’s guess where it came from (or who put it there), but I cannot remember exactly how I got it. The skin is sore enough that one would think I might recall, but I don’t.

The sex last night was . . . especially rousing. Egssy came over in a particularly foul mood. I don’t know what set him off and did not think to ask. Or, rather, I thought and then thought better of it.

Sighing, I close up my shirt and fix my tie. I have an 08:45 meeting with Agent Carme Rocha Morais, the new Merlin, and I want to review several assignment statuses before then. Taking up my glasses from where I had set them on the sink, I set them on my face, and exit into my office.

Kay had opened the windows when he came in, and the morning sun is streaming into the office, bright and cheery. It is especially ill-suited to my general mood these days, but I do not bother to close the curtains.

As I stand there, surveying the room, there is a familiar knock at the door.

“Enter.”

Kay pushes through, carrying a pot of tea, toast, and jam in one hand, a tablet tucked under the other arm. I suppress a smile; the tablet I had asked for, the tray of goods, I had not.

Kay sets the tray down upon the long coffee table between the matching sofas. He then straightens and offers the tablet to me; when I take it, he signs:

Mission reports, sir, as requested.

I press my thumb to the screen to unlock it. As my hands are busy, I say ask aloud: “Thank you. Remind me again, has Morholt returned?”

No, sir. He is scheduled to arrive back this afternoon. At this moment, all Knights are afield.

I nod. No rest for the wicked, it would seem. I page through the first several reports. “Lamorack made it to Shanghai?”

Yes, sir. He sent his last transmission this morning at 0400 before going into deep cover.

“Good. Let me know as soon as we hear anything from him.”

Kay raises his hands as if to sign something else, but hesitates, hands frozen in midair. I give him a quizzical look.

“What is it?”

Kay licks his lips. If I didn’t know better, I might say it was a nervous tick. Slowly, he replies: There . . . was a request from Research & Development. Did you have a chance to look it over?

My eyebrows crease slightly, and I shake my head once. “No. What about?”

They are requesting my expertise. For a new project. They are asking for about one afternoon per week of my time.

“To be spent in ballistics and weapons testing?”

Yes. Is . . . he looks at me, his face almost desperately stoic. Is that acceptable, sir?
I consider this. It is difficult to forget what Andrew Waite was before I promoted him to Kay—in short, the finest ballistician that had ever been under my supervision, and the most competent technician I had ever seen. These were the reasons why I had promoted him, had seen fit to bring him with me into the office of Arthur. He was simply the best I had working for me at the time who was not a division head, and someone I trusted to get the job done. It had rarely occurred to me that he might want to return to that kind of work, in any capacity.

Thinking on this, I navigate to my messaging platform and find the request in question. I skim through it. “Is this something you would like to do?”

When I look back up at him, his mouth is slightly pursed, as if he is annoyed. At himself, perhaps. He seems, to me, more and more expressive these days, albeit in understated ways. Though, perhaps this is less to do with his level of comfort with me, and more to do with the fact that, after several weeks of working closely with him, I am picking up on the more subtle facial expressions that I had seldom paid attention to whilst Merlin.

(I can only assume the opposite must be true; he must be able to read me quite well, by now. The thought is both reassuring and unsettling.)

*I want to be of use in any way I can, sir. To you and to Kingsman.*

His answer tells me that I asked the wrong question. “Do you think you could manage this, along with your other duties?” I ask more gently.

After a moment, Kay nods.

“Then I don’t see why it should be a problem,” I reply slowly. “I only ask that you include in my schedule when you will be out.”

He blinks at me. He almost looks nonplussed. *Yes, Arthur. Will that be all?*

“Yes, Kay, thank you. When Agent Rocha Morais arrives, please send her in.”

*Yes, sir.*

Kay lets himself out as I sit down upon one of the sofas, looking through the reports. All agents afield, and I have assignments lined up for each and every one of them upon return. Christ, we’re busy. I am at the point where I am seriously contemplating sending a trainee out on a more rigorous assignment—Lizann could do with the experience.

At the thought of Mark Lizann, I close my current document and pull up his report from the last minor recon assignment he had been given. The report was unremarkable, as it should have been, and Lizann’s notes were meticulous. I pull up Lizann’s personnel file. Though he has only served on small recon and on asset extraction assignments, his record from the field is impressive. All reports of him commend his bravery, his leadership potential, his ability to think quickly on his feet, and, above all, his ability to get the job done. He is as fine a shot as any, former long-distance runner, speaks three foreign languages (Spanish, French, and Russian). His test scores are impressive. His mentor, Safir the fifth, has nothing but high praise for him. At the beginning of his training, he was given a puppy, a German Shepherd. I’m told he’s named it Isabel (“Izzy” for short). He is scheduled to take his final exam in two months.

I know all of this. I have read and reread his history, have asked Kay to keep me abreast of all his accomplishments and achievements. I know what kind of young man Mark Lizann is. He is ideal for the Knighthood. I need not convince myself any further.
I think back on my time as Merlin. It was my job to outfit agents for assignments, to monitor their progress, and to train them. I have had a hand in training nearly every agent that has come through here in the last seventeen years. Some of them surprise you, in good ways and in bad; but, by now, I know what I need to look for. Lizann has it.

He is superior to Eggsy in all the ways that count.

Giving in, I heave a sigh to myself in the silence of my office. I have not yet given much thought to where I should place Eggsy once I tell him. Overly emotional though he may be, he is a bright, loyal, capable, and courageous young man; it isn’t as if we cannot utilize him. Far from it. His naturally protective and caring nature make him ideal for certain other positions, now that I think about it. He could be utilized in the Knight Support Corps in asset extraction, for one; emergency medicine, for another, though he would need accelerated training—

I am broken out of my musing by the sound of my phone giving a sharp, high pip.

Frowning, I set down the tablet and extract it from my pocket, peering at the message on the screen.

Kay: Trouble in Gymnasium 3. Agent Unwin has been sent to the infirmary.

My brows pull together in confusion and concern. What the devil?

Rising quickly to my feet, I cross my office and open the door.

Kay’s face is already turned to look at me. I stride over to where he sits. “What happened?”

One side of his mouth dips disapprovingly. I received a message from the Taskmaster, Commander Thornton. Apparently, there was a fight.

Jesus wept. And he had been doing so bloody well. In an uncharacteristic display of frustration, I put one hand over my eyes briefly. “Bloody hell.”

When I remove my hand, Kay is simply watching me. His eyebrows are raised primly, though he looks somewhat sympathetic.

I stand there for a moment, hesitating. There is absolutely no need for me, Arthur, to take time out of my day to see to the aftermath of a fight among trainees. In fact, it would be slightly ludicrous to do so.

But I’m worried. This is the first time in almost two weeks that Eggsy had acted up, and fighting with another trainee seems . . . out of character.

But rather in character with the way he had behaved last night. . . .

Making up my mind, I sign: I will be back shortly. If I do not return before Agent Rocha Morais arrives, please express my apologies and ask her to look over the most recent mission reports while she waits.

I make my way down to the infirmary with quick, sure strides, my feet carrying me there without conscious effort on my part. It has been almost two weeks since I last came this way.

I’m not going to see him, I tell myself firmly. There will be no need. The inpatient ward is in a completely different hallway. I need not even stray towards Harry’s room.

I keep telling myself this as I ride the elevator down to basement level 1. When I exit the elevator, I
approach the nurses’ station. The young woman at the desk (Amelia, I think) blinks, looking surprised to see me.

“Arthur?”

“In which room is Agent Unwin?” I ask without preamble.

“B08, sir, left hallway.”

I thank her and stride off in the direction she stated, my concern bubbling up even more strongly. What happened? What spurred this fight? Was he all right? Did he—

As I make my way down the hall, a familiar figure steps out of one of the rooms, B03. It’s Commander Thornton. When he catches sight of me, his grim expression grows even grimmer.

“Arthur,” he addresses me. “May I have a word, sir?”

I slow to a halt. A strange and knowing feeling creeps over me. I look past him, through the open doorway of B04, and into the room.

A nurse in black scrubs and swarthy junior agent that I do not recognize are standing next to another trainee who is seated on the examination table, nursing a black eye. He has a cold pack pressed to his face, but his build and shock of light blonde hair, like a halo around his head, tells me instantly who it is.

Mark Lizann.

I turn to Thornton.

“A fight broke out during hand-to-hand training,” Thornton explains. “I wasn’t there, but I have at least two witnesses saying that Unwin was the instigator, and Lizann was mostly on the defense. Seems like they were put up against each other, and Lizann threw Unwin one too many times. Things got heated. Nurse thinks Lizann’s got a cracked rib, but he’s otherwise fine. Unwin might have a minor wrist fracture—doc’s looking him over now.”

From his seat on the table, Lizann looks up when he hears my voice. The skin around his left eye is swollen, and I notice that he has several red marks along his forearms, as one might obtain from blocking blows.

The expression on his face... was he expecting me to come? Hoping, even?

“Ey, guv.”
I am still clutching at the door handle. He looks far better than Lizann. His face is untouched, merely
flushed, his dark golden hair askew. “What happened?”

Eggsy shrugs the shoulder of the hand that isn’t being wrapped. He gives me a grin that has
something sharp and mean buried beneath it. “Oh, you know, schoolyard scuffle. No big, bruv.”

“Who started it?”

“We both started it.” He doesn’t seem to be talking about Lizann.

“Why?”

 Abruptly, the nurse finishes wrapping Eggsy’s wrist and stands. She doesn’t bother putting away the
rest of her first aid kit, just gives me an unseeing nod and skirts past me. Smart woman. I enter the
room and close the door.

Eggsy is still staring at me, not saying anything. His glare is tempestuous; he radiates anger, but it is
also muddied by another emotion, one that he is desperately trying to hide. His mouth is pursed, as if
he is trying not to speak, even though my question still hangs in the air.

I ask another. “What is going on, Eggsy?”

He gives another shrug that is much too casual and says acidly, “Suppose you’ve seen Mark already.
He’s pretty fit, isn’t he? You fucking him too, that it?”

I react without thinking. My hand flies out of its own accord.

I have never hit anyone out of anger. I have been tempted—he has tempted me, on numerous
occasions—but I have always maintained enough control to prevent myself from acting rashly.

Not now.

The sound of the slap is loud, jarring in the silence. My hand stings where it connected with Eggsy’s
face, and his head whips with the impact. He recovers quickly, serving me up a mean, satisfied glare.
He wanted me to hit him.

I can only gape at him. I feel horrified with myself.

“I didn’t mean— I’m—”

“When were you gonna tell me, huh? When were you gonna fucking tell me that Mark was also
training for Knighthood? Were you just gonna wait until it was the two of us at the end of our
training and make us duke it out?”

I manage to recover, but only just. I don’t know how he found out about Lizann’s training. Outside
of Chester’s selection process, Kingsman Knighthood candidacy training is on a need-to-know basis;
the only people who are aware are the candidates themselves, their mentors, technicians running
training simulations, and Arthur. Eggsy is an exception merely because of the circumstances of his
last training—everyone knew he was gunning to be a Knight. But Lizann? I hardly think that Lizann
would have told Eggsy; another agent? But who?

“It is not my prerogative to inform you of other candidates—”

“Why the fuck not? Don’t you think I ought to know what I’m up against? If I had known, I would
have—”
"Would have what?" My words come out in more acerbically than I intended. "Would have trained harder? Would have been more focused?"

There is no way that our conversation (shouting match) is not being heard up and down the hall, even with the moderate soundproofing in the room. The idea doesn’t seem to bother either of us. As confrontations go, this feels strangely manageable: Eggsy only seems to know that Lizann is also training for Knighthood, not that I assured Lizann the position over him. At least that much is still a secret. I can handle Eggsy’s outrage over thinking that he wasn’t special. In fact, it’s necessary. He’s missing the point entirely.

Eggsy shoves his uninjured hand down into the examination table with a hard thump and retorts, "That’s not fair—"

"Fair? Since when did fair come into play? This isn’t a game, Eggsy."

"If I had known that I was competing with someone else—"

"You were never not competing. We can’t afford to only train one person at a time for a position in which the level of peril is so high—"

"I’m just saying you should have fuckin’ told me!"

"I shouldn’t have to, because it shouldn’t matter. The amount of effort you put into your training shouldn’t hinge on whether or not you think you need to beat someone else, because the people that you need to beat are always going to be out there, trying to kill you!"

"I KNOW THAT!" he yells, jumping up now. His cheek is glowing an angry red from my slap. "I bloody well know that—what, did you forget? V-Day? Because I certainly fucking haven’t."

"You were brilliant," the words surprise even myself, and they come out with an almost tender kind of admiration. I take a split second to steel myself. Don’t. "You were brilliant, and you rose to the occasion the moment we needed you. But you have been an utter and complete wreck since, and I’m not confident in. . . ."

I trail off, noticing the expression that has taken over his face. A look of dawning realization, surprise, shock, incredulity, hurt. His face says it plainly:

I’ve gone and shown my hand.

Eggsy brings both hands up to his face to cover it momentarily, and he mutters through his fingers. "Oh my god. Oh my fucking god, how was I so stupid?" He removes his hands, and his gaze is like hot coals. "You don’t want me to be a Knight."

"I don’t want you to get killed."

And that’s it. It is the plainest, best way I know how to answer him, the reason for my doubt. But he merely gives a harsh scoffing laugh, his face twisting in anger, eyes glimmering with a hurt that I can almost physically feel.

"Is that the excuse you’re going to hide behind? How fuckin’ sweet." He looks down at his shoes. "I trusted you. I thought you were in my corner. I thought you gave a shit about me."

"I do. More than I should."

His head whips up, eyes flashing. "I’m finding that really fucking hard to believe right now. This is
the only thing that I’ve ever really wanted in my life, and you don’t think I’m cut out for it. Why? Harry thought I was good enough.”

“This isn’t about—”

“I think it is. I think it’s all about Harry.”

The silence that sits between us is absolutely deafening. I can practically hear my ears ringing.

I should say something. Defend myself. But I know that he wouldn’t hear me, no matter what I said. And looking at him look back at me with that baleful expression just makes me tired. It’s strange, but I simply don’t have it in me to give any more emotion to this situation.

The silence stretches on until Eggsy cannot help but break it.

“What?”

“Sometimes, you utterly defeat me.”

His brow furrows and his mouth drops open as if he means to speak. No words are forthcoming, though. He simply gapes at me, frustrated and disbelieving.

I look into his youthful face; even flushed as it is from the fight, even tired as he is, he looks radiant. If I have any desire left in me, it is only to kiss him. Idiot boy.

There is a sudden, loud rapping at the door.

I have barely opened my mouth to tell the person to come in when the door opens anyway, hitting the wall with a bang.

And in the doorway, panting, is Dr. Caffrey.

Both Eggsy and I freeze.

“He’s awake!” Caffrey exclaims. “Arthur, Galahad is awake—”

Everything that happens next happens in slow motion. Eggsy propels himself from the examination table, nearly falling off it. He pushes past me heedlessly, jostling my shoulder. He disappears out the door, and I can hear his running footsteps echo down the hallway.

Caffrey is still speaking to me, though his voice is muffled. His face itself looks blurry. What is wrong with me? I blink, swallow, try to focus. Try to comprehend.

Harry is awake.

I cannot explain it. I should be elated.

Instead, I am filled with a crushing and overwhelming sense of panic.

Harry is awake.
Good news! I am currently writing the epilogue, meaning that the rest of the chapters will be posted regularly (probably once per week).
**Chapter Summary**

Appulse: (astronomy) the shortest apparent distance between one celestial object and another, as seen from a third body during a given period.

**Chapter Notes**

A/N: Temporal lobe damage can result in very severe language impairments, an idea which I toyed around with for Harry. Ultimately, I did not want him to be the focus of another kind of tragedy, and it’s difficult for Harry and Merlin to have the conversations which drive the plot if the damage and deficit was more severe. Since I’ve previously described Harry’s brain trauma as relatively minor (for a gunshot wound) I’ve given him anomic aphasia which, while still difficult to effectively write (esp. for Harry), does not impede the progress of the story.

It is only by some small miracle that I do not actually faint. My vision tunnels, and then next thing I know, I am halfway sprawled on the floor with Caffrey standing over me, gripping my shoulder. I did not fully lose consciousness; though, in the following moments, I almost wish I had.

I allow myself to sit for the span of several deep breaths on the floor before taking hold of Caffrey’s proffered hand and pulling myself to a lopsided stand. I lean heavily against the examination table for support, my head still spinning.

In a blurry voice, I demand that Caffrey explain.

He talks, though I scarcely listen. It is a ruse, really, a ploy for time. I am shaky, as if I have just been given a huge dose of epinephrine. Looking down at one of my hands to see it quivering, I quickly ball it into a fist. I focus on breathing through my nose and try to catch what Caffrey is saying.

He cannot explain it. All he knows is that he was paged by a nurse five minutes ago, and arrived in Harry’s room the moment that he opened his eyes and started trying to speak.

“I haven’t had a chance to perform any real tests, obviously, but a quick evaluation indicates that all of his basic neurobiological functions seem intact,” Caffrey says excitedly. “The nurses have—”

“I thought you said he was descending into a vegetative state.” The words fly out of my mouth without real thought, my tone level but inlaid with accusation. I feel as though I’ve been lied to. Ruinously.

Caffrey nods emphatically, apologetically. “Yes. It did seem that way. His overall prognosis was very grim—but he’s pulled through, despite all of that.” He smiles.
No matter how many times he says it, I can scarcely believe what I am hearing. *Harry is awake.* He is awake, and there is no explanation for it. “Is he lucid?”

“Yes. He asked for you, actually.”

Though warmth floods me at those words, I nod stiffly. “I want to be kept up-to-date on his recovery,” I say crisply. “For now, keep the news confidential. Please go and inform Galahad that I will be in to see him shortly. Thank you.”

My tone and look are both pointed. Caffrey receives the message plainly. He inclines his head slightly and then turns, closing the door behind him.

Once the door is fully shut, I let out a gasp I didn’t know I had been holding. More gasps seem to leap out of me, one after the other. I can feel myself shaking, my chest and arms and fingers quivering with— what? Delirium? Excitement? Elation? *He’s awake.* Why do I feel as though I am drowning?

A hysterical bark of a laugh escapes me, and I clamp a hand over my own mouth.

I stand there, alternately shaking silently and making quiet, not-quite-laughs for several minutes until I clench my jaw shut and swallow the rest of the pathetic sounds that I’m making. This is ridiculous. What am I doing? I need to go and see him.

I go to the sink and mirror in the small room; I splash cold water on my face and then dry off with one of the fresh towels. I examine my features critically. My eyes are red, though I haven’t been crying. There is some petechiae dotting my upper eyelids, but it’s minor enough to be unnoticeable at first glance. Mostly, I look utterly depleted.

I nod to my own reflection. Exhaustion is as fine an armor as any.

There is no one standing outside the room when I exit, much to my relief. For all that Caffrey had been in a kerfuffle, the rest of the infirmary is quiet; I pass a single physician as I walk back down the left hallway and then start down the center one, towards room B029. I can sense my steps slowing the closer I get, but I make myself keep walking.

The door is open. I pause before moving into the doorway.

I dare not step into the room. I think my legs might give out on me again. As discreetly as possible, I lean against one side of the doorframe, gripping it with one hand.

*Harry.*

He is no longer laid back against his bed, but sitting upright, on his own. His hospital gown pulls around his shoulders, and his hair (which hadn’t been trimmed, save for the portion around the wound that was shaved) is a mess. He looks—god, it’s so bizarre. For the past month-and-a-half he was all but lifeless. And now he’s—he looks just *fine.* Thinner, yes, and paler, but he’s *moving* and smiling. He looks beautiful. Tired. *Alive.*

But I have little time to appreciate any of this, because the principal thing that I notice is Eggsy.

It would be hard not to. Eggsy has all but climbed into the small, narrow bed in order to throw his arms around Harry in a tight hug, his face almost buried in Harry’s neck. The embrace looks intimate and almost uncomfortably tight, but Harry bears it with grace and aplomb. His own arms are gently encircling Eggsy, one thin hand rubbing at Eggsy’s back; Harry has his cheek pressed into Eggsy’s forehead, and is murmuring unintelligibly. Eggsy’s frame is shaking, and I can hear muffled sniffling
and tightly drawn breaths.

Eggsy pulls back to look at Harry, and I can see now that there are indeed tears on his face, trailing wet streaks down his cheeks. He is aglow with emotion: his eyes are red, his mouth rosy, his skin pink. He looks into Harry’s face, his expression heartbreaking and hopeful and joyful all at once. He sniffs and tries for a grin.

Harry looks back into Eggsy’s gaze. Tenderly, he brings on hand up to wipe a tear away from Eggsy’s cheek with his thumb. His mouth curves into a soft, crooked smile. It’s such a fond expression.

It makes my brain screech to a halt and my insides turn to ice.

Because, in that moment, I know.

I know.

I begin to sway on the spot, feeling myself growing dizzy again. My vision blurs slightly, but I see Eggsy bury his face back in Harry’s neck. He hasn’t noticed me.

But Harry has.

I look up to meet his stare. My own expression is pure deer-in-the-headlights, a moment of shocked realization before the impact. His warm brown eyes watch me over the top of Eggsy’s head.

His expression shifts subtly. It remains fond, but tenderness fades, as do the crinkles at the edges of his eyes. His lips curve into an old, familiar smile for an old, familiar friend.

“Merlin.”

It is not impersonal of him to call me by my former codename. He says it with the same warmth as when he calls me by my given one. They were one and the same, for a time. It is done with fondness and out of respect. Harry has no way of knowing that Eggsy knows my real name.

Eggsy jumps in Harry’s arms and twists to look back at me. His expression is . . . caught out, somehow. Embarrassed. His left cheek is still glowing from my earlier slap, and it seems like a beacon. Evidence. He moves slightly away from Harry, looking very much like a puppy who has been caught doing something he knows he isn’t supposed to.

The damage is done, though. I cannot help but keep looking between him and Harry, so quickly that they begin to blur.

Another wave of vertigo swarms me. I blink and clear my throat. “Arthur, now, actually.”

Harry nods, as if he expected this. “Eggsy tells me . . . that you lot saved the world.” His voice is rough and weak.

A feeble smile forms on my lips. “You’re behind the times. That was weeks ago. Old news.”

He nods again, but his smile is beginning to slip. He senses something is wrong—he may have just recovered from a coma, but he is still Harry Hart, and it cannot have escaped his notice. There are thousands of little cues setting him off, from the way Eggsy has stiffened beside him, to the nearly palpable tension in the air, to the look of pale shock on my face, and whatever other stray emotion may be there. He sits there, one hand on Eggsy’s shoulder, the other propping himself up in the bed, looking first at me and then slowly turning to look at Eggsy. His eyebrows knit together fractionally.
He opens his mouth—

“It’s—” I start, then swallow thickly, “it’s good to see you—that you’re awake. I— I’ll leave you
two—”

Before he can say anything, I am whirling around, pushing against the doorframe to propel myself
back into the hall.

