**Spirit to a Dove**

by alienharry

**Summary**

For as long as it’s been on the air, Harry’s been an avid watcher of *Trivialities*. He’s always imagined what it’d be like to compete on the show himself, and when the opportunity arises, he’s fast tracked to join the new cast for the show’s eighth season.

Alliances are formed, strategies are planned, and Harry finds himself with his very own nemesis. Between trivia and physical challenges, Harry’s making the most of his time in the house, but nothing could’ve prepared him for Louis Tomlinson.

**Notes**

This fic has been a long time in the making, so a big shout out to everyone who stayed with me through the process. A huge thanks to my betas Mehgan, Ella, and Nina. They all put a lot of work into getting this fic where it is, and I owe them my life. Like, they REALLY helped a homie out on this. So thank you so much!!

See the end of the work for more notes.
History

Week 1

Sunday

When the car pulls up to the house, Harry’s stomach starts churning again. He’s had an on-and-off feeling of discomfort ever since he’d gotten the call that he’d been chosen to compete on season eight of Trivialities, the hit competitive reality show based off of the board game Trivial Pursuit. He’s seen every episode of the show, and he knows how to play the game, but he’s afraid that people will see right through the quiet persona he’s planning to use, will see that he’s a threat. Or maybe his nerves will get the best of him, maybe he’s underestimating the difficulty of this competition. So many things have the potential to go wrong, and Harry’s not sure if he’s mentally prepared for it.

He’s been planning his tactic for the show since before he even auditioned, constantly thinking of different ways to enhance his game. Of course, he’d had to come up with a tactic for when he auditioned so he could show something to the judges, give them a peek at his gimmick, but he hadn’t known that what he came up with would take him all the way to the real deal. Now it’s happening: he’s about to walk up the steps and into the place he’ll call home for the next six weeks.

That is - if he makes it that far.

Either way, the car has arrived at the house, and Harry has to get out. Soon. He doesn’t have time to sit here contemplating everything. A car is scheduled to arrive every fifteen minutes, so he knows that everybody who’s already inside is waiting for him, and delaying his own entrance could be holding up another contestant’s arrival.

When Harry gets out of the car, he finds that a member of the crew has already grabbed his luggage out of the trunk and set it on the sidewalk where it’s waiting for him to carry it into the house. He can see the camera crew standing at various places around the yard, and through the window he can see at least one camera set up in the house. There are smaller cameras mounted onto the structure of the building, covering every square inch of the yard, and he assumes it’s the same set-up inside. Every waking moment is recorded, and regardless of how secretive he’s planning to be, eventually all fifty states - and Canada - will see, and know, everything.

His stomach gives another nervous lurch at the thought.

The moment Harry crosses over the threshold and into the house, he hears laughter coming from what he assumes is the kitchen. There’s the sound of clinking glasses and what seems to be people having a great time. Walking into the room reveals four people standing at the island in the center. There are rows upon rows of full shots sitting on the counter and a thin ginger man dividing them amongst the other three people at the counter.

“Ehm,” Harry clears his throat to draw the attention of everyone in the room. “Hi?”

There’s a chorus of hellos from two girls with drinks in their hands and one guy with blonde hair who’s leaning against the sink. The ginger passing out the shots grins widely, greeting Harry with, “Hey man, what’s up? I’m Oli.”

“Hello. I’m Harry,” he introduces himself, still holding his bag despite the pile near the door that the others have made with their stuff. “Is this everyone who’s arrived so far?”
“Sure is,” one of the two girls answers with a friendly smile. “Want to join us all for shots?”

Oli leans forward and extends his hand to Harry, offering him a glass. “We’re toasting to our superior minds and bodies.”

Everybody is obviously expecting to find amusement on his face, but Harry knows he’s not quite managing, instead unwittingly cringing at the unfortunate phrase.

“I’ll pass for now,” he says as politely he can muster, “I’m going to claim a room.” He doesn’t really care about making friends just yet, not when most of the contestants haven’t even arrived. There’s a plethora of rooms available for the taking, and he’s not about to give up the chance to get a good one before all of the other contestants arrive.

