Galahad and Mr. Unwin

by harryfuckinhart, missbecky

Summary

When a mission goes tits up, Harry is forced to hand over sensitive data to a random civilian in order to keep it from falling into the wrong hands. Unfortunately he also happens to be very attracted to the young man in question. And then he learns the man’s identity -- and suddenly Harry's life will never be the same again.

Notes

My entry for the 2017 Kingsman Big Bang. With many thanks and admiring awe for my incredible artist harryfuckinhart. Please give them all the love they deserve. Their art can be found here.

Thanks also to deepdarkwaters for help in Britpicking this fic. The title and basic premise comes from the pilot episode of the TV show Scarecrow and Mrs. King.

"Permission to pour champagne all over the next...young person...who suggests I'm too old and feeble to be carrying a tray," Harry says.

"Denied," Merlin replies, although not without humour. His voice in Harry's ear is as steady as always.
Harry utters a long-suffering sigh. "I suppose I shall just have to imagine it then."

"I'm surprised you're not doing that already," Merlin says.

"Who says I'm not?" Harry murmurs, and sallies forth once more into the breach.

He's certainly been in worse undercover roles before, but few have been as humiliating as this one. The party is full of women wearing glittering gowns and men in black tuxedos much like his own; right now the only thing setting him apart from the guests is the silver tray of champagne flutes he's carrying.

His "fellow employees," nearly all of whom are half his age, accepted without question his story about being new with the catering company. Most of them made a comment about how heavy the trays could get, and that he should call them when he needs help. A few of them even meant it kindly, which was somehow worse than the mockery. But they have, for the most part, left him alone all evening, which is the most important thing.

As a waiter he's able to move unhindered through the crowd, scarcely noticed and never spoken to. The September night is rather cool, and Harry notices a few of the guests repressing shivers; more than one wonders out loud why their host insisted on an outdoor party instead of being considerate enough to bring them all inside.

Even if he were a guest, Harry would only murmur a polite response to these complaints. After all, it would be rather rude to say that their host, a prominent MP currently under investigation by Kingsman, also happens to be an enormous dick. As a waiter, though, he merely glides around the outskirts of the party, listening to snippets of conversations without context, keeping an eye out for his target while deftly avoiding anyone who might actually want to take one of the champagne glasses he's carrying around.

Fortunately for them both, his target tonight is not their host, Albert Mason, the prominent but dickish MP. Harry is here to meet Mason's head of security, a man who has been on Kingsman's payroll for decades. Long before Harry joined the ranks, there had been some kind of incident (Harry doesn't know and he doesn't ask), and a favour was owed. For years now his target has been providing Kingsman with all kinds of information under the code name Blackbird. Harry hadn't even learned his real name until this morning.

He spots the target – real name Gregory Jones – as he's making his second circuit of the courtyard where the party is being held. Ever the professional, the older man stands off to the side, keeping a watchful eye on the party so no one will harm his boss the MP. His suit is perfectly tailored and the party lights reflect off his highly shined shoes.

Harry doesn't signal his approach or anything of that nature. Blackbird knows he will be contacted tonight, but not by who. He and Harry have never met, have never spoken. Everything has been arranged through Merlin, Blackbird's point of contact at Kingsman now for nearly fifteen years.

Harry doesn't change his measured pace as he walks toward Blackbird, still holding the tray of champagne flutes. As he draws near, he stops and tilts the tray in an invitation. "It's a nice evening," he remarks casually. "And traffic is light, too."

Blackbird looks briefly startled. He had seen Harry approach, of course, but had dismissed him as merely a waiter. But when he hears the code phrase, he looks again and actually sees Harry this time. "I heard there was a blockage at Charing Cross," he says.

"There was, but it's been taken care of," Harry replies, completing the code.
Blackbird nods. He's been MP Mason's head of security for many years, and in that time he's seen an awful lot; not much fazes him. He's perfectly calm as he says, "Meet me in the park in five minutes. Six-four-one for entry." He takes one of the champagne flutes off Harry's tray and walks away, just one more guest accepting a glass before moving on.

Harry glides onward, completing his circuit of the courtyard. He's minus two more glasses by the time he walks into the kitchen through the back entrance. He sets his tray down on a long table covered with bottles of alcohol, then backs away.

"You're clear," Merlin says in his ear.

Without hesitating, Harry walks back out into the courtyard. He's not a waiter anymore. He's an invited guest, in the same black tuxedo as the other men, his hair perfectly combed, silver cufflinks gleaming at his wrists. None of the other wait staff notice as he walks right past them; even the ones who teased him for being too old to do this job don't see him.

He lights a cigarette and strolls casually through the garden, just a party guest who wanted to be courteous to others when indulging in his nasty smoking habit. Harry gave it up himself years ago, but it's a useful distraction sometimes, and it does give him the perfect excuse to wander away from the main courtyard.

After a few minutes he turns down a dark lane. Trees arch overhead, giving the lane a secluded feeling. A few paces down there is a gap in the foliage and another turning. Here, however, a black wrought iron gate blocks access.

Harry drops his cigarette and grinds it beneath his shoe to make sure it's put out. He inputs the code he was given, and the gate unlocks. He pushes it open and steps into a smaller, more private garden.

"It's all here." Blackbird is not one to waste any time, something Harry can appreciate. The older man walks toward him, pulling a mobile phone from his coat pocket. "Pictures of MP Mason and the Russians." He hesitates a moment, not releasing the phone even after Harry has taken hold of it. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you how sensitive these pictures are."

"Of course you don't," Harry says. The warning annoys him. He wouldn't tell Blackbird how to do his job, would he?

"And I trust Kingsman will handle this with their usual discretion," Blackbird says.

"Naturally," Harry says. He actually has no idea what they'll do to Mason, what kind of pressure they'll put on him to ensure he never again has any contact with the Russian spies masquerading as diplomats. Neither does he care. His only concern tonight is getting the evidence and handing it off to the tech branch so they can pull what they need from the phone.

Blackbird still hesitates, loyalty to his old employer momentarily winning out over loyalty to country. And while they're both standing there, each of them with a grip on the phone, Harry spots movement out of the corner of his eye.

Blackbird sees it at the same time. In unison they look over and see two men approaching down the same path Harry used to get here. They are both wearing dark suits. And they are both armed.

It couldn't look any worse, the two of them meeting in this private garden, the phone held between them. Harry curses under his breath and pulls the phone free of Blackbird's grip just as the first stranger raises his gun and fires.

The gun is silenced, but the spit of noise is still terribly loud against the night. Blackbird goes down
without a sound. Harry doesn't hesitate. He turns and runs, tucking the phone safely into the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket as he races for the far end of the garden.

"Make for the corner," Merlin advises in his ear. "You'll have to leap the gate."

Harry doesn't waste breath responding. He just runs, feeling bullets thud into his back, mercifully stopped by the bulletproof fabric. He'll be bruised as hell and sore tomorrow, but at least he'll still be alive.

Realising that he isn't going down, the men behind him exclaim in surprise and start to give chase. Harry's got a good head start on them, though. He sees the gate looming, puts on a little more speed, and leaps.

He clears it with just enough room to spare. He lands hard on the other side, tucking and rolling on the grass, letting his forward momentum carry him up onto his feet again. Then he's running again, headed for the long curving driveway leading away from the manor house itself.

"Veer left," Merlin says. "The parking valets have been leaving the cars down that way."

"Who are they?" Harry demands. The men who tried to kill him spoke Russian in those few moments he heard them, yelling that he was still alive, but that's all he knows about them. He assumes they're at the party tonight in order to keep an eye on MP Mason, but how did they know to watch Blackbird? How the fuck was he made?

"Working on that," Merlin says.

"Well, work faster," Harry snaps. He can see the cars ahead, parked in neat rows, just waiting for the parking valets to come retrieve them. He arrows toward the first one, a silver Fiat that gleams under the evening sky.

As he runs up and flings open the car door, a bored attendant spots him. "Hey! Get away from there!"

Harry throws himself in the front seat, and yes, there are the keys dangling from the ignition. He starts the car, spares a moment to hope the parking valet doesn't get shot for his troubles, and stomps on the accelerator. The car shoots forward in a spray of gravel just as his three pursuers appear in the rearview mirror.

"Who are they?" Harry says again. The little Fiat handles the curves of the driveway beautifully; just ahead is the enormous black iron gate leading to the estate. "And how the fuck did they know to follow me?"

"Unknown," Merlin says, and Harry makes a rude noise.

The gate is slow to open. He's forced to bring the car to a complete halt. Already he can see the splash of headlights behind him as his pursuers continue to give chase. They're in a sporty red Jaguar, and gaining fast.

Anger and bitter frustration knot in his chest. It's not the loss of Blackbird that pisses him off, although that is a bad thing, and not just for Kingsman. It's the knowledge that he let it happen, that he wasn't alert enough, that those men, whoever they are, escaped his notice. This is his failure, his fuck-up, and now he has to make it right.

As soon as the gate is open wide enough, he floors it. The little Fiat shoots forward through the gap and quickly accelerates down the road.
"I've alerted your contact that you're being pursued," Merlin says.

Harry nods. He is supposed to meet Amelia in Victoria Station, where the hand-off of the phone won't be noticed among the crowds. From there she will work her tech magic on it, pulling all the information she needs from it. She'll have her work cut out for her though; everything happened so fast back at Mason's estate, Harry didn't have time to get the phone's password from Blackbird.

For once, traffic is light, and he makes his way through the city with more speed than he expected. Unfortunately, the same conditions allow for his pursuers to keep up as well. Every time he glances in the rearview mirror, he can see the stolen Jaguar behind him. Worse, there are three men in the car now; at some unknown junction, his original two pursuers have been joined by a third.

There are car parks around Victoria Station, but on impulse Harry decides not to use them. Halfway down Victoria Street he abruptly pulls the car over and slams it in park. He spares enough time to pull the handkerchief from his pocket and wipe down the surfaces he's touched, then he's out the door, hurrying over to the train station itself.

A quick glance as he's crossing the road shows the Jag pulling up to the kerb.

Cursing under his breath, Harry joins the flow of people swarming up the steps and into Victoria Station. "Merlin, we have a problem."

"Yes, I'm aware," Merlin replies dryly.

"One of them is Ludchenko."

There is no response to this. Harry imagines the slight widening of Merlin's eyes, the reflexive check of a third computer screen, verifying the information. Not that there's any need. Harry got a good look at who was in that Jag, and he knows he's right.

"Right, this is bad," Merlin says.

"You have quite a keen grasp of the situation," Harry murmurs. He checks the departures board, but it's a futile gesture. According to the plan, he's supposed to meet Amelia on the 22:30 to Islington, but he already knows that isn't going to happen.

It's the damn Russians following him. Vasily Ludchenko is a known affiliate of the Russian mob, and he's been linked to several bombings. He has no compunction about using innocent civilians to achieve his ends, and Harry has no doubt that he will view the crowds in the train station as nothing but leverage.

Had he known Ludchenko was the third person in the car, he would never have come here. But it's too late to do anything about it now. He's stuck here, which means he has to work with what he's got.

Rapidly he walks toward a newsagent, mentally running through his options. He can try to ditch the phone, but he doesn't have a good feeling about that. The Russians will immediately start tearing through the place trying to find it. At best Ludchenko and his goons would call in a bomb threat. Depending on how badly they want the phone and what's on it, they might not even wait that long, might even start shooting up the place right now just to evacuate the station and give them the chance to search for the phone.

He can make a run for it, hop on the next train leaving regardless of where it's going -- and step out into their waiting arms at the next station.
Or he can try to hand the phone off after all. Not to Amelia, who isn't even here yet, but to someone else. Someone he can instruct to meet with her, someone the Russians won't be looking for.

It'll mean surrendering to them, letting them walk him out of here and shove him in their stolen car, but Harry isn't particularly bothered by that. Self-sacrifice is not exactly his preferred mode of operation, but sometimes it's necessary. He's confident in his ability to get away from them. He's more worried about that phone and what's on it. Getting it to Kingsman while protecting as many civilians as possible is his priority right now.

He steps around a rack at the newsagents, like he's considering what magazine to buy for his journey. Swiftly he scans the crowds, searching for a target. He needs someone young, someone likely to be intimidated by authority, someone able to blend in –

Someone who is pickpocketing his way through the station.

Harry permits himself the faintest of smiles. The young man in question is incredibly attractive, there is no denying the obvious. Even in a hideous yellow jacket and with winged trainers on his feet, he immediately strikes Harry's fancy. His snapback is pulled down low, shadowing his eyes, but nothing obscures the view of his sharply angled jaw.

He's a very good thief, Harry sees at once. The young man casually passes behind an older woman frowning down at her phone, not even breaking stride as one hand reaches deftly out and pilfers a brown wallet from the woman's handbag.

He'll do nicely, Harry decides.

Luck is on his side. Ludchenko and the other two Russians seem to be in no hurry. They have him cornered, or so they think, so for now they are content to merely watch him closely. Harry fingers a magazine, skims over another, then turns away from the newsagents.

With only a glance, he follows the young pickpocket across the terminal. The yellow jacket makes it easy to keep him in sight despite the crowds. Harry watches as his target steals yet another wallet from an unsuspecting man old enough to be his grandfather. He knows he ought to disapprove, but he can't help an odd twinge of pleased satisfaction at how competent this attractive young man is. He's chosen well, he tells himself, and honestly believes it's only because his target is so effective at what he does.

"What's your plan, Galahad?" Ever the killjoy, Merlin's voice is a jolt back to reality.

"I know what I'm doing," he says.

"Really? Because it looks to me like you're just wandering around aimlessly while some very bad men follow you," Merlin replies.

"I'm shocked you don't trust me," Harry murmurs.

"You forget," Merlin replies, "I know you."

Harry hums in agreement, then follows his target into a Vodafone store. The young man -- and honestly, Harry just can't keep thinking of him that way. In true Kingsman fashion it's the work of a single second to christen him with a code name. He'll be Mercury, messenger of the gods with winged feet of his own. Also notably a trickster and fittingly enough, a patron of thieves.

So Harry follows Mercury into the Vodafone store, risking only a quick glance out into the terminal to confirm that Ludchenko and his minions are indeed approaching.
He's going to have to be fast.

Mercury has moved into a far corner, pretending to be interested in the phones for sale. His right hand is deep in the pocket of his hideous yellow jacket, no doubt making sure the wallets he stole are still there. Up close he is even more attractive, with a narrow scar running through one eyebrow and a dark mole on his throat.

Harry walks right up to him. It's a good location, out of sight from anyone in the terminal, as well as the bored store employee standing at the till. "I need you to do something for me."

Startled, Mercury looks over at him. His eyes are a wondrous colour somewhere between green and blue, and for a bewildering second Harry almost forgets why he's even here.

"You better not be doing what I think you're doing," Merlin warns in his ear.

Harry ignores him. He looks down at Mercury. "I need to give you one more thing to carry."

Instantly Mercury's eyes harden. Though they're still standing beside each other, there might as well be a chasm between them. "I don't know what you're talking about, bruv." His accent is pure working class London.

"I don't care about the wallets," Harry says.

Beside him, Mercury hisses. "You a copper?"

"Who I am doesn't matter," Harry says. He pulls the phone Blackbird gave him out of his pocket. "I need you to give this to a woman on the 22:30 to Islington. She's expecting it." On the spur of the moment he adds, "She'll pay you for it."

Mercury eyes him with suspicion. Harry holds still with an effort. The need for haste thums through his veins. Any second now one of the Russians is going to enter the shop. He can't afford to be seen with this young man; everything depends on Mercury's anonymity.

"Yeah? How much?" Mercury asks. Despite the strangeness of the situation, he's obviously enticed by the prospect of getting paid.

"Enough," Harry says. He thrusts the phone at Mercury. True to human nature, whose tendency is to accept something handed to them, Mercury takes it. "The woman on the 22:30 to Islington. She's wearing a red scarf." In fact there is no such arrangement in place, but he trusts Merlin will pass that little detail along to Amelia so she can make sure she's wearing one when she gets here.

With a frown, Mercury tucks the phone in his pocket alongside the stolen wallets. "Who are you?" he asks, but it's clear from his tone that he doesn't really expect an answer.

Which is just as well, because he's not going to get one. Harry backs away. "Just deliver it," he says.
Then he's walking away. Just in time, too. As he rounds the aisle of smartphone accessories, he sees Ludchenko standing just inside the shop.

Harry walks right up to him. "Rather chilly for this time of year, don't you think? I'd wager it reminds you of home."

In his ear, Merlin groans loudly.

Ludchenko smiles, slow and satisfied. "You and I will take a walk now."

"Yes, it's a nice evening," Harry responds. His heart is beating faster, but he's not frightened. He did what he needed to do. Mercury will deliver the phone, Kingsman will get the information they need, and he'll be delayed a few hours at most.

The other two Russians move to flank him. Harry walks off with them, casual as can be. He doesn't look back, but he knows Mercury is standing there in the shop, watching him.
He's halfway across the terminal when Merlin, who must be hooked into the station's security system, says, "Your boy is headed for the platform."

Harry nods a little, knowing Merlin will see the movement and understand.

"I really hope you know what you're doing," Merlin says.

