

**our vintage misery**

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# our vintage misery

by [fideliant](#)

## Summary

*hey young blood, doesn't it feel  
like our time is running out?*

On a difficulty scale of one to saving the world, love shouldn't be this far off the charts.

## Notes

Written based very, very loosely on [this](#) little edit I made a while back; it's not so much an actual piece of quality work as it is song-lyrics-as-titles hedonism slash my never-ending Colin Firth sexual infarction, but when life deals you lemons... mash them all into a blood-curdling monster of a fic and chuck it at someone else. =D

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## put on your war paint (novosibirsk, feb '15)

The world doesn't end on Valentine's Day and they wind up in hell anyway, in some godawful airport on the arse-end of civilisation, where all the overhead signs are in Russian and the one vending machine that isn't out of order only accepts payment by credit card, AmEx preferred. Eight hours and the snowstorm that rolled in after they touched down is still fucking going, and so Eggsy's still sitting here in this crummy departure hall, looking at the flight board every fifteen seconds and pinching creases into the pant legs of his Bespoke trousers, feeling like the restless preteen vacationer he can't remember ever having been as a boy. His dad took him and Mum on holiday when Eggsy was five, he's been told. Ibiza. There used to be loads of photos until Dean got rid of most of them — those that Eggsy rescued, he keeps rolled-up in a Pringles can under his bed and still takes out to look at from time to time.

It's roughly minus nine million degrees outside the airport and by the way the wind is squalling like it's trying to take the roof off, Eggsy surmises it's safe to assume they won't be leaving any time soon. It'll be a few more hours at the very least, if they're lucky. He can see the snow coming down in sheets through the thick glass windows at the other side of the hall, swears he can see snowflakes the size of fucking *snowballs*, so there. He's staying indoors where his worries are restricted to catching frostbite instead of freezing to death on top of catching frostbite, even though he desperately needs that smoke he's craving, like, yesterday.

Yesterday — Kentucky, the church, Harry, *Christ*. He almost can't believe it, that it's only been a little over a day. Jesus Christ.

Eggzy blinks, blinks harder and looks up from the floor to cast his gaze around the hall for the umpteenth time, from the rows of sparsely-occupied seats opposite to the snow being kicked up in swirls by the wind outside. He has absolutely no clue where they are, though he can distantly recall Merlin mentioning it twice, after they had picked Roxy back up and right before they landed to refuel the jet, but he hadn't been paying attention, had had too much on his mind then, not unlike now. Somewhere in Russia, clearly. He can't even do a location search with his, no, Chester King's phone, because the geriatric fuck apparently never heard of data roaming for some reason or another, and Eggsy doesn't have the greatest feeling about the local Wi-Fi networks, like if he tries connecting to any of them he'll get his contact information stolen or be uploaded with all kinds of internet porn viruses. But then again, dead man's phone. It's not like there's anyone who would mind.

He sits back and sighs, folding his arms. Maybe he should call home again, have a conversation with his mum and try not to feel like the shittiest son in the world — a world he just saved, mind — for putting anal on one side of it above being with her right now on the other, among separate, significantly more important things he'll beat himself into the ground over after he's pulled his head out of his arse. It's just that Eggsy's a man of the moment, always has been, had learnt how best to live in it, needed to for years. Explains his track record with pathologically bad decision-making, doesn't really excuse it.

He recognises the carrier service as that of the Valentine Corporation when he checks the phone, so Eggsy grimaces and pockets it again. It's tempting, to have one last spit in the faces of both men who tried to fuck him over, but now that his fledgling sense of priorities has finally kicked in he knows that petty vengeance is the last thing he needs a top-up of. What he needs is to hear a friendly voice, to speak with someone he knows and trusts to give him the unvarnished truth, whether he's truly and spectacularly fucked things all the way up for life and if un-fucking them is still at all possible. Mum's probably not the best for that, which leaves either Merlin or Roxy, but Eggsy doesn't know where in the airport they've individually buggered off to, so he sighs again and stands up, scratches the back of his head before setting off in search of Kingsman agent or cheap alcohol, whichever one he so happens upon first.

By some fortune or misfortune, it turns out to be both, sequestered away in the corner seat of an airport bar at the junction of a duty-free store and a closed currency exchanger. Eggsy almost passes right on by, thinking it to be some other bald-headed wayfarer, but then he sees the epaulettes on the man's aviation uniform. Merlin hasn't changed his clothes yet, has had no reason to, Eggsy supposes. The man has his arms propped on the counter in front of him and a set to his shoulders, and he's hunching forward in a manner than only someone with an intact pub virginity wouldn't recognise as *keep away, shitfacing in progress*. That he's nursing a half-finished bottle of vodka — just the bottle, no glass — also speaks volumes. Shitfacing with shit vodka in a shit bar; Eggsy knows that he should walk away and leave Merlin to whatever shit he's dealing with, that it's the only decent thing to do, which is why he feels like an asshat immediately when he saunters over and reverse-slides into the seat next to him and leans back on the counter without saying anything.

Merlin starts, half-turns and frowns when he sees that it's him. "A gentleman would've asked for permission first," he says.

Deeming it too late to do a one-eighty on the asshat routine, Eggsy shrugs. "Free seat's fair game. I'm just sitting here."

"There *are* other free seats in this bar. Like over there." Merlin indicates the far end of the counter with a tilt of his head.

"Thought I'd save us both from looking completely pathetic. Well, less pathetic," Eggsy amends, extending a hand for the bottle. When Merlin doesn't respond, either verbally or physically, Eggsy reaches to pluck it from between his hands and Merlin lets him, watches him take a long pull, and yeah, that's some fucking rank stuff right there, but it's not like Eggsy's ever allowed shoddy liquor to stand between him and getting plastered when he's in the mood for it.

"Speak for yourself," Merlin mutters, and glowers at Eggsy when he doesn't return the bottle. "If you're done I'd like that back, thanks."

Eggzy considers the remaining vodka and the amount that's now smarting in his stomach, then sets the bottle down on the countertop, out of arm's reach from Merlin, and shakes his head. "M'not, but *you* are," he announces, and if that he has to be the responsible one out of the two of them doesn't indicate how well fucked they are now, he's not sure what will.

“Someone’s got to fly us out of here and it ain’t gonna be Roxy. Unless if you’d like me to give it a go, I wouldn’t mind —”

Merlin groans, “Please, god, no.”

“That’s what I thought.” Eggsy sniffs the bottle rim and wrinkles his nose; he’s never been one for neat vodka. He looks along the length of the empty space behind the counter twice and asks, “What’s a guy gotta do to get some service here?”

“Get up off your arse and walk next door. This fine establishment appears to be off-hours,” Merlin sniffs, tilting his head to contemplate his estranged vodka. “You owe me eight hundred rubles, incidentally.”

“Whatever that is in quid, you’ve been fucking fleeced, Merlin, mate,” Eggsy says, and the evil eye this gets from Merlin is a gentleman’s two-fingered salute if he’s ever seen one. “Got any cash left? Wanna see if they have anything that’s not all crap.”

Merlin rolls his eyes but reaches into his blazer to fish out a fistful of crumpled notes. He hands them to Eggsy without looking at him and Eggsy grins, pocketing the money and sliding the vodka back over to Merlin.

“Thanks,” Eggsy says, hopping off his seat. “Be right with you.”

“No rush,” Merlin says wryly and returns to his drink. “Take all the time you need.”

Half an hour later, Eggsy is two-thirds through the tequila he bought and his head is thrumming like a car engine, the old kind that gets cranked up and takes a couple of kicks to the front exhaust to really get going. Merlin’s long finished with his vodka, so Eggsy allows him a shot of tequila or four, maybe nine. They’re drinking themselves stark blind on his money besides — while the few decent bones Eggsy has in his body may have all fractured years ago they’re still there, splintered but capable of forcing him to act like a passable human being on occasion. He can never quite figure if it’s better that he has to live with them or not, if the frequency at which he’s able to ignore them means he’s just talented or that much of the shithead he tries too hard to be at times.

Case in point — when Merlin elbows his empty vodka bottle off the counter and nearly falls out of his seat in an attempt to catch it, Eggsy laughs too heartily and for too long that it borders on harsh, and Merlin snaps at him to do something with his own excrement that has Eggsy marvelling at the miracle that is human creativity when one gets adequately smashed. Right after, Merlin’s already-red face goes even redder, virtually crimson, and he mumbles, “Sorry. Didn’t mean that. It’s just — I’ve had, you know.” His eyes drop to the tipped-over bottle on the floor.

“Too much?” Eggsy offers, more amused than offended.

“Quite.” Merlin wipes his mouth on his sleeve, sighs like a guy who’s come one johnny short of a sympathy fuck. “It’s not that I — we’re not supposed to. Not really.”

Eggsy swirls the tequila bottle in his hand like it's an oversized martini glass and the motion itself has him feeling properly ill. He stops and waits for the liquor to cease swirling, then holds it out in offering and rests it on the counter when Merlin shakes his head. "I'm not asking first, if that's what you're thinking," Eggsy says, after some thought. "A man's just gotta drink sometimes. Whatever's eating you, I dunno if I really want to know, anyway."

He does mean that, isn't trying to be a wise-guy for once, so when Merlin looks at him — really, *really* looks at him — Eggsy starts panicking internally because he has a feeling he's about to find out what type of drunk Merlin is, and if he's the painfully honest kind who pours their bleeding heart out and expects to receive sensitivity or consolation in return, Eggsy doesn't know how either of them are going to handle that. He's not good with that sort of thing; yes, he's a pretty okay listener, but he didn't come here for this, it's not like he doesn't have his own fair share of open wounds to lick, and if this situation calls for anything as blessed with suck as Eggsy's personal input, he will in all likelihood never be able to look Merlin straight in the eye or be in the same room with him once this is over and they're back in their heads again.

"This isn't like me at all," Merlin laments, and Eggsy's insides roil, because oh fucking boy, here it comes. "I haven't done this for a long time, not since James — Lancelot, before Roxy. Not since James died. We were together, he was my candidate, and. Well, we weren't together when he was my candidate, that was after. Four years ago, in fact. Would've been five next week. He said he'd take me to Portugal, give me the sex holiday I've been putting off for years. Man was a sex maniac. Loved it as much as he loved me, I think, if not more."

Eggsy's tongue feels thick and sandy in his mouth, but he nods and takes another swig of tequila, nodding again for Merlin to go on.

"He always was a twat, James," Merlin says with a snort. "Thought himself top of the class, and in loads of ways he was. But a twat through and through, make no mistake about that. Was always charging in blind with his missions, no glasses or anyone on monitor to watch his back, never listened — I kept telling him it was going to get him killed some day, and look what happened. Though I guess that's not really fair, you could say we've all got it in for us, just a matter of time. Comes with the job, doesn't it? One moment you've the whole world at your feet, and the next..." He mimes firing a gun at his temple and shakes his head.

"I don't think, it's not like any of you plan to, you know," Eggsy says, mimicking the gesture. "Nobody does, it happens. Shit happens." *Like this answer*, he thinks in the second he has to check back through what he's said. Could he sound any more like a boilerplate wanker if he wanted? He's not trying to be purposely unhelpful or anything, and that kind of makes it worse. This is why he's reluctant to project when it comes to opinions and feelings under normal circumstances. It's why he just doesn't project, period.

To his surprise, Merlin gives an assenting hum and actually looks thoughtful. Eggsy finds himself regretting his folly of not picking up a couple litres of water along with his tequila, reconsiders that maybe it's not the fairest thing to inflict their paired drunk selves onto Roxy after they've received the all-clear for the jet to take off again.

"Shit happens, indeed," Merlin agrees, sighing plaintively. "I mean, we knew it wasn't going to last, it never does, something was bound to crop up sooner or later, but. *He* came to me, at

the beginning. Said he'd been fancying me for ages, ever since I brought him to Kingsman, and that was — it was the first time anyone had said that to me. At that point I didn't even care that he'd been my candidate, it felt... different, being the one to be told that. It was nice."

"Was it really?" Eggsy doesn't mean to question the veracity of that, just needs a placeholder response as he works out how he's going to distance himself from choice elements in Merlin's drunken parable. He's not this James person and Harry's not Merlin, and that much will suffice until he unearths a more compelling counterargument from the depths of his inebriated arse.

Merlin nods. "Take it from someone who's been there, lad. Once you've had forty odd years of handsome strangers on the streets and *oh no, I'm not, you know*," his accent smooths over on the last six words and he laughs, humourless. "And it wasn't just that he was the only one who ever, who made me happy. James was well fit, honestly speaking. One of the most beautiful men I'd ever laid eyes on. Sucked cock like that was his degree at Cambridge, too. I didn't even think about standing a chance in hell with him, until he asked."

"Oh," Eggsy mumbles, and that is something else he's going to have to bury deep down inside as well, provided there's still space left by the manifold regrets he already keeps there. "So, like. You miss him, yeah? That's what this is about, I get it, that's cool —"

Merlin waves a dismissive hand. "I do miss him, I'd be one heartless cunt if I didn't," he says. "God knows I do. But it's like I said, that bottle-buster's been done. Perhaps there'll be someone else, someday. It's possible."

"Okay," Eggsy says slowly, and if not James, "Harry, then?"

Shrugging, Merlin glances at Eggsy's tequila and looks back at him. "Is that not why we're both here?"

"No," Eggsy says, now a bit too quickly. "It's just that I, with Princess Tilde and everything."

"Ah, yes. Her Royal Highness," Merlin recalls. "What about your little mountaintop tryst? I would've thought you'd be pleased by that."

"I wish," Eggsy mutters, and now that he's made the tactical mistake of putting that out in the open and Merlin's raising an inquisitive eyebrow at him, he groans. "See, the thing is, I didn't — we didn't, uh."

"Fornicate?"

"Fuck," Eggsy gasps the word like a reflex, and it's just as well. "Yeah, fine, we didn't fuck, okay? We were going to, I was gonna, but then... I dunno. I couldn't, it didn't feel right. The champagne tasted really funny, and I wasn't, not with what happened with my mum and sis, and *Harry* —" He winces painedly and snatches at the tequila again, growls, "Fuck, just forget it. Forget I said anything."

Merlin's expression softens with something like understanding and he says, his voice quiet, "I know. I loved him once too, Eggsy."