The two girls wave him off good naturedly, but Oli pins him with a cold glare until Harry disappears into the living room and up the stairs, a cameraman following at a safe distance. He walks to the end of the hall before settling on the last room on the right hand side - a two-person bedroom - and takes the bed farthest from the window.

Harry throws his luggage on the bed and starts unpacking, taking his carefully folded possessions and putting them into the footlocker at the end of his bed. On top of the box, he places a framed photo of his family and an old stuffed animal. He’ll be here for a while - if he can handle the competition - so he wants to make this place feel as much like home as possible.

An hour later, he’s standing on a chair and hanging a poster when he hears footsteps entering the room. He hasn’t even managed to turn around and get a look at who his potential roommate is before there’s a noise of approval followed by, “This room has the best aura, so I hope you don’t mind a roommate.”

Harry turns to find a petite blonde woman - short in stature but standing tall in a way that gives the illusion that she takes up more space than she actually does. Harry can’t find it in himself to respond, not sure if he’s allowed to say anything other than absolutely! She’s eyeing the window and the surrounding empty walls with an amused grin, but when she notices Harry’s not saying anything, she turns to where he’s watching her closely.

“I’ll listen to any music you like,” she offers, one eyebrow raising as she tries to sell herself as a roommate. “I’ll study with you, and I’ll even let you have the bed by the window.”

They both look back at the window at the same time.

“I - uh,” he clears his throat, shaking his head to look back at her. “I actually don’t want the window.”

Her chest rises and falls with a rapid sigh of relief, a smile taking over her face. “Thank goodness,” she laughs. “I really wanted it.”

She picks her bag back up off the floor and tosses it towards the bed, watching it bounce as it hits the mattress.

Harry turns his attention back to hanging up his posters. He knows that sharing a room with this woman can go one of two ways: they’ll either become best friends or worst enemies.

A third, and unlikely, option is that they won’t interact much, instead keeping their distance and getting friendly with completely separate groups of people. As a long time viewer of the show though, Harry’s very rarely seen that happen. And when it has happened, it usually results in one of them getting sent home significantly earlier than the other.
Harry will be damned if that's him. He's not going home without the grand prize.

When he wins, he’s going to use the money to pay off his student debt. He doesn’t have to pay his student loans back just yet, not when he’s still in school for another year, but winning the money would allow him to be able to leave college with no financial worries and just focus on starting his career - it’s everything he needs.

He looks back at the girl as she’s unpacking her bag. He could use a friend like her, someone strong, confident, and eager to be in charge - someone with wide, friendly eyes and a dangerous smile. Harry could benefit from having her on his side and making her look like the backbone of the team, only for him to come out strong at the end of the game like a secret weapon.

“I’m Harry, by the way,” he finds himself saying.

She turns around and smiles. “I’m Perrie,” she says as she walks forward and holds her hand out for Harry to shake. “And it’s important for you to know that I’m not just going to be some mindless partner that you can use to get your votes through and to further yourself in challenges.”

“I was thinking the exact opposite,” he tells her honestly. “I figured you’d be more of the brains of any operation.”

Perrie grins, a hint of smugness shining through. “I’m glad that’s clear.” She says before going back to her bed to finish unpacking. Harry climbs up on the chair again. “So where are you from?” Perrie asks him, her voice echoing slightly in the empty room. “It can’t be too far from here.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The whole vibe you’ve got going on. The slow, deep voice, the vague posters,” she turns around and gestures to him, emphasizing her point, “the way you’re dressed. You might not be from San Francisco, specifically, but you’re definitely not from the East Coast.”

Harry grins at the clear, confident look on her face. “I’m from Portland, actually.”

“That makes a lot of sense, to be honest,” Perrie laughs in response, nodding as she turns back to where she’s taking her clothing out of her bag. “It was either that or LA.”

Harry laughs along, small chuckles escaