Fidelity

by AnnaofAza, futuredescending

Summary

He should not carry the warmth of Eggsy’s mouth with him or the rapid pulse like machine gun fire in his neck.

He should not look at Eggsy and think about those eyes closing, spine slackening, pliant tongue becoming sure.

He should not greet Harry every morning with Eggsy’s saliva on his lips and the fingernail marks that had dug through his jumper.

In which everyone tries to do the right thing.

Notes

For futuredescending, who wrote gut-wrenching Merlin/Eggsy ficlet that wrung me out and brutally kicked me until I had to write something about it.

And now, together, we've created a train of angst.
Eggsy doesn’t particularly enjoy Kingsman’s meetings and Merlin is nothing if not his efficient, straight-to-the-point self, but these days their sprint-like appointments (mission briefings, debriefings, equipment testing, it didn’t matter) were shorter than ever, and still every second of them was born with excruciating tension, avoidant gazes, and clipped replies.

At the end of yet another forced gathering filled with awkward stops and starts, it’s Harry who brings up the matter first in his deceptively polite and arrestingly direct way. “Is there something that’s happened between the two of you I should be made aware of?”

“No,” Eggsy and Merlin answer simultaneously.

Harry just raises his brows in clear disbelief. “Alright, but do let me know when you’ve worked it out. We’ll throw a party,” he dryly says before switching gears, focusing on Eggsy, growing warmth in his eyes letting Eggsy know that business has concluded for the day. “Do you have plans for dinner tonight?”

“No….” Merlin immediately starts for the door, and Eggsy can’t help but track his swift retreat before turning back to Harry. “I’m sorry, what was the question?”

He feels like he’s being thoroughly dissected and examined by Harry’s penetrating gaze and struggles to not react. Harry finally takes pity on him and softens, reaching across the short distance between Arthur’s and Galahad’s positions at the table to take hold of his hand and draw it up to his mouth, kissing his scabbed over knuckles. “If you’re not otherwise engaged, then I would very much like to wine and dine you before taking you back home and thoroughly desecrating the bed.”

Even after six months of, for lack of a better term, chivalric courting and the official establishment of their—capital R—Relationship, Harry still has the propensity to make Eggsy blush with his uncanny ability to conflate the genteel and profane. And as off-balance as he currently feels, Eggsy knows his cheeks are positively flaming, but he still strives to make a show of thinking about it. “I’ll have to check my schedule and get back to you.”

A small smile toys at Harry’s lips and his eyes gleam with amusement. “Well, if you can find the time, I’ll be at the shuttle at seven.”

“So if I can find the time, you’ll be at the shuttle at half seven, is what will really happen.”

Harry looks like he wants to protest simply out of reflex, but finally concedes. “That very likely will be the case.”

It hadn’t always been this easy.

Harry has been legally dead for a good four months until the day he waltzes into the shop wearing an honest to God plaid shirt, khaki trousers, and hiking boots with a head half shaved and still swathed in bandages. His first words to the very badly shaken Andrew are, “Pardon me, if it’s not too much trouble, my dressings should be changed. There’s hopefully less drainage now,” before promptly passing out on a bolt of Italian silk-wool blend. Leave it to Harry to even do unconsciousness with
He remains that way for the next five days, and there is a serious possibility he would never wake up (something about too much fluid buildup in his head, they had to drain Harry’s skull like a coconut, for fuck’s sake) during which Eggsy camps out in Harry’s room, discovering the torture that are the medical wing’s chairs, experimenting with how long he could go without bathing before he starts to smell truly rank, and testing the upper limits of his sleep deprivation, and quite possibly, the endurance of his very soul.

But on the fifth day, like some new divine decree, Harry wakes up, moans about looking like Merlin when he learns the other half of his head had been shaved, takes one look at Eggsy in his wrinkled and ripe-smelling Kingsman suit, greasy hair, dark circles, and fraught expression, and fondly whispers, “But look at you, worth getting shot in the head for.”

Which is really as much a wretched thing to say as it is wonderful, and Eggsy, dancing on his very last tightly strung and sleep-deprived nerve, bursts into ugly, congested tears while Harry lets him snot all over his chest as he holds Eggsy and even pets his disgusting hair.

After that, he remains an adamant fixture by Harry’s side throughout his recovery, his physical therapy, the long and arduous process of becoming legally not dead, and his eventual installment onto the still-vacant Kingsman throne.

Harry’s first words as the newly-coronated Arthur are, “My greatest nightmare has been realised,” which makes the other knights laugh, even though he is being perfectly serious.

There are the few awkward moments when Harry is ready to go back to his home only to learn that Harry’s home had legally become Eggsy’s during the period of his temporary death.

“I’ll move out!” Eggsy blurs out. “I didn’t have much anyway, and I hadn’t really done much with the place.” It is supposed to be reassurance, but it isn’t until Eggsy voices the words that he realises how truly pathetic he sounds.

“Nonsense,” Harry easily brushes off. “I am not about to put you out of a house and home. You can have the guest.”

And that is how Harry and Eggsy become co-owners of a house together.

In hindsight, the Relationship had been pretty much inevitable. There are too many nights of going home together at the end of a long day, cooking dinner together, doing the washing up after, watching classic films, evening walks in the garden, doing the shopping, heading down to the local for a pint. Somehow, Harry could be gallant and chaste in his insisting upon wooing Eggsy old school style despite the fact they both live under the same roof, one of them is a sexually-interested, hot-blooded, young male, and neither finds the other’s body repulsive.

But the truth of the matter is that somewhere between getting bailed out of the nick, jumping out of airplanes thinking he had no parachute, not shooting his dog, and saving the world from a mad environmentalist, Eggsy had found himself at first in awe of Harry, then inspired by him, enraged at him, brokenhearted for him, and then terribly, terribly in love with him.

After their sixth date to the Electric Cinema, when Harry leans in to kiss him goodnight before going his separate way into his own bedroom, Eggsy grabs the lapels of his suit and practically drags Harry into his. “Look, the romance has been great and all, but can you start putting it in now, yeah?”

And Harry, gentleman that he is, lives to serve.
But before all of that slowly unfolding wonder, there had been the uncertainty, the despair.

The high from saving the world comes to a crashing halt as soon as the jet lands and is resettled in Kingsman’s hangar with Eggsy finding himself locked in the lavatory having a panic attack.

What an awful feeling it was to realise he had gone from one day being a street punk chav who had failed out of everything he ever tried to do to a man who had saved the world by killing thousands of people, most of them world leaders, and three of which had been performed in a very personal manner.

His brain replays their deaths over and over again, their faces, the various bodily fluids that had poured out of their orifices, then skitters to thoughts of how many other deaths had happened because he hadn’t stopped it sooner. Harry would have done. Roxy certainly would have done it better too. Who was he to have the godlike power to decide who lived or died? Didn’t that make him just as bad as Valentine himself?

“Shhhh, none of that now. You’ve done very well, Eggsy, very well. Not even Harry could have done it better,” Merlin says, because, oh right: Merlin had gone to fetch Eggsy, discovered the state Eggsy was in, bypassed the locks, wedged his rather gangly body into the narrow space Eggsy had found between the toilet and the wall just so he could hold Eggsy securely and let Eggsy soothe himself by rubbing his cheek against Merlin’s wool jumper and listening to the steady thump-thump of his heart.

Eggsy hadn’t realised he had spoken his thoughts aloud, but Merlin’s reassurances, delivered in that honey warm tone which was a 180 degree difference from his usual dry delivery, are immensely comforting.

That night, they finish the entire decanter of Napoleonic brandy. Fuck Chester King thrice over.

They find a pattern thereafter. Merlin guides Eggsy seamlessly through missions, practically directing Eggsy’s actions remotely like he could touch and manipulate Eggsy’s body with barely a spoken word, such is the growing trust and connection between them.

For all that time, Merlin never once lets him down.

Every time Eggsy finds it difficult to adjust to the rhythm of Kingsman life: the harrowing missions, the comedown of adrenaline, the injuries, the ones he can’t save, Merlin becomes less the exacting taskmaster than the friend, the comforter, the confidante.

“How did Harry handle all this?” Eggsy asks. “He made it look so easy.”

“The Harry you knew had over twenty years of experience as an agent,” Merlin reminds him. “I imagine when he was your age, he felt very much as you do now.”

“Fuck, I miss him,” Eggsy admits.

“As do I.”

Eggsy learns that Merlin has two cats named Apollo and Starbuck that are currently housed with his brother because he practically lives at Kingsman, carries a secret fondness for 80s New Wave, drinks a steady supply of tea throughout the day and night, and has watched the entire series of the remade Battlestar Galactica over fifteen times, the last one being accompanied by Eggsy.
He tells Eggsy about Lee’s training, how his dog had been a little dachshund named Banger who always urinated when he was excited, and how after Lee died, James had adopted Banger to live alongside his own Irish Wolfhound, Beowulf. The two dogs swiftly became inseparable, and the size disparity between the two creatures always made for an amusing sight.

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Things had changed when Harry re-entered their lives, and Eggsy’s world had narrowed in scope to practically watching for Harry’s next breath. He’d been so focused on Harry’s well-being, so terrified of losing him again, that he hadn’t realised how quietly Merlin had stepped into the background and made himself as obscure as possible. No more late night conversations. No more television series marathons. No more drinks.

Shamefully, he doesn’t notice it until Merlin briefs him on his first assignment since Harry’s coronation, his first mission, in fact, since Harry had been returned to them.

Merlin is polite, professional, and completely devoid of the growing camaraderie they had once shared, giving Eggsy the emotionless, pertinent facts of the mission and little else. No more dry, amusing asides, no more concerned glances, no more easy smiles.

“Merlin, we alright?” Eggsy asks after Merlin asks him if he has any questions and then promptly dismisses him.

Merlin looks up at him from where he had been busy with his tablet as always. Eggsy can’t glean a single thing from the empty expression on his face. “Yes, of course, Galahad. Is there any reason why we shouldn’t be?”

“No.” If anything, the innocent answer just confuses Eggsy more. “I mean. It’s just that. You seem… I dunno. Distant, maybe?”

Merlin blinks uncomprehendingly at him. “I don’t know what you mean by that. Do you feel as if I am not providing you with enough data or support?”

“Nevermind,” Eggsy mutters, beating a hasty and utterly bewildered retreat.

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But it continues to bother him. Eggsy feels like he’s lost a piece of himself. Merlin is in his ear as always on missions, but something is off. He speaks, but it’s no longer like a dance. It takes longer for Eggsy to understand his direction, like there’s a delay. Eggsy has to struggle with it like they’ve been poorly translated.

He moves just a little too slow. He makes more mistakes, one of which lands him in Kingsman’s medical ward with a concussion.

Harry is there by his side much of the time, of course, but his duties at Kingsman means he doesn’t get to adhere to Eggsy’s bedside the way Eggsy had been glued to his.

He doesn’t know whether to be angry, embarrassed, or relieved when Merlin finally comes to visit.

“How are you faring?” Merlin asks warily, like he’s afraid Eggsy will go off on him.

“Alright,” Eggsy says. “Sorry I fucked it up.”

“Don’t worry about it. Roxy took care of the rest.” Merlin still refers to Roxy by her name but he
always addresses Eggsy as Galahad these days. It stings. “I’ve gone over the extent of your injuries with the doctors. It appears you’ll be off the roster for the next two weeks at lea—”

“Did I do something to you?” Eggsy suddenly asks.

“Excuse me?”

“Did I piss you off? Accidentally steal your favourite mug? Shave your cat? ‘Cause you been giving me the evils for awhile now and I don’t have a fucking clue as to what I’ve done,” Eggsy says all in a rush, fearing he’d lose his nerve otherwise.

Merlin doesn’t answer for a very long time, like Eggsy’s caught him out. Finally, though, he looks away, actually turns his head and all. “No.”

“Then what the fuck is this?”

“I’m trying to do the right thing here, Eggsy,” Merlin says, and when he finally meets Eggsy’s eyes, Eggsy is taken aback by the depth of intensity within them.

“What right thing? I don’t know what you’re on about. All I know is that I miss you. It’s like you’re not even here anymore.”

“You really want to know what this is?” Merlin asks, something in his voice changing: a dare, half-mad, half-resigned, that makes Eggsy want to proceed more cautiously.

But he also wants to get to the bottom of this, whatever it is. The issued challenge riles up his blood, makes his nostrils flare and that old defiant self that still lurks within him comes out swinging. “Yeah, I really fucking do, mate.”

Merlin comes at him, except whereas Eggsy would have been ready for the fight, fists up, bouncing on the balls of his feet, he’s utterly unprepared for the way Merlin sits down beside him on the hospital bed, cups his cheek, and captures his lips in a tender, then searing, kiss.

He’s so shocked, it feels like hours before he realises he’s kissing Merlin back, mouth open, tongue sliding along his, fingers entwined in Merlin’s jumper to keep him close and inhale his bergamot scent. Merlin’s hand has slid down to his neck, thumb pressed to his pulse point, counting the rapid beats of his heart.

Oh.

When Merlin finally pulls away, Eggsy slowly opens his eyes, feeling the lingering warmth and saliva on his lips.

“I’m sorry,” Merlin says, looking ten shades of wrecked. “I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

“Merlin….”

“It won’t happen again, Galahad.”

“But—”


“So are you ever going to tell me what’s happened between you and Merlin?” Harry asks, pulling
Eggsy from his distracted thoughts and back to the present. Right: they’re at their favourite little trattoria, and Harry’s been keeping up a light stream of chatter while Eggsy’s simply sat there like a lump. “Because it’s not minor, whatever it is, and it seems to be significantly affecting you.”

The familiar feeling of guilt and dread weighs heavily in his stomach whenever Eggsy thinks about it. “It’s fine.” He puts on his best unbothered face and uses his fork to spear more penne pasta off his plate. “Being handled. I promise.”

Harry just looks at him, really looks at him, in the way he does when he knows Eggsy is lying through his teeth. Eggsy can tell he’s disappointed, but he won’t press the issue, gentleman that he is, even though for once, Eggsy wishes he would.

Because knowing how much he’s let Harry down almost hurts worse, but if Harry’s disappointed with him now, Eggsy can’t imagine how disappointed he’d be if he ever learned the truth about what happened between his boyfriend and his best friend.

Can never know that Eggsy had liked it.

Still runs his fingers over his lips and imagines it.

Dreams about what could have been and more, sometimes.

Chapter End Notes

For insanereddragon; prompt, Merwin, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have kissed you.” LOOK WHAT YOU’VE DONE.
Chapter 2

Merlin recalls one mission in the dessert, something that stayed with him, even though he’d been safely tucked away at headquarters.

It had been one of his first mission with Harry—Galahad, back then—and they’d still been trying to find their footing around each other. Harry had once compared them to two stones that had to be rubbed together before they could fit, and Merlin thought it apt. His cool head and logical mind had been paired with Harry’s rapid-fire heartbeat and impulsiveness from the beginning; Harry had been and still is the quintessential agent—comfortable in a firefight as seducing a target—and Merlin prides himself in being the one to channel that power into a focused goal eighty-five percent of the time.

But back then, they didn’t quite get along, and thanks to Harry’s need to prove a point about being a gentleman by smashing his umbrella into the face of a bullying thug, he’d been trailed to his hotel by the group, who turned out to be a band of mercenaries.

Harry had been surprised, and too late, the leader jammed a gun underneath his chin and threatened to blow his brains out if he didn’t drop his own weapon.

Harry had thrashed, cursing, all while Merlin snapped, “Surrender, Galahad! Surrender!,” knowing that every instinct in Harry was telling him to fight back. He’d relayed a message for backup the whole time, and for one agonizing minute, Harry had continued struggling until finally, finally, he dropped his gun.

Satisfied, the mercenaries had dragged Harry back to their base, hoping to get information out of him, and Merlin had to keep telling him to pretend to cooperate, to comply, as the clock wound down until Percival and Tristan slipped in and brought Harry home.

It had been in the hospital wing when Harry told Merlin, “I don’t like it.”

Merlin looked up from his notepad, pen grazing the razor-thin, light blue line. “What don’t you like, Galahad?’” he’d asked.

“Surrendering.” Harry stared up at the ceiling, hands at his sides, trying not to prod at his bandages. “It feels...wrong.”

“You realize that if you didn’t, they would have killed you.”

“I know. But...I’m not built for just waiting.”

“Some people find it difficult to yield,” Merlin had replied. “But you have to realize that it’s often necessary. Don’t think of it as surrender. Think of it as waiting for the right moment to strike.”

Harry had nodded solemnly, gaze considering.

It’s always been easy for Merlin to accept that. Sometimes, he wonders if it’s something ingrained in him, something that kept him from getting expelled from the schools where fellow students mocked his accent or kept him silent in the solemn, penetrating eyes of the saints in the chapel. What kind of man allowed himself to easily step back instead of forward?
But this is what makes him a good handler, quartermaster, and Arthur’s right hand. He does not claim credit. He does not demand thanks. But he does operate behind the scenes, faceless and faithful, and keeps things running so smoothly that no one notices until it stops. What the King dreams, the Hand builds, as one of his favorite series says, but at times, The King eats, and the Hand takes the shit feels more accurate.

And it makes him think of Eggsy.

Eggsy, who had risen so fast and far that his crash had been inevitable, and Merlin had stepped forward to pick up the pieces and stretch to make himself a pillar of support. Eggsy, who had allowed himself to be healed, to step back into the field time and time again, to trust that Merlin could walk him through death and back. Eggsy, who helped him finish Chester King’s vile brandy, watched Battlestar Galactica, and buried his face into jumpers with tiny woolen pills and frayed hems. He can easily recall that Eggsy, separating him from the Eggsy who now goes home with Harry.

But all he can bring himself to do, with a mixture of guilt and disgust and longing, is to remember the kiss.

He remembers rewatching and rewatching the footage where Eggsy had been a step too slow, confused about Merlin’s directions. He remembers Harry smoothing a hand over Eggsy’s and squeezing, lips moving in soft reassurances and encouragement. He remembers looking at this young man, lying in the bed with raised bars, with a darkening bruise and bright red cut high on his forehead, and forcing himself to add the information the doctors were relaying to him in his tablet.

Stepping out of the hall, Merlin had approached, tablet with Eggsy’s full diagnosis in hand, when Eggsy had demanded, confused and challenging, to know what had changed between them.

It had been like the time Merlin had dared Eggsy to whisper his concerns in his ear, Eggsy pursing his lips and marching forward. He recalls that smug sort of triumph when he’d tugged on the cord and the parachute had billowed out, knocking Eggsy on his arse onto the lawn.

Now, he knows how Eggsy might have felt: startled, relieved, and angry all at once.

Merlin had marched towards him, sank onto the bed, and surrendered: sliding his palm up Eggsy’s pale cheek, leaning in with his lips parted, and kissing him. Eggsy had smelled like that sour, stiff hospital scent, and his hair had been greasy from days bereft of showers, along with dry, chapped lips that had scratched uncomfortably against Merlin’s.

And Eggsy had kissed back.

If he hadn’t, that would have been the end of it. Merlin would have felt justified in walking away to find the catharsis that came with rejection. But Eggsy had responded, and changed the equation.

Kingsman has warped his sense of right and wrong to some extent, but he knows what he’s done is wrong. It’s not fair to his best friend of thirty years. It’s not fair to Eggsy.

He should not carry the warmth of Eggsy’s mouth with him or the rapid pulse like machine gun fire in his neck.

He should not look at Eggsy and think about those eyes closing, spine slackening, pliant tongue becoming sure.

He should not greet Harry every morning with Eggsy’s saliva on his lips and the fingernail marks that had dug through his jumper.
And he should concede once more, to do right by Harry and Eggsy both. *This time,* he thinks. *They both deserve to be happy.*

"Tell me what’s wrong with Eggsy."

Merlin looks up from his tablet. “Eggsy?” he asks, voice composed.

“Yes.” Harry replies, then sits across from him. “What happened between you two?”

Merlin looks at his friend, hands wringing, forehead tense, and makes his decision.

“I kissed your boyfriend,” Merlin says, and watches Harry flinch, face impassive but eyes watching what he knows fall to pieces. “I’m sorry.”

When Harry speaks, his voice is hoarse, as if he’d been screaming at Merlin for hours, which Merlin simultaneously hopes will and will not happen: “What?”

Merlin looks at him, unflinching. Harry wants mercy, Harry wants a joke, Harry wants a lie, but Merlin won’t give it to him. “I kissed Eggsy.”

There’s several ways this could go: Harry could punch him in the face, start railing against him, or flip over the desk Merlin’s sitting behind. Instead, Harry says, voice quiet, “I knew it.”

It’s Merlin’s turn to ask, “What?”

“I mean, I haven’t suspected it this whole time,” Harry reiterates, “but Eggsy told me.” He then takes a deep breath. “I’ve worried about him looking at me one day and seeing the grey in my hair, the lines on my face, and not to mention, the healed hole in my head. But I haven’t expected...” His jaw clenches, then clenches. “How the *fuck* did you think this was a good idea?”

“I didn’t,” Merlin snaps back, instinctively. “It’s not like I planned—”

“That’s right; you *didn’t* think!” Harry jabs a finger at his face. “Why would you...*how could* you...?”

“I’m sorry,” Merlin repeats. “I... I didn’t mean to, he wants to say, but it sounds weak in comparison to what he’s done. “It won’t happen again. Ever.”

“Really?” Harry narrows his eyes. “You two say nothing happened between you, but you went and kissed him! Why did you do that? I thought I was supposed to be the bloody impulsive one!”

“I thought I was going to explain!” Merlin shouts. “I thought I was going to tell him, or at the very least, make up an excuse! I couldn’t have gone on and made it seem like this was his fault because it was mine. He’s *yours.*” Now, he wavers, but spits the rest out: “He was always yours.”

“What?”

He can’t believe Harry’s making himself carve out his heart like this. “You’re the charismatic one, the one who can smile and get away with all sorts of things through charm that’s as effortless to you as hacking is to me. And you’re the one who pulled him out of the police station and set him on a new path. You’re the one who died with his heart in your hands and resurrected to give it back. I was the bridge between him and you. You were never afraid to take and fight for what you wanted, and perhaps that’s a flaw in my programming, but you deserve him. He deserves you.”
For too long, Harry stares at him like a safe door that has just swung open, mute and disbelieving. Finally, he manages, “How long have you...”

“I don’t know.” Merlin drops his gaze to the desk, cluttered with papers. “I don’t know, Harry, but I never meant to hurt you like this.”

“But you did. God damn it, Merlin, you’re my friend.”

Merlin doesn’t know how to respond to that.

For what seems like hours, they don’t say a word, until Harry looks down at his hands and says, “He’s staying at his mother’s tonight.”

Alarmed, Merlin sits up. "Don’t blame him for my mistake,” he protests.

“It’s not just yours.” Harry now raises his chin, eyes on Merlin. “It’s also Eggsy’s.”

“No,” Merlin repeats, “I kissed him—”

“And he kissed you back.” The fight seems to go out of Harry now. “I saw the footage. He wanted you. And perhaps it’s time I let him go.” He stands up, ready to leave.

“Oh, no, you bastard.” Merlin stands up too, shoving his chair backwards, nearly up against the wall. “You are not playing the bloody martyr here. He does not want me. He’s been with you for six months. He loves you.”

Harry’s voice turns hard, and if Merlin hadn’t know Harry for the better part of his life, he would have said Harry’s being cruel and unforgiving. But he can sense the underlying pain, the almost child-like vulnerability, when Harry says, “But if he loved me, would he have done that to me?”

Merlin has to try twice before settling on, “It’s not quite as simple as that.”

“No,” Harry says, “but all the same...Eggsy and I will be taking a break. And I think you and I shouldn’t see much of each other as well.” He then nods, turning towards the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow for the scheduled debriefing, Merlin. Good night.”

The door slams shut behind him. Merlin sits back down, taking off his glasses, eyes wet. His hands shake on his knees, and he feels as if in an aftermath of an explosion—ears numb, head ringing, flesh burning.

It’s only a few minutes until his glasses ping. Merlin slips them back on, clears his throat, and asks, “Yes, what do you need?”

“Merlin?” a voice, quiet and hesitant, says. “Can we talk?”

Chapter End Notes

This was written to Leslie Odom, Jr.’s “Wait for It” and Rhianna’s “Stay.”

I’m as repentant about this as futuredescending is with hers.
Bors still needs an expert hack on a heavily encrypted home system to complete his mission (dodgy embezzlement, links to more notorious terrorists). Kay is still new to the field and needs a little more hand-holding for her op in Lithuania (she does absolutely fine and only needed light encouragement).

Merlin handles these, and then moves on to denying seven proposals for new weapons or upgrades to existing ones. He sends one request back for more clarification (Is this a laser cutter or flame thrower?). He reluctantly approves two, with an addendum that they must make the materials more cost-efficient for production on a broader scale, given the way the agents go through explosives like Kleenex.