Surrounded by hostiles, his mission in the hands of a civilian pickpocket, Harry can't help but agree.

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Six hours later he's limping into the shop on Savile Row. Merlin sits beside the fire, a glass of whisky in one hand. He waits for Harry to lock the door, then says, "You look like shite."

Harry glares at him. He lost his glasses on the third -- or maybe it was the fourth -- punch to the face, and has been out of contact with Kingsman ever since. "As always your concern is overwhelming."

"You did say you knew what you were doing," Merlin says, as bloody calm as ever. "Drink?"

Harry nods. It took him a little longer to get here than he thought. Ludchenko escaped simply by virtue of having left somewhere around the second hour, but his two "friends" are very dead.

The whisky stings the cut on his lip and burns sliding down his throat. The warmth is welcome, though. Very welcome.

He sits somewhat gingerly opposite Merlin. Protocol says he should present himself first to Arthur for a debrief, then head to Medical for whatever stitches they deem necessary. Merlin meeting him here like this is very unusual, and despite the soothing whisky, Harry remains on edge. "So? What did Amelia find?"

Merlin sets his glass down on the table at his elbow. His clipboard rests on the couch beside him. "Nothing," he says. "Because she never got the phone."

Harry just stares. Through a dull roaring in his ears, he hears the rest of it. "Your boy didn't come through."

"Your boy." Mercury, Harry had privately dubbed him. A thief and an opportunist, and now a thief yet again.

"Amelia says he did show up on the platform. But apparently there was a large tour group waiting there, all women, all wearing red scarves to identify each other." Merlin's tone remains dry, but there is no mistaking the undercurrent of amusement in his voice.

"For fuck's sake how was I supposed to know?" Harry snaps. Suddenly one whisky isn't near enough. For this he needs the entire decanter.

"Of course you couldn't," Merlin says. "However the fact remains, the boy still has the phone."

"He's not a boy," Harry glowers. He can still see so clearly those amazing eyes, the angle of that jaw, the fading bruise on one cheek.

Merlin ignores this. "Done with your drink?"

In answer Harry tosses it back. "I suppose Chester is looking for my head on a silver platter?"

"Actually, he doesn't know yet," Merlin says.
Carefully Harry sets his glass down. He managed to scrub most of the blood off his hands, but he was in a hurry and he can see now where he missed a couple spots. "And?"

He thinks he knows what's next. He hopes he's right. If so, there's a chance he can still salvage the mission -- and his performance tonight.

And to his relief, his hunch is correct. "I've been able to identify your messenger," Merlin says. "Facial recognition software had a hit about half an hour ago."

Harry stands up. Pain twinges in his side, where he steadfastly refuses to believe any ribs are actually broken. It's enough to make him catch his breath, though. "Who is he?"

Merlin rises too, a bit more slowly. He holds out his clipboard. "I'm afraid," he says, "you won't like it."

Taken aback by this rather dire prediction, Harry accepts the clipboard. It's been idle long enough that the screen has gone blank. He taps at it impatiently, waiting to see the identity of young Mercury.

The photo that appears on the screen is recent. The young man who Harry code-named Mercury is in fact called Gary "Eggsy" Unwin. In the photograph he is in the training uniform of the Royal Marines, a beret covering his hair. His expression is not much more open than it was in Victoria Station. According to the accompanying caption, he was discharged a year ago.

Beside the photo are Eggsy Unwin's vital stats. Age, height, weight, IQ. Then the damning words, the ones that change everything.

*Mother: Michelle. Father: Lee (deceased.)*

Harry looks up at Merlin, his eyes wide. "Oh fuck."

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Merlin encourages him to come to HQ, but Harry is having none of it. He does, however, step into the armory behind fitting room three long enough to properly wash his hands, tend the cut on his lip, and equip himself with a new pair of glasses. The old ones have been remotely deactivated already, the cost of yet another lost pair to be deducted from his next paycheque.

"At least I wear them," Harry says as he and Merlin leave the armory.

Merlin's lips thin out. James's well-known penchant for going it alone by refusing to wear the glasses while on a mission is one of his life's great frustrations. "Yes, I suppose you get points for that."

They return to the main room of the shop, where everything is still lit by warm firelight. Merlin pours them each another drink. "You're sure you won't stay?" he asks.

"No," Harry says. He might be hurt, but he refuses to make the trip to Medical -- and not only because of his stubborn pride. The staff there will be obligated to report his presence to Arthur, and right now Chester King is the last person he wants to deal with.

"Who else knows about this?" he asks.

"No one," Merlin says. "As I said, I only found out half an hour ago. It's actually quite fortunate you were…detained for so long."
"Yes," Harry says dryly, ignoring another twinge of pain along his ribs. "Quite."

"What exactly is it that you're planning to do?" Merlin asks. There is quiet sympathy in his voice. He was there that day too, of course, the day Harry's fuckup cost Lee Unwin his life. But Merlin didn't visit that tiny flat. Merlin didn't have to listen to a grieving widow. Merlin didn't force a smile for a young boy who had just lost his father.

And Merlin has never carried the guilt that Harry does. It's something he envies his friend, although not without some bitterness.

"I need to talk to him," Harry says. "Find out if he still has the phone and get it from him."

"Well, you're not going to do that right now," Merlin says.

Harry looks at him. They're seated on the leather couch facing the shop window. Beyond the glass Savile Row is peacefully quiet, not a soul walking past.

"It's half two," Merlin says. "I'm sure he's asleep right now." As though expecting Harry to object to this perfectly reasonable argument, he hurries to add, "And at any rate, I haven't had time yet to pull a number for him."

Defeated by logic, Harry frowns into his drink.

"I can have it for you in the morning," Merlin offers.

"It's morning now," Harry points out, but it's a token argument only. He knows when he's been bested.

So he'll go home for the remainder of the night. In the morning he'll get Eggsy Unwin's phone number from Merlin and call him. And until then he'll sit and remember Lee Unwin and the disastrous mission that did for him, and experience the old guilt all over again.

In the beginning he had tried to keep a close eye on the family. He had never done anything so crass as to actually intervene in their situation, but he had steadfastly believed that he was ready to do so, should it become necessary. The old Arthur had objected, but Harry had persisted.

Then he had been sent to Marseilles for a lengthy mission, undercover work that kept him out of England for nearly a year. By the time he came back with a new scar on his leg and a fresh headline for his office wall, memory of the Unwins had faded. After that when he did think of them, it was always with faint regret and little more.

And would it really have made a difference if he had been there? Eggsy seems to have done well for himself if he landed in the Marines, although the story of his discharge will need to be studied. Still, Harry has to admit, until he knows more about their current situation, there's really nothing he can do.

"All right," he says. "Send the file to my home computer. I'll look it over there."

Merlin's eyes narrow. "I shouldn't."

"But you will," Harry says.

"Just so long as you promise to look after yourself," Merlin says. "I know those weren't the most pleasant of fellows who had you."
"No, they weren't," Harry says shortly. He's tired, in pain, and angry at how badly this supposedly simple mission was botched. And he's had enough of Merlin's overbearing attitude. "I would have stayed longer, but when I saw they were prepared to get creative with some dentistry, I decided it was time to take my leave."

Merlin goes very pale; it's well known that of all the awful things he's witnessed over the years, nothing distresses him like things involving teeth. "Good plan."

"I rather thought so," Harry says somewhat loftily, rather pleased at finally having managed to wipe the smugness off Merlin's face. He drains his glass, sets it down, and stands up. He manages this last without even a wince, which is a satisfying success.

"Good night," he says.

"What would you like me to tell Arthur?" Merlin asks.

At the end of his patience, Harry says, "Tell him the truth. I was attacked and the phone is not currently in my possession, but I'm going to get it back."

"Ah," Merlin says. He nods faintly. "So the Galahad version of the truth." Which is of course his way of getting back for Harry's below-the-belt comment about the creative dentistry.

"Tell him whatever you bloody well want," Harry snaps. "Just keep him off my back."

He heads for the door, annoyed at the limp that he can't hide; one of the Russians kicked his knee in order to drop him to the ground, and it fucking hurts. He opens the door and is about to walk through when Merlin says his name.

Harry doesn't even try to conceal his impatience. "What?"

Merlin is still sitting on the sofa, the clipboard by his side. "Be careful tomorrow," he says.

Harry nods stiffly, then walks out of the shop without a word. Nonetheless, Merlin is already forgiven. They've been friends for too long for Harry to hold any kind of grudge. Besides, in spite of his bad mood, he does know that Merlin means well. The concern over his well-being, though completely unnecessary, is genuine.

He sets off down the pavement, resigned to a long and rather painful walk home. He trusts Merlin to have his back, to keep Arthur at bay until he can retrieve the phone Blackbird died for. By this time tomorrow the mission will be complete and they will be able to toast to yet another success, and Harry will have a new page from the Sun for his office.

But first, he has to meet with Eggsy Unwin.

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Harry is still awake when the morning sun lights up the city.

He hadn't meant to stay up all night, but by the time he went through the file Merlin sent him, there didn't seem to be much point in pretending he could get to sleep.

Eggsy Unwin's file is so much worse than he could have ever imagined. Drugs, theft, shoplifting, underage drinking, the boy has done it all. Left a gymnastics team where he could have been an Olympic star, made it through school by the skin of his teeth, joined the Royal Marines and promptly was discharged when he found out his mother was pregnant. Never had a job, never applied to any
school or training program.

And yet he is brilliant. The score on his intelligence test would make any parent proud. And though he scraped by in school with barely passing grades, Harry suspects this poor performance was a cover designed to keep him from attracting undue attention. In Eggsy's world, it doesn't pay to be seen as too clever.

All this only makes Harry's guilt grow heavier. What might Eggsy have accomplished if he hadn't been forced into a life of petty crime? What might have happened if Michelle Unwin hadn't grabbed onto Dean Baker and held on tight? Where might Eggsy be now?

One thing is for certain: he would not have been in Victoria Station yesterday, picking pockets. Harry supposes he ought to be grateful, in a way. He's been given a chance to make amends, to right the wrong he did the Unwin family when he allowed Lee to die on his watch.

And yet he can't lie to himself. When he thinks about seeing Eggsy again, atonement has very little to do with it. He wants to see Eggsy not only to get Blackbird's phone, but to be in the presence of those amazing eyes again. To stand next to the brilliant young man he had dubbed Mercury, that old Roman god who was the patron not just of thieves, but of transitions, of boundaries.

Harry is not superstitious and he doesn't really believe in fate. But there's no denying that there is something almost fantastical about he and Eggsy randomly meeting again like this.

One way or another, things are about to change. For them both.

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Part of the case file Merlin sent over is the security camera footage from Victoria Station. It's silent and not the clearest quality -- a result of being magnified -- but it's clear enough to see everything that happens.

On the video, Harry can be seen exiting the Vodafone shop. Immediately Ludchenko and his Russians approach and surround him. Even at a distance it seems obvious that this is no meeting of friends. But no one notices. No one pays any attention.

Except for Eggsy Unwin. He walks slowly from the shop, reaching halfheartedly for some earbuds on display just inside the entrance. But it's clear he's not really interested in them. He's focused on Harry.

It's the look on his face that Harry can't stop staring at. Eggsy looks concerned, worried even. Not for himself, although he must surely have been wondering what he had got himself mixed up in. No, Eggsy watches this stranger he just met being marched away, and it's plain as day that he is worried for him.

Harry pauses the video just as Eggsy finally leaves the shop, headed for the platform where he will make his rather minimal effort to meet Amelia and follow through on his side of the deal. He's already watched this part a few times, though, and there's nothing new to be learned from watching it again.

He shakes his head slightly. Of all the people in that bustling train station, he had to find the one he has a personal connection with. Someone he is already impossibly attracted to, in spite of the vast and frankly terrifying reasons not to be.

Someone he can't wait to see again.
He sighs and closes the laptop. It's still far too early to call Eggsy, who no doubt enjoys a long lie-in like most people his age. But he can at least start the day and make himself look presentable for their eventual meeting.

He tries not to wonder why that matters so much to him.

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At 8:00 Harry decides he is through waiting. It may still be – probably is – too early to call, but he doesn't care. He needs that phone and the evidence it contains of MP Mason's treason.

By now he's fully dressed in his favourite navy pinstripe suit, ready to leave at a moment's notice. His ribs and knee still hurt, but a hot shower felt good on his strained muscles, and he is confident that he can successfully meet any challenges this day might bring. He takes one last look in the mirror, scrutinising his image for any flaws.

The one thing he didn't do this morning is use a light layer of makeup to cover the darkening bruises from his "business meeting" with Ludchenko and his pals. Normally he would have done so without hesitation, not wanting a civilian to see the evidence of a physical confrontation and either get scared or be made to feel guilty about the situation. But he feels strongly that this is not the way to go with Eggsy Unwin. Deception and his usual spy's tricks will not work here.

Honesty is the right way to go. It worked last night when he was so forthright in letting Eggsy know that he knew about the stolen wallets before handing him the phone. And it will work again today. Or so he hopes.

He has a strange and rather frightening suspicion that he intends to be fully honest with Eggsy.

Satisfied with what he sees, Harry turns away from the mirror. He is armoured in the suit, looks good, and has all the weapons he might need. He is ready.

He goes to his office for this, the one room he is completely certain is not bugged, although he does sweep the entire house periodically. He uses his personal phone, too, something he rarely has any reason to do. But he doesn't want Kingsman privy to this conversation. He is already too close to the edge of humiliation and defeat on this mission. The less Kingsman knows, the better.

He sits at his desk, laptop open, Eggsy's photo on the screen. The picture really doesn't do him justice, Harry thinks.

Annoyed with himself for such a frivolous thought, he picks up the phone and calls.

Eggsy takes long enough to answer that Harry thinks he must have silenced his phone for the night. Or maybe he's just a heavy sleeper. He's about to hang up and try again when a sullen voice says, "Hello."

Harry sits up straight, the phone held to his ear. "Eggsy Unwin."

Eggsy's voice grows thick with suspicion. "Yeah?"

"We met yesterday in Victoria Station," Harry says, although that's putting a rather charitable spin on their encounter. "Do you still have the phone I gave you?"

In the ensuing silence he can imagine the initial confusion on Eggsy's face giving way to dawning comprehension. He pictures a small bedroom, clothes draped over every available surface, the bed unmade for weeks at a time, the stolen wallets tossed in the rubbish, their contents already plundered.
"What the fuck," Eggsy says. "How did you get this number?"

"The same way I know your name and where you live," Harry replies.

He can practically see the way Eggsy draws himself up. "You threatening me, bruv?"

"Don't be absurd," Harry says. "But since you failed to deliver the phone as I asked, I need to get it
back so I can do it. Is there somewhere we can meet?"

Silence from the other end. Faintly in the background he can hear a man's voice raised in anger. For
a moment the words become clear, (get out here goddamnit), then they become indistinct once more.

"Eggsy?"

"Yeah." He sounds more sullen now than before. "You know the Black Prince?"

"I can find it," Harry says.

"Good. Meet me there." Eggsy hangs up without bothering to name a time.

Harry puts his phone down on his desk. He gazes at Eggsy's photo for a long moment.

Then he nods. They're off to a fine start.

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The Black Prince is no different from any other London pub, and Harry finds it easily enough. He
would have liked to have done some research on it beforehand, but he doesn't want to use Kingsman
resources until he can be certain Merlin will erase his tracks first. The irony about that, of course, is
that he doesn't want to speak to Merlin until he actually has something to report. So for now no one
at HQ knows he is here, although he does activate his glasses just before he walks in. At least this
way there will be a record of their meeting, should things go completely tits-up.

Eggsy sits at a table in front of the window, a mostly-full pint in front of him. He's wearing a jacket
over a striped shirt, and another snapback covers his head. He shifts nervously when Harry enters.

"Guess you found it."

Harry walks up to him. "Yes, I did." He's aware of how he stands out in this setting, dressed in his
suit and tie, Rainmaker in hand. It's for the best that he called as early as he did; at this hour they
have the place to themselves.

It's a good thing, too. He can't help but stare down at Eggsy, drinking in the sight of him. There's
time now to truly look, to linger on the colour of his amazing eyes, the mysterious scar cutting
through his eyebrow, the sweep of his jawline. He has a mouth made for kissing, which is suddenly
all Harry wants to do.

Eggsy shifts over again on his seat, and abruptly Harry realises he's staring in a most ungentleman-
like manner. He has to get hold of himself and stop letting this insane attraction rule his every
thought. He has to remember that this can never be, that the ghost of Lee Unwin has also come to
this meeting.

Even knowing all that, though, Harry still wants him.

He leans the Rainmaker against the bench and sits down across from Eggsy. The barman looks over
at them and Harry gestures at Eggsy's glass. "What he's having." He has nothing against drinking in
the morning, but he has no intention of actually finishing his pint. He needs to keep his wits about
him, to say nothing of the fact that the painkillers he took before leaving the house shouldn't be
mixed with alcohol.

Eggsy doesn't speak as they wait for the barman to bring Harry's pint. He stares at Harry, at the
bruise on his cheek and the cut on his lip, and his hands grip his glass tightly. His shoulders hunch a
little higher, but he sets his jaw, and it's clear that he's not about to run away.