My feet carry me in jaunting, drunken steps. Everything passes me in a blur. I meant to head for the
elevator but I’m going in the wrong direction— possibly because my body knows something I don’t.
I just barely make it to the men’s room at the end of the wing and throw open a stall before I vomit.

-KM-

Somehow, I manage to make it out of the infirmary without being stopped. Whilst sagging against
the wall of the elevator, I pull out my phone and message Kay. I ask him to have Dailey bring the car
around, and to reschedule my meeting with Merlin.

He replies within seconds, saying Yes, sir, of course. And then, after a brief pause: Is everything all
right, sir?

What a fucking question. And yet, I make some effort to reassure him that, yes, I am all right. Ill, I
decide. I have suddenly taken ill and will be working from home. It’s only a temporary lie—Kay
doesn’t yet know that Harry is awake, but he will soon enough— everyone will—but it will suffice
for now.

It becomes less and less of a lie as I make myself walk out to the front of the building. I do, actually,
feel ill. Nauseous. I could almost be sick again, but I had vomited little enough the first time, and I
honestly don’t know that there is anything left in my stomach to expel.

Dailey is there waiting when I come out. He takes one look at my face and his eyebrows raise in
surprise and concern. Without thinking, he opens his mouth—

“Don’t,” I say, sharp and more authoritative than should be possible in my current state.

He immediately shuts his mouth. Without a word, he opens the door for me. Once inside, I roll up
the partition so that I am not forced to avoid his eyes.

The moment I enter my house, I begin stripping off my clothing. On the ride over, it had begun to
suffocate me, as if the fabric was coiling around me, itching, preventing me from breathing. I strip off
my jacket, leaving it on the floor of the living room. My tie ends up on the staircase, my shoes in the
hallway, my trousers and pants on the floor of my bedroom. I rip a button from my crisp white shirt
in my heedless effort to remove it from my body. My skin is absolutely crawling.

I go into the bathroom and turn on the shower, stepping in immediately. The water is cool at first,
prickling my skin unpleasantly, but soon becomes warm, and then scalding. The heat is painful for
the first several minutes: the nerves beneath my skin sing sharply, but I hold myself under the spray
until the pain subsides into a dull throb.

I do not wash myself. I simply stand there, letting the water pour over me until it runs cold.
When I exit the shower, I dry off mechanically. I dress in dark grey sweats, a plain white shirt. And then I crawl into my own bed, slipping beneath the unmade covers. I close my eyes and inhale the scent of sex and Eggsy, still clinging to the sheets.

-KM-

For seven blissful hours, I succumb to a remarkably dreamless sleep. It is so peaceful that, when I awaken at 17:00 hours, I forget for all of ten seconds why I am waking in the late afternoon in the first place.

After that realization, my body turns to lead. I do not want to move, but I cannot go back to sleep. I lay there beneath the sheets, staring up at the ceiling, stomach churning.

The image of Harry and Eggsy together on the hospital bed keeps swimming in and out of focus. I zero in on different details each time it becomes clear: the tiny shaking of Eggsy’s entire frame; his dark golden hair, wild from his scuffle with Lizann; how his skin practically glowed with his flush; his eyes, wet with tears and happy beyond words. And I remember Harry: smiling, whole, weak, alive. The way Harry’s hands had comforted Eggsy, one rubbing reassuringly against his back, the other straying up to pet softly at his hair. The look between them, when Eggsy pulled back.

I had experienced a distinctly shocking and ugly feeling then: I felt like a voyeur. Watching something not meant for me to see. I had every right to come in and see Harry but, as soon as I walked into that room, I knew that there was no place for me.

My stomach clenches painfully at the memory, and I curl up on one side, pathetic. My head pounds.

Harry is awake. He awoke against all hope and prediction. He pulled through, just as Eggsy was so desperately sure that he would.

Just as I was certain he wouldn’t.

A cold and unnerving chill to wash through me. I had thought Harry was going to die. I was prepared for him to die. I had been treating him like he was already dead.

Protocol K58642.

God. My god.

I had almost killed him.

I think back to three weeks prior, to the ultimatum I had received from Caffrey and Buchanan. Two weeks. They had given him only two more weeks and I had been fully prepared to acquiesce to their suggestion and expertise. No hope, no protest. I had given up, by that point, had given up on him.

For weeks now, I have been more prepared for Harry to die than for the prospect of him waking up.

And to wake up like this.

If I had any doubts before, that scene I had witnessed in Harry’s hospital room dispelled them absolutely.

Eggsy had not given up on Harry. And Harry had awoken for him.
Not for me. For Eggsy.

_I think I’m in love with him._

The answer had been plain in Harry’s eyes.

This is what hurts the most. This is what sinks a knife into my gut and twists and _twists_. I had known, of course. Somewhere, deep down, I think I always knew. It had been evident from almost the moment I had seen them together, when Harry first brought Eggsy in for training. A spark. Eggsy ignited something in Harry that I hadn’t seen for a long while. I had watched them, at first careful and curious, but then suspicious and apprehensive. I had seen it, even then. I knew, though I had dared not put a name to it. _I knew_. And I had been more prepared to watch Harry die than to bear that knowledge in full force.

I want to laugh, or cry, but both seem to require far more vigor than I currently possess. I only have enough energy to lie here and blink, to grind my teeth silently and think and breathe. Even after almost twenty-four hours, the sheets still smell of Eggsy, of his sweat and his sex.

I think of Eggsy. My feelings towards him. By turns affectionate, angry, protective, sympathetic, jealous. I press my nose into a pillow and inhale deeply. Just last night he had let me fuck him senseless into these very sheets, moaning wantonly and asking me to fill him up, make him beg and scream for it.

He is probably still at headquarters, still in the infirmary at Harry’s bedside. His body may still hold the memory of me, but his head has no spare thoughts for me any longer, save for a well-placed anger.

I had not given a great deal of thought to what would happen between Eggsy and I once Harry was dead. I was dealing with the situation moment-by-moment. But, I suppose, I may have assumed that we would continue as we were, ebbing and flowing around Eggsy’s mood. That we would, perhaps, continue even after I told Eggsy he would not be Knighted; that he might forgive me, and resume our old habits, if for no other reason than the comfort of routine. And now? I have no place in Eggsy’s life now. Even if I hadn’t seriously fucked up in our fight, there is no room for me in his life now.

I was never more than a substitute. I knew that from the very beginning, and I do not feel . . . jilted by it. I know that am not, nor have I ever been, in love with Eggsy; but he invited himself into my life, into my day-to-day thoughts and routine. He ingratiated himself to me utterly, became another bright, celestial object to which I was only a satellite. The idea of having him taken so swiftly leaves me feeling strangely bereft.

It seems that I am having everything taken from me, all at once.

It should hurt less than this. I am a grown man, well into middle age. Not yet an old spy, but getting on in my years. I have passed through my share of life experiences. And it had seemed for a long while that, as I grew older, my emotions became paler and my grasp on the liveliness around me grew more slippery. It seemed as though I was becoming immune to both the charms and heartbreak of the world at large; through my work and my own sheer stubbornness, I had removed myself from its spirited turning. This seemed only par for the course; and I had thought that I was through feeling so heartsick.

But it eats at me now with the same fresh, scarlet ache that it did all those years ago.

Only worse. So much bloody worse.
Perhaps it hadn’t hurt quite as much then because there was little enough to be lost. What had transpired between Harry and I . . . you might simply call it a folly of youth. Looking back, it seemed both inevitable and condemned from the start. I was captivated by him from the moment I met him, all those years ago at Cambridge, and he took to me with a quiet and understated affection that I have never been able to understand, only be grateful for. His friendship felt like something I should be indebted to—not because he ever made me feel obliged, but because he made me feel so . . . well, alive. He befriended me at a time when I had never known real companionship. When he became a Kingsman, he made sure that I was recruited to be with him. In those early days, we were nearly inseparable. And we were young and reckless, Harry especially so. Between the two of us, something was bound to either explode or break.

I wasn’t ready for it. I don’t think either of us were. But it happened, and it kept happening. There were no real boundaries to our relationship, no neat definitions or routines. Sometimes, we would go weeks without seeing one another, depending on the workload at Kingsman. Other times, we saw each other so often that I feared he might grow tired of me. He never seemed to. In one moment, we were friends, best mates who would both tease each other mercilessly and see each other to the end of the world and back. In the next moment, Harry would crowd in against me—in an alcove of some dimly-lit bar, in a deserted corridor, in the cozy safety of his flat—and kiss me until I felt like I was drowning.

I never said no to him. I was afraid to ask what any of this meant. Every time he touched me, I thought it might be the last.

I’d had sex before, with men and women— but I had never been touched so reverently. It was like he cast a spell over me with his entire being, and by asking for anything—for more, for an explanation—I would break it. And so, we went on that way, for years. During those years, I memorized him, practically worshipped him—and, when I saw him at work, I would give him a level nod and a wry smile. There was no need to say anything, to display anything more than camaraderie. I knew how he felt. I had the proof in my skin. I was content with this arrangement, whatever it was.

Or, so I thought.

He put an end to it several days after Bedivere the fourth, Thomas Moorefield, died. Harry had been moody for the past month, uncharacteristically taciturn and closed-off. He got that way, sometimes; before, I had always blamed it on his artistic nature and calmly waited it out. This time was different, though. I don’t know what set him off or what made it singular, but I remember him coming over to my house early in the evening the Saturday after Moorefield died in action. He was quiet, asking me politely for a drink, which I granted him. We sat in the living room next to the fire, not speaking. After an hour of drinking in silence, he told me that it had to stop. That he couldn’t bear it, the thought of losing me, or making me go through losing him. His father had died two years ago—natural causes—and it meant I was the only family he had left, save for an old blood relations he rarely spoke to.

“It has to stop,” he said into his whisky. He never said what “it” was, and it would have been childish of me to ask him.

I never said no to him, even in this.

He avoided me, for a time after that. He needed to give himself some distance, a chance to establish a new order in his mind. I let him. I waited. I was patient. I wanted to go to him, but I didn’t.

Harry did, eventually, come around. We would meet for dinner at a restaurant he fancied, or at a pub for a pint. He even came back to my house a few times. It was almost a year, though, before he
touched me again, and only then in friendship.

There was nothing dramatic about what happened between us. It hurt, certainly, but it did not feel like something I should mourn. He was still my friend. I had that much of him left.

But something changed between us. Maybe it was just a consequence of growing up, growing older. He changed into someone who was pricklier, more aloof. Still Harry, underneath it all, but protecting himself with sharp edges that I did not know how to handle without being stung.

I changed too, in self-defense. I developed my own sharp edges to slot between his. I only wanted to be near him. To be able to watch him live and breathe.

And what did Harry want? I still don’t know. I only know that I had never been so cherished or admired as when I was with him.

-KM-

After a night of little sleep, I am only marginally emotionally stable; however, I cannot excuse myself from the office for a second consecutive day. And I cannot avoid seeing Harry indefinitely. He is already suspicious of me based on my behavior the other day, as well he should be. Why should I flee his presence, lest I felt that I had something to hide?

And what, possibly, could I have to hide from such an old and intimate friend?

A good deal, it would seem.

I pass through my day with an edge of distraction. I meet with Agent Rocha Morais, though it is a brief, perfunctory affair; I confirm, based on reports from her superior, that she is a capable, no-nonsense kind of person with a pleasant demeanor that I cannot, in the moment, bring myself to reciprocate. But, if she finds my manner odd or unwelcoming, she does not give any indication. At the end of the meeting, she thanks me for my time, and says she looks forward to working with me. I can and do little but return the farewell almost verbatim, but she gives me an unaffected smile as she lets herself out.

The interaction leaves me unaccountably physically drained. I slump back into my chair, closing my eyes for half a moment.

I find myself thinking on the incident report that had come through earlier this morning. Thornton filled it out. It essentially reiterated what he had told me about the scuffle between Eggsy and Lizann, with an important addition: footage. In it is everything I need to see: one of the gymnasium 2 security cameras shows a group of trainees on the mats, Eggsy and Lizann pairing off. They sparred lightly for a few minutes, though there was a telltale tightness in Eggsy’s shoulders. Lizann threw Eggsy once, twice, three times. He gave Eggsy a hand up each time. I rewatch these first several minutes twice, slowing the footage down in places, speeding it up in others. Lizann is not much larger or taller than Eggsy, so he does not have a distinct physical advantage. His advantage is simple and twofold, and the footage shows it plainly: he is a better fighter and Eggsy’s performance is sloppy.

The fourth time Lizann knocked Eggsy to the mats was what did it. When Lizann extended his hand to Eggsy, Eggsy did not use it to get up. He started fighting meanly, with intent to do bodily harm. The last few minutes of video show Lizann on the defensive, blocking blows without trying to land many. He behaves with a bewildered kind of restraint, which the other trainees witness to the fight
had commented upon. When Lizann does finally land a blow, it makes Eggsy stagger. There are a few seconds where it looks like they might dive into it again before Commander Thornton walks briskly on screen.

I freeze a frame of footage and zoom in on Eggsy’s face. His skin is flushed, his expression tight.

_How did he know?_ I have yet to figure out how Eggsy discovered that Lizann was training for the Knighthood. I could, of course, find out; but it seems like a moot point. The issue is certainly far from Eggsy’s mind at the moment.

The image of Eggsy and Harry in an embrace swims to the surface of my mind, and my eyes snap open. I check my watch. It is nearly noon, and I have not sent word to Harry, nor seriously contemplated going down to see him. Nor has he attempted to reach me—which, I suppose, is not unreasonable, given his weakened state. Caffrey had delivered a report to me late yesterday, which I consumed this morning, detailing Harry’s physical wellbeing: his muscle atrophy and weight loss make him tire easily, though he is beginning a physical therapy regimen today to recover his strength. He will be subjected to a battery of neurological tests on the morrow. Beyond that and entertaining the company of a certain Agent Unwin, Harry does not appear to be up to much.

While looking over this most recent medical report, I had, on a grim whim, pulled up the reports from his surgery. I looked over the footage once more, not flinching at the amount of blood, nor at the sight of a surgeon pulling out fragments of skull, the bullet, and then applying the polymer that would mimic bone. I review the notes made by the surgeon. I look at his X-rays.

It’s an unnerving sight. The bullet grazed along the side of his skull and lodged near his temporal lobe. The X-ray shows it nestled in a small crater of fractured skull; but, his most recent X-ray is relatively clean, the spot where the bullet had been now an unnatural white from the polymer. I find myself wondering what the scar will look like.

That he survived this at all is astounding. That he awoke from a six-week-long coma is almost beyond belief.

At least, it was beyond me to believe.

I look at my watch again. I don’t want to do this right now. I want to wait until the end of the day, so I can have some chance of getting more work done.

But I cannot formulate a reason that might be acceptable to him for continuing to stay away. I am going to have enough trouble explaining my abrupt and flustered departure yesterday.

I sigh. Making up my mind, I get up from my desk and cross the room to the door. For once, Kay is not there when I open it; I am relieved, though I sense a surprising twinge of disappointment as well.

I know where he is, of course. Research & Development. He had included his absence in my schedule, just as I had asked. And it isn’t as if he _never_ left my office to run errands, attend meetings, and the like. Still, I have become entirely too accustomed to being greeted by his attentive expression.

Bitterly, sardonically, I think to myself: there goes another steady presence in my life.

And then I have to silently reprimand myself for being so dramatic, because _really_.

Pulling myself together, I begin making my way towards the infirmary.
It is a curious thing, to be able to feel just one’s feet turn slowly into stone. I am half-afraid that I would not make it to medical, my feet become so heavy. It seems to take ages before I am exiting the elevator at Basement Level 1, and crossing the small space towards the center hallway. As I pass the front desk, I nod at the clerk, who returns the gesture with a murmured, “Arthur”. When I reach the room to Harry’s door, I place a heavy hand upon the doorknob and wait several seconds before turning it.

I am surprised (and relieved) to see that Harry is not alone. That is, Eggsy is still there, as I presumed he might be, but there is a third person in the room with them. He is a middle-aged agent wearing a light blue button-up and black slacks; his security and ID badge has the blue stripe of medical personnel across the top.

I can only assume that he must be Harry’s physical therapist. Indeed, he is sitting next to Harry’s bed with a theraband, providing resistance as Harry pulls against the band with his leg.

(I have a moment to be extremely grateful for his presence; the fact that he is here means that Eggsy cannot be close to or wrapped up in Harry. I don’t think I could stomach seeing that again so soon.)

As I enter, all three people stop what they are doing and turn to look at me. It occurs to me, in that moment, that I should have knocked before entering. A gentleman would knock. I simply never had to, before.

I can scarcely take in each of their individual expressions before Harry speaks.

“Arthur,” he greets. His voice is still rough, though sounding much steadier than yesterday. It is still an astonishment to be hearing it at all.


Before it can reach an uncomfortable length, Harry gestures to the man whose name I do not know and says, “This is my…”

He trails off unexpectedly and looks suddenly irritated. The man he was gesturing to stands quickly from his crouch and reaches out to take the hand that I mechanically offer to him. “Grey Austin, Galahad’s PT,” he says by way of introduction.

“Thank you for looking after him, Mr. Austin,” I say. “And apologies for interrupting.”

Austin inclines his head. “My pleasure, sir. And it is no interruption; Mr. Hart and I were just finishing up.” He looks back at Harry and points at the theraband. “I am going to leave that with you, Mr. Hart.”

Harry nods. “Thank you. And will you be back tomorrow at the same time?” His speaks slowly and deliberately. It sounds strangely effortful.

Austin nods. “Yes. You are free to go through the exercises I gave you as you like, but do not overexert yourself—and please don’t try to go anywhere without the walker before I think you’re ready.”

For the first time, I notice the small metal walker beside Harry’s bed. Harry gives an embarrassed sort of grimace. “Yes. I promise.”
Austin smiles good-naturedly. “Thank you.” He glances down at his watch. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, and I have another appointment.”

I nod and watch silently as Austin helps Harry swing his legs back onto the bed, and then grabs his tablet from the end of the bed. I step aside as Austin excuses himself from the room.

I am immediately sorry for his absence. The silence he leaves behind is palpable.

My gaze drifts over to Eggsy and where he is sitting, his chair leaning up against the wall and several feet from Harry’s bed. He is wearing the same black combat trousers he had been wearing yesterday when he got into his scuffle with Lizann; however, his shirt is new and appears freshly laundered. His hair is messy, and there are dark circles under his eyes. He must have stayed here overnight.

His eyes dart between me and Harry with a mien I have seldom seen him wear. It’s subtle, an apprehension that borders on simple fear. I can see it in the slight purse of his lips, the tension in his shoulders, the way he focuses intently on my face, and then Harry’s.

I know what he’s thinking. I am thinking it too.

“Eggsy,” Harry says softly from the bed as he smooths the white hospital sheets over his legs, “I was wondering if you might give Arthur and I . . . some time?”

The alone is unspoken but perfectly clear. Eggsy’s features changes only minutely, his disapproval of this idea making itself known by his deepening frown. He looks like he might protest, but a look at Harry has him rising from his chair. As he passes, he glances at me with a look that I can only describe as distrustful. He does not want to leave the two of us alone. He no longer trusts me. He is suspicious of me, of what I might say. What I might reveal.

It hurts. More than it should.

The door closes with a soft click behind him, and then the silence is all ours. Just mine and Harry’s.

Harry smiles at me, the same fond smile, though today it does not quite reach his eyes. “Won’t you sit down?” he gestures at the chair vacated by his PT.

Stiffly, I walk over to him and set down in the chair. I feel constricted, as if my suit is too tight. I look at him nervously. Fool that I am, I had not thought of what I might say to him once we were alone; how I might explain myself.

What might I say to him, now that he could finally reply?

I feel some of the color drain out of my face. My god. I had been told that talking to comatose patients may help them in recovery, that they can hear what is being said to them, perhaps even understand in some way. I had said . . . such things to him while he was under. Does he know? Does he remember?

“I see that someone has kept up with my stubble, though a . . .” he pauses, thinking, “. . . a haircut seems to have been out of the question.”

I am startled by the levity of the statement. I look at his hair, and its long unruliness.

“Difficult to give you a proper one with a head wound.”

Almost self-consciously, Harry brings up a hand to touch the gauze against his temple. “Yes. I see that.”
I am so utterly dumbfounded. I don’t know what to say to him. This man, my friend, my best friend; for whom I have risked my life for, who has risked his for me in turn; this man with whom I have shared decades, countless memories, precious secrets; he is the only person who knows me, perhaps even better than I know myself. We should have nothing to hide from one another, and conversation between us should be as easy as it once was, as natural as breathing.

But he almost died. I was going to let him die. I had grieved him and let him go. And now, he is miraculously whole again, alive again. And so much has changed— I have changed.

How am I going to tell him about Eggsy? Should I tell him? Or should this be another secret that I swallow down?

I look at him again. The coma had weakened him, made him paler and thinner. He is still Harry Hart; yet, today, he seems to me to be a different man, an imposter wearing Harry’s skin. Or, not an imposter, but someone I do not know.

But, then, Harry Hart himself has always been an enigma. Admirable, witty, utterly charming, yet also constantly dancing beyond everyone’s reach. I may have gotten closer than most, in our youths; he needed someone to share his brilliance with, I think, someone who would appreciate him, bear witness to his achievements, share in his triumphs. I shared less and less as the years went by, but we stayed . . . the way we were. In some ways, though not in others. I was still always the one whom he came to bother at odd hours, whom he occasionally brought a mug of tea when he had a spare moment, whom he invited over for dinner and drinks, whom rubbed shoulders with him in passing, almost like an accident. If I could not call us friends, I don’t know what we would be. But, now, thinking back on everything, I wonder how well I knew him— know him—really. This man that sits before me—he feels untouchable. Not like someone I could have ever held, or laughed with until breathless, or kissed until desperate.

Did I fall in love with a man, or an enigma?

He is smiling at me, the way he always has. But why can’t I see his face?

“Eggsy tells me this has been hard for you.”

I tense immediately at the idea that Eggsy was talking about me. Harry is, obviously, paraphrasing, and it makes me wonder what Eggsy really said.

“That’s putting it mildly,” I reply thickly.

Harry is quiet for a moment, his face drawn and somber. Then, he murmurs: “I am sorry, Alec. I didn’t mean to leave the two of you that way.”

Hearing him use my given name instead of my title is thrilling, but marred by the words that follow. The two of you. Not “I didn’t mean to leave you that way”. The two of you. Eggsy isn’t even in the room and, yet, he is still takes up a third of the space.

“I thought you were dead. I was—” I swallow past a stone in my throat. “I was going to kill you.”