At last, though, Merlin can’t put it off anymore. He’s been at Kingsman for fourteen hours already. He has only eaten a bowl of porridge and half an egg salad sandwich in all that time, a tension headache is gathering at his temples, he’s in love with a man who is already taken, and his relationship with his best friend is currently in question.

Michelle Unwin now lives in a spacious townhouse in Richmond, and it’s readily apparent she’s taken to her new lodgings with pride. Daisies brighten the front doorknob in a loosely woven wreath and cheerfully crowd the planter set below the front window. JB’s little head and perked ears pop up in the pane, and he and Merlin share a long look before JB starts barking to announce Merlin’s arrival.

“Christ, JB,” Merlin hears what he can only assume is Michelle say from inside the house. “Shut your gob, will you?” Before the door opens to reveal the woman herself. She’s looking much better now that’s free from Dean’s terror and abuse, clear-eyed and soft. From the look of polite puzzlement on her face, she has no idea who he is, all to the better. “Can I help you?”

“Good afternoon, Mrs Unwin. I work with Eggsy. Is he home?” Merlin asks, even though he knows Eggsy absolutely is given the lad had rung him not six hours before requesting they needed to meet.

“Yes, I can get him.” It doesn’t do much to clear up Michelle’s curiosity, but she opens the door wider. “You wanna come in?”

“I can wait out here,” Merlin says, polite but firm.

It earns him a strange look, but Michelle closes the door to keep JB from running out and Merlin can hear her shout for Eggsy to come down and see to his guest. There’s the thunderous sound of feet stampeding down the stairs, an exchange too quiet for Merlin to easily decipher, and then the door is open in a whirlwind of rustling flowers. Eggsy’s emerged, coat already on, several feet ahead of Merlin down the lane in the time it’s taken him to blink.

“In a rush, are we…?”

Eggsy’s step slow and he finally turns back around. His face is bleak, paler with too bright eyes. “There’s a pub round the corner. Thought we could go.”

Merlin has already taken a step forward without realising it. Even now, it’s difficult to resist the urge to reach out in concern, a bad habit that’s been difficult to break. “Alright,” he agrees, even though every second of this feels like an increasingly bad idea.

He follows Eggsy the short distance around the bend to the homely but well to do pub he had
previously passed, and once they’re sat at a table, pints in hand, Merlin simply waits.

“I take it you’ve spoken with Harry,” Eggsy says, and when Merlin only nods to confirm, goes on, “I’m sorry. I should’ve warned you first. Knew he wouldn’t let it lie for long, not when it was affecting work. He tracked down the recordings, and then confronted me about it, and I couldn’t not tell him the truth when it was literally playing out before our eyes.”

“And what,” Merlin carefully asks, “Truth is that?”

Eggsy takes a pull from his glass and a deep breath and says, “He asked me what I wanted. I told him I didn’t know.”

And though he fully expected to hear it, it seems nothing could prepare him for its impact. The air is punched out of him, noisy and pained. Merlin finds it difficult to difficult to breathe in again.

“It’s not how it’s supposed to be, right?” Eggsy starts babbling in the wake of Merlin’s silence in increasingly wavering tones. “You’re supposed to unquestionably want to be with the love of your life, right? It’s practically fucking fate. He came back from the fucking dead for me and he’s helped me so much and look what I’ve done. Look what I’ve done.”

“You haven’t done anything but been honest, albeit maybe a little late. But it’s as I told you and as I’ve told Harry, if there’s any fault to be had here, it’s mine.” One glass down, and Merlin is swift to stand to get another round even though Eggsy isn’t even half through his. The alcohol isn’t doing much for his aching head, but neither is this conversation. “But I will say this: you’re not obligated to love someone just because of the things he may or may not do for you.”

“I still love him,” Eggsy says as soon as Merlin sits back down with their new set of glasses.

“Of course you do.” To think otherwise would be foolish.

“Could I kiss you?”

Merlin almost chokes on his drink. “What?”

“Harry was right about one thing,” Eggsy says unhappily. “I wouldn’t have been so bothered by it if it hadn’t meant something. So I just...I liked it. I wanted it to happen again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Merlin says, carefully setting down his pint.

“Why not?” Eggsy challenges, and Merlin knows reckless self-destruction when it rears its ugly head. “Didn’t stop you before when I was off the market. Now that I’ve been cut loose, what, suddenly I’m sloppy seconds?”

“Don’t talk to me that way.” Eggsy has the good grace to look chastened, flush staining his cheeks. “I’ve never hurt Harry like this before. I hate myself for what I’ve done.”

“Sorry,” Eggsy says. “I’m sorry. I’m a real bastard.”

“No,” Merlin immediately refutes. “Eggsy—”

“Do you want to know how many times I thought about you while we were shagging?” Eggsy asks, leaving Merlin rather nonplussed. “How often I closed my eyes and wished it were you instead? How I’d bite my own lip to keep from moaning your name?”

Whatever Eggsy sees in Merlin’s suckerpunched face, it makes him smile, and it’s not very pretty, all
glittering, cutting angles. “Told you.”

Before Merlin can think of a response, Eggsy pushes his chair back from the table and flees all together, leaving Merlin in a witless, wordless reel. Like Harry, Eggsy moved like a tempest and always struck out like lightning.

It’s a mess of a day, all of it. Suddenly Merlin can’t stomach the thought of leaving another man ruined before it’s done.

“Eggsy!” He takes off after Eggsy back out beneath the overcast sky, and his longer stride eats up the head start quickly enough, heavy hand alighting on Eggsy’s shoulder, forcing him roughly back round and pushing him against the side of the building. “Eggsy, will you stop—”

Eggsy is all bared teeth and flinty eyes. “Fuck you! You did this to me! If you hadn’t kissed me, I wouldn’t have...I wouldn’t have....”

He never finishes, words hitching in his throat, chest heaving, face collapsed in anguish. It’s too much to bear. Merlin folds him up in his arms, and Eggsy clings to him just as tightly like he had done so many times before, times when the world felt too large and horrible, and he felt so very small.

“...I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry....” Merlin finally makes it out, the muttered chant against his chest. Every cell of his being violently recoils from each iteration, and in the depths of his madness, he decides to shut Eggsy up by tipping his face up and kissing him.

Would that it were the watershed moment, the point of discovery where they both learn that it had all been a one-time fluke born of hot tempers and stress, and that the only thing to pass between them was simply innocent mutual comfort, rueful contemplation over this whole misunderstanding, and a return to calm, happy normalcy once more: Harry happy, Eggsy happy, Merlin happy for them.

But it’s like a match struck, and Merlin is as brittle as parched grass, and the flames roll through him like wildfire. Eggsy is liquid heat in his arms lips sliding against his, body pressed length to length, only the building at his back to prop them up. When he moans into Merlin’s mouth, Merlin is wholly and dizzyingly overwhelmed with want.

It’s never been like this, desire bulldozing all his jealously guarded reason. He’s cool, detached, and logical to a fault. He assesses risk versus benefits, accepts opportunity costs of missed chances, and rarely regrets his decisions, much less second guesses them. He loathes impulse and recklessness and buffers himself in caution as much as he does a well-loved jumper.

But Eggsy tastes like bitter hops and his five o’clock shadow irritates Merlin’s own stubbled chin and he smells like JB and whatever artificial floral air freshener Michelle spritzes around her house and he moves like a lethal predator and kisses like he means to consume. He feels like the sun in Merlin’s arms, like Merlin hadn’t known how dark his world had been until Eggsy had cast his light upon it, showing him how much there is to be left wanting (how he wants). If that’s an attractive likeness for Harry, then it’s a world-toppling catastrophic event for Merlin, and here they are now, far past the point of no return.

Someone calls them poofs as they walk by, but they don’t part until the tips of Eggsy’s fingers dig into his shoulders and he pulls back, lips wet, swollen and dark. “Don’t,” he gasps, and for a moment, Merlin thinks he regrets what they’ve done, and it hurts. “Don’t turn me away too.”

If Merlin had been in his right mind, it would have been a plea to give him pause, an inkling for concern, but all that drives him now is the fact that for the first time in his life, the worst has
happened, and the world is lying in ruins at his feet, so what does it matter now, all his caution and care? How freeing. How awful.

All he knows is that Eggsy is solid and warm against him. Eggsy opens up to him. Eggsy wants him back. And Merlin finds that the thought of not having it ever again is nigh on unbearable. “No. No, never again.”

He’s sorry for all of it. He’s not sorry at all.
It’s thirty-five minutes past ten when Harry arrives to the meeting. Merlin’s been waiting for him, tea on the table gone cold, along with stacks of folders and two pens.

“Glasses, Arthur,” he only says.

Together, they run through this month’s agenda of missions, requests for weapons, finances, and basic Kingsman infrastructure. It’s almost as if nothing’s changed, if not for the fact that Harry speaks in short, clipped sentences, while Merlin goes over data and figures and nothing more. No sly asides about Tristan’s love for explosives or who in the tech department is shagging, no eye-rolling over Statesman’s consistent hints to come over to England and do some meddling of their own, no groans of how this tedious process is taking off more years of their life than being in the field.

They only discuss what’s necessary, then Merlin gives him a file containing his own mission. A stipulation of Harry’s before being reluctantly crowned Arthur had been at least one field assignment a month, and frustratingly, they’ve been from mind-numbing reconnaissance to blow-out-your-brains surveillance, the latter joke that had been met with death glares.

It hasn’t been that long ago since Eggsy lifted Harry’s hand and pressed his lips to his knuckles after fifteen minutes of complaints to Merlin. “Please, love?” he’d asked. “Don’t go so hard on him. We want you safe.”

Harry had looked at Eggsy, who’d sat by his side during nearly every step of his recovery and confessed to him, eyes downcast, that he’d seen Valentine shoot him in the head. “All right,” Harry agreed, then leaned over to kiss Eggsy’s own knuckles. “I know.”

His stomach now twists. “Sounds good to me,” he replies, then opens the file. It looks like he’ll actually stretch his legs this time around, playing the part of a bored, wealthy businessman at a gala dinner and collecting snippets of information with samples of wine. “This seems to be in order.”

Merlin nods, expression perfectly blank. “Very good, Arthur.”

“I shall take my leave now,” Harry says, then stands up, collecting his file and a few bits of paperwork he hasn’t yet read over properly and signed. “Have a good day.”

He almost misses the purplish-red mark on the side of Merlin’s neck.

That day, Harry does not go to his office. Instead, he changes into loose-fitting sweats and a t-shirt, leaving his glasses on his desk, and heads over to the training facilities. He’s in no mood for swimming in the empty pool, joining Kay and Geraint for a basketball game, or running on one of
the treadmills.

Instead, he stands over Roxy, sitting on the dark blue mat and stretching towards the tip of her left toes. She glances up, greets him politely, and says, “So, I assume we’re going to spar.”

He appreciates her forthrightness, nodding, and Roxy stands up. Both of them eye each other before backing up a few paces, and Harry inwardly calculates how there’s a slight hesitance in Roxy’s left leg—probably from her fall in Lithuania—and the defensive stances she takes, arms protecting her upper body. Roxy is young and calculated, while Harry is experienced and strong, yet he hasn’t had the opportunity to really get into the field, as Roxy has. He and the other agents—Harry firmly refuses to think about Eggsy, Eggsy and his teasing smirks and youthful body and agile movements and victory kisses—have sparred, but sparring is not the same as fighting for one’s life.

There’s no gong or inquiry of readiness; instead, they spent a few seconds sizing up the other before Harry makes his move.

He charges forward with a punch, and Roxy neatly catches him, swinging him around and bending his arm so he practically kneels on the ground. Recovering quickly, he kicks at her legs and throws her, sending her stumbling, then rolling safely a few times and coming to a stop. They try again, hitting and kicking at vulnerable spots, then somehow, she ends up throwing him onto the ground. They grapple, Harry’s fingers and shoulders screaming in protest, while Roxy tenses, pushing back. He rolls, forcing her onto the ground, and she snaps her neck forward, smashing her head into his. Using Harry’s brief vertigo, Roxy stands up, kicking him when he belatedly rises, and Harry staggers backwards, almost off the mat. He quickly swings around his arm when she attacks him, hitting her hard in the ribs. She hisses, then pivots around when he tries to kick her, and snatches him by the arms.

Grunting, she twists and tugs, and before Harry can resist, Roxy throws him over her back, grunting when she flips him down on the mat.

He lands flat on his back, gasping when Roxy’s foot firmly plants itself on his chest. “Do you yield, sir?” she asks, panting.

Part of him knows he can yank Roxy’s foot from right under her, could push himself up from the mat, could continue the fight. But all he can do is lie there, maybe wishing Roxy would finish what they started. “I yield,” he replies. “Excellent job, Lancelot.”

She nods, then steps back and holds out a hand to help him out. Harry accepts, and for a moment, they both stand, panting and swiping seat off their faces.

“I needed that,” he says.

Roxy nods. “It did look like it.” She then crosses her arms. “I hope you gave me a fair fight.”

“I did,” Harry promises her. “Would you like to go again?”

She seems to hesitate before shaking her head. “I don’t think it’ll do you any good.”

“I think it will.”

“I think you’ve beaten yourself up enough without me having to do it for you.”

Harry raises his eyebrows. “How did you know?”
“I’m not a spy for nothing,” Roxy retorts, then asks, a bit hesitatively, “Harry, would you like to…

discuss it?”

Harry looks at her. She doesn’t know.

A large part of him is immensely relieved that Eggsy had disclosed nothing to her, but another part
wishes he had so Harry didn’t have to consider telling her. “I think I made a mistake,” he ends up
saying.

“And can you fix it?”

Harry ponders, then shakes his head. “I don’t see how I can. It’s out of my hands.”

“If you can’t fix it,” Roxy says, “you just have to stand it.” She then gives him a quick, sympathetic
smile. “But you’re not the type to give up, are you?”

“No,” Harry says, “but I have to on this one.”

“Harry?”

Harry closes his eyes, takes a deep breath in order to look Eggsy in the eye. He looks immaculate in
his suit, like a portrait, something that curators forbid the unwashed masses to touch. “I want you out
of my house,” he says. “Merlin isn’t home most of the time, but you’ll be comfortable there. If you
like, I can help you transfer your things.”

Part of him wants to yell in denial, the very thoughts of Eggsy cooking dinner for Merlin, smiling at
him when he walks through the door, and being held in Merlin’s arms are like bullets thudding
against his suit—not enough to kill, but to wound.

But he must let Eggsy go. He’s opened up another path, just like when the met for the second time,
and all Eggsy has to do is take it.

Eggsy lowers his eyes. “Harry…” he starts, but Harry shakes his head. Already, he dreads the
gossip, the speculation. Everyone will look at him, then Eggsy, and wonder how he couldn’t keep
this bright young thing by his side, then go, of course. He begins to wish he hadn’t suggested to help,
to pack up the life they had together on one free afternoon.

Eggsy straightens his back, clenches his fists, and says, “I kissed Merlin last night.”

Stop, Harry wants to plead, but only replies, “That’s your right, Eggsy.”

“I told him to stay with me.” Eggsy looks up at him, defiant and hard. “I told him that I wanted him.”

He’s never known Eggsy to be this cruel. “What do you want, Eggsy?” Harry asks.

It’s the same question he’d thrown at him after last night’s knock-down-and-drag argument. He’d
swiveled his computer around, showing Eggsy the Kingsman footage he only had access to because
he’s Arthur. Eggsy had told him what happened when they got back to the house, Harry thinking it
was some sort of sick joke, and when it had been confirmed, they’d cut into each other as cleanly as
they did before that horrible day in Kentucky.

“I don’t know!” Eggsy had shouted, loud enough to wake the neighbors. “I don’t know, okay?”

But now, Harry’s question is tired. Resigned, even. He knows what Eggsy wants—who Eggsy
needs.
Eggsy bites his lip. “I don’t know what to do.”

He knows how this will go in one of those sappy romantic soap operas he secretly stores on his DVR: the confession, the manful tears, the kiss, the parting. Everything would be wrapped up in an hour, unless it was those types that brought back the infidelity aspect in order to rev up the drama during low ratings, an endless cycle of desperation and drama.

It would be tempting to have Eggsy in his arms once again, to taste the familiar heat and teeth and tongue, but it won’t bring Eggsy back into his house. It can’t turn back time—and hell, even if Harry could, what could he honestly have done? Follow Eggsy like a jealous harpy? Prevent Merlin from being alone with him? Taken Eggsy out to another movie, another dance, another free evening?

Harry walls up his heart. “You do what you feel is right.”

“But I don’t know.”

“You can’t keep going back and forth on this matter. It’s not fair to me. And it’s not fair to Merlin.” Harry keeps his tone firm, almost like the teacher he used to be to Eggsy before this whole mess.

“But what do you want?” Eggsy keeps pressing. “I just told you what happened, and it’s like you don’t even care.”

“I want you to be happy!” Harry snaps. “With me.” But he quashes it firmly, like a cockroach under heel. “Fuck, Eggsy, why can’t you shut up for once?”

But Eggsy doesn’t back down. “And why are you just willing to walk away?”

Harry sighs. “Because Merlin will love you. He won’t always seem to show it, but if he pries himself away from his desk and pulls on a fresh jumper, if he lets you take sips of the whiskey he stole from Chester’s predecessor, if he ever lets you take his cats to the vet, you’ll know he loves you. He helped save the world, save Kingsman, save countless agents who’ve never thanked him a day in their lives. He’s not someone who just shits out paperwork and orders, ageing every day behind a desk. He deserves you.”

Eggsy glares. “Oh, don’t go playing the fucking *I’m so old and broken* card! Come off it! Don’t think I’m some stupid chav who doesn’t know that you’re trying to drive me straight into Merlin’s arms. I don’t want to leave you—“

“I don’t want to leave you, but you already left, haven’t you?” Harry resists the urge to slap his palm down against his desk. “Merlin wants you.”

“So this is about what Merlin wants.”

“No,” Harry snaps, with only a second’s pause. “It’s what you want. You kissed him back—”

“And you don’t think I know I fucked this up? That I’ve sat back and lied to you all this time? Every fucking day while you were in your comas—comas with a fucking plural s!—I’ve waited up for you, and even before then, I watched you. My whole life was you. And now, it’s Merlin, too—not a replacement, but an addition! You’re here, too, and you…you’re…”

“What?” Harry demands. He doesn’t want to hear this, doesn’t want another argument, but sometimes, he can’t seem to help to himself.

“You’re always on my mind!” Eggsy looks as if he wants to stop talking, but the words keep pouring out: “You’ve always been since the moment we met outside the police station, and I never
thought we’d be more than mentor and student, but we did, and I fucked it up. And I’m sorry.”

“Sorry.” Harry measures that word for a moment. “Sorry? What do you want me to do, Eggsy? Fall on my knees and beg for you to take me back? That’s not how it works, and it won’t be fixed just like that. You’ll still love Merlin, Merlin will still love you, and I…”

*I love you.*

Has he said that to Eggsy? Had Eggsy waited until Merlin said it before Harry ever could?

They could have had a good life together. Harry could envision years and years ahead, in his house with Mr. Pickle and the butterflies and decades old china and movie marathons on the couch, but all they have left is a house still cluttered with Eggsy’s things that will be boxed up like Eggsy had never stepped into his life.

He remembers writing an email to Eggsy on the plane to Kentucky, something he never sent because he was so confident that he’d come back. But he did tell Eggsy, before he deleted it, *thank you for bringing some warmth into my life.* Eggsy has done that, then snatched it away, and Merlin, too. Kingsman recruitment had taught him distrust, and here, it has once more.

He no longer has a best friend or a boyfriend, and Harry hates how, with that, he now has nothing.

“I’m going to go,” Harry says, then stands up. “Eggsy, let me know if when you’re coming by, and I’ll see you at your debrief before your next mission.”

Eggsy grabs his arm before he walks out the door. “Harry…I just…I want Merlin, but I want you, too.”

“You can’t have us both,” Harry says, then shakes off his hand. “Good night, Eggsy.”
Eggsy isn’t sure what he’s expecting when Merlin jiggles his Yeoman’s key and wedges open the old, slightly warped door to his flat. Maybe something ultra-modern, geometric shapes, minimalism, glass everything. What he gets when he steps through the doorway is anything but.

It’s surprisingly small with the spare amount of furnishings to match, so much so that Merlin doesn’t even need to give him a tour. The kitchenette is practically a part of the lounge. The back of the space yields three doors: bedroom, toilet, cupboard, respectively. Aside from the ornate mouldings on the ceiling and along the walls, there’s little in the way of actual decoration. Taken as a whole, it’s a space meant for one, and one who rarely stayed here at that. Two would be testing one’s patience and tolerance.

“It’s not much,” Merlin says like he can read Eggsy’s thoughts. “But in all honesty, I’ve never needed anything more.”

Fair enough. The flat doesn’t even feel lived in, doesn’t even smell like anything beyond musty, uncirculated air. It feels empty and impersonal. “Could rent it out as an AirBnB,” Eggsy jokes for the pleasure of witnessing how Merlin practically arches his back like an offended cat and glares at him. “It’s fine. It’s great.” It certainly is better than what Eggsy used to live in for most of his life. “Thanks for putting me up. Saves me a whole lot of questions with me mum.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m nearly never here.” Merlin clears his throat and holds out the spare set of keys. “Please know that just because you’re now living in my flat, you’re under no obligations to...to...”

“Repay you with sexual favours?” Eggsy arches a brow as he takes the keys and squeezes them into his fist until the metal edges dig into his palm. Merlin doesn’t quite blush, but he can’t keep from shifting slightly in discomfort.

“Among other things,” Merlin finally settles for. “That’s not with this is about.”

“I know,” Eggsy assures him. “It’s just temporary until the new flat can be set up and then I’ll be out of your hair. So to speak.” He grins when the rest of Merlin’s awkwardness falls away as he gives Eggsy another scathing look. That’s better.

“I've got to return to HQ,” Merlin says, getting back to more even footing. “But I can check back in with you later, if you want.”

“Alright,” Eggsy agrees. He’s not about to keep Merlin out of his own home, after all.

Merlin nods, and just like that, the awkwardness is back, settling between them like newly fallen leaves. “Right. Well. Is there anything else you need?”

“Enough booze to poison an elephant?”

“That would be the top shelf in the upper right cabinet. Might be a bottle of vodka still in the freezer,” Merlin answers without missing a beat. “It’s all paint thinner, but help yourself, as it’s the only way I’m ever going to get rid of it. I keep the good stuff at my desk anyway.”

Eggsy grins. The smile feels like brittle and worn thin, already cracking at the corners, but good nonetheless. “Cheers, guv.”
Merlin sighs. “Eggsy….”

“I’ll be fine,” Eggsy says, cutting him off at the pass. The whole thing is tiring. Merlin has got to be tired of having to exhibit all this concern. Even Eggsy’s tired of himself.

Still, he can’t help but lean into Merlin’s big palm when he cups Eggsey’s face, thumb tracing the sharp angle of one cheek. It’s a bit of badly needed but undeserved tenderness that almost undoes him there and then, but he keeps it together until he can hear Merlin making his way down the stairs and then flops down the sofa, all energy and motivation to do anything at all leaving him in one fell swoop.

He’s got no upcoming missions yet. He’s not even needed at HQ or the shop. There are no reports to write or meetings to attend or practice to work in. Michelle has taken his sister and JB (who has, in effect, become more his sister’s dog than his of late) up north for a mini-break. Roxy is off on mission. Merlin has to work. Harry...well. Best not think about that.

For the first time in a very long time, Eggsey finds himself having absolutely nothing to look forward to nor dread, and though in theory that ought to be a blessing, the reality is rather different. He feels both useless and even taxing on others simply by existing.

The thought of trying to go out, even to the local, is too much, so Eggsey finds the stash Merlin had pointed him to, settling for the Absolut (wondering under what circumstances Merlin had come into possession of such swill) and a completely unopened bottle of Jameson’s as the tools necessary to get completely blotto for the foreseeable future. No glass needed: just swigs straight from the bottle at three o’clock in the afternoon.

By three forty-five, he’s achieved his goal of getting absolutely shitfaced. His face is numb, the world gently spins, and all the existing problems in his life have been wrapped up in a diaphanous fog. He flips through the telly and settles for watching *The End of the Affair*, the remake, which hits a little too close to appropriated home, but who didn’t enjoy a spot of self-flagellation while in the comfort of it?

Sometime around when Bendrix is praying to God to bugger off, Eggsey’s mobile rings, and the first thing Roxy says to him when he picks up is, “On a scale of one to ten, how pissed are you right now?”

“Was never very good at maths,” he mumbles.

“Well, that answers that. Please tell me you’re safe at home and not in one of those nasty little holes in the wall you think are inviting.”

“I’m fine,” he tells her. “I’m at Merlin’s flat.”

The other end remains suspiciously quiet.