There's more than just stubbornness in Eggsy's face, though. Yesterday everything happened so fast,
but sitting here right now, it seems quite clear to Harry that Eggsy is attracted to him. The gaze that
lingers too long; the way Eggsy's hands keep tightening about his glass; the blossoming of red colour
on his cheekbones; all lead to one inescapable conclusion.

Evidently Eggsy feels the same way about him.

It's certainly gratifying to Harry's ego, but he has to admit he's also highly intrigued. So Eggsy shares
his inexplicable attraction – which is even more inexplicable in Eggsy's case. What could he possibly
see in someone twice his age? Is it the challenge? The suit and the money it implies?

The mystery of Eggsy Unwin deepens. Harry definitely wants to learn more, but this is neither the
time nor the place. They have business to conduct first. He has a mission that must be completed.

So after his pint has been paid for and the barman has returned to his spot behind the counter, Harry
brings the conversation around to the whole purpose for their meeting here. He takes a sip from his
drink, then sits back. "Do you have the phone?" He keeps his voice down so the barman can't
overhear them.

"You said you ain't a copper," Eggsy says in the same low tone. "So what are you? A spy or
something?"

Harry lets himself smile, just a little. "Or something."

Already he can hear Arthur squawking about secrecy and protocol. He knows he's playing a
dangerous game. It's pure madness to let Eggsy know the truth, although he does have two amnesia
darts in his watch, should it come to that. But for some reason Harry can't explain, he's willing to
give in to the madness. Eggsy is the son of a Kingsman candidate. He grew up in a terrible situation
because of his father's integrity. He's already displayed bravery and a certain loyalty to Harry,
someone he never even met before yesterday, by attempting to deliver Blackbird's phone as he said
he would. The fact that he probably only did it for the money he was promised doesn't change the
fact that he did try.

And he's here now. When he could have told Harry off, called him a lunatic, said he ditched the
phone on his way home from Victoria Station. He could have made up any number of stories, in fact,
and Harry would have had no choice but to believe him.

Instead he's here. Looking at Harry alternately with wariness and the same fascination Harry feels for
him.

Eggsy lets go of his glass and leans back in his seat. "Yeah, I still have it."

Relief courses through him. Just the fact that Eggsy showed up today was a good sign, but until now
he hadn't realised just how badly he needed Eggsy to still have the phone. Now he can complete his
mission. Now he can nail MP Mason for treason and make Blackbird's death count for something.

"Good," he says. "May I have it, please?"
Eggsy makes no move to get the phone, which Harry assumes is in his jacket pocket. "What's on it?" he asks.

"Nothing that concerns you," Harry replies evenly.

"You were willing to pay me to deliver it to some woman," Eggsy says. "So I think maybe it does concern me."

Harry's first reaction is irritation, swiftly followed by astonishment. This young man, who can't be more than twenty-three years old, is trying to blackmail him.

It could almost be funny. Except it's not. He needs that phone.

Still, he can appreciate Eggsy's courage and his stubbornness. It's just a shame that he's decided to bring those things to bear against a Kingsman. It's a battle he can't possibly win, although he can't know that.

"If it's money you want," Harry says, "you'll be paid."

Eggsy bites his lip. He crosses his arms, seems to think better of it, then lets them fall. He glances at the barman and leans in. Harry watches all this impassively; the more nervous Eggsy is, the easier it will be for him to give in.

"Is you really MI6?" Eggsy asks.

Harry does not hesitate. "I am not," he says.

Eggsy's shoulders slump a little. His disappointment is so keen that for a moment Harry almost wishes he had lied to him.

He can't fathom why it should matter, though. Does Eggsy think Harry could do something for him? Something to help his situation? Or does he think that he can't blackmail Harry now if he isn't actually a spy?

Before he can find out, the door to the Black Prince opens and a group of men enter. They are an assorted lot, varying ages and appearances, but they all have one thing in common: from the moment they walk in, they are fixated on Eggsy.

"Oi, what're you doing here?" one of them demands. He walks in front of the others, clearly their leader in spite of the fact that he's still fairly young.

"Having a pint," Eggsy says sullenly. "What's it to you?"

"You buy that with the money you still owe Dean?" snaps the group's leader.

Eggsy doesn't respond. It's patently clear, though, that the answer to this question is yes.

A few things fall into place then for Harry. He knows now why Eggsy was stealing wallets in Victoria Station yesterday. Why Eggsy was willing to take the phone and deliver it for him, based on a promise of more money.

And he sees other things, too. The bleak years of Eggsy's life, growing up with a stepfather involved in drugs and crime, slowly dragged into those things, no doubt against his will. What might have been exciting to a young child the first couple times has long since curdled into something he despises, something he clearly does only because he must. His contempt for the group of men
standing in front of them now, men who must be his stepfather's associates, could not be more obvious.

Right then and there, Harry makes a decision.

"Listen, boys," he say, and it's a conscious choice to call them that, "I've had a rather difficult day, so whatever your beef with Eggsy is -- and I'm sure it's well-founded -- I'd appreciate it enormously if you could just leave us in peace until I finish this lovely pint of Guinness." He gestures to his glass, which he's barely touched, then gazes innocently up at the leader.

The goons all exchange glances. Most of them look scornful, like they can't believe Harry's nerve. A couple of them start to grin, anticipating a new element of fun to their morning's activities.

If Merlin were in his ear right now, he would be warning Harry to stand down. Chester would have a lecture ready. Alistair would gently sigh and shake his head. Only James would encourage him, which is actually, come to think of it, a very good reason to stop now.

Harry's never been very good at taking advice.

Even with (possibly) broken ribs, he can take them all out rather easily. He estimates it shouldn't take more than three minutes at most. The barman is actually the biggest problem; in the time it will take him to put down Dean Baker's little minions, the barman could call any number of people.

Well, it's a risk he'll just have to take.

The leader gives him a look. "You should get out of the way, grandad, or you'll get hurt and all."

Eggsy leans in, as serious as Harry has ever seen him. "He ain't jokin'," he says, his voice low. "You should go."

This simple but courageous act of loyalty to someone he only met yesterday, barely knows, and who until five minutes ago he clearly planned to blackmail, only cements Harry's intentions. There is no possible way he is leaving now and abandoning Eggsy to these cretins.

Yet he stands up as though he fully intends to walk out. A warning throb of pain jabs his ribs, but he ignores it in favour of picking up the Rainmaker where it's been leaning against the side of his seat. He considers leaving on a note of farewell, something like It was lovely to meet you, then decides against it.

The cretins are still clustered about their table. With no sign of yesterday's limp, he walks toward them as though he doesn't notice them, murmuring, "Excuse me," as he goes. They step aside with exaggerated gestures, obviously enjoying this show of what they consider chivalry. As though their behaviour toward Harry makes what they are about to do to Eggsy any less awful.

He's nearly at the door when one of them says, "If you're looking for another rent boy, they're on the corner of Smith Street."

Harry stops dead in front of the pub doors. He had never planned to leave, had always intended to reach up and lock them all in, so there wouldn't be any witnesses to the carnage he's about to unleash. He even fully expected one of them to make a smartass comment -- men who would follow Dean Baker around are the kind who always need to get the last word in. What he didn't expect, though, is the lance of white-hot fury that slips into his chest in between one breath and the next.

It's ridiculous. It's beyond ridiculous. He doesn't really know Eggsy Unwin, any more than Eggsy knows him. That they seem to share an attraction to each other means nothing at this point -- Eggsy
doesn't even know his name. But he cannot -- will not -- stand here and let these thugs slander Eggsy's name that way. Whether it's even true is beside the point.

The point is, Harry is going to teach them all a badly needed lesson.

Slowly, deliberately, he locks the doors while intoning his least favourite of all Chester King's ancient quotations. *Manners maketh man*. It fits admirably, though, especially when he's able to look the lead goon in the eye through his reflection on the wall. "Do you know what means?"

The guys all look at each other, some more bewildered than others. Behind them, still sitting at the table, Eggsy Unwin looks almost lost.

"Then let me teach you a lesson," Harry says.

It goes splendidly. More gratifying then putting them down one by one, more satisfying than watching the barman slump over with a dart in his neck, even better than the soaring rush of the adrenaline from a fight, is the look of awe on Eggsy's face. The way Eggsy not-so-subtly shifts on his seat as Harry walks over, trying to hide the evidence of his arousal.

The morning is definitely looking up. He knows he will pay for this later, that his ribs will give him cause for regret, but right now all he feels is the warm glow of victory -- and an absurd pleasure at knowing he has just earned Eggsy’s total respect.

He half-expects to hear Merlin in his ear. *If you're through showing off, Galahad…* But Merlin does not speak. There is no one on the other end.

There is no one but him and Eggsy.

"Now then," he says. He sits across from Eggsy. “They’ll be out for a few minutes, but we should be quick. If you’ll give me the phone, please, then we can be far from here before they wake up.”


It takes Harry a second to realise what he just heard. The anger he felt toward Dean's goons returns in full force then, and he inhales sharply, trying to get a rein on his temper. "You said you did."

"I mean, I don't got it with me," Eggsy says quickly. Most of his admiration has faded; no doubt he's thinking about how easy it was for Harry to take everyone out with nothing more than his hands and an umbrella. "It's still at home."

He does a better job this time of keeping his voice down. "And why didn't you bring it?"

Eggsy shrugs. "I dunno. I guess I thought…for security? Like, you wouldn't kill me or something if you thought you still needed me to get it for you?"

Harry fights the urge to facepalm. "And why would you think something like that?"

"Well, what the fuck was I supposed to think?" Eggsy bursts out. "All this James Bond shit, giving me that phone and then being hustled off by some seriously bad guys, then you somehow get my number and call me, and then you show up here looking like someone tried to beat you up… seriously, what the fuck am I supposed to think?"

"All right," Harry says. "Fair point." Laid out like that, he has to admit that it really is all very strange. Most people would never have gone along with his urgent request at the station in the first place, let alone dared to show up today.
But Eggsy Unwin is definitely not “most people.”

Eggsy glances at the goons sprawled on the floor. "So you gonna come with me to get it?"

Harry’s initial reaction is that it's a trap. Immediately though he dismisses that as just the ingrained paranoia of a spy, the inability to take things at face value and always look for the hidden layers, the angle.

He's suddenly weary to death of it all. The spying, the mind games, the mistrust. Eggsy is just who he seems to be, nothing more. And yes, Harry will go with him, even though he can already think of a dozen reasons why it's a terrible idea.

But he would like to spend more time with Eggsy. He wants to find out if Eggsy is the boy on paper Lee would be bitterly disappointed in, or the actual young man Lee would be proud to call his son.

And that's the only reason he wants to be alone with Eggsy, he tells himself. The only reason.

“I will,” he says. He stands up, and his ribs protest with a sharp jolt of pain. This time, to his great annoyance, he is unable to completely hide his reaction. He reaches up as though to push his glasses more firmly into place, deactivating them so they no longer are recording. “But we should leave now.” The barman will be out cold for at least another ten minutes, but he has no such guarantee about Dean Baker’s little minions.

Eggsy gets up, more slowly. He eyes Harry carefully, but he doesn't say anything.

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Harry hails a cab to take them to Eggsy's flat, and almost immediately regrets it.

Sitting in the back seat beside Eggsy is an exquisite torture. He can smell the soap Eggsy used this morning, a cheap but clean scent. From time to time Eggsy glances in his direction, but without making actual eye contact. In such close proximity, his helpless attraction to Eggsy becomes a source of frustration. To be this close to him but unable to touch him.

For his part, Eggsy sits with both hands balled up in his lap, hiding what must be another inconvenient erection. Occasionally he shifts restlessly, twitching one shoulder or glancing over at Harry. Despite his obvious interest, though, he sits pressed up against the car door, keeping as much distance between them as possible.

Harry can understand why. That comment Baker's minion made about Eggsy being a rentboy must have stung. And there is no denying that their current situation looks bad. An older gentleman in a suit and tie with someone Eggsy's age, leaving a pub like the Black Prince together? The cabbie will no doubt be talking about it for weeks to come.

He doesn't know if the rentboy comment is even true; his research into Eggsy's background didn't reveal anything like that. But as he sits there in an awkward silence, Harry realises that he doesn't care. If anything it only increases his respect for Eggsy, that he would go to such lengths to protect his family and keep them safe.

Traffic is not too bad, and they make good time as they head toward Rowley Way. They do not speak on the trip. Tension lies thick between them, a sudden gulf that Harry doesn't know how to cross. He's very much afraid that he went too far in the pub, that the burst of violence he put on display did nothing to endear him to Eggsy, and in fact only managed to push him away. Eggsy's home life is bordered by violence; there can be nothing in it to attract him.
Yet it's clear that Eggsy is attracted to him. And because he too keenly feels the magnetic pull between them, Harry searches for some way to break the silence. "You didn't tell me why you left the Marines."

Eggsy stiffens up. "Didn't know I had to explain myself to you."

"Only if you want to," Harry says.

They ride in silence for a couple more blocks while Harry debates trying again. He notes the flow of traffic, makes sure the cabbie is not watching them too closely, and is about to speak up again when Eggsy says, "It was my mum."

Harry looks at him, trying to make the connection but coming up empty.

"She couldn't handle it," Eggsy says. "Me being in the Marines. She went mental, started banging on about losing me as well as my dad. I was gonna stay anyway, but then she got pregnant with Daisy." He shrugs. "Couldn't leave her then, could I?"

Harry just stares. He knows enough about Eggsy's backstory and his current lifestyle to know that a life in the Marines, grueling as it may be, would actually have been an escape for Eggsy. And for him to give that up, to turn his back on what might very well have been his only chance at getting out of his dead-end life…

Such courage deserves to be recognised. Not with a medal and a favour, but with an act of equal unexpected bravery.

Well. Harry knows exactly what that is. He just isn't sure if he can do it.

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Eggsy's flat is small, crowded with illegal merchandise stacked on every available surface, and smells of cigarette smoke and dirty nappies. He's obviously embarrassed to have someone like Harry inside, but it would look even worse for Harry to linger outside where anyone could see him -- and later report him to Dean Baker.

He doesn't remember this flat from his first visit. Mostly what he remembers is the way Michelle Unwin cried, and the snowglobe Eggsy was playing with. He remembers it was almost Christmas and very cold out. He remembers thinking he would never forget the way Lee used to smile when he was complimented for finishing yet another trial.

Eggsy tells him to wait in the living room, then disappears into what must be his bedroom so he can retrieve the phone. Harry wonders where Michelle and her young child are, but refrains from asking. He doesn't want to make the situation even more uncomfortable than it already is.

He doesn't have long to wait, fortunately. Less than a minute after leaving him, Eggsy reappears in his bedroom doorway. Harry looks up at him -- and then stares.

Eggsy is holding Blackbird's phone, but that's not what has Harry's attention. He's taken off his jacket and undone the top button of his shirt. The pale vee of skin that is revealed is arresting enough by itself, but far more important than that is the gold medallion resting atop his shirt.

"You know," Eggsy says. He leans on the doorway, looking strangely shy. "I don't even know your name. Are you like, allowed to tell me?"

The honesty that has held him in its grip all day makes Harry speak before he even knows what he
means to say. "My name is Harry Hart. I gave you that medal."

Immediately Eggsy's free hand rises to cover the medal. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I knew your father," Harry says. "He was a brave man. A good man. And having seen what's become of his son, I think it's safe to say he would be very proud of you."

Eggsy's eyes, so beautifully caught between blue and green, grow very wide. His lips part in slack surprise. "You knew my dad?"

"I did," Harry confirms.

"You mean…” Eggsy seems to struggle with his idea. "My dad was a fucking spy?"

"Or something," Harry says, referring back to their conversation in the Black Prince. Already it's something only the two of them share, a code word, an inside joke. The realisation makes something spark in his chest.

But this thing between them, whatever it is, can't be. It can't. Because if he is going to be honest, then he has to say it all.

"Your father died because I made a mistake. I missed something, something that could have cost the lives of every man present." He will never stop berating himself for such a simple, colossal mistake. It doesn't matter that Merlin, James, or even Lee himself should have seen it, too. He was in charge of the operation, and that makes it his mistake. "He saved us all that day, at the cost of his own life."

Eggsy stands very still. He still clutches the Kingsman medal, that favour he's not called in after all these years, despite the grimness of his situation. Possibly he doesn't know that's what it's for. Michelle Unwin might not have explained it to him, wanting to just forget what happened on that terrible day when the stranger in the suit came to tell her that her husband was dead.

Or maybe he just keeps on hoping he'll never need to use it, pride and stubborn independence and family loyalty giving him the strength to go on against all the odds. Maybe Eggsy is the type of person who will never give up, never give in, always find a way.

"My father saved your life," Eggsy says. He looks like he's trying to adjust to this idea.

"Yes," Harry says. "And the lives of others as well."

Eggsy smiles then, full of pride and love for a father he barely knew and most likely doesn't even remember. When he smiles, he goes from attractive to simply breathtaking. Harry is once again helplessly drawn to him, amazed to discover that he almost doesn't want their business here to reach its inevitable conclusion – because then he will have to leave.

He doesn't want to walk away from Eggsy Unwin a second time.

Slowly Eggsy releases the medal. He looks at Harry like he's seeing him for the first time. He stands up straight, no longer leaning on the doorframe. His eyes narrow and his gaze flicks up and down Harry's figure in a quick but measuring glance.