“You cannot blame yourself for that. You were prepared to do what needed to be done. I would have done the same in your position.”

It does not sound like a lie, but it does feel like false comfort. When I say nothing in reply, Harry shifts beside me. Warmth and pressure make me jump slightly, and I look down to see that Harry has reached out and taken my hand.
It nearly breaks me. His grip is warm and dry, and distressingly frail. His hand shakes ever-so-slightly. Harry is seldom a demonstrative person. He rarely engages in physical contact with anyone, even me. Every time he had ever touched my shoulder, brushed against me, thoughtlessly touched me in passing—every single one of those moments had cemented into my brain. So does this one.

He squeezes my hand for a small moment, then retracts. My hand twitches involuntarily at the loss.

“I feel fortunate that I have both you and Eggsy to look after me so.” His features shift into a wry expression. “I think Eggsy is terrified every time I doze off that I won’t wake up; yet, every time I do, he grows more and more confident in me. It’s rather inspiring.”

“He has barely left your side.” I sound hollow, even to my own ears.

“Yes.”

He is looking at me, but I cannot return his gaze. My own eyes are locked upon my hands, which have threaded together in my lap to prevent them from needlessly fidgeting. I think about Eggsy—wrapped up in my sheets, wrapped up Harry’s embrace. I have to tell him—something. It is not only my secret to bear, but I cannot keep this from him.

“Harry, Eggsy and I—”

“I hear that you fired Lauterbach.”

The interruption startles me as much as the actual content of his words. Harry almost never interrupts. It’s uncouth; but I am surprised enough to let it slide, and simply answer: “Yes, I did.”

Harry shakes his head. “He . . . was never going to survive in a post-Chester Kingsman. Best thing for him, really.”

“He left me with no choice.”

“I am sure. You seem to be adjusting well—to the position.”

I almost laugh at that. “As well as can be expected,” I allow. “This was not a role I thought I would ever have to assume. It has not been without its difficulties.”

“Tell me.”

He is leading me away from talking about Eggsy—deliberately. But what choice do I really have? I acquiesce. I tell him all about the days following V-Day, what an utter clusterfuck it was. I tell him about the Knights and agents who have died, those we have already replaced and are in the process of replacing. I tell him about Lauterbach, his insolence and insubordination. I tell him about the new projects coming out of R&D. I even tell him about Kay, and how he almost shot me one morning by accident.

But every time I near the subject of Eggsy, Harry deflects. He does it deftly, and if I did not know him so well I would think it was uncalculated. But I know all the tricks Harry employs when he does not wish to talk about something; he’s been using them on me for years.

We have been talking for about an hour when there is a small knock at the door and Eggsy, without being invited, walks back in.

I am more annoyed than I would like to admit. He gives me the same dubious gaze that he bestowed upon me previously, and does not at all seem placated by Harry’s affable and rather insouciant
demeanor. He only seems to relax once I excuse myself and leave.

I pause outside the closed door for a time, thinking. A part of me does not want to leave them in there, alone. I do not like to think about what they might be talking about in my absence. What Eggsy might say to Harry. How he might touch him.

But I cannot go back in there. Not now.

-KM-

I do not make plans to see Harry the next day. Rationalizing this to myself (and anyone else who might ask) is easy. One need only glance at my schedule to see how full my plate is.

The majority of my morning is spent on call with Demarais, strategizing. All of our able-bodied Knights are still afield on assignment; but there is no rest for the wicked and the world, being the shitshow that it is, keeps turning and turning up new trouble. We have analysts all over the world monitoring crime syndicates, trafficking rings, violent socio-political groups, drug trade, gun-running operations, and all kinds of unsavory activity that keep us in business. V-Day seems to have had a curious effect upon the criminal activities of the world: immediately afterwards, things were pretty calm, mostly due to everyone (including us) being so disorganized and having to rebuild; now, six weeks out, activity has begun to bubble over, almost like a rebound effect. It’s a true shame that Valentine had an elitist attitude towards his idea of a new world order; he only recruited the social and political elite to his cause, not necessarily those with actual power. Gone now are the pretty faces of order; it’s like turning over a smooth rock to expose the vermin crawling beneath.

In any case, it means that we are quickly becoming extraordinarily busy. We must set our priorities, utilize our agents effectively.

Unlike Demarais, I do not like the idea of sending lower-level agents (read: agents in the Knight Support Corps) on anything more than reconnaissance or intelligence-gathering missions. Knights are specifically trained to be deadly, capable, independent operatives in the field; most other agents (even if they are field agents) work in teams and regularly report in. They do not receive the same level of training and cannot be expected to perform at the same capacity as Knights. All this, Demarais agrees with.

But we are simply spread so thin, and I am running out of options.

“There are at least five assignments in the queue that need to be handled immediately,” Demerais says, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers. “I believe our next agent scheduled to return is Norrick, and he will not be back for another four days. Lancelot will be back within a week, but beyond that, everyone else is preoccupied, no?”

I allow myself a disapproving frown. “Yes, I know. And I know that several of these—” I gesture to the document projected between us, the list of assignments we have been mulling over, “—could possibly be handled by the Support Corps. I have several excellent agents, as do you, that would be equal to the task.”

“Then what is your main objection?”

My nostrils flare as I take in a deep breath. “I do not think we should set a precedent for this. For making exceptions and sending other agents out to do Knight’s work. We have a hierarchy for a
“What do you think about sending Knighthood candidates?” he asks. “In times of need, it was common practice to bring them into the field.”

I pause, thinking of Lizann. “Yes, but with another Knight.”

He grimaces. “Monsieur Arthur, though I appreciate your caution and think that it is well-founded, we may not have that luxury at the moment. You have said yourself that some of these assignments are extremely time-sensitive.”

I consider him steadily. He is perfectly right. We do not have the luxury. I need as many agents afield as possible, Knight or no. And, to be honest, I think it would good for Lizann to stretch his wings a bit—on an assignment of reasonable peril. I do not want to get him killed before he has the chance to make a name for himself. I have already invested much in him.

“Yes,” I say, finally acquiescing. “Yes, fine.”

Demerais doesn’t miss a beat. “Who will you send out, then? I hear a great deal about this Agent Unwin of yours.”

I bristle, just slightly. “Agent Unwin is currently not cleared for field duty.”

Demarais nods, as if he knows this already. “Spending too much time in the infirmary with Galahad, I hear.”

I look at him, somewhat dumbstruck. I had not expected the news of Harry’s recovery to travel so quickly, nor of his constant companion in the infirmary. Christ, spies are the worst gossips.

The holograph of Demarais looks down as he fishes a sleek lighter out of his pocket. He flicks it once. He is itching for a smoke. “And how is Monsieur Hart?”

My eyes track the movements of his hands, watching the little green flame flicker in and out of life. “He is well—as well as can be expected. His doctors are running a neurological battery on him this morning to determine if there is any lasting damage. His physical recovery is expected to be complete, with the requisite physical therapy.”

Demarais hums, nodding. He meets my eyes briefly, and then raises an eyebrow as he looks down at his lighter. His mouth curls in distaste. “The reason I ask is that Director Donahue made an interesting inquiry to me earlier this morning.”

“What kind of inquiry?”

“Well, apparently after chatting with the Tokyo office, he was wondering when Monsieur Hart would be well enough to take the Arthur position.”

Something like dread spears me, makes my entire body tense up. I lower my hands and fold them in my lap to keep from fidgeting. “Did he, now?”

Demerais nods. “I suppose it isn’t an entirely untoward question. The position was originally supposed to pass to Monsieur Hart, as you are well-aware. You have only recently officially taken the title. It is not unreasonable for someone to wonder whether you might step down in favor of the most senior Knight.”

“No. Not unreasonable.”
“Troubling, though.”

“Well, it certainly makes me wonder what the other directors think of me and my ability to lead.” I give him a pointed look. “What have they been saying?”

Demarais looks slightly uncomfortable. “They talk to me less openly, now that I interact with you so much. But I know that most of them wonder about the suitability of your temperament, and are still not happy with the way you disposed of Lauterbach, even if they agree that he did deserve a reprimand.”

“What was I supposed to do? He defied me, committed treason.”

“It’s been suggested that you could have simply demoted him—although that is certainly much more than he deserves. What a cunt.”

I open my mouth and then close it. I hadn’t thought of that, until just now.

“In any case, it has soured your reputation. We are not political organization, but we do have our own internal politics. My impression is that Donohue and Yoshizawa, at least, would like to see you step down in favor of Monsieur Hart.”

“Blast,” I mutter, though I had been favoring a different word. Demarais interprets this and snorts.

“Quite. Of course, this is only public sentiment. Preference, if you will. They knew more of Mr. Hart than of you prior to this disaster. You may seem like a rogue dark horse, no matter what you do. But no one can dispute that you have done a commendable job, especially in the circumstances. Besides, such a thing would require you to formally relinquish the title, since you have already signed the official documentation. If you would like, I can probe the matter and see what the consensus is? It is good to know what your colleagues think, especially if they are wary of telling you.”

I nod my assent. I am not terribly caught off-guard to hear all of this, but it is concerning nonetheless. “Yes. Please. Report back to me when you’ve spoken to everyone. In the meantime, I will consider carefully these assignments, and decide whether or not I can send a candidate out on one of them.”

Demarais flicks the lighter once more, and then returns it to his pocket. “I trust your judgement.”

“At least someone does.”

After Demarais closes the line between us, I sit back in my chair, slumping uncharacteristically. My fucking god. I should have seen this, should have anticipated it the moment Harry awoke—although, to be fair, I was rather preoccupied with other things.

It’s nice to know that other people doubt me as much as I doubt myself, I think sardonically. At least there is consistency.

It occurs to me that I neglected to ask Demarais what he told Director Donahue in reply to his question. Nor did I ask what Demarais himself thinks of this suggestion. Demarais has demonstrated nothing short of solid loyalty towards me; he has given me his council and not shied away from sharing his dissenting opinions in private, but in front of the other directors, he has consistently gone to bat for me. But would he voice to me if he thought I should step down? He had been less than thrilled about my decision to fully take on the title and responsibilities of Arthur—and had directly expressed his concern.

Demarais preferred the direct approach. If he thought I should step down, he would say so.
In any case, all of this feels extremely premature. It has been less than 48 hours since Harry awoke. He can barely walk, and he hasn’t been cleared from hospital. He is in no state to be running this organization.

At least physically. The report I receive from Caffrey mid-afternoon tells me that his neurological state is more well-preserved.

After a battery of tests, Caffrey has determined that there appear to be few, if any, lasting effects of Harry’s coma. All brainstem and midbrain functions appear to be intact. He tires easily, but that likely an entirely physical symptom, attributable to six weeks in bed and the resulting muscle atrophy.

The more miraculous finding is that, as of yet, there are few if any obvious signs of serious brain damage from the bullet. He did sustain some damage to his left temporal lobe—his skull had fragmented along the trajectory of the bullet, and there had been some intracranial bleeding, but not enough to cause a hemorrhagic stroke. The only real manifestations that had turned up so far were little more than eccentricities, for a gunshot to the head.

Harry displays an intermittent tremor in his right hand, which I had noticed earlier. He retains almost no memory of the church massacre or being shot, but his long-term memory is otherwise intact. The bullet had damaged a portion of his trigeminal nerve, leaving him with some neuralgia. He is demonstrating some trouble with his working memory, but Caffrey assesses this deficit to be mild, and may be temporary; lastly, Harry demonstrates a degree of anomic aphasia. He displays difficulty in word-finding (sometimes adjectives, but mainly with regards to complex and abstract nouns, such as “physical therapist”); he also cannot name colors.

I cannot help but snort at the last item. That is going to piss him off.

The snort turns into a chuckle, which turns into a laugh, which goes from amused to desperate and ends with me leaning with my elbows on my desk, my head in my hands, shaking. Jesus fucking Christ.

Once I have calmed down enough, I make myself go to Harry. I need to. I do not want to—and it is strange that I should be seeing a day when the thought of talking with Harry makes me apprehensive — but it is my duty to, as Arthur. As his friend. Armed with a shield between him and myself—his test results—I venture down to the infirmary with a determination that renders my emotions, thankfully, subdued.

Harry is alone in his room, thankfully. He appears tired when I arrive, though he brightens at the sight of me. It’s painful, but I give him a smile in turn.

We talk about his test results briefly. As predicted, he is annoyed at his inadequacies—mostly so at his weakness, and he gives his walker a thorough tongue-lashing for my amusement— but also has the grace to be grateful.

“All in all, I have led a very lucky life,” he muses. “It almost makes one wonder when the luck will run out.”

I shake my head, perhaps too forcefully. “Don’t think like that.”

“It’s in my— my nature to be cynical. Don’t take that away from me as well.”

In addition to what? I almost ask, but bite my tongue down on the question. Somewhat abruptly, I tell him that I have to leave—duty calls.
He nods. I want to think that he looks disappointed, but I cannot say for sure.

On my way out the door, I bump into Eggsy.

He literally collides with me, stumbling into me so hard that I have to catch myself against the wall to keep us both from falling. He grabs at my suit-jacket with one hand and my arm with the other, the rest of him leaning into me with more force than is comfortable.

And yet, it fills me with longing, to feel the warmth of him. Even his smell, stale and several days old, is alluring.

He pulls back from me as soon as he regains his balance, a recoil that is almost sharp.

“Sorry,” he says, but glares as if it were my fault. He looks towards the door. “What were you doing in there?”

Here we are. Back at square one. Acting as if he is the only one with the right to see Harry. I hold up my tablet and arch an eyebrow. “Test results.”

His eyebrows raise slightly. “All good?” he asks, carefully.

“Much better than expected, but the doctor will continue to monitor him in the next several weeks to determine that there are no other emergent complications.”

“Right, then.” Eggsy looks past me towards the door, impatient. He begins pushing past me—

I grab his arm around the biceps, halting him.

He looks back up at me, startled. I am surprised myself. I don’t know why I did that. Why I felt the need to reach out and touch him.

Eggsy’s face shifts from surprise to irritation quickly. He wrests his arm away from me. “What?” he demands.

“Eggsy...” I don’t know what to say. What I should say. What needs to be said.

His expression shifts again, this time moving into something unexpectedly aggrieved. It’s a soft, pink kind of pain, like new scar tissue, like sensitive flesh that has been flayed. He licks his lips, and they glisten under the white lights.

“Look, Alec—I’m sorry,” he mutters, his voice low. “I’m sorry, I just—I can’t—”

I hold up my hand for silence at the same time that I look down. I don’t want to see his face or hear his explanation. I don’t need to.

“Go home tonight, Eggsy,” I say to his shoes. “Go home and sleep in a proper bed. In the morning, shower, shave. Put on a fresh set of clothes.” I pause. “Harry will appreciate it.”

I hear the intake of breath as he opens his mouth to say something but now it is I who pushes past him, picking up a quick stride that quickly and easily puts distance between us. He does not follow me, or call out after.

It is for the best. It is for the best.
It is gone eight that evening when I receive the call.

It goes through to my personal mobile on the emergency line from the Tactical Situation Room. I pick up on the second ring.

“Arthur.”

“Agent down, code four,” comes the voice of Merlin, her syllables strained. “Lamorack was shot.”

I sit up straight from where I had been leaning back into the sofa. I set my glass of scotch down on the coffee table with a hard thunk. Lamorack the fourth, Pietro Varonikov, had last been in Shanghai, in deep cover. “Alive?”

“Beijing field office just dispatched an extraction team from Hangzhou, but—” she pauses and I hear furious typing. “I don’t think they’ll make it in time. His heart rate is dropping fast and he’s stopped transmitting.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck— “Make sure his body is recovered. And sweep the flat he was in, I want absolutely no trace of his presence there.”

“Affirmative, sir. What about his assignment?”

“On hold. We will re-evaluate once we have this mess cleared up. Report back when you have him.”

“Aye, sir.” A beep, and the line drops.

Less than an hour later, I receive the message:

Lamorack dead.

I stare into the dark emptiness of the room around me. I bring my scotch to my lips.

Long live Lamorack.

The next morning, I go running. Kubenick is my tail today and keeps a weather distance. I barely feel the 13 kilometers, barely see the park as I pass through it. My body seems to be made of air.

When I go into work that day, I call Kay into my office. I ask him to schedule a meeting with Mark Lizann for later that afternoon. I tell him to bring the dog.

There is a new vacancy in the Knighthood; and I intend to fill it immediately.
Libration

Chapter Summary

Libration (astronomy): an apparent or real oscillation of the moon, by which parts near the edge of the disc that are often not visible from the earth sometimes come into view.

Chapter Notes

Some things to think about this chapter and those that follow: Always remember that Merlin/Alec is an unreliable narrator. Is he assessing the situation accurately with regards to other people? Is he assessing himself accurately? These are decisions that you, the reader, need to make. Merlin’s recollections and views are, ultimately, influenced by his feelings. I will tell you that Merlin is extremely hard on himself. One of the reasons that Kay and Demarais are so important to the story is because they give you a glimpse of what other, outside parties see in Merlin.

It is not my intention that you like Merlin. At the conclusion of the story, you may not. That’s just how the writing goes.

Lizann hesitates.

I watch him steadily whilst he levels the gun at Izzy’s head. She is still very much a puppy, has only just learned how to sit still on command. She tilts her head at him, at the barrel of the gun. He readjusts his grip once. Twice. I say nothing, give him no encouragement. I simply stand behind him, hands clasped behind my back, waiting.

Shoot the dog.

He hesitates; but he does pull the trigger.

He is almost shaky with relief when he discovers the bullet is a blank.

I promote him on the spot. He is rather caught off-guard, and it makes him look even younger than he is. When he recovers, he accepts gracefully, gives a subdued smile of relief. He looks rather charming, even with his black eye. I notice just the faintest tremor in his hand.

I return the smile as best I can, and reach down to scratch Izzy between the ears.
Once Lizann leaves to report to Merlin for his first assignment as a Knight and to be fitted for a suit, I allow myself to sit down for a moment, to do nothing more than ponder what I have done.

I am more assured than ever that I made a wise choice in Lizann. The final exam is as much a test of devotion and loyalty as it is of character. You see, if you don’t shoot the dog, you fail; but if you don’t hesitate, you aren’t human.

Lizann passed with flying colors. We have our new Lamorack.

-KM-

Promoting Lizann does little to stir anyone or anything in Kingsman. At our Round Table meeting the next day, the Knights in attendance acknowledge him politely. We drink to Lamorack the fourth, and welcome in Lamorack the fifth. He is congratulated solemnly and warmly by turns. They welcome their new comrade easily into the fold, though Roxanne does give me a curious glance when no one else is looking. Ector does the same, his gaze less curious and more pensive. I ignore both of them.

I allow myself to feel pleased with my actions for only a day, and even that seems excessive. Promoting Lizann solved only an immediate problem that arose out of dire circumstances. I am still short qualified field agents. We are still stretched thin.

And now that Lizann is Lamorack, it means that Ector’s position is still up for grabs; and the only person who is in any position to try and take it is Eggsy.

His final exam is approaching in three months. I do not know yet what it will consist of. Knight candidates who wash out on their original final exam and successfully petition to retrain and retest must face a challenge designed by the agents they intend to make their peers—that is, his final exam will be designed by a host of sitting Knights. I do not expect them to make it easy on him—quite the opposite. It is meant to be almost prohibitively difficult: to ascertain that, yes, despite initial failure, this candidate is worthy. They will assess him in every way possible with that one test: psychologically, physically, morally. They have until six weeks prior to submit their proposal. I dread reading it.

I think back to almost two months ago, when I had been sitting at my desk and reviewing Eggsy’s request to resume training. I should have rejected it outright, then. I should have spared him all of this. I am not optimistic that he will succeed his second exam—actually, I am afraid. I am afraid that it will crush him, that it will be too much for him. I am afraid of what it will make him.

In a moment of weakness, I am perversely grateful for the state of Harry’s health. Eggsy will scarcely leave his side whilst he is so weak. He certainly cannot be bothered to train in earnest, or even think about advancing himself in the ranks. Perhaps he will postpone. Perhaps Harry will make him.

I give in and sigh. It is a problem for another day. It is a problem for when Harry gets better.

-KM-
A week passes. I don’t know how it happens, but it seems to slip by without my noticing.

Though, to be fair, I was rather preoccupied.

An ISIS cell we had been monitoring decided to get frisky and blew up a mosque in Sinai, Egypt. The event, and the possibility of several more to follow in quick succession, means that I end up pulling both Safir and Percival out of their current assignments in Turkey and Ireland, respectively, and send them into an active war zone to deal with the crisis. And so, we are stretched ever thinner, and I am left to hold even more threads than before.

It feels like more than I can handle, but I handle it all the same.

It leaves me with very little spare time. I arrive at HQ no later than 0700, and leave by 2200 or 2300, if I leave at all. Twice that week I fall asleep on the sofa in my office, leaving Kay to gently (and cautiously) rouse me in the morning, bringing with him breakfast and a clean suit. During that week, I spend practically all my waking moments pouring over memos, status reports, watching the feed from either Safir or Percival’s glasses, and giving our new Merlin help where needed. She’s a perfectly capable quartermaster, but this is new territory for her. It would be a dereliction of duty not to help, and she appears very appreciative. She is not in an enviable position just now, being thrown into the lion’s den within her first week on the job, but I still find myself wishing to trade places.

I miss the sense of absolute competence I felt as Merlin. I have none of that here, in the Arthurship. I came into the position in a time of unparalleled crisis and have been putting out fires ever since. It often seems that I am not cut out for this. We’ve had five Arthurs before me, and each of them were more capable leaders than I. Demarais’ report concerning the other directors does little to bolster my own confidence. Six of the nine directors he has spoken to expressed a desire to see me step down in favor of Harry Hart—more than I was expecting. I don’t ask Demarais to clarify which directors, but I do ask if they gave explanations for their wishes. No one was unkind in their assessment of me, but there was a distinct . . . dissatisfaction and doubtfulness with regards my leadership ability.

I have to wonder if Lamorack’s death has anything to do with it. It certainly weighs on me. It was a dangerous mission, to be sure—they almost always were with him. He seemed to have no fear of death, and perhaps that was his undoing. I don’t know. The after-action report said that he’d been caught unawares. Not because he’d been careless; the opposition had simply been craftier and trigger-happy. They’d fired upon him before even having an inkling as to who he was, simply identifying him as a threat. There was little that could have been done.

I cannot help but feel as though Lamorack’s death is on my hands. It is part of the reason why I invest so heavily in Safir and Percival on this mission. Kingsman cannot afford another casualty so soon, nor can I.

All this rarely leaves me with moments of freedom. It isn’t difficult to explain my absence from Harry’s bedside. The one time that I do see him, towards the end of the week, when the mission is wrapping up, he seems not at all surprised or bothered by my absence from his side.