Eggzy inhales a mouthful of tequila and sputters, liquid fire shooting into both his nostrils, and Merlin wallops him on the back while he expels what feels like the upper parts of his lungs into his lower throat. "I don't," he wheezes between whole-body coughs that leave his airways spasming, "What the *fuck*, Merlin?"

Merlin grins evilly. "Lad, from an old queer to another, I must tell you — your technique could use some work. You've got a lot to learn."

"I'm not gay," Eggsy wants to say he protests, but it comes out as more of a prissy little boy's whine — fuck *everything*.

"Well, I am," Merlin sighs and pilfers some more of Eggsy's tequila. There's a faraway look in his eyes as he stares down at the amber liquid. "He used to call me *Archie*. James called me that, too."

"Archie? As in, *Archibald*?" Eggsy says, putting crucial emphasis on the last syllable.

Merlin looks at him knowingly with his mouth quirking up, like he didn't expect anything less. "Archibald MacDonald, at your humble service."

"Gary Unwin, *not* at yours," Eggsy returns, "But hold up just one sec, when you said —"

"Hold on." Merlin touches his glasses, the left headpiece of which is flashing, and grimaces apologetically at Eggsy. "I have to take this. Give me a minute." He turns away to face the wall and answers, "Hello? Yes, speaking," as Eggsy retrieves his tequila, pouts into the bottle and lifts it to his lips, draining the rest in two tongue-searing gulps.

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### **jack-o'-lanterns in july (louisville, feb '15)**

For the next twelve hours, Eggsy can't breathe. Or, more precisely, it feels like he can't, a bizarre sensation to be having when he's roughly a breath and a half away from hyperventilating. And uh, wow, *crying*, though he may be slightly far gone on that. He's still pretty drunk, the mess of his body clock coming second only to his entire existence in general, and all he wants is to get a little privacy, try and work himself back into some simulacrum of regular breathing with the assistance of a sick bag. But air comes thin enough as it is at forty thousand feet, so he doesn't, and neither does he wipe the salt streaks from his cheeks the whole flight back to Kentucky until Roxy emerges from the plane lavatory and attacks him with a paper towel.

"You should freshen up a bit," she tells him. "Merlin says we'll be there soon."



Eggsy snivels, because for all he knows Harry may be dead for real by then, but takes the towel from Roxy and rubs at his face with it, blows his snotty nose.

When they do land, it's four in the afternoon and sunny out. The early American spring weather is pleasantly cool but Eggsy starts to sweat from the moment they step off the jet. A car is waiting for them at the edge of the runway and Eggsy lets Roxy take the front passenger's seat, clambers into the back and buckles up. Nobody says anything on the road, though Roxy gives Eggsy a number of looks over her shoulder and Merlin makes frustrated tsking noises every time he forgets it's a right-handed drive. For the greater part of the journey, Eggsy sits as still and quietly as he can in the back of the vehicle like a lad expecting to be rewarded for good behaviour, as if this is all it will take to shunt him back into the universe's good graces.

Norton Hospital is chaos on arrival, which isn't surprising given V-Day was only two nights ago. That and it's America, where every third person seems to be packing some form of heat or another and the police get paid to shoot the crap out of people even without Valentine's fucking chips in the equation. The wait in reception takes forever, but they do eventually get to the front of the queue, where a hospital clerk with a shiner and a bandage over her left cheek asks who they're here to see, and speak clearly, please, because she hasn't got all afternoon.

"We're here for Henry DeVere," Merlin answers, and Eggsy's heart surges against his ribcage in realisation. An alias, duh. It's not like *Galahad* was Harry's real name. Is.

The clerk looks dourly at them. "DeVille? Like, Cruella?"

"No, Henry DeVere," Merlin repeats with an otherworldly patience Eggsy knows better than to interpret as anything other than *did I fucking stutter?* "That's D-e-V-e-"

"Yeah, yeah, I've got it, Braveheart," the clerk says, looking at her computer screen. "And how are you related to Mr DeVere?"

"I'm his brother."

"And the two of them?"

"His kids," Merlin says, clapping Eggsy on the shoulder. Roxy smiles weakly. "We were on vacation together."

"I'm going to need to see some ID first," the clerk says with a curt nod.

Through some essence of jiggery pokery or actual honest-to-goodness Harry Potter shit, Merlin manages to produce a British passport of one Robert DeVere on the spot, which gets them led to intensive care by a significantly less overbearing member of staff. The nurse furnishes them with details on the way — that Mr DeVere was brought in the other day in critical condition, that he's presently very unstable, and that if she may be so frank with them, it would be best if they thought about preparing for the worst. Eggsy's sobriety is mostly reformed by now but he feels horribly lightheaded just the same as they stare through the glass into Harry's room, where the very, very broken man lying in the bed there barely

resembles a living person at all, let alone Harry Hart. He looks worse than the first time he almost snuffed it, his head covered in bandages and sans a significant amount of his hair. Tubes and wires snake over nearly every square inch of exposed skin, hooking him up to a nightmarish assortment of machines and monitors and drips and drains.

Eyes prickling anew, Eggsy has to remember to breathe.

Roxy's hand slips into his and he takes it, returning her reassuring squeeze. At this distance, he can see the rhythmic rise and fall of Harry's chest, and the sight paradoxically loosens and tightens different parts of his own. He swallows and bites his lower lip, bites and bites to force himself back to the fact of Harry being here, alive, just barely but that's something and better than what he could've dared to hope for before this. Even by method of life support, a breath is still a breath, after all.

In keeping with their departure from silver screen-worthy cliches, Eggsy decides against maintaining a bedside vigil until Harry wakes up or shows signs of getting better — he will, however, stay in this dimly-lit intensive care unit for the rest of the afternoon, or at least until visiting hours are over and the ward staff boot him out. And he does this for a solid nineteen minutes, at which point Merlin, to whom Harry's personal effects have been relinquished, buzzes in and reports that they're missing his glasses. There's a short bit about accounting for controlled equipment and the importance of preserving the sensitivity of intelligence, and as Roxy's already heading back to the airfield to pick up the rest of the stuff they'll need to spend a week here, that leaves just him and Merlin, who technically can't push shit to Eggsy down the pecking order — since a) from Eggsy's understanding Kingsmen are supposed to be equals, and b) he's not a Kingsman besides — but still kinda can, just because.

Merlin gives him a hundred American dollars to pay for the round trip to the church and back. Presumably the surplus is meant to cover any other miscellaneous expenses that he might conceivably incur, so Eggsy invests in a pack of Camels from a roadside store after five minutes of unsuccessful attempts to flag a taxi down. He barely keeps from purchasing more booze, gets a lighter that only has a minuscule risk of birthing incendiary hell instead, and almost sneaks a quick smoke before Merlin checks in and snaps at him to get a move on. Stubbing out the fresh one he's just lit, Eggsy curses under his breath and flings his arm out at the road again, climbs into the taxi that finally pulls over and gives the cabbie the address of the church.

Southglade isn't all that far from the hospital, situated a few kilometres out where city molts into suburb. Eggsy alights on the street opposite and stands in the driveway of a landed home with a FOR LEASE placard in the window, just looking at the church for a while. It's peculiar, being in a place he's seen on video, to be taking in with his own eyes where *something* happened. Living in London, he thinks he really should be more used to it, but Eggsy still needs a moment to collect himself before he crosses the road into the courtyard.

The street is a lonely one, no cars or people in sight. A cordon has been placed around the church and someone's chained the doors shut, put a padlock on the front for good measure. Not that Eggsy has any intention of going inside, anyways. The dried blood on the pavement — *Harry's* blood, he realises, bile burning bitter in his throat — already has his skin crawling. He lights another cigarette and takes a long drag, holding the smoke deep in his

lungs and exhaling it back out in a pensive sigh. Nerves refusing to settle, he smokes the cig halfway down to the filter, extinguishes it with the toe of an Oxford and carries on with what he's been sent here for.

Harry's glasses are nowhere near where he fell — and lay bleeding out over the concrete, part of Eggsy's brain supplies; the dickish part that rarely knows what's good for him — turning up a short distance behind the cordon, under a piece of white tarp that must've been left behind by whoever locked up the church. Eggsy stoops to pick them up, inspects the eyewear for damage or signs of tampering. Most of it is in reasonably good condition, not even a scratch on the lenses, but a chunk of the upper rightmost rim has been gouged out in the rough contours of a bullet. Ballistics-resistant, Eggsy remembers Merlin telling him not so long ago. If Harry hadn't been wearing them at the time, had taken the shot directly to the face — Eggsy shudders and sends a retrieval confirmation through the pair Merlin's loaned him, then ducks under the cordon to head back to the road.

It's still as deserted if not more so, as Eggsy thinks there was a pigeon roosting on the television aerial two houses away from where he got out of the taxi. Said aerial is now vacant of all lifeforms, avian or otherwise, and he looks both ways down the street of empty houses for another taxi or any evidence of public transportation, or a parked automobile to jack, whatever. Nothing. The thought of Harry being here in this godforsaken neighbourhood, all alone, sits cold and unsettling like a paving stone in Eggsy's chest. He takes a deep breath, hands itching to meddle out a third cigarette just to have something to do with them, to seek comfort in the familiarity of the motion.

Instead of that, Eggsy finds himself unfolding Harry's glasses and looking down at them, at the tortoiseshell frames and pristine lenses. It registers as a weird thing to do and creepily inappropriate besides, but he removes his own and tries them on for size, to get a feel of how they sit on his face. They fit him well, very well if but for the tiny bit of damaged frame that scrapes the skin below his right eyebrow when he blinks.

The glasses start up without prompting and Eggsy follows suit, not having expected them to still be working. Man, the battery life on these things, it's mental. A password box and a writing cursor greets him, along with an optically-operated keypad. Eggsy thinks and thinks, thinks about how he really shouldn't be doing this, but... it's unlikely that Harry uses the same password for his glasses and home terminal, any spy worth their salt probably knows better than that —

"Fuck me," Eggsy mutters. The user interface and software on the glasses are identical to the pair Eggsy has, but the vast number of files stored within the internal hard drive is a testament to Harry's years of service. There are mission reports and blueprints and case summaries, details of handlers and contact information for countries Eggsy hasn't even heard of. Tinkering with a few choice icons gets Eggsy access to security feeds from the shop and mansion, locations of the nearest safe houses, the manifold IP addresses used by the Kingsman mainframe to mine for information. No wonder Merlin was so uptight about getting Harry's glasses back.

There's a folder labelled *Real-Time Footage* containing another labelled *Surveillance* and Eggsy clicks through both to find thousands of hours worth of video recorded from Harry's

perspective, sorted by the date and time of day when each clip was taken. Scrolling through them, Eggsy plays some of those with himself in the thumbnails, a few minutes for each, seeing for himself how Harry saw him. He relives the day they spent with each other, the night of train-tempered loyalty, back to when Eggsy had first set foot in Kingsman Tailors, all through Harry's eyes. He lets the clips run longer and longer each time, and when even Holborn Police Station is done Eggsy rewinds it to the clip an hour before that out of curiosity, plays that one too.

He recognises the briefing room from the gilded corner of the table, where Harry's writing a letter to someone named *The Rt. Hon. Kenneth Avery Worthington* requesting permission to speak with his son. As he's sealing the envelope with hot wax — who even fucking *does* that anymore — there's a knock at the door, and Harry says, "Come in."

"Galahad, sir," a woman says. Her voice is naggingly familiar. "It's the Unwins. They've just called."

Harry's hands still on the envelope. He looks at her. "Are you certain?"

"Oxfords, not brogues," she recites, handing a folder to him. "You might want to take a look at this."

Eggzy has a feeling he knows what's inside before Harry opens it: the processed arrest report from the station, complete with incident narrative, fingerprints and mug shots. He's scowling at the camera, expression a thunderstorm, and he recalls trying to be as difficult a subject as possible with the side profile and being told then to *keep it up, sunshine, you ain't doing yourself any favours like that*. But now he's not thinking of Holborn Police Station and their grotty holding cells, not when Harry's touching his fingers to Eggsy's front shot and keeping them there without saying anything. His index finger slides along Eggsy's sulky cheek, signet ring only just visible at the edge of the video frame.

"Sir? Is something the matter?"

Harry doesn't look away from the photographs. After a while, though, his hand slides off the report and he turns to the woman. "I need to make a few calls," he says, closing the folder. "Anita, if you would be so kind, clear my schedule for the rest of the day, please."

"Certainly, sir. Would you like me to post that for you?"

"Hm? Oh, that." He's left the envelope behind — Harry goes back to pick it up and tucks it neatly into the folder. "No, it's alright. I'll post it myself." The woman nods and leaves the room. The instant she's gone, Harry takes the envelope out again, drops it in the trash and removes his glasses, ending the clip there.

Eggzy stares at the video selection menu for several long seconds after that, a sense of disquiet rolling about inside him. So clearly he wasn't Harry's first choice of candidate, which, look, he's not going to lie, fucking stings something fierce. But then, binning the envelope — it was like Harry knew that Eggsy would be the one he'd propose, all from what, a minute of fingerbanging the most unflattering picture of Eggsy ever taken? He could have easily fetched Eggsy's sorry arse back home without a word and gone with Worthington-

whatshisface's kid, and that would've been that. 'Course, the world'd be over now if he did, but who the fuck really knows.

*Adapt and learn*, Eggsy mopes as he pulls the glasses from his face. He folds them up and stows them in his suit jacket, a homey weight pressed to his chest, and sets off at a slow amble up the street, towards the main road where he'll have better luck with getting a taxi.

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### **crosswalks and crossed hearts and hope-to-dies (barnet, mar '15)**

Harry survives. Such a simple, trite statement, but it's one that Eggsy will turn over and over in his thoughts for weeks, keeps close to home, hoards like a magpie assembling a trove. It seems nigh impossible on dozens of instances at the beginning, especially the one when Harry flatlines four times in a single night, having been repeatedly brought back to the fringe of life only to die again. If anything, he has the common courtesy to reserve that performance for outside of daytime visiting hours — assuming Eggsy had been present at his bedside and survived the resulting emotional trainwreck, chances are he'd have snapped and pulled the plug on the bastard himself.