“It’s not like that,” Eggsey says. “He ain’t even here. He like literally never is here so it weren’t no bother to stay here until my living situation gets sorted.”

“Oh Eggs,” Roxy sighs. He hates that he’s become the mate she’s got to worry over all the time. That had once been his job in life, right?

“Can you be in love with two different men at the same time?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t even been in love with one man yet. Would almost seem like a nice problem to have in theory, except I hate watching you go through this. Arthur and Merlin too, for that matter.”
“I don’t deserve either one of them.”

“You deserve to be happy,” Roxy argues. “I don’t know what else to tell you, but you know I’m here for you, no matter what, right?”

“As long as you don’t hate me,” Eggsy says, hating the way his slurring has tilted into pathetic begging.

“No. Don’t be silly,” she admonishes softly. “We’re young, you know? Serious love is a new thing to us still. I can’t exactly claim any experience there, I’ve only got to watch you stumble your way through it first. You’re allowed to make mistakes, I think. You’re only human beneath that bulletproof suit. No one should fault you for that.”

“Thanks, Rox.”

After that, he hopes he’s actually ended the call before passing out, waking up several hours later with a crick in his neck, a dry mouth, and still mostly drunk but it’s beginning to tip into the nauseating hangover.

“Fuck.” Eggsy tries to rub away the bleariness of his eyes, stave the growing headache by massaging his temples, and finally finds the impetus to stagger over to the sink and gulp down a litre of water straight from the tap before sinking down onto the kitchen floor and sitting back against the refrigerator. It leaves him feeling bloated, sweaty, and still drunk, but at least he probably won’t die of dehydration later.

This is how Merlin finds him some untold number of minutes later, pausing in the front door to give him a worried once over. “Alright?” he hazards to ask.

Eggsy squints up at him through one eye. “Yeah. Yup.” He even pops the ‘p’.

“I tried ringing,” Merlin says. “You didn’t pick up.”

It’s only then Eggsy notes that there’s an air of nervous energy crackling about Merlin. A hurriedness to his appearance in his just slightly rumpled clothing, the pinched lines of his face. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing dire,” Merlin says. “There was a bit of an incident with Arthur’s mission.”

“What?” It’s nearly shouted, loud enough to make Merlin wince, but Eggsy doesn’t care as he scrambles to get his own two feet beneath him. “What fucking incident? Those things are supposed to be walks in the park, Merlin! There aren’t supposed to be any incidents!”

“No one expected there to be, but our intel was faulty.” Which is enough to put the grim look on Merlin’s face alone. “There was a conflict. No casualties. All the gunmen were rounded up. Arthur took a clip to the temple, but he’s fine. Minor concussion. He’ll stay overnight in medical for observation but—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Eggsy almost wants to start laughing, because how is this his life? Or really, how is this Harry’s?

Merlin must see the hysterical twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Well, he is the most hard-headed man I’ve ever known.”

“They have to shave his head?”
“Yep. He was spitting nails about that one.”

They both smile, though the humour fades quickly.

After a tentative hesitation, Eggsy asks, “Can I see him?”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” Merlin asks.

“Maybe when he’s asleep? He don’t have to know I was there.” And what has his life been reduced to that he has to sneak around to spend time with a man who doesn’t even want to see him. “I would rather see for myself. That he’s alright.”

Merlin just looks at him, and Eggsy’s too inebriated to really pin down the expression on his face, can guess it isn’t a happy one, but he acquiesces anyway. “Maybe shower first. You smell like a distillery.”

Much to the curiosity of the medical team, Eggsy lurks around outside Harry’s room like a wanker until he’s certain Harry’s too deep under to pick up on his presence. Merlin only accompanied him as far as the medical wing itself before briskly telling Eggsy he has a mess to clean up and leaving him to it.

Even though his head feels woolly and thick, Eggsy’s starting to pick up on those quickfire flashes of hurt on his face before they sink back down below the depths. He knows now that it’s him who’s caused most of them lately.

Harry’s room is dimly lit. He’s not hooked up to as many machines as Eggsy has seen in the past, but the shaved patch of hair and bandage on the side of his left head—same fucking side and everything, fucking hell, Harry—is an unwanted familiar sight, dredging up too many terrible memories to name.

While he’d like nothing more than to go to Harry’s side, and hold one of his hands in his own, brush his lips to knuckles like they so often did with each other, Eggsy doesn’t dare come any closer than the foot of Harry’s bed, like he fears he’ll trip some invisible alarm that will alert Harry to his unwanted presence. Harry finally looks peaceful when he’s asleep. His features are lax, the lines all smoothed out. Eggsy aches to touch his face, to press his ear to Harry’s chest, lay himself out along Harry’s warm body and fall asleep like that.

It strikes Eggsy just then that this is how it will be. Harry this close and yet unapproachable. There will always be the unbreachable gap, the estrangement. This is Eggsy’s punishment, to have so close, but to never have. The worst part is that it has all been his own doing.

When he makes himself leave, his stomach’s begun to roll and his head is both a weight he’s got to hold up and yet feels curiously detached from the rest of his body, meandering through down the halls until he finds Merlin’s sanctuary, the man himself seated at its heart before his wall of monitors.

Upon Eggsy’s arrival, Merlin turns and frowns like he hadn’t been expecting Eggsy so soon.

“Would you like to lie down? You’re swaying.”

Eggsy just braces a hand against the wall for support. “The op in Bolivia. That one still open?”

“I volunteer for it.”

“No,” Merlin flatly refuses before turning back around to his station. “It’s a bad idea.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a six-month minimum deep cover mission in a human trafficking ring for what will undoubtedly be a horrendous experience with little to no communications or backup, so no, you won’t be assigned to that one.”

“Only three people at the table fit the age range,” Eggsy argues. “Roxy and Georgie are both women. Would you rather send one of them? Bet you their horrendous experience is gonna be a hell of lot worse.”

“You’re too inexperienced.”

“Any one of us would be, Georgie most of all. I’ve already killed hundreds of people,” Eggsy says. Not many agents could claim they came into the job with that kill count. “It’s not like there’s much innocence left for me to lose.”

“You’re three sheets to the wind and you’re trying to run away from m—your problems.”

Eggsy sighs and crosses the short distance to lean over Merlin’s desk, try and catch his eye. “I love you both,” he says, watching the way Merlin startles at the frank admission. “And I’ve hurt you both. And nothing I can do now will not hurt someone. I see that now. I just think...I just think it best if I weren’t around for awhile, ’cause I just keep making it worse. In the wise words of Taylor Swift,” he smirks bitterly. “I wish to be excluded from the narrative and all.”

Merlin scowls. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“I’m taking this dead serious,” Eggsy says, meeting his gaze head on. “Do you realise how much it sucks being the Yoko here? At least with me out of the picture, you and Harry can maybe fix things.”

“Now who’s being the martyr?”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing here,” Eggsy echoes back at him.

Merlin narrows his eyes. “At any rate, it’s ultimately not my call who signs you off for it.”

“No.” In his bed, Harry stares at them both like they’ve gone mad, but his gaze can only skitter over Eggsy. Instead, he directs most of his ire at Merlin like it had been his suggestion in the first place. “Absolutely not.”

Merlin seems wholly unaffected at being the focal point of Harry’s displeasure. If everything weren’t so terrible, the sight would have almost been funny. “I concur with Arthur. Galahad—”

“With all due respect, sirs,” Eggsy says. “But you haven’t got many options.”
“We can pass the op to Statesman, let them work it out,” Harry says tightly.

“Passing the buck is it? Not very sporting for a gentleman,” Eggsy says and is gratified to see how the sting finds its mark in the unhappy tick at the corner of Harry’s mouth. “It’s our mission, our footwork, our problem. We break this ring up and we save untold numbers of lives.”

“You’re not the right candidate for this job even if we did decide to do it ourselves,” Harry tells him.

“Why not?”

“You’re not emotionally stable, for one,” Harry baldly states, and, right, he’s not holding back at all. “In fact, your current psychological state leaves much of your decision-making under question right now.”

Eggsy blinks, scarcely believing what he’s hearing. “Are you saying I’m unfit for duty? Because I told you I didn’t know what I wanted in my relationship?”

“You lied to me for weeks and only confessed when I put the evidence down before you. You come to me to provoke a reaction after necking with my former best friend. I’m making a rational decision based on all the available evidence,” Harry says.

“Jesus, Harry, that’s not….” Merlin starts to say, only to be shut up by the fierce glare Harry aims in his direction.

“I was saving the fucking world while part of your brains was drying up on the pavement in Kentucky,” Eggsy tells him. “I do just fine under duress, mate.”

“Yes, one impulsive decision made in the heat of the moment that resulted in the complete destabilisation of the world’s leading governments, thousands of deaths across the globe, and several months of costly cleanup and putting out fires, of which we are still having to suffer, including the situation that led to this very mission you want to volunteer for,” Harry snaps. “Well done.”

Eggsy’s mouth opens but he can’t find the words to speak. There’s a hard lump that is lodged in his throat, another forming painfully in his stomach, in his chest, expanding. “Guess I’m not…” He blinks, then has to keep blinking. “Guess I’m not… Kingsman material… after all.”

He doesn’t even wait to be dismissed, can’t, the room feels too hot, too bereft of oxygen, so he just keeps moving through Kingsman’s halls and rooms, narrowly avoiding collisions with others, ignoring any questions or noises of concern. It feels not unlike it did when Chester King told him he wasn’t good enough, told him to leave, and Eggsy had scooped up JB and had blindly run without knowing where he was heading, just needing to get away.

This time he doesn’t end up in the front drive with a Kingsman taxi waiting for him to steal. This time he ends up in the hangar and there’s all of Kingsman’s fleet available to him for permitted use, however thin his credentials apparently are to use them.

*Harry would have been proud of you, Eggsy.* Merlin had once told him after it had all been done and over with. It had been a bittersweet thing to hear back then, but Eggsy had clung to the hope that he really was worthy all this time, even after Harry came back.

Well, now he had the truth.

He picks the restored 1976 Triumph Bonneville, tosses his Kingsman glasses and phone to the floor, and deftly pries off the GPS tracker and smart chip that would let one control the bike remotely.
The smooth purr of the engines promises escape. The air outside is swiftly turning cool with an approaching storm. He doesn’t know where he’s going now even still, but he already feels better when the bike starts tearing down the country roads, wind lashing at his face, with nothing in the world to stop him.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Written to “Stars” (aka the song from the Season Three finale of *Bojack Horseman*).

Eggsy’s never been to Montana, but on his last mission in America, Jack said, “You know, when I went to Yellowstone as a kid, all you could see was sky, stretching out like—” he’d gestured, opening his arms wide. “It was the biggest thing in the world. But,” he’d interrupted himself with a laugh, “you’ve grown up in London, all those tall buildings crowding for space. You wouldn’t know about the sky.”

But Jack was wrong. Eggsy had been to somewhere like that, when things back then were as simple as eating vegetables and remembering to not to write his lowercase e’s backwards. He and his mum and dad went to visit his gran in Wales, and he’d spent the better part of the trip racing around in the open air, salty wind tickling his reddening cheeks and blowing right through his favorite woolly jumper.

Out here here is different. The air smells like before water hits the dust and turns into petrichor, the grass beginning to whip in the wind. The sky is crowded with gray clouds that are thick and heavy, while his bare hands are beginning to get stiff, fingers clenched too tightly around the handles.

The roads here are dust, but clear and distinct, leaving down various paths. Roxy once told him that there were trails for horseback riding here, back when it was a thing, and had sighed in disappointment that Kingsman no longer kept horses. Eggsy’s never ridden one, but he’d like that now—thighs clamped to keep him on something that would race forward, mane and tail tangling in the wind, knowing where to go in this empty countryside.

He should go back. But to go back and…what? Go back to Merlin’s flat, so stale and empty that all it was missing is cobwebs?

The gas pedal’s pressing harder into his foot. Sixty-five miles, according to the speedometer.

Roxy can take care of herself, and Georgie, too, but he knows the world shits on you more if you’re a bird, and Eggsy likes to think he knows what he’s getting himself into with this mission. There are some things Kingsman couldn’t teach you through textbooks or scenarios, and Eggsy knows that when Merlin and Harry and Percival and Chester King and the rest of the lot were with their silver spoons and nannies and boarding schools, Eggsy had already seen the arse crack of the world.

Maybe he’d seen so much of the ugliness that he can’t go back. He should know what happiness felt like, should remember how his dad used to slow-dance with his mum in the kitchen, but only recalls those in snippets, like a skipping videotape. What he does remember fully is the snow globe leaving his hand, a light circle of metal pressed against his palm, then years of sneers and slaps and surrender.

Seventy miles.

Eggsy knows the saying: you can take the kid out of the estates, but you can’t take the estates out of the kid. Even during Kingsman training, even during saving the world, even when sleeping in the fold of Harry’s arms, he still was running fast away from the life he’d known, full of his mum’s
sobbing and his sister’s crying and Dean’s ugly words.

He tells himself that none of that really matters anymore, but whenever he looks at his mum and sister safely tucked away in the house he paid with cash (just because he could) and the bespoke suits on his body, he remembers. He remembers freezing up when Harry first kissed him, so full of tenderness and love, compared to the impersonal, almost perfunctory ones Dean gave his mum when he wasn’t groping her arse. He remembers feeling that tightening knot in his chest whenever Harry or Merlin scolded him during training, then when he and Harry got into stupid little domestic arguments, knowing intellectually that they won’t hit him, but flinching all the same. He remembers growing up, apologizing profusely for the smallest things, and wearing the medal every day and thinking, *It’s not that bad yet.*

Seventy-five miles.

He can take it. He can go away from this place and redeem himself, far away enough that he wouldn’t be Eggsy Unwin. What would it be like to step away from his body, to leave the familiar streets of London, to be surrounded by hurt and anger and torture again?

Deep down, he knows it’s some sick sense of self-flagellation with sprinkles of desperation to prove himself the man Harry knew he could become, but pain had remade him, pain had spurred him, pain had taught him how to survive. Kingsman training had left him so tired that he had tears in his eyes when he bedded down for the night, limbs aching and stiff, but there was a sense of satisfaction in that. Every mission he accomplishes, every life he saves, Eggsy feels he’s worthy, finally reaching that potential his family and neighbors and teachers and toffs had believed he’d never put into practice.

*But no matter how many lives you save,* Merlin had told him on the plane home from Valentine’s bunker, *you still remember the lives you’ve taken.*

Eighty miles.

He wants to lay himself bare in front of Merlin and Harry. He doesn’t know if they’ll punish or absolve him, but they have to see that he’s sorry, sorry for being so weak and so thoughtless. He ruined a friendship. He ruined a relationship.

And even if Harry would take him back, even if Merlin allowed him to stay over longer than he promised, even if they all ended patching it up eventually, there’d still be that heavy weight of blame.

Eighty-five miles.

All his fault—

Ninety miles.

Thunder crashes in the distance, and Eggsy just keeps himself from startling so bad that he flies off the bike and smashes open his head. And fuck, he realizes, what’s he doing? He doesn’t even have a helmet, for fuck’s sake.

Slowly, heart pounding, Eggsy gradually presses on the brake pedal, slowly, one pressure at a time, until it rolls to a stop in the middle of the path. The wind now is picking up, and tiny droplets like shards of ice are coming down, ready to turn into sheets of rain.

There’s another boom of thunder, harsh and like a shout.
Dismounting, with his legs shaking, Eggsy sits cross-legged on the wet grass. He doesn’t have a proper coat or umbrella or even gloves, and they’re going to be angry—angrier—if he doesn’t return soon. This probably doesn’t spell well for his psychological state, either, running off like this without so much as a note, but he can’t go back, go back to Harry’s disappointment and Merlin’s pity and Roxy’s too-sympathetic understanding.

Instead, he closes his eyes, and lets the rain come down.

Late in the evening, pushing close to the AMs, his mum looks at him, soaking wet on the porch and shivering. “I’m making you a cuppa,” she only says.

Daisy’s asleep at this time, so Eggsy slips into his room and rifles through the drawers, coming up with sweats and a t-shirt, picking up his wet clothes off the floor and tossing them into the tub. On the way downstairs, he sees his mum’s robe dangling from one of the doors and misses Harry and his red robe, tattered and well-loved, wrapped around his body on cold days.

When Eggsy sits down at the kitchen table, with a steaming cup of tea and a plate of biscuits underneath his nose, his mum takes a seat across from him, folding her hands. “Tell me,” she orders.

And Eggsy does.

She knows about him and Harry, but not the bit about spies, though he suspects she knows a lot more than she lets on. But just for the sake of confidentiality, he glosses over the details or outright fabricates them, spinning a rather dull tale of commissions and sales and numbers.

He wishes he can tell her about the colorful explosions in an underground bunker, the blood and brain splattering across his suit and face, the slick dance floor where he desperately tried to get away from spinning steel blades long enough to get a hit in. How he’d sobbed naked in a princess’s arms, crashed face-first down onto the cot on the plane, went numb to the world for the longest time. How he kept avoiding the news and going out after V-Day to ignore the destruction, the horror, the grief.

But this isn’t about Kingsman, really, so Eggsy lets it spill all out: the kiss, the lies, the truth coming out, everything, taking sips of tea and halfheartedly nibbling on the biscuits so he doesn’t start breaking down. His mum listens without a word, taking a few bites of biscuit herself, then when Eggsy runs out of words, sighs and takes both of his hands in hers.

“Well, babe,” she murmurs. “Looks like you got yourself into a right mess.”

Eggsy can’t even laugh at that. “What should I do, Mum?” he asks.

“Babe,” she says, with a sigh. “I know as much about relationships as you at the moment.”

Eggsy blinks. He’s seen his mum sob into her hands after his father died, fret over the bills, hold an ice pack to her cheek after Dean hit her. He’s heard her beg him to be turn off the lights to save money, to not antagonize Dean, to come home. So it shouldn’t be a surprise that she’s not going to straighten her back and spout easy lectures of wisdom, but it is.

And honestly? It’s refreshing, knowing that someone also doesn’t have it all figured out.

“But what you did wasn’t right, Eggsy,” she tells him firmly, “but neither was Merlin. And it seems Harry cocked it up at the end, but…well, he seems like the most innocent person in this.” Shaking her head, his mum half-laughes, “Who knew I’d be defending Harry Hart?”

Then, she looks away, squeezing his hands. "I know about mistakes. And I know that no matter how
good life gets after you put it back together, it’s never the same. It’s like when Daisy colors on the wall. We have to paint over it, but the crayons and markers are still there.”

Eggsy nods.

“I haven’t been the best mum,” she continues, “and I can’t take it back. But what I can do…what I can do is try to make up for it.”

For a while, they simply sit there, hands still touching across the table. Outside, the rain has slowed to rheumatic pattering.

“I might be going away, Mum,” he says. “It’s going to be a long…business trip, about six months or so.”

“Six months?” Eggsy watches his mum briefly close her eyes. “I don’t ask you anything, babe. I know you’re not just a simple tailor. But…why are you going away for that long?”

“I need to prove to them that I can do this. That…” He breathes. “I messed up a while ago, and it…it had pretty bad effects in Kingsman and…the surrounding companies.”

She frowns the same way as when he would come home from missions with bruises and say he was mugged, but again, says nothing about it. “That’s a big decision, but…do you think it will solve what’s happening here if you’re so far away?”

Eggsy looks down at the table, not responding. Even if he was just a simple tailor, the answer would be no, but he’s a Kingsman. If he ends up getting assigned the mission, he’ll do it.

His mum seems to sense the conversation is done, drawing her hands away and nodding towards upstairs. ”Stay here for the night,” she suggests. ”The guest room is yours for as long as you want. JB’s sleeping in Daisy’s room, but he’ll be happy to see you in the morning.”

"Some of my things are at Merlin’s,” he admits, standing up and swaying slightly. He feels like he could sleep for years.

“Well, if you want, you can move back here if you want some peace and quiet.” She comes around the table to hug him tightly, wrapping her arms around him and holding onto him tightly. “Daisy misses you. And it would be nice to have you back for a while.”

Eggsy hugs back, burying his face into her shoulder. “Thanks, Mum,” he mutters.
Harry’s anger has always burned cold, and at its height, it leaves the blood in his veins icy and his heart numb. He can feel the desolation of his salt and burn, and sometimes he takes vicious satisfaction from it, because there’s nothing that can hurt him then. It’s the truest kind of freedom he’s found.

But this isn’t like that.

He feels like the blood is boiling in his veins and his heart is racing a thousand beats per minute. His ears sting, his chest feels like he’s been buried beneath a cairn. Everything is alive and stinging and he’s not sure what to do with this restless, simmering anger, bed bound as he is with the Kingsman doctors threatening to sedate him to keep him there.

“Well,” Merlin says in the ringing silence of Eggsy’s wounded retreat, and Harry expects a dry remark or, more likely, a sharp reprimand, but they’ve lost that level of intimacy and Merlin gives him neither. “If that will be all, Arthur.” His feet are already pivoted towards the door.

But Harry can’t leave it alone. It angers him more that Merlin won’t react. “Is that all you have to say?”

“What else is there to say? You’ve made your opinions known. As the leader of our organisation, we must accept them,” Merlin says.

“You’re full of shit,” Harry spits at him. “You assert your opinion on matters even when they aren’t solicited.”

“Fine,” Merlin says, and there is a note of deliberate patience to his tone that is immensely gratifying. “If you want to know my opinion: I think you were out of line, and just perfectly exhibited why a boss should never date his employee.”

Harry scoffs. “That’s rather rich, coming from the man who’s had more prolonged and direct involvement with the training and guidance of said employee, and who is also in a supervisory role.”

“I can separate my professional life from my personal one.”

“That’s because you never had a personal life to speak of,” Harry says before he can think better of it.

But if he meant the words to inflame, Merlin once again catches him wrong footed by abruptly deflating. “I suppose that's true.” And the concession of his words strikes a very wrong chord in Harry, makes a hard lump form in his throat. “Some of us do not naturally possess the effortless charm nor talent, not like you Harry." And off Harry’s stricken look, "I’m not resentful. I’m not even envious. You’ve had your burdens to bear. It’s only that...I’ve worked hard to come as far as I have and...and I have only recently begun to realise the extraordinary sacrifices I’ve had to make in order to do so.”

“Merlin....” But Harry doesn’t know what else to say. The blood he so desperately wanted now tastes like ashes in his mouth.

“Tell me what you want me to do to make this right, Harry,” Merlin practically pleads. “Tell me, and I’ll do it.”
“I want for this not to have happened!” There. Voiced aloud, finally, and with it, the last of his energy. He’s tired. His head aches. He’s going to have to suffer the indignity of this blasted asymmetrical hair until it can grow back in again. “I want,” he sighs, “To stop feeling like this every time I look at your face or his.”

Merlin drops the hand holding his clipboard down by his side, moving from his stance at the foot of Harry’s bed to sit on the edge of it. It’s something he would have done before without question, but now there’s a guardedness to his expression, wary of any sudden demands for him to back off. “Maybe it’s not such a bad idea, then, for Eggsy to go away for awhile. He needs to feel something worthwhile in his life again. And the distance may do you both a good turn.”

“And you?” Harry asks, arching a brow. “What will it do for you?”

Merlin gives him a half-sceptical look, like he can’t be sure as to the reasons Harry’s asking. “I think you and I both know that Eggsy and I can never have anything more,” he says. “I think I knew it the moment he tried to go back to you, after….”

The second time. Harry stares at him, at a loss for words.

“He can try and tell you how much he doesn’t know what he wants. I put that confusion there. He’s voraciously hungry for any scrap of affection or approval, you know. But he always put you first, Harry.” Merlin’s voice is steady. He doesn’t look away, and there isn’t even anger or accusation in his eyes. But then, Merlin has never been one to shy away from or deny plain truths whenever they are presented to him, difficult or no. “And he’ll always go back to you.”

“I tried…” Harry swallows, tries to speak, stops, and has to start again. “I wanted to let him go. For you. I want to. I think...I do want you both to be happy in the end. I want that.” To be less selfish. To be a better man than he is.

“Well,” Merlin replies in a tone filled with forced levity. “First life lesson, isn’t it? We can’t always get what we want.”

“I’m not...ready to forgive this,” he admits. And indeed, he doesn’t know when or if he ever will be, he’s never been known for his tender mercies. “And yet, while I can stomach a relationship forever lost, I...I am loath to lose my best friend.”

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” Merlin whispers.

He’s said it before, many times even with every look and unspoken gesture, but now, like this, when he can barely scrape out the words beneath his breath, Harry can finally accept it.

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Across his desk, Eggsy doesn’t look away when their eyes meet. It’s not a challenging gaze nor a pained one. It’s attentive, shallow, no more nor less than what any of his other agents would afford him when they’re being directly addressed. For a brief moment, Harry mourns the boy who wore his heart on his sleeve.