“You have responsibilities,” he says simply when I make my excuses, the word responsibilities enunciated carefully. He is sitting up in bed now, and seems more awake than my previous visit. Some color has returned to his cheeks, and the last evaluation I received from Caffrey was very positive. He is progressing in his physical therapy regimen, and is continuing to see a speech therapist to combat his minor aphasia. “Besides, I am quite well taken care of.”

He says it wryly and looks pointedly over to the sole other chair in the room, currently unoccupied but for a familiar Adidas jacket.
I look at it warily, as if it might spontaneously combust. “I am surprised he isn’t here now,” I say, sounding much too casual to my own ears.

Harry sighs. “I made him go home. His mother misses him. She’s the one who,” he gestures at a small, tasteful bouquet placed on his bedside table. I had noticed the flowers when I entered but had refrained from commenting.

“Ah,” is all I can say. I am imaging Eggsy bringing them in, blushing furiously, muttering that they were compliments of his mum.

“Ah,” Harry mimics, a small smile playing about his lips. He gives me a look that, for an inexplicable reason, makes me blush.

I’m saved by the sound of my phone beeping in my pocket. I fish it out and look down at the message. Urgent.

“I have to go,” I say, getting up. I search Harry’s features and am gratified to see a glimmer of disappointment—but there is something else there, too, and I cannot determine what it is. I straighten my suit self-consciously. I can’t help it. “Do you need anything?”

Harry sighs and languorously brings his arms over his head, leaning back against his pillows. “Freedom,” he says drily, precisely. He gives a baleful glance over at the walker, still standing next to his bed. “At least, from that.”

I catch myself staring at him, stretched out as it were and on display. The hospital gown is shapeless and does little to hide his form. When I came to visit him in his comatose state, I had never once experienced what I might call attraction to his body; now, even though it is wan and less magnificent than before, I find myself appreciating it anew.

Before Harry can say anything, I clear my throat. “Yes. Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

As soon as I get back to my office, I call R&D, the biomechanical engineering division. I inquire after the status of the post-spinal injury leg braces they have been working on, and ask that they have a working prototype ready within two days.

-KM-

The first week is excusable. The second week less so.

The situation in the Middle East is more or less under control, though relations are still prickly. I bring Safir back and return him to his previous assignment but leave Percival there to deal with whatever fallout is coming. It makes me uneasy, and I have to remind myself that he is only slightly less senior than myself, and can handle it.

After that, I am left to continue leafing through the assignments and operations that Demarais and I had discussed last week. I’ve determined that there are two black ops assignments that can be handed off to Kingsman Support Corps—in and out, no mess, minimal field time required—and one assassination-prevention mission that I hand to an entire extraction team. Demarais is, for a wonder, satisfied with these decisions. Some of the load is taken off my plate.

Still, even with considerably more time on my hands and less crushing pressure, I do not make a
point to regularly visit Harry. A part of me wants to—in all honestly, there is a part of me that wants to be by his side almost desperately—but an even larger part of me that senses the inherent danger in doing so. Call it self-preservation. Call it cowardice.

The truth is . . . I do not know how to behave around Harry. I do not know how to feel around him. And I am wary—almost ludicrously so—of walking in on him and Eggsy.

Not walking in on them doing anything in particular, just . . . seeing them. Together.

That initial scene between the two of them has clung to the insides of my brain. If I’m not exhausted, it’s the last thing I see behind my closed eyes, before I fall asleep. I see them together, on Harry’s hospital bed, clinging to one another as if nothing and no one else exists in the world. I see Harry’s thumb sliding across Eggsy’s cheek to wipe away his tears. I see Eggsy’s wet mouth, how he licks his lips and looks at Harry with those bright green eyes. I see Harry looking back, his own gaze warm and honeyed. I see Harry lean forward—

Eggsy has not made a point to contact me once since Harry awoke. I haven’t seen him at all, save for our brief interaction on the second day. He’s avoiding me, and I’m extending the same courtesy. Maybe it is for the best. I don’t know what I would say to him.

A part of me is irritated. That he should be with Harry constantly, should always be taking up the space beside Harry. It’s almost just as before, when he was oblivious to the fact that anyone but him could be sucked up into Harry’s orbit. But now, he knows, and is distrustful. So, he stays by Harry’s side, effectively keeping me at bay.

It’s a wonder that Harry doesn’t grow sick of him. Eggsy has stopped spending the entire day with Harry, especially since he has been improving steadily, but still takes time to sit with him for hours at a time. What do they talk about for so long? Do they only talk? The cameras in the hospital room do not have microphones, and I dare to watch the video feed only a handful of times. Each time I see essentially the same thing: Eggsy sitting by Harry’s bed, chattering away, sometimes with JB in his lap. And Harry, responding with laughs and smiles that are wry, but seem to come all too easily. Perhaps it is the absence of the crisply tailored suit that had been his signature and armor for the past two decades, but the smiles seem softer, to come more easily than I have ever experienced. He almost seems like a different person, to watch him interact with Eggsy.

And Eggsy himself . . . there is almost no resemblance between this young man and the one whom I have entertained, comforted, and fucked for the last six weeks. He smiles just as easily as Harry.

(Watching them, I find myself recalling the moment that Eggsy asked me to hit him. Would he ask such a thing of Harry?)

I find myself watching both of their faces rather closely during one particular interaction. I recognize the curve of flirtation in Eggsy’s grin; he says something to Harry, and his eyes wander, very deliberately, up and down Harry’s gown-clad body. Harry looks nearly surprised, eyebrows raising just fractionally—before he says something in return, a something which has Eggsy blushing and licking his lips. He glances down, giving a sheepish laugh. And then, tentatively, he reaches his hand out and places it in Harry’s.

Harry grips back. His eyes never leave Eggsy’s face. He opens his mouth to say something—

I shut the video feed off. I cannot read lips. I have no way of knowing what they were saying, what Harry was about to say.

Truth be told, I am afraid to know.
I shouldn’t be, at this point. In the moments between one work-related thought and the next, I have had opportunity to mull over these . . . new developments. To mentally acclimatize to them. The logical, pragmatic part of me accepts all of this as the inevitability that it is: now that Harry has woken, and the shock of that has worn off slightly, it is only natural that Harry and Eggsy would seek each other out. That they would resume where they had left off; that they would become close. One might even surmise that it was a fateful happening. It makes sense. Rationally.

But, much to my constant chagrin, I am not a fully rational being. I am only rational enough to realize how . . . patently ridiculous my feelings about this are. It has almost nothing to do with me, at this point. I should not be jealous or afraid of what transpires between Eggsy and Harry.

Yet, I am. I feel as though I am suspended, waiting on tenterhooks. Listening for the sound of the other shoe dropping.

-KM-

Harry’s medical report at the end of the second week is almost stellar. His mobility has improved (thanks to the braces, which are allowing him to walk without a walker or crutches while he recovers his strength and stability). He is much less tired than before, is eating well, and is attacking his physical therapy regime with a verve that is, in the printed words of Grey Austin, “simply inspiring”. His working memory deficit, whatever it was, seems to have resolved. His other neurological problems persist—the neuralgia flares up unexpectedly, causing him a good deal of pain; his aphasia remains a minor issue, though he is seeing a speech therapist daily; and the tremor in his hand may prevent him from handling a firearm for a while. Other than that, he is remarkably healthy.

It’s positively infuriating.

I am happy for Harry’s recovery. Overwhelmed, at times, when I think about it. But it also makes me want to scream. It’s such an abrupt about-face, it’s almost as if nothing had ever happened.

Except that it did. It did, for Eggsy and I. But Harry has no idea what we have been through, what happened between us— unless Eggsy has told him, which I somehow doubt.

And, yet, Harry seems to be aware of . . . something. I go by the infirmary to check on him at the end of the second week, purportedly to see how he was adjusting to the leg braces. Eggsy is there when I arrive. He gives me the same baleful look as always, stands, makes some excuse to Harry, and stiffly walks out. I watch him go, carrying the tension with him from the room. He is already down the hallway before I wonder whether I should have tried to speak to him.

Harry, on the other hand, is in a rather chipper mod. He demonstrates his walking prowess to me by leaving his room and walking halfway down the hallway and back (less graceful than his usual stroll, but perfectly serviceable). When we return to his room, he sits down on the bed and begins, “Not quite what I’m used to, but I am thankful for it. It gives me a great deal more self-sufficiency than before . . . which my doctors are pleased with. I’ve been told I might be discharged soon.”

I nod. “That’s . . . I’m very glad to hear that. I’ll send someone by your flat to tidy up?”

Harry smiles crookedly at my somewhat stiff reply, but his eyes are searching. “Thank you. A little — ah, dusting should do. And how are you holding up?”

I look down at my lap. I have developed an unnerving habit of avoiding Harry’s direct gaze lately, at least initially. It’s something I need to be wary of; it makes me look suspicious. I force myself to meet his gaze again.
“Well enough.” I pause. “Lamorack died two weeks ago. I’m sure you heard.”

Harry nods. “Yes, I heard. He was replaced quickly enough, though.”

I try not to let my defenses raise, even though I tense. “It was necessary. Even with things calmed down in . . .” I trail off, rethinking. Should I burden him with this? Is it a burden at all? Our conversation has all the hallmarks of normality, but is somehow stilted, and not just because of Harry’s aphasia. What kinds of things would we have said before, without thinking? Are we capable of that now?

“Well,” I clear my throat, “we have a cue of assignments a mile long. We’re beginning to recruit support corps for some of the more straightforward ones.”

“It seems reasonable. And what about Eggsy?”

I stiffen. “What about him?”

“I’ve been awake for two weeks and he’s been . . .” he trails off, unable to find the word. Somewhat peevishly, he gestures to the room at large, “every day. Not that I don’t appreciate the company, but shouldn’t he also be out?”

“Perhaps. But he’s been temporarily benched from field duty.”

Harry looks disingenuously surprised. “Why?”

“He got into an unprovoked fight with another trainee . . . didn’t he tell you?”

“He . . . didn’t put it quite like that; but, if we are as busy as you say, it seems a shame to bench him. I am sure you could use him . . . Knight or no.”

His voice is so measured, so calm. As if none of this surprises him. As if I am a slow child and he is walking me through the steps of a relatively simple maths problem—which he is, in a way. I am grudging to admit it but, yes, I could use Eggsy. It sends mixed messages, after our argument—which happened over two weeks ago, but is still fresh in my mind—to give him an assignment after I all but admitted that I didn’t think he was Knight material.

But Harry is right. I need all the warm, able bodies I can get right now. Eggsy’s included, much as I am grudging to do it.

Harry sees me deliberate and tuts softly. “Think on it, will you? It might do him some good to have something else to think about.”

I had used exactly the same logic previously, when deciding to send Eggsy out on assignment. I can hardly argue the point. I lower my eyes to my lap. “All right.”

“Though don’t send him into too much danger; I am rather fond of him.”

It’s said in a joking manner, but it makes me whip my head up and I almost do a double take at Harry’s expression. His features are pleated into a mild mien that might have fooled anyone who hadn’t known him as long as I have; beneath it all, there is an undertone of curious calculation. It’s a deadly look, one that I’ve seen before in interrogation rooms but always from the other side of mirrored glass. That look has seldom been aimed at me directly. It makes me squirm and my heart pick up a rapid pace.

“I . . . will see what I can do.”
Harry smiles beatifically. Am I imaging it, or does the smile not quite reach his eyes? “Thank you.” He then sighs. “I suppose you have to leave now.”

I swallow, nodding. I rise from my chair. “Duty calls.”

“I wish you would visit more often, Alec.”

It is said so softly and fondly that it almost sounds like a plea. It does something to me, that low wistfulness; it is almost enough to make me forget my own apprehension and sit back down, just to stay with him a while longer.

“I don’t want . . . I’m not sure that Eggsy would appreciate it.”

Harry’s face does not flicker. His tone is deceptively mild when he asks: “Did . . . something happen between the two of you? It seems as though you are hardly ever in the same room together. I cannot help but wonder if that is by design.”

I take a step backwards from the bed, shaking my head. Perhaps too emphatically. I need to get out of here.

“No,” I say, doing my resolute best to look him in the eye. “Nothing of consequence.”

More assignments pile up on my desk, ready to be distributed. I give two to Lamorack that are suitable for his skill level, give another to a black ops team in North America, and put one assignment in the queue of each Knight that is currently out on duty.

I do not assign one to Eggsy.

Two days later, I receive a notification from Dr. Caffrey: Agent Galahad discharged from hospital and being sent home. Scheduled for weekly neurological checkups and will be tested for field readiness in two weeks.

I mark the missive as acknowledged. Two weeks seems like very little time, but I am told that Harry is not expected to pass this first round of testing. He will merely continue to be tested every two weeks until he is deemed field fit.

Assuming that he wants to return the field. There are other possibilities for him.

Though, in our scant few conversations in the infirmary, we have not discussed the Arthurship. He is well-briefed on the situation by now, knows where things stand. But it still seems premature to bring up, with him just being released from medical. Besides which, Harry has never once expressed an interest in being anything more than a Knight. He disliked Chester well enough when he was Arthur, but also seemed to hold the position itself in some minor disdain; the idea of sitting back and watching others participate in the action never appealed to him. Even though he is well into middle age, this attitude hasn’t changed much. I do not think being Arthur would suit him.

But, I’ve been wrong about his wishes and desires before.

Sitting there in my office, contemplating the enormity of work that lays before me, I am struck by the
sudden urge to go visit Harry. To leave Kingsman this instant and follow him to his flat in central London. I would knock on his door and he would answer, surprised, then pleased. He would invite me in, make me a drink. He would—

Eggsy might already be there.

My lip curls unpleasantly at the thought. I pull up Eggsy’s profile and check his current status. Still at HQ, purportedly training in Gymnasium 1. Idly, I bring up the camera feed. Eggsy is working out, alone, bench pressing at one of the many barbell stations.

Watching him work, I think on what has transpired between us in the last two weeks—precious little. He has studiously avoided speaking to me, and I have made almost no effort to talk to him. It’s been two weeks since our argument. Two weeks since he’s shared my bed.

The loss of his presence in my day-to-day has made itself known in a myriad of little ways. In a way, it was a good thing that work picked up almost immediately after Harry’s awakening; it prevented me from having too much time on my hands, time that Eggsy had once filled. I feel his absence more keenly now that I am not spending almost my every waking moment at HQ. I miss him. But I do not know that I want him back.

I have no idea what he is feeling. Still angry, perhaps. Almost definitely. But beyond that, his current emotions are a mystery to me.

I sigh, bringing my hand up to cover my face. This is ridiculous. We cannot avoid one another forever. It is simply untenable. We need to talk, whether either of us is ready for it.

It is, looking back, a rash thing to do; but I make up my mind in that instant, and message Kay and tell him to ask Agent Unwin to my office. Today.

Then, I go to the assignment queue and leaf through them to select one for Eggsy.

-EKM-

Eggsy arrives an hour later.

He pushes the door to my office open without knocking. He has had a perfunctory shower and changed out of his gym clothes into his trainee’s uniform, but his face is still slightly pink from exertion. He approaches my desk slowly, his eyes distrustful and guarded.

“You wanted to see me.”

His voice is flat, not antagonistic but certainly not inviting conversation. Pity. I gesture to the chair across from my desk. “Yes. Please sit.”

He does so, almost disdainfully. He settles in his seat and looks at me for a long minute. Then, he asks, point blank:

“What do you want?”

I am nearly tempted to tut something to him about manners, but refrain. Harry could possibly get away with that, at a time like this; I cannot. “I want to discuss your return to active duty. I have an
A flicker of surprise, immediately squashed by hostility. He asks icily: “Shouldn’t you be giving that to Mark?”

“Agent Lamorack is already afield. This is a more low-profile assignment.”

The evenness of my tone seems to irritate him further. His mouth curls into a snarl. “That it? You finally decided I’m good enough for the field again?”

I brace myself. I knew this was coming, but it makes me weary to weather it all the same. “I did not ask you here to— listen to your petulance — argue. I am giving you a chance to—”

“To what? Prove that I’m worthy enough to be a Knight? Don’t see much the point, you’ve already made up your mind on that.”

“Eggsy—”

“Don’t fuck with me,” he interjects, face drawn tight with anger. He may have come into the room merely wary but, now, he radiates hostility. “You know Harry asked me, first day he woke, what my codename was? And I had to tell him I didn’t fucking have one. The look on his face. I was so fuckin’ embarrassed.”

“I’m sorry.”

Eggsy gives a mirthless laugh. “You’re sorry? I’m fucking sorry. Sorry that I thought I could make something of myself. Sorry to have disappointed Harry so massively. Sorry that I thought you might believe in me too.”

That last sentence hits me hard. I do believe in him—I just do not believe that he can do this. It’s a futile distinction, though, as is trying to explain that to him. He has already decided what to believe, and what to think of me. That I am two-faced, that I am dishonest, that I do not care about him or his aspirations. His next words only prove that:

“You never brought up my training—not once. Is that because you knew you were just letting me string myself along? Did you ever think about telling me? When you were listening to me prattle on or ball like sodding a baby? Did you think about it while you were fucking me? Did you?”

I owe it to him to be honest. Now.

“Yes.”

“And you said shit.” He gives me a hard look. “You know, I been thinkin’ a lot about the last two months. All the time I spent alone with Harry, and then with you. All the stuff I told you. I should have known better. I was so bloody open with you, and you never said a damn word. Yeah, you told me about Harry, even a little about you and Harry. But every time you started to show something about yourself, you clammed up. Like you didn’t want me to see. Like I wasn’t good enough to see you. But I liked you. I wanted to keep spending time with you. So, I told myself it wasn’t personal. Maybe it’s not. I’d kind of rather believe it’s not. I still—” he stops himself, biting his lip. “You let me fucking expose myself to you, and you didn’t give anything back.”

“That’s not—”

“Oh yeah, you comforted me. You let me cry in front of you, and you held me, and you fucked me when I asked you to. But you were never open with me—never really honest. You watched me
become a fucking wreck over Harry and all that time didn’t tell me that the only other thing I cared about wasn’t a possibility? What the fuck, Alec? Who does shit like that?”

His voice began strong, fueled by his fury; but as he continues in his accusations, it changes, becomes more strained. My name leaves his mouth in a waver. He is blinking rapidly, his eyes growing red. He breaks my gaze, looking down. He doesn’t want me to see him cry. Not this time.

“Do you regret it?” I ask in a low voice, dreading the answer.

Eggsy gives a single sniff and speaks to his lap. “Yeah, I fuckin regret it,” he mutters. “I feel betrayed. I almost feel. . . .”

He stops, biting his lip. He still will not look up at me, but the expression on his face has taken on a miserable cast, almost painful. Suddenly I know, with sickening clarity, what he is going to say. But I hope to god that he won’t.

When he speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper:

“I feel violated.”

The words, though softly spoken, devastate me. Something in me constricts painfully, and I can taste bile at the back of my throat. God. I close my eyes for an instant, and a memory comes swimming back to me sly and mocking: I remember the aftermath of the first time I had fucked him, wondering if I had taken advantage of him. I had known better, despite what I let Eggsy tell me at the time. I have been taking advantage of him all along.

I feel monstrous.

“I’m sorry.” It’s all I can think to say. It’s nowhere near enough.

Eggsy’s head whips up at that. His eyes are narrowed and all trace of sadness is gone. “I don’t care,” he spits. “I might at some point—I might even feel sorry for you—but, right now, I’m just fucking pissed. You had a chance to share your feelings. Too late now. So don’t tell me you’re sorry. It doesn’t fuckin matter. I don’t even know why you’re keeping me around. You don’t need me to run your sodding errands, and I don’t need your fucking pity.”

Perhaps it’s the heat behind his words, so bitter I can taste it in my own mouth; perhaps it’s his fluid vulgarity. Whatever the case, those words snap me back to attention, pulling me out of my own feelings of misery and making me snap: “This is not pity. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t be sending you out, but my hands are currently tied. We have too much to accomplish and not enough field agents. I need you.”

“Oh, so I am a last resort, then? No fucking thanks. I’d rather stay here with Harry. He needs me.”

“He really doesn’t.” He doesn’t need you. Harry Hart has never needed anyone.

Eggsy scoffs. “How the fuck do you know? You been listening in on us, that it?”

“There are no microphones in that room.”

I say this without thinking and almost without inflection—and I realize immediately that I should have said nothing. The silence that ensues is utterly damning, and the look that Eggsy gives me tells me that he understands everything that is implied by my statement.

“You are such a bastard,” he says quietly, still looking at me with incredulous awe. “You’ve got real
“fuckin’ problems, you know that?”

“I am well aware,” I reply acidly. I stop myself abruptly, marveling at the situation. How the fuck did we end up here?

I know how. This is all of my own doing. I was dishonest with him from the start. I may have believed my reasons valid, at the time. Maybe I was just a fucking coward. Whatever the case, I am reaping what I have sewn. We both are.

“Look—” I stop. Open my mouth to try again. Stop. Eggsy is watching me expectantly, haughtily, eyebrows raised. *Oh, sod it.*

“I fucked up. I know that, and I will admit it. I made a catastrophic fucking mistake with you, and I wish I could undo it. But I can’t. I can only ask that you believe me. Believe me when I tell you that I never wanted to hurt you, and I never wanted to put you in danger. As for the Knighthood, my opinions there were formulated both based on what I thought would be best for you, and what would be best for Kingsman. That is my position, as Arthur. I will not justify that any further to you.”

It is not kind, but it is the most honest thing I can think of to say. It needs to be said, but it comes too late: it feels paltry and flimsy in my mouth.

Eggsy’s voice is thick when he says, “Well, thanks. Thanks for finally coming fucking clean. I feel loads better.”

There is nothing I can say to that and, frankly, I am tired of this conversation. “Your assignment is in Ireland,” I say without so much as a segue. “Percival was just there, but he had to cut his mission short to deal with other matters. He was investigating an arms dealing operation outside of Belfast. I want you to go back in and see what the situation looks like at present. Merlin will fill you in with the rest of the details. You depart tomorrow at 08:00.”

I had settled on having him follow up on Percival’s last mission for several reasons. Percival’s last report had indicated that the operation might be much larger and more far-reaching than we originally assessed. At present, we still needed more intel to determine what the next course of action should be. We would have to send Percival back in, and soon, but I needed someone on the ground to continue to evaluate the situation whilst Percival was otherwise occupied. All in all, a fairly safe, straightforward assignment, one that I am reasonably certain is within Eggsy’s skillset.

Eggsy folds his arms, petulant. “No.”

I find myself blinking in surprise.

“I’m afraid this isn’t a request. I need this taken care of, now.”

“Find someone else.”

His self-righteous resistance – his sheer, bloody-minded obstinacy makes me realize, much too late and with painful clarity, that is was a mistake to have this conversation here. Just like it was a mistake to have sex with him here. He does not respect me, nor does he respect my command. The illusion of my authority is almost utterly shattered.