All in all, it's not the most enjoyable month of his life, less the week of popping home for a bit to settle his family, their housing and the non-issue of Dean. Eggsy reckons he must've had more fun during Hell Week of basic training with the Marines, only now there's less water and back-to-back endurance training, and a hell of a lot more feeling stripped down, torn up and wrung out just before he falls asleep every night. It's like with combat diving again, that all-consuming press of being surrounded and crushed by that much water, the cold salt-sting stroke blind panic of learning how to open his eyes to the darkness of the ocean or drown trying, having to take a deep breath and hold on and on and on — stretched out over the three weeks between when they arrive in Kentucky and can finally bring Harry home.

He's still in considerably bad shape and far from out of the woods, but the hospital is dreadfully overworked and understaffed, and it only takes Merlin reminding them that the DeVeres have a private intensive care facility in England twice to get the transfer papers signed at speed. Then it's just a matter of ringing in the Kingsman aeromedical division, and as they're cruising over the North Atlantic Eggsy thinks giddily that perhaps they'll be alright after all, is able to believe it with what mixture of hopeful innocence and reckless abandon the child in him can muster.

Days pass, and gradually — so gradual that Eggsy wonders if he's making it up sometimes — bit by bit, Harry heals. The bandages are changed, tapered down, then removed to the point where his features are visible again, paler and more gaunt than Eggsy remembers but still so very handsome. Machines are moved around, tubes swapped out for thinner, less intimidating-looking tubes. On good days he manages to breathe on his own for a while, making it to a round four hours on record. Eggsy's not there for it, but he hears from one of

the nurses that Harry had been half-conscious and trying to say something while off mechanical ventilation the other day.

At any rate, Harry doesn't wake fully, not just yet.

"I'm not waitin' forever for you, y'know," Eggsy says, riffling through the copy of *Pick Me Up!* he brought with him — it's his mum's, fuck you — to read to Harry. It's an early Thursday afternoon and they're in their regular post-lunch configuration — Harry in his bed, Eggsy occupying the chair to his left, an open bag of Kettles' on the table between them. Harry's back on the most dreadful of machines again, the one that does his breathing for him, whose noises and alerts Eggsy has shat himself enough times over to be able to make some sense of now. A high-pitched series of beeps means the plastic tube in Harry's mouth needs cleaning, or that he's biting down on it too hard. A long, droning alarm warns of an air leak somewhere along mouth tube or connecting apparatus. There are other sounds as well, many more that he's heard and hasn't deciphered, but the current smooth whirr of the machine tells him all he cares about, that Harry's as fine as he can be and still painstakingly making his way upstream towards recovery.

Eyeing his comatose body, Eggsy has to remind himself that this is almost exactly where they were, all those long winter months ago.

"Archie won't stop chewing my arse about it nonstop, Hars," Eggsy complains as he skims an article about some woman in Brighton who swears to have lost ten kilos by drinking almond water every day. "It's happening this month whether you're up or not. An' Percival was there for Rox — you gotta do the same for me, come on. I don't wanna become a Kingsman without you watching. Please, Harry."

To this impassioned, heartfelt request, Harry answers with silence. *Rude*, Eggsy thinks.

"Suit yourself. It's gonna be well grand." He flips the magazine shut and shrugs, looks at Harry's unconscious face. His hair's starting to grow out again in uneven tufts and he's sporting a beard too, the dark bristles prominent along the curve of his neck and around the adhesive strap that's securing the tube in his mouth. Eggsy pushes down on the urge to reach out and stroke his fingers over the coarse hairs lining Harry's jaw, shakes his head to clear it. Maybe he should see if he can get someone to give Harry a shave, or do it himself if he so dared. Maybe not.

"You'll be mad that you missed it," Eggsy tries again. "Don't tell me you won't."

He doesn't.

Thwarted, Eggsy sighs and lowers his gaze to Harry's IV-ed hand. There are veins there — thick, blueish veins that stand out beneath lightly-furred skin — tracking across the back of his hand and up his muscular arms like the tributaries of rivers, like the lifelines that they are. Some of Eggsy's own blood has been put into those veins, back when Harry needed all the A-negative he could get, and Eggsy essentially demanded that the hospital drained his O-neg body dry; perhaps it still runs within them, even now.

“I dunno why I even love you, sometimes,” Eggsy mutters, and it’s a lie, a fat fucking lie, because he knows for a fact that he loves Harry for his smiles and stalwart manners, for the uncanny form with suits he has like they were fathomed into creation with him in mind. He loves him for the way he can make Harry laugh, for the curl of his untamed bed-hair that one sleepy morning they’d shared, for the twinkle in Harry’s eyes and the warmth of his voice whenever he’s speaking with Eggsy. It’s a provocative stab at fate more than anything, wrapped up in the exculpatory shell of the whitest of lies — with Eggsy’s luck, it makes sense that Harry would’ve roused mere seconds ago to hear that, and Eggsy will take *liar* over *lovelorn confessor* any day of the week, and Harry lucid over all else.

It’s pretty frustrating, then, when nothing happens. Harry’s eyes don’t open or flicker, or sift about beneath closed lids. Even as Eggsy keeps a close lookout, Harry’s face remains slack, his placid fingers still on the blanket. No indication that he’d heard, not even the slightest of movements save the mechanical cycling of air in and out his lungs.

“I said I love you,” Eggsy says, much louder than before, opting for the more direct approach where subtlety failed; of all times for the universe to feel like he deserves a break, for crying out loud. “Did you get that? I fucking love you, you wanker.”

Just as sedately — or sedatedly, whatever have you — as he’d done the first time round, Harry ignores him.

“I do mean it, you really are a wanker,” Eggsy says, suddenly feeling like a prize one himself. Piling down on someone who’s indisposed and can’t shit-talk back has to put him degrees of wankery above the garden variety, no question about it. “It’s been ages, just wake up already, Jesus Christ. What, are you waiting for a kiss or something? Is that it? Fine, you wanna be Sleeping Beauty? I’ve got your Prince Charming right *here*.”

He puts his lips to Harry’s forehead on *here*, meaning to restrict it to a fleeting peck, a borderline nothing brush of mouth over skin that shouldn’t mean a whit, only it lasts for seconds too long to be nothing but a legitimate kiss and almost overtakes Eggsy completely. Harry’s forehead is smooth, warm, and his hair smells of antiseptic and hospital shampoo, a far cry from that smoky cologne of his Eggsy has come to associate with burnt umber in autumn and the clean taste of Vermouth. When Eggsy pulls back his eyes are tingling, breath bated in the split-second thrall of anticipation as he waits, just watching.

Nothing. Harry sleeps on. Captured on the monitor above his bed in numbers and waves, his bleeping heart rate holds steady at a round eighty-five, the rough number it’s been at since Eggsy came in.

“Guess you’re not Sleeping Beauty, then,” Eggsy says, keeping the disappointment out of his voice — so contained, it burns in his chest like stomach acid gone the wrong way. He doesn’t know what he feels more stupid for, that he’d tried or had expected anything to come out of it, like this isn’t the real world they’re living in and that kind of thing isn’t what gets people deservedly mocked at best and, more deservedly, slapped at second-best. But Harry doesn’t mock or slap him, and it probably makes Eggsy a right asshole for thinking him the sort who’d do either, for selfishly yearning to be on the receiving end of both, as if Harry’s not a better person than that.

This is why he will never be worthy of this man, Eggsy realises.

“One more week,” he decides, and this is as much to himself as it is to Harry. “I’m not waiting any longer than that, next Thursday’ll be when my commissioning’s on. If you ain’t up by then...” Eggsy hesitates, tries to think, but draws a resounding blank. He swallows and shakes his head. “Just be there, yeah? Or I’ll ask Archie to do it here if you can’t get out of bed, but only if you’re awake. No point coming down if you’re still snoozing. I think that’s fair. We got a deal, Harry?”

The lack of a response is just as good as any. It’s fine, Eggsy wasn’t really expecting one, anyway. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs, a tightness in his throat. “See you tomorrow,” he grunts as he gathers up his stuff, and says goodbye to Harry before leaving, like he always does, not that it matters or anything.

Three days later, there’s a phone call at dinner.

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### **silver clouds with grey lining (oxford, may ‘15)**

The thing is, Eggsy’s found, is that for how getting in’s a massive pain in the bollocks, there are actually an awful lot of Kingsmen. Harry broke the numbers down for him once: fifty knights in total, ten each to the five global divisions, all of which operate at their own regional discretion with UK headquarters as the main command centre. In any of the other four branches a leadership vote would be conducted among their remaining operatives, but Arthur as Commander-In-Chief requires a representative from all five divisions to stand for election, with a two-round system and a minimally three-fifths majority necessary in the runoff.

“This is pointless,” Roxy whispers as the hologram of Galehault — a tall, wiry Yank in a beige suit and glasses — continues explaining why he feels it’s important for the next Arthur to have an expert understanding of Anglo-American relations. Around the room, similarly-hologrammed men and women nod every so often, a few of them taking invisible notes on the tables in front of them. “I don’t know who any of these people are. We shouldn’t even be here.”

Next to her, Eggsy grunts and sinks lower in his seat. He just wants to cast his vote and get this over and done with so he can go visit Harry in the infirmary for the day. The thermos in his bag isn’t going to keep the soup Eggsy got his mum to pack for him piping hot for much longer, and lukewarm food isn’t really what he’d been planning to surprise someone who’s been complaining of it all week with.

They vote, count the ballots, and vote again after the closing speeches of the two finalists have been given. The winning margin is razor-sharp close at sixty-four percent, with the victor having won over thirty-one of the forty-eight Kingsmen present, Eggsy among them. It



helps that the other contender — Sagramore, fellow Brit and esteemed Oxfordian through and through — makes increasing emphasis on enlisting candidates of more reputable background one of his running points, to which his opponent gently reminds him that it was a young Englishman from the estates who brought down Richmond Valentine earlier that year.

No contest in Eggsy's mind, really.

Shoulder chips aside, it's collectively decided upon that Hoel, an elegant aged Japanese man with short snowy hair and a trim full beard, will be the fifth Arthur and also the first agent of non-Briton heritage to hold that designation. Later, in exchange for Eggsy's thermos of warm Scotch broth, Harry relishes him with a little of what he knows of the former Asian division lead — that he was recruited from JGSDF, had been in Kingsman for a decade and a year at the time Harry joined, and, among other impressive things, allowed his younger brother to ascend to the Chrysanthemum Throne to pursue a career in Special Forces instead.

“That makes him something like an emperor emeritus, mind,” Harry says, blowing on his soup. Clapsed tightly around the thermos, the tremor in his hands is still evident. “*Daijo Tenno*, they call it. I do believe he may be the only Kingsman of legitimate royal status we've had thus far, though I should also tell you that he's always expressed immense dislike of that fact.”

Eggzy smirks. “Should I be calling him *Your Majesty* and curtsying whenever I see him, then?”

“I'm not sure if you know this, Eggsy, but katanas are really, really sharp things,” Harry says conversationally and takes a sip.

Eggzy doesn't, and neither does he get round to finding out for himself whether the Arthur-to-be carries one around or not when Hoel gets in touch to invite him and Roxy to Shanghai as part of some dialogue session he's having with all new Kingsmen knighted within the past five years. Being a loudmouth doesn't mean Eggsy can't recognise a situation where he should zip his yap when he's in one, and unlike with Chester King he has a feeling that no good will come of messing with the kind-faced, soft-spoken man whose hologram insists on first names, gives off an air of respectability so sharp it spills over into lethality, and also freaking *bows* to them both before and after they're done talking.

“You voted for him too, didn't you?” Roxy says afterwards as they're taking the lift down to the monorail, and grins when Eggsy shrugs noncommittally. “This could be rather fun, I think.”

She's not wrong. The thing in Shanghai is a conference solely by name and a holiday retreat by strictest definition, and there's some, well, a lot of peer networking on the side, which Eggsy reasons has to be a little of the point of the six of them being gathered there. With that in mind, he drops a few Jägerbombs with recently-commissioned Breunor from Ghana, goes to five different clubs in a single evening with Lucan and Morien as the Chinese know the city and where everything's at, and the night before they're dismissed to their respective divisions Aglovale tells him with his tongue inches from Eggsy's tonsils that they can never, ever do this again, Gareth, mate, because he has a girlfriend back in Toronto. Which, okay, Eggsy really didn't need or want to know but should've rightfully asked about before they

got to this stage, except while he's still *Gareth* he lets Aglovale fuck him to ball-splitting orgasm because he needs this like burning, needs it after a month of not-dead Harry and thin hospital gowns and bitten lips and the grating agony of inaction, to finally let his cock do his thinking for him like he used to all the time when gentlemanly propriety wasn't a concern.

It's probably this which karma gives him one in the nuts for when they return to London at the end of the week with Hoel — who would still very much wouldn't mind *Takaharu-san* even after he's formally Arthur, he reassures them — and Eggsy finds that the ward which Harry had occupied for the past month is empty. Discharged to outpatient therapy, Merlin tells him, and catches Eggsy before he can run off to grab a taxi to Harry's place.

"Hoel, I mean Arthur's granted him an indefinite leave of absence," Merlin says. "For his recuperation, and the like. He's now with one of our physio centres up at Oxford."

"Okay." Eggsy mentally alters his travel plans; it's three hours to midnight, best if he goes tomorrow.

"Arthur would like to see you in the morning," Merlin adds, and Eggsy works his jaw, alters again.

The bollocking streak continues into the next day with Arthur giving him an assignment in Krakow, deployment effective immediately, where he's to conduct recon on a Serbian weapons firm that has reportedly amassed and is attempting to trick out one million of Valentine's old SIM cards. It ends just as Eggsy expected, the whole factory killing itself in the middle of the night without him having to lift a finger, but it takes them two weeks to fuck up and when the mission report has been filed, he's sent out again to Gibraltar to fight Moroccan insurgents from Good Friday through to Easter Monday.

This goes on for another six weeks, mission after mission and Eggsy being given little to no time for reprieve, less so a day trip to Oxford. He gets Harry's new number from Merlin after coming back from breaking up a Sicilian maritime smuggling ring but doesn't call, just keeps it on his phone and reasons that he's too tired or pretends to forget he has it. He'd call if he weren't so busy, Eggsy tells himself. One hundred percent. But the missions don't stop and neither does Eggsy, which continues to be the case until he finishes his objective in Lesotho a day earlier than expected and has a night out incognito at Breunor's suggestion. They meet up in Cape Town and drive out to the city and proceed to get majestically wasted, almost starting a pub fight when Eggsy sloshedly boos Manchester United on the bar telly and Breunor, despite possessing the sports literacy and football know-how of a kiwi fruit, opts to join in anyhow.