“My comments about your decision to set off the implants during V-Day were inappropriate,” Harry tells him. “It wasn’t a decision you enacted alone, and not only were you in a difficult situation with few good options left to you, but I believe you made the best one, one I would have made had I been
in the same position.”

Eggsy doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even so much as blink. It throws Harry off for a moment, but he gamely continues. “After extensively discussing the matter with Merlin and thoroughly reviewing our options, I have decided to approve your request for the Bolivia mission. I still have significant reservations, but this isn’t an organisation that has many training wheels, especially right now and with what limited resources we face.”

If he didn’t know Eggsy so well, he might very well have missed it: the slight release of tension, the loosening in the rigid cast of his shoulders by just a hair. “Understood, sir. Thank you.”

Harry pauses, trying to put together his next words carefully. “And though I may have given you every cause to think I have little faith in you, Galahad, that is not the case. This will be the most challenging mission of your career to date, but in difficult and even seemingly impossible circumstances, you have always risen to the occasion. I have no reason to think this should be any different.”

Still, there is hardly a reaction. It’s nearly frustrating, but, Harry supposes, understandable, the injuries only being papered over for now in the context of the current setting and some last grasp at professionalism. “In preparation for these sorts of long-term missions, it is standard practise that the agent undergo full psychological training and makes sure their living will is up to date,” Harry says, and is proud of himself for the smooth delivery, as much as he never thought he would say them to this man. He himself has only ever participated in such a mission twice in his life. The first time because he had been cocky and thought too much of himself, the second because it was either him or the much softer, more fragile Tristan at the time. He still had nightmares about both, even now. “Also, the costs for repairing the vandalism done to the Bonneville will be coming out of your wages.”

Here, finally, a glimmer of feeling surfaces, one that is rueful, maybe chagrined, as Eggsy finally looks away. Perhaps not for the minor property damage inflicted so much as for the stunt itself. Eggsy had gone off grid only to reappear back on it not more than four hours later at his mother’s home, and Harry wants to ask what had changed, why he hadn’t stayed away for longer like he had clearly been intending, but of course, such questions were not permitted to him anymore. “Understood, sir.”

“How do you have any questions or further concerns?”

“No,” Eggsy says, lifting his eyes to hold Harry’s gaze once more.

“If at any time between now and drop-off you feel you cannot undergo the mission, you can step back. You will not suffer any recriminations or consequences for doing so.”

“Understood, sir,” Eggsy says and nothing else. Harry wants to shake him.

Lie and say Eggsy’s been forgiven if only he will stay.

Beg him to reconsider even, but.

“Alright.” And it feels like Harry’s just signed the boy’s death warrant himself.
In the coming days, the psychological assessments all come back normal: Eggsy is of sound and competent mind. He understands what he will be doing. He understands the risks. He is doing this for, more or less, the right reasons, or at least that is what Morgana concludes.

Harry can’t tell if he’s mollified or disappointed. That he hasn’t too badly damaged Eggsy with his tendency towards callousness. That this is really going to happen now and Eggsy hasn’t backed down, not even once.

On the night before Eggsy is due to fly out, Harry breaks down and contacts him.

“Arthur?” Eggsy’s voice says over the private line through their glasses. It’s as professionally polite as it has been of late, but there’s an undercurrent of confusion beneath.

“I just need to know,” Harry says because it’s easier to talk to Eggsy when he doesn’t have to see him. “If you’re doing this because you think you still have something to prove.”

Eggsy exhales noisily. Harry imagines he’s sinking back in whatever he’s sitting in, in whatever place he lives in now, legs sprawled as they were often wont to do, posture terrible. “I think I’ve already proven I can fuck it up with the best of ’em, yeah? You were right about one thing, Harry. I’ve got to learn to clean up my own messes.”

“This is not the way you need to start doing it.”

“I was one of your messes, wasn’t I?”

Harry’s breath stutters in his throat. “No,” he denies. “...No, that’s not...”

“It’s alright,” Eggsy says. “Far as I’m concerned, you did right by me and then some. And I swear I’m not just doing this ‘cause of you. Or, well, guess I should be honest: at least, not mostly ’cause of you.”

“So if I asked you not to go....”

“Sorry, Harry.”

“And Merlin?” Harry asks, hating the way desperation creeps into his voice. “Did you think about him?” Had you truly ever?

“You know,” Eggsy says. “At this point, I think I’ve wronged him more than I’ve wronged you, but he’s so fucking understanding about it. It’s almost worse that way.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. I think he secretly does it out of spite.” And he even smiles a little when he hears Eggsy laugh.

“Will you two at least...try and fix things? You both need each other.”

“God help us.”

“Harry.” Eggy’s voice has gone serious. It wipes the last traces of humour from Harry’s face. “I know you haven’t forgiven me, but I’d feel rather, er, what’s it? Remiss, if I didn’t say it before I went.”

“Alright,” Harry manages, closing his eyes and bracing himself.

“I’m very sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.” Whatever gates that had been keeping Eggsy’s cool restraint in check break open now. It colours his voice, bleeds into it like an oil spill. “I love you. I
love you still.”

Harry wipes away his blurred vision with a shaking hand, bites down hard on his lip until he tastes copper, and breathes in and out, in and out. “Alright. Yes, thank you, Eggsy.”

He can practically see the bittersweet, glittering smile that stretches across Eggsy’s mouth, the rakish wink, when he says, “Guess I’ll catch you on the flipside,” before disconnecting.
Chapter 8

Merlin knows Harry’s anger. Harry can carry a grudge for as long as Madron FC kept losing matches, a stubborn fire that keeps burning with every stray bit of twig that falls in, and it’s the same with nearly all of his emotions, bubbling and boiling inside until it explodes.

Merlin isn’t like that at all. It’s essential to his job to pluck away the rising panic when a bomb begins ticking down, when a flood of heavily-armed mercenaries flood the room, when a plane starts heading for a nosedive without a runway in sight. He’s earned the reputation of being cool under fire, as well as the reason why Kingsman hasn’t collapsed and become extinct, like so many other independent spy agencies.

He likes being thought as that capable, but at times, it can be exhausting. This has been his life for so long that he can’t see himself anywhere else, yet these past few weeks have taken a toll on him. His work is impeccable as always, but every time he sits down or has a liedown, he wants to sleep for a thousand years, exhaustion pulling at every string. He’s begun having migraines, heavy things that sit in his skull and press down into his eyes, and as Merlin checks up on Eggsy, pops another pill.

Eggsy can’t be caught talking to himself, for fear of one of his captors expecting something and simply shooting him without so much as a warning. So Merlin sits back as Eggsy plays his role as the scared university student who’d been snatched when he’d wandered off from his study abroad group. Merlin and Harry had dragged out the preparations for as long possible, outfitting Eggsy with both glasses and the prototype contact lenses, coaching him through rudimentary phrases and words of the different languages in Bolivia, and handing him the files they’d managed to acquire.

Eggsy is young and strong, so it would have been more than likely he’d be chosen for forced labor, but there always is the other option. Eggsy had known that, nodding firmly, clenching his fists.

At that moment, he and Harry had exchanged a look—not too long so that Eggsy would notice—and a silent wave of something, not quite forgiveness but almost an alliance, passed between them.

All of it’s still up in the air. Eggsy has been planted and is waiting in an overcrowded cell with sobbing women, wailing children, and stone-faced but nervous men. He’s talking in English, still playing his part as a clueless tourist, making soothing sounds at the children, some of whom are clinging onto the nearest person or sitting there, shell-shocked and numb.

If Eggsy does get recruited for forced labor and gets transported to where Kingsman has branches—America is preferable, though he’d have to be lucky and end up near the Statesman’s Kentucky base —this mission would be easier for everyone: quicker extraction, more hands on deck, and hope for rescue, the last being one of the most important for agents in intensive undercover missions. Merlin still remembers Harry’s, and the third time Chester suggested Harry. Merlin had quietly persuaded him that Percival, calm and level-headed, would be preferable.

He’s the one who saw Harry, shaken but refusing to go to therapy, after his first undercover mission, then the Harry who stared into space without seeing anything after his second. Tristan had been relieved to have been spared, but only two weeks after Harry came back home, he’d been shot in the head by a sniper in Mozambique. No miracle for Tristan, as it had been with Harry, only the sobbing of Tristan’s widow and Harry’s conflicted survivor’s guilt.

The door opens, Harry stepping into the room. “How is he?”

“Unharmed, for the most part.” Eggsy kept prodding the lump on his head, where he’d been
knocked out, and he slightly winced when he shifted his body to the right, but had been otherwise untouched. “How are you, Harry?”

Harry sighs. “This is Eggsy’s first extensive undercover mission. How do you think—” he abruptly cuts himself off.

They’d had arguments like this before, Harry once shouting at Merlin, _How can you always be so fucking calm?_, and this is nothing new.

“I know,” Merlin says, then turns his attention to the monitor. He isn’t sure if _me, too_ would reopen the wound.

He hears Harry take a deep breath, then pull up a chair beside him. They’re side by side, but a good 254 meters away, the space between them a weight pressing into Merlin’s shoulders.

Harry finally coughs, then sets something down on the table. “I have something for you.”

“I can’t drink on duty, Harry,” Merlin says, eyeing the bottle. Harry, of course, has the alcoholic tolerance the size of a horse, and while Merlin is no slouch, he doesn’t drink as much as Harry does on a regular basis. He’s surprised Harry doesn’t smell like a distillery by now.

“You can’t, but I can,” Harry retorts, untwisting the cap before setting down two large paper bags. “However, some substance should be in order.”

Merlin takes it, then shakes open a bounty of chips and vinegar, roquefort and salmon on walnut and rye bread, some baklava from his favorite Greek restaurant down the street, and a large bottle of water. Harry must have gone all over.

Harry unpacks his own fish and chips with mushy peas, along with his own slice of baklava. “Dig in,” he suggests. “And if we’re hungry after this, I have tikka masala. You go on this _I can’t eat until I know they’re safe_ martyr phase, so I bet all you’ve eaten are those awful Kingsman-issued nutritional bars and the muffins Bors brings.”

Merlin doesn’t see the point of lying when there’s a small pile of thin shreds of foil in the bin below his desk. “Thank you, Harry,” he says instead.

They eat, watching Eggsy finally begins to succumb to sleep, allowing a young girl to rest her head on his shoulder.

“It almost makes me glad my job requirement is to plant my arse here,” Harry admits, breaking the silence.

Merlin nods. If Harry had been a field agent, he’d already be sent out. He could have argued for time to allow his mind to settle, but ultimately, he’d have no choice.

They’re silent again, the gulf stretching between them once more. Harry picks at his chips, taking swigs from the bottle. Merlin finishes his sandwich, then starts in on his chips—he hasn’t realized how hungry he is—without so much as a word. They’re used to sitting like this, thoughts passing between them like telepathy, but this time, it’s as if that connection is lost.

“I’m the one at fault,” Merlin finally says, deciding to rip off the plaster in one swoop. “I know you won’t forgive me, and I’m not asking you to. But let me say that I shouldn’t have stepped out of my place. I had no right to do that.” He then pauses. “It’s not all Eggsey’s fault, you know.”

Harry stares at him. “I’m angry at you, too,” he declares.
“Yes, but our relationship is different.” Merlin pauses to take a bite of his sandwich, chewing slowly. “How many times have we sworn not to speak to each other again?”

“Seventy,” Harry immediately says.

“Seventy-two,” Merlin corrects. “Granted, this...situation is different from anything we’ve been through, but we know how to come back together. You and Eggsy…”

He doesn’t say more, but Harry knows how fledging and hopeful he and Eggsy were. Harry had talked his ear off for months about Eggsy, then had mysteriously refused to talk about the twenty-four hours, and finally did something about it, perhaps thinking of the carpe diem reasoning behind many of their agents’ sudden and often reckless decisions. But it had paid off, and Harry and Eggsy were happy.

Until, of course, he’d cocked it up.

“Eggsy was the one who suggested a reconciliation,” Harry finally admits, then takes a long gulp of whiskey without so much as a grimace. Merlin mentally calculates how much time this conversation has left before the alcohol hits, according to the graph he’d made on a slow day for Harry’s file.

Harry takes another drink when Merlin doesn’t reply. “Shit. I should have started eating before I began.”

“You shouldn’t have started drinking at all,” Merlin retorts. “You’ve just been cleared by Medical.”

“But I have been cleared,” Harry replies, then raises the bottle to his lips defiantly.

The girl beside Eggsy begins to whimper. “Quiero ir a casa, quiero ir a casa…”

“It’ll be all right,” Eggsy says soothingly, but his tone wavers, likely not wanting to promise anything, but not wanting to leave her like this. “It’ll be all right.”

Slowly, the girl’s sobs taper off, her breathing becoming slow and steady. Her forehead presses against Eggsy’s shoulder, arms limp against her body. Eggsy stays perfectly still for a while, then slowly turns his head to scan his surroundings. Nearly everyone’s decided to sleep, trying to find a way out of this nightmare. Even though Eggsy—nor Merlin—can see a guard, there’s likely at least one on the other side of the only door. Even if there were an open escape route, they’d be fools to try to rush out now.

Soon, Eggsy’s body curls into itself, knees and arms protecting his vital areas, and Merlin and Harry continue to watch, even long after he closes his eyes.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Warnings: This is not a nice part. References to non-consensual acts that happen to others and some moments of extreme violence, though nothing overall too explicit.

He doesn’t remember falling asleep, but at some point, the exhaustion of several sleepless nights must have overwhelmed the levees of his vigilance in spite of the suffocating heat, the growing filth caked to his body, the insects, the fear. The next thing Eggsy is aware of is struggling to swim up to the surface of consciousness against the heavy bone weariness trying to pull him back under and blinking open his eyes to a jerking sway as the van they’ve all been shuttled into navigates the rough, unpaved roads.

They are on the move again and have been so for the longest stretch Eggsy could remember. There were too many of them stuffed into the back of the van, shoulder to grinding shoulder in the sweltering heat and smothering stench of unwashed, sweaty bodies. There were no windows, only a thin seam of light leaking in through the back doors told Eggsy it was still daytime.

Their captors have been moving them around for awhile. Eggsy’s long ago lost count and wouldn’t have been able to pin his location to any map. Their numbers change constantly, faces swapped out like playing cards. He’ll wake up from another reluctant slumber to find the little girl he’d been trying to comfort the night before suddenly vanished along with the three other women, two new teenagers dragged into the pen to replace them.

(It had been deeply upsetting, when it first happened. Against his better judgement, he’d lost his temper and tried to attack the guards. It had earned a severe beating with the butts of their rifles that had him spitting out two teeth, his upper right molar and incisor, afterwards.)

There are faces he’s been with from the beginning, mostly young men like himself, though some are much older. Fathers, he eventually learns, whose entire families were dissolved when they trusted the wrong people to ferry them across the border.

At least he’d been one of the first ones in, pressed into the back corner of the van, able to lean against the metal walls that, while not exactly cool anymore from the oven of their bodies, do give him somewhere to lay his head. He’s grateful for small mercies like that now, like when they pull over to let them empty their bowels outside or pass out more than one bottle of water to them. He’s witnessed what the guards do to the women in their group with casual ease, right by the side of the road, uncaring of their terrified audience. He’s especially grateful neither Roxy nor Georgie are here in place of him now.

Eggsy thought he’d been prepared for this, but in hindsight, that confidence had been foolish. There was no amount of preparation he could have done. It’s more than the degradation, the relentless stream of abuse, and the constant low thrum of dread that sits at the bottom of his stomach. It’s the sense of isolation that has started to creep in, the intense vulnerability. He knows there’s someone on the other side keeping watch (though he’s paranoid that one day the contacts will stop working and he’ll never know it, he’ll just disappear like all the others). He tries to take comfort in and regrets that it’s probably Merlin bearing witness to all, and yet it’s a one-way road. Should Eggsy come into
trouble or his life fall into danger, there would be no immediate support, no one coming to his aid to save him.

He’s all but alone now.

Days bleed together beneath the earth’s surface in long, unending hours of painstakingly furthering the miles-long tunnel between what Eggsy assumes is the U.S. and Mexico. It’s got to be done without the aid of loud machinery, so picks, shovels, and enslaved labour it is, from the first rays of dawn until the last bit of light is bled from the sky, retreating before the onset of night, returning early the next morning.

Eggsy sleeps better now, too exhausted to dream, hearing the sounds of chiseled rock and shifting dirt even in his sleep. They all get locked up together at night in an old barn that still smells like cattle, nine men and the six women. They sit segregated like they are all back in school, the women, all painfully young, staring at them from across the room with haunted eyes. Maybe it’s all in vain, but he tries to study each face in the shadows, hoping that somewhere on the other side, someone is identifying their faces for the families and friends and loved ones who miss them.

Once, he’s ripped out of his slumber by one of the guards staggering into the room. They all immediately recoil from him like cockroaches trying to shy away from the light. The smell of alcohol emanates from the guard’s pores. His glazed eyes roam over the women before he stumbles forward and grabs Nicole by her hair, trying to drag her across the floor.

She starts screaming. The other women start up cries of distress in response, clutching at her arms, trying to keep her with them.

“¡Cállate, carajo!” the guard snarls, turning his gun on them and waving it threateningly.

Eggsy can’t help it. He sees the terror in Nicole’s face, gone red and blotchy from hysterical crying, and launches himself at the man, knocking him to the ground with enough unexpected force, he releases his hold on Nicole and the gun both.

He gets in three good punches before the other guards rush in and drag Eggsy off.

Afterwards, one of them, David, who is younger than most of them and not so sunk into cruelty yet, helps pick Eggsy up and carries him gently to his bed of filthy rags to lay him down, even gives him a fairly clean handkerchief to staunch the bleeding from his broken nose and helps him bind his broken ribs.

“I used to be where you are now. Taken from my home, put to work by these men. I used to be like you too, always wanting to do the right thing,” he quietly tells Eggsy, catching him off-guard. Clean and put together, but more importantly, the one carrying a gun, David seems a far cry from the defeated men and women he corrals. He must see the shock in Eggsy’s face, because he then says, “I kept my head down and did as I was told. I showed the guards I could be helpful to them, yes? Now look where I am. You can be the same. You just have to accept it. This is your life now, but it doesn’t always have to be.”

Eggsy can’t bear to look at David anymore, not his well-meaning face or kind eyes. He turns his head and realises Nicole had been taken away anyway.
He’s lucky: he’s young, in shape, strong, even if his lips are so dry they crack and bleed constantly and his fingernails are starting to fall off. They don’t get much to eat or drink. The women start actively bargaining with their bodies for more.

The men who are older, or the sick, they’re the ones who go first.

Carlos had never looked well. Too sweaty, too pale, too emaciated to begin with. The hard labour had done him no favours, and one day he had stopped what he’d been doing, shovel falling from his hands. He had stared through Eggsy, eyes full of relief, and simply collapsed. Dead. Dehydrated, literally worked to death.

Alan, a graduate student at Notre Dame who had gone to Nicaragua for his spring break, had helped him bury the body in the tunnels. Carlos had a son and a daughter, Eggsy knew from the man’s story on one of the many long nights they spent in the pens. Carlos hadn’t known where they were taken. The best case scenario, Eggsy thought though did not voice, was that they were dead as well.

Neither Alan nor Eggsy knew what last rites to give, nor did they really have the time or energy to do so anyway, so they both silently agreed to stand next to the newly churned patch of dirt in the tunnel floor for a few moments of pause to pay last respects for a man neither of them knew but whose death they keenly felt all the same.

Alan had crouched down and laid his callused palm across the dry, crumbling soil. “This whole tunnel is going to be lined with our bodies by the time it’s done.”

And Eggsy couldn’t help but think with a growing sense of foreboding that he’s probably right.

At first, he thinks he’s dreaming it, the whispering from the other end of the room that frequently rises into soft talking and carries across the quiet of the room as easily as shouting.

“He’ll get caught!” a female voice desperate insists.

“We won’t.” He recognises Nicole’s voice, deep and rock solid. Trauma has made her resilient, but unforgiving. “Nobody else is watching. That fat fuck who’s supposed to be on guard always drinks too much and falls asleep after I blow him. He keeps the keys right in the ignition. We steal the car and no one will even know we’re gone until sunrise.”

There’s a long, long silence.

Then, “Look, do you want to stay here? Service more men until they get tired of you and sell you to someone else? Maybe they don’t even bother and just shoot you in the head and bury you in the tunnels too. Go ahead and stay. I’m going to get the fuck out of here or die trying. Are you coming with me?”
“...okay. Yes, I’ll go. Anything is better than this.”

“When?” asks another.

“Tomorrow night. They get gas in the afternoon, so we’ll have a full tank. I’ll go off with him and knock him out after, then I’ll come back for you, and we go.”

“What about the others?”

“What about them?” Nicole asks.

“We just leave them behind?”

“We can’t save everyone.” Practical, if unkind. But then Nicole relents just a little. “Maybe we get out and tell the police what happened. Show them where we were kept. They’ll be saved too.”

It’s a nice lie to mollify them, assuaging any remaining scraps of guilt at leaving the others behind. Eggsy can’t blame them. The women have it ten times worse than any of them. At any other time, he’d be cheering them on, even helping them with their plan.

But not now. Not when they’re not only threatening to unravel Kingsman’s whole operation here but have just presented the precise opportunity Eggsy’s been waiting for: the chance to get out of the tunnels where the only end he’ll meet is a dead one, and earn the necessary good will with the rest of the guards. Rise through the ranks just like David described. Get more access to more names, more locations, more information for Kingsman to finally and irrevocably bring them all down.

Small sacrifice for the bigger picture. Ends justify the means.

But the cost. The cost is so high.

A Kingsman only condones the risking of a life to save another. Arguably, shutting down this particular ring would save hundreds, perhaps thousands, in the long run.

It keeps him up for the rest of the night, long after the others have settled down. A hard lump forms in his stomach and sits there. He pulls at the chapped flakes of skin from his peeling lips until he’s opened up several stinging cuts then runs his tongue over them constantly to make it hurt more.

When the sun starts creeping over the horizon and the guards unlock the door to the barn to release them, they tumble out, tired and squinting, eagerly holding out their hands for the small plastic bowls of rice and beans to eat with cold tortillas and plantains. The heat is already starting to rise, worse now the closer to summer it gets.

Eggsy waits until the others have started heading to the van to be taken to the dig site before approaching David. His hands are shaking at his sides, heart racing, like it’s trying to claw up into his throat.

He can barely get the words out, but he does.

_____

He feigns sleep when Nicole quietly slips from her mattress and goes with the guard as she has done almost every night like clockwork. He counts the minutes in his head and stares up at the wooden
beams above him, rafters disappearing into the deeper shadows of the barn’s roof. There are holes in it, and he can see the smattering of indifferent stars overhead.

He can’t move. The weight of what he’s done feels crushing, pinning him to the floor.

He listens for Nicole’s return, opening the lock and removing the heavy chains from the barn door as quietly as she can before opening the door just wide enough for a person to squeeze through. Hears her harsh whisper to the others, “Come on, we’ve got to go now!”

The other women hadn’t been sleeping a wink either, he’d wager. Eggsy hears them immediately trying to furtively cross the floor to slip out of the barn. Surprisingly, Nicole doesn’t lock the door behind them. Maybe it would have taken too much time or caused too much noise. Maybe she thinks she’s giving the rest of them a small sliver of a chance to escape themselves.

It makes it easier for Eggsy to slip out the door and follow them from a quiet distance, ducking behind the side of the main house to watch. He owes it to them to watch.

They reach the van without interruption. Eggsy can see the way the women hasten their movements, as if sensing their imminent freedom. Some of them dare to smile in relief.

For one hopeful moment, Eggsy thinks that David is far more humane than even Eggsy would have expected. That he’s willing to turn a blind eye to this. It would have been easy for him to have done so with little to no consequences for it. Mercy, just this once. The corners of his mouth turn up at the thought.

But it’s not to be after all.

“Run!” Nicole shouts, but it’s too late.

The men break from the shadows like nocturnal predators, circling the van, the women, pointing their guns at them.

Within the weak pool of the outdoor lights, Nicole looks back at them with defiance, one last refusal to be afraid or flinch as each woman next to her is executed in quick succession and left to lie there, blood spreading out and staining the ground beneath their lifeless bodies.

They leave Nicole for last, forcing her to kneel, one of them putting the barrel of the gun to her forehead. Belatedly, Eggsy sees the gash at his temple, realises he must have been the one she had tried to knock out earlier. “Buen intento, puta,” he says before pulling the trigger.

After her body crumples to the ground, he turns back to the rest of them and shrugs. “Alimenté a los perros.”

They laugh as they walk away, leaving the bodies there for, indeed, wild dogs and other night creatures to find. One of the men turns and the light catches him just right, and Eggsy recognises David’s profile. He must somehow sense Eggsy’s gaze upon him, because he turns his head and unerringly meets Eggsy’s eye, nodding to him in recognition. Perhaps even pride.