I will not fucking have it. I will not.

“May I remind you that, *whatever* else I am, I am still Arthur. I am your superior and you will do as I say if you want to remain a part of this organization. When you decided to join Kingsman, you agreed to do whatever was asked of you. Right now, I am asking you take this assignment. That will
be all, Agent Unwin.”

The look he gives me is filled with something only slightly less ugly than contempt. His jaw moves, and it seems for a moment that he might retort, give me lip. But I had stopped pulling my punches, and the weight of my words settles in him; he looks me once over slowly, assessing. I see the exact moment that he decides not to test me.

Stiffened by anger, he rises from his chair. His hands are fists by his side, and he gives me a single slow nod.

“Sir.”

-Eggys leaves the premises immediately after we are finished. He speeds off in his Kingsman-appointed car, and it does not take a stroke of genius to guess where he is going.

The confrontation leaves me exhausted, but I do not have the luxury of departing whenever I wish. I do not even have the luxury of immediately mulling it over; almost as soon as Eggys is out the door, I receive an urgent call from Merlin, asking for assistance. The remainder of my afternoon is spent in the Tactical Situation Room (TSR), helping Rocha Morais navigate Bedivere through Mumbai, with several members of the MI in hot pursuit (honestly, the uninformed interference of other intelligence agencies is one of the more aggravating things we often must deal with). It is a near thing, and Bedivere is extremely mouthy throughout (as is his custom in a crisis) but we manage to shake his tail and get him to relative safety. I sign off from the coms and leave Rocha Morais to handle the rest at 06:27; I then return to my office.

Kay is still there when I arrive, although he is straightening his desk, as he always does before he leaves for the day. For no discernable reason, I pause in the doorway of the outer office, leaning against the frame to watch him. For a few seconds, he is so focused on his task that he does not notice me.

I sometimes get the feeling that I do not appreciate Kay enough. He is incredibly dedicated and diligent—I honestly could not have asked for a better assistant. To even call him an assistant or secretary often seems like a disservice to him. I think briefly back to the early days of my ascension to Arthurhood, how chaotic things had been; if Kay had not been there to help me, to keep track of everything and to run interference with the inhouse divisions and other offices, I honestly don’t know that I could have held us together. There are countless things, large and small, that he takes care of in advance of my knowing about them, all in order to insure that I can do my job with the utmost efficiency.

And he does all of this seemingly tirelessly, without complaint, without grudge. He is one of the most efficient and hardworking people I have ever met.

And I know remarkably little about him.

I have his file, of course, his demographic details, his service record, the details of his early life and the reason for his mutism; and I worked with him previously, when I was Merlin, though not extensively. But, of the young man who is Andrew Waite, I have very little knowledge.

The feeling of being watched pulls me from my thoughts, and I blink to see that Kay is indeed
returning my gaze. He tilts his head in question.

I shake my head. Nothing, I sign; and then: How is your work with R&D coming along?

Something that might have been a smile flits briefly across Kay’s lips. Well. We are almost finished testing the new Guinevere 20. You will probably receive the blueprints and notes later next week.

You are enjoying it?

Kay seems surprised by the question. I am.

I cross my arms over my chest—and then uncross them, remembering that I need my hands to sign. I push against the doorframe so that I am no longer leaning. I give him a serious look, and sign:

I apologize for forcing you into this job. I am sure it is a great deal less . . . I struggle for a word, my hands stilling . . . interesting to you than your former position.

Kay considers me silently. After so many weeks spent in close proximity, after learning all of his subtle shifts in expression, it is odd to find that I cannot read this one. He is as stoic as he ever was before. He raises his hands.

There is no need to apologize, Sir. I am here to serve, just as you are.

I feel my brow furrow. Without thinking, I open my mouth—

Kay holds up a hand. It is the closest he has ever come to interrupting me.

But I do enjoy my work, sir—my work with you. His pale hands flutter. I respect you a great deal, sir. I feel privileged to work for you.

It’s such a small thing, but to hear him say it . . . it warms me in a way that is almost painful.

“Thanks,” I say, my voice gravelly. “You know, I would have been lost without you—in those early days, especially.”

Kay’s face melts from stoic to startled; it almost reminds me of the time he nearly shot me. His hands twitch, as if he is about to say something—and then he closes his hands deliberately into fists. And he blushes.

It’s a small thing, but he is so pale that any change in his complexion is patently obvious. It is subtle, like a single drop of blood dripped into a dish of cream, and just as fleeting.

His blush makes me think, inexplicably of Eggsy.

And thinking of Eggsy makes me think inevitably of Harry.

Something must have changed in my face because, when I refocus, Kay’s hands are moving again, and he is at the end of a question:

—sir?

I hazard a guess at what the question might have been. “Nothing, I simply . . . I don’t know if I am doing anything right.”

Kay considers me carefully. You are, he replies slowly.

I bite back a rogue grin that, should it have materialized, would have been exquisitely painful. I want
to tell him—to tell him everything. I don’t know what it is about him, or if it has anything to do with him at all, but I am sick of keeping all of these secrets to myself. I have been sitting on some of this for years and it has eaten away at me all this time. The last few weeks have been both utterly draining and suffocating. My throat grows thick, as though a scream is building up there. It makes me light-headed.

“I may have done something reprehensible,” I hear myself say, my voice coming out thick.

Kay is quiet. When I look up, I am relieved to see that he does not look uncomfortable. Simply pensive.

*Is this to do with Agent Unwin?*

Neither his perceptiveness nor his directness surprise me. There is little hiding from Kay. I shouldn’t be telling him any of this though.

“Yes.”

Pause. He continues to watch me.

I feel a flush slowly creep up my neck. Christ, it’s been a long time since I’ve felt truly embarrassed. I press my lips together and raise my hands. *I am sorry. I do not mean to burden you. It’s—it’s not for you to... .*

I find myself trailing off as Kay raises his own hands. He waits for mine to stop moving before beginning: *If I may be so bold, sir... . You once asked me what I thought of Agent Unwin. At the time, I did not tell you what I was really thinking. He takes a breath; the look on his face is determined. He closes his eyes, and only opens them halfway through signing:*

*I don’t think that Agent Unwin is worthy of you—of your time. He does not treat you with respect. You deserve better.*

I blink, hard. My eyes are burning. He knows. God, of course he knows—at least he suspects. How could he not? And he’s not the only one. Dailey, Witman, perhaps even Kubenick—hell, perhaps the entire bloody organization at this point; but most of the shame I feel comes from the thought of Kay knowing. Somehow, his opinion matters more than the rest.

*Eggsy has been going through a rough time,* I sign, somewhat weakly. (*And I have treated him poorly,* I do not add.)

Kay remains unimpressed. *He is belligerent, selfish, and childish, and I will continue to think of him uncharitably until proven otherwise.*

This crispness of his movements and his prim air make the delivery of that declaration exceedingly haughty, and I cannot help but laugh.

As the sound leaves my mouth, it occurs to me that I haven’t truly laughed in a long time.

The sound startles Kay, but he also looks pleased. A small, almost imperceptible smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. He runs a hand down the front of his jacket as if to smooth it, and then signs, *I am about to leave. Do you require anything?*

I shake my head. *No. Thank you, Kay. I will be leaving shortly as well.*

Kay nods. *I’ll tell Dailey to bring the car around.*
It is only when I arrive home that evening that my head clears enough to reply the conversation I had with Eggsy.

I consider his words as I brush my teeth, wash my face, his accusing tone ringing in my head. All of it had hurt; but it wasn’t his fault. It was mine.

_Don’t fuck with me._

_You are such a bastard._

_I feel violated._

Eggsy had gone to Harry’s tonight. Of that I was certain. I did not know if he was still there, or what they were doing; but I could imagine.

I take a sedative before bed. My sleep is deep and dreamless.

_-KM-_ 

Eggsy and Harry arrive at Kingsman the next morning in the same vehicle.

I know this only because Kay tells me, with an utterly gelid expression, that both Agent Galahad and Agent Unwin have just been received in the main garage.

I check my watch. The time is 07:25. Eggsy departs for Ireland in less than an hour.

I give my thanks to Kay and, once he exits my office, I pull up the series of security cameras that cover from the main garage to the main hanger. As I watch Harry and Eggsy walk together down the hallways, I can bring myself to feel only slightly pathetic about my covert surveillance.

They move through HQ as a brace, a natural pair. Harry subtly shortens his long stride to accommodate Eggsy, and their footsteps fall in and out of sync in a way that seems almost by design. Their mouths move occasionally, but I do not bring up the audio feed. I do not need to know what they are saying.

What I am looking for is evident in their demeanors. People who have recently had sex have a certain air about them, secretive and sated. Harry and Eggsy do not.

It is only a small comfort.

It shouldn’t be comforting at all.

I close down the camera feed once they reach the main hanger. I have seen all I need to, for the moment.

_-KM-_ 

Harry comes by my office later that day.
I cannot say that I am surprised. I knew this was a possibility, perhaps even an inevitability—Harry had physical therapy, speech therapy, and his neurological checkup to occupy most of the morning, so had reason to remain at HQ after Eggsy’s departure. It was not unreasonable to assume that he might stop by my office after his appointments.

Nonetheless, it does catch me off-guard.

I am on my way to a meeting with Commander Thornton, and am just closing the door to my office when the outer office door opens.

Harry steps into the room, his steps measured and even, the mechanical whir of his leg braces only barely audible. He is wearing a three-piece suit, a grey pinstriped number that I recognize, complete with a blue and silver regimental tie. The suit is loose on him, but he carries it with the same ease and grace as he always has. He almost looks like his old self; the scar on the side of his head stands out as a stark reminder.

He comes to a stop in the middle of the room, and his eyes flick to Kay briefly (who gives a single deferent nod and then continues his work) before coming back to rest on me.

A small smile curves his mouth. It barely reaches his eyes.

“Arthur.”

“Harry.” I try to keep my voice light.

He gives me a once-over and his smile twitches. “Surprised to see me?”

I shake my head, self-consciously smoothing a hand down the front of my own three-piece. I could never wear them as elegantly as him. “What brings you by?”

“I was coming back from my— lesson with my . . . talking doctor, and I thought I would pay you a visit.”

“Oh. And how is your progress?”

“Slow going and difficult; but she is . . . optimistic. For my . . . getting better.” His mouth twists.

His struggling for words is almost entirely at odds with his countenance. It is at odds with who Harry Hart was. I feel the sudden and irrational need to apologize, but I tamp it down. “I’m glad to hear it.” And then, because I cannot help it: “It’s good to see you looking so—out of that hospital garb, I mean.”

His smile turns wry. “Gowns are not very flattering on me.”

“No.”

He considers me thoughtfully. There was a time when I would have given anything to be the center of his attention even for a moment—but now, in this instant, his attention leaves me feeling vulnerable. He looks at me as though he sees everything and I— before, I could have told you at least half of the thoughts passing through his head. Now, he is utterly blank to me.

“I was wondering if you could . . . if you would like to take a short walk about the grounds with me,” he says. “It’s rather fine out . . . but it seems as though you are busy.”

It is a relief for him to say it, so that I do not have to. “I am. Sorry. Meetings.”
“Where?”

“Support Corps.”

He nods. “Would you mind if I accompanied you?”

For some unfathomable reason, I find myself glancing over at Kay. He is keeping his head down, dutifully ignoring us. I wonder what he makes of all of this.

Turning back to Harry, I find myself nodding in acquiescence. As much as I do not want his company at present, I cannot find a reason to deny him. “Certainly.” I gesture to the door he had just walked through. “After you.”

He gives a small smile and turns to push his way back out the door. I give another surreptitious glance at Kay. Only now does he raise his eyes from his computer and look at me directly, grey-blue eyes watchful and serious.

Apropos of nothing, I nod at him, and then follow Harry out the door.

The journey to the Support Corps offices is not a particularly long one, but my pace is slower than usual to accommodate Harry, and the first few seconds of walking in silence seem to stretch interminably. After what feels like some length, he clears his throat.

“I saw Eggsy off this morning.”

“Did you? And how was he?”

Harry gives me a sidelong glance as we round a corner. “He was rather . . .” he searches for the word, “. . . irritated, I think.” It is not the word he wanted, but it will suffice; it leaves me with no doubt that Eggsy told him everything about our encounter yesterday, or very nearly.

“He wanted to stay with you,” I say, testing the waters.

Harry nods in agreement. “Silly, of course. It’s not as if I am going anywhere.”

He says it with a modicum of humor, but I cannot bring myself to smile. “Well, not anymore.”

I am about to open my mouth to reply (with what, I have no idea) when another voice breaks in:

“Galahad! God, is it you? Back from the dead?”

Harry and I stop and turn in unison as Ephraim Freese, codename Bedivere, saunters up to us. He is a large man on the cusp of 40, and has the distinction of being the swarthiest Knight hired during Chester’s rather Aryan elitist rule. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Harry’s eyebrows raise.

“Bedivere,” he greets, taking the hand that the other man offers him. Bedivere shakes vigorously, his massive dark hand engulfing Harry’s comparatively frail one. Bedivere barely even acknowledges me, all his elated attention on Harry. I am struck with the sudden realization that, outside of Eggsy and I, there are, in fact, other people who have an interest in Harry’s wellbeing—his coworkers, for one. We had never drunk a toast to Galahad, so there was no reason to believe he’d died—but I had not informed any of the other Knights of Harry’s recovery either. I feel a little like an idiot.

“I thought you were dead for sure,” Bedivere says energetically, beaming.

Harry gives him a wry look. “You seem almost pleased by the—idea.” He finds the word just in time.
Bedivere chortles. “Pleased? I was ecstatic. You have no idea what a burden it is to work alongside you. I thought my days of competing with you were over. Woe is me— but the others will be pleased to know, I’m sure. Have you spoken to any of them yet, or am I the first to have the privilege?”

Harry cannot suppress a smile. He and Ephraim always had a bit of a friendly rivalry, though Ephraim would almost always concede that Harry was the better agent. It was something I had completely forgotten about until just this moment; for the past several weeks, my head has only been filled with thoughts of Harry in which I myself featured. I didn’t spare a single thought for his relationships with anyone else.

Of course, the other Knights would want to know about the fate of their comrade. Of course, they would care that he had recovered.

Unable to help myself, I begin moving slowly; Harry and Ephraim pick up on the cue and amble along with me, the three of us moving down the large hallway somewhat awkwardly.

“I haven’t spoken to the others yet,” Harry replies slowly. “And I am hardly ready for the field. I am still recovering.”

“You say that now. How long have you been out of hospital?”

“Two days.” We turn a corner. “But I have been awake for two weeks.”

I wince; when I glance over at Bedivere, he looks genuinely shocked.

“Two weeks? And no one thought to tell us. Harry, I’m hurt.” He then looks at me, as though he might about to repeat the sentiment. I step in hurriedly:

“Galahad’s recovery was on a need-to-know basis.”

Bedivere raises his eyebrows fractionally at this. The natural next question would be “why?” but, unexpectedly, Bedivere simply says, “Of course it was,” and begins prattling on about something else. That is the thing about Bedivere: he dislikes awkward and emotionally fraught conversations. At the barest whiff of anything more dramatic than celebrity gossip, he will immediately steer the conversation in some other, far more inane direction. While at times annoying, it presently means that I do not have to be caught in the tete-a-tete that Harry had, indubitably, planned for this walk. We manage to approach the glass doors of the Support Corps long before Bedivere has run out of steam.

I manage to leave them at the door without much fanfare. Bedivere practically hauls Harry off in the direction of the firing range. As they are leaving, Harry tosses me a backward glance that makes me feel as though I have just dodged a bullet.

-KM-

I need not wait long. The bullet finds me at home, three days later.

It is gone seven-thirty. I have been home for about twenty minutes, and am debating the merits of eating or going directly to bed when the doorbell rings. Curious (and not the least bit apprehensive) I go to answer it.
It’s raining out, thick and cold. He looks at me from beneath the shade of his umbrella, brown eyes unreadable.

“May I come in?”

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun. Hold onto your pearls.
Zenith

Chapter Summary

Zenith: (astronomy) the point in the sky or celestial sphere directly above an observer

Chapter Notes

Surprise! I made an executive decision to post the last 2 chapters and epilogue simultaneously because I didn’t want to be influenced by the reviews that rolled in. I just had to get this all out. I need to be done with it.

This is probably the heaviest chapter in this story, IMO. It took me forever to flesh out this conversation because it’s so fucking dense. Please grab a bottle of wine before reading.

ALSO: This is the first chapter in which we really get to see Harry Hart as a character, not through the recollections of other people, but through his actions. Pay attention.

I let him in, wordlessly.

He stands in my entryway, his umbrella folded and dripping apologetically onto the rug. The look he gives me is less apologetic, more anticipatory. He is waiting to see what I will do.

I step forward.

-KM-

I let my hands fall into their old, familiar patterns.

I take his umbrella from him, set it in the stand by the door. He turns slightly and I lift my hands dutifully to his shoulders, help tug his overcoat off. I take it carefully in my hands and hang it in the hallway closet to dry. I have done this countless times before, on so many occasions I can scarce remember them all; this time, however, the silence between us looms like a dense fog. It feels different. Unfamiliar.

Wordlessly, without looking at him again, I turn towards the living room. He follows behind me, his
footsteps soft even on the hardwood.

I glance at the small, built-in bar in the corner of my living room; well-stocked, but the whisky glasses are missing. I go into the kitchen to fetch them, leaving Harry in the living room.

As soon as I am alone in the dimly lit kitchen a wave of panic overtakes me, hot and gut-wrenching. At any other time, I might have been warmed by the idea of Harry coming to visit me, after hours. It is something he used to do with some regularity, his occasional and occasionally unannounced visits always making me feel . . . thought of. Regarded. That he would choose to spend time with me, over anyone.

This time is different. He has not come over simply to take in my company. I cannot fool myself. I know what he is doing here. I know why he came. I do not want to do this, not now. Not ever, really.

But I don’t have a choice.

Two of my whisky glasses are sat by the sink, not dirty, per se, but not washed since their last use—since Eggsy and I last used them. God, was that really two weeks ago? I go over to the sink and begin washing them, one-by-one.

Faintly, I hear the sound of music coming from the living room. It’s soft, classical. This is also part of our routine. I prepare drinks, Harry selects music. On the rare occasions I was invited over to Harry’s, our roles were reversed.

It feels wrong to be engaging in these behaviors now, when they bring absolutely no comfort but a false kind of calm. But I am not about to tell him to turn the music off.

By the time I have the glasses dried, I feel somewhat less sick. Steeling myself, I bring the glasses back out into the living room.

Harry has taken up a seat (his seat, I think) on the long couch. He has taken off his jacket and lain it carefully over the back of the sofa. I turn my back to him as I pour us each a healthy drink at the bar, and I can feel his eyes upon me, intent and unblinking. I deliberately lower my own gaze when I turn back around and bring our drinks to the sofa.

I hand his drink to him before I sit down. He reaches up with his left hand—the one without a tremor.

Our fingers brush slightly. This too, has not changed: I still feel the same spark of electricity when we touch, both longing and familiar and anticipatory all at once.

I keep standing. He is looking up at me, and I am looking down into my drink. Like a schoolboy who cannot meet a teacher’s gaze.

“Won’t you sit down?”

His voice is measured as it always is these days, but it seems to have less to do with his speech impairment and more to do with coaxing a frightened animal to obey. It is not a command but my body folds mechanically and without my willing it to do so; it has always been primed to do as Harry says.

I sit down on his right, leaving about a foot of space between us; not an unfriendly distance, but a cautious one. I steal a glance at him; he is not looking at me now, but down at his glass. Only the unscarred side of his face is visible to me. Looking at him, handsome as ever, still makes my stomach
flutter. Without the reminder of all that had happened, this could be any other evening, at any other
time.

I think about the last time we did this. It must have been nearly four months ago, while Eggsy was
still in training.

I think about the last time Eggsy and I did this. How, after drinks, I had put him over my knee,
spanked his arse raw, and then fingered him open until he was rutting and whimpering in my lap.

Beside me, Harry raises his glass to his lips. He is still using his left hand; to the untrained eye, it
seems steady, but I see how carefully he must consider his movements. The tremor in his right hand
must be bothering him especially. He takes a small swallow and then lowers the glass again, holding
it between his two hands.

I copy his movement, listening to the silence between us. It is punctuated by the velvety sounds of a
piano—I cannot recognize it. I have never been good at that sort of thing, was never very cultured.
Harry would exactly what it was. It even occurs to me that he would have picked this particular piece
deliberately.

Harry is quiet for a long while, and it is a quiet that I dare not break. This, too, has the same energy
as it did before, this sitting: anticipation. Waiting for him to make the first move. Wondering whether
he would put up another wall between us, or lean over and . . .

But, no, he won’t. Not now. He is thinking of what to say. He is wondering how best to approach . . .
this. After a time, he opens his mouth briefly, as if to speak, and then closes it again. The silence
peaks and crests around us.

I take another swallow of my whisky, my own hand seeming shaky to me. This all feels both
intimately familiar and uncannily strange. He has done this countless times before—come over, sat in
silence, had a drink. But nothing like it was before. It feels like sitting with a ghost, or the physical
manifestation of a wrongdoing.

Eventually, just when I think we might never recover from the silence, Harry speaks.

“I have decided to retire my codename.”

This is not what I expected. At all. My head whips to look at him and I find myself blinking, still

Harry’s forehead creases as he chuckles slightly. The laugh feels entirely natural, cutting through
some of the tension between us. “I may be a fool about some things, but I know when I’m finished.
I’m fifty, Alec. I was recently shot in the head, and now I’m . . . frail as a fucking kitten. I think it’s
time.” He pauses, glancing at me. “You are surprised.”

I want to laugh. How could I not be? But I avert my gaze, looking instead at his hands, clasped
around his drink. “I’m just trying to imagine what you would do otherwise.”

Harry nods. “I do not know. I don’t suppose I ever thought far enough into . . . the . . .” he cannot
find the word, so simply skips over it, “for retirement. It almost feels forced upon me—but, I am not
resisting. Now. I don’t think that Kingsman needs me any longer.”

“We do.” I need you. As much as I have been reticent to spend much time around him lately, the
thought of Harry leaving Kingsman entirely strikes a panicky nerve “There is plenty that you could
do without being in the field—”
“Such as become Arthur?”

The question brings me up short, and I bristle involuntarily. “Yes.” I say this more stiffly than I’d like and follow it with an equally stiff drink.

Harry watches me, missing nothing. “What do you . . . think?”

I take another drink from my glass, stalling as I return to Harry’s question. I look down into my glass; I am not pacing myself very well.

“I think you would hate it,” I say finally. “I think you’d be brilliant at it. And I think that everyone would respect you a lot more than they currently respect me.”