"You wouldn't happen to know Galahad, would you, Gareth?" Breunor asks, thwacking Eggsy bodily between the shoulder blades as Eggsy's emptying the contents of his stomach in a fenced-off skip.

Eggzy retches again, his head jerking up at the mention of Harry's codename. A glob of sick spatters the pavement next to Breunor's quarter-brogue Oxford. "He was my sponsor," Eggsy mumbles to a lamp post, groping about in his pocket for his handkerchief. "And mentor. Why?"

“He wasn’t at Arthur’s vote, was he?” Breunor says, offering his own handkerchief to Eggsy. “Word is he hasn’t been seen around for quite some time. Is he alright?”

Eggzy... doesn’t know, realises that he actually can’t answer that question. The last time he spoke with Harry was before jetting off to Shanghai, when Eggsy was sneaking him soup and puff pastries and other foodstuffs Harry wasn’t supposed to be having and then helping him dispose of the evidence, which makes it, god, what? Two months? Give or take a week, sixty days since he last heard Harry’s voice. It really has been that long, shit. That he can believe it is the worst part, the clincher that squeezes his already-wrecked stomach until it’s cramping so hard he has to brace a hand against the wall to keep himself on his feet.

“He’s fine,” Eggsy mutters into Breunor’s hankie, and the barefaced lie follows him throughout the night, sticks in his mouth and teeth and gums like popcorn kernels, impossible to remove even after he’s sick again an hour later and barely makes it to the extraction point on time to be picked up the next day. The nine-hour nap he takes in-flight doesn’t help at all, so Eggsy gives in and asks Arthur for the weekend off, then buys a Friday night ticket for the eight-thirty Oxford Tube out of Victoria and spends the hour’s bus journey on the M40 wondering whether it’s too late for him to turn back.

The address Eggsy types into Citymapper brings him to a house on the outskirts of town, this quaint little Enid Blyton-type cottage with a porch and thatch roof and honeysuckle-covered trellises in the front garden. Smoke rises from the stone chimney in a wispy spire and there’s a light on in the curtained ground floor windows. Eggsy rings the doorbell and waits on the welcome mat, almost makes a run for it at the approaching tip-tap of a walking stick and shuffling feet — what if he’s got the place wrong and is about to disturb some random pensioner’s Friday evening? — but then he hears the door being unlocked and it swings open and it’s not an old wrinkled fart who looks out at him. Just an old fart, Eggsy’s favourite old fart, only Harry.

“Eggzy,” Harry says. While it shows in his expression somewhat, he doesn’t sound surprised.

“Hey, Harry,” Eggsy answers with a silly little wave, and it’s getting to say his name after so long that has him rooted to the spot, staring stupidly back at Harry, no other words running in his mind.

“You’re here,” Harry says, which Eggsy thinks is a pretty lame manner of greeting until it occurs to him that people ordinarily don’t show up at other people’s houses at ten in the evening. At least not without telling them they’re dropping by for a visit.

“Yeah.” Eggsy gulps, nods. “I am.”

Harry opens the door wider, adjusting his stance using the cane he’s holding on to with his other hand. “Please, come in. It’s rather cold out tonight.”

Eggzy acquiesces wordlessly, removing his shoes in the hallway as Harry locks the front door and beckons him inside. “Just make yourself right at home,” Harry says in the living room. “Have you had dinner yet? I can make you something if you’re hungry.”

“M’alright, thanks,” Eggsy says, looking around and taking in the whitewashed walls, the chintzy upholstery.

“Some tea, perhaps?” Harry asks, and Eggsy looks back to him. He’s in his pyjamas and dressing robe, the red one he let Eggsy wear when he was staying over at Harry’s. His hair is neatly combed down and product-free, the tender bits of grey in it and around the curls at his temples brought out by the orange light of the fire in the hearth. A pair of reading glasses dangle from the chain around his neck, and Eggsy can feel an old man joke coming on but it’s superseded by a soul-lurching crash of affection for Harry, for how amazingly dapper he looks all the time down to the soft-edgedness of his bed-ready dress, and it makes Eggsy want to walk over and slump into his arms, just to touch and smell and be with him like Eggsy always wishes he could, to hold him fast and kiss him. It’s all he can do not to.

“Sure, if you’re having some too,” Eggsy mumbles, gaze shifting to where he’s scuffing his foot against the carpet.

Harry nods and smiles. “Is chamomile alright? I’d make Earl Grey but it’s not the most ideal thing to be having before bed.”

“Mmph.”

He helps Harry make the tea in the kitchen and they return to the living room with their mugs. Harry directs Eggsy to the squashy-looking armchair by the coffee table, taking the sofa directly opposite him. They drink over the sounds of the wall clock ticking and the crackling fireplace, an easy enough absence of words looming between them.

“This your place?” Eggsy asks eventually, when it feels like he really should say something, seeing as he’s the one who turned up out of the blue and is now drinking Harry’s tea, leeching the warmth of his fire.

Harry wafts the steam from his mug under his nose and inhales appreciatively. “Maybe someday,” he sighs.

“Kingsman’s?” Eggsy looks around the place again when Harry nods. “It’s nice. The outside of it, too. It’s all so, um. And everything else, is it all like — I dunno, I’ve never been to Oxford before.”

Harry stirs his tea, head tilting towards the window. “It’s not as exciting as London, given, but yes. It is nice, isn’t it? I could show you around, if you’d like.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Sunday.” Harry smiles apologetically at him. “I’ve some appointments pencilled in for tomorrow. I wasn’t expecting you, I’m afraid.”

“Oh.” Eggsy wraps his hands around his mug, its heat searing his fingers and palms numb. “Y — yeah, I know. I should’ve called,” he says, and means it not just in the sense of before coming tonight, but also in general, after Shanghai and even while he was picking up the pieces of a world slowly falling back to shambles. He means it as the slew of apologies he

can't verbalise, *sorry for vanishing on you, sorry for keeping you hanging these two months, I should've texted to ask if you were alright, I should've called*. It doesn't matter how badly he wanted to, or how many times he almost did and aborted at the last second — the bottom line is that he didn't, couldn't man up to the moment and set aside his own messed up feelings for two measly minutes to check in on Harry like any half-decent person would. Fundamentally, Eggsy's not the world's greatest human, he knows that. But he thought he'd have been adequate enough — almost good, even — to accomplish the bare minimum that would allow Eggsy to call himself Harry's friend.

"You've been very busy," Harry notes. Not *yes, you should have*, or *then why didn't you?* — either of which would be miles kinder than what Eggsy would say, has said to anyone who treated him the same way he did Harry. Right now Harry could tell him to leave and Eggsy would go, would crawl out the door on his hands and knees if it really came to that. "I understand, Arthur's told me. You just got back from somewhere today, didn't you?"

"South Africa," Eggsy says, the uncomfortable feeling in his gut from Cape Town returning in spades.

"You must be tired," Harry says, and Eggsy realises that yeah, he actually is, and also still slightly hungover from whatever crazy alcohol-drenched fuckshit he got up to with Breunor last night.

"A little," Eggsy admits, scrubbing a tea-warmed hand down his face. "Was just a long flight, that's all."

"And you came all this way to see me," Harry says, a tinge of something like marvel in his voice, a look in his eye that Eggsy isn't sure he wants to understand. "Eggzy, you shouldn't have."

The way he says it, as if Eggsy's done the most gentlemanly thing fathomable by coming, puts a few extra loops into the knot tied at the base of Eggsy's throat. Swallowing, he wonders if Harry would be saying that if he knew what Eggsy isn't telling him, the real reason for his weeks of silence. It's that for the months since they met he's been scared of what Harry means to him, of how it's grown to become too much, always too much, the enormity of what Harry makes him feel. That he was secretly glad about Shanghai for the distance it put between them, for the time it gave him to think about whether this legitimately is love, the *whatever* he has for Harry, or a passing thing he could potentially live to regret, and that even now he's still a ways away from figuring it out. The simple truth is that Eggsy didn't call because he doesn't know what he would've said, if it would have been what needed to be said, and he couldn't trust himself to get his words right when his everyday thoughts about Harry frighten him stiff on their own. It was easier to say nothing and pretend that was something in and of itself, to make a hundred excuses like they didn't all boil down to the same thing, that he just can't deal with wanting Harry so much he can't bear to look at him sometimes.

But even though Eggsy's still half-wishing he hadn't the spine nor balls to come, he's here now, in Oxford with Harry before him, and while he doesn't say any of what he's thinking, he knows that he owes Harry something that's just as patently honest, something that Eggsy

means without a scrap of artifice whatsoever. It's the least he can do for Harry, just for tonight.

"I missed you," Eggsy says. He thinks he hears a quaver in his voice and does nothing to stop it. "I thought — I wanted to see how you were doing."

Harry's smile is demure, a small benevolence, both endeared and endearing, and Eggsy can't help but think with something rapidly expanding inside him that yes, this may just be love, after all.

"I've missed you, too," Harry says. "It's good to see you again."

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### **take the world back from a heart attack (zurich, sep '15)**

There are levels upon levels of protocols for reinstating an injured Kingsman agent back into the field. Eggsy reads up on them in his spare time, going through the different tests and assessments Harry will have to clear before he's deemed fit for active duty. Initially it's just so that Eggsy stops feeling lost whenever Harry brings up what he has coming next in passing, but then he starts taking note of whichever station it is that Harry finds inordinately difficult and thinking about how he could possibly help him with his preparation.

The written examinations aren't that big of a problem — Eggsy's told by Merlin that Harry aces them with positively stratospheric colours — and there's nothing much Eggsy can do to make the multiple psych evals any less tiresome for Harry beyond providing an outlet for him to expend his ranting breath. Yeah, being asked to look at and describe ink blots sounds like an awful way to waste an hour, and no, Eggsy doesn't see the point of talking about Kentucky over and over again even if there probably is one. Harry just wants to move on, and Eggsy gets that. He's still trying to, himself.

Unsurprisingly, it's the more physically strenuous tests of the lot that give Harry the most grief. Bedridden for a stretch and saddled with motor control issues from his brain injury, Harry doesn't emerge from his physical fitness assessment a happy person, his crossness yielding only to reluctant amusement at Eggsy vowing to personally train him back up to scratch Rocky Balboa style. They're making it *that* kind of movie whether Harry likes it or not, though Eggsy's fairly confident he does for all the bellyaching he puts up over having Eye of the Tiger played out loud on Eggsy's phone when they're on a run or lifting weights in the gym together.

As a matter of fact, Harry actually hasn't been set back much by way of musculature, just the ability of applying it to the task. Months of physio have covered the basics, leaving core aptitudes like marksmanship and close combat to be refreshed and relearned. The main problems are the intermittent shakes in Harry's hands, the twenty percent vision loss in his left eye due to bullet-scarred nerves. Eggsy is relentless at the range until Harry's quick-draw

hits closest to home as it can get and spars him in the dojo every other afternoon, making sure he's drilled into the habit of watching out for right-hand strikes so he doesn't get inadvertently blindsided.

In July, Harry retakes his tests. He passes most, but not all of them, and is understandably grumpy about it for a few days. With another sitting scheduled in a couple of weeks, Eggsy drags Harry back to work with his list of things that could use improvement, and they keep working over the remainder of the month to a uniform pass mark across all sections in the August re-sits.

Eggzy gets brought out to the most expensive dinner he's had in his life by Harry the week before he's to be recommissioned, as sincerest thanks. Poking through his sturgeon caviar, Eggsy tries not to be too disappointed over them inevitably spending much less time with each other after this, now that Harry's going to be back on the roster.

Of course, this is before Arthur continues to prove himself the godsend Eggsy never knew he needed by appointing him as referee for the duration of Harry's probationary period. He can tell that Harry isn't overly pleased with the notion of being bogged down with supervision, but the reasoning behind requiring an interim handler to look out for him is sound, and Harry doesn't object. Of all the Kingsmen it could've been he is glad it's Eggsy who's tagging along, that much is clear.

They're sent to Amsterdam first to intercept a case of stolen CIA dossiers at the airport, and within three hours of arrival Harry secures his objective by cleanly terminating and then impersonating the intended recipient of said dossiers without raising suspicion. It's an indubitable success, the account of which Eggsy is more than happy to elaborate on in profuse detail while he's writing a glowing appraisal of Galahad's performance for the after-action report. He has to consciously veer away from words like *wicked sick* and *amazeballs* and *fucking incredible*, no matter how woefully inadequate *outstanding operational competence* feels in summing up why he thinks Harry's got to be the best secret agent who ever lived.

Harry's next comeback mission bring them to Munich and across the country to Stuttgart, hot on the trail of a Switzerland-based human organ trafficking cartel with several underground surgeries in Germany. When they ferret one out Harry dismantles it and they move on to discerning the location of the next, hitting fast and hard with a target eliminated almost every day. Self-confined to mission control, Eggsy can barely keep up with the pace Harry's moving at, and it's only how cheerful Harry is about being in the field again that stops him asking to take things down a notch. It's not often that Eggsy gets to see him this happy, and there's no doubt in his mind that Harry deserves this, to be unstoppable and brilliant at doing what he does best, so Eggsy will bend over backwards to let him have this even as it feels like they're slowly, avoidably getting in over their heads.

It's this which has Eggsy blaming himself when something goes awry midway through a raid and Harry vanishes, dropping off the radar completely, his homing signal fading into ether five miles north of the Swiss-German border and staying offline no matter how many times Eggsy tries to reactivate it. He's practically in tears by the time someone answers his distress call, still can't put together complete thoughts as Merlin works his technological wizardry

and gets a lock on Harry's location for him. Careening down the highway to Zurich in their Land Rover, Eggsy doesn't take his foot off the gas for a second. It's been half a day since he last heard from Harry — another hour or so, and the combination of desperation and fear simmering to a boil inside Eggsy won't put him in a remotely sound state of mind to be handling firearms around people.