Harry does not move. This is where Eggsy will turn on him, will realise that he is responsible for his father's death, the ultimate cause of so much of the misery in his life. If he is fortunate, Eggsy will throw Blackbird's phone at him in anger and he will be able to make his exit with some of his dignity intact.
But Eggsy's expression does not turn cold with anger or hatred. Instead he seems almost contemplative as he at last turns his attention to the phone he holds. "So this," he says. He stares down at it. "It's kinda like working with my dad in a way, innit? He would've wanted me to do this."

"Yes," Harry says. He has no doubt of that. Lee, had he lived and become Lancelot, would have been a fine Kingsman. He might even have been given this mission to meet with Blackbird and collect the evidence of an MP's treason.

He does not say more, though. Eggsy has to turn the phone over of his own volition. Harry could easily force him, of course, or use his second amnesia dart and simply take the phone from Eggsy's unconscious hand, but he would no sooner do that than strike himself in the face. He has too much respect for Eggsy to even dream about harming him.

He recognises the danger here, of course. He's become frightfully soft about a young man he scarcely knows but is alarmingly attracted to. He's already permitted this encounter to last far longer than it should, risked everything by beating up those punks in the bar, and taken an even larger risk by coming here to Eggsy's flat. No one at Kingsman knows he is here, and only Merlin knows Eggsy even exists.

It's high time to put an end to this. To act the professional. To get the job done.

He's about to speak when Eggsy looks up. "Okay," he says. He smiles a little, somewhat crooked and rather nervous. "Yeah." He holds out Blackbird's phone.

Harry walks toward him. He reaches for the phone with a mixture of relief and disappointment that now he no longer has an excuse to stay here.

Their hands meet. Electricity sparks up Harry's arm and pools in his groin, a heated arousal that he is shamefully aware of. Eggsy inhales sharply, and Harry knows he feels it too. Then they're separating as Harry quickly moves backward, clutching the phone like it's a lifeline.

He can still feel the warmth of Eggsy's skin on his fingers, though. He wants to touch Eggsy again, to find out if his wrists are thick or slender beneath the shirt he's wearing. He wants to see if there are more of those dark moles scattered across his pale skin, like stars strewn across a night sky. He wants to kiss those parted lips and never stop.

"Yeah," Eggsy says again, and his voice is a bit shaky.

Harry forcefully brings himself back under control. He came here to do a job and now that job is complete. The only thing left for him to do is leave.

"Thank you," he says. He slides the phone into the inner pocket of his suit coat, behind the white linen square that peeks out of the outer pocket.

"Yeah," Eggsy breathes. He looks oddly unhappy, like he wishes he hadn't handed the phone over.

"I need to go now," Harry says.

Eggsy nods. "Figured."

It's only a few short steps to the door, but Harry doesn't move. Ridiculous as it is, he simply can't make himself go.

"So am I gonna see you again?" One of Eggsy's shoulders hunches up a little as he asks, the gesture of someone accustomed to being attacked for daring to say something unexpected. "Or are you
gonna drug me and make me forget all this?"

"I could," Harry says with complete honesty. Not right this second, not with the equipment he has on him, but it's certainly possible.

Eggsy stares back. He sort of smiles nervously, clearly hoping Harry just made a joke.

After a moment, Harry smiles back.

Eggsy relaxes, his shoulders slumping. "Fuck. I almost thought you meant it." He shakes his head, then he looks at Harry again, this time with no hesitation. "So will I see you?"

This is truly insane, Harry thinks. He actually should make Eggsy forget all this. It's Kingsman standard procedure. If he lets Eggsy go now, knowing what he knows, Arthur will label him a sentimental coward and find a way to punish him for breaking the rules meant to protect their very existence. He will probably never go out in the field again. Certainly he will never live it down.

To hell with it. He says, "I think something could be arranged."

Eggsy smiles, slow and wide. As before, that smile transforms him into someone beautiful enough to take Harry's breath away. "Yeah," he says. "Good."

Harry smiles back. He's helpless not to. None of the rules, no logic at all, in fact, seems to apply to Eggsy Unwin.

He finds that he doesn't particularly care.

"So I'll see you then," Eggsy says. "Sometime."

"Yes," Harry says. "Sometime."

Somehow he manages to look away from the magnetic pull of Eggsy's eyes and head for the door. He lets himself out without first stopping to listen if there is anyone just outside, a move almost unheard-of for him. He closes the door behind him and walks out into the September sunshine, and is astonished to realise he's still smiling a little.

Down the street, someone shouts. Children at play, most likely, but the sound is enough to startle Harry back to reality. He does a quick look around, establishes that no one saw him leave Eggsy's flat, then walks swiftly down the stairs toward the street. He won't be doing Eggsy any favours by lingering here or by being seen; he suspects Eggsy will be in enough trouble over the fight in the Black Prince.

But Eggsy is tough, and strong, and brave. He will be all right. Harry has seen enough to have confidence in that.

All the same, he can't help worrying a little as he strides down the street, looking for a cab.

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It's almost noon and starting to cloud up when Harry arrives at the shop. The painkillers he took this morning have long since worn off, and it requires some effort to walk upright and not list slightly to one side, coddling his injured ribs. He plods up the steps with none of his usual bounce; his knee is hurting again, too.

He hopes the debrief with Arthur will be quick. If all goes his way, he'll be back home tonight in
time for dinner and a very stiff drink or two.

"There you are." Andrew greets him from behind the counter without his customary deference. "Merlin would like you to contact him at your earliest convenience." Despite the mild words, there is no doubt that he means right now. And though he doesn't appear to move, Harry knows that he's just pushed one of several buttons hidden beneath the counter, alerting Merlin to his presence.

Somewhat guiltily, Harry glances around. He never did activate his glasses again, reasoning that there was no need. "Where is he now?"

"At headquarters I believe," Andrew says. He looks disapproving, he's never been fond of when he's forced to play go-between.

"Thank you," Harry says. He heads for the stairs leading to the upper floors. Arthur frequently holds court here, preferring the dining room above the shop to the one at HQ, a fact which gives the stewards no end of grief.

His knee throbs as he climbs the steps, and he grimaces. He has no idea if Arthur is even here today. He probably should have asked; he had been planning to take the shuttle to HQ, but now he finds himself wondering. He quiets his footfalls just in case, almost gliding as he follows the dusty runner across the old wood floor past the dining room and to one of the small bedrooms in the rear of the building. Normally any visiting agent is housed at HQ, but there have been instances when that trip wasn't feasible, and a guest had to stay here. Harry himself has never slept in any of these room, has rarely even set foot in them, but he's grateful for them now. At least here he can have some privacy.

The bedroom is furnished in typical Kingsman style, with lots of old wood, tartan, and rustic country paintings. It's also somewhat dusty and the air smells stale; Chester King would have a fit if he knew. Not that Harry intends to say anything. He has it on good authority that the stewards all dislike Chester, who long ago squandered any goodwill he had amassed during his career as an agent. Now Chester is all about being Arthur, insisting on the trappings of power and alienating most of the people who work for him while being completely clueless about it.

So Harry is not about to get anyone in trouble over some dust in a room that probably hasn't been used in six months or more. He just quietly shuts the door and sits on the edge of the bed before reaching up to tap his glasses. "Merlin?"

The response is immediate, which is never a good sign. "Galahad! Where are you?" There's some puzzlement in Merlin's voice as he looks out at the bedroom through Harry's glasses.

Merlin's probably never been in here, either. "Above the shop," Harry replies. "You have news?"

"You have the phone?" Merlin asks.

"Yes," Harry says. Even though he knows it's there, he pats his pocket just to be certain.

Merlin's sigh of relief is audible. Another not-good sign. It's not like Merlin to be so obvious about what he's thinking.

The sense of foreboding that Harry felt after he left Eggsy suddenly returns in full force. A layer of darkness seems to overlay the contents of the room, heavier and more pervasive than the dust. "Why did you need me to contact you? Why didn't you just ping my glasses? What's happened?"

"I've been busy," Merlin says a bit peevishly. "I do have other matters to attend to, you know."

Harry says nothing. He knows better than to fall for this obvious bait.
After a moment's pause, Merlin continues. And as ever, he wastes no time on sentiment, but gets right to the point. "When I attempted to erase the security camera footage from the Victoria Station Vodafone shop, I discovered it no longer exists. I sent Percival down there, but it didn't matter. Ludchenko got there first."

Harry stares blankly at the tasteful draperies flanking the window. "How did he know?"

"I can only guess," Merlin says, which is his way of pretending to show some gentleman-like modesty. After so many years in his job, nearly all of Merlin's "guesses" end up correct. "But it would have been the only place to look. You didn't have the phone on you when you were in their custody, so you obviously got rid of it beforehand. You were in their sight the entire time -- except for when you were in the shop. It was the only opportunity you had to dispose of it."

"You're worried they'll identify me," Harry says.

"The thought did cross my mind," Merlin says dryly.

"They won't find me," Harry says.

"DeVere then," Merlin replies.

"Simpson," Harry says, somewhat impatiently. That's the name on the ID he was carrying when Ludchenko walked him out of Victoria Station. The name the catering company hired him under. It's an alias he doesn't use often, but Merlin still helped him set it up for this mission; Merlin ought to remember that.

"Ah yes," Merlin says. He sounds distracted, and Harry momentarily feels guilty. He has no idea what else is on Merlin's plate right now, how many screens he's viewing, how many pairs of glasses he's looking through. Alistair is somewhere in France, he knows that. Stephen is in Scotland. Or is it Wales? James is around, though, restless and still on the prowl for his band of mercenaries and their rage-inducing chemical warfare.

Thoughts of James inevitably lead to Lee Unwin, and from there to --

Cold horror washes over him. "If they've seen the video, that means they've seen Eggsy."

"What?" Merlin still sounds distracted.

"Eggsy!" Harry snaps. "Ludchenko has seen him!"

After a pause, Merlin replies, "I'm afraid so." His tone is gentle but unforgiving. Clearly he's giving this conversation his full attention now.

"And have they identified him yet?" Harry asks. He curses himself for not comprehending the danger earlier.

"Unknown," Merlin says, "but I wouldn't underestimate their ability to find out who he is."

"He has to be warned," Harry says. He looks around and realises he's standing up; he doesn't even remember getting to his feet. But it feels right. He wants to be out on the street already, headed for Rowley Way and Eggsy's dingy flat. He needs to warn Eggsy, needs to tell him to get out of there, now.

He imagines making that call, and a hot dart of scorn pierces the chill that currently envelops him. What exactly does he think will happen? More than likely Eggsy doesn't give a shit what happens to
Dean Baker if some Russian thugs come calling, but there is no chance he will leave his mother and baby sister behind. And Harry can hardly tell Eggsy to bring them with him, not when he doesn't even have a shelter to offer one lone young man.

Except that he actually does have one, doesn't he?

"I'm bringing him in," he tells Merlin.

The pause on the other end speaks volumes. "Harry…"

His actual name, not his code name. Merlin is not his handler just then, not a fellow Kingsman. He is a friend giving a subtle warning, trying to be kind.

Harry doesn't care. He will not stand by and let Eggsy remain in danger. Not when he's the reason Eggsy is in that danger in the first place. Not when they've only just forged the beginning of…well, he doesn't quite know what they have. All he knows is that he cannot – will not – let it be destroyed. He cannot let Eggsy be hurt.

"He has as much right to be here as anyone," he says hotly. "Or do you forget that his father died saving our lives?"

"I have not forgotten and you bloody well know it," Merlin says, low and heated. Clearly he's taken offence at Harry's comment. "But you need to think. What will Arthur say if he finds out? You'd be exposing not just yourself, but all of Kingsman, all for one—"

"For one what?" Harry interrupts. "One brave young man who did his best to help a complete stranger, not just once, but twice."

"What are you talking about?" Merlin asks.

Harry bites back a sigh. Of course Merlin hasn't seen the footage from his glasses yet, and his meeting with Eggsy and the subsequent fight in the Black Prince. Merlin doesn't know that Eggsy tried to warn him too, tried to keep him safe from violent harm.

Well, it doesn't matter what Merlin knows. Let Arthur turn bright red and threaten Harry with expulsion from the ranks – after years of empty threats, Harry no longer believes Chester will ever follow through with any of them.

And what harm can it do? Eggsy is courageous, quick-witted, loyal, and fiercely intelligent. He would be an asset to Kingsman in any capacity. Why not bring him in? Why not make him one of them? He certainly deserves a chance, if nothing else.

"I'm calling him," Harry says firmly.

His personal phone, the one he called Eggsy from this morning, is still in his office at home. But he would be a poor spy if he didn't have a memory trained to remember details like phone numbers. Using his Kingsman-issue phone, he dials Eggsy's number and has to stop himself from pacing the room as he listens to the ringing on the other end.

The call goes to voicemail.

"Shit," Harry hisses. He stands still in the center of the room, undecided as to his next course of action. He looks down at the phone, then pulls up his list of recent calls and tries again.
"Harry." Merlin still sounds like he's trying to be kind.

Eggsy doesn't answer this time, either.

His heart pounding, Harry ends the call. He doesn't know what's happened to Eggsy. Leaving a voicemail could be potentially disastrous depending on who currently holds Eggsy's phone. His own number will have shown up as unlisted, of course, but in the wrong hands the hidden number by itself is a big clue as to who was just calling.

"I'm going down there," he says. He has to know what's become of Eggsy. It could be something simple. Perhaps Dean Baker's boys have come calling to take their revenge, and one of them smashed Eggsy's phone. Or maybe his mum and baby sister have returned home, and he silenced his phone so it wouldn't wake the baby. Hell, maybe he's just in the loo taking a shit. There could be any number of innocent reasons why he isn't answering.

But somehow Harry doesn't think so.

"I figured you would say that," Merlin replies. "Be careful."

Harry doesn't reply. He's always careful, of course. Except for when he's not.

He leaves the bedroom and hurries through the hall with none of his previous care for stealth; he doesn't even feel the ache in his ribs and knee. Chester King himself could accost him now, and Harry would brush right past him. He has thoughts for one person only.

He's just stepped out into the noon sunlight on Savile Row when his phone rings. He stops dead on the steps and pulls his phone out. His heart lifts when he sees the number, but dread just as swiftly takes its place. "Yes?"

"Harry? Is this Harry?"

It's Eggsy, and at once a load lifts from Harry's shoulders. "Eggsy. Where are you?" He scans the street with the habit of long ease, noting the shoppers, the tourists, anyone who looks like they don't belong.

"Staying with a mate," Eggsy says. "Didn't seem like such a good idea to stick around my place, you know?"

Harry opens the door to the shop and eases back inside, so no one passing by on the street can overhear him. The shop itself is empty except for long-suffering Andrew at the counter; the tailors in the back work with the doors closed and most likely don't even know he is here. "That was very clever," he approves. He glances about him, then heads for fitting room one, where he can have some privacy in case anyone should decide to enter the shop.

"You called," Eggsy says. He sounds weird, like he doesn't know what to make of this information.

"Yes," Harry says. Now that he knows Eggsy is safe, some of his urgency has vanished; temporarily it's enough just to hear his voice and know he is all right.

"Didn't expect that," Eggsy says. "So soon and all."

"I'm sorry if I alarmed you," Harry says, which is ironic given what he has to say next. "I needed to make sure you were all right. I'm afraid my Russian...friends from Victoria Station might be able to identify you."
There is a long silence on the other end. Harry tries to imagine where Eggsy is, what he's thinking right now. Is he still glad he met Harry? Or is he cursing fate or whatever brought them together again?

"The same 'friends' what gave you those broken ribs?" Eggsy asks.

Harry freezes. "How did you know that?"

"Seen it before," Eggsy says. He sounds fairly casual, but Harry has no doubt that the experience is in fact quite personal to him. "You hide it really good, though."

Gentlemanly etiquette is so ingrained in him that even now Harry has the ridiculous urge to say thank-you for even such a strange compliment as that one. Annoyed with himself, he glares at the wall of the fitting room and focuses on the matter at hand. "The point is, they have the security camera video from Vodafone. They may be able to identify you. I'd like you to come in."

Eggsy gives a short, incredulous laugh. "What, to your super-secret spy organisation?"

"Not quite," Harry says. "There's a tailor shop on Savile Row called Kingsman. Meet me there."

This time the silence on the other end is even longer. Harry bites his tongue and forces patience on himself. If he pushes too hard, he runs the risk of alienating Eggsy at a time when it's crucial to keep him close. Kingsman can protect him anywhere, of course, but it will be far easier for everyone if Eggsy comes to them.

"What about my mum?" Eggsy finally says. "If they really can ID me, then they'll find my mum, too."

"We can discuss how to protect her once you're here," Harry says, blithely uncaring that he's just promised Kingsman resources he knows he won't get permission to obtain. "The important thing is to get you to safety."

After another excruciating pause, Eggsy says slowly, "Yeah, okay."

Harry bows his head a little, surrendering to another wave of utter relief. "Good. Very good. Meet me at Kingsman, and we'll sort out what to do next."

"Okay," Eggsy says. He hangs up.