“You give yourself very little credit.”

I shrug. “I’m being honest.”

“I hoped that you would.”

Something about the tone of his makes me look up at him. He has shifted in his seat, a his body more towards me. I can see both sides of his face, can see the edges of the jagged scar along his temple. He is gazing at me seriously, his brown eyes steady and unblinking. The sheer weight of his attention makes my throat run dry.

“I have several questions that need honest answering,” he says this very slowly, and I can tell he has practiced this, practiced not losing these words. “I am sure you can guess what they are.”

My hand tightens around my glass, but I do not drink. “Fire away.”

“Why have you been avoiding me?”

The question catches me completely off-guard, like a shock to my nervous system. This was not the query I expected. I thought he might ask me about Eggsy, but this is more . . . personal.

“Would you believe me if I said I have been busy?”

It is an utterly lousy deflection, and I nearly wince as I deliver it. Harry merely considers me, his expression unchanging. After a moment of intense and uncomfortable study, he says: “They tell me that you visited me quite often while I was in a . . . asleep. That you or Eggsy were at my side nearly every day. But, since I have woken, I have seen Eggsy every day for hours, and you all of five times. When you have come to see me, you’ve been . . . quiet.” His mouth purses slightly. It was not the word he wanted, but he continues. “I was beginning to wonder whether you actually cared that I had woken.”

What? The idea has me so incense that I begin to reply without thinking—

“Of course, I care—!”

I stop myself. He doesn’t . . . he doesn’t really mean that; he is merely trying to elicit a reaction out of me, get me to say something. It’s an old, useful trick, and might have worked if it were not so familiar to me.

“It isn’t a question of caring.”

“No. No, it isn’t.” Harry sighs, breaking his gaze to look down at his own glass. “You know, I remember almost nothing of what happened . . . before. I don’t remember the church. I don’t
remember being shot. Sometimes, however, I think that I might remember some of what happened . . . in between. I don’t know if these are real— real, or not; but I have recollections of laying in darkness, with your voice beside me. Other voices too but, most often, yours.”

I can remember. All those still, stale evenings, spent alone in a room with a wax figure. The blue light of the hospital room, the incessant blinking of monitors. The utter silence when I was not speaking consuming. And all the things I said to fill that silence. Oh god—

“And what am I saying?”

Harry shrugs. “That, I cannot remember.”

I let out a breath. “It is probably for the best. I said a lot of things I shouldn’t have.”

Harry sets his glass down. His tone, when he speaks next, has a hard edge to it. More practiced words: “I may have been nearly brain dead for a month, but I’m not stupid, Alec. Something is not right here.”

And then, he reaches over and, with his old familiar ease, plucks the drink out of my hand and set it down on the table next to his. His other hand lingers, curling over mine, firmer than it felt two weeks ago. I feel my breath catch in my chest.

“Such as?”

Harry’s hand squeezes mine almost reflexively and he gives me a sharp look. “You, for one. This is the longest . . . this is the longest we have spoken in two weeks. You can barely look at me, even now.”

I do not bother trying to prove him wrong. Instead, I stare at my hand in his. I have large hands, long slim fingers and broad palms. They seem ungainly in comparison to Harry’s. I have always felt ungainly around him, in every respect. In my body, in my movements, in my speech. Even now, when he is just a few days out of hospital, when his speech is unsteady and he keeps pausing and rerouting in unexpected places . . . I feel that I am the uncoordinated one.

It strikes me that, even with his anomic aphasia and measured manner of speech, Harry Hart dominates this conversation, just as he has every other. He is steering me, unwieldy thing that I am. He presses his thumb into the space between my thumb and index finger. Such a slight gesture, but it sends a chill through me.

“Why haven’t you made Eggsy a Knight?”

I recoil instantly at the question, withdrawing my hand as if stung. I dart my gaze up at him, accusatory, leaning back and away. This is the question I had been expecting all along—but that he would spring it on me in such a way, when he had lulled me into a sense of— god. Had he planned this?

“I should think that would be obvious.”

“It really isn’t.”

And then I understand. Yes. I walked right into this.

“He failed the test.”
This is the beginning of the conversation he meant for us to have all along, the conversation that he had planned and prepared for and I had vainly hoped might not happen. His next words have some heat behind them, and it seems to make him more fluid.

“He failed to shoot a bloody dog; but he saved the world as we know it. Not without help, but that must count for something?”

“It does. It did.”

“Then why?” He seems genuinely confused. I can easily believe that he is—but this Harry Hart. He is not the best spy in the world for nothing; this could be a charade, for my benefit.

(He has done it before.)

But, even if it is a falsehood, how else should I respond but with the truth?

“I don’t think that he’s cut out for it. I don’t think he has what it takes.”

These are not difficult words to say to him. I have been saying them to myself for months now. Watching Harry’s face react is an entirely different matter. He looks both as if he does not believe me, and as if he is trying to work out why I might believe such a thing. Finally, he simply says:—

“I thought you of all people would be able to see his . . . potential.”

It feels like a low blow. My lip curls unpleasantly, and my skin flashes hot with anger. “Why, because we’re both from rough backgrounds? Spare me, Harry. That isn’t what I’m referring to, and you know it. Perhaps you’ve glimpsed it during your many conversations with Eggsy—then again, perhaps not.” I pause, taking a breath. “I don’t think Eggsy should be a Knight because he is too volatile. He walks into almost every situation heart-first, and his head follows like a tail. He may have stopped Valentine but, beyond that, he has not been able to keep a clear head. You have no idea what he has been like for the past two months.”

Harry barely misses a beat. “I do, actually. He’s told me a little. As for his . . . volatility, I don’t think that should disqualify him. He has a great deal of compassion—I do not think this is a weakness. I will admit that he can be a bit . . . careless. But he’s young, Alec; with the right guidance and opportunity, he will grow out of it. He has so much potential, and I cannot see it go to waste. I have great faith in him.”

I shake my head in disbelief. He is not listening to me. I do not know what Eggsy told him, but it could not be anything close to the whole truth.

“Youre great faith might just get him killed,” I say coolly but, even as I do, a glimmer of doubt flickers through my mind. What if Eggsy did tell Harry everything? And, after confessing all, Harry maintained such unshakable confidence in him? How? Unless. . . .

Could I be wrong? Could I have misjudged Eggsy so unjustly and severely? Harry was right, after all: Eggsy did display tremendous courage and skill in the V-Day incident. . . .

But then I think of the after-action reports, of the times Eggsy has come back from minor assignments with lacerations and bruises that should have never touched his skin in the first place. Careless doesn’t begin to cover it. Why doesn’t Harry see that? But then, I answer my own question: “You have a serious blind spot when it comes to him.”

It is not often that people have accused Harry of having a weakness. For all our shared history, our camaraderie and closeness, I have accused him least of all. Have I ever criticized him? I cannot
remember. This feels like the first time in my life that I am well and truly angry at him. It’s such an enormous feeling that I cannot bear to continue looking at him, at his utterly inculpable expression.

Abruptly, I stand and turn, going back to the liquor cabinet. I down the rest of my whisky and set the glass on the counter, reaching for the bottle.

I hear Harry also rise behind me, hear his quiet footsteps approach.

“I might say the same of you. Why is that?”

I ignore the question. Instead, I pour myself a healthy new glass and take a swallow. Only then do I turn back to him and open my mouth to say: —

“What is he to you, exactly?”

That was not what I meant to ask. The question leaves my mouth before I have a chance to think about it, and I instantly want to take it back. I already know. I just don’t want to hear his answer.

Harry looks at me steadily. His gaze has taken on a half-predatory glint, like a cat watching a bird. It’s an expression I have seen him turn on countless targets, people he is about to interrogate or kill or verbally eviscerate, but very seldom myself. It’s unnerving.

“You almost never ask the direct question, Alec. You always prevaricate.” He pauses, mulling over the verb before continuing slowly: “You want to know if Eggsy and I are romantically involved.”

I cannot help myself. “And are you?”

“He has made . . . overtures.”

“And?”

Harry’s expression does not change. “He’s kissed me, but just the once.”

God, how chaste. “Last night?”

“Yes.”

The “yes” is spoken with a softness not imbued in his previous admissions. It is tender, somehow. That “yes” changes his countenance, as he remembers. The kiss. A kiss which I have also tasted, from both sides of the exchange. I can feel it on my own lips so vividly, I might have been there with them, between them. I take another angry swallow of whisky.

“Does it matter so much to you?” Harry asks softly.

“You’re in love with him.”

That suggestion—accusation?—seems to make him curious. He tilts his head, considering. “I don’t know that I am. I don’t think I know what love is— I’ve never felt it before. But nor have I felt the same . . . depth of emotion for anyone else . . . .”

I am leaning heavily against the bar. My vision is swimming. His words echoing in my head. I’ve never—

“. . . Alec?”

I can’t do this.
“Can you please leave?” It is half a demand and half a plea, but Harry does not move. I swallow hard, painful. “Please, just go.”

Harry steps closer. “Alec—”

The hand holding the glass of whisky slams down on the marble countertop. I hear a crack, but the glass stays intact in my hand. I wish it had broken, and almost slam it down again. I am angry, so fucking furious.

“What are you doing?! What kind of chance do you think you have with him?! He is half your age, Harry! He’s a fucking child!”

My rage would have made a lesser man quail. Harry merely blinks at me, with an infuriating calm that deflates me. “And, yet, that didn’t stop you.”

I give a derisive laugh. My hand clenches around the whiskey glass. I want to drink what’s left in it just as much as I want to throw it at the wall. “Oh, so then he’s told you? That he’s been well turned-out?”

A flicker of hurt passes across Harry’s face, and the sense of victory it brings me warms the cockles of my black heart. It’s just as pleasing as it is disgusting.

“He did. In so many words. He was rather reluctant to talk about it.”

I snort. I can’t imagine why. “He thinks it was a mistake.”

“And was it?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you do it?”

How can I explain this to him? How can I tell him about all of those evenings I spent with Eggsy, talking, reminiscing about the past, hiding myself even while Eggsy tried to peel back these layers?

I think about Eggsy, then, truly. I think about the last conversation we had—the argument. Wherein he accused me of using him. And of never being honest with him. Have I ever been honest? With anyone? With Harry?

I have never lied to him. I have only ever committed the sin of omission. But there is no hiding, now. I cannot afford it.

“He needed me,” I say at last, my voice tired. “I was the closest thing he had to you, the one who knew you best. I did not start out with the intention of sleeping with him. He approached me. He flirted with me. I simply stopped saying ‘no’ at some point. I couldn’t. He’s so . . . so delicate, Harry. So young. He needed someone to take care of him.”

Harry seems surprised. “You do really care for him.”

“Yes.”

He considers. Then: —

“Did you need him?”

I almost say, Like a hole in the head, but stop myself. It would not be fair to Eggsy. “I don’t know. I
needed . . . something. Perhaps I simply needed to be needed. In any case, I let it happen. I wanted to know what you saw in him. I suppose we were both looking for a bit of you in one another. And you . . . you weren’t going to wake up. You were dead. I was prepared for you to die . . . . in some ways, you had died already. Eggsy simply had a harder time letting go . . . .”

“And now appears . . . to be more well-adjusted for it.”

His tone is indecipherable. As he delivers that damning line, my hand uncurls from around my glass. As soon as I relax my grip, I can feel a sharp stinging in my palm; I look down at my hand and see a trickle of blood coming out of a cut in the center, the valley of my hand where callouses never formed. Confused, I glance back at the glass and see it: a small chip at the mouth of a larger crack, right around the rim.

Before I can protest, Harry is stepping forward and drawing my hand up for inspection. He cradles my hand in both of his, gentle and almost reverent. The wound is weeping sluggishly; he smooths his thumb across the skin near the cut, making it gush a little more. He kneads my hand almost absently. His head is bowed and his face is drawn in thought.

His touch sends a fire coursing through my body, reawakening old flesh memories. He is standing close to me—too close. I can smell his cologne. I think I’m shaking. This feels too intimate, obscene.

“Are you angry with me?” I had to break the silence. I could not think of what else to ask him. My voice sounds small, almost child-like.

Harry removes a white handkerchief from his pocket and presses it to the small wound. “For sleeping with him? No. I am merely trying to understand where this leaves us.” He pauses, assessing our joined hands; then, he looks back up at me, curious. “Do you . . . are you in love with Eggsy?”

The laugh that escapes me is sudden and incredulous, harsh and bitter. “No. No, Christ—” My hand, previously slack, squeezes around his, the handkerchief separating them.

“Don’t you know?” I whisper, my voice cracking. “Don’t you have a fucking clue?”

Harry’s brown eyes are deep and serious. “I think I might.”

I lean in, then, slowly. I fill the negative spaces between us, give him time to step back. And, when he doesn’t, I kiss him. I kiss him because it is all I have ever wanted to do since he woke. I kiss him because I cannot help it. I kiss him because I know I will never get another chance.

He does not stiffen or seem startled. He allows it, as he had countless times before. His mouth parts and he tilts his head, both reflexively. These small movements, the feeling of his lips, the taste of him, all so familiar, like slipping into a recurring dream. I want to hold him here indefinitely, relearn him, tell him—

But he places a hand to my chest then, gentle but firm. He pushes me away.

“You have been, and will always be, my dearest friend,” he murmurs. His hand moves from my chest to my shoulder, and he squeezes. “But I can’t, Alec. I simply can’t.”

I have heard this in my head so many times. But hearing it out loud . . . his words rip something apart in me. It feels like flesh tearing.

“I know.” I knew it when he put a stop to us all those years ago. Maybe I even knew it when he first kissed me. “But I . . .”
I love you.

I can’t even bring myself to say it. It gets swallowed up in my own pride, fear, anger, dishonesty. And a childish part of me thinks that I don’t need to say it, that he—he must be aware. He could not possibly be that willfully blind. Not for so many years.

“I—” I swallow hard. Fuck. “—irrationally. I always have. I’ve tried—tried not to. You make it impossible.”

Harry is quiet for a moment. He keeps his hand on my shoulder and looks into my eyes steadily, searchingly. An expression crosses his face that I cannot put a name to.

“I . . . I never discouraged you from being . . . enamored with me. I am sorry.”

Eggsy’s words come echoing back. You’re sorry? I’m sorry.

“Why didn’t you?”

For the first time since we began speaking, he cannot hold my gaze. His eyebrows furrow fractionally, and his mouth creases minutely as he directs his gaze at my chest.

“I don’t know.”

I stare at him in disbelief.

“Please leave.”

This time, when the broken request leaves my throat, he complies.

I stay frozen to that spot as he collects his jacket, his coat, his umbrella. I do not move until I hear the door open to the rain, still pouring steadily, and then shut behind him.

As soon as it does my knees buckle under me. I sink to the floor in a heap, my back against the wall the only thing keeping me moderately upright. My hand clenches convulsively around the white handkerchief. My entire body begins to shake. My head pounds.

I do not weep.

-KM-

I remain in that position for god knows how long. It is very late in the evening when I finally manage to get up and drag myself to the couch. I do not even bother trying to make it up to my bedroom. Sleep comes almost instantly, blissful.

I wake of my own accord a little after 04:00 hours. It is a slow and painful swim into consciousness. I feel battered and dry, as if I had gotten into a fight or had too much to drink. One might argue both to be the case.

I roll over from my fetal position to lay on my back. I stare up at the ceiling, listless. Had I really said all of those things?

Predictably, I begin replaying pieces of conversation. It has left me exposed, spiteful, sickened.
Betrayed. Ridiculous. Embarrassed.

I should have seen all of it coming. It was so utterly fucking typical—of him, at least. My reactivity and emotionality had been . . . unprecedented. I suppose a great deal of it stems from incredulity and anger, a sense of being cheated—though even that seems unrighteous.

Harry and I have been friends for upwards of twenty years. We are each other’s longest lasting relationships. I have seen him go through dozens of lovers and romantic interests throughout the years, have heard him describe in subdued tones that end of each one. To hear him tell it, all but a few ended on his terms and with his parting words. Listening to him tell me such things about people I had never met, I allowed myself to imagine what those conversations must be like, never suspecting that I might, one day, be at the receiving end of one.

Could we remain friends after this? Uncertain. I said some rather foul things. Harry had taken them levelly enough, but that did not mean they did not carry weight with him. And that kiss—I feel myself flushing in shame just thinking about it. God. What the fuck. What the fuck.

As I lay there on the couch, my back stiff, I cannot help but wonder if . . . if this was all my own doing. Am I to blame for all of this?

Perhaps not all. Harry had, after all, acknowledged and apologized for one thing.

*I never discouraged you from being enamored with me. I am sorry.*

*Enamored?* It was a fucking cop out; he couldn’t say it either. And *never discouraged*? Disingenuous, at best. I was *encouraged* at every turn; I simply thought little of it before.

(We were younger, then. Maybe it was vanity. I do not know what it feels like to be worshipped, but it must be a heady, intoxicating experience. How could he not allow it, when it seemed to be doing no harm, only bringing me closer to him? How could he not actively try to bolster my esteem of him? How could he *not* wish to be admired?)

It would be a falsehood to assume that Harry Hart could never succumb to something as plebian as vanity. His entire aesthetic demands it. I have even found it irritating at times, his insistence on elegance, on subtlety. Did I appeal to his vanity?

(Am I oversimplifying this? Coddling myself?)

When I asked why he didn’t discourage me, he claimed not to know. Perhaps this is true. Perhaps he simply could not bring himself to say. My crime, my fucking *idiocy*, was that I allowed it. I knew it was an unequal affection, and I allowed it all the same. It felt *good*. And he continued because it also felt good.

That is why we do anything, I suppose.

I was always content to love him more than he loved me.

I think of Eggsy, how he fits into all of this. None of this is his fault. Despite what Harry says (or refuses to say), he is indeed in love with Eggsy—that much is plain. And it would be spiteful and ridiculous to blame Eggsy for that.

I knew that I had only ever been a substitute for him. I knew he would discard me, at some point. His dismissal hurts, but does not wound. For all his other faults, *he* is entirely inculpable. He has not betrayed me. He has not led me on under false pretenses. He has been utterly, and even painfully, honest with me right from the start.
I remember how he looked when Harry first awoke. How happy.

Closing my eyes, I cover my face with my hands. I press my fingers into my skin, push my nails in so that they leave indents. I cannot do this anymore. I cannot feel this much all the time. I cannot be this fucking person any longer. I have to let this go.

I need to talk to Harry. To Eggsy, also, if he will ever consent to speak to me again. I need to apologize. To clear the air, with both of them. But, more than anything, I need time. I need distance, and space to think about this. I need to give them room, and to give myself enough breadth to step back and look at this deliberately.

But not today. Today, I need to go to work, and do my damn job.

-KM-

At 05:20, I pull myself from the couch, change into my running clothes, and exit my house.

Agent Kubenick had the night watch, but it is Witman who tails me on my morning run. My pace is uncharacteristically sluggish, and my form feels sloppy. The only benefit to the jaunt is that it keeps me from thinking; all of my mental energy is concentrated on maintaining upright, on putting one foot in front of the other. I barely run 10 kilometers, and return to my house feeling less refreshed and even more beaten than when I had begun. I try not to contemplate what Witman thinks of all this.

I shower, perfunctorily. Shave. I pick out a deep blue three-piece with a silver tie and arm myself for battle.

I arrive at HQ at 07:05. Kay is not in yet, so I shut myself in my office and ring the mess for a pot of coffee.

I end up staring alternately at my computer or out my window for endless minutes, not really focusing on anything. Pieces of conversation keep floating back to me in a jumbled mess, making it impossible for me to concentrate. I click around aimlessly.

Kay arrives at 07:45, his workstation signaling to me that he has logged in. Knowing that he is just outside, busying himself, gives me the push I need to open several files and begin working. I go through several reports slowly, inefficiently, but it is more than I might have expected of myself.

By 08:20 I am working my way through my second cup of coffee and feel marginally more human. Functional enough, at least, to take Demarais’ call when he patches in.

If he senses that something is off, he has the grace not to mention it. We review the state of world affairs, discuss the reorganization of the Shanghai office, talk briefly about the most recent memo from accounting. I ask for an update on Public Sentiment, as we have euphemistically come to call it (unchanged). It feels strangely good to speak to Demarais about such dry subjects. As we go over tedious details, I can almost forget why I feel so exhausted and emotionally wrecked.

Besides my impromptu meeting with Demarais, I have no other appointments today. I continue to work through the endless list of tasks set before me, moving on to a third cup of coffee. It is barely lukewarm by this point, but the regular action of sipping from it, and the caffeine it supplies, makes it bearable. The longer I work, sitting in darkness and silence and drinking my coffee, the more last night seems like an awful dream, something my subconscious cooked up to torment me. All of it still
feels unreal. Had I really said those things? Had I really kissed him?

But, when I think of the kiss—the foolish, brazen, imbecilic kiss—it is as if a large weight drops instantly upon me. It is a sensation that I cannot argue with.

I press my hand to my mouth, a poor mimic of the pressure of another’s lips. I could not have dreamt that. It had been real. If I close my eyes, I can still feel him, smell him, taste him—

Resolutely, I keep my eyes on my screen and blink as little as possible. I drink down the rest of the coffee to wash the taste of him from me.

Late in the morning, there is a soft knock at the door.

“Enter.”

The door opens to reveal Kay. As he approaches, I see that he is dressed in his R&D technician’s uniform, a black jumpsuit with two grey stripes on the left shoulder, the Kingsman insignia stitched in gold upon the right breast.

I watch his face as he takes in my less-than-crisp comportment. This is the first he has seen me today, and I know from a recent trip to the loo that, even while pressed into an impeccable suit, I still look like shite warmed over. As per usual, Kay’s face betrays little.

I am about to head over to R&D for the afternoon, he signs. Do you need anything before I go?

I consider him. He could have asked me this over our messaging system. There was no need for him to come in and speak to me face-to-face.

When I do not answer immediately, Kay’s eyes drift from me to the tray the mess had brought in earlier, the now-empty pot of coffee and the mug next to my hand.

Shall I ring the mess for lunch? he signs, and I suppress a grimace. He knows that I neglected breakfast.

I shake my head, smiling ruefully. I am perfectly capable of calling for it myself, Kay.

He raises a single blonde eyebrow, and asks pointedly: But will you?

I raise my own eyebrow in turn. Did you come in here just to check up on me?

A brief flash of color rises to his cheeks and dissipates quickly. I’m sorry, sir.

Despite my exhaustion, I cannot help but smile. It’s fine.

Kay hesitates for a moment, as if debating whether to speak further. He always seems so serious, so focused. It occurs to me that I have rarely seen him smile.

I am thinking about this when he raises his hands again and begins, Sir—

Across the room, there is a knock at the door, and it opens. Kay turns mid-sentence, and I crane my neck around him to see who has stepped in.