The countryside house that he screeches to a stop in front of doesn't appear to be guarded at first glance, but a fusillade explodes from the living room as soon as Eggsy barges down the front door. His suit sponges a dozen rounds that he pays back in kind with his own pistol, cutting a swathe through the house one gunman at a time and reloading between cleared rooms. More enemies swarm up from downstairs, some of them wearing scrubs underneath their bulletproof vests; it's easy enough to lure them into the kitchen, which Eggsy booby-traps with his lighter and primes to detonate at the highest possible blast setting, then picks off stragglers trying to escape back into the main hall.

With the house fallen silent, Eggsy cautiously advances to the first floor to check for any leftover hostiles, and Harry. There's nobody else, so he moves back to the ground floor and goes downstairs instead.

He finds Harry unconscious in the basement, strapped to the operating table he's lying on. Surgical instruments have been laid out on a stainless steel tray and a lamp's shining down at him, the disc of light circumscribing where his shirt has been ripped apart at the buttons to expose the dotted line inked down the centre of his chest and abdomen in black marker. There's a rubber mask fastened over Harry's nose and mouth, hissing some vapour that Eggsy's willing to bet is the source of the faint sickly-sweet smell in the air. He can't tear it off Harry's face anywhere near fast enough, and Eggsy's hands won't stop trembling as he unbuckles the thick leather cuffs binding Harry's wrists and ankles, the heavy straps across his hips and shoulders and knees, to release him from the table.

While he's battling the last set of restraints, Eggsy hears a bushwhacked groan from higher up the table, groggy with exhaustion and anaesthesia, "What...?"

"Harry," Eggsy breathes, returning to take him by the shoulders. "Harry, oh my god."

"Mm, hmm?" Harry's eyes are hazy, fluttering as they struggle to stay open. He reaches up with a hand, perhaps intending to block out the light, but his fingers bump into Eggsy's cheek and he keeps them there. "Eg — Eggsy?"

"I'm here." Eggsy holds on tighter, gripping too hard with his fingers, doesn't let go. "I'm here, Harry. I, I've got you, I've got — are you okay?"

Harry blinks, looking confused for a moment, and Eggsy can sense it, the swell of raw panic in his chest threatening to rupture, going supernova-hot, but when Harry murmurs drowsily, "I — yes. I'm alright, Eggsy," it's all too much, and Eggsy can't take it, he just can't anymore, he leans down and kisses him. He feels Harry's mouth open under his, like Harry was going to say something else, and there's still some sweetness of the knockout gas lingering on his breath; Eggsy screws his eyes shut, choking back a sob and sliding his hands to Harry's jaw, and he kisses Harry harder because it hurts, it fucking hurts to think of what he would've found if he arrived an hour later than he did, that he almost lost Harry again, that



this is what loving this man does to him, how the mere thought of Harry alone, Harry harmed, Harry *dead* — it's as though Eggsy's having bits of him cut away, his insides scraped out like a gourd. The cruelest knife is knowing things will always be this way, the certainty that Eggsy could sooner stop his own heart beating than he could loving Harry, even as it leaves him hollow and aching and wishing that he didn't.

He doesn't stop kissing Harry until Harry makes a muffled noise against his mouth and Eggsy jerks back, the stammered apology springing to his tongue and freezing at Harry's stymied expression. He tries to force it out but it slinks further down his bone-dry throat, away from the thawing heat in his face. Heart racing, skull tingling, Eggsy tries to think of something else to say as Harry sits up, an explanation for what he just did, something, anything at all, but his mind's a blank and he *can't*.

"My glasses," Harry says quietly, indicating where they are on the tray of instruments, next to the scalpels and forceps. "Could you...?"

Eggzy passes them to him and Harry murmurs his thanks, fumbling them back on with clumsy hands. He doesn't have to ask for Eggsy to help him stand up, or assist him with hobbling across the basement and ascending the staircase. They leave the house as one, Harry's arm slung around his shoulders, Eggsy's own supporting Harry by the waist, and they say nothing to each other on the long drive back to base.

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### **dance alone to the beat of your heart (buenos aires, oct '15)**

After they're returned to HQ via a jet out of Vaduz, Eggsy recuses himself from presiding over the balance of time left for Harry's field appraisal. In the incident report, he accepts responsibility for the events leading up to Harry's capture, claiming to have been off-monitor at a crucial point in the raid, and Eggsy hides the prevarication in the adjudicator's comments, the sole section meant only for Arthur's eyes, so Harry won't have any say in the matter even as he's fully absolved of liability. It's possibly the most selfless thing Eggsy has ever done for another person in his life, and also the most selfish.

For the subsequent month following his discharge as Harry's assessor Eggsy is given no missions, new or old or half-baked, not even the domestic IRA shenanigans up in Belfast that nobody fucking wants to touch. When Eggsy gets antsy enough to pull an Everdeen and volunteer as tribute, Arthur informs him coolly that Lamorak has been persuaded — soundly browbeaten, Lamorak insists to Roxy — to accept the one-day recce mission. Eggsy hasn't been given notice for any sort of official suspension, but he knows that Arthur's majorly pissed at him over Zurich, and he can take a hint after being assigned to store counter duty for the third week in a row. He doesn't protest when it runs into a fourth, doesn't complain or argue with Arthur, pushing down on the fighting instincts that he's cultivated over nearly two decades as he checks their stocks of bulletproof textiles and dusts off the display shelves, and as far as possible Eggsy tries to keep his thoughts from straying to where in the world Harry

is, who Harry's with now, if he's doing okay, whenever the front door tinkles and it's an older gentleman who's come in for a fitting or quotation.

He still dreams about the kiss, though, and Eggsy thinks he's allowed that. There's only so much policing one can do with so indelible a memory.

When the month of Eggsy doing squat is up and they're finally back to *Gary-san* rather than *Gareth* this *Gareth* that, Arthur puts him on the case of a rogue MI6 agent hiding within the British High Commission in Argentina. The preliminary delineating intelligence is skimpy but Eggsy lands with Oxfords on the ground running, determined to do a stellar job of it; it's as much to regain Arthur's trust as it is to refocus himself, to hold an objective in mind and work towards that instead of wasting any number of hours a day stewing and stewing and feeling accordingly pathetic about it. He's tired of wallowing in the quagmire of his self-loathing and pity, of regretting more and more things every day. Time to save someone else's world, even if his own is already past reckoning. Time to be Gareth, Kingsman agent, once more.

He doesn't have much of a plan going in, but it isn't the first time Eggsy's had to play by ear and he's not complacent enough to think it'll be the last. After scouting out the embassy for days he infiltrates the premises posing as an assistant immigration consultant from the Home Office, and the second time he's there he uncovers not just the rogue spy, but an entire MI6 splinter faction that has appropriated control of the ambassador's security detail. Eggsy barely gets the warning to HQ before he's beset upon immediately following this revelation, and a daring chase slash firefight breaks out in the consulate, culminating in Eggsy shooting three security staffers dead and escaping the grounds by the skin of his teeth.

Requesting for extraction an hour later, Eggsy's instructed to stay put. A furore is going down at Vauxhall Cross, cataclysmic, with even Downing Street slated to get involved at the personal request of the British ambassador to Argentina. The three men Eggsy killed were MI6, all of them turned, thank god, but Kingsman is the only party currently grounded in that vital piece of detail thus far. Questions are being thrown around, answers stubbornly or wilfully ignored on repeated provision. An investigation is under way, and in the meantime Eggsy's likeness from the security footage of the shootout has been circulated to all British intelligence agencies, MI5 included. Needless to say, returning home to London isn't his best option for the time being, not until Arthur can smoothen things out and Eggsy no longer has to field the risk of being arrested somewhere on the streets and brought in for interrogation.

Eggzy's sorely tempted to take his chances, honestly. Goodness knows he's spoiling for a decent fight, but orders are orders and Kingsman directives gotta direct.

He gets the hell out of the city on a bus and alights at the last stop, walking a few more miles down the beaten highway before the safe house comes into view. There are no lights around or stars in the sky, but from the main road Eggsy can make out the silhouette of the farmhouse in the distance, the lonely slant of its roof and its dark, sloping windows. As he approaches, a gust of wind rustles the surrounding field; if there's a footpath or side-road leading in, it's very well-concealed. Eggsy stands at the roadside looking at the house for a long moment, then squares his shoulders and starts trudging through the knee-high grass, shoving his hands deep in his pockets.

The front door creaks ominously on its hinges when Eggsy pushes it open. He pokes his head in first, groping about the adjacent wall with his fingers for the switch, flicks the lights on. Blinded temporarily, Eggsy blinks away and squints, slipping inside and grating his muddied shoes on the welcome mat as he closes the door behind him. He surveys the place when his vision has acclimatised fully, glossing over the low ceiling and rustic furniture, the stains in the walls that he hopes is just mould and nothing more sinister. One window in the living room has been inartfully boarded over and the others look like they're on their way there. Studying the fine layer of dust on everything, Eggsy feels his spine itch, childhood asthma intuitions flaring, but he folds his arms and breathes out a resigned sigh. He'll have to make do. It's not like he has anywhere else to go.

He's relieved to find a change of clothes available in the bedroom, folded up neatly in a dresser that smells of must and mothballs. Most of his stuff is back in the city, in the hotel that was deemed too unsafe to go back to. Eggsy only has the suit he's wearing and his wallet, his glasses and watch and umbrella, a pistol with two rounds left in its last magazine. He checks that the safety is still on before emptying his pockets onto the bedside table and strips down to pull on a clean shirt, electing to go starkers below the waist into the bathroom, where he whaps the faucets with the lacquered handle of his umbrella to get the air out and washes his face in the sink.

The water is ice-cold, trickling down his cheeks and neck in rivulets, but it somehow makes Eggsy feel all the more tired. Taking a shower would probably knock him out, so he nixes that in favour of calling it a day, and what a day, what a fucking day it's been. Shambling back to the bedroom, still pantsless, Eggsy's about to flop down on the dusty sheets face-first when he notices his glasses flashing and mutters, "Fuck." Reluctantly, he muddles them on with a sharper and louder, "Fucking *fuck*," because whatever additional instructions Arthur has for him could've waited until morning, and Eggsy considers just ignoring the call but ultimately sprawls flat on the bed and answers to the grimy ceiling, his eyes drifting shut, "Yeah, Gareth here."

"...Eggsy."

Eggsy's stomach does a somersault. He snaps his eyes open and bolts upright, pushing his fingers against the bridge of his glasses to steady them. "Harry?" he says.

"It's me," Harry replies evenly, and Eggsy's stomach tosses again. "I've heard about what happened. Are you alright?"

"I'm okay, but." Eggsy stops, remembering the concealment directive for agents who've been compromised. "You shouldn't be calling, you're gonna get in trouble with Arthur."

A pause, then Harry says, "I know. It's fine."

It's not really, but Eggsy doesn't hang up the call even as he knows it would be the responsible thing to do. How could he, with Harry on the line and hearing his voice again after ages, and Eggsy wishes he could see Harry's face but there's no function for that on their glasses, at least not that he knows of. "If you're sure," Eggsy says, bringing his legs closer to sit cross-legged on the bed, resting an elbow on his thigh and his jaw in his hand.

“Where are you now?”

“Argentina.” Eggsy turns on the bedside lamp so he won’t have to keep on talking into the dark, never mind that by and large it doesn’t really make much of a difference. “What about you? You on a mission?”

“No, not at the moment,” Harry says. “I’m at home.”

“Really?” Eggsy casts towards the bedside table, to where his watch sits ticking away. A quarter past midnight. “It’s like, four a.m over there now. Why’re you up so late?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Harry says. “I was... worried — about you.”

“Oh.” Eggsy turns this over in his head, lets it sink in slowly. It’s not the worry he has trouble wrapping his brain around. It’s being the subject of that worry in context of yet another month of radio silence on his end, of the cut-and-run fashion in which he’d handled matters post-Zurich. He hadn’t even told Harry he was stepping down as his handler, had given him the unceremonious rub of finding out right before his next mission, and Eggsy knows it was a dick move of the highest calibre, he knew it then and he knows it now. But what else was he supposed to do, knowing that he fucked the fuck up in Zurich; as if it wasn’t shitty enough being verbally useless around Harry half the time even before that, and Eggsy couldn’t think of an explanation that didn’t make him want to throw himself into a river somewhere. If he’d called, if Harry wanted to have a discussion about it, Eggsy would’ve probably apologised or tried to laugh it off as a joke, both of which would’ve felt like drowning anyway and he couldn’t bring himself to do that, was content with the prospect of Harry hating his guts for all eternity so long as Eggsy could keep things from spiralling further out of control.

Well, so much for that.

“Do you know when you’ll be back?” Harry asks, breaking the silence.

“Um.” Eggsy keeps staring at his watch as if he does so long enough it’ll give him all the answers he needs. “I dunno, Arthur didn’t really say. He’s trying to sort shit out back home so I’ll be okay.”

“I see. Do you think it’ll be rather a long time?”

“Depends on those MI6 fuckers, I guess,” Eggsy sighs, reclining back to lie down again. “They’re the ones who’ve got it in for me. Figure I’ll be stuck here for a while.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Exgsy groans. “Tell me about it. God, I’m fuckin’ knackered.”

“Were you about to go to bed?” Harry asks.

Exgsy nods sleepily, then remembers that Harry can’t actually see him. “Yeah, I was.”

“Your rest should come first. We could do this tomorrow.”

Closing his eyes again, Eggsy ponders on it. They could, most definitely, but even then he's no more sure where their conversation then would go than he does with the one they're having now, if he could keep from confessing how terribly he's missed Harry, the many dreams he's had about him, how Eggsy wouldn't have been able to forgive himself for ruining everything for them. That he almost can't for coming close, except Harry's on the phone with him now, awake half a world away in the same night as Eggsy and not at all mad at him, and Eggsy can't put his finger on what this means, if it has to mean anything at all. He thinks and he thinks, up until he's inches from conking out and relegates the mental task as one for another day, but he does want to have this moment, wants for it to last while it can.

"Rest is so overrated," Eggsy mumbles. "Tomorrows, too."

He imagines he can hear a smile in Harry's hushed breathing. "Alright, then. What would you like to do?"

Eggzy turns on his side and grins into the pillow. "M'tired. You could sing me a lullaby or something," he jokes. "It'd help me sleep."