Harry slides his phone back into his pocket. He stands still for a moment, looking at nothing in particular. Then he says, "I take it you heard all that."

"I did," Merlin confirms over his glasses.

"It was the only thing to do," he says, defending his decision.

"I'm not arguing," Merlin says. "Although I'm not the one you need to convince."

Harry winces slightly. He's managed to avoid Arthur altogether since the mission with Blackbird, but he doubts his luck will continue to hold. "I'll deal with him when the time comes. Until then, Eggsy is my priority."

"Yes, I thought it might be," Merlin says with a touch of dry humour. "However, might I remind you that your actual priority is keeping your arse put, so Amelia can collect Blackbird's phone from you."

A bit startled, Harry realises the truth behind this statement. He is still holding the phone Blackbird
died for, the phone containing the proof of treason committed by a member of Parliament, the entire reason for this mission's existence in the first place.

It's a sobering reminder of how quickly his entire world has been turned upside down. Only two days ago he would never have thought he would be so swift to jeopardise a mission over the fate of a stranger. And yet here he is, constantly on the verge of doing something impulsive and reckless all for the sake of one young man.

"I expect her there shortly," Merlin says. "And I expect you to be there when she arrives."

This is fine. It's not like he's going anywhere, Harry thinks. Not when Eggsy is on his way here as well.

"If you're through lecturing me," he says, "I have plans to make."

"By all means," Merlin replies.

Harry deactivates his glasses and sighs.

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By the time Eggsy arrives at the shop, Harry is ready to say to hell with it and start searching the city.

It's been a very long afternoon. For all its importance, his meeting with Amelia took less than five minutes. She stayed only long enough to obtain Blackbird's phone, offer condolences on his death, and confirm what Harry already knew: the phone is password-protected and it will take some time to get at the data it contains.

Since then he's been lurking in the workroom, avoiding Arthur (who is in fact on the premises today) and doing a rather poor job of sewing what is meant to be his next suit. Twice he's tried calling Eggsy, only for the call to go directly to voicemail both times. Only the sure and certain knowledge that Eggsy would inevitably show up five minutes after he left has kept him here all day.

But at last his impatience is rewarded with Andrew opening the workroom doors. "Sir? You have a visitor."

Harry drops the sleeve he's been working on to the worktable. He spares a moment to make sure his hair is still perfectly combed, adjusts his tie even though it doesn't need it, then follows Andrew out into the shop. His knee twinges with pain after the hours spent on his feet, and he swears under his breath as he forces himself to walk normally, with no hint of a limp.

Eggsy stands by the couch, backlit by the light coming in from the window. His hands are thrust in the pockets of his jeans, and he's wearing the same clothes he had on this morning. The medal Harry gave him when he was just a child is no longer in sight, tucked beneath his shirt. He looks slightly uncomfortable, but also curious.

He doesn't look hurt, which is the most important thing at this stage. Whatever delayed his arrival, it wasn't because he was attacked. Harry walks toward him with a slight smile. "You made it."

Eggsy shrugs a little. "Wasn't hard to find." He doesn't offer an explanation for his tardiness. He looks around the shop, checking out the bolts of fabric, the fire burning on the hearth, the enormous grandfather clock. "I never met a spy pretending to be a tailor before."

Harry's smile becomes more genuine; he finds it almost impossible not to smile when he's around Eggsy Unwin. "I'm not pretending."
Eggsy looks almost disappointed. "You really a tailor then?" He gestures to the dress forms standing in a row in the shop window, all of them proudly displaying elegant suits. "You could make me one of them?"

Harry thinks of how Eggsy would look in a tailored suit. Away from the cheap fabrics he's wearing now, the battered trainers, the snapback covering his head. He imagines the crisp lines of a pinstriped sleeve, a tie knotted just beneath that mole on his throat, the wide strap of a Bremont about a youthful wrist.

He looks at Eggsy with simple honesty. "I would very much like to."

Eggsy swallows hard and stares back at him. Faint colour flushes his cheekbones. Maybe he's thinking -- as Harry is -- of the fitting that must take place first, and the measuring. Some of those measurements are rather intimate, as he either knows or guesses. Maybe he's thinking about what it would be like to spend so much time together in a small fitting room, where there isn't much room to move around and they would be physically close to each other. Maybe he's wondering how much of his clothing he would need to take off for that fitting, how much of himself would be bared and revealed for Harry to gaze at it, to touch, even if only lightly, while holding the measuring tape up to his body.

The door to fitting room two opens then, and the client who was inside walks into the main room. Taken by surprise, Harry spins in that direction, his right hand rising automatically toward his jacket and the pistol nestled beneath his arm. It's a reflexive action, something he does without even thinking about it.

Fortunately the client is too busy talking to someone on his cell phone to notice how close he just came to having a gun pointed at him. He barely glances at Harry, gives Eggsy a look of scornful dismissal, then walks out of the shop. Behind him, the tailor who was conducting his fitting sighs with relief.

Harry lets his arm fall back to his side. An unaccustomed flush of embarrassment creeps over him – until he sees the way Eggsy is looking at him. On Eggsy's face right now is the same combination of admiration, lust, and puzzlement that came over him in the Black Prince after he witnessed Harry take out his stepfather's thugs.

Just as in the pub, he can't help the heady rush of pride at seeing Eggsy look at him that way. And it only adds to his certainty that this thing between them, this insane attraction pulling them together, really does flow both ways.

The door closes behind the departing client. The tailor, also a steward for Kingsman and fully aware of Harry's identity, steps back into the fitting room to put it to rights again. Behind the counter, Andrew discreetly watches it all, but says nothing.

"So," Eggsy says. He takes a single step closer. "You said something about taking care of my mum?"

The question returns Harry's attention to more practical matters, and the reason he summoned Eggsy here in the first place. "Yes," he says.

"So what can you do?" Eggsy asks. He glances up at Andrew, then returns his gaze to Harry.

He really does have the most extraordinary eyes, Harry thinks.

Oblivious to this, Eggsy goes on. "I meant it, what I said. I ain't doing nothing until I know she's
safe. Her and the baby."

"Of course," Harry says smoothly. He turns slightly to one side and gestures for Eggsy to go ahead of him. "We can talk in private upstairs."

Eggsy hesitates, glances again at Andrew, then looks back at Harry. After a moment where his internal debate is written all over his face, he makes up his mind. He pulls his hands out of his pockets and walks forward, moving past Harry as he heads for the stairs.

He smells of the city, of outdoors and traffic smog and the greasy shop he must have eaten lunch in. He's still perfectly clean-shaven, no five o'clock shadow marring his beautifully angled jawline. And as he passes by, another bloom of pink colour rises on his face.

Harry breathes in deep and reminds himself to stay focused. As fascinating as this strange attraction is, it's also highly annoying. In all his years at Kingsman he's only ever experienced this kind of thing once or twice. And it was long enough ago that he can't remember how he dealt with his treacherous emotions back then, or how he managed to subdue his body through sheer reason.

A discreet tap on his glasses activates them; hopefully Merlin is there on the other end, watching and listening. He guides Eggsy through the upstairs with a few murmured directions until they end up in the same bedroom Harry called him from this morning. He closes the door behind them and takes a few steps inside the room, careful to maintain some distance between him and Eggsy.

Now that they are alone, that magnetic pull between them is harder to deny. It's like the cab ride from the Black Prince all over again, only this time without the misery of embarrassment to cloud the issue.

"So you gonna tell me what the fuck is going on?" Eggsy demands. He's got his hands in his pockets again, his shoulders up, chin thrust out in defiance. It's a calculated pose, a way of saying that he's not going to fall for any bullshit, he's ready to spot a lie, he won't be taken advantage of.

Being honest with him has worked well so far. Harry has no desire to start lying to him now. "One of my colleagues attempted to recover the security camera footage from the Vodafone shop where we met. However, when he got there, he learned that someone else had beaten him to it. When he investigated, he discovered it was Vasily Ludchenko."

"The guy who kidnapped you at the station," Eggsy says. He jerks his chin in Harry's direction. "The one you beat you up."

"A rather dramatic way of putting it," Harry says, "but yes. The same."

"I'm guessing he ain't exactly a nice guy," Eggsy says.

"Not quite," Harry says with the faintest of smiles.

Eggsy does not smile back. "So he can ID me. What are you gonna do about it?"

Thankfully he has an answer for that. After making sure Eggsy was truly coming here, Harry had done his best to convince Merlin to provide a safe house for him. Merlin had demurred, though, claiming that he could not authorise such a thing without Arthur's approval. Nothing Harry said could persuade him, but he had at last managed to wring one concession from his old friend.

"We can arrange for your mother to stay in a hotel," he says. "Tell her she won a contest, and the prize is a stay in a luxury hotel."
Eggsy makes a face. "She'll never believe that."

"Of course she won't if I'm the one to call her," Harry says. He's already thought of this objection, along with half a dozen others Eggsy might be expected to say. "But she will if you tell her."

Eggsy thinks this over. As he does, some of the tension bleeds from his body. His shoulders go down and he bites the inside of his cheek. "Yeah, okay," he says. "I guess I could say I entered some contest, something stupid, you know? But I didn't tell her 'cause I figured we wouldn't win. Nobody I know ever wins those things."

Harry smiles a little. "Very good." He's inordinately pleased with Eggsy's quick thinking, his ability to make up a story on the spot. It's the hallmark of a good spy.

"And that's where I been all day," Eggsy continues. "I went to the offices and made sure it was legit, all that. And now that I know it's real, I can tell her."

Harry nods. "I think that should work, don't you?"

"Yeah," Eggsy says. "Only one problem." He makes an apologetic grimace. "My phone's dead."

That explains why he didn't answer before when Harry called him. "You can charge it there," he says. He gestures to the nightstand beside the bed, with its charging port. "The cord should be in the drawer."

It is indeed, and Eggsy plugs his phone in. "Thanks," he says. He looks oddly shy. "For everything."

It's a strange thing to hear, coming from someone whose life and family has been put in danger, but Harry accepts it gratefully. "I'll step out for a bit," he says. "Let you talk to your mum alone."

Eggsy shakes his head and looks pointedly at his phone. "It's gonna take a while. I just plugged it in."

Harry smiles, pleased to be giving Eggsy his second demonstration of Kingsman technology, and this time in a situation where nobody has to be hurt. "You might be surprised."

Eggsy glances down at his phone. His eyes widen in astonishment. "Fuck me," he breathes.

"The hotel information is on the desk," Harry says, and then leaves him to it.

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The shop is closed when Eggsy creeps tentatively down the stairs. The tailors have either left for the day or gone to start work on Arthur's dinner. Only Andrew remains, although he is currently in the back office, filing the last of the day's invoices. "Everything settled with your mum?" Harry asks.

Eggsy nods and comes a little further into the room. "Yeah. She's actually pretty excited. Never stayed in a five-star hotel before."

The old guilt stabs at him once more, thinking of the financial situation Michelle Unwin inherited when her husband died. But Harry refuses to fall into that trap again. He could drive himself insane with all the what-ifs and the maybes. The situation is what it is. All he can do is focus on what's happening right now.

"What would you have done if I'd said no to the hotel thing?" Eggsy asks. His chin is up again, belligerence lurking in his eyes. He might have to let other people tell him what to do, but it's clear he...
resent it.

"Then we would have found another way to ensure her safety," Harry says. "This simply seemed the easiest way to go about it. Plus it was something I could arrange ahead of time so it would be ready when you got here. I thought time was a priority."

Eggsy looks like he's trying to find a way to argue with that, only he can't, of course. He kind of sags all over, the tension bleeding from him. "Yeah." He hesitates, then says, "Thanks for looking out for her."

"It was my pleasure," Harry says.

An uncomfortable silence falls between them. Eggsy looks around the shop, checking it all out. Logically his next step should be to inquire about Ludchenko and his own personal safety, and how Harry plans to keep him safe. Instead he offers up an attempt at lightening the situation. "Tailors and spies. Who woulda thought?"

It's not what Harry expected but already he's come to appreciate Eggsy's intelligence, and the way he refuses to do the obvious thing. "Believe it or not, Kingsman wasn't always a spy organisation."

Eggsy seems amused by this. "So where do you keep your Aston Martin? And all your cool spy gadgets? Under the wools or the linens?"

If he wants to be distracted from thinking about his own perilous situation, Harry is more than willing to let him. He's already broken a dozen rules by telling Eggsy the truth about Kingsman and bringing him here. What's one more?

And he has to admit to a rather unseemly thrill of anticipation as he walks forward. "Why don't I show you the fitting rooms?"

He opens the door to fitting room one and walks inside. Eggsy hovers in the doorway, looking at the small room with a hint of trepidation mixed with curiosity.

Harry waits for him in front of the mirror. "Come on in," he invites.

Eggsy hesitates a moment longer, then walks inside. He glances around. "Is this it?"

Harry can't hide his smile. Pride is one of his worst vices and he knows it. Chester had once scolded James, saying he was going to get himself killed one of these days because he preferred to show off rather than do the job right. Stung, James had retorted that Harry was far more likely to meet such an undignified end. No one, including Harry himself, had been able to deny it.

"Not quite," he says.

He shows Eggsy the secrets the small room contains, all those things their clients would never dream about: the pistol secured to the back of the mirror, the darts tucked beneath the table, the coat hook that pulls off with a sharp twist and becomes a blade to be thrown. He doesn't set his hand on the mirror, though; the lift is one secret that must remain kept. For a little while longer, at least.

Eggsy is properly impressed by all of this. When they cross the shop to fitting room three, he's ready. This time he needs no coaxing to enter.

This room looks just the same as the first, though, and his face falls with some disappointment. "It's the same."
"Of course it's not," Harry says. "Pull the hook on your left."

Eggsy doesn't even hesitate. He pulls the coat hook, and the door to the armory swings open.

It's worth everything then, to see the way Eggsy looks back at him, already grinning. His failure to save Blackbird, the loss of the phone, the lingering pain where the Russians beat on him -- all of it fades to insignificance when Eggsy's eyes light up. Harry follows him inside, still smiling.

He's vaguely aware that he's just crossed a line, but that too is insignificant. What does any of it matter when he can put that look of wonder on Eggsy's face? When he can make this breathtakingly beautiful young man happy, even just temporarily?

"Oh yes," Eggsy says as he takes it all in. He's grinning wide. Gone is the closed-off posture, the veiled belligerence. Now he swaggers, walking in like he owns the place. "Very, very nice."

He's a completely different person from the sullen thief Harry first met in Victoria Station. Even this morning seems far away. This is Eggsy young and full of delight, still capable of wonder in spite of the cruelties life has dealt him. This is Eggsy marveling at everything he sees, completely unaware that he himself is the most amazing thing in the entire room. This is a brilliant, strong man with a good and generous heart, and as Harry follows him across the room, he realises with no fanfare at all that he would in fact follow Eggsy anywhere.

Naturally Eggsy gravitates toward the guns first. Harry steps up, proud to show him. "This is our standard-issue pistol," he says. "It's quite unique, as you can see. Comes with a shotgun shell for messy, close-range situations." He's had to use it himself before; "messy" is a bit of an understatement.

Eggsy nods. "Never seen one like that before," he says.

Harry puts the pistol back in its place. "Your weapons skills are excellent, by the way. I saw it in your Marines file."

Eggsy looks startled by this at first. Then he grins and winks.

They move through the shelves, Harry pointing out a few items of interest like the golden lighter and his signet ring. Eggsy takes it all in with keen-eyed interest, but when he diverts Harry's attention by gesturing to the wall of computer tablets, Harry knows exactly what he is doing.

And sure enough, the moment he turns away, Eggsy reaches up with one stealthy hand and pockets one of the lighters.

He's a bit annoyed, because honestly, does Eggsy think he's stupid? But he's also secretly delighted that Eggsy is so good at sleight of hand. It's a skill that will stand him in good stead when –

When what?

Abruptly he realises what he's doing. He's been in here, showing off weaponry and gadgets, thinking all this time that one day Eggsy will be a Kingsman, too. When in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Chester King will never allow it. There isn't an opening at the Round Table. Harry has broken a multitude of rules and traditions by telling Eggsy about Kingsman and what he really does for a living, and while it's too late for the standard amnesia dart to work, there are other, more insidious ways to ensure Eggsy doesn't remember what happened during the last twenty-four hours.

The mere thought of it, of anyone scrambling Eggsy's brains and erasing the memory of their meeting, is enough to stiffen Harry's spine. He won't allow it. He absolutely will not.
He leads the way out of the armory. Halfway to the door, he says without looking back, "Put it back, Eggsy."

And Eggsy spins on his heel and does so immediately. Harry does look then, wanting to be sure he actually puts the lighter back instead of only passing his hand over the empty space. Sleight of hand is a very useful skill, but it's one he won't allow to be used against Kingsman.

Eggsy looks completely unrepentant as he sets the lighter back in place. He sort of shrugs, a smile playing about his mouth. "Had to try, didn't I?"

"I don't wish to know what you planned to do with it," Harry says. He waits by the door for Eggsy to rejoin him.

"Dunno," Eggsy says, all cheek. He winks again as he saunters up.

Harry closes the fitting room door behind them as they emerge back into the main room. It's still light outside, and the shop is pleasantly full of evening sunshine. He has no idea if Andrew is still here, or where Arthur is.