My stomach clenches.

Harry stands in the doorway, one hand resting on the handle, having not stepped fully into the room but lingering on the entrance. He is dressed impeccably, as always, wearing a light-grey three-piece
with a black tie. His is wearing Kingsman glasses today, the thick frames giving his face a sharper appearance, though his expression is deceptively mild.

He looks from Kay to me, curious. “Arthur,” he addresses. “I am interrupting?”

In a move that appears much more natural than it should, Kay immediately glances back to me to gauge my reaction. I attempt to school my features into some semblance of calm. What the hell? Why is he here so soon after . . . ?

(Couldn’t this fucking wait?)

“Ah, no. Kay was just updating me before heading out.” I look back to him. Is there anything else?

He shakes his head once. No. I will be in R&D if you need me.

Watching him turn his back to me and walk towards the door, I realize that I do not want him to leave.

Christ. I am afraid of being alone with my best friend and am seeking emotional comfort from my secretary. My god, I am pathetic.

When Kay reaches the door, Harry steps aside. They exchange a brief glance as Kay sidles past him and, if I didn’t know better, I might think that they were sizing each other up. Once Kay has left, Harry steps fully into the room; he shuts the door behind him and pauses to consider me.

I say nothing. Silence has, and always will be, my best and last defense.

He allows the silence to stretch for half a minute before he crosses the room in slow, carefully measured steps. He keeps his gaze on me the entire time he approaches, and his movements remind me of a jungle cat silently sidling up to its prey. It is only once he has come closer that I realize that I cannot hear the mechanical whir of the leg braces. He has stopped wearing them.

(And, when I think about it, I did not hear them last night either.)

He stands before my desk, looking down at me in my chair. The chair that I do not deserve in an office that I do not deserve, in a position that I do not deserve nor did I ask for. His look is nearly inscrutable.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. I refuse to be the reactionary party this time.

“It was my intention for us to have another discussion,” I say coolly, only realizing then how angry I am at being forced into this conversation so soon, at having this taken from my control. (He couldn’t have let this lie, even for a day? He couldn’t let me recover even slightly from last night?) “But I had envisioned a much different time and setting.”

“I think . . . both are appropriate for what I intend to say.”

“Which is?”

“I want Eggsy to have my codename when he completes his training.”

The word codename is said more quickly than the surrounding words and seems almost out of place in the sentence.

(Said quickly, so he won’t lose it.)
“Assuming that he is able to complete his training.”

Harry’s eyes narrow fractionally behind his glasses. “That is another matter. I would also like to resume my . . .” his mouth twitches in distaste, “—role as his mentor. Effective immediately.”

“It is your prerogative to do so, and I do not believe Ector will have a problem with it.”

“Will you?”

“Officially, no. I will not stop you from training Eggsy.” Or for doing anything else with him, for that matter.

“Will you actively prevent him from becoming . . . from succeeding?”

I consider him for a long moment.

“No. I won’t. I don’t think that I need to.”

For the first time since he entered the office, Harry’s expression gentles. “I am hopeful that we can prove you wrong.”

In the depths of my pocket, my phone buzzes. I ignore it.

I allow myself a sigh. His optimism confounds me. Its nature, its source. I almost find myself wanting to be proven wrong. I tell him as much. “I rather wish you would.” It seems like a betrayal of myself.

“And, after you have retired your codename to Eggsy? Will you seek the Arthurship?”

Harry’s gaze seems to flicker from my face, down to my tie, and back again. “I am considering it.”

“I will not stop you from doing that either.”

Harry raises his eyebrow just slightly. “You do realize, of course, that if you grant me the Arthurship, I can promote Eggsy as I choose?”

I grit my teeth. “I do.”

He continues to gaze at me, questioning without words. I sigh again.

“Between the two of us, I would be glad to be rid of the bloody position—and all the authority and power that accompanies it.”

That much, I realize, is true. As much as I have desperately clawed to hold onto my tenuous grasp of authority, as much as I have pushed myself into this position, I think I would leave it in an instant if I knew it would be left in Harry’s capable hands. I would not vacate so readily for anyone else. I trust him with Kingsman, which says a great deal. He must see this, because he gives me a look that is full of old camaraderie.

I nearly return the look. Instead, mine morphs into something different: ashamed, bitter. I direct it at the ground, but not before seeing something like sadness flicker across Harry’s face. We are both quiet for a moment.

“I miss you, Alec. I do not mean . . . to be cruel when I say that.”

“I know you don’t.”

“I miss the way it used to be.”
The, *So do I*, hangs in the air between us, unsaid but heard utterly. We both know his meaning but are referring to different things entirely.

“I am sorry for hurting you. For not being more careful with you.” His words are softly spoken, full of regret. I both hate and love the tenderness there. I am pathetic enough without his pity.

“I am not some delicate piece of china, Harry.”

“I think that you are . . . more delicate than you realize.” He pauses. “What happened last night—”

In a rare breach of decorum, I find myself interrupting him. I am trying, I realize, to beat him to the punch. To take back some control. To show him that I know what needs to be said, and I am willing to kneel before him and say it.

“I owe you an apology. I behaved rashly last night. It was a lapse of judgement on my part. I know — I know that it’s foolish of me to . . . to . . . .”

Harry steps forward but I hold up a hand to stop—whatever he was about to do. “No, don’t. I need to say this.” I square my shoulders. I prepared myself to say this. This morning, I thought it over. I am ready.

That doesn’t mean it’s not going to hurt.

“You and Eggsy both deserve to be . . . with each other. Whatever that looks like. If I had known that you were going to wake, I wouldn’t have let any of this happen. I certainly won’t stand in your way now.”

It feels as if I have more to say after that, but I cannot think of anything more. A pregnant pause stretches between us.

“We can work through this, Alec.”

He says it as certainly as he says everything. I want to believe him, but cannot bring myself to look him in the eye.

“Can we?”

It seems that Harry is about to reply when a sharp pip comes from my computer.

Startled and frowning, I look over. An emergency video call has popped up.

It’s Kay.

Something in my chest twists. I am immediately on high alert.

“Excuse me,” I say to Harry tersely, refocusing my attention on the screen. I see the call has been dispatched from the Tactical Situation Room—what is Kay doing there? I search his face for clues; he looks extremely tense.

What is it? I sign hurriedly.

Kay does not respond, but steps out of the way to let Rocha Morais into view. Her dark eyes are wide with alarm, but she delivers her message with authority: “Agent Unwin, sir. Code four. He’s being flown into medical as we speak.”

*Code four. Agent down, emergency medical extraction.*
Harry is already across the room and out the door before I can turn to say anything. I look at his retreating form for half a second before turning back to the screen. Rocha Morais is still speaking, but I am looking at Kay, who is alternating between watching a screen that I cannot see and glancing back at me over Rocha Morais’ shoulder. His expression is grim.

It tells me all I need to know.
Stellar Remnant

Chapter Summary

Stellar remnant (astronomy): aka, “compact star”; refers collectively to white dwarfs, neutron stars, and black holes; the form of the remnant depends on the mass of the star when it formed

Chapter Notes

Warning! This chapter contains non-graphic descriptions of physical trauma involving the face. If the terms used aren’t explicitly obvious, don’t look them up if you are squeamish.

Also, I forgot about this detail when I wrote it, but I realized recently that Eggsy actually says “I’m up shit creek” in the first movie when he places his call to Kingsman from the interrogation room. My, how we have come full circle.

They bring him in screaming.

Agent Klein, the lead on the KEME team that brings him in, informs me that Agent Unwin was incoherent and fading in-and-out of consciousness when they picked him up. While they were loading him into the helo and making their escape, it seemed that he might have fully passed out; but, once they were in the air and he was stabilized, he began to rouse. They were an hour outside London HQ before he started screaming.

One of the field medics injects him with a tranquilizer as soon as they land. He is transported immediately to Emergency Medicine.

He will live. But there is little they can do for him otherwise.

-KM-

Once the situation has been contained, I have Merlin explain it to me in detail. I review the visual and audio feeds. I examine Eggsy’s field notes from the mission.

I try to convince myself that this isn’t my fault.

I had sent Eggsy into known territory to follow up on a lead that Percival was investigating three
weeks prior. An arms dealing operation, seemingly based in Ireland but with possible international expansion. Eggsy’s instructions were to meet with Percival’s contacts, to observe, and report back with news of activity. He was instructed to keep a low-profile; his cover was as a university student on holiday, in town for two weeks visiting chums. He was told to learn the locals, determine who the players were, but to keep his distance. In no way was he to engage. This was strictly reconnaissance, just as many of his previous missions had been.

I should have paid more attention. I should have read the transmissions he had sent in. I might have picked up on something.

Eggsy was investigating a warehouse situated near the dockyards of Belfast Lough, a place he had been casing for days. Purportedly storing mostly vehicle parts fabricated by a private manufacturer and to be sold to the military, but Eggsy was suspicious. And so, he decided to take a closer look.

They had known he was coming. That was how they got the drop on him.

Hired muscle had jumped him in the warehouse. They attacked from behind, landed a head blow that sent Eggsy to the ground. He recovered quickly enough to stagger back to his feet, but he was disoriented. Concussed. There were three of them and one of him. And as soon as they discovered that, even concussed he would put up an impressive fight, they took no chances.

Eggsy managed to stab one in the leg, nicking his femoral artery. He then rolled underneath the carriage of an armored truck and was quick enough on the other side to run down a long hallway created by the warehouse stock. He must have realized that he was in over his head, because that was when he patched into HQ.

I listen to the audio file, over and over.

“Agent Unwin, this is Agent Yoshito in TSR, where—”

“Look, no time bruv, I’m up shit creek and I need Merlin, now!”

(I wonder about that. If he simply means that he needs help, or if he meant that he needed me.)

“I can assist—”

“Fuck, there’s one at the entrance.” Panting. Pause. The camera of Eggsy’s glasses jerks around wildly, and I can sense the moment he realizes that he is a mouse caught in a maze with cats. His voice becomes more panicked. “Send backup—”

“KEME Team Delta has been dispatched to your location, Agent Unwin, ETA 20 minutes. Just keep—”

“I may not last 20 minutes, bruv— shite!” The sound of gunfire.

“Agent Unwin!”

No answer. The ring of returning fire.

“Unwin!”

“I can’t—”

The audio cuts out at that point. The man firing at Eggsy was only a distraction, not meant to kill him. Another man comes up from his right side and manages to land a blow when Eggsy does not
dodge quickly enough. The glasses are knocked to the ground. All that can be seen are legs from the knee-down, scuffling around as they go at it.

He and his assailant exchange blows. They are both on their feet the entire time and, based on their movements, I can only assume that they each manage to land several. The man does not appear to be especially physically imposing; in a normal situation, Eggsy should have been able to take him. He delivers a punch that sends the man sprawling to the floor, and that should theoretically be the end of it.

But Eggsy is still discombobulated. And then the third man—the shooter—rejoins.

He steps on the glasses.

Eggsy’s injuries tell the rest of the story.

The shooter comes up behind Eggsy, throws him into a shipping crate. He then hauls him up and holds him by the arms while the other man gets up from the floor. They begin interrogating Eggsy, interleaving questions with blows. He has three cracked ribs. Fractured clavicle. There are multiple contusions littering his torso from body blows inflicted with what appears to have been a barbed set of brass knuckles. Internal bleeding. When he refused talk, to give himself up, they moved to his face.

Broken nose. Fractured eye socket and cheekbone on the left side. Blunt globular trauma to left eye, resulting in a closed-globe injury. Hyphema, partial retinal detachment. Right eye much worse: globe rupture from penetrating trauma, likely from one of the barbs on the brass knuckles.

He is, effectively, blind.

It is unclear what happened after that. My guess is that he went limp after the wound to his right eye, and his assailants let him sink to the floor. It was their mistake to think that he was completely beaten.

When the KEME team found him, he was huddled in a corner on the floor of the warehouse, keeping out of the sight of the last guard, biting on a torn bit of his own shirt to keep from screaming. The two men who had been beating him lay on the floor several yards from Eggsy, and it was evident by a trail of blood that he had crawled away from them: one dead with a cervical spine fracture, the second with a bullet through his gut, most likely point-blank range. The wound itself was not fatal, as he was still alive when the KEME team arrived; but the infection from the bullet piercing his intestine will kill him anyway.

Merlin relates to me, in a quiet voice, that the fact that Agent Unwin was able to disarm these two men, despite being in severe pain, disoriented, and handicapped, was nothing short of remarkable.

I reply that this will likely never be a comfort to Eggsy.

-KM-

They do what they can to treat Eggsy’s broken bones. They make a small incision in his face to reset the broken piece of his cheekbone and place a polymerizing bridge between the bones. They do the same for his eye socket. He will have two small scars where the incisions were made. The same procedure is done for his clavicle. The ribs they leave to heal on their own.
They clean his eyes. They stop the bleeding. They bandage them. When I finally make it down to the infirmary, I ask for the physician who was on duty when Eggsy was brought in and who oversaw his emergency medical care. The doctor, Gory Whistlan, gives me a grave look and recounts Eggsy’s injuries.

I have the nerve to ask about his vision.

Whistlan shakes his head. “It’s possible that he may retain some vision in his left eye; but not enough to see clearly. His right eye is completely unsalvageable, and we may have to enucleate it—but we cannot make that decision until the swelling around the area begins to subside. That, I am afraid, is all I can tell you.”

I thank him, my voice sounding hollow to my own ears. Dr. Whistlan must excuse himself because I blink, and he is gone.

My feet carry me to the ICU. I do not enter, merely stare at the scene through the glass.

Harry is there, at his bedside. He is holding Eggsy’s hand, staring at him intently.

Eggsy’s battered body lays motionless in the bed. Every inch of skin I can see is mottled red and purple by bruises. There is a necklace of them around his neck. His mouth is raw, red. The bandages over his eyes are thick.

I don’t know if Harry can see me in his peripheral vision. He does not turn around. And I do not have the nerve to go in.

After staring for several minutes, I turn heel and leave.

-KM-

I go to the TSR. Bile sits just at the back of my throat, but I refuse to stop by a lavatory to wretch. I don’t know why. My thoughts are not making sense.

The quartermaster’s domain—where I have spent half of my life— is on the second floor of Kingsman London HQ. It is partitioned into two major sections: research and development on one, and field prep and support on the other. A large part of both sections have an open floor plan, making it fairly easy to see what is going on in any one location from an elevated viewpoint. Merlin’s office is located one level above, with glass windows allowing the quartermaster to survey his domain. The Tactical Situation Room is adjacent to Merlin’s office and is simply a large room set up with wall-to-wall monitors except on the back wall where the door is. This is where Merlin spends most of their time when helping agents in the field.

Merlin—Rochas Morais—is still there when I arrive. She is overseeing a clean-up team, also sent in from the Support Corps. She is staring at the screen in which I can see someone mopping up blood from the floor with. She turns her head when she hears me open the door.

“What is your plan?” I do not bother with preamble.

“Containment,” she replies calmly. “To preserve the mission, we make it look as though there was never a fight. There were four guards on premises, including the one Agent Unwin was hiding from when KEME arrived. He’s been taken care of, and we are bringing back all four bodies for
examination. Cleaners are in, taking care of the mess.”

I don’t follow. “You’re making it appear as though the guards just, what, vanished?”

“Yes. There is little avoiding this criminal operation know that *something* happened at this facility—” she gestures to the screen. “However, if we sanitize the scene, and they find that nothing was disturbed or taken—”

“They may presume to be dealing with deserters, rather than someone infiltrating their operation.”

She nods. “It will make it easier for another agent to pick this mission back up. Although it is becoming rather delicate.” She turns to a monitor and brings up a transmission log, which has been annotated. “Agent Unwin managed to gather some useful information before this altercation. We now have clues as to who the major players are. Once we process and autopsy the bodies being flown in, it may become more obvious.” She turns back to me. “I think we should discuss what the next step is, once we. . . .” She trails off, her face crinkling in concern. “Arthur, sir? Are you all right?”

I don’t know how to answer that. When speaking to her about the mission, I was on autopilot, able to navigate with affectless ease. Now, without a mission to focus on, I feel. . . .

Someone comes up beside me and latches onto my elbow, steadying me. I am led to a chair and sat down.

A familiar pale face swims before me. Kay. I hadn’t even noticed him when I walked in. He must have been here this entire time.

His hands are moving in front of me, first quickly, and then more slowly, repeating the same phrase until it finally registers with me:

. . . *take you home?*

I nod.

The next hour is little but a blur. Later, I can remember pieces: Kay, steering me firmly by the elbow through the rest of Kingsman, taking us on a route to the main garage that miraculously manages to avoid running into almost anyone. Kay, gently shoving me into the backseat of a car and getting behind the wheel. The drive, passing countryside sliding into the cityscape, lights and noises until, finally, we pull up at my house.

Kay does not wait for me to move. He simply gets out of the car and comes around to my side, opening the door and pulling me out. He is surprisingly strong, and maneuvers me up the stairs to my door without trouble.

I remove my keys from my pocket, but my hands are shaking. I still cannot think. Kay stills my hands with one of his own and plucks the keys from them. He turns them in the lock, opens the door, and ushers me inside.

Kay handles me with a brisk efficiency that is oddly comforting. He has never set foot in my home before, but he easily steers me towards the kitchen and sits me down in one of the seldom-used chairs. He then begins rifling around in the cupboards, eventually finding a glass and filling it with water. He sets it in front of me, with the unspoken order to drink.

The water is lukewarm, and I only drink half of it down; but, once I do, I blink, and it is as if my full, unadulterated vision returns to me. I can see everything starkly.
Kay is standing before me, looking down. He is not very tall—shorter than me, at least—but, with me sitting, he seems towering. His blonde hair frames his angular face, and his blue-grey eyes are darker than usual, clouded by concern. One of them has a small imperfection in the iris, a tiny speck of brown or gold. He raises his hands, and I notice for the first time that his fingers are elegant, fine-boned, his nails short and glassy-looking.

*What do you need?*

His face betrays nothing and everything. The fine cupid’s bow of his mouth, the downturn at the corners. The flicker of his eyes across my own face. He thinks he should stay—wants me to ask him to stay. He thinks he should look after me.

I feel my eyes begin to prickle and I lower my head, covering my face with both hands. Replacing the vivid details of Kay’s face with the darkness behind my eyes is not comforting. Is this what Eggsy will see from now on?

I feel a wetness on my fingers. It is all I can do to keep my shoulders from shaking. I concentrate on the silence around me, telling myself that to break it with my sobs would be sacrilegious.

Kay moves forward, just a fraction. He is hovering on the edge of an idea. He wants to stay. I want him to stay.

But he knows, and I know, that this would be crossing too many of the boundaries between us. And, frankly, I don’t know that I can bear to be cared for right now.

“What please leave.”

It’s the second time I have asked that of someone in the last two days, in this very house.

And, for the second time, my wishes are obeyed.

-KM-

I do not return to the office for three days.

There is no escaping the work. I remote in from my home workstation once I go through the main security channels. Initially, I work in fits and bouts. When not working, I sleep, or simply lay in bed, not moving. Every hour is exhausting to me. I feel completely drained every waking moment. Sleeping only seems to make me more tired. After this first day, I work around the clock, barely stopping to eat or drink or sleep. The work keeps me focused, grounded, useful.

The entire after-action report from Eggsy’s mission is filled out by Merlin, with addendums from Eggsy’s doctors. They report that he is awake, that he seems to be recovering from his concussion, but that he is inconsolable. He barely eats. Refuses to talk, even to Harry, who seldom leaves his bedside.

(This is, in a very fucked up way, an ironic turn of the tables.)

This feels like my fault, no matter what I tell myself. I should not have given him a mission. He was emotionally compromised. He was unfocused. He disobeyed orders.
Agents are fully responsible for themselves in the field. Mentally, emotionally, physically. I have told Eggsy this. I know this. Then why do I feel so guilty?

I know why.

Because I am left to wonder . . . to wonder if this merely proves the point I have made from the very beginning: He is too reckless. He cannot compartmentalize. He was never fit for the Knighthood.

Could he have overcome these flaws? If I had given him the right instruction, the proper care, would he have grown?

It was a mistake for him to go in there alone, without sanction, without letting anyone know ahead of time. But, when he realized he was in utter peril, he did do the right thing: he called in for help. He had followed protocol, and it had done him no good.

I think of Lamorack’s recent death. The situation there had been similar: Lamorack died because the enemy got the upper hand—and Lamorack was an extremely competent, effective, and experienced agent.

Did it matter? It is impossible to know, and tortuous to wonder. It matters little. Now, any chance he might have had is utterly destroyed.

I had a small hand in this, but it feels as though I personally took that away from him. Took away his vision, his independence, his livelihood.

I never wished this for him. Yes, I thought he was naïve, juvenile. I thought he was careless, overly emotional, sometimes selfish, difficult. I did not believe in him the way Harry did. There were times when I wanted to hurt him—physically, emotionally. But, through all of that, I still cared for him. I wanted to keep him safe, to protect him. This seems like a betrayal.

I can only imagine what it feels like to him. What he must think of me.

Then again, he is probably not thinking of me at all.

I send a request to Eggsy’s physicians, asking them to keep me abreast of all updates. I should be spared nothing.

-KM-

I return to the office around noon on the fourth day. I cannot afford to stay away any longer.

I barely nod at Kay before locking myself in my office. I feel badly for not giving him more acknowledgement; he has been keeping the office under control in my absence, no small feat. But I cannot face him, just now. This is the first time I have dared come back to HQ since Eggsy was brought in, and I need to collect myself.

I stand in the center of the room, surveying. It’s a large office, and I never understood how Chester—or any of the previous Arthurs for that matter—managed to make use of all the space. The décor gives it the feeling of a study of some university dean: fine wood paneling, deep greens, furniture from another era, facades made of book spines. Chester had always seemed right at home here, with his crusty upper lip and outdated attitudes. I have never quite measured up to that standard. I always
felt like a substitute schoolmaster in this office, trying to hold court as effectively as possible whilst knowing that I do not truly belong.

So much has happened here. This room almost gives me a sense of dread, just by association.

How ironic, to dread the place one works.

My first order of business is to patch into the French office. I call Demarais’ direct line but am intercepted by his secretary; he’s in another call, at the moment, but he will be finished in just a minute. I wait patiently until the green holograph image of Demarais flickers into being. He is stubbing out a cigarette.

“Merci, mon Dieu,” he greets me haggardly. “How are you feeling?”

“Still recovering,” I reply somewhat gravely. I had told Kay to inform Demarais that I had taken violently ill, which wasn’t entirely untrue. “Kay has brought me up to speed, but—”

“I will fill you in with the details,” he finishes. He proceeds to light up another cigarette and do just that. We discuss Bedivere’s last assignment, the assignments that Lancelot, Bohrs, and Morholt are currently out on. Updates on world events: a bomb went off at a convention center in Atlanta, Georgia, possible ties to a white nationalist group there; talk of interference with elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which the African office is looking into. . . .