To his astonishment, Harry doesn't call him a rascal or a mischievous scamp, doesn't tell him to grow up or stop being ridiculous. Instead, Harry's quiet for a while, then he asks, "Do you like ABBA?"

Eggzy immediately forgets what he was going to say. He has no smart remarks, no witty ripostes to this, just a lump in his throat that he swallows to croak out, "Um. Sure. Why not?"

"I'm not the best singer," Harry confesses, fair warning, but Eggsy doesn't, can't, won't care.

"That's me warned. Fire away."

He leaves the lamplight on beside him, listening to Harry clearing his throat, and Eggsy wills himself to tune out the stray creaks and drips reverberating absently through the house, to pay no attention to the rustling of grass just outside the window. Harry hems and hums, picks up a beat and gets into the correct key. When Harry breathes in and begins, tentative at first but amply confident by the chorus, Eggsy stops holding his breath, just lets go of it and everything else that's had him on edge all day. He loses himself in the rich, melodic baritone of Harry's singing voice, meandering his way into sleep on the refrain of some old, upbeat song about destiny and Napoleonic wars and falling hopelessly, irrevocably in love, *couldn't escape if I wanted to, knowing my fate is to be with you, finally facing my Waterloo*.

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### **scrap scrap metal the tanks (london, nov '15)**

For the first week that Eggsy's holed up at the safe house Harry calls him at least twice a day, every day, to ask how things are going, if he's holding up fine on his own, whether he's

eating his meals and taking care of himself alright. Eggsy's answers don't change all that much between calls: he's atrociously bored out of his skull, but yes, he's keeping it together, more or less, though he's probably going to be sick of baked beans and brined tuna for all the kitchen doesn't seem to have much more than that to cook a decent meal with. There are pasta shells and lentils as well, and one morning Harry talks him through a one-pot tuna minestrone over the phone, poor man's fare that Eggsy ends up over-salting but hey, you know what, actually tastes pretty damn good, so he makes it again for lunch and dinner and licks the bowl clean each time like Oliver fucking Twist. Harry gets the reference, of course he does, and when he laughs and commends the breadth of Eggsy's literary erudition it's the highlight of Eggsy's day, his week, hell, probably his whole bloody month.

Week two, and Harry prefaces his Monday morning check-in with a heads up — he's leaving on a mission up in Stockholm soon and it looks to be a long one, but he will still be keeping in touch with Eggsy, just not as often as before. Eggsy shrugs it off, pretends to be only a fraction as disappointed as he feels, and tells Harry to say hi to Princess Tilde for him but please don't actually, because Merlin put two and two together with the same stupid excuses Eggsy gave her and he knows Tilde's not an idiot, not to mention brutally candid about these things.

As is the case with many of his thoughts involving Harry, Eggsy keeps that last part to himself.

The second week ticks by slowly, then a third, and sure enough, the frequency of Harry's calls decreases markedly. Eggsy starts waking to skies full of morning sun and lying in bed, wondering if he'll get a call later on in the day or not. He never goes more than two days in a row without hearing from Harry, cooks tuna minestrone on the days he doesn't. Their calls don't stretch as long as they used to either but they do keep coming, which is the important part, and Eggsy learns to cherish their little conversations for the brief moments of unbridled joy only talking to Harry can produce nowadays. Harry tells him all about how beautiful Sweden is, how charming the people are, and Eggsy responds with a complaint about the leaky roof or mildew in the shower, and they laugh and joke with each other and it's fine, it's all fine, Eggsy wouldn't dream of asking for more.

Five weeks in, Arthur rings him with a set of good news — MI6 has finally wised the fuck up, the arrest order on the embassy shooter has been rescinded, and Eggsy can now return to the United Kingdom safely — and not-so-good news — all Kingsman pilots are engaged and won't be available any time in the near future, so Eggsy has the option of staying another week in Argentina, or taking a commercial flight back to London himself. It's an easy enough decision, but en route to the airport Eggsy finds himself dithering to no end over whether he should call Harry and let him know; on one hand Harry hasn't called in three days and Eggsy doesn't want to bother him if he's busy, but on the other he knows he really shouldn't spring this on him like the last time, so he compromises at the last minute by sending Harry a hasty text message as he's boarding, *flying home now, be back soon*, and switches the comms on his glasses off after taking his seat in first class.

It's eleven in the evening when the plane gets in at Heathrow. A light rain is falling and it's chilly out, such that Eggsy's breath starts silvering even before he steps out of the airport. Shivering, he puts his hands in his pockets and thinks longingly of the balmy Buenos Aires

spring weather; maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if he hung back a while longer. He loves London, don't get him wrong, but there *are* far less gloomy places to be at this time of year. Ask any Londoner and they'll tell you the same thing.

He buys a coffee from the Starbucks in arrivals, caramel macchiato with steamed milk, and warms his hands with the cup on the way to the taxi pickup point, taking small sips every now and again. There's someone ahead of him in the queue, an unhired taxi idling by on the road, and Eggsy's about to call out to draw attention to this fact when the person waiting at the stand turns around and looks at him.

"Evening, Eggsy."

Eggzy freezes. If he'd just walked right into a glass door, the feeling would very much be the same. "Harry," he says, his voice thready.

"I got your message," Harry says, not looking entirely certain himself. "I thought I'd come give you a lift home."

"Uh." Eggsy looks from the taxi to Harry, his throat gone abruptly dry. He recognises Harry's coat as the same one from the night of train-tested loyalty, the double-breasted button-down that accentuates the lines of his body and brings out the sturdy cut of his shoulders, and now that Eggsy's made the mistake of fixating on that he can't stop looking, can't stop thinking about the perfectly crisp Bespoke suit he'd find underneath if, in some unthinkable alternate reality, he were to take Harry's coat off for him. Harry's wearing a... a charcoal-black knit tie, definitely silk by the weave of it, like that's what normal people dress up with on an everyday basis, but Harry's not a normal person, neither of them are. It looks very nice on Harry, all of it aggravatingly nice on the whole, is what Eggsy's trying to say. Or not say, rather.

"Didn't know you were back," Eggsy mumbles later on, in the taxi.

A large freight truck blares past on the freeway, disappearing into an exit lane. "Only just half a day," Harry says. He shakes his head and smiles when Eggsy offers him some of his coffee. "No, thank you."

A hand curled around the cup, Eggsy extracts his phone from his trousers pocket with the other and turns it on, checks it when it's finished buzzing to completion. Twenty-eight new messages, twenty-one of which are from his mum. Eggsy sighs, and it's a good thing he has heroic quantities of sugar and caffeine on hand, but even so he's still jetlagged and flight-weary, and doesn't feel like he won't have it in him to straighten this mess out until he's taken a long hot shower, powered his way through a number of sleep cycles, and had a good hearty breakfast to boot.

"Can I stay over at yours tonight?" he asks, and before he can think better of it, Harry nods.

"Of course, Eggsy."

When the taxi chugs into Stanhope Mews an hour later, Eggsy's still trying to think of how he's going to bail and stay the night in a hotel or something, but after they've alighted Harry

puts his hand on Eggsy's shoulder to usher him inside, and. That's pretty much that. Eggsy lets Harry guide him into the house, down the hallway and to the bathroom, and only puts down the half-finished coffee he's been holding since Heathrow when Harry brings out an extra towel, shows him where the soaps are, and supplies Eggsy with spare pyjamas and a nightrobe to sleep in. It's not the luxurious red robe of his that Eggsy knows too well, but when Harry leaves to get the guest room ready Eggsy can't resist burying his face in it all the same, and it does, oh, it does smell like him, vaguely, of Harry's cologne, his shampoo, his delicate detergent. The midnight blue terrycloth is a soft comfort against Eggsy's cheek, like it must have been for Harry himself once, and the thought curls warm in Eggsy's belly, an invisible flush that spreads hotter as it tracks lower and broader —

Mr. Pickle scrutinising him judgmentally from his perch on the wall, Eggsy gulps and lumbers into the shower, flinching away from his own reflection in the mirror as he passes. Shamed by a dead dog; Jesus, his *life*.

Washing up doesn't take more than a few minutes, but Eggsy doesn't get out after he's rinsed the last of the suds down the drain. Standing with the showerhead blasting a rut into his hair, he thinks about the crap dessert he had on the plane, the row he might have with his mum tomorrow, how many hours of sleep he's going to need to start feeling like himself again. And then, without meaning to, he thinks about Harry.

He tips his face to the water jet and thinks of the fifteen months it's been since Holborn Police Station happened and the eternity it's felt like, of Harry travelling all the way across London to get him even though he honestly didn't have to, of how he's ached over and for Harry in so many ways and the bruises every one has left. And Harry... fuck, Harry'd said so himself in this very bathroom, didn't he, that all this — Kingsman, the fathering, everything he's done — was because Harry got his dad blown up, nothing more. A man repaying his debts. He should have seen it sooner. At the end of the day, if this is allowed to carry on it will inevitably end in anger and hurt and disappointment and heartbreak, and Eggsy's just speaking for himself; with all Harry's put into building this meaningful, sterling relationship that they have, Eggsy has no care having all of that go to nought, for both their sakes.

Towelling off and robing up, Eggsy comes to the decision he should have made a long time ago.

The guest bedroom is on the first floor, two doors down from the master room. Harry's sitting at the foot of the double bed, his legs crossed at the ankles and hands in his lap. When Eggsy comes in, he looks up at him and stands, says, "There's something that I," at the same time Eggsy blurts, "Harry we need —"

They stop talking. Harry blinks, then nods and says, "After you."

*Okay.* Eggsy draws a deep breath. "We need to talk," he says.

Harry nods again. "About what?"

"Us," Eggsy clarifies, and it can't be a good thing that he's already feeling like a twat, but whatever he's going to regret in the aftermath of this conversation can't compare to the ramifications of not having it. "This, like. The thing that we, what we, uh. Have."



Harry says nothing. His expression remains neutral, mouth set in a thin, impassive line.

Eggsy sighs, scratching behind his ear to have an excuse to angle his gaze away from Harry. “I’ve been thinking about, like. A whole lot of things. All the stuff that’s been going on, it’s been a little — complicated. With the last time that we, and then this whole month back when I was, hm. Anyway. I dunno, I thought that we could just go on like this but it’s really not working out. For me, I mean. And I’ve had lots of time to get myself sorted, even if I am pretty shit at this kind of thing, you probably know that too, but I promised myself that I’d give it a go.”

Harry looks down to the carpet for a moment, then focuses back on Eggsy. “Alright,” he says. “What’s the matter, Eggsy?”

Floundering for a second, Eggsy tries to pull himself together before continuing. “I need you to know that meeting you has been one of the best things to ever happen to me,” he says, and now his pulse’s thrumming in his ears, nerves fraying the way they do whenever he knows he’s about to do something monumentally stupid. “Before that I was a wreck, an absolute wreck, and I thought, I knew that wasn’t ever going to change. But then you, god, in that shop, that dressing room — I never had no one say to me what you did, and then with Kingsman and giving me everything; it really was *everything*, Harry. Like you wouldn’t even know. And I get it, I do, it’s ‘cause my dad kicked it and you were trying to make up for that, but. I don’t want you to be worrying yourself over that forever, yeah? You’ve got no reason to, you’ve done loads for me. It’s been more than enough for ages, you don’t have to keep at it.”

Harry doesn’t look convinced, doesn’t look relieved, doesn’t look *anything*. There’s a line in his forehead that’s distressing for more than how heart-wrenching it makes him, all rumpled and posh and cracked-apart gorgeous. “I’m not sure I understand where this is coming from,” he says softly.

There’s a weighted pause, and Eggsy exhales noisily into it. His heart doesn’t slow down, not even a tic, and he doesn’t know why he expected it to or what to say next. But he can’t clam up and pretend to have not asked for this in the first place, he’s never been the sort of person for starting things and leaving them hanging, and it’s like he said — he’s having his go, and there won’t be another one, so.

So.

“You’ve been bloody amazing to me, you know that?” Eggsy tries again. “The absolute flippin’ best. You don’t know how happy it’s made me, knowing that I’ve got you looking out for me. And I know I don’t say thank you very much at all but I am grateful, I really fuckin’ am.”

“Language,” Harry murmurs, but he’s never given a fuck about swearing before so Eggsy knows better than to take it to heart.

“It’s just been difficult,” he presses on. “I wish I knew how to make you understand, it’s not like — that I don’t want you to be the way you are to me, but you keep doing it so fucking much and I,” Eggsy has to stop and shake his head to clear it again, “I don’t know how I’m

supposed to feel about it, I just don't. Sometimes I think it'd be better for the two of us if you didn't, if it's only 'cause you think you owe me or my dad. I don't need any of that."

Harry's face has gone very pale. "I see," he says, his voice still unerringly calm. "Is that what you truly believe? That I'm only doing these things out of guilt, or that I'm somehow beholden to you and your family?"

Suddenly unsteady on his feet, Eggsy digs his heels in and forms his hands into fists. "Are you?"

"I'll apologise, if that's what you want," Harry says, toneless. "For all that I've done, the good and the bad and whatever unhappiness it's caused you. Would that make you feel better?"

"No, that ain't what I'm saying!"

"Isn't it?" Tired as Harry sounds, the words come like a backhand across the face. "Then why don't you tell me what it is, Eggsy. I'm all ears."

Eggsey opens his mouth and closes it again. He's lost the only substantial thread of this whole conversation with that one fucking outburst; just fantastic. He bites his lip, hard, and swallows half-formed words as he takes a bracing breath of air and starts from scratch.

"Look, it's like this," he says, going for a different tack that he hopes will make contact with the wall, even if it won't stick. "Me and my mates, we used to hang out for drinks every night at the pub, you know the one. And there used to be this bird who worked weekends at the counter — Lucy, her name was — and every time it was my mate Jamal who picked up the drinks he'd always get extra stuff from her, like. One time it was this leftover can of Foster's she said she didn't want to bin, and sometimes she'd also give him free water to save him 20p, or spoon all the foam out of our pints so we'd have more beer; it was only him. Not me or Ryan, just Jamal, only ever Jamal. See, the three of us thought it was 'cause she was into him, and after a while he got pretty into her too. Loved her to bits. He was crazy about her, it was like she was all he ever thought about."