In spite of how sick he feels, Eggsy nods and backs away, taking off across the yard at a run, telling himself it’s because he needs to slip back into the barn before the guards inevitably come to check up them, but by the time his hand is on the door, it’s all too much.

He turns sharply on his heel and promptly vomits against the side of the building, retching up the last of his dinner and what meagre water he’d been able to drink.
Then gasping, trying to steal back the oxygen that has difficulty making it into his lungs.

Then, horrifyingly, sobbing, for the last lost pieces of the man Harry had seen in a tailor shop mirror, a whole lifetime ago. For the man he would never be again.
Chapter 10

Eggsy’s woken up by a hand shaking him roughly by the shoulders. “Get up,” someone orders.

He recognizes David, rising to his feet as quietly as he can, though everyone is really too exhausted to stir. It’s all right for him to look fearful, and that not hard, either, to be honest. He prays to whoever is out there, to Merlin, to Harry, to anyone watching him that no one has found out about Kingsman. He’ll never give them up, but he’s not looking forward to putting his interrogation survival training to the test.

Once they’re out of the barn, David looks at him up and down. His gun’s slung over his shoulder, and the sight of it makes Eggsy remember he’s not in a bulletproof suit, has no weapons of his own, and is supposed to be the weak-kneed university student.

“Be on your best behavior” is the only thing he says before pushing open a door to another barn, a barn where he’s seen girls stumble towards in the evening in hopes of something to aid their survival. Eggsy thinks of Nicole, gun pressed against her forehead, her body missing in the morning, a dust-dragged track on the ground, and the meager contents of his stomach shift.

The barn is low-lit with lanterns placed around the room, and crowded towards the middle, the other guards stand in wait for him.

Eggsy freezes, counting the men and looking for an exit route, but knows deep in his bones that he can’t fight back. Not just because of the mission, but because of the lethargy weighing down his bones and muscles and head, the soreness of his limbs, the pounding ache in his skull. His eyes land on a half-eaten bowl of rice and beans, and his stomach growls audibly.

If he thinks too much about food, he’ll swoon right onto the floor. Eggsy’s thought he’d been hungry after his dad’s death and during Dean’s foot on his and his mum’s necks, but he’d never truly gone without so little food. He’d always been able to steal something from a local Tesco’s or get something from Ryan and Jamal or resort to dipping into his stash of granola bars hidden underneath his bed.

David now speaks in rapid-fire Spanish, and Eggsy can pick up snippets of those women and helped us and loyal, feeling sick. He knows what’s coming, knows this is what he’s been planning since he got here, knows that his betrayal of Nicole and the other women and the next weeks—he thinks they’re weeks—of subservient behavior have led to this.

The guards’ setup is somewhat organized, if not as airtight as Kingsman’s. The barn is falling apart, but is in much better condition than the one he and the others are sleeping in. They have proper bedrolls, pillows, and cabinets made out of stacked boxes to put their possessions in. Glittering bits of metal are on their fingers, strewn across the room, likely pilfered from the captives or the dead. There’s a few boxes of ammo, a ring of keys on one of the homemade cabinets, leftovers from the previous meal, and a grimy mirror.

Eggsy looks at himself, the pale, skinny thing his body has become. He can see how tightly his stomach’s pinched, the dark circles underneath his eyes, the asheness of his skin, the missing fingernails, the slight swelling of his limbs, the chapped lips that are nothing more than flakes of skin, and his hair—it’s a vain thing, compared to the others on the list, but he can’t help but feel dismayed at the wispy strands, thin and delicate and beginning to turn grey. He remembers his mum brushing it when he was a kid, Harry stroking it tenderly while they were in bed, Merlin gripping the back of his head when they kissed outside the pub.
His life in London seems like a dream, so far away that Eggsy’s hopes lag and leap at varying intervals. He knows they’re real; his glasses attest to the steady stream of someone on the other side, but there is no rescue team lying in wait.

The chatter has stopped, all of them looking at Eggsy. David now turns to him, gun still slung over his back. “Do you want a trial run?”

“A what?”

“You can be part of the guard. No labor, no mines, more food, more water.” David nods as he speaks. “You’re not going to be accepted right away, but we’re willing to give you a chance.” He looks hard at him. “You’ve been resistant, yes, but you did the right thing in the end.”

Did I? Eggsy thinks, not for the first time.

“I…” Eggsy appropriately hesitates. “I...what do I have to do?”

“You’ll have to be put on patrol with a partner,” David explains. “You’ll take your meals with us, sleep in this place, and follow any order given to you. Understood?”

In other words, he’s going to watched more than ever. Always performing, unable to step out of the spotlight.

But he knows what he has to do. “Understood,” he says, and the guards nod, some looking more reluctant than others, but David claps a hand on his shoulder, steering him towards a bedroll and a pile of folded clothes. “These are yours,” he says, and once the guards begin to prepare for the day, loading weapons and chattering and talking about breakfast, David pulls him closer, fingers tight on his arm.

“I put in a good word for you,” David whispers, breath hot on his neck. “Don’t make me regret it, okay? It’ll be on both of our heads if you fuck this up.”

The first thing Eggsy does is get a bath—a pitifully small one with a wooden tub, a sliver of Ivory soap, and rags, but more than anything he’s had recently. It’s diminished by the fact he has to put filthy clothes over his clean skin, but again, better than nothing. He can’t help but remember, though, the nights of lying loose and lazy in a spacious tub, Harry scrubbing his skin with foamy soap, bath oil soporific and smooth against his skin.

The prisoners don’t dare to spit at him or call him a traitor, but he knows that in their eyes, he’s no better than the guards now—probably even less. One woman, who reminds him unnervingly of Roxy, with her greasy brown hair pulled into a ponytail and sharp eyes, refuses to look at him whenever he passes by. Alan, the one with the son and daughter, glares at him with resigned hate, refusing his offer to help bury another body in the tunnel. Everyone looks at him with fear, with hidden disgust, and Eggsy has to pretend to not care.

And truthfully, he deserves it.

Eggsy turns down offers of sleeping with the women, even some of the men, for extra food or water or blankets. He can’t give out mercies, not as easily as that, without a price. He could drag a pleading woman behind a shed or off the roadside, telling her to moan and weep and beg, and slip her an extra scrap from the table, but he’s too afraid of rumors circulating to do more than slip tortillas underneath pillows and in between folds of blankets while patrolling.

But he won’t hit anyone. That’s his one rule. No hitting. He’s trying to stand between the line of
playing his role and not losing any more parts of himself to this hellhole as best he can. But he has to
snap at them to hurry in their work, warn them away from restricted areas, and put down small
rebellions, and whenever he must, he can feel the hopeful man standing in front of a tailor shop’s
mirror begin to chip away.

He’s new enough to not be trusted with a weapon, but the guards make him carry around an
unloaded gun as part of the uniformity. David shadows him, telling him this or that about his duties.
Sometimes, when there are lulls, he tells Eggsy some local legends, a few jokes, tricks on how to
learn the local language, and it’ll be easy to fall into his camaraderie and friendly face if he were just
another man.

One evening, David wordlessly adds another helping of beans to his bowl and sits down beside him.
Privately, as David eats and talks a little about their schedule for tomorrow, Eggsy recalls the dishes
he’s tasted during his runs around the world, spices that made his nose run and flavors that kicked
fish and chips out the window. But after finishing his bowl of rice and beans, topped with precious
chili peppers and onions and onions, he feels like he can never eat again.

He remembers Harry introducing him to a bakery, where lines wound around the block, and ordering
sandwiches and iced tea and plantain chips. He remembers him and Merlin sharing Chester King’s
decanter, warm cups of tea, and sunflower-studded biscuits. He remembers eating at Nando’s with
Roxy, Sunday roasts with his mum and sister, fish and chips with some of the agents.

“All right, now,” David now says, dragging him out of his thoughts. His hand is resting on Eggsy’s
denim-covered knee. “Get some rest. We have patrol in a few hours.”

Eggsy lies awake, trying to sleep, ignoring David’s soft snores from the bedroll beside him. The
alarm clock is set, so they can easily wake up, grab a gun, and check up on the others in the barn and
make their rounds. Flies buzz around him, and Eggsy irritably tries to swat at them without making
too much noise.

It’s high summer. Last year, he’d raced through the bunker of a madmen, convinced that the man he
loved was dead. Somehow, he’d also saved the world, too, and later, got a miracle, as if the world
had been tired of shitting on him.

But this is such the opposite.

His eyes drift closed, tears in the corners of his eyes. His suffering is nothing compared to the people
in the next barn, he knows, but he misses home so much that he almost can’t stand it. But he must.
He has to get the others home, too.

When he opens his eyes again, Harry’s lying beside him in their bed, with its cool cotton sheets and
warm quilts. His fingers absentmindedly trace Eggsy’s arm, moving up the fine hairs and flecks of
moles, and when he looks at him, all curly hair and soft smiles, his expression is full of open and
honest love. “Are you all right, darling?” he asks.

Eggsy moves closer to his body heat, tucking his head against his shoulder, bare underneath the
blankets. “I’m...I’m all right, Harry.” His throat closes as Harry leans over and brushes a kiss on his
forehead. The room is dark, with only the moonlight coming in through the window, so he could see
the gaudily-patterned wallpaper. “I just miss you. I miss you so much, and I’m so s—”

“No,” Harry says, still soft and fond, “no, it’s all right. I’m here.”

“Here now,” Eggsy argues, fully aware of not allowing himself to sink into the illusion of safety and
affection. “But what about when I wake up?”

“But let’s make the most of it,” Harry says, and kisses him.

It shouldn’t feel real at all, but the firm press of Harry’s lips is instantly familiar, and he wants this. Eggsy pulls him closer, opening his mouth, letting him in, and Harry obliges, running his hand through Eggsy’s hair, murmuring assurances and platitudes.

When Harry pulls away, a clump of dark gold hair is clutched in between his fingers. “Whoops,” he says, chuckling a little. “My fault. You’ll be bald as Merlin soon…”

With a startled, half-strangled gasp, Eggsy wakes up, automatically looking down at his hand. It’s empty, no clump of hair curled in his palm, but he doesn’t dare touch his head.

“Fuck,” he quietly whispers.

“Hey,” David’s voice says, and Eggsy turns, heart pounding wildly in his chest when he sees him sitting up, bedroll sliding down to his waist, revealing a bare chest. “Who’s Harry?”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

My god, it would be nice to pretend the last 24 hours hadn't happened.

There’s a moment of dread when Merlin realises what’s going to happen. It’s inevitable, really. It’s what Harry would have done had he been caught up in the same moment, presented with the same opportunity. One Galahad to another. They really are too much alike.

“Doesn’t matter now,” Eggsy says softly and surges up until the image of David rushes up closer to the screen and is then obscured altogether when Eggsy closes his eyes.

The wet sounds and heightened breathing of a kiss fill the room, the soft rustle of shifting of fabric. Eggsy opens his eyes to David’s surprised grunt as he pulls back sharply, wet lips swollen, to stare at Eggsy in shock, pupils dilated. Merlin’s seen that look before, a hundred times over even, given how many honeypot missions he’s observed over the decades.

“What...what are you—” David starts.

“You saved me,” Eggsy tells him breathlessly, reaching up a pale, ravaged hand to cup David’s face. “You saved me.”

He sounds so earnest, so reverent. Merlin can imagine the arresting picture Eggsy makes: his young, pretty face full of awe, slightly dazed, mouth partly open and inviting, worship and devotion shining in his eyes. Who could resist that? Merlin hadn’t. It would have certainly taken a better man than David Quiroga.

The vantage point jerks sharply and suddenly David can be viewed from a slightly upward angle. Eggsy must be straddling him. David’s chest rises and falls with his heightened breathing. A fine tremour shakes out through his body as the view dips, sinking lower and lower, pushing back more of the bedroll to come level with his lap and Eggsy’s hands come into view, reaching for the zip.

Merlin drags his eyes away, turns and chances a glance at Harry sat just behind him, though he knows he won’t find much there if Harry didn’t want him to see it. Harry has a hand to his mouth, index finger laid out along his cheek, eyes hooded and cast downward as if tired or bored. He’s utterly still as the speakers fill the room with all the noises associated with very enthusiastically given (and enjoyed, from the bitten off moans) oral stimulation.

“You don’t have to be here for this,” Merlin says unnecessarily. It’s not like Harry doesn’t know and isn’t simply subjecting himself to self-torture.

Harry lifts his eyes and the look he gives Merlin holds a skin-scouring concentration of withering, but all too soon dulls into self-doubt, sadness. “I did this.”

Both of Merlin’s brows lift. “While it’s your world and we only live in it, I believe you may be flattering yourself a bit too much there.”

“I invited him into this world,” Harry goes on, not even bothering to glare at him. “I framed it as something...exciting and honourable. Transformative. I promised he would make a difference. But it
wasn’t the full picture, was it? It wasn’t honest. I didn’t tell him that there would be moments on the job when he’d be starving half to the death and kneeling in the dirt to fellate a human trafficker.”

Merlin had witnessed that entire moment a year and a half ago, the two of them in the dressing room, gazing at each other in the mirror like the rest of the world hadn’t existed. Eggsy had reached another dead end in his life, had looked to Harry for answers, but more importantly, for hope. And Harry...Harry had already been looking at Eggsy as something special. “One may suffer the greatest indignities,” he says to Harry, “but that does not have to mean one’s dignity has been taken away.”

“Oh, spare me.” The bitterness was back in full force, which was an improvement over the melancholy navel-gazing of mere moments ago. Merlin would count it as a win. “I made the choice. I signed off on it, knowing where it would most likely end up. I brought him into it, knowing one day it would most likely extinguish his light. I sought the relationship, knowing one day, he’d need something more.”

“Oh god,” Merlin muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. “Do you ever listen to yourself sometimes? Fucking drivel.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do you or do you not believe Eggsy is a capable young agent who is strong enough and intelligent enough to make his own decisions? His own way in the world as a young man?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then by gods, Harry, let him own his choices and stop trying to take credit for them like the self-absorbed twat your vanity occasionally permits yourself to be!”

The words, heated, louder than his usual soft-spoken calm, had Harry straightening in his seat, brows mildly raised, which was just about near drop dead shock for the man.

Merlin was mildly embarrassed for his transparent emotions, but he couldn’t back down from them now. “I bet that were you to ask him right now if he could go back in time knowing what was to happen whether he’d still choose this mission, he would say yes, because he wants to shoulder the burdens of his choices, just as we all do. It gives our lives meaning. You may have shown him the door, but it was his decision to step through it and to stay in the room. Or, in the case of your relationship, to step out.”

As he spoke the words, Merlin realised he ought to be heeding them himself. He had kissed Eggsy, knowing of his involvement with his best friend and that it would hurt Harry very much. That was on him. But what transpired thereafter, the questions, the uncertainties...no, that wasn’t, actually.

“After we thought you had died,” he begins after a long hesitation, looking Harry squarely in the eye even still. “We were both devastated. He had lost a first love. So had I.”

Harry remains silent, still, but there’s a storm of emotions brewing in his eyes that flays Merlin down to his soul.

“That was how we got through our grief, Harry. We had set the world on fire together because maybe we didn’t feel like there was much of a world left at the time, but either way, it left a mark. I don’t know when that need for comfort became love for him as well, but it happened to me when I didn’t it could happen again.”

“And then,” Harry spoke up. “I show up, slightly worse for wear, and assume everything was to carry on as normal, myself at the centre of attention, of course, like a wanker.”
“A bit, yes,” Merlin agrees, and they both reluctantly smile. “And I loved the both of you enough to want to see you two happy, at least, that’s what I told myself.”

“And here I was trying to do the honourable thing. Step back to let you two be happy, albeit with far less grace,” Harry says with a generous helping of wryness before his tone grows resigned. “I just about think the rub of it was that I had gone from having the best of all worlds: the unquestioning devotion of love and friendship from you both, to having none at all.”

“That didn’t go away, Harry, just because of what happened between Eggsy and myself, not for either of us,” Merlin insists. “It’s not a zero sum game, is what I suspect that young lad currently half way around the world was trying to say.”

Harry grimaces at the reminder, turning his attention back to the obscenity playing out across the monitors.

_We shouldn’t be...oh, fuck. Fuck, your mouth._

Harry looks as if he’s trying to settle in for the long haul, to brace himself and bear it, but he can’t bring himself to look for very long, practically recoiling with his whole self. “How do you stand it?”

“Decades of practise, I suppose. Knowing that whatever I feel is not likely a tenth of what the agent I am watching is undergoing. It is my job, in some ways, to bear witness.”

“When I was....” Harry begins before trailing off, swallowing.

“Yes,” Merlin says softly. “I was there.”

Harry blinks in quick succession and looks away. Merlin politely shifts his focus back to the screens. Several minutes transpire before Harry says, voice almost level, “You’re just about nearing the end of your third consecutive twelve-hour shift. And don’t you dare say you’re going to stay on. You can’t watch him 24/7. Even you need to sleep at some point.”

“And pratefully who would you suggest take my place? I have my entire staff monitoring our agents elsewhere when they aren’t trying to catch up on their own sorely-needed rest.”

“I have two functioning eyes. Surprising, that, actually,” Harry says.

“Harry....”

But Harry silences him by reaching out to lay a hand over his knee, warm and calm. “Let me be there for him too,” he quietly pleads.

Merlin studies him. Harry is no longer so tense with his quick flare ups of temper, the buildup of frustration. He’s tired too, lines of his face deepened with exhaustion, pale, and ever sad, but beneath it all, there a steadiness, like he’s finally been broken in and now he’s unshakeable. He could probably use a long bout of dreamless sleep too. “Alright. Just for four hours, and then I’m back.”

“Twelve hours. You go back to your flat and leave Kingsman behind for at least a little while,” Harry says sternly, which makes Merlin snort.

“Six hours. I’ll even shower and change. But I’m not leaving.”

“Eight hours. And...fine.”

“Fine,” Merlin agrees, and then becomes annoyed at himself anyway when he realises that was the
number Harry had most likely been aiming for all along.

“Good man,” Harry says with a smirk, kicking his chair with his foot to send Merlin sliding across the floor towards the door. “Off you go.”

“Wanker,” Merlin grumbles under his breath, but stands up with humiliatingly creaking knees and continues out the door anyway.

But not before turning back and sharing one last solemn look with Harry.

“I’m watching,” Harry tells him. Not that Merlin would ever question he wouldn’t, but the confirmation is reassuring all the same.
Harry watches David pull his trousers back up his ankles, glancing around the room. His hands fumble with the zip, then the button, then reaches for the gun leaning up against the wall. “We've got work to do,” he gruffly says.

Eggsy ducks his head, and Harry realizes he’s still on his knees, the denim becoming slowly stained with dirt. “Yeah, of course, yeah.” His hand comes up to swipe at his mouth, coming away with spit and come smeared across his skin.

Harry wants to touch Eggsy, wants to clean up the mess with a damp flannel, pull him down next to him, and hold him so close that he can feel the warmth and heartbeat pressed along his body. He'd never left Eggsy so abruptly and not—Harry notices Eggsy shifting uncomfortably in his jeans—unsatisfied.

But he has looked back at Eggsy many times, as David’s doing now, waiting by the doorway, lips still slightly parted and pupils fixed on the young man slowly picking himself up and reaching for his own weapon. Harry recognizes that look: contemplative, cautious, not willing to say anything, but far from shoving Eggsy away.

A tiny, possessive pocket in his mind had preened at his name escaping from Eggsy's lips, but another part, the Arthur and the former field agent, prayed and berated and groaned all at once. But Eggsy, as reprehensible as the situation was, hadn’t panicked, not for a second.

Merlin’s right. Harry wouldn't have picked him for a candidate, for an agent, if he didn't think Eggsy capable. If he'd wanted Eggsy sheltered and safe, he would have sat back, gifted the young man with a house and the necessary connections and funds to escape his circumstances, and had moved on.

“Count them,” David’s now saying, opening the door to the barn. Eggsy nods deferentially, gaze scanning over the huddled men and women. One woman opens her eyes, stiffening at the sight of them, but doesn’t move. Neither of the men say a word or approach her, and Harry lets himself breathe when it looks like David isn't about to advance, yet doesn’t relax. Eggsy has stood by, as a prisoner and as a guard, allowing atrocities happen, something that goes against everything he’s believed in. Harry knows Eggsy won’t dare compromise the mission—knew it before he had betrayed Nicole and the other women—but who knew what would make Eggsy potentially snap?

Eggsy quietly murmurs a number, and David nods, satisfied. He gives the room another cursory glance, then beckons for Eggsy to follow him, securing the door closed. Eggsy just barely allows the chain to come into focus, but Harry knows him, knows that a part he’s stomped deeply inside wants to hit David over the head with his weapon, free the prisoners in the barn, and start the noisy jeep and drive far, far away.

Harry watches as the two men patrol the surrounding areas as the sky begins to lighten to a dark grey. He wonders what Merlin’s doing now, if he’s showering off the stale sweat and getting something in his stomach and allowing himself to rest, or if he’s just lying on his back in bed, too worried to truly sleep.

Merlin still is fond of Eggsy, but instead of reaching for the bottle he knows Merlin’s got stashed in his desk, Harry folds both hands on the desk, stomach no longer a slow-burning churn. He had been
angry, of course. A part of him still nurtures that betrayal. But now, it seems inconsequential, almost silly, when he looks at Eggsy—what he can see of his sallow skin, his thinning fingernails, his slightly-bloated limbs.

He recalls a phrase from Latin, a class he’d skated through in secondary. Sine qua non. Something absolutely necessary, not to be ignored or left behind. And that something, he’d thought in the medical wing of HQ, was Eggsy. Eggsy, who’d come into his life again for only a few short months, and he’d been startled by the fierce no, I won’t let him go when he’d woken up and seen Eggsy in a rumpled suit and with truly greasy hair slumped in a chair beside his bed. Eggsy had been at his side through it all, the one Harry got up for in the mornings when he’d entertained the thought of what could have been if Valentine had given him a merciful death.

Harry still can’t let him go, but now, he realizes he can’t let Merlin go, either. He’d been remiss in taking his friend for granted for years, for allowing him to slip into the back burner. It might be selfish—it is, really—but he wants them both in his life.

A beep issues from his glasses, and Harry sees the oncoming message, tapping Merlin’s keyboard to project the image on a second screen.

“Jack,” Harry says. “How are you?”

The American agent sighs. He looks like he hasn’t slept in months, hair scraggly and mustache no longer neatly trimmed. The jacket's rumpled, and on his desk is a large paper cup—coffee, of course.

“It's hell down here. But it...could be worse, I suppose,” Jack adds, not sounding very convinced.

Harry nods in silent commiseration. V-Day has brought in leaders no one in their right minds—Harry hopes—would have allowed to come to power under ordinary circumstances. Fear has always been a powerful tool, and Jack's country has never responded well to it. Statesman's numbers had been decimated much more severely than Kingsman's, and Harry, as much as he disliked his own position, didn't envy Jack, who had little support to speak of. Certainly no Merlin.

And Jack, Harry knows, is young. Not as young as Eggsy, but certainly decades younger than Harry himself. The brash, cocky young field agent suddenly being thrust into a position that demands careful deliberation and holding up the straggling remains of infrastructure and organization that had periodic bouts of infighting before V-Day—Harry does not envy him one bit.

Tugging a tablet across the desk, Jack begins tapping on the screen. “So, Galahad. What's his status now?”

“Posing as a guard, seeking protection that he wouldn't get as an ordinary prisoner.” It's rather amazing how calm his voice is. “Not burned.”

“So, not currently seeking extraction?”

“No,” Harry admits, eyes looking over towards the other screen. The guards are beginning to wake, stepping out to prepare breakfast and their daily rounds. “But his progress is...on schedule, for the most part. I assume you called about the contingency outlines I sent to you recently?”

Jack frowns. “Look, Arthur, I gotta be straight with you, but Statesman is down a lot of agents, a lot of handlers, a lot of admins. We're recruiting, but it's still...slow.” He shakes his head. “And Galahad...he's playing the long game, right? You don't have a due date, we don't know exactly where he is, and we will need manpower to extract him and the people there, then seriously inform the officials, if they actually want to help.”
“So…” Harry trails off, a bad feeling closing around his chest. Eggsy and David are now being dismissed for the morning meal, David looking once again at Eggsy as they proceed towards the guards’ shack.

“We have to put a vote for it,” Jack says wearily. “And I'm going to warn you that not a lot are not wanting to risk going after one agent—not even ours—when we have...not a lot ourselves. Not to mention the power structure where Eggsy is...it’s complicated.”

Harry closes his eyes. He's expected this, of course, but it seems like a blow. He can't fail Eggsy like this. “I understand.”

“If it were up to me…” Jack begins, and Harry remembers he’d taken a shine to Eggsy during his last trip to Kentucky. “But, look, you never know,” he continues, trying for optimism. “We may vote for an extraction team or someone else to come in. For an independent organization, we still run on bureaucracy here.”