Eggsy glances around. Already the silence between them is growing thick with tension. They're fine when they're moving forward, Harry realises. When they're talking about things that matter, or taking some kind of action. But silence is not their friend. In the silence they start to think about everything outside themselves, all the reasons their strange but undeniable attraction should not exist, why Eggsy should in fact flee the shop and never look back, leave this madness behind him.

Again he wonders why Eggsy doesn't ask about his own safety, why he seems content to hang out here with Harry now that he knows his mother and sister are taken care of. This would be the perfect opportunity for him to ask, especially now that he's seen the weaponry at Kingsman's disposal, weapons that they would presumably wield in his defense.

But Eggsy does not ask. He just stands there, pretending to be interested in one of the suits on display in the window.

And abruptly Harry reaches a decision.

"I was going to get some dinner," he says. "Have you eaten? Would you like to join me?"

Eggsy looks up at once. "Yeah," he says. "Okay." He smiles, tentative at first, then blossoming into the real thing, his eyes lighting up again.

Helplessly, hopelessly charmed, Harry can only smile back.

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Normally he would enjoy a leisurely walk to Sketch or a similar restaurant, but tonight that's out of the question. Not only is Eggsy completely unable to afford such a place, he would stick out like a sore thumb with his clothing, his accent, and his general lack of knowledge about the world of high-priced restaurants. If Harry were to take him there, Eggsy would never forgive him. And rightfully so.

They've known each other for less than a day but already Harry has a fervent desire to watch over Eggsy, to keep him from being shamed again, like this morning in the Black Prince when that bastard made that cruel remark about rentboys. He would very much like to take Eggsy to Sketch or The Ledbury, let him indulge on sinfully expensive food and wine and enjoy himself all night long. But he wants to do it as equals, not as some kind of lesson, something to do with etiquette or French
For the first time in a horribly long time, Harry wants to take someone out on a date.

Tonight, though, must be far more informal. They barely qualify as friends yet. He's already behaving like a daft fool; he knows he has got to act more professional.

They stroll down Regent Street toward Piccadilly, the September evening stretching out before them. Eggsy seems more at ease again now that they're not simply standing around with nothing to do but avoid looking at each other. And when Harry inquires after his sister, he comes to life, full of stories and eager to share them all.

Not much is required of Harry then but an occasional smile and nod, and an encouraging gesture or two. Eggsy is clearly besotted with his baby sister, and it's obvious he would do anything for her. Knowing what he does about the family's finances, it makes perfect sense to Harry now why Eggsy was in Victoria Station last night stealing wallets. Someone like Dean Baker doesn't give two shits about keeping his baby daughter in nappies and bibs. That kind of thing is left to Eggsy to sort out. And when there isn't any money for it, he simply finds another way.

Again Harry feels a reluctant admiration for Eggsy's cleverness. He supposes he ought to disapprove of the stealing, but his moral compass was long ago compromised by the job -- and at any rate, it's none of his business.

By mutual consent they end up at a Japanese restaurant not far from Piccadilly, someplace where neither one of them looks too out of place, and the menu prices are affordable but not so cheap that Eggsy would suspect any kind of charity at work. They get one of the last open tables and place their order, and then there's nothing to do but sit there and stare at each other.

Hoping to delay the return of the uncomfortable silence, Harry says, "So if you weren't having dinner with an old spy pretending to be a tailor, what would you be doing?"

Eggsy shrugs a little. "Dunno. Probably having drinks with my mates at the local." By which he no doubt means the Black Prince. A place he would do well to avoid for the next few weeks, if he knows what's good for him. "Or maybe watching a movie?"

Harry perks up at this. "What kind of movies do you like?"

It's easy from there. He's always been a film buff, and it turns out Eggsy has interesting taste. By the time their meal arrives, they've already debated who the next James Bond should be, ("Is it really like that, being a spy I mean?" "Not quite. But sometimes. A little.") and agreed that Helen Mirren is a national treasure.

"I confess to a certain fondness for musicals," Harry admits. He pokes at his dinner, which smells delicious. "Not a very popular opinion, I'm afraid."

"Why not?" Eggsy challenges. "I like some of 'em, too."

"Do you?" He can't help smiling a little.

"Yeah," Eggsy says. He doesn't look a bit embarrassed, as most young men his age would if they had to say such a thing out loud. "Like My Fair Lady. Always did like that one."

That's the moment, Harry thinks much later. That's the moment he falls in love.

He doesn't know that yet, though. He just sits there with his fork in one hand and a smile on his face.
he can't seem to get rid of, and he says, "Well, you're full of surprises."

Eggsy grins at him.

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They've just finished dinner when the quiet ping sounds over Harry's glasses. It's Merlin. "I thought you would want to know, Amelia came through."

"They unlocked the phone," he says. Across from him, Eggsy grins.

"Yes," Merlin says.

"And?" He's a little annoyed at having to ask for it. Probably Merlin considers it a subtle punishment for making him get Michelle Unwin a luxury hotel room under false pretenses.

"They found all the evidence we need."

He exhales in relief. He always expected this, but it's still an enormous weight off his shoulders. Blackbird did not die in vain. Kingsman has the proof they need of MP Mason's treason. "Send it to my home terminal."

"Already done," Merlin says. He pauses. "I expect you'll be paying MP Mason a visit tomorrow."

It's not a question.

"Yes," Harry says quietly.

The transmission ends there. Nothing more need be said, after all. He is back on the mission he never really left in the first place. The only difference is that now he's been pointedly reminded of that fact.

This dinner with Eggsy, this evening, the nebulous plans for the rest of the night that he's scarcely admitted to himself -- they are all superfluous. He has been postponing the inevitable, mooning over a man half his age while a ghost hovers between them. Regardless of what Eggsy seems to think about him, this cannot be.

This must not be.

He is a Kingsman and that is who he will always be. That must come first.

There can be no more avoiding the issue, no more absurd fantasies. He's already wasted far too much time -- and in the process done Eggsy a grave disservice.

Their waitress approaches and discreetly leaves the bill. Harry reaches for it before Eggsy can do more than glance at it, and leaves cash on the table to cover their meal, plus a generous tip.

"Oi," Eggsy says. "What's my share?"

"Nothing," Harry says.

Eggsy's eyes narrow as his mood shifts. Quickly, before he can get too angry, Harry says, "Consider it my way of saying thank-you for allowing me to complete my mission. I couldn't have done it without you."

Eggsy looks like he wants to protest, but after a silent but visible struggle on his face, he surrenders. "Well," he says, "it ain't every day a fit bloke in a tux asks me to deliver a phone."
Harry smiles, wishing he wasn't so pleased to be labeled "fit." He tucks his money clip back in his pocket, finishes the last of his drink, and looks expectantly at Eggsy. "Ready?"

They leave the restaurant and step outside. Night has fallen while they were eating. People pass them by, talking to each other, listening to music, looking down at their phones. Hardly anyone glances at them as they walk slowly down the pavement, heading in the general direction of Piccadilly.

He knows what he has to do now, although he wishes more than anything that he didn't have to. But there is no getting around it. He has a job to do, and it must be done. Duty has always come first with Harry; it's the reason he's reached his age without ever forging any serious romantic relationships or deep friendships that exist outside Kingsman. As pleasant as this day has been, that's all it will ever be. One day.

So he takes a deep breath and he says what must be said. "Now that your mother is safe, what will you do, Eggsy?"

And so it's out there at last. The question neither one of them has been able to ask.

Eggsy jerks his shoulders up in a shrug. "Dunno. I guess I hadn't thought about it."

"It's not safe for you to go home," Harry says. Not just because of Ludchenko and his cronies, either. Dean Baker's little gang will surely be waiting for him, eager to bash his head in for sitting there and doing nothing while Harry took them down.

"Yeah, I know," Eggsy says, somewhat peevish.

The best thing to do is ask if Eggsy has somewhere to go. The friend's house he was staying with earlier, for instance. But Harry is deeply reluctant to offer that suggestion, because logically there is no reason for Eggsy not to agree.

And despite everything, against all reason, he doesn't want to say good-bye to Eggsy just yet.

They turn the corner and stroll down Regent Street. Traffic is heavier here, both pedestrian and vehicular. Harry glances about reflexively, a spy's behaviour long since ingrained into habit, but he doesn't really pay the scene much attention. He is too focused on Eggsy.

"If you need a place to stay," he says carefully, "there are bedrooms above the shop. You could sleep there."

Eggsy makes a pained wince. "I don't know if that's such a good idea," he says. "Kinda weird, sleeping above a room full of grenades and guns, you know?"

In fact Harry doesn't know, but he does know better than to say so. He's searching for another option when Eggsy says, "What about you? Do you live there? Or do you got a place of your own?"

Surprised, he glances over and sees the careful way Eggsy is trying to keep his expression neutral, like there is nothing riding on Harry's answer. But he's unable to keep the hope out of his voice – and with a jolt Harry realises that Eggsy is giving him a way to suggest what they both want.

This is his last chance to do the right thing. To put his duty to Kingsman and country first. To reject the magnetism pulling him and Eggsy together and remain the solitary creature of habit life has made of him.

It may be the biggest mistake he's ever made, but he simply can't do it. After a day of bending the rules when necessary and outright breaking them when that was needful too, this final step hardly
It's just two simple sentences, so easy to say he marvels that he could ever have contemplated not saying them.

"I have a house," Harry says quietly. "You're welcome to stay there if you like."

"Yeah, okay," Eggsy says with no hesitation whatsoever.

"All right," Harry says.

And that's it. The final line has been crossed. There is no looking back now.

"Where do you live?" Eggsy asks.

"Stanhope Mews," Harry replies. He doesn't expect Eggsy to know it, and indeed that turns out to be the case, if Eggsy's blank look is anything to go by. He's actually glad. Most people leap to conclusions upon hearing a certain address, and make assumptions about the person living there. The class gap between them is nearly as wide as the difference in their ages; the less reinforcing of that divide, the better.

Swiftly he runs through a mental image of his home as it was when he left it this morning, making sure there is nothing that will outright embarrass him. Everything was put away, though, as it should be, and the house was just cleaned a couple days ago. He always keeps a spare set of toiletries in the guest bath, although it's usually Merlin who uses them, and even then not very often, so there will be no need to stop anywhere along the way. The spare room may be dusty, but the night is cool without being chilly, and an open window will fix that problem easily enough.

He spots a cab coming down Regent Street, and without thinking raises his arm to hail it. "Do you need anything?" he asks. "Or should we go straight there?"

"I'm fine," Eggsy says. There's colour in his cheeks now that he's suddenly faced with the result of his verbal manoeuvering. But he meets Harry's gaze head on, without flinching.

The cab signals its intent to pull over, and Harry stops walking. This is completely insane and he knows it. Merlin would argue vehemently against it. Arthur would castigate him in the fiercest of terms, no doubt in front of others, just to get the full effect. He berates himself for it even as he steps toward the kerb.

He has no regrets as he opens the cab door. "Right," he says. "Shall we?"

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"What the fuck is all this?" Eggsy walks into the office with a look of horror. "I mean, I figured you had questionable decorating skills after I seen all them pictures downstairs, but this is just mental." He looks around at the Sun headlines and shakes his head. "Fucking hell, Harry."

Harry says nothing to Eggsy's comment, but he is amused by it all the same. He smiles a little as he walks over to his desk. He sits down and stretches his legs out, grateful for the chance to take his weight off his aching knee.

The cab ride here did not take long in spite of the evening traffic. Unlike the ride from the Black Prince, though, the tension between them this time was sweeter, almost pleasant.

More like anticipation.

No one saw them walk in together; his neighbours are either in for the evening or still out. Eggsy had
arched his scarred eyebrow at his first sight of all the pictures crowded onto Harry's walls, but he had refrained from saying anything. Harry had led him on a brief tour, showing off the kitchen and dining room while deftly leaving out Mr. Pickle in the downstairs loo and the location of the guns hidden throughout the house. After stopping in the guest room so Eggsy could see where he would be sleeping, Harry had led him up here.

Up until now Eggsy had followed him around somewhat slowly, maybe wondering if he had made a mistake in coming here, maybe wondering nervously just what Harry had planned for the rest of the night. Certainly he couldn't have anticipated the sight of the office with its red walls and newspaper clippings, because the moment he saw it, all his apprehension dropped away.

Now he wanders about, checking out the gaudy headlines. "I mean, what is all this?" he says, and Harry waits for it, for the question that will let him explain. He stops in front of one and points at it. "To Pee or Not to Pee? Really?"

"That," Harry says, "was the headline the day after I defused a dirty bomb in Paris."

Eggsy blinks, clearly not expecting this. He gets it right away, though, what each of those headlines means, and his expression changes as he gazes around the room. When he looks back at Harry, it's with the same combination of awe and respect that filled his eyes at the Black Prince. "Fucking hell," he says again.

Harry sits still, waiting for what he knows will come next.

Sure enough, Eggsy singles out another headline. Each one is connected to a mission, to a set of memories. Some of them are pleasant to recall. Others would give him screaming nightmares if let them (and sometimes they do even when he doesn't.) But each one is a victory, a time when the world went on spinning, when people went about their daily lives with no idea that a man in a bespoke suit had made it possible for them.

"Germany 1, England 5," Eggsy says. He looks expectantly at Harry.

"Missed that game," he replies. "I was breaking up an undercover spy ring at the Pentagon." And earning the wrath of Statesman for it, too. They've never forgiven him for infiltrating one of their national institutions instead of sending one of their own.

Eggsy shakes his head. He considers the wall, then walks deliberately to the oldest clipping, the one high up in the corner. He taps the paper right on Princess Di.

"My first mission," Harry says. Technically he was still in training then, but as it was the mission that made him a Kingsman and earned him the name Galahad, he long ago decided it counts. "Foiled the assassination of Margaret Thatcher."

Eggsy doesn't seem pleased by this. "Not everybody would thank you for that one," he says darkly. He walks over and settles himself in the room's only other chair. He slouches as he sits, legs spread a little, head back.

Harry tries not to let himself be too distracted by this sight, but it isn't easy. "The point is, Eggsy, nobody thanked me for any of them. Front page news on all these occasions was celebrity nonsense. Because it's the nature of Kingsman that our achievements remain secret."

Eggsy nods a little at this, which is really nothing more than common sense. Even MI6 keeps their exploits out of the papers -- and everyone knows they exist.

"A gentleman's name should appear in the newspaper only three times," Harry continues. He can
hear how stuffy he sounds, and he hates that, but it's too late now so he keeps going. "When he is
born, when he marries, and when he dies. And we are, first and foremost, gentlemen."

Eggsy makes a rude nose, making it quite clear what he thinks of this. "That's me fucked then. I'm
just a pleb."

"Nonsense," Harry says. It doesn't escape his notice that Eggsy speaks as though he too planned one
day to become a Kingsman. Maybe he isn't even aware of how it sounded. Or maybe he knows full
well, and this is a way of testing Harry to see what he says.

There is only one response Harry can make, though. Swiftly he rises to Eggsy's defense. Yes, Eggsy
comes from a rough neighbourhood, and yes, both his accent and his manners betray his upbringing,
but that certainly does not make him a bad person. He is brave and generous and loyal. Only the
accident of his birth means he is not already a fine gentleman.

"Being a gentleman has nothing to do with the circumstances of one's birth," he says. "Being a
gentleman is something one learns," he says.

"Yeah, but how?" Eggsy says. He sounds defeated already, like he knows perfectly well there is no
answer to that question. He is never going to be a Kingsman or a gentleman. He has been told all his
life that he is hopeless, that he is stupid, that he is good for nothing and will amount to nothing. He
hasn't yet fully accepted that into his heart, but if things don't change for him -- and soon -- he will.
And then it really will be too late for him.

Right then and there Harry makes a decision. Fuck Chester King and his elitist attitude. Fuck Merlin
even for refusing to help, for wanting to keep Eggsy at arm's length. Fuck all of them if they can't see
what is so plain to Harry: that Eggsy belongs in Kingsman.

"All right, first lesson," he says. "You should have asked me before you took a seat."

Eggsy's face falls, his disappointment palpable. At the same time, he seems to have expected it. After
all, everyone else always finds fault with him; why should Harry be any different?

"Second lesson," Harry says. "How to make a proper martini."

For the second time that day, Eggsy just lights up. And just like before, Harry's breath is taken away
by his sheer beauty. "Yes, Harry!" He's on his feet in a flash, alight with anticipation.

Harry rises from his chair a little more slowly. But underneath his veneer of calm, he finds he is
nearly as eager as Eggsy is.

Since they are going to be spending a bit more time together, Harry makes another impulsive
decision. Eggsy already knows most of the secrets regarding Kingsman and himself. One more won't
matter much in the scheme of things.

Trying to keep it casual, like he isn't about to start stripping off all his clothes, he undoes the buttons
of his jacket. He slides his arms out of the sleeves and turns to drape the jacket over his chair. The
move hurts his ribs and he catches his breath, praying Eggsy doesn't hear it.

No need to worry. Eggsy makes his own sound, barely audible but unmistakably shocked.

He straightens up, and yes, Eggsy is staring. Not at the gun in its holster, though, as he expected –
but directly at him.