Harry blinks. "I don't see where this —"

"Just hang on a moment, let me finish," Eggsy pleads, and Harry does. "So Jamal, we get him to buy her a drink one night and ask her to dinner, yeah? This is after like two months of him eating his fuckin' heart out to us, and she tells him no, she didn't like him like that, which I honestly thought was a bunch of rot because then what was up with the stuff she'd been doing? But apparently it was this thing that Jamal did for her when she first started working there — she mucked up his drink or something, and he was cool about it, didn't get angry at her or force her to give him another one. That's just Jamal for you, he's like that, he thought it was nothing, he'd forgotten about it. Who knows, maybe she thought he was a decent guy or that she owed him, but she didn't fancy him or anything, she wasn't the type of bird who was into blokes anyway. She was just being nice 'cause she wanted to, that's all."

Harry's forehead creases further into the look of one who isn't really following, but he doesn't interpose again, keeps on listening.

“So it’s like this,” Eggsy says, spreading his hands in helpless surrender to what he’s set in motion. “He was crushed when that happened, Jamal. Absolutely crushed. We never saw him on Saturday or Sunday nights again, until Lucy got a different gig at some other place in Newington, and he still wasn’t quite the same after he’d come back. He never — she was the very first, he said. He really thought she could’ve been the one for him, that there was something special there between them. There wasn’t, but you couldn’t blame us with how she was around him. We all thought it, too.” Eggsy looks right into Harry’s face, eyes wide and honest. “I reckon that if I were with my mates now, if they knew about us, they’d be saying it’s like Jamal and Lucy all over again.”

The singular instance of dawning comprehension that Eggsy expects to see from Harry doesn’t happen. Instead, Harry looks more tired, his mouth turning downwards, and he can’t seem to meet Eggsy’s gaze. One last push onto the tracks, then.

“Jamal, he. It looked like he had it real rough for weeks, not gonna lie. Couldn’t imagine what it was like for him to go through that.” Eggsy won’t look away, not for this. “Plus he didn’t even know her that long, they never talked much, not as much as we’ve been, and. You get the picture. I guess what I’m going at is that I’m betting he wasn’t half as mad for Lucy as I am for you, and even then he was, like. Yeah.”

Still staring at the floor, Harry says nothing. It’s as though he didn’t even hear. Eggsy is either going to die of humiliation or spontaneously burst into flames where he stands. He closes his eyes and resolves to make a run for it at the count of twenty, but before he makes it past ten he hears Harry say, “They would be wrong.”

Eggsy blinks at him. “What?”

“They would be wrong,” Harry repeats to the spot of carpet in front of Eggsy’s bare feet. “Your friend — he had feelings for her, correct?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You said that they were unrequited,” Harry says quietly, something unhappy in his voice. Though the twitch to his mouth hints at the beginnings of a shaky smile, his face twists into a brief rictus of solidarity and it’s gone as he looks up at Eggsy. “If you’re certain that was the case, then I hardly think our circumstances are comparable.”

Eggsy’s mouth must have fallen ajar at some point because he shuts it once he realises he’s been gaping dumbly for several seconds. “What do you,” he says, but stops the question short because he knows what Harry means, even while he still doesn’t dare let himself believe it. “So, you’re saying —”

Harry turns away, and Eggsy feels as though the ground is being swept out from beneath him.

“Wait, no, if you were, then that means — *fuck*.” Eggsy presses a hand to his face, tension and incredulity winding and unwinding through him, and he clutches at his hair like the physical gesture will translate to him actually managing to get a grip of some kind. Then, out of field so far left it leaves him spinning, he’s suddenly, inexplicably *angry*.

“How long?” he demands.

“What does it matter?” Harry murmurs, keeping from holding Eggsy’s gaze.

“It does if you’ve been messing with me all this while,” Eggsy snarls, thinking, with equal parts fury and despair, of the kiss in Zurich and their calls in Argentina and all the things in between, of the days when the longing was so great it felt like he was walking around with a cavern bursting open in his chest. “You knew I had it bad for you, you *knew* — what the hell were you playing at, then? What were you dossing around for?”

Harry looks at him with such *heat* that it takes Eggsy everything he has not to recoil or take back what he said. “Do you think this has been any easier for me?” Harry says, and all of a sudden it’s February and they’re back in the downstairs bathroom again, with Eggsy feeling wretched and chewed-out and wishing Harry would stop looking at him like that. “That I’ve enjoyed having to keep my distance, always adoring from afar? That it brings me any satisfaction to love and know at the same time that I’ll never have you? You wound me terribly, dear boy.”

Eggzy boggles, shell-shocked, breathing much too quickly, and he has no idea how he’s still keeping his feet on the ground; everything’s reeling around him. “You can’t be fucking serious,” he cries, gesticulating wildly with his arms. “Are you hearing yourself right now? *I’m* not the one who’s making things so hard, why don’t you try looking in a mirror, Harry, fucking hell.”

“Please don’t do this.” If misery could burn, the amount coming off Harry as he rubs a tired hand over his face would raze human flesh, turn whole bones into ash. “Don’t make me do this, Eggsy.”

“I haven’t made *you* do anything,” Eggsy growls, moving nearer to Harry despite his impulses telling him to step back. “*You* called *me*, remember? In Buenos Aires? *You* came for *me* at the airport, just now; it was always you, I never —”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like that,” Harry insists, sounding like it’s being dragged out of him.

“Well, I bloody wanted it to be!” Eggsy shouts, and grabs Harry by his braces to haul him in close.

As soon as their lips meet, Eggsy stops worrying about this being a mistake and who’s at fault here and every other insignificant thing that shouldn’t matter or come between them. The kiss is nothing like their first, the one of frantic, overwhelming desolation that had overtaken Eggsy the day he’d gone down into that basement and found Harry strapped to that goddamn table. Standing upright, the height Harry has on him is starkly obvious, and Eggsy cranes his neck and tips his face up, rocking forward on the balls of his feet to lean into it, to get his mouth into a better angle against Harry’s, which firms and quivers and goes slack and then, at long last, Harry wraps one powerful arm around Eggsy and puts a hand on his shoulder as he kisses him back. Eggsy can feel Harry’s teeth through their welded lips, Harry’s breath billowing past his cheek, and he *knows*, he just does, that Harry is whom he

will feel the most right with in the world, that he is the only person Eggsy will ever want to know the full weight of his own heart in their hands.

For the second time that night, Eggsy's mind is made up.

"Whatever's stacking you deep, if it's that big a deal, then fine," he says after they've drawn apart, addressing Harry's breastbone because it's easier than looking at his face. "We won't. We'll keep on doing things the way they are. You don't even have to tell me what it is, if you don't want to. But — I love you, you great big stupid prat. God I love you. So fuckin' much, more than I'll do anyone else. And that means I'll try, I'll give it my best shot if you'll let me. Please, just... a chance, that's all I'm asking for."

Harry looks morosely down at him. His hand, so long since Eggsy last saw it tremble outside of his volition, hovers over Eggsy's hip like he can't decide if he should hold tighter or let go altogether. "You do mean that," he says, just above a whisper, and Eggsy sees it, almost, the walls that Harry's coming out from behind of. "You really would have me as I am, wouldn't you?"

Eggzy nods, the motion more ferocious than it should be for the affirmation it's meant to convey. "Why the fuck wouldn't I?"

"I'm an old man, Eggsy. My best years are hardly ahead of me."

"That don't matter to me none," Eggsy dismisses.

Harry smiles sadly. "What then in twenty years, when you won't even be as old as I am now? Thirty, when you're only just older?" He laughs without an ounce of mirth in it. "I've had my time, I've enjoyed my youth. It's only fair you get to enjoy yours."

If it were any other person, Eggsy would be hard-pressed not to try and knock some sense into their thick skull. "And somehow I won't if you're there with me? Come off it."

Harry slides his arm from around Eggsy's lower back. "You must understand that I want nothing for you but happiness," he says, and it's sorrow-laden but wholly sincere. "Truly I do. And maybe I could give it to you, but it won't be long before I —" Harry cuts himself off, shaking his head. "Don't you see? Gary Unwin, you would make me happier than I'd ever be for the rest of my days, but — I can't do the same. Not for you. Do you think that's fair to you?"

This man, Eggsy thinks, is going to be the actual death of him, and more for the fact that Eggsy would literally lay down his body for him. "I don't fucking want to be happy for all my life," he says, straight and plain to Harry's face, imploring him to grasp this simple concept. "I want to be happy with *you*. Let me decide what's fair for me and what's not. Why's that so tough for you to get?"

Harry presses his lips together. He seems unable to speak, but maybe that's because he doesn't know how two minutes on the phone with him can make stormy Argentinian nights brighter than the sunniest spring days. Eggsy thinks about telling him this, and then he thinks about kissing Harry again. He yanks down on Harry's tie for leverage and the kiss is slower,

more tidal, and *lovely*; Harry's mouth opens just a sliver and Eggsy's tempted to feed Harry some tongue, but this probably isn't the best time to find out if he likes that sort of thing, so Eggsy just kisses him firmly and breathes through it with Harry, like if he keeps this uncomplicated then somehow he'll convince Harry to let this *be*.

Shame, then, that Eggsy's hands have already tugged the Windsor of Harry's tie loose and are now pulling it free, sliding his braces off his shoulders and unbuttoning Harry's shirt, and *this is such a fucking bad idea*, but — Harry isn't telling him to stop, nor does he push Eggsy away. No, he's too busy fumbling with the drawstrings keeping Eggsy's robe secured at his waist and kissing Eggsy like he's dying for it, his breathing becoming more ragged as he pries Eggsy's robe apart to slide a hand into his pyjama bottoms. Eggsy feels his hips jerk reflexively at the contact of a warm palm over his cock, hissing when Harry wraps his fingers around him and jerks gently from mid-length to tip.

Pressing his whole body into Harry's, Eggsy peppers messy kisses down his neck, trailing a series of purpling marks along the side of his throat and sucking the largest one of all over Harry's pulse point. He mashes his tongue into it, gleaning the faint bitter tang of aftershave, and laps it all up to get to the clean salt taste of Harry's skin underneath. Harry grunts and rests a hand at the back of Eggsy's head with the other still stroking him, and with a matching groan Eggsy bucks into his grip, pushing close to get his crotch wedged up against Harry's as he nicks red scores into Harry's jawline with his teeth, ducking back up to kiss the corner of his mouth.

"Eggsy —"

"I want this," Eggsy says fiercely, furrowing his brows. "I *want* this — to be with you. I meant it, I ain't gonna be happier with anyone else, even if it won't be forever. And I, I dunno if I'm gonna make you happy always, I can't promise I will, but I'll bloody well do my best."

"You do make me happy," Harry murmurs, his voice a pitch lower than its usual register.

"Right." Eggsy nods, and takes Harry's wrists, then his hands. "And you, me. That's what I'm saying, it don't have to be more complicated than that."

"I," Harry says, but doesn't seem to know how to continue.

Eggsy strokes his thumbs over Harry's knuckles, and Harry's fingers clasp his. "Be honest, Harry. What do you want?" he asks.

All of Harry's composure appears to fall away at once. His shoulders sag and he huffs out a breath, eyes closing for a moment before he opens them and says, confessional, "You."

"Me," Eggsy reiterates. "And here I am. So, what do you say?"

A long, long silence ensues, wherein Harry looks like he's going to say something half a dozen times and Eggsy braces himself, unsure. And then, finally:

"Alright," Harry mumbles, and Eggsy's joy is like a geyser breaking open in his chest. "A — alright."

“Yeah? Awesome. Brilliant.” Eggsy laughs, kissing Harry over and over until he feels giddy with it, but he doesn’t stop, it’s not enough, he needs more. He clears his throat and draws back to catch Harry’s eye and cock a sly eyebrow at him. “So are we gonna stand around here all night, or are we going to fuck?”

Harry stops fondling him, lips pursed. “Now? But you’ve only just had a wash…”

Eggsy flicks the edge of Harry’s shirt back to press a kiss to his bare shoulder. “Means I’m all squeaky clean and ready for you, innit? C’mon, Harry.”

“I don’t have condoms, are you sure…?”

Eggsy grins. “Even better. I mean, if you’re okay without them too,” he adds.

“I — yes.” The small smile that has been foxing the corners of Harry’s mouth for the past minute grows wider, and who is Eggsy to resist kissing that smile, really? “I would be amenable to that.”

“Then that’s that settled.” Eggsy takes Harry’s wrists and tugs him towards the bed. “Let’s get to it.”

“Is it warm enough for you in here?” Harry asks. “I can turn up the heating, won’t take more than a —”

Eggsy shakes his head, adamant. “I’m good. Let’s go.”

“I haven’t got any personal lubricant either —”

“You’ve got some aloe shit in the bathroom, just use that.”

“We might have to take it slow,” Harry cautions. “I must confess that it’s been a while since I’ve done this, and goodness knows I’m not as young as I once —”

“Harry, if you don’t get inside me in the next five minutes, I’m gonna fucking *yell this house down*.”

Five minutes, as it happens, is plenty of time for a person to completely rethink their entire worldview concerning the things that can, do and should happen during sex. And the thing is, Eggsy’s done enough fucking around for his own to have felt dead set for years — he’s slept with blokes and birds while he was at school, and one time it was both just for the hell of it; he can think of a couple ways about sucking a cock or tonguing a clit to get stiff-hot flesh pushing slick into his lower lip; he’s tried all sorts of wacky things he watched in porn to see if real life worked like that, and some of them turned out accordingly disastrous, but not all. Point being, Eggsy’s not the most experienced but he does know that what he likes about sex is the same for lots of other people, the rawness and sheer immediacy of it, of action and response in the span of a few seconds and the swiftness required to carry one ungraceful motion to the next.

But Harry has other ideas for them tonight when he’s back from the bathroom — there’s nothing quick about the way he undresses himself and kisses Eggsy to the bed, licking into

his mouth and smiling when Eggsy sucks daringly on his tongue. He plumps up the pillow behind Eggsy's head, making sure that he's comfortable before taking his time with charting a path down Eggsy's body with his lips, kissing every spot repeatedly like he's trying to leave an imprint. Eggsy's done unspeakable things to the people he's shagged and had equally unspeakable things done to him in return, but he's never had anyone carefully spread him out and work him open with thick, patient fingers, nor has anyone rubbed easy circles over his abdomen with their hand in counterpoint with the firm strokes over his prostate, all the while telling him that he's doing very well as Eggsy gasps and curses out his arousal.