“How democratic of you.”

“Democratic.” The very word seems to sneer on Jack's tongue. “That's us. Well, I'll let you know, okay? Over and out.” With that, the screen goes blank, then the golden Kingsman logo begins to slowly rotate against the black background.

Harry shuts it off, rubs his temples, and turns his attention back to Eggsy. He has seven hours to go.

Chapter End Notes

So, I don't have a high opinion of America right now. Sorry, Jack.
Chapter 13

Over time, one can get used to anything. Eggsy sleeps deeply and well. It’s only when he awakes that he feels the itch of stale hay digging into his exposed skin and swelling insect bites, feels sticky with the buildup of dirt, sweat, and grime. He starts out in his own bedroll at night, but inevitably by morning, he’s rolled over and scrunched up next David’s warm body.

Sometimes Eggsy will open his eyes to find David awake as well, the contours of his body barely illuminated with the first rays of dawn streaking in through the wooden slats, the harsh edges of the world soft and muted as if Eggsy were still in a dream. Sometimes he’ll pull open David’s bedroll and crawl down to his groin to furtively suck him off, betraying only the softest slide of slick flesh and choked off grunts.

Then the sun will fully brighten the sky and the other guards will be up and the day will begin. Morning count, breakfast, transporting the workers to the tunnel, making rounds under the hot afternoon sun.

The guards will eat lunch, the slaves will not. It’s a long, long day, only ending when the sun begins to sink into the horizon, and they’ll use the last of the fading light to pack up and head back to base. The women will circle them at supper to offer marginally enthusiastic sex in exchange for better food, while the rest of the workers get the scraps that are left.

The guards drink and smoke, some play cards or watch the little portable telly, even though it barely gets any reception. Evening count and then bed, laid out on the rapidly cooling ground, hearing the night insects chirp and screech, the guards snore, some of them fucking women, sometimes the low, menacing growls of wild dogs fighting.

Eggsy’s eyes remain open, seeing nothing, hearing everything, a backdrop score to the steady rhythm of his dulled heart.

Early dawn. The barest hint of heat already pressing down upon him in the barn. His hair is lank and damp at his temples. Three new welts along his spine from some blood-hungry creature. David tastes sour and rancid with the increased sweat accumulated on his skin during the night. He tangles his fingers through Eggsy’s hair, pulling him up and down with coarse guidance and Eggsy finds that he likes it, the sharp twinges of pain in his scalp, the blunt battering of his throat. Wants it to hurt more.

Count. Breakfast. Tunnel. One more worker doesn’t make it.


A baseball game fading in and out on the telly.

Count. Sleep. The mourning of an owl haunts the night.


Break down and pack up. Supper. Sleep.

Dawn. Eggsy rolls away from David with the taste of come lingering in his mouth and rises. In the next stall over, he sees another guard standing up, pulling his shirt down quickly over his generous belly and the faded black markings of a tattoo on the jut of his hip. The woman, Eggsy no longer knows their names, is slower to rise, gingerly gathering her torn clothes.

There’s the count, and one of the slaves doesn’t wake up. Breakfast.


Supper. Sleep.

Dawn. Eggsy rolls away from David with the taste of come lingering in his mouth and rises. In the next stall over, he sees another guard standing up, pulling his shirt down quickly over his generous belly and the faded black markings of a tattoo on the jut of his hip. The woman, Eggsy no longer knows their names, is slower to rise, gingerly gathering her torn clothes.

There’s the count, and one of the slaves doesn’t wake up. Breakfast.


Supper. Sleep.

Some of the guards wash up with the rusting old outdoor shower, but the water runs out before Eggsy’s turn.


But as sunset comes round, and the heat marginally lessens, today David crowds him close, and whispers, “Hey, wanna see something?”

“Alright,” Eggsy says and follows him without question.

They start walking away from the site, and Eggsy briefly worries if anyone will think they’ve run off, but no one stops or calls out to them. They walk until the grade slowly rises and they reach the crest of a steep rise overlooking a barren desert valley. Far off in the distance, the silhouette of craggy rock formations stretch up beneath the setting orange sun.

“Nice, right?” David says.
“Yeah.” It’s the kind of image that would make for a breathtaking card to send home even. The colours of sunset bleed flames into a descending purple twilight. Desert spills out as far as he can see in every direction. The world seems almost too large to bear.

A hand touches his shoulder, anchoring Eggsy amidst his spiralling thoughts, drawing him back into his body with the suddenness of a rebounding elastic band. He startles, looking over at David.

“Hey,” David says, smacking something against his arm. A medium-sized white tube labeled Vitacilina. “Trust me, it helps out here.”

It’s such a small but thoughtful gesture, unbearably kind in this harsh environment that for a few moments Eggsy can’t speak, he just takes the tube and squeezes out the cool white lotion, rubbing it into his cracked and bleeding joints and heated, parched skin, leaving dark streaks of dirt in its wake. The lotion leaves an oily film that feels smothering.

It gives him the idea to coax David towards a rocky outcrop just down slope, hidden from any prying eyes from the site. He slicks David up with the lotion and lets him bend Eggsy over the rocks, hard and fast. It hurts, just like Eggsy wants it to. He bites the inside of his lower lip until it bleeds to keep quiet. His hands scrabble to find firm grips on the rock, his short blunt fingers pinching the sharp edges until they cut him.

Harry has long, graceful fingers. His hands are worn smooth, weathered and callused, patterned with faint scarring. He liked to hold Eggsy’s hands above Eggsy’s head and weave his fingers through Eggsy’s as they fucked, one more point of inextricable entwinement.

Merlin, too, has long fingers, softer hands. Larger hands, too, that could cup the entirety of Eggsy’s skull in one palm, pressing Eggsy’s head to his chest. Eggsy had often closed his eyes, soaked up his body heat, and felt comforted late at night on the couch in Merlin’s private office, when he was exhausted and overwrought, when the world had felt too heavy, when he had felt too alone in it.

Such memories already feel like somebody else’s.

David finishes inside him and presses against Eggsy’s back for several long shuddering seconds, his breath wet against Eggsy’s shoulder. He pulls out and hastily puts himself together, averting his gaze when Eggsy gingerly does the same, ignoring the hardness between his own legs that feels separate from him, gritting his teeth against the uncomfortable mess soaking into the seat of his underwear.

——

Dawn. Again. He’s sore.

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It blurs together, the endless mornings and nights and the hot stretch of blazing sun in between. He finds his thoughts turning crueler.

The slaves move too slowly, he has to shout at them to do every single thing.
They take too many water breaks.

They demand too much food and still they want more.

They are constantly testing him. Disrespecting him.

Do they think he likes this? Likes them?

Dawn. Something is different. There’s a nervous energy in the air. The guards are tense, snapping at the slaves, at each other. Everyone moves quickly through the morning routine. David pushes him off when he automatically reaches into his bedroll.

“What’s going on?” Eggsy finally asks.

“The boss is coming today,” David says grimly. “You know who that is?”

Eggsy just shakes his head.

“Alejandro Martínez, of the Martínez cartel. He is the third youngest son. His brothers control most of South and Central America now, so Alejandro wants to push north. Make his own name.”

“So everyone has to polish their shoes and wash behind their ears?”

But David just frowns. “He’s a dangerous man because he has a lot to prove. If he sees no value in you, he will not hesitate to kill you. So keep your head down until this is over, do you understand me?”

Martínez arrives in a sleek black SUV wearing a tailored black suit despite the heat, and the guards practically bow and scrape before him. He’s tall, almost rangy in his slenderness, and is well-kept and polished from his carefully slicked back curls to his manicured nails. Eggsy doesn’t get to look long because David quickly ushers back to his rounds.

Throughout the day, he keeps an eye out for Martínez, who seems to want to handle the inspections of the tunnel personally. From the escalating tension among the guards, he can tell that no one is happy.

“Boss doesn’t think progress is going fast enough,” David tells him at lunch.

Eggsy squints. Martínez and his men are far enough away that Eggsy can’t see the expressions on their faces, but the rest of the guards circle around Martínez with heads bowed like scolded children. “Perhaps if we actually fed the workers adequately, they’d actually be more productive.”

“Everyone is expendable.” David fishes around in his jacket pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, offering one to Eggsy, but Eggsy waves him off. The nicotine would be nice, but he can barely get enough water as it is to put up with smoker’s mouth.

In the distance, Martínez studies the sleeve of his jacket and brushes the sand from it.

David works off the day’s stress by vigourously fucking Eggsy behind the latrine. Enough to exhaust him too, but not so much as to not dream again.
He dreams of the sunset, of sitting on that outcropping on the hill and watching the sun slip behind the rock formation on the horizon. A gentle wall of heat washes over his face like an anointment. He raises his phone to take a picture of it but won’t go so far as to tag it with #nofilter like a wanker.

“I’m gonna send this to me mum,” Eggsy says.

“She’d like that,” Harry says. A reflection of the sun shines in his glasses, orange balls of light replacing his irises, which Eggsy finds amusing.

“A photo to remember me by.”

“Not one of yourself?”

“Nah. I’m a mess,” Eggsy says. “I gotta get him to see me, Harry. I saved myself from the salt mines, but getting close to him is the key to wrapping this all up.”

“Bravo,” Harry praises, smile strangely stiff on his face.

“Then I can come home.”

“Can you?” Harry challenges.

Eggsy swallows and feels the dread curdle in his stomach. He doesn’t want to think about it too long, so instead he focuses on his problem. “How do I get him to trust me?”

Harry is quiet for a very long time, so long that Eggsy starts to worry he won’t answer, but Harry doesn’t fail him, not even in his dreams, not ever. “By getting him to distrust everyone else.”

Eggsy opens his eyes and stares up at the rafters of the barn. He knows what to do.

Martínez stays in one of those large, fancy luxury trailers because they haven’t got anything nicer on the premises. Eggsy marches right up to the door and pounds on it.

“¡Qué chingados!” He hears from inside before the door to the trailer is unlocked and an irritated Martínez appears with a gun in his hand, glaring at Eggsy. “¿Que carajo estás haciendo?”

“Someone is sabotaging your tunnel,” Eggsy says. “A spy from your brother’s gang.”

Martínez studies him more sharply now. “How do you know this?”

“It’s Michael. He has your brother’s tattoo on his left hip.”

After that, all the guards are roused from their slumber and made to stand in a circle in the centre of the barn, half-dressed. Eggsy refuses to meet David’s hard, questioning gaze.

Two of Martínez’s personal guards drag a resisting Michael to the centre of the group and hold him down while they ruck up his shirt.

Someone curses.
Martínez’s face darkens as he steps closer to Michael, staring down at him impassively. “So you work for my brother all this time? Making sure I would fail?” He spits. “Traidor.”

“Alejandro, no es lo que piensas!” Michael pleads, shaking. “Alejandro!” He desperately looks to the rest of them imploringly, but they all know when to cut their losses. Finally Michael’s wild gaze lands on Eggsy. “It’s you!” he snarls. “You’re just a little bitch, aren’t you, puto? ¡Vete a la verga culero! It’s the only thing you’re good for!”

Martínez turns to Eggsy and holds out the gun. Eggsy stares at it. “Go on, take it,” Martínez urges, and when Eggsy does, he looks Eggsy in the eye, his dark and fathomless, and says, “Shoot the dog.”

Eggsy turns to Michael and remembers how he dragged Nicole across the barn by her hair, and every night after was personally motivated to see to her suffering. How he had stared down at her dispassionately before putting a bullet between her eyes, and then laughed.

Eggsy’s hand doesn’t even shake when he unhesitatingly lifts the gun and returns the favour.

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After, Martínez invites him back to his trailer and pours him good mezcal. Eggsy savours the smooth, smoky burn down his throat and in his belly.

“You did me a good service tonight,” Martínez says as he sits across from Eggsy. “I am a firm believer that loyalty is to be rewarded. So tell me, what do you want? Within reason, of course.”

Eggsy contemplates his glass for a few moments longer before he meets Martínez’s eyes. “I want to learn from you. The whole business.”

It’s clear that Martínez is surprised from the way his dark brows dip in confusion. “Learn from me.”

“I don’t want to be in this dust pit anymore,” Eggsy says flatly. “I know real power when I see it, and I want to be close to it. Learn what you know. Do what you do.”

Martínez laughs bitterly. “I am on the losing end of this fucking competition with all my brothers. They constantly seek to undermine me. Make me look bad in front of our father.”

Eggsy leans forward, earnest. “Then let me help you. I’m very good at observation. I can be your unsuspecting eyes and ears so that what happened tonight will never happen again.”

Martínez sits back, studying Eggsy. “You started out as one of the slaves, no?” he muses. “Do you not hate the men who brought you here? Why should I trust that?”

And for once, Eggsy doesn’t even have to think about the answer, letting the honesty shine in his eyes.

“Because there’s nothing left for me to go back to.”
It’s very late when Eggsy returns to the guards’ barn and slips into his bed roll, immediately closing his eyes and trying to calm his racing heart.

“How did you know about the brother’s spy?”

Eggsy opens his eyes and turns onto his side to face David. He can only see the whites of his eyes and the palest impression of a face in the dark. “I remembered seeing something like it on the news once. When I saw it again on Michael, I didn’t think anything of it until you explained who everyone was. Then I knew.”

“You must have a good memory to recall all of that.”

There a note of suspicion there. Eggsy can hear it. He smiles at David. “It bought you and me a way out of here.”

“What?”

“Tomorrow, when Martínez leaves for Miami, we go with him.”

David just stares at him. “How…? How did you?”

Eggsy reaches out, cupping the back of his neck almost tenderly. “I showed him how I could be helpful,” he says, parroting back his words.

He’s looking for it, the moment when David realises that maybe Eggsy’s a lot a more than he seems. Not the poor, naive boy from uni who couldn’t hold his liquor and got spirited away by the big bad men. Not the kind-hearted boy who tried to protect the women and children at great cost to himself.

Eggsy closes the distance between them, pulling David’s head down close to his. He dares to brush his lips across David’s in the briefest of kisses because he misses them, but doesn’t chance more. Doesn’t trust himself.

Instead, his grip digs in until David is hissing and whispers, “I want your mouth now.”

David looks at him. His eyes are like two black holes. Without a word, he pushes the top of Eggsy’s bedroll away and sinks down lower.
Florida is too hot, David thinks, then changes his mind. It’s not quite the hot he knows of, where his skin is still healing from the cracks and dryness and roughness. He could easily imagine his skin sizzling if he pressed fingers against it, but didn’t because of the bubbles that formed under the hot sun. It was almost a mercy in the tunnels, shielded underground, but he wouldn’t trade whatever shelter he had for not being beaten and worked like a dog, worse than one.

Florida has rain falling as hot as the shower in the hotel he’s getting used to after years of dirt, a sliver of soap, and a ragged washcloth, and the rain leaves steam afterwards, filling the air with a sultry dampness. Everyone sighs when the rain stops, sweat clinging to their bare skin, temporarily cooling them until the heat begins again.

Liam loves it, though, even though he tries to hide it. He tilts his head back to meet the rain, turning in place so he can gape at the sights a boy from London has never gotten to see. He’s probably heard fantasies of America, like everyone has, but America has always sounded a twenty-minute snake to him, coils of bright yellow and black and orange. They will flee from you at first, his aunt had warned, after reciting the order of colors and making them repeat the sequence back, but they will bite you if they are afraid enough.

It’s almost easy to get seduced by the long, white beaches and rolling waves and palm trees competing with the buildings for space. The water is beautiful, warm and turquoise and showing the soft sand and darting creatures underneath, and just a walk through it can make the filth, the heat, the dust of the tunnels and barn and shacks seem farther away. He remembers knees poking into his legs, sticky fingers grabbing the remote control, gasps at the latest plot twists from the telenovelas he pretended to be bored with, the telenovelas that showed another world that look like this one.

But, he does admit, although the sun shines long into the night hours, although the faucets run hot water, although the food is plentiful and sometimes so rich that his stomach turns, there is a price for it all, and he’s not sure Liam knows.

Martínez is paranoid and short-tempered, so much so that David finds himself tiptoeing softer than he had back where he used to be. His men fall in line easily, mute and simple, and it’s habit by now to do the same.

Liam does the same, but in a different way. What he’s heard in whispers is a Liam he feels as if he should know about a boy who creeps around on his toes, listening and useful, and whispers in Martínez’s ear, even getting the privilege of contributing to the men who slip away or are sent away or—

But for now, it's slow, with Martínez looking for customers and sponsors and sentencing one or two or more traitors from his brothers’ circle to death. They say Liam is always there with him, eyes cold
and focused. There are even whispers about Liam rising through the ranks and becoming his right hand. Already, Liam has a place in Martínez's house, a maid that cleans his room, and a seat at the dining room table.

Make yourself useful, he had told Liam so long ago, but he did not mean like this, so close to the man in charge that he no longer had the shield of anonymity. He meant as he was doing—being one of a pack—and is still doing, patrolling and watching as just another obedient, mute guard in Martínez’s shadow.

It's after Liam comes back from another meeting that David watches his shoulders slump over, fingers fiddling with the tie around his neck.

“Need help?” he asks.

Liam wordlessly nods, allowing David to put his hands at Liam’s neck and undo the knot. Martínez had given him a suit, dark gray with a matching tie, finer than anything David’s seen on him.

The tie’s put on a nearby table, looped like an apple peel, then comes the jacket, the shirt, and the pants. David does this all for him, while Liam stands perfectly still, watching him in the full-length mirror. His body’s beginning to heal, skin softening from the lotions David helps rub into his skin and light hair shining under the constant sun. His ribs do not poke out so much, while the swelling in his limbs and stomach have gone down.

Liam steps away, naked and unabashed, then goes into the bathroom to turn on the shower. He carefully places his glasses on the sink, lenses facing towards the bedroom. “Martínez wants you at the next meeting.”

“What? Why me?”

“I don’t know,” Liam says, shrugging, then runs a hand through the water to test the heat. “But he wants you and me to report to him.”

David can only stand frozen in place. He’s never been invited to the meetings. Liam has, always has, but David’s always sent to another job while they take place. No one who is in the room dares to allow details slip—Martínez grows more adamant about this by the day—with Liam being more tight-lipped than most. What could that man want from him?

“You coming?” Liam asks, looking back as he steps into the shower, surrounded by blurred glass walls.

David slips out of his clothes, placing the holsters and guns on the nightstand, and follows.

Water pours down on them like the rain, and they both stand underneath it, hands full of slippery soap. He’s glad to have the sweat be rinsed down the drain. It’s almost a miracle to be clean again.

“So, it’s tomorrow?” David asks. “The fifth?”

“Yes, the fifth.” Liam runs his hands down David’s limbs, lathering it with white foam. His palms are still rough with callouses.

David can still can’t hardly believe they’ve been away for two months and says so, but Liam shakes his head, laughing a bit at the time passed. “I think I could have graduated by now.”

It’s been a while since Liam has hinted at the what-have-beens. David slides his slick hands up
Liam’s arms. “What were you studying?”

“History,” Liam says. “And my mum wanted me to go into business, so I was doing a little bit of that. Bolivia—it was supposed to be a good opportunity for me. A bit different than I imagined, but…”

David silently nods. He thinks of his sister, telling them about her new job in Ciudad Juarez in one of the maquiladoras. She had sent them money, then a photo of herself in her work uniform, dark hair in a knot above her shoulders. Her clothes and shoes were returned to them in three months. "Do you have any other family?"

"No."

“What about Harry?” David asks. Liam is quieter in his sleep, but fitful murmurs occasionally pass his lips.

“What about him?"

“What was he?"

“College roommate,” Liam says, then moves to rinse his hair.

Something overtakes him, closing around his lungs, and he slides his hands up Liam’s sides, then fastens them tight around Liam’s chest. A fist of two hands forms, pressing against the steadily-beating heart. “You’re away too often.”

"David," Liam says, a bit softer, turning around to face him. He does not seem to need David much here, but still keeps him close. “I’m just...securing our position here. I don’t want to go back. Do you?"

“No,” David admits, and kisses him.

Liam stills for the briefest second, but is quick to respond, opening his mouth. David holds his chin, pressing against him as water thunders against the glass, the tile, their bared flesh, and curls one hand around Liam’s left shoulder, placing his right palm against the blue-tiled wall for balance. He wants to take Liam against the wall, hear his cries above the sound of water, press his fingers into his hips. He tugs on Liam's hair, pulling it so his roots stretch, and Liam gasps, but allows him, nails digging into his skin.

He pulls back, gasping, lips wet and reddened, and David leans in again, teeth grazing a chapped portion on the lower lip. His thumb grazes Liam’s cheekbone, tracing it, then moves under his lower lid. "Has anyone told you that you had eyes like the sun?"

“No,” Liam says, then guides David’s hand down between their bodies, pressing it firmly, holding it there. He looks at David, gaze hungry.

“I want you,” David thinks. He hasn’t wanted more than a few minutes of sleep, an extra helping of beans, softer blows against his sore flesh for such a long time, but he wants him. He’d saved him. Liam would not be a guard, a confidant of Martínez, without him.

He wants Liam on his mouth, on his knees. He is not Martínez’s. He does not belong to Florida or Mexico or Bolivia or England. He belongs here.

“We are in a climate of distrust,” Martínez says, picking up his fork. Everyone else mimics him, but
does not put a morsel of anything into their mouths unless Martínez tastes first—or, more accurately, an unlucky servant in the kitchens. They say Martínez won’t have even a sip of water before commanding someone to test it for him. “It’s been worse since the election.” He then grins like lighting, quick and leaving nothing behind. “But luckily, everyone still wants to buy drugs.”

Everyone else laughs, but it’s devoid of the belly-deep ones born of humor. No one wants to smile too much, laugh too loudly, ask too much.

The dining room has floor to ceiling windows, and curtains that are drawn to reveal the ocean. There’s a glittering chandelier above their heads, glass curved upwards so it looks as if tongues of fire are about to fall around them. The table is made from heavy wood, deep brown, and both it and the chairs have carving on the legs. Steaming dishes cover the surface, with small bowls of dipping sauces and chili oil and lime slices. The glasses are full with wine, deep red that matches the curtains. The walls have gold frames of photographs of the ocean, palm trees, faces David does not know.

“If we can establish more connections, more buyers and sellers, then it will not matter about my brothers.” Finally, Martínez places something in his mouth, covered in bright red sauce that has the nostrils of David’s nose burning, and everyone follows suit. David’s stomach turns, but he still eats, not daring to offend Martínez. Liam is eating plentifully, sampling all of the dishes, without one glance towards David. He's back in another suit, this one the same dark gray, and his hair is combed neatly, glasses perfectly straight on the bridge of his nose.

“All of you are responsible, and you will share in the profit that will come to us,” Martínez continues. “If, of course, you want this.”

There’s a round of nodding and murmurs of yes, yes. Martínez takes a sip of mezcal. He does not offer for anyone else to drink from the bottle.

Liam's eyes are fixed intently on Martínez as he begins to talk about business, pausing to occasionally taste something from one of the platters. He eats almost delicately, slicing into a capon with a shining silver knife, lifting tiny bites to his mouth, chewing slowly. His nails shine, buffed and trimmed, underneath the lights.

"Tomorrow, I will meet with someone who wants to be a buyer," he announces. "Liam, you will come with me." He names a few more to serve as guards, including David himself, but David knows favoritism when he sees it. Liam had been the first name called, and he sits near Martínez’s hand, on a cushion and carved wooden chair, hands gripping the silver utensils as naturally as Martínez does.

But no one asks who the buyer is. One does not ask someone like Martínez a question without lowered eyes or tentatively asking for permission to speak.

But Martínez, after a few more bites, speaks: “Another American, not from here. Enrique, run a background check on him. If he's law enforcement, it can spell trouble.” He then scowls, and David’s food becomes tasteless on his tongue. “And I'm certain my brothers will never let me forget it."
Merlin didn’t used to have to rely on his alarm to rouse him from slumber. He was a chronic insomniac at the best of times and fortified his sleeplessness with an unending supply of caffeine and being a workaholic. Used to. Past tense.

Something about the last few weeks has been stealing away his energy faster than he can replenish it, like a stone grinding down the wheat. The exhaustion lives in his bones, behind his eyes. It makes moving, thinking, and speaking all the more difficult.

So he sleeps now, more than he has ever done, and when the alarm goes off, it is still well before dawn. He is slow to open his eyes, even slower to rise, fighting against the increased weight of gravity on his leaden limbs.

He lets the hot shower spray beat down upon his back. He makes black sludge coffee for breakfast because he never remembers to shop for groceries, and sits at the small table in his kitchenette, reading email and ignoring Eggy’s belongings in the far corner, half sunken in the shadows. Eggy’s stay had been so brief, as if he had looked over the depressing hollowness of Merlin’s small life and immediately hightailed it across the pond.