"Fuck," Eggsy breathes.
Not at all displeased, Harry slides the holster off his shoulders, moving with care this time, all the while noting the way Eggsy's fascinated gaze follows every moment. At his age it requires quite a bit of effort to stay strong and agile, and for the most part he is proud of his body. It feels good to show off for Eggsy, to see the colour suffuse Eggsy's cheeks once again.

"Might as well get comfortable," he says.

"Yeah," Eggsy says, and it comes out like a croak. But he responds in kind, removing his jacket and laying it over the chair where he was just sitting. He's still wearing the striped shirt he had on this morning at the Black Prince, which momentarily throws Harry for a loop; so much has happened since then that it almost feels like entire days have passed, not mere hours.

Did he really only meet Eggsy yesterday? Did they really only start talking to each other this morning? It seems impossible.

"So, are we…?" Eggsy gestures toward the door.

"After you," Harry says.

Eggsy heads for the door and the stairs, and Harry follows. Of course he does. He's been following Eggsy ever since he met him, even when he was standing still all afternoon waiting for Eggsy to come to him. And as he sets foot on the stairs, the most curious sensation falls over him. That even though he is merely walking, he is in fact actually hurtling forward.

Toward what, he can't say. But he is unafraid of it, whatever it is.

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"Harry, can I ask you a question?"

It's late, nearly midnight, and they are in the living room. Eggsy lounges on the couch, holding his fourth martini of the night. He laughed his head off when he first heard Harry's rather ridiculous recipe for the perfect martini, then laughed even harder when Harry admitted he borrowed the concept from Winston Churchill. But he stopped laughing at that first sip, and though he's obviously not used to drinking straight alcohol, he's held his own admirably.

Harry would be hard pressed to say when he's passed a more enjoyable evening. He discarded his Kingsman glasses two hours ago, although they are on the coffee table where he will not miss a summoning ping, should they go off. His tie too is a casualty of war, although he has to admit he's not sure if he left it in the dining room or the kitchen.

He sits in the armchair across from the couch, holding his currently empty glass. He would like another drink, but with his dwindling rational brain he knows that would be a bad idea. He didn't sleep at all last night and it's been a very long day. He's had too much to drink already, although to be fair, the most intoxicating part of the night hasn't been the alcohol, but Eggsy's charming company.

It's clear Eggsy is drunk, or very close to it. But he seems sober enough now, his eyes fixed on Harry's face as he waits.

"Of course," Harry says. He has been honest with Eggsy from the start, or as much as he could be. He sees no reason to stop now.

Eggsy takes a deep breath. "Is all this because of my dad? You making sure my mum and me is safe and all that? Like, you feel guilty about what happened or something?"
Harry doesn't know how to respond. He supposes it ought to be about Lee. He should be thinking about poor dead Lee Unwin and the family that was left to struggle on without him. But he isn't. He hasn't thought about Lee since leaving Eggsy's flat this morning. Spending all this time with Eggsy has been like some kind of fantastical story, the kind of thing that should leave him groaning with scornful derision but instead has him feeling utterly grateful that it even happened at all.

No, it's all about Eggsy. It's only about Eggsy.

There is no way to say that out loud, though, without sounding like a complete arsehole. So Harry just says, “No.”

Eggsy looks at him. "That's it? Just, 'no'?

"I'm not sure what you want me to say," Harry replies. "I owe your father a debt I can never repay; I wouldn't be sitting here now if it weren't for him. But I would have done all this for you and your family regardless of whose son you were."

Eggsy's mouth tightens. He glowers down at his drink. "Cause I'm your responsibility now. Part of your mission."

"That is part of it, yes," Harry allows. He can hardly lie and say it's not true, after all. Eggsy is not stupid, nor would Harry insult his intelligence by pretending that keeping Eggsy safe is not his duty now. "But not the larger part by far."

Now Eggsy's glower becomes more pronounced. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

There's nothing for it. He has to explain himself, and somehow not sound like a complete perv or a nutter. Harry faces him squarely, grateful to the years of deception and training that allow him to keep his expression under control. It isn't easy, what with the gin and all, but somehow he manages.

"It means," he says, "that I am glad you're here. I've greatly enjoyed our time together."

Some of the challenge fades from Eggsy's eyes. That bewitching pink colour stains his cheeks again. "Yeah, me too," he mumbles into his drink.

"And when this is over," Harry says, "I hope we can still spend time together."

Eggsy's gaze flies up to meet his. He looks both surprised and happy, like he can't believe what he just heard. "You serious?"

"Very much so," Harry says.

Eggsy stares at him for a long moment, then glances down at his martini. He swirls his drink a little, and when he speaks, it's clear that he's trying very hard to sound casual. "I want that, too," he says. He inhales deeply and looks up at Harry -- and this time he doesn't look away. "And I been telling myself all day that I'm fucking mental, that it's just me bein' grateful for all you did for Daisy and my mum, and the way you kept them wankers from beating me up and all, but that ain't it. That ain't it at all."

Harry sits very still. The small part of him that remains sober and clearheaded sends up a flare of alarm, but he chooses not to heed it. All day he has been thinking the same thing, that he's mad to feel so strongly for this person he just met and whom he hardly knows. To find Eggsy has been thinking the same thing only makes the whole situation seem even more insane.

How then, can it also feel so right?
Slowly, never taking his eyes off Harry, Eggsy gets off the couch. He sets his drink on the coffee table next to the Kingsman glasses that have been mercifully silent all night. He walks the few paces separating the couch from the armchair where Harry sits.

"Tell me I ain't imagining this," Eggsy says.

"You're not," Harry says.

Eggsy comes in closer. He smells of martinis and the restaurant where they had dinner. His eyes are so clear, an astonishing colour somewhere between blue and green. "You know I've wanted you since I met you last night."

Torn between duty and desire, Harry gazes up at him. This is truly it, his absolute last chance to salvage the situation and keep them from going down a road that is probably just leading to disaster. He can gently turn Eggsy around, remind him that they only just met, that this is not a good idea for a multitude of reasons.

Instead he confesses, "As have I."

"I fucking knew it," Eggsy breathes. He starts to bend down, but Harry abruptly stands up, making him back away a tiny bit. He blinks, suddenly unsure of himself.

Still holding his empty glass, Harry leans in. Seeing that, Eggsy meets him halfway.

Their first kiss is soft and sweet and tastes like gin. It makes his cut lip hurt but Harry doesn't care. He doesn't know what to do with his hands, wants to hold Eggsy close, wants to touch him all over, but his glass is in one hand and he's terrified of ruining this moment. So he simply stands there, his lips pressed to Eggsy's, and he wishes it could last forever.
It doesn't, of course. Eggsy pulls back and gazes up at him, lips wet and slightly parted.
They stare at each other for a moment, neither of them moving. Then Harry deliberately drops his glass on the chair behind him and they fall together again.

There is nothing sweet about this kiss. It is heat and breath and want. Eggsy's arms rise to encircle him, and it hurts, pain stabbing his ribs, but Harry barely notices. He lays one hand flat on Eggsy's back, feels the play of muscles there, and deepens their kiss. He has not felt such pure lust for someone in years.

Eggsy's hands roam over his back and up to his shoulders. He groans a little, a deep sound that vibrates down into Harry's throat as they kiss and pull at each other.

And then he suddenly backs away, letting go of Harry completely. His eyes are wide, his mouth red. His erection is very noticeable.

And yet it's over, Harry realises. Now that he is not kissing Eggsy, he too is coming to his senses.

"Right," he says quietly. "We've been drinking."

"Yeah," Eggsy breathes, a bit unsteady. "Maybe not such a good idea."

"Yes, you're right," Harry says. Even though he wants nothing more than to touch Eggsy again, to kiss him again, to make Eggsy groan again.

Eggsy backs away another step. He licks his lips, looking uncertain. Like part of him very badly wants to go back to what they were doing.

But they can't. They mustn't. Harry takes a calming breath, unable to ignore the warning throb in his ribs that time and wincing a little. "Perhaps we should just call it a night. It's late, after all."

Eggsy nods. He seems both grateful for this excuse, and disappointed by it. "Yeah."

Harry makes himself smile. "Good night, Eggsy."

Eggsy blinks, apparently realising he's just been dismissed. But there's really nowhere else for him to go, so he nods again. "Night." He hesitates. "Thanks for letting me stay."

"Of course," Harry says smoothly. Yes it's late and he is half-drunk and exhausted, but he also knows perfectly well that he's going to lie awake in spite of all that. He knows his mind is going to torment him for hours, gifting him with images of Eggsy sleeping in the bedroom down the hall.

He tries not to wonder if Eggsy will be thinking the same thing about him.

Eggsy turns and heads for the stairs. Harry watches him go and waits until he hears the door upstairs close before he lets out the breath he didn't even know he was holding. He looks down at the martini glass lying on the chair cushion and he closes his eyes.

"Fuck."

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To his surprise, Harry falls asleep almost right away. His sleep is deep and peaceful; if he dreams, he does not remember it.

He wakes up shortly after five a.m. and hobbles toward the loo, his injured knee stiff and aching. As he washes his hands, he studies his reflection in the mirror with a frown. The bruising on his face has just started to fade, but is still annoyingly noticeable. The lines about his eyes seem deeper than
usual, adding the weight of years. He looks old and tired, not at all like a man who would be considered attractive to someone like Eggsy Unwin.

He sighs and returns to his bedroom. There is still an hour before his alarm goes off. He should try to get some more sleep.

But he is awake now, his mind racing. Getting back to sleep is not going to happen, and he knows it.

He hopes Eggsy slept well, but that leads to thoughts of Eggsy lying in bed, possibly naked or bare-chested, and he has to push those thoughts away. He doesn't want to think about Eggsy like that. Not until he knows for sure where they stand. Last night's kiss might have been a drunken one-off they can later blame on the martinis. Or it might have been the first step toward something that's both a bit frightening and terribly exciting all at the same time. Only time will tell.

Lying there in the dark, Harry makes plans. He will make breakfast for them both; nothing too heavy, though, in case Eggsy is hungover or feeling ill from all that gin last night. Eggsy will want a change of clothing, but the particulars will be up to him. There are probably some clothes in Harry's closet that won't be too large on him, or they can simply outfit him at the shop.

Because that will be their first stop of the day. They are going to Savile Row, where Harry fully intends to finally sit down with Chester King and have a long talk. He will explain everything that happened with Blackbird and Ludchenko, how he met Eggsy in Victoria Station and who Eggsy turned out to be. And then he will make his case for Eggsy's admittance into Kingsman.

On this he is adamant. He doesn't necessarily expect them to take Eggsy on as an agent, although he thinks Eggsy would do well in that role. But there are plenty of other jobs Eggsy would excel at. He could be an analyst, a handler, or one of the unsung heroes who do all the mundane work for the agents: setting up fake IDs, booking hotel rooms, arranging transportation, all the things someone like Harry takes for granted when going out into the field. He could be a pilot, a driver, a mechanic. He could be out there working informants, creating new contacts and spy networks, acting as liaison between the agents and the people who provide them with all their information.

The point is, Harry tells himself, there are options. He may have only just met Eggsy, but he trusts his own judgement, would do so even if he didn't have years of experience backing him up. Already he knows that a place must be found for Eggsy in Kingsman. This is where he belongs.

Assuming, of course, that Eggsy wants it.

That offer will not be easy to make. Last night Eggsy expressed his suspicion that Harry's involvement was motivated by guilt. A job offer today will only seem to confirm those suspicions, while smacking of charity at the same time.

But he has to try. Eggsy deserves so much more than what life has given him so far. He deserves at least a chance to better himself and his life.

With half an hour to go before the alarm, Harry finally gives up. He climbs out of bed, wincing at the throb in his ribs and sparing a few moments to stand there with his hand pressed to his side. He's still not convinced that they're broken, but that doesn't make the pain any less.

Even allowing for slower movement thanks to his injuries, he's still just setting breakfast on the table by the time Eggsy finally wanders downstairs, face a bit puffy, eyes somewhat bleary. But he perks up well enough when he sees the spread on the table and smells the coffee. "What's all this?"

"It's this new thing called breakfast," Harry says. "I heard it's all the rage in Europe. Thought I'd give
"Cute," Eggsy says as he pours himself a cup of coffee. He sips cautiously, not wanting to burn his tongue. He lowers the cup and exhales in delight. "Oh, that's fucking delicious."

Pleased that he likes it, Harry smiles. He gestures to the food. "Go ahead."

Eggsy doesn't need to be told twice.

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The skies are grey and lightly drizzling by the time they leave. For probably the first time in his life, Harry is actually early; the shop won't even be open yet when they arrive.

That's fine, he thinks. He could use the time to plan what he's going to say to Arthur. And he can feel Eggsy out for any sign that he's interested in joining Kingsman.

Because of the weather, they take a cab to Savile Row. Today there is no tension at all between them. Neither of them have mentioned what happened last night, but it's clear that Eggsy isn't worried about being so physically close to Harry, nor does he seem embarrassed. Of course there's always a chance that he simply doesn't remember what happened last night thanks to all the alcohol, but Harry doesn't think that's the case; he didn't have that much to drink, after all.

No, the realistic – and yet decidedly more fantastic – option is that Eggsy remembers their kiss perfectly well, but doesn't regret it.

Savile Row gleams under the city lights, the pavements wet and shining. The display light is on in the window, but the rest of the shop is dark and quiet. Harry uses his security code to get in, and opens the door for Eggsy.

Eggsy looks around with mild interest. On the cab ride over, he said he had talked to his mum, and she was thoroughly enjoying herself and being utterly spoiled by the staff of the five-star hotel. Apparently even Daisy seemed happy there, although Harry was hard pressed to know how a baby could tell the difference.

"So we gonna hang out here all day?" He doesn't seem too thrilled by the prospect.

"No," Harry says. "I need to speak with my boss." He also needs to meet with Amelia and discuss what she found on Blackbird's phone, and familiarise himself with the evidence of MP Mason's treason. Then he needs to pay the MP a visit. And then, should Arthur extend the mandate of his mission so far, he would very much like to deal with Ludchenko once and for all. He owes that man for quite a few things, starting with Blackbird's death and ending with his own fragile ribcage.

Eggsy toys with the end of a tie on display. "What's gonna happen to me?"

"I don't know," Harry replies. "That's one of the things I need to discuss with my boss."

Eggsy nods. He doesn't look up. "Well, you know, I'll still help you. If I can." He shrugs like the offer means nothing. In point of fact there is almost nothing left for him to do, but until Ludchenko is dealt with, his and his family's safety is still an issue. That means he is still Kingsman's responsibility.

"Thank you," Harry says. "I appreciate that."

"You know, it's funny," Eggsy says. "I almost didn't meet with you yesterday. I thought about telling you I ditched the phone somewhere, that all this was just too fucking weird for me, or something like
that." He finally looks up, a tentative smile on his face. "I'm glad I did, though."

Harry smiles back. "So am I."

He spots movement at the corner of his eye then, and he glances up, not expecting much. Even at this early hour, there is traffic on Savile Row; someone has already walked past just in the short time he and Eggsy have been here.

But this is not a random pedestrian walking by. The man walks right up to the door, and Harry sees the gun in his hand at the same time he recognises the face and IDs the man as one of Ludchenko's associates. As two others come into view, including Ludchenko himself, there is a muffled gunshot, then the outer door is shoved open.

It all happens very fast. Harry reacts instinctively, drawing his gun at the same time he smoothly steps in front of Eggsy, shielding him from attack. As the three Russians enter the shop, he knows a moment of clarity, a single instant when his spy's mind makes connections and reaches inescapable conclusions.

They followed Eggsy. They've been following Eggsy, right from the start. From wherever he was yesterday morning to here. To the restaurant in Piccadilly. To his own house in Stanhope Mews. Only the civilian crowds and their healthy concern about Harry's abilities and whatever traps might lie in wait in his house have stayed their hand. But now the moment has arrived, their best chance to achieve their goal. There is no one else here, the street is relatively quiet at this early hour, and their targets are alone.

They don't know that Kingsman is not just a tailor shop. Nor can they know the bright rage Harry feels at seeing them enter this place, this sacrosanct territory. Once again he has failed. He was so caught up in Eggsy's presence that he failed to notice them following last night. Overcome by Eggsy's charm and his own attraction, he had let his guard down. Now he's facing the consequences – and they are disastrous.

All this passes through his mind in a moment, in the time it takes for Ludchenko to step into the shop and stare coldly at him.

One of the Russians fires. So does Harry.

The Russian goes down, a hole between his eyes.

The bullet strikes Harry right above his heart. It's a good shot. A very good shot. The impact sends him reeling backward. Already his chest is numb.

But they don't know. Just like they don't know this place is so much more than a tailor shop, neither do they know about the suits produced here.

But neither does Eggsy.

As Harry falls, Eggsy screams in horror, in denial, in grief.

Harry twists as he collapses. It's going to hurt like hell when he lands, and he braces himself. But they mustn't see the front of his suit. They mustn't see the lack of blood, the evidence that they have not in fact killed him. If they do, they will shoot him again, and this time it will be a head shot.

He lands hard. Instinct and training scream at him to roll, to keep moving, to minimise himself as a target. Instead he makes himself lie there as one who is badly injured, his left arm pinned beneath him. Undignified, breathless sounds of pain escape him; they add authenticity to his charade, but are
unfortunately all too real.