It's... different, to say the least. Different, but in the nicest way imaginable. Even while Eggsy's sucking Harry's cock just to get him hard enough, it's the first time he's felt so taken care of in bed, so looked after and worshipped, and nothing could compare to this. Nearly ten years of him trying and failing to stop comparing his sexual partners and now, he's not thinking of kneeling in a parking lot with Connor's spunk sliding down his throat, not eating out Gillian on the bench of the girls' locker room at school, and he's definitely not thinking of Aglovale's balls slapping against his own in a Shanghai hotel room as Harry tells him to lie on his side and bring a leg up and checks him again with three bunched-up fingers. Eggsy clutches the pillow to his cheek, barely holding back a moan when he feels the head of Harry's cock grazing over his hole and pressing in, just the tip. Then, Harry murmurs more encouragement and continues sinking into him, so maddeningly slow that Eggsy thinks he might just make good on his promise to scream his head off if he doesn't black out or die from this first.

Once Harry's all the way in, Eggsy expects him to start thrusting, to pin Eggsy with his bulking weight and fuck him roughly into the bed. What he's not expecting is for Harry to sigh and lie down next to him, slotting himself along the length of Eggsy's body and holding him close, putting an arm around Eggsy's front and a leg on his thigh. He kisses the back of Eggsy's neck but doesn't do anything else otherwise, and they lie like that for a solid minute before Eggsy's need for friction outlasts his ability to stay silent.

"Harry —"

"Shh." The large hand at Eggsy's belly gives him a gentle squeeze, nails scratching soothingly at the fuzz dusting his navel. He's seen that hand jam a stripped gun barrel into someone's jugular, once; it handles Eggsy with such care, such devotion. "I have you, Eggsy. Breathe with me."

Confused, Eggsy obeys the instruction anyway. Whatever Harry's waiting for he'll wait for it too, torture as it is to keep lying still and doing nothing with Harry's cock up his arse and Harry's mouth at the nape of his neck and Harry's heartbeat thudding just above the line of his spine —

Harry exhales a hot breath down his back, and Eggsy gasps, muscles tensing up.

"Relax," Harry whispers, moving his hand to Eggsy's left pectoral and rubbing two fingers over his nipple. "My lovely, darling boy."

Eggsy whimpers, because Harry's now closing his fingers around Eggsy's cock and thumbing at his slit, and when Harry reaches lower to roll his balls in his hand Eggsy can't keep from



clenching onto him. He feels lit up like a fuse in anticipation of what Harry's going to do next to him, even as Eggsy's already overstimulated with so little done, the lack of movement making him hyper-aware of the lightest brush of fingers down the inner aspect of his thigh, the snugness of Harry's cock deep inside his body. It's — fuck, Eggsy gets it, *that's* how Harry's feeling every reaction he's getting out of Eggsy, every last spasm and twitch, and the thought of how Harry's probably going to get to feel Eggsy coming around and on his cock as well is so fucking hot that Eggsy keens with the realisation, very nearly there.

"You can come, whenever you're ready," Harry tells him, and shit, Eggsy wants to, he wants it so bad. He squirms and grinds back against Harry, willing to be overcome with sensation, and when Harry's fingers are at his mouth he opens without hesitation, lets Harry slide them in until they're knuckle-deep and he's struggling to breathe, and with his hands holding on to Harry's wrist and Harry's voice rumbling in his ear, "Come for me," he's powerless to do anything but.

It's only then that Harry begins to move in earnest, fucking in and out of him as Eggsy sobs through it around Harry's fingers, which slip free as Harry reaches down to fist his dribbling cock, to stroke and milk Eggsy's orgasm out of him. "Beautiful, Eggsy," Harry purrs, rubbing his thumb into Eggsy's too-sensitive slit again and Eggsy chokes, spurting one last load that gets all over the soiled bedspread and coats the underside of Harry's hand. He's actually ready for when Harry's fingers push right back into his throat, musky with the bitter-salt taste of his own come — it's filthy and debasing and Eggsy whines and whines, but he keeps licking feebly at them for the next minute that it takes Harry to breathe in deep and start pulsing out warm into him.

Blissed stupid, Eggsy lies slack and silent for a hanging moment, a sheen of cooling sweat on his forehead. He shivers briefly, his skin prickling from the chill fluting over it and the blooming warmth beneath. When his pulse and breathing have ebbed back down, he turns his head to look at Harry, and a smothering kiss replaces the fingers that withdraw from his mouth. He's not sure how long they keep kissing, but when they peel apart Harry's soft inside him and pulling out and Eggsy rolls over to prop himself up on his elbows.

"Harry, that was —" He pauses, running his tongue over his lips and laughing breathily. "Wow. Fuck."

Harry smiles at him. "Did you find that enjoyable?"

"I'll fucking say," Eggsy says, collapsing back onto his pillow with a sated sigh. "I haven't had a shag like that since, ever. You're the fucking best."

"Much appreciated, Eggsy. I'm very pleased to hear that."

"I mean it, Harry," Eggsy insists. "God, that was amazing, we gotta do it sometime again soon, we should be doing it all the fucking time, I can't believe I ever — wait, where're you going?"

"Bed," Harry answers, standing up and moving to retrieve his shed clothing.

"We're already —"

“My bed,” Harry corrects. “This one’s rather... contaminated, in a manner of speaking.”

Smirking, Eggsy swabs his palm indolently over the stains he’s made in the linen. “Aw, c’mon, Harry. What’s a little bit of come to ‘ya? Live a little.”

Harry picks up the set of pyjamas he lent Eggsy. “You can stay here tonight if you want, you don’t have to come with me.”

“Uh, I think I just did,” Eggsy points out smugly, and dodges under his scrunched up pyjama bottoms as Harry pitches them at his head.

“Cheeky berk,” Harry says, but his smile is fond. “Get dressed and wash yourself up first. I’m not letting you in my bed like that, you’re utterly filthy.”

“I wonder who’s to blame for that,” Eggsy muses, pushing back the covers and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

This time, the fastball Harry makes of his nightshirt smacks him squarely in the side of his head, and Eggsy bolts out of bed, quick as winking, to chase him all the way to the master bedroom.

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### **raise you like a phoenix (ibiza, jan ‘16)**

“I can’t believe you’re taking a business call on vacation,” Eggsy complains.

“Yes, that’s correct, we’ll be back on the third,” Harry confirms, readjusting his glasses as Eggsy tries to swipe them off his face. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that? It’s rather noisy where we are.”

“I said you shouldn’t be taking that, we’re on vacation,” Eggsy says louder, stealing Harry’s unguarded martini instead.

“Oh, no, that’s quite alright.” Harry side-eyes him as Eggsy sniffs the rim of his glass.

“We’ve our return flight booked already, but it’s very kind of you to offer, Takaharu-sama.”

“Tell Arthur he’s ruining our New Year’s.”

“Yes, it is lovely here, we’re having a fantastic time,” Harry says, his arm catching Eggsy around the waist.

“We *were*,” Eggsy says darkly, prodding at Harry’s cheek with the cocktail umbrella.

“Gary sends his regards, too.”

“No I fuckin’ *don’t*.”

“And a very Happy New Year to you as well, Sir,” Harry says. He hooks his glasses on his shirt pocket and plucks the paper umbrella from Eggsy’s fingers, tucking it behind Eggsy’s ear. “You could’ve just ordered another for yourself,” he sniffs, giving his shanghaied martini a woeful look.

Eggsy shrugs. “Tough. I wanted yours.” He takes a lengthy sip and smacks his lips contemplatively, then lifts the glass to eye level and squints at it. “Is that a fuckin’ lemon skin in there?”

“It adds flavour,” Harry says. “Brings out the Kina Lillet rather nicely, don’t you think?”

“Tastes weird.” Eggsy makes a face but slurps another mouthful of the cocktail. “What happened to them olives, then? You never taught me to go round puttin’ lemon skins in martinis.”

“Lemon rind is the term you’re looking for,” Harry says. “And one might choose to mix a martini with several other garnishes apart from pimento olives: citrus peel, mint, pepper, fire —”

Eggsy’s eyes widen. “*Fire?*”

Harry smiles serenely. “You’ve never had a Flaming Ferrari, have you?”

“Well, *now* I want to. Screw this lemon shit, have they got that flaming thing here?”

“Hm.” Harry peers at the beverage menu over at the counter. “I don’t think they do, unfortunately.”

“Damn.” Eggsy polishes off the martini and sets the empty glass on a nearby table. The balcony of the rooftop bar they’re in isn’t excessively crowded, but the bay, coast stretching for as far as the eye can see on either side of it further down, is packed with masses of people milling about, drinking and hobnobbing from berm to night-blackened sea. Loud music thunders over the pounding surf, matched only by the echoing sound systems of a dozen different parties taking place in the city. It’s mad and chaotic and earthshakingly lively, and it’s not at all how Eggsy imagined he’d be spending his final minutes of the last day of the year, all of Ibiza shimmering with festivity around them like one big dance number that makes Eggsy’s old vacation photos look as though they were taken in fucking Eastbourne, or something. Which, by the way, reminds him:

“Hey,” Eggsy calls to Harry as he takes his phone out. “Last pics of the year, get over here.” He pulls Harry to the railing overlooking the throngs far below, tugs him close and snaps a photo of them, then undoes the second button of Harry’s shirt and snaps another with him kissing Harry on the cheek. “One for Archie and one for the scrapbook,” he explains, keeping his phone.

“In that order, I should hope,” Harry grumbles, and Eggsy swats at his hands when he tries to button up his shirt again.

“No, leave that.” Trying his luck with the third button is an enticing idea, but Eggsy rests his palms against Harry’s chest and licks his lips at what’s already visible of it. “I think it’s a good look for you.”

Harry must read the hunger in his expression because he raises a sharp eyebrow and reaches out to stroke his thumb over Eggsy’s jaw. “Patience, love. We’ll usher in the new year in fitting style yet.”

“Usher in the new year in me, you mean —”

“We’re in *public*, in case you’ve forgotten,” Harry chides, and Eggsy rolls his eyes.

“Obviously I haven’t, otherwise I’d have your cock stuffed down my throat right this —”

A kiss, Eggsy realises, is a mightily quick and effective method of shutting another person up provided that they’re open to tracer-fast ambush by warm, loving mouth, which probably means that Harry’s perpetually going to have the last word between the two of them if he ever catches on to how Eggsy’s lizard brain has been hard-wired to be a-okay with being jumped like that all the time, if he hasn’t caught on by now. Harry steadies Eggsy’s chin with a thumb and forefinger, holding him by the hip, and fuck it, Christmas was a week ago and the New Year will be here in a matter of moments, so Eggsy throws his arms around Harry’s neck, giggling like a born fool as he alternates between sucking on Harry’s bottom lip and his tongue. He chases the taste of lemon and dry gin past Harry’s teeth, and Harry gives it to him readily in a series of licks, of open-mouthed kisses that leave Eggsy hard and wanting and wishing for the year to be up already so they can hurry back to their hotel room and do something better with their night.

There may well be a higher power looking out for him after all, because when Eggsy’s breath is his own again it’s less than a minute to midnight. There’s an electric quality to the air that has settled over the bar and the beach below, growing more charged at the thirty-second mark and peaking when the countdown begins from ten, and Eggsy cuts Harry a knowing look before they turn to the sea and gaze up at the night sky.

In the final seconds he can’t help but find it strange, not having to only think of the year gone by in terms of his fuck-ups and what could have been or were very nearly fuck-ups, but also the things that weren’t fuck-ups at all and how staggeringly proud Eggsy is of them. A dozen different instances of the good he’s done with himself come to mind and he’s no less glad of each one than the last, of becoming a gentleman, a Kingsman, of saving the world he’s now sworn to protect. And then this — him standing next to the man who brought Eggsy into this life and is also the love of it — it’s not fazing in the slightest, coming to grips with the inevitability of fuck-ups continuing to happen in the year to come. They’ve already carried each other through so much without having realised it, and now that they have they won’t ever stop, can only keep getting better from here on out, like so many things that improve with conscious practice.

When the first of the fireworks go up, Eggsy grins past a brief throwback moment to imploding heads and Sunshine Band beats, but then it all erupts into shattering light and he forgets what he was thinking of, the inside joke he was about to share with Harry, forgets to be funny and himself and everything else for the full flush of colour and smoke dappling the

sky back into life. Gawking his awe heavenwards, Eggsy hears Harry make a reverent noise beside him and is inclined to agree; he grins and says, side-glancing at him, “Yeah, yeah, okay, I’m glad we stayed for —”

Harry isn’t watching the fireworks. Not even close. His smile is consummate gentility defined, crinkling up the crows’ feet around the corners of his eyes, and it hits Eggsy like the softest, most intimate punch in the world. He looks back at Harry, quietened by the labouring of his own lovestruck heart, an unusual spark in him that he’s rarely known all year long but has been feeling strikingly more often as of late. It’s the spark that threaded through Eggsy the first time he’d seen Harry awake in the infirmary, pale and sickly but all smiles from the moment Eggsy dropped in to visit. He’s felt that same spark in a little Oxford cottage, over bowls of tuna minestrone in Argentina, and in the number of instances Harry has embraced him from behind, drooping his head over Eggsy’s shoulder so Eggsy could kiss his cheek and inhale the scent of his hair. When Harry traces things like *dearest* and *beloved* on his bare back in bed and Eggsy returns the favour with the filthiest curse words he knows, he feels that spark, too. He feels it every time he catches the fond look Harry gives him whenever he thinks Eggsy’s not watching, and he feels it now.

“Happy New Year, Eggsy,” Harry says. It doesn’t come out loud, but the words are still clear over the deafening roar of sound around and below and above that threatens to drown them out.

“Yeah.” Eggsy swallows thickly, and they’re now just as close as they were a minute ago.

“You too, Harry.”

“Make a wish,” Harry whispers, and Eggsy kisses him, closes his eyes, does.

## End Notes

To Ash, for bearing with my RL grouching the whole month it took to write this and throughout the general best-buddery we've had going on the last ten years -- this one's for you.

As always, if you haven't ducked and this was at all titillating or to your liking, I'd love to hear your thoughts below or on [Tumblr](#)!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!