I am nodding almost mechanically through all of this and am both listening and asking pertinent questions with a detached sort of ease—and so am startled when Demarais trails off, and says in a low, gruff voice:

“How is your young trainee?”

He can only mean Eggsy. I close my eyes briefly, the memory of medical reports flashing before me. For each of the three days I was absent, I received one update on Eggsy. The first was less of a report and more of a memorandum: patient continues to be stable, is getting fluids via IV, sleeps a good deal, is still taking morphine, refuses to eat. Agent Galahad was in the room or around the ward for the majority of the day. The second was much the same. The third was an official report: patient had to be sedated in order for doctors to unwrap bandages and examine his eyes. The prognosis is not good.

“He is alive,” I finally manage. “But that is the best I can say for him. He will never return to fieldwork.”

Demarais’ face contorts subtly and he flicks his cigarette. He looks uncomfortable. “I feel the need to apologize.”

I furrow my brows, confused. That was not at all what I expected of him. “For what?”

“For convincing you to send junior agents into the field.”

I breathe a sigh. “This is hardly your fault, Director. We both agreed to what we would assign junior agents and Support Corps. All that besides, this was a reconnaissance mission, and well within Eggs—Agent Unwin’s capabilities. It shouldn’t have turned ugly, but it did.”

“I did wonder why Agent Unwin chose to get so close,” Demarais muttered. “I took the liberty of reading through his mission parameters and the AAR. It does not seem to make much sense.”

“He disobeyed direct orders.” I try to keep the frustration out of my voice.
Demarais is quiet for a moment. He stubs out his cigarette and does not light another one. “Then it is not your fault, either. And I will make that known to the other Directors, should they question it.”

I hadn’t even thought of that. “I am sure they grow weary of your defending my ineptitude.”

“I wouldn’t say that they think you inept,” Demarais says. “I had a long conversation with Director Tshiswaka the other day—who, for your situational awareness, is largely in your corner. She thinks that you are an exceptional agent, but perhaps better suited to your old post. She also gathers that you dislike your current position, which hardly helps you.”

I almost snort. “She isn’t wrong.” Pause. “I have been seriously considering the idea of allowing Galahad to step in and take my place.”

There is a long pause while Demarais considers this. “I see. And what does Galahad think?”

“He has not made a formal decision, but he indicated to me that he would not be opposed to the idea. He said he intended to give up his codename—” but that was before Eggsy’s accident. What will he do now? “There is no reason for me to not step down.”

Except that, if I did, there would be no place for me at Kingsman. I could not stay here, could not resume my role as Merlin under Harry— even if Rocha Morais was gracious enough to resign, which she has no reason to do. More importantly, I do not think I could work with Harry. Not now. Not when I have cost him and Egssy so much grief.

If I give Harry the Arthurship, I am finished.

“That would make for a great deal of reorganization in a very small amount of time,” Demarais observes while I stew in my thoughts. “For the Arthurship to change twice in less than a year is unprecedented.”

“But that does not mean that it isn’t the right thing to do.”

Demarais gives me a hard look, searching. “It sounds as though you have already made up your mind.”

“Perhaps, I have.” Perhaps the decision has been made for me.

“I don’t want you to do anything rash.”

I give a mirthless scoff. “I think this has been a long time coming, don’t you?”

“If you say so.”

His expression is still stony, unmoved. I cannot help myself. I ask: “Do you think Galahad would make a better Arthur?”

Demarais gives me a slightly consternated look, which I absolutely deserve. “I think it’s an unfair comparison to make, for a multitude of reasons that should be obvious,” he says, somewhat irascibly. “And it is something that you, and the other directors, would do well to remember. I wouldn’t have wasted any effort supporting you or defending your decisions if I thought you were doing a shitty job, or were unequal to the task.”

His reply is sharp and brusque, almost like a reprimand. He seems annoyed. It is oddly comforting.

“Thank you,” I say, after a minute.
Demarais merely snorts. “So: what will you do?”

“I do not know.” I take in a deep breath. “I need to speak to Galahad.”

-KM-

It takes me most of the afternoon, but I finally work up the nerve.

I contemplate for a moment requesting him to my office—but quickly decide that seems too much like a summoning and, in the present circumstances, would be inappropriate and tactless. There is only one thing for it: I must go to him.

I wait for a moment when Kay has left the office to run some errand. I slip out without having to face his gaze or his judgement.

The walk to the infirmary seems to take an eternity. I have the irrational suspicion that everyone who passes me, who makes eye contact and nods, who greets me with a soft “Arthur”, knows what has happened.

The long-term care ward is always quiet but, today, it seems stifling. My feet carry me down the hallway slowly, and I hear my every footstep with resounding clarity. Too loud.

I stop before the door. B028. Christ. They had placed Eggsy in the room right across the hall from Harry’s old room.

The shades on the viewing window are half-slit. I can see only see horizontal slivers of the room, but enough to make out the dark outline of a suit-clad figure sitting by the bed.

I steel myself. Reach out and open the door.

Harry turns immediately at the sound. He looks at me for a brief moment, not long enough for me to fully examine his face, before he turns back to Eggsy. From my vantage point by the door, I can see that Harry is holding one of Eggsy’s hands.

“He’s asleep,” Harry says quietly. His thumb moves over Eggsy’s hand, kneading.

I look at Eggsy’s monitors. Surely enough, his heartrate is slow, as is his breathing, indicative of deep, sedated sleep.

I look fully at the prone form on the hospital bed. Eggsy has a compact, well-muscled body, but he looks inexplicably small and frail in his hospital gown. His skin, milky pale in ordinary settings, gleams an almost ghostly white underneath the white lights. The top of the hospital gown is wide, and I can see dark purple and yellowing bruises around his clavicle. Only the lower portion of Eggsy’s face is visible, a dark bruise along his jaw. His eyes are covered by thick, impeccable white bandages which wrap completely around his head.

“The doctors replaced his bandages earlier,” Harry says, his voice just as quiet, speaking to me but not looking at me. “They may have to remove his right eye.”

My stomach clenches painfully. “I know.”

Harry nods twice. He continues to look at Eggsy, as if he hasn’t been doing this very thing for the
last three days. He is looking at Eggsy as if he cannot bear to look away, as if Eggsy might disappear if he did. Finally, after several minutes, he gives a small sigh, his shoulders moving with the breath.

“What do you want, Alec?”

“I need to speak to you. Can we talk outside?”

For a moment, it seems as though he is not going to respond. Then, he stands slowly and turns to me. He gestures towards the door.

Once we are outside the room and he turns to face me, I get my first clear look at him. The lines of his suit are impeccably sharp, but that is the only crisp thing about him. Harry’s face looks utterly haggard. there are dark circles under his eyes, and the sclera of his eyes are a light pink. He’s been crying.

That notion, more than anything, gives me pause. I imagine Harry at Eggsy’s bedside, after Eggsy has fallen asleep following one of his rages, holding Eggsy’s hand and unable to keep the tears from his eyes.

(I have seen Harry cry all of once. Years ago, when his mother died. He’d hid his face from me, then.)

Before I can speak, Harry speaks, his voice with an unusually hard edge:

“You do not need to apologize.”

I blink, contemplating this gambit. The way he says it, it sounds like he thinks I should. But we both know this is beyond apology. “That is not why I came here.”

“Then why?”

I swallow. I had known this was going to be difficult. Here, in the moment, my task seems insurmountable; but I must do it.

“I know I cannot fix this or make amends. I can only focus on what happens next. How to move forward.”

I watch his face for a sign—for a reaction, anything, but his face is completely shuttered off. I have seen this expression before, when I have tread upon a subject he would rather not discuss. “And how might that be?”

“That is what I came to ask you.”

Harry’s brow creases slightly. “I do not understand.”

“I have thought of this every way that I can. I know I can do nothing to help Eggsy; but I also know that my being here will only make it harder on him.”

I see the realization dawn on Harry’s face, followed shortly by disbelief and concern.

“You are offering to leave.”

I nod once. “Yes.”

Harry shakes his head, as if he still does not understand. “This is not about you, Alec.”
“That is why I am offering,” I say firmly, the words surer than I feel. “The only thing I can think to do, at this point, is to remove myself entirely from the picture.” This is not about me. This is not because it will make me feel better. Nothing will make me feel better.

*I am offering to do this because I love you, and leaving is the only power I have left.*

His expression changes, and it is so sudden as to be jarring: it goes from soft to flinty in half a heartbeat as his eyebrows raise fractionally higher, and his mouth curls downward. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

This tone, also, is familiar. It was the same one he used when he told me that things had to end between us. It is meant to brook no argument, to put me in my place. Meant to be cold enough to prevent me from talking back.

I cannot help the sneer that crosses my mouth. It’s as ugly as I feel.

“Do you still think we can work through this?”

It’s a prod at the edges of a fresh wound. Harry ignores the question, mouth pressing into a thin line. “This is hardly the . . . time, Alec.”

“I am telling you that I will leave. You will never have to see me again.”

Perhaps he had not understood what I said before. Perhaps he did not think that I meant it. A look of shock graces his face for all of a second before he shuts again. His eyes, normally a warm, lively brown, seem cold and considering.

“I don’t blame you for . . . what happened.”

He does mean it, but it’s still a lie.

“Yes, you do. I blame myself. I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself, and I don’t expect you or Eggsy to either. And, given that, it seems to me impossible for us to work and coexist in this organization together.”

Harry frowns. By his side, I see his right hand flex. “You . . . presume that Eggsy can still work here. He’s blind, Alec. And, as advanced as our . . . technology is, there is nothing that can give him back his vision. He has spoken very little since he woke. He largely refuses to talk, even to me. He . . .” Harry trails off as his voice becomes rough. He averts his eyes for a second and clears his throat. “He feels powerless and useless. He feels as though whatever . . . purpose he had has been taken from him. Nothing I say to him can make him see otherwise. This has broken him, Alec.”

Eggsy’s words float back to me: *I feel violated.*

I think back to the very beginning, to that first day when I had watched Harry’s surgery, not knowing whether he might live or die. I think back to the first conversations I’d had with Eggsy. I think about all that I had allowed to happen, that I hadn’t stopped out of sheer bloody-mindedness and my own selfish pain. I should have never doubted that Harry would wake. I should have never let Eggsy believe that he could be a Knight. I should have never let him into my home, or my bed. I had failed both of them, utterly.

God. When did I become such a selfish, reprehensible person?

“I know,” I say thickly. “I know I cannot do anything for him—for either of you—except this.” I take a deep breath. “I have decided that I will relinquish the Arthurship to you, without contest, when
you feel well enough to assume the position. And then I will leave.”

My words hang in the air between us, and I find myself holding my breath. I want him to ask me to stay. To order me to stay.

And, for a terrifying moment, I think he might. He teeters on the edge of something, his eyes conflicted. But, in the end, Harry merely gives me a hard look, and says:

“Do what you think is best.”

The words are hollow, tired. He is not going to make this decision for me. He is not going to fight to keep me near him.

This feels like that moment all those weeks ago, when I saw, through his eyes, a gun being levelled at his head. This feels like the moment before Valentine shot him. The certainty that I am going to lose him forever.

It hurts just as much the second time around.

My throat closes up. My chest feels like it is collapsing in on itself. God.

“I know – I know you told me not to apologize. But I am sorry.” My voice is strained, barely making it out of my throat. It fucking hurts. “I’m sorry for all of it. I—.” I stop, and try to bring myself to look him in the eye, one last time. I manage only partially, my gaze latching onto his tense mouth.

“Please tell Eggsy...”

It isn’t that I cannot bring myself to finish; it just feels inappropriate.

Harry stares at me. I look up briefly, and think I see something like a flicker of sadness in his cool gaze. Regret, perhaps. It’s gone as soon as it arrives.

“I will. When the time comes.”

-KM-

I go back to my office.

It seems that is all there is for me to do. I gave Harry my ultimatum. Now, all I have to do is sit and wait for him to decide to ascend the Arthurship.

I do not see any of the people I pass on my way back to my office. I am both gutted and utterly numb, like a ship that has been shred to pieces by a storm, detritus listing in the now-calm waters.

When I open the door to the outer office, Kay is there. He stands abruptly from his seat, grey eyes flashing with concern. He walks around the side of his desk and approaches me, his signing unusually frenetic.

Demarais just called, he signs, eyes darting between each of mine. He says he has a proposition for you to consider. He implied—are you leaving?— I do not understand. What’s happened? Why—?

He stops himself, suddenly, as if realizing that he is rambling. His hands drop to his sides.
I close my eyes. Take a deep breath.

Yes, I am leaving. For reasons that I cannot fully explain now. I will be giving the position to Galahad, once he is ready. I do not know when that will be.

I am relieved to not have to use my voice. My fingers move lugubriously through the signs, but more fluently than if I were speaking. I don’t know if I could get a full sentence out otherwise.

Kay shakes his head, as if in disbelief. I don’t understand.

Neither do I. I do not understand how this mess came to be, and I do not know how to fix it.

It doesn’t matter.

Kay considers me. His grey eyes are piercing, unrelenting. Determined.

He raises his hands again:

Please, don’t leave. We—Kingsman needs you.

I look at him.

I look at him for a long time.
Harry declines the Arthurship.

Four weeks pass after I make my offer to him. Four weeks in which he does not come to see me, and I refrain from seeking him out. And then, when I am beginning to think that he may hold me in limbo forever, he comes into my office, and announces that he will taking Eggsy and leaving.

It takes me utterly by surprise. It makes no sense to me, at the moment. I plead with him to reconsider. I reiterate that I will leave. He hears none of it. With his decision, he takes my offer and turns it back upon me.

Even if I wanted to, there was little enough I could do to stop him.

When he leaves, I do not know what to do; it is apparent to me, though, that I cannot continue in my current position. Asking Demarais to replace me is both the obvious and only solution. He refuses, at first; he is not convinced when I tell him that I am no longer fit to bear the responsibility. He only acquiesces a month after Harry leaves, when I am hanging onto my sanity by a thread and it becomes painfully clear to all involved that something must give.

A formal vote is held amongst the Board of Directors. The decision to instate Demarais as the new Arthur is unanimous, and he officially takes over two days after the vote is held. I am relieved of my duties and title; I am told to go home, and to await further instruction.

I do not know what it means. I left to my own devices for an agonizing week of mandatory leave before Demarais (in an act of mercy) approaches me about a new position.

I often wonder about the wisdom of his decision to reinstate me in Kingsman. How much of it is for my benefit, and how much for Kingsman’s. It is certainly unorthodox. The position he creates for me has no precedent and may have required some placating and reshuffling that I am not fully aware of. Demarais has a strange, grizzly kind of diplomacy that people respect and do not often object to. I certainly could not have handled such a maneuver.

I am named Pellam—in Arthurian legend, a keeper of the Holy Grail but, in life, merely the mother of Research and Development. In very loosely defined terms, mine is a senior, supervisory role in the R&D department that also lends a hand elsewhere when needed, including Tactical Support. I work as an auxiliary to Merlin, which Rocha Morais seems fine with (and even sometimes grateful for). My job description is nebulous, and allows me to do a great deal, officially and unofficially. I am seldom bored.

Giving me a new position does not fix everything; but it gives me something to do, a sense of purpose. I do not do well with being idle; the week I spent awaiting my fate nearly did me in, and Demarais knew it. Once I am working again, I cannot not afford to collapse. In being responsible for others, I am more responsible with regards to myself. In that first year especially, I work mercilessly, tirelessly. It is both a method of coping and of not coping.

It works, for a time. For several months, it seems to stay the turmoil within me. That is, until one early morning at HQ finds me hunched over my workstation, nearly catatonic and shaking so badly from lack of sleep and sustenance that, when one of the technicians finds me, their first action is to
alert medical, and their second is to alert Arthur.

I am placed on mandatory medical leave. I am given a long overdue psych eval. I am assigned a physician who prescribes medication, physical exercise, scheduled meals, a compulsory amount of sleep, and therapy.

All of this feels like pulling the stitches on a festering wound.

Demarais takes an unanticipated interest in me. He is unexpectedly patient, and expectedly gruff. He demands, without real threat, that I pull myself together. That I will not be permitted to return to work until I demonstrate that I can take care of myself.

That, more than anything else, makes me submit to everything. Woodenly, I comply.

And, to my utter disbelief, I begin to see myself changing.

It is miniscule, at first, and the victories seem pathetically small: the mere act of not thinking about Harry and Eggsy for more than an hour at a time; the feeling of hunger, or the enjoyment of food; the desire to sleep, and the feeling of being refreshed by it instead of sickened by the hours wasted on harrowing dreams. And, perhaps most surprisingly, the indulgence in leisure: reading, walking about the grounds, watching trainees run drills, spending time in the kennels with the dams and their pups. I even begin helping the kennel master run the adolescents through training exercises.

It is at this point that I am cleared to return to work on a part-time basis.

The day I return to my domain, I find that Demarais has given me a gift: Andrew.

It is the only time which I can admit to experiencing happiness at someone else receiving a demotion.

Demarais never explains himself. He simply hires a new person—from the French office—into the Kay position. No one questions him. The matter is not discussed. Andrew Waite returns to R&D and resumes his old position as if he had never been elsewhere.

It still takes me three months to stop accidentally calling him Kay.

At the end of those three months, I am allowed to resume work fulltime, under the condition that I continue with my appointments and health checks. I can do little else but comply.

A year passes.

I did not realize how much of a hermit I had become until Kay asks me to accompany him to lunch one Sunday. Stepping out into the push and shove of London during the day staggers me, and I nearly have a panic attack when I see a jogger of Eggsy’s build and height pass us.

I know it is not Eggsy—the resemblance isn’t even that strong. But it startles me so badly that I have to stop us and sit down for a moment to catch my breath. It had not occurred to me that this would be a peril of crowded streets. I am wiser now.

It takes me a good deal of time and exposure to stop seeing them everywhere. I find them even in strangers that bear only the most remote resemblance: a young, muscular man in a ballcap eyeing a shop window; the back of a tall, brunette man in a well-tailored suit; a young boy with Eggsy’s same green eyes, same toothy grin; a man with a declining physique, dressed in a boxy business suit, but with Harry’s long-legged stride. Every time I see a couple boldly holding hands in the street, I think of Eggsy and Harry.
Once, when I become so distracted by one such a couple that I come to a full, jerky stop, Andrew reaches down and grabs a hold of my hand. That startles me out of my trance. I nearly jerk away, but he squeezes, and when I meet his eyes, he holds mine firm.

He tilts his head, coaxing. *Come on.*

It takes me some time. It takes me many outings, some voluntary and some forced; but, eventually, I stop seeing them.

Andrew seems to make it his personal mission to reintegrate me into society. In this endeavor, he utilizes his muteness to his full advantage. If he insists that we go to lunch, he also insists that I handle the ordering. He seems to deliberately choose establishments with chatty maître-ds, and I often find him subtly smiling at me over the top of his menu as I practice the art of small talk.

In those moments, too, I feel myself changing. Slowly, minutely.

Another year passes.

Time and distance allow me to remold myself. To assume a slightly different shape, and then another. But I have yet to become the kind of person who does not think about them.

It is natural for me to wonder. I have no idea what became of them, so the possibilities are manifold. Harry had waited only long enough for Eggsy to be discharged from the hospital before cutting ties with Kingsman completely. They disappeared. I assume they went abroad, at least for a time. With the generous retirement plan afforded to Knights and Eggsy’s grievance pay, they would not want for anything. They had no reason to make contact with Kingsman, or me, for that matter.

Some days, the temptation to look them up is so overwhelming that I almost give in. There is a division in the Global Surveillance department that, among other things, keeps tabs on all firees and retirees. It would be no trouble to ask after their whereabouts. For a time, I contemplate asking for my access to be restricted; but, the more time that passes, the more it feels like a victory to keep resisting on my own. So, I do nothing.

A third year passes.

At the encouragement of Andrew (and my therapist), I use my mandatory days off to venture out into London. For the most part, I visit bookshops, museums, galleries, parks—things that I had absolutely no time for previously. Sometimes, I do not enjoy it, but I still make myself go. This, too, feels like a small victory.

And so, it happens one day, when I am taking a controlled stroll through Hyde Park. It is a glittering morning in late August, and pedestrians and joggers are out *en masse.* I am walking along the north edge of the Italian Gardens, casually taking in my surroundings, when I see a couple seated at a bench.

I almost don’t double-take. I have, more or less, trained myself out of doing so; but something about this couple makes me stop.

And, once I look properly, I am frozen to the spot.

They are dressed casually, meant to blend in, but they stand out nonetheless. An elegant man in his fifties sitting cozily next to a young man, wearing dark shades with a probing cane resting by his side. The older man is turned towards the younger, one arm around the back of the bench, his other hand resting casually on the young man’s thigh. The young man, resting his dark blonde head against his companion’s shoulder. He’s speaking softly, his lips moving in a slow rhythmic way. The
older man smiles at this, closing his eyes briefly.

They look, for lack of a better word, content. Perhaps even happy.

I should move. I should turn around and leave before they see. They are rather lost in their own world, but there is no way they would not notice my staring—

But before I can make my body comply, Harry reopens his eyes. They land directly on me.

My heart stops for several beats.

From what I can see, Harry does not tense noticeably enough to alert Eggsy that something is wrong; but his gaze his taught, caught-out almost. He appears startled, apprehensive.

I hold my breath, waiting. A long moment passes.

But, then, inexplicably, Harry’s expression softens. From this distance, I cannot discern his gaze fully. I do not need too.

Almost imperceptibly, he gives the faintest of nods. His smile is soft, fond. Sad.

My mouth curls around his name silently. Then, I too nod.

And I turn my back on them.

-KM-

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.
How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.
Admirer as I think I am
Of stars that do not give a damn,
I cannot, now I see them, say
I missed one terribly all day.
Were all stars to disappear or die,
I should learn to look at an empty sky
And feel its total dark sublime,
Though this might take me a little time.

- A.E. Housman
And that's it. We're done. Thank you to everyone who read through this entire monster of a fic. HUGE shoutout to ViolyntFemme, who has left me some of the most thoughtful and engaged reviews I have ever received. You are an absolute gem.

I know this is not the ending a lot of you were hoping for. I knew where this story was going from the get-go, and changing it for the sake of a happy ending felt dishonest. The epilogue was always intended to be bittersweet without fixing anything. I hope that, if you didn't like it, it at least made you think.

The entire inspiration for the fic came from the AE Housman poem, so blame him.

I am contemplating writing a meta/afterword to discuss some of the themes and issues in this fic, if anyone is interested. Some of this will be reiterating my responses to reviewers, some of it will be my own musing on the characters. TBD.

Best,

stereokem

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!