The remaining Russian hurries forward and kicks the gun out of his hand so hard he's fortunate that
none of his fingers break. The gun skitters across the floor, toward the counter where Andrew spends
most of his day indulgently tending Kingsman's clients.

For a moment there is silence in the shop, broken only by Eggy's rapid, panicky breathing. Then
Ludchenko says, "Where is the phone?"

"What?" Eggy's voice is high-pitched in fright.

"The phone," Ludchenko says. He sounds terribly patient. "I know you had it. What have you done
with it?"

"I don't know what you're on about," Eggy says. He hasn't moved. He stands there with his hands
raised, and he keeps glancing down at where Harry lies at his feet. If he were a Kingsman, Harry
would be able to signal him with subtle eye movements and gestures. Instead Harry can only gaze up
at him with dulling eyes.

"You will give me the phone," Ludchenko says, "unless you wish to join him."

That fast, Eggy folds. "Yeah, okay. I will. Just... just don't hurt him anymore, okay?" There is a
quiver in his voice, and he's still breathing far too fast.

Harry lies still, a dying man. The dead Russian is unmoving in front of the door. The other Russian
has his gun pointed at Harry, ready to move in case he should try anything. Ludchenko's weapon is
aimed at Eggy.

And Eggy... He can't imagine what Eggy intends with this ploy, pretending he still has the phone.
He fears the outcome, and yet he has no choice but to let it play out.

For now.

"Where is it?" Ludchenko demands. His face is cold but handsome. He wasn't present when Harry
made his escape from his custody. If he had been, he wouldn't be standing here right now, but lying
in an unmarked grave somewhere north of London. It's an oversight Harry doesn't plan to make a
second time.

"It's in there," Eggy says. He gestures toward fitting room one. Then he looks down at Harry, his
face screwed up in a pained wince. "I'm so sorry. I hid it in there when you were giving me the tour.
I wasn't sure if I could trust you."

The sheer audacity of his lie is breathtaking. Faced with imminent death, believing that the only
person who might save him is dying at his feet, he still has the courage and the wherewithal to come
up with a believable story. Harry could fall in love with him simply for that.

Still unsure what Eggy plans to do, but trusting him to know what's right, Harry plays along. "And
the phone..." He gasps a little, dying and out of breath. "...you gave me?"


"Enough," Ludchenko says. He glances once at Harry, triumph bright in his eyes. It's an added
cruelty, thinking that Harry has just been humiliated before dying. A man like him would love such a
thing.
And Eggsy apparently knows it.

Ludchenko gestures sharply with his gun. Eggsy flinches, then realises what's expected of him. With a last lingering look down at Harry, he slumps off toward fitting room one.

Harry watches them go; he's lying facing that direction. He watches as first Eggsy disappears into the fitting room, then Ludchenko. And then he's left alone with only the Russian watching over him.

"I hid it in here." Eggsy's voice drifts out into the shop, somewhat muffled. "In there."

A drawer is opened. There is an unidentified noise. Then a gunshot, swiftly followed by another.

_Eggsy_

Terrorstricken, Harry kicks out at the Russian standing over him. His foot catches the man squarely in the knee; with a yell, the man goes down. By then Harry is up and lunging at him, reaching for the gun the Russian is already aiming at him.

It's a brief, brutal struggle that ends with the Russian dead and Harry holding the gun. He rises to his feet, almost slips on the blood on the floor, and hurries toward the fitting room.

It only takes him a couple seconds to reach the doorway, but in that time a dozen different visions pass through his mind, each worse than the one that came before. He sees Eggsy dying, bleeding out. Eggsy dead, those beautiful eyes glazed over, clever hands forever still. Eggsy dead, and with him, the future that might have been.

He reaches the fitting room and grabs at the doorway as he sways to a halt. The sight that greets him freezes the blood in his veins. Ludchenko is dead on the floor, slumped against the wall with a hole between his eyes. Eggsy stands beside the mirror, holding a Kingsman pistol with both hands. The gun is aimed at Harry's head. He's deathly pale, but his hands are steady.

Harry lowers his gun. "Eggsy."

Eggsy stares at him. The whites of his eyes are visible. "You was shot."

"No," Harry says. "Well, yes, but not quite. Every Kingsman suit is bulletproof."

Eggsy blinks. His arms sag a little. "The fuck?"

Harry reaches up and pulls the bullet out of his lapel. He'll be bruised and sore for days, but the suit has once again saved his life. He holds the bullet up for Eggsy to see, then deliberately drops it to the floor.

"Oh my God," Eggsy says. He lowers the gun. "Fucking hell. I thought you were dying!"

"I thought he killed you," Harry says. He knows he heard two gunshots. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Eggsy shakes his head. "He missed." And yes, even as he speaks Harry spots the second bullet, the one Ludchenko fired. It's embedded in the wall beside the mirror. Most likely it missed Eggsy's skull by inches.

But it did miss.

And Eggsy did not.

They stare at each other across the small space in the fitting room. From start to finish the whole
thing lasted no more than five minutes, but to Harry it feels as though an age has passed since this morning. He and Eggsy smiled at each other over breakfast. They waited together for the cab that would take them to Savile Row. And now they have each faced the fear that the other was dead.

There are practical things to be done now. Arthur must be alerted. Merlin must be told. The bodies must be moved and the blood cleaned up. The front door with the lock that has been shot out must be replaced. But just then Harry doesn't think about any of that.

He thinks only of Eggsy, and the pure relief of getting to hold him again. Of getting to kiss him.

Eggsy hugs him fiercely, and Harry doesn't even care about the pain of his now-definitely-broken ribs. And when Eggsy demands in between kisses, "Don't you ever fucking do that to me again," Harry can only kiss him back in silent promise.

Eggsy leans up into the kiss, rising onto his toes a little, clutching at Harry with restless urgency, hands grabbing at his suit jacket, his shoulders, his waist. His mouth is hot and desperate, never still; his breath on Harry's skin sends shivers through him.

"You were very clever," he murmurs against the corner of Eggsy's mouth. He wonders if this is the first time Eggsy has ever killed someone, if he will be all right. It was a lucky shot with Ludchenko, but the end result is still the same. "So brave."

"I thought I was gonna lose you," Eggsy gasps.

"I would never," Harry vows. He has no idea what the future will bring for them, but he knows one thing for certain: whatever it is, they will face it together.

In those few moments when he thought Eggsy was dead, that his brave sacrifice had been for nothing, he had died a hundred times over. It doesn't matter that they scarcely know each other, or that they've only had one day together. Harry knows beyond a doubt that he and Eggsy belong together.

"Are you really okay?" Eggsy demands. He pulls back a little so he can study Harry's face, but doesn't let go of his shoulders.

"Yes," Harry says.

"You shoulda fucking told me about the suits," Eggsy glowers.

"Yes, I should have," he agrees. It would have been a lot kinder if he had. But what's done is done. Eggsy looks down, and he grimaces. "Fuck. I really nailed him."

"Yes, you did," Harry says. He looks dispassionately at Ludchenko, and the bullet in his forehead.

He has no emotion over Ludchenko's death except satisfaction. His mission is one step closer to being complete; there is one less item to resolve now. Ludchenko has ceased to be a man and become simply one more objective that can be crossed off a mental checklist.

But seeing the dead body is a forcible reminder that there is still plenty that must be done. So with some reluctance, Harry releases Eggsy and steps away. "We have to do a few things now, and we have to do them quickly. Do you trust me?"

Eggsy stares at him. "Yeah, I do. I mean, I probably shouldn't." He utters a quick, nervous laugh, then grows serious once more. "But I do."
"Good," Harry says. "Then let's get started."

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Epilogue

By noon everything is sorted out.

Ludchenko and his two associates are gone, the bodies discreetly disposed of by the silent team whose job it is to clean up the messes created by the Kingsman agents. Merlin shows up for a while, clipboard in hand, and nods in satisfaction. He introduces himself to Eggsy and they shake hands. Eggsy doesn't quite know how to react to him at first, but when he realises Merlin is the one who arranged the hotel stay for his mother, he warms to him at once. And Merlin, much to Harry's quiet amusement, responds in kind, chatting with Eggsy for some time.

Seeing that, Harry feels safe enough to retreat to HQ and Medical. There is no getting around it this time. The official verdict is exactly what he expects: broken ribs with attendant bruising. He is ordered to rest as much as possible, given another bottle of rather strong painkillers to join the ones standing in an orderly row in his medicine cabinet, and released.

When he returns to the shop, Merlin is discussing repair work for the shop with Andrew, while Eggsy looks on. When Eggsy spots him walking out of fitting room one, his entire face lights up.

"Was wondering when you were gonna show up."

Merlin glances up and their eyes meet. They will talk about it later, Harry knows, just the two of them chatting over drinks as they so often do. He will do his best to explain how he fell under Eggsy's spell so quickly, but he thinks it won't actually be that difficult. Now that Merlin has met him too, it might in fact be quite easy to explain.

Arthur, however, is a different story.

Exhaustion is starting to set in, but there is still this one last thing to be done before he can sit down with Eggsy. So with reluctance, Harry walks over and says, "How are you doing?"

"Okay," Eggsy says with a nod. It's not a satisfactory answer, but it could well be the truth. For now, at least. Things might be very different in a few hours, once he's had some more time for it all to sink in. "I talked to my mum. She's having fun at the hotel." He pauses, studying Harry a little more closely than before. "How are you?"

"I'm all right," Harry says. They could stand here all day, he realises, exchanging inane small talk and staring at each other to the exclusion of everyone else in the room. So he takes as deep a breath as his wounded ribs allow, and he forges ahead. Doing his duty one more time.

"I'm very sorry," he says, "but I must speak with my boss now. Will you be all right here for a while longer yet?"

Eggsy bristles a little, his shoulders coming up. "I'm fine. I'm not a kid, you know."

Harry ignores this jibe. "I only don't want you to think I'm trying to avoid talking with you." He watches the way Eggsy's eyes widen a little at this, then continues, "If it were up to me we would have already found somewhere to talk. But I really must meet with my boss before I do anything else." He gives Eggsy a faint smile. "I'm already in enough hot water with him, I'm afraid."
Eggsy nods. Already he's relaxed. And at Harry's last comment, he frowns a little, those lines of concern appearing between his eyes. It's the same way he looked on the video from Victoria Station, when he witnessed Harry abducted by the Russians, when all he could do was stand there and watch.

"Anything I can do?" he offers.

"No," Harry says, but he relieves the rejection with a smile, this one more warm. "But thank you."

"Yeah, well," Eggsy says. He shrugs one shoulder, striving for casual. "Just so you know, I got your back and all."

"I do know that," Harry says. And he does. If he hadn't already been convinced of that fact from Eggsy's behaviour at the Black Prince, this morning would have forever laid any doubts to rest.

With Eggsy's smile to brace him, he heads upstairs for his appointment with Chester King.

It isn't pleasant. After a perfunctory greeting, Harry takes his accustomed seat at the enormous table in the upstairs dining room, facing the music. He remains quiet while Arthur paces the room in a controlled fury, hands clasped behind his back. Arthur brings up every failure he made on this mission, beginning with Blackbird's assassination, moving on to his colossal blunder of giving the phone to an ignorant civilian -- and a thief, no less! -- before dwelling for some time on his refusal to come in and debrief, thus demonstrating how insubordinate he is.

"Yet you still could have salvaged this," Arthur says, "had you only followed proper procedure and wiped the boy's memory." He stops pacing then and stares at Harry, standing behind his chair at the head of the table. "Instead you brought him here. You showed him some of our most carefully kept secrets. You behaved as if he were one of us!"

There will never be a better opening than that, and so for the first time in nearly twenty minutes, Harry speaks.

"He is one of us," he says.

It takes all of his powers of persuasion, along with a steely-eyed review of the security camera footage of this morning's events, to finally sway Arthur. Not much, of course; Chester King has not budged from his stance on an issue in over thirty years. But ultimately he is forced to grant, however grudgingly, that Eggsy showed uncommon intelligence for someone in his position, and that his loyalty is beyond question.

"You may officially bring him in," Chester finally says. "But not as an agent. I will not allow it, Galahad." His eyes grow narrow and dark with suspicion. It's a very unattractive look for him. "And don't even think of going all noble on me and resigning your seat so the boy can have yours."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Harry says loftily. "Abandon Eggsy to you? I know you have a low opinion of me, Arthur, but that's going too far even for you."

Chester's face purples at that, but he holds his tongue. Not out of any compassion or respect, Harry knows, but from a more base cunning. Chester will allow Harry his little folly. And the very moment Eggsy fucks up for the first time, he will be there to swoop in and declare the little experiment over, and banish Eggsy forever.

Not that Harry has any intention of letting him, of course.

But for now he keeps his peace, too. Two can play this game – and he was always a far better player
than Chester King ever was.

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And then at last they have the chance to talk. At last they can be alone. And the offer he has been hoping to make since yesterday can finally be put into words.

They sit on the bench in the armory hidden behind fitting room three. It's the only place Harry could think of where they might talk in private. Arthur had declared that Eggsy could not leave the premises until his situation was sorted out, a demand Eggsy himself was thankfully unaware of, or things might have turned ugly in a hurry. For his part, Eggsy had seemed okay with staying, although it's clear that he's starting to become uncomfortable with all the attention.

"You're sure you're all right?" He remembers his first kill, the numbness afterward, the way he had honestly thought he wouldn't be affected after all, in spite of all the dire warnings he had received to the contrary. It wasn't until two nights later, when he woke up on the floor, the sheets twisted about his ankle as he tried to crawl away from the dead man that had been chasing him in his dreams, that he realised the effects had been there all along. He had just been too blind to see them.

"Yeah," Eggsy says. "I mean, I guess so." He shrugs a little. "I know I oughta feel bad, and I guess I do, but not really. He was gonna fucking kill me. I thought he had killed you." His eyes harden. He looks like a Kingsman then. "I'd do it again."

"I know you would," Harry says. "And I'm proud of you."

Eggsy looks startled by this, then he looks down, a flush creeping over his cheeks.

"You kept a cool head about you in an extremely volatile situation," Harry says. "You took steps to minimise the danger, you attempted to save my life, and you intended to take on a very dangerous man by yourself." He smiles a little to show he means no harm by his next words. "That was very foolish."

Eggsy winces minutely. An ugly light enters his eyes as he prepares to fight back.

"And it was also very brave," Harry continues. "And as it turns out, it was the right thing to do."

Totally at a loss now, Eggsy stares at him. "So you ain't angry with me?"

"Of course not," Harry says. "How could I be?" He considers reaching out and laying his hand on Eggsy's shoulder, but decides he had better not. Not just yet.

"You have consistently impressed me with your clever mind and your bravery," Harry says. "Today you impressed the rest of Kingsman." He smiles. "If you're interested, Eggsy, there is a place for you here."

Eggsy's bewilderment is now complete. "What, like a spy?"

"Of sorts," Harry says.

He waits patiently while Eggsy thinks it over. He can see the way Eggsy's emotions shift from one second to the next: confusion blending into self-satisfaction, pride warring with hope. He says nothing, though, giving Eggsy time to work it out for himself.

Eggsy looks at the weapons lining the wall as though he's seeing them for the first time. He frowns a little, then bites his lip. "Would I get one of them?"
"Possibly," Harry says. "It would depend on your actual assignment. And that would be up to you."

"I don't want to be a tailor," Eggsy says immediately. He flushes, but does not flinch away as he turns toward Harry.

"I think that can be arranged," Harry says. That was his promise as he was leaving Eggsy's flat yesterday morning, a promise that they would see each other again. A mere twenty-four hours later, though, it's become something entirely different.

"Good," Eggsy says. He smiles, slow but brilliant, his eyes lighting up.

"Regretfully, my mission is not yet concluded. I have an MP to go visit," Harry says. "And we have some treason to discuss. I was originally planning to go today, but it's already been a rather busy day so I was thinking I would put it off until tomorrow. Would you care to join me?"

Eggsy's smile could light up the entire city. "Fuck yeah," he says.

Harry smiles back. "I'm glad."

"So what are we gonna do the rest of the day?" Eggsy asks.

He can think of a dozen things ranging from the perfectly innocent to the completely obscene, but on impulse Harry says, "I thought we could get you fitted for your first suit. It's been a while since I measured anyone, but I'm sure I can remember how it's done."

"I bet you can," Eggsy murmurs. He shifts on the bench, moving a bit closer to where Harry sits. "And then?"

The encouragement in Eggsy's eyes is all he needs to see. "And then we could get some dinner," Harry says.

Eggsy nods, indicating his approval of these plans. He leans in just the tiniest bit. "And then?"

"And then," Harry says, "I'm going to show you how to make a proper martini."

"Again?" Eggsy teases. He smiles, but there's a dark edge to it now as his gaze rakes over Harry's body.

"This time," Harry promises, "I'll do it right."

"How's that?" Eggsy says, his voice almost a whisper.

"First lesson," Harry says. "You start like this." He leans in and kisses Eggsy. He barely has to move though; Eggsy is already there, anticipating him, meeting him halfway.

He still doesn't know the ending or how they'll get there, but as far as beginnings go, Harry thinks this one is just perfect.

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