Merlin takes the first bus of the day across the city to the still closed shop and reads the national papers on his tablet on the shuttle ride to headquarters. He finally starts to run into more people once he reaches the manor. There’s always an active shift in his department, buzzing with wiry energy and too little sunlight.

His second in command falls into step beside him as soon as he steps off the shuttle.

“Jerry.” Merlin doesn’t even look up from his tablet. His feet know the route by muscle memory now. “What’s it like today?”

“Tristan should be wrapping up Morocco in six hours. Gawain requested an additional two fifty be wired into his expense account.”

Of course it is Gawain. “For bloody what?”

“Payoffs. Thinks the intel is good, though.”

“Gawain always thinks throwing money at it is the solution to everything, but fine. Send it.”

“Percival is running into unexpected resistance in Chengdu, but isn’t worried about it yet.”

“Percival wouldn’t worry if a nuclear holocaust were raining down around him. Keep an eye on the situation and if it doesn’t improve in forty-eight hours, we’ll revisit our strategy.”

“Noted. Kay’s leg is coming along nicely. Should be ready for physio in another three weeks.”

A spiral fracture. Nasty thing. “Start looking into potential missions that will fit the timeline, two months out, pending medical sign-off, of course.”

“Of course.”

Harry is already on the floor, conversing with two of Merlin’s weapons technician leads. At first
glance, he looks as pressed and well put together as he usually does, but the bags are prominent under his eyes, his button down shirt is wrinkled, and the suit he’s wearing is less than sharply creased. Given how many spare suits agents kept on premises, it is telling, then, of how long it’s been since he actually left the estate.

“Any change?” Merlin asks quietly when he draws close enough to assure that any words traded between them would stay there.

“No.”

And that’s that. Their morning ritual. Merlin walks on.

There are supplies to inventory and requisition forms to fill out and budgets to assess. Merlin attends intel meetings and then strategy meetings and then finance meetings. Weapons demonstrations and consultations. Pre-mission briefings and post-mission debriefings. He personally oversees Lancelot’s mission in Libya and Bedivere’s mission in Honduras.

By the time his mind comes up for air, it’s 36 hours later, and he’s starving, wrung out, and exhausted. A migraine is beginning to form behind his left eye.

The shift around him has changed thrice over, some having been there when Merlin first arrived, gone home, and already come back again. He thinks about stretching out on the small cot he keeps in his private office or unlocking the bottom right drawer of his desk to make a larger dent on that old expensive scotch he reserves for the best and worst moments of his life, though the present situation could hardly be deemed as either.

What he does do is swing by Arthur’s office to find the light still shining beneath the door.

“Please don’t tell me you’ve been here as long as I have,” he says once he’s given permission to enter.

Harry looks up from where he’s practically hunched over his desk, elbows settled upon a thick stack of papers that all undoubtedly require his attention and/or signature in triplicate despite how much they’ve already moved to paperless format. He seems as worn and aged as the pages of the old leatherbound books on the shelves behind him. His glasses, which used to just be for Kingsman recordings and communications but now have a prescription in them, are perched halfway down the bridge of his nose. His desk lamp casts harsh shadows across his face. “That depends. What day is it?”

“That answers that question.” Merlin wavers just within the door, indecisive.

He is struck by a strange sensation: that this is one of those moments where his next action sets into motion a cascading series of cause and effect. He could nod his goodnight as he usually does and go back to his little flat before forgetting he still hadn’t any food, decide the effort to find a takeaway menu wasn’t worth it, and simply collapse into bed, roused by his alarm after too few hours for another near two sleepless days. Repeat all this again, with slightly different players, same routine. He is one of the reliable gears of Kingsman, ever churning to keep the engine going strong and steady.

The endless path to be tread, whose reward is only more of the dull same, unfurls oppressively before him, and he finds himself scrambling back from its crumbling, precipitous edge.

“Want to grab a bite?”

For a moment, Merlin thinks Harry will refuse. His lips part, his brows furrow. His eyes squint in the
way they do when he hesitates to voice something disagreeable, rare as those times are. The hesitation, not the disagreeableness.

But then Harry looks at him, really looks at him, maybe for the first time, and Merlin wonders if he sees what Merlin has always known to be true about himself, or if Harry can only scrape the surface of his thoughts, pair it with years of knowledge and experience to make an educated guess, mostly right, but there would always be that unknowable nth quantity remaining. “What do you have in mind?”

“That sounds dreadful,” Harry remarks before pushing his chair back from the desk. “I know just the place.”

Merlin suspects he knows it. “The Italian place?”

Harry smiles ruefully. He always hated being predictable, but it’s hard to surprise someone who’s known him for decades. “Should serve your requirements nicely.”

“It’s been a long time.” Merlin tries to recall when he last went there. It has to have been at least 15 years for him, though he imagines Harry has remained a loyal customer. “I wonder if the stuffed shells are as good as I remember.”

“As if you’ve had anything better since.” Which is a fair point.

They walk side by side down the long corridors of the manor in comfortable silence, a familiar enough sight to everyone who’s worked at Kingsman for longer than the last rocky few months. They sit beside each other on the shuttle, their legs occasionally knocking together with the sway of the train, mirrored in length and gangliness. Merlin had always found that pleasing. They are well matched in rough outlines; it is only the finer details that distinguish them, gold from brass. When he is tired and his vision is blurry, they appear one and the same.

They take a Kingsman taxi to the deli-come-restaurant, which occupies a sliver of a footprint in Harry’s neighbourhood. The interior is cramped and narrow, still bearing its original linoleum tiles and unflattering overhead fluorescent lights. The owners have grudgingly permitted a ledge-like table ringing the perimeter along with a few stools to serve for seating, but most customers take the hint and do not linger after receiving their orders. All that aside, there’s a simple enough reason for the deli’s continued existence going on over two decades now: the food is transcendent and unshowy. It used to be insultingly cheap, but for London’s skyrocketing costs of living.

Harry enjoys everything about fine dining, from costume to ritual, but he knows Merlin does not, so they put in their orders and do not take off their coats, leaning against the ledge and gazing out at the street beyond while they wait. The percussive bang of pots and pans play behind them, accompanied by sizzling notes and quick shouts of Italian, where only in the kitchen can such a melodic language be twisted into the equivalent of barking.

“I remember when I first came to the city after uni. More than anything, I felt like I had finally come home,” Harry suddenly says, apropos of nothing, though his features are drawn into deep thought as if he’d been mulling over the issue for some time. “Do you know what I used to love most about London? That I would never be bored. There was always something different to do each night and I thought I’d never get tired of the endless possibilities.”

When Merlin had first arrived in the city, he had liked it because felt large. Expansive. When one grew up in a small Scottish village where everyone knew each other’s business, one came to value
anonymity and distance. Merlin clears his throat. “Can’t say I was one for going out all that often. Seemed like a waste of time.”

From the corner of his eye, he catches Harry’s faint smile. It transforms his profile, from world weary to benign amusement. “Mostly, it is. But back then, I felt as if I had plenty of time to waste. Only, even I grew tired of the constant change. Familiarity and reliability became more desirable, my home and creature comforts. Until one day, I woke up and realised I was old and the world had moved on without me.”

Merlin doesn’t think Harry longs for the glory days of his youth, per se, but the man had always been prone to wistfulness for the sheer romance of it, as if he enjoyed re-reading his life like a favourite novel. Merlin doesn’t have a poetic bone in his body. He has always been, and, he suspects, always would be much more sensibly minded. “Well, we get enough excitement from our work, don’t we? No need to go seeking more of it in our personal lives as well. Then again, I sometimes think I was already born old.”

“Or wise, you could say,” Harry says kindly.

“Old,” Merlin reaffirms. “There may have been a time about before age five when the world didn’t feel like such a burden upon my shoulders.”

“I wouldn’t recognise you.”

“You wouldn’t.” He weighs the pros and cons of what he’s about to say next, but. “I once thought when we grew up, we could transform into dragons.”

Harry blinks at the confession, which Merlin has never admitted to anyone before.

“And how I wanted to be a dragon, Harry. My parents told me that dragons were creatures of the devil, but I was ready to be a dragon for the Lord.”

Harry starts laughing, head thrown back, mouth wide. He must be deliriously tired, but it’s encouraging all the same. Merlin finds himself chuckling too.

“By the grace of God.” The mirth tapers off, and Harry’s gasping a little, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes behind his glasses. “And what did you do when you realised it was not to be?”

“Cursed God, the church, and my parents and declared the whole Christian tradition to be in bad form.” Merlin shrugs. “It was about that time I picked up a book on dinosaurs and evolution from the local library. Practically contraband.”

“And thus you converted to the doctrine of science.”

“To become the cynical atheist you see before you today.”

“Poor Mr and Mrs Douglas.”

“They eventually got over it. Not so pious themselves these days anyway. I’ve worn them down via shock exposure therapy. Once I revealed my devotion to being a godless heathen, coming out was a drop in the bucket. I still thank Saint Darwin for that one.”

They pick up their order, a positively grotesque amount of food, and meander back to Harry’s home. The path down the mews is dotted with softly glowing outdoor lights and an abundance of greenery.

“Is it just me or is it beginning to look like a jungle down here?” Merlin barely manages to dodge a
“Our newest neighbours,” Harry explains, “are a bit eco-happy. Got everyone else in on it too.”

“Except you, you cranky bastard,” Merlin notes, nodding to the barren facade they now approach. “Bet they even offered to keep them up for you when you used your long work hours as an excuse.”

Harry shrugs but doesn’t deny it. “The less people snooping about the house, the better. I’ve become happily misanthropic.” He fiddles with the lock, which has always been sticky. Merlin once offered to get it fixed, but Harry had waved him off, labeling the problem as unimportant. He secretly thinks Harry just finds the spot of bother charming. At last, success is had and Harry pushes the door open with more force than ought to have been necessary. “Of course, Eggsy went and befriended them all.”

Eggsy. The mere mention seems to have a mass and gravity of its own, halting all other conversation in its tracks. Merlin can’t see Harry’s face as they trudge into the house, but the heavy ensuing silence is louder than any words that could have been said.

When Harry flips the lights, Merlin can immediately discern the sense of abandonment that blankets the house like an early morning fog. The air smells stale, every surface just a little bit dusty. People infuse physical spaces with warmth and vitality if they spend enough time within them; there is none to be found here. Merlin is acutely familiar with every nuance of neglect.

But the fortunate thing about that particular type of emptiness is that it can be easily renewed with good company, and good company can be buoyed by good food and drink. Harry bats away Merlin’s token protests and breaks out several bottles of wine from his stores to accompany their meal that really ought to have been reserved for a more momentous occasion. “I’ve well surpassed the midpoint of an average man’s expected lifespan, much less a Kingsman’s. I can’t imagine there to be so many celebratory moments left on this leg of the journey aside from the sheer miracle of still being alive.”

They feast like kings, like they had done in their 20s when they had a rapacious metabolism and far more gruelling lifestyle to perpetuate it, soaking it all up with rich wine: panzanella, cacciucco, bruschetta al pomodoro, cacio e pepe, and of course, Merlin’s favoured conchiglioni ripieni, just as wondrous as when he first tasted it. Harry demonstrates eleventh hour discipline by forgoing the almond plum cake slices, but Merlin unrepentantly scrapes the crumbs off the plastic carton.

Bellies full to discomfort, heads muzzy and vision blurred, this time by too much wine, they retire to the couch with another opened bottle, sitting against each other one one end and leaving a good metre of seating beside them. Harry turns on the telly more for background noise than any particular interest in watching whatever mindless soap opera plays out across the screen.

No more words need to be said, they are so used to existing quietly and comfortably within each other’s space, like putting on a well-worn and loved jumper that becomes a second skin. Merlin tips his head back and rests it on the back of the couch, idly gazing upon the crown moulding and pretty embellishments in Harry’s ceiling that go rarely noticed until moments like this. He’s not so up to date with his architecture to identify the style or era and doesn’t want to give Harry a chance to flaunt his encyclopedic knowledge of such things by asking, so he’s content to simply and ignorantly admire it.

But when Merlin turns his head and studies Harry’s profile, he tries to remember what it is like to be in love. He notes the way Harry’s gaze has gone middle distance, focus no longer pinned to the here and now. For awhile, Merlin lets it be, taking the opportunity to allow his gaze to linger. Age-wrought gravity has drawn down the planes of Harry’s face, dulled once sharper lines and angles,
and hollowed out once supple spaces. Merlin supposes Harry might’ve been very boyish once, but whenever he watches those old recordings or glimpses an aged photograph of Harry’s younger days, it always takes him off guard. The man captured in those images is different to the one he knows.

When he’s had his fill, he speaks up. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Harry startles, gaze clearing up and quickly darting to Merlin and then away in a rare show of shame. He raises a hand to turn off the feed he had been partially projecting through his glasses. “Sorry. I....it’s difficult to stop. It feels like letting him down.”

“Believe me when I say I know the feeling.”

“You’re free to roll your eyes at my foolishness.”

“What foolishness?”

Harry smiles mirthlessly, a distorted thing rippling across his face. “He saw everything that happened in Kentucky. One of only two people who even cared, I suppose.” Merlin knows all of this, but Harry’s gaze settles heavily upon him meaningfully. “Though I hadn’t known it at the time. My glasses had been damaged in the—the signal attacks and I couldn’t hear you. I could only assume it was the same on your end as it was on mine, that for all intents and purposes, I was alone. And if that is what he’s feeling now…."

“You’re not to know that,” Merlin says gently, though he knows it anyway, that soft-hearted boy. “He’s made of amazingly resilient stuff.”

“I don’t doubt him.” So much conviction, no hesitation. Not that Merlin had doubted Harry either. “It has only recently occurred to me that...everything will be different now, no matter what happens. There’s no going back from it.”

Harry can no longer meet his eyes, and Merlin wonders if he’s caught up with thinking about the past again: that point in time that had irrevocably shifted his own world view. It usually happened so unexpectedly, and came with so much regret.

“And now that I know it,” Harry says, his voice thinned out to barely a whisper. His glasses reflect the images from the telly, a young, handsome couple locked into an intimate embrace, some sweetly soppy score to serenade it. “I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“The short and most sensible answer is to get on with it,” Merlin says, arching a brow, but finding his usual stoic pillar a terribly hollow prop now. He doesn’t even sound as if he believes his own words. “But in truth, it can be just as lonely.”

“Do you think…” Harry begins, but trails off. Merlin’s patience is rewarded when he at last opens his mouth again. “Do you think David genuinely cares for him?”

It’s the first time Harry has ever mentioned him. Merlin can see perhaps the real question underneath: do you think he genuinely cares for David?

“I think there is a strong attachment at the very minimum,” Merlin cautiously says. “Eggsy is...very good at engendering such feelings.”

Finally, Harry sits back and imitates Merlin’s ungainly slouch. It’s a terribly unflattering look for one’s jawline, Merlin can see, but he can’t find the will to reform the bones in his body to sit up properly. “He’s doing well, though, isn’t he? Better than I could have anticipated. Or would have done.”
“That he is,” Merlin agrees. Already they’ve been able to uproot a web of names and connections based on the information Eggsy managed to coax into recordable existence. Rare, it was, for an operation to move this swiftly and seamlessly, but then they’ve never had someone like Eggsy in their ranks before either: an affection-starved boy who has proven to be uncannily adept at finding all one’s vulnerabilities and, though Merlin’s healthy dose of cynicism says, exploit them, he knows Eggsy has never done so out of malevolence. “I take it Statesman came through?”


“You didn’t tell me,” Merlin says, and finds the note of hurt in his own voice grating.

“I didn’t tell anyone.” Harry turns his head to him in an almost lazy gesture, mirroring him. “Turns out having just the one may be all one needs.”

He finds himself navigating a complex well of feelings ranging from mildly irritated exasperation to hope. He hates that last one most of all. “Jack’s decided to take an unscheduled sabbatical?”

“Even better: with all the intel coming in about a powerfully-funded and growing drug cartel within America’s borders, he’s managed to convince Statesman to address the matter.”

For as much as Harry loathes dealing in politics and bureaucracy, he can be remarkably cunning about it. He and Chester are similar in that regard, one of their thankfully few shared traits. “Well done.”

But there is no trace of satisfaction in Harry’s face, just the tightening line of his mouth, the pinch between his brows. “I’d rather not say that until our agent is back with us.”

Safe. Unharmed, he does not need to add.

But Merlin finds himself circling around our, desperately, like water dwindling down a drain.
In some terrible, terrible spot in his mind that had survived ROTC and Statesman, Jack thinks, *I'm really going out on a limb for him, since I'm voluntarily going to Florida.*

Florida, as far as Jack is concerned, only has three things going for it: the amusement parks, the beach, and the setting for a few of his favorite TV shows. The rest—the summer storms that seem to start on the dot; the mosquitoes that had held a vote and decided that Jack’s the tastiest morsel out of the entire state population; the snakes, the fucking snakes; the alligators, except for the meat; the heat, which falls in fat droplets of warm rain or simply steams the shit out of everything; and the people, tourists and locals included—are not able to make up for that. It had been a favorite place for their former illustrious leader—a man who wore alligator cowboy boots and drank enough whiskey to put Harry Hart to shame—to send him on missions.

Jack had once tried to confide in Ginger about this, but she’d rolled her eyes and said, “*You* get beaches and palm trees and pina coladas. *I* get Kansas.” And that had been the end of that contest.

*She* should have gotten his position. He’d been foolishly optimistic when the dust had settled and the heads of Kingsman branches had endorsed him that he could usher Statesman into a new era—a better one. But there had been no use ignoring the high body count in both the agency and the United States, the chaotic election cycle, and the fact that one of the primary reasons of his candidacy was because he had not been in a coma, lying in a hospital bed, afflicted with permanent brain trauma, or dead.

Looking out the plane window, Jack sits back and closes his eyes. He’d gotten himself into this mess. It’s his job to get himself—and Eggsy—out of it.

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When he touches down in Florida—oh, God, *why?*—Jack immediately sets his plan into motion. His file as Javier Torres states that he has no place of residence, recently was let go from his last job as a busboy, and is supporting his family in Chile, a country Jack had only heard of in his parents’ stories until he had been assigned it his eleventh mission. He hasn’t shaved, hasn’t showered, and hasn’t purchased clothes going for less than ten dollars. The only possessions he has to his (fake) name are a cheap cell phone, a few clothes, photoshopped pictures of his “family,” and basic toiletries. No bank account, no fake Social Security cards, not even a driver’s license.

According to the intel Merlin and Harry had given him, Eggsy’s been living here for a few months under the name Liam Collins as a bodyguard of sorts for Martínez, who’d decided to spread his wings and move to the States to further expand the interests of the family cartel. Martínez worries about proving himself to his brothers and father, so he had put his trust right into Eggsy’s hands at the labor camp. There’s also another man to look out for, another guard, David, and so far, Merlin and Harry are uncertain if David could be helpful or detrimental.
Attempting to assess that situation for himself, Jack watches the feeds from his tablet in a dinky motel that allows cash payments. In his ear, Ginger says, “You’re damn lucky you managed to convince Statesman before you decided to abandon your position to go off on a one-man mission.”

“I am,” Jack replies, then quotes, “because this rapidly-growing and powerfully-funded cartel within our borders is a threat to our national—and possibly international—security.”

He can almost hear Ginger rolling her eyes. “You’re almost too proud of that, cowboy.”

“Ginger,” Jack says, sitting up on the too-thin mattress. “This isn’t exactly a vacation. And I do want to help Eggsy.”

“I know you do,” she replies. “But there is a reason I voted no the first time.”

_The wisest decision isn’t always the most popular one_, he remembers her saying in their early years as Statesman. “I owe him one. Besides, I actually like the guy.” And that’s quite an accomplishment in and of itself, to be honest.

She sighs, but it’s a bit more lighthearted this time around. “At least you had the sense to leave me in charge.”

Yeah, thank God for that. It had been one of the easiest decisions he’d made since becoming head of Statesman. Oh, he knew of the whispers of favoritism, but it was never directed at Ginger—Ginger, who had been a Statesman for as nearly as long as Jack; Ginger, who could send grown agents quivering with a look; Ginger, who could dish shit out, take it, and throw it all back again. Instead, all the complaints went to Jack, something that he should be used to by now.

“Remember naptime is at eleven, then change their diapers around two—“

“Jack.”

“Hey, it’s not like I have you on speakerphone.”

Sighing again, Ginger apparently decides it’s best to change tactics. “Let’s just talk strategy,” she begins.

Once he’s settled in, finds a new job, and knows enough people who can identify him as Javier Torres, he calls Martínez—or rather, one of Martínez’s goons. He sounds appropriately nervous and determined with an accent he never uses bleeding into his vowels, words clipped and clumsy. The man on the other line tells him that he’d get back to them.

The next day, at the restaurant he works at, two customers stride in and flag down Jack for a drink, sweating from the hell that is Florida. Jack dutifully brings over the menu, trying not to stare too much at Eggsy.

He’s in a gray tank top, baseball cap pulled over his head and a backpack slung over one shoulder. His cheekbones are less hollow than Jack’s seen in the videos, but different enough from the Kingsman agent Jack met a year ago. His skin is darker, too.

Eggsy doesn’t give him a glance, only ordering a Corona and some nachos, the kind that has globs of bright-orange cheese with bright-green jalapenos. His companion prefers a Blue Ribbon with hush-puppies.

Jack takes their order, shouts it back into the kitchen, and pulls out a rag to scrub the counter.
For a long while, both of the men only watch him, then lean towards each other, muttering a few low words. Jack pretends not to notice, moving on to take another order, bring an over-priced cocktail to a tired-looking woman, and dump a dish that has one of the cook’s hair sitting in the fries.

Finally, when Jack brings Eggsy and the stranger what they asked for, the latter asks, just low enough to not be heard underneath the bar’s chatter, “How did you hear of us?”

“By working in the back,” Jack says, and by a stroke of luck, he made contact with one of the busboys who makes a little money on the side. He allows a touch of desperation into his eyes, scrubbing the space in front of them so they could see his cracked fingernails. “He told me you can help me.”

It doesn’t go down in a warehouse.

Instead, Jack walks into one of Martínez’s fancy hotels, past a sign carefully posted in the window—Now Hiring: Janitors—and heads towards the back, past guests on their way to Bayside Marketplace, chatting eagerly about what they’re going to buy and complaining about the weather. When he catches a glimpse of their belts, Jack hides a smile. He recalls the security Kingsman has with all its bells and whistles in Britain, hiding weapons in umbrellas and shoes and watches, where here in Florida—and Kentucky—you can walk around with a gun without anyone blinking an eye.

He can hear the dumpsters being loaded, people snapping orders, and some large party outside laughing, and clutches the business card Eggsy had passed him tighter in his palm as he pushes open a swinging door, roving his eyes around the steel lockers.

Someone is waiting for him to pat him down. Jack’s clothes are scuffed sneakers, worn jeans, an old bomber jacket, a white t-shirt, and a backpack holding a cheap flip phone. He has some fancy toys, too—coins that have hidden blades and a tracker in his belt buckle. His contact lenses show what’s happening to the folks back at Statesman, and the stud in his ear allows Ginger to yell at him if he does something stupid.

But to an outsider, he doesn’t look like a threat.

The man nods, then Jack’s guided down a hallway and flights of concrete stairs. He lets his fingers just graze the wall, planting a bug behind a potted palm tree.

The door shuts behind him, and there are six men, with only one wearing a three-piece suit, arms folded. His dark hair is artfully styled, nails buffed, and a gold watch sits comfortably at his wrist, and he looks at Jack with a hint of hunger reined in. He needs workers, Jack knows, but has to carefully review what Jack has to bring to the table first.

On his right is Eggsy, the only white boy in the room, with his hair cropped close to his scalp and wearing all black, a gun at his belt. On his left is another man, his eyes not on his boss or Jack, but on Eggsy. Assessing, not like the agent Jack is or the bodyguard Eggsy is pretending to, but like how children stare at a wolf in a zoo, trying to figure out how their dog that curls up on the bed beside them at night had come from that beast.

“You want a job?” Martínez now asks.

Eggsy’s mobile stubbornly rings for a good thirty seconds before he submits to the inevitability of reality and stretches out an arm to pluck it from the nightstand. “What?”

“Why the hell don’t you pick up your phone, gringo?” complains the voice on the other end. “Boss wants to see you right away. Just you.”

The call ends as abruptly as it began, leaving only the silence of dread in its wake. Too many strategic arrests and crackdowns lately. Everyone is in a simmering bad mood.

Eggsy carelessly tosses his phone back on the nightstand, letting his body go lax in rebellious defiance to the universe for a scant five seconds more before he pushes himself upright. Almost immediately, an invisible oppressive weight settles over his shoulders. The tickling scratch in his throat heralds a hacking cough, muffled in the crook of his arm. It leaves behind the taste of ashes in his mouth, which he quickly rectifies by lighting up another fag and letting fresh smoke burn away the lingering staleness.

He smokes half his cigarette that way, squinting through a cut in the drawn blackout curtains that bleeds light at the edges, just enough to glimpse the startlingly blue ocean just outside. It can’t be half nine in the morning, but already the sun is out in full force and carefree beachgoers are already staking claims to patches of the bleached white sand.

Behind him, he hears the rustle of sheets, and then a sleep-thick query, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Eggsy says, stabbing out his fag into the small grimy tray by his feet and leaving the smoking remnants in a mass grave of its brethren. “Gotta go in.”

When Eggsy looks back at David, he’s still mid-yawn, idly rubbing a hand down the rough patches of stubble along his neck, still heavy eyed and sluggish. There’s an overenthusiastic red circular imprint on his shoulder that would line up perfectly with Eggsy’s teeth, put there in a moment of desperation: he turns away the softness of Eggsy’s mouth these days, but welcomes the sting of his bite.

“Give me five and I’ll come with you.”

But Eggsy just shakes his head. “I was asked to come alone.”

The silence is as absorbing as the calm before a storm. A wary groove appears between David’s brows, making an appearance more and more often these days in a way that will turn permanent in fifteen years’ time. “You’re doing that more now.”

“A lot is going on right now. Growing pains.” Eggsy’s smile is faint and quick, like a breath of fog on glass. “Be glad you’re not in the thick of it.”

When David doesn’t reply, he gets up and scavenges the floor for his clothes, assembling his uniform in quick, brisk gestures. He catches sight of himself in the mirror above the dresser and wilfully doesn’t pause, but the brief glance stays with him long after like a flash shadow: a familiar stranger, holding himself like he used to back on the estates, wearing a face of deeply etched defiance and flinty eyes. So much for superior selves.
He makes his way through the tasteful if generically adorned halls of the hotel and takes the lift to the first floor conference room where a continental breakfast buffet has been set up: silver trays bearing congealed scrambled eggs, stale pancakes, and flat discs of sausages, miniature packages of corn syrup parading around as maple, and lukewarm coffee canisters. The room opens up to an outdoor mezzanine, and even at this early hour the humidity is thick and oppressive. On the outside veranda beneath a large umbrella, Martínez is already surrounded by his most trusted lieutenants. Just one empty seat remains.

“Look who it is!” Martínez declares as soon as he spots him, his wide smile only mildly rebuking. “I thought you gringos liked to call us lazy!”

Eggsy smirks and sinks down into his chair, tapping out a new fag from his pack and lighting it. “Sorry. Late night.”

“You don’t leave the hotel. You don’t have any whores come in. It’s just you and your little friend,” Hernández remarks quietly from next to him.

The table falls silent, uncomfortable. Eggsy takes another deep drag from his cigarette and stifles a yawn. “What are you trying to say?

“That you’re a fucking faggot who sucked dick to get where you are.” Hernández looks at him directly, with transparent disgust.

Hernández is in his fifties at earliest, though sometimes it’s hard to tell with the hard lives these men lead. Inevitably, though, Eggsy would wager he probably thinks he’s holding closely with his traditional Catholic values, that despite all the killing, womanising, and brutality accumulating in his world as casually as the dirt beneath his fingernails, it’s the thought of two blokes sucking each other’s dicks that’s the gravest of sins.

There is a vacuum of silence as Eggsy just stares at the smoking tip of his cigarette, watching the embers burn up more paper and chemicals until a sizeable amount grey ash builds, threatening to crumble away.

And then, he’s surging forward and putting out the end of his fag in that motherfucker’s eye. Hernández cries out in pain. Everyone at the table springs up and divides, some to see to Hernández, others to drag Eggsy off and hold him back.

“You motherfucking cocksucker!” Hernández screams, clutching at his face. “You fucking psycho!”

“Get him out of here!” Martínez shouts, eyes wild between the two before settling on Eggsy. “You calm the fuck down right now, you piece of shit!”

As Hernández is guided away, moaning and growling curses in turn, what’s left of the table settles back down into a tense aftermath, glaring at each other, but mostly eyeing Eggsy with a combination of wariness and resentment.

Eggsy glares at them all, blood up, chest heaving. If any of them so much as twitched….

Martínez meets his eyes. “Sit the fuck down, right now.”

And Eggsy does, dropping back into his chair, then leaning forward to light up another cigarette, seeing as how he had to do away with his first so prematurely. Shame, that.

Mendoza looks to Martínez. “Boss, you can’t just let this go. Look what that crazy motherfucker
“Hernández was a cunt,” Martínez says, shutting up any further protests. He’s still staring at Eggsy, though, eyes hard. “You pull that shit again and I put a bullet through your head personally, understand?”

Eggsy is first to look away. “Si, Señor.”

With matters more or less settled, Martínez slowly sinks back into his chair. “I can’t afford to deal with this shit right now! Not when the Feds have dismantled six of my brother’s labs in the last two weeks.”

“That isn’t good news, boss?” García tentatively says. “Let the Feds take out the competition for us, I say.”

“No, you twat,” Eggsy says, earning another round of hateful glares. “It means someone is talking, and could lead them to us.”

Martínez shoots him a warning glance. “They got Marco.”

The table grows silent. Marco was Martínez’s brother’s most trusted man.

“We need start thinking about moving out the labs,” Martínez says.

“We just got here!” García protests. “Surely, no one can possibly—”

“Exactly. We just got there. Our control on Miami is tenuous,” Martínez says. “We can’t risk it. García, start relocation. I want our labs moved by the end of the week.”

Though García isn’t happy about it, he wouldn’t dare disobey a direct command. “Yes, boss.”

“There is another matter I wish to share.” Martínez looks around the table. “Tomorrow, I meet with the other families to discuss an alliance and make sure we maintain our foothold in America.”

Everyone is troubled to some degree by this announcement, Eggsy can see, from grim faced to outright alarmed. This time, it’s Flores who speaks up. “But boss, what’s to stop them from taking over the city? We will look like easy prey if the Feds get the rest of your brothers.”

“They see us as easy pickings anyway. If we do not ally with them now, then we risk facing multiple enemies on multiple fronts,” Martínez says.

“They will betray us just as soon as help us!”

“Not until the greater threat to us all is stopped. We fix this first, then we deal with the other families after,” Martínez says.

It’s a sound tactic, really. Nothing to unite rival cartels like their common hatred for the government. Satisfied he has inspired his employees, Martínez looks to Eggsy. “But first...Collins.”

Eggsy looks up and meets his eyes.

“Find this rat. We need to stop him before he brings us all down.”

“With pleasure,” Eggsy says, tipping his head, his smile sharp and feral.
Rain beats down on the windscreen in torrents, making it difficult to see anything more than the colourful smears of neon lights from the strip and the red blare of tail lights around him. Between the flashes of illumination being thrown into the car, Eggsy doesn’t know if he’s imagining all the sidelong looks David casts in his direction, but his silent profile is a dark shape in Eggsy’s periphery. Though he sits in the passenger seat only inches away, the silent shadow barricade around him seems formidable.

Eggsy fiddles with the useless de-fogging button and wipes at the glass with his hand, squinting to find a parking spot along the kerb, but finally manages to wedge the vehicle between two SUVs with only minor fender bumps. As soon as he cuts the engine and stops the A/C, the humidity settles on his skin like a fine warm mist.

“Why are we here?” David asks, suspicious marking his tone.

It grates on Eggsy, but he tries to infuse his tone with playfulness. “To eat,” he says simply, before pulling on the door handle and rushing out into the heavy downpour.

Even though he sprints to the bar, he’s soaked in a matter of seconds, dripping on the floor as he crosses it claims one of the several grimy high tops and habitually takes stock of his surroundings. There’s the World Cup going on telly, supplying most of the noise in the room. It’s still too early for most of its customers, and too disreputable to bring in any early-supper tourists, leaving a nearly empty room nearly buckling under the weight of its own neglect. There are only a few others here, and Eggsy knows them all by name.

David eventually trails in, more drenched than Eggsy, but he doesn’t even seem to notice as he slides into the other chair. The glow from the screen shines in his eyes, making them flat and glassy. Rivulets of water running down his face and neck. Eggsy wonders what he would do if he leaned across the table and licked one of them off. Probably punch him in the mouth.

The only thing that breaks David’s concentration is the apathetic waitress who eventually makes her way over to them and takes their orders with little change in expression. Eggsy doesn’t blame her: nobody here even tips well. Half the time, even he bloody forgets.

When she’s gone again, Eggsy divides his attention between the match and his companion, gradually becoming more itchy and irritated as his clothes begin to dry and feel clammy against his skin.

Finally, he leans back in his chair and doesn’t bother lowering his voice. “Wanna go fuck in the toilets?”

It works a treat. David’s gaze finally meets his, eyes widening in alarm. He quickly glances about, then angrily leans forward. “Shut the fuck up, what’s wrong with you?”

“It’s very impolite to answer a question with a question.” It took coming to America to learn how damn priggish he could make himself really be. Harry would be proud.

“I mean it, Liam. Cut that shit out.”

“It’s a simple yes or no question,” Eggsy bites out, grating each consonant like crunching down on tinfoil. “Do. You. Want. To. Fuck?”

David just looks at him like he’s seeing him for the first time. “No, I really fucking don’t.”
Eggsy smiles sweetly, like David’s just given him the most thoughtful compliment. “That weren’t so hard, was it? I’m gonna go smoke.”

He slides out of his chair with a wet squelch and saunters to the back of the restaurant, making a sharp right just before the silent kitchen. There’s a small side patio that that he steps out onto littered with broken furniture, staying just beneath the overhang. He only belatedly realises his fags are soaked through when he retrieves them from his back pocket. Fuck.

Eggsy chucks them away.

“Look on the bright side,” Jack dryly says, “those things will kill you.”

A grimace flickers across his mouth before Eggsy has a chance to stop it. When he turns his head, he finds Jack leaning against the wall a few feet away. Jeans, a Hooters t-shirt, and tatty trainers where Eggsy half-expected the usual cowboy boots. The getup makes Jack look about a decade younger and a hell of a lot more adrift. Eggsy supposes it’s intentional.

“What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Jack says with a shrug. “You’ve been doing your level best to avoid me for weeks now. I’m hurt.”

“You’re fucking up my shit,” Eggsy says. “Everyone’s spooked. They got me looking for a snitch now. Should I serve them you?”

“Isn’t that the entire point of this thing? To fuck their shit up?” Jack smiles, just one side of his mouth.

But Eggsy just shakes his head. “It’s too soon. I’m finally in a real position to learn everything and you wanna end it now?”

“You knew when I showed up, it was the beginning of the end,” Jack says. “Arthur sent me to get you.” Like he’s a child in need of being picked up from school.

Somewhere behind the sheets of rain, a dozen labs are being packed up and scattered to other locations. The women are rounded up, shoved into vans and driven back to their families for the evening, but not before the threats to their family are reinforced: anyone who talks will watch their loved ones die first. Eggsy’s done it himself, ran the barrel of a gun down a woman’s face and watched her pupils dilate in fear until her brown irises all but disappeared.

“I’m not done yet.” He grinds down on his teeth, turns to look at Jack. “Don’t you get it? I’m this close. Martínez is going to form an alliance with outside cartels. We could get the names and locations of everyone. We could take ‘em all out!”

“You’ve done more than enough already, Eggsy. The Martínez cartel is already falling both here and in Mexico. That’s a good thing. It’s good work that any agent would be proud of.” Jack tries to reaffirm his approval, his reassurance, with his brown eyes, steady as the earth, always so calm. It’s one of the things Eggsy liked about him most in the aftermath of V-Day, when everything else felt chaotic, ephemeral.

Beneath the fluorescent, moist sheen of Miami, they are flat and dark. His even, easy tone: curiously hollow, his words feeling as trite as a hastily plucked card from the convenience shop aisle.

Eggsy looks at him and feels like he’s seeing and hearing him for the first time. He doesn’t know why it hurts, but pain doesn’t make him sad anymore. It just makes him angry. “It’s not enough. Do
you get me?” He shakes his head, pushing off from the wall, half beneath the awning, half out of it, getting wet. “It’s not nearly enough!”

Heedless to the small temper tantrum in his midst, Jack patiently says, “The longer you stay at this, the greater the chance of two things happening. One, you get caught. Two, you get in too deep. Trust me on this, Eggsy. I know.”

“What do you know of it, you fucking hick?” Eggsy snarls at him, turning sharply on his heel, fingers clenching and unclenching into fists. “You don’t know what I’ve had to do for this!”

Jack tilts his head, eyes narrowing, mild-mannered, even while devastating. “What is it you’re afraid of returning to?”

Over Jack’s shoulder, through the open door with a view the way into the bar, Eggsy catches sight of him. David meets Eggsy’s eyes, unknowable. Eggsy used to think he could see tenderness within them sometimes.

Jack follows Eggsy’s gaze, glancing over his shoulder briefly. “I always did want to ask: who’s the extra limb?”

“A bloke I let fuck me to form an attachment. To be kinder to me,” Eggsy dully says, then he breaks his staredown with David, shifting his focus back to Jack to grin mirthlessly. “Only now he thinks I’m a monster too.”

Jack doesn’t so much as bat an eye. “When is Martínez meeting with the other cartels?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll alert Statesman. We get out before it goes down,” Jack tells him. “Make an excuse to visit the lab on 21st in the late afternoon. It’s where they have me set up. We go from there.”

And when Eggsy doesn’t say anything, he adds, softer, “Not every mission will feel like a stunning success. Sometimes it’s messy. Sometimes it only feels half done, and maybe it is. But the part you’ve played here, Eggsy, is over now. The key is knowing when to leave the party.”

It all slowly sinks in: the damp, the blood on his hands, the weariness. For what? A few names. A few labs. It’s not nearly enough. His shoulders finally ease into a slump once more. David must see the change in him. His long gaze, which had been remote for so long, turns curious. Cautiously open. It warms Eggsy, just a little bit.

“And what happens to people like him?” Eggsy nods back to the bar. “He was a slave too, once. He didn’t want this life.”

“And at some point, he made his choice and crossed over that line,” Jack reminds him.

“He’s not evil.”

“No one really is, but he was fine with letting women get raped and people worked to death. He’s killed some them himself, I’m sure.”

Eggsy finally looks away from them both. “So have I.”

Jack seems to belatedly recognise how callous he sounds. “Look, if he doesn’t resist, no one is going to go out of their way to see to his death. That’s all we can promise.”
“I gotta go,” Eggsy says, turning. “Been out here too long anyway.”

“Eggsy.” Jack stops him with a hand to his arm, leaning in close. “Day after tomorrow. This ends. We go home.”

Home. Funny. Eggsy’s no longer sure what that is anymore.

By two in the morning, the rain stops and the air is only scant degrees cooler, still thick enough to wrap around his skin like a wet coat. In contrast, the return to their room is like stepping into a welcome icebox: cold and crisp, infused with the scent of the recently shampooed rugs with some sort of commercial detergent. It wakes Eggsy up some from the lingering torpor of perhaps one too many shitty beers, but only enough for him to realise how exhausted he is.

David comes in shortly after, flipping on the lights Eggsy hadn’t bothered with and flicking his room card onto the nearby table. Despite earlier, he hadn’t asked a single question, nor spoken much at all for the rest of the night. Eggsy doesn’t know whether to be relieved or irritated by it, so he finds the middle ground and settles on indifference instead, flopping backwards onto the bed, damp clothes and all.

But as David rounds the bed, Eggsy cracks open his eyes and can feel the shift in the air, the stirring restlessness in his expression and every tense line of his body.

“That was the new guy, wasn’t it?” David finally asks, meeting the wall and having no choice but to turn back around and pace like that. “What was he doing there?”

“Why does anyone go to a bar?” Eggsy asks almost philosophically.

David shoots him an annoyed glance, finally pausing before the small round table that sits in the corner of the room and unholsters his gun, laying it across the flat, glossy surface. Jacket next, then his belt.

Eggsy sits up, increasingly interested in the proceedings.

When David’s hands move to the button of his jeans, he leans forward, stilling them. He keeps his eyes locked with David’s as he slips down onto his knees and sees to his still mostly soft cock personally.

At some point in his life, Eggsy had to admit he just likes sucking cock. In general, maybe. On principle. Low investment (mess, exertion, emotions); greater returns (everyone pays for it, just not always with money). He’s used it more as a means to an end than ascribed any loving act to it for most of his life with only a few exceptions that hardly matter anymore.

This is how it all began with them, like this. Maybe it’s how it’ll end.

It doesn’t take much to get David going, frustrated as he’s been with Eggsy. Easy to let him drag his fingers through Eggsy’s short hair, grab what little he can to pull him in closer, take in more, fuck out all his repressed anger until Eggsy’s scalp is tender, his jaw is sore, and his throat swollen.

Only this time, instead of coming down Eggsy’s throat, David pulls out of the hot, wet suction of
Eggsy’s mouth and pulls on his hair to urge him to his feet. The sudden change momentarily throws Eggsy off; he glances at David questioningly, but is only pulled closer into a consuming kiss, finally.

He only loosens and pushes away enough clothes to fuck him, turning Eggsy towards the bed, pushing down his jeans, and slicking himself up with actual lubricant this time, which makes for a nice change. He’s never thought about prep before, and Eggsy’s never taken the time to correct him either, just accepted the single, relentless push in with clenched teeth, grunting helplessly at the burn.

They are as impossibly close as two non-faggots can be, kneeling on the bed, clothes almost entirely on, except Eggsy’s back is pressed all along David’s front, damp shirt sticking to his skin, the back of his head cradled against David’s shoulder as he grips Eggsy’s chin. The fucking takes place in sharp, jerking movements that make the mattress creak and Eggsy’s breath stutter out of his lungs with every short thrust. All of this is familiar too.

What’s new, wondrous even, is when Eggsy dares to turn his head, and David turns his too, and their mouths open up to each other, at first a smear of lips, tongue, breath, and then sealed together, a connection. When David’s thrusts slow langourously, too absorbed with Eggsy’s mouth. When his hand loosens from Eggsy’s jaw and wanders down his chest and stomach to his hip, gentle, then boldly around his cock, an experimental stroke.

It’s an unexpected pleasure, one that collapses all the tense lines Eggsy usually braces himself against and causes him to sink against David, body moulded to his, moaning too wantonly, it’s so good.

After that, Eggsy forgets about his acute grasp of time. Time unfurls. He just wants to keep kissing like this, eyes closed, head dizzy, sucking on David’s tongue as his cock grinds deliciously inside him, David’s hand stroking him up and down with just the right amount of pressure, building a pleasurable warmth in his groin, slow and steady, until Eggsy’s cries are being muffled, and he’s shaking in David’s hands, coming over his hand and onto the sheets.

He’s still trying to catch his breath when David pushes him down to the mattress and starts fucking him with more single-minded concentration. It’s not long. Eggsy’s barely clear eyed when David tenses and drapes himself over Eggsy’s back, biting down along the line of Eggsy’s neck, keen and bright.

David is a hot, heavy weight: hot inside him, hot breath panting into his skin, until Eggsy cannot distinguish who is who. When he starts to stir, Eggsy reaches back and pinches his hip to keep him still.

And David does, for just a little while, resting his cheek along Eggsy’s shoulder, smoothing his hand down Eggsy’s thigh, at least until the cold air dries their sweat and makes their skin tacky while strained muscles begin to ache. Eventually David pulls out and moves off of him to clean up.

Eggsy just half-heartedly shucks the rest of his clothes without getting up. The air is cold, though. Shivering, he wraps himself up in the disgusting wet sheet. By the time David emerges from the bath, Eggsy is perched at the edge of the bed, staring at the nautical painting on the opposite wall, unused to feeling like an open wound.

“What if I were to tell you that all of this was going to end in forty-eight hours’ time?”

He senses David’s stillness behind him, the caught unawares paralysis and ensuing confusion.

“What are you talking about?” David finally asks.

Eggsy finally looks over his shoulder. David’s stripped down to boxers, chest still dotted with drops
of moisture from his shower. “I know you don’t like it here. I know you don’t like this entire life. I know you’re starting to not like me. Can’t blame you. I don’t like me neither. But what if I told you I can get you out? New IDs, new life, anywhere you want. Start again. Do whatever it was you was supposed to do before all this shit.”

It occurs to David that something is not quite right here. Lenses shifted, new pieces of the puzzle finally slotting into place. He doesn’t ask why Eggsy’s is saying all these things now. He just asks, eyes hard and glittering, “How?”

Eggsy takes a deep breath. “My organisation.” There, now it’s out in the open. Before David can start in alarm, he assures, “It’s not the government. It’s...more effective than the government.”

“It’s you,” David says, finally realising. “The crackdowns. You’re doing this.” The knowledge now sits heavy on his shoulders as well. He turns away from Eggsy, running his hands down the sides of his face.

“It was always gonna be me,” Eggsy says.

David shakes his head, and then his shoulders begin to tremble with the laughter quaking out of him. “I should’ve known. Everything you were doing. How fast you climbed the ranks. Earned his trust. Jesus.”

“It was a long-term undercover mission.”

David stills, quieter than the night around them. “Was any of it real?”

“I don’t know,” Eggsy admits. “It’s hard to tell anymore. I just know...I just know I don’t want you to get dragged down in all of this. And it will go down.”

Finally, he turns back around to face Eggsy, even moves to sit next to him on the bed, so he mustn’t abhor Eggsy that much. “What’s your name?”

Eggsy smiles a little. “My parents used to call me Eggsy. It’s a stupid story.”

“Eggsy,” David repeats, shaking his head, maybe in amazement at the entire situation. “Okay. Eggsy.”

“Let me keep you safe. Please.”

He dares to reach out, covering David’s hand within his, heartened when David does not reject him.

_____
doesn’t know how or when.

Jack wasn’t wrong: it galls him that he won’t see this through to the end. A part of him feels incomplete. Unresolved. The older agents sometimes had ghosts in their eyes when mulling over a glass of stiff scotch. Eggsy suspects this will be one of his.

He’s watched them all come and go through the past half hour: caravans of big, dark SUVs spilling out several armed men at a time. He recognises some faces from old grainy dossiers Kingsman keeps on file. Some go into the hotel. Many linger and congregate in front of the lobby entrance, standing guard, eyeing each other warily. The sheer concentration of them gathered together in one spot makes him edgy. He should be far away from here by now.

Jack’s wondering where he is. Martínez too, for that matter. Getting caught lingering in the car park wouldn’t be a good idea, but he can’t leave yet.

Finally, Eggsy breaks down and pulls out his mobile, clearing away the dozens of messages to pull up a new window.

Where are you?

After more than a few minutes, David replies. In the room.

Eggsy frowns. That wasn’t the plan. Why?

You need to see something.

He starts to type something out about not having time for this, but ends up deleting the words and slipping his phone back into his pocket. Pushing off his car, he weaves his way through the lot back into the hotel through the side entrance. He avoids the lifts, taking the stairs two at a time until he reaches the third floor. Uses his room card to unlock the door and slip into his room.

“We shoulda been out of here at least an hour ago. What the fuck is the hold up?”

At first, nothing seems amiss.

David stands by the bed, fully dressed. His eyes are curiously flat, unknowable again. It’s his first sign.

When Eggsy rounds the corner, he sees the rest: García, Flores, Hernández, Núñez, Martínez.

“Don’t look at him,” Martínez says, drawing Eggsy’s gaze from David. “A dog will always choose what is familiar every time.”

“Fucking traitor puta,” Hernández spits. He wears a thick wad of gauze over his left eye. His other is dark and glittering with hate. “You think you can fuck us over like this and run away?”

It should be alarming. Eggsy feels nothing but exhaustion. His eyes close and open sluggishly. His head feels very light. He opens his mouth to speak. His voice sounds very faint and distant. “Yeah, that was kinda the idea.”

“You’re going to tell us what is going to happen, and when,” Martínez says. “If you cooperate, I will make it quick for you. It is more than you deserve.” He doesn’t need to articulate the alternative. Eggsy’s witnessed many demonstrations of it before.

“I don’t know when or how. I was never told those things,” Eggsy says. “I was just told to be out of
here by now.”

García steps behind him. Eggsy feels the hard barrel of a gun pressed to the back of his head and a rough hand on his shoulder shoving him down to his knees. “Then you’re fucking dead, faggot,” he mutters, just loud enough for Eggsy to hear, digging the gun in hard as if the emphasise his point.

When Eggsy looks up again, his gaze travels past Martínez, inexorably drawn back to David, the black hole of his expression, wishing there was more.

“How does betrayal feel?” Martínez asks.

Eggsy tries to recall Harry’s face right after he first told him. Hard to remember now, though. He often confuses the memory of that haunting pain shining in Harry’s eyes with the very first time he caused it. The more he thinks about it, the more likely it was that Harry’s eyes had gone very cold, shut down. He had made the mistake of letting Eggsy hurt him once; he never would again.

“Familiar,” Eggsy says, finally meeting Martínez’s gaze.

Then he closes his eyes and waits for it all to be over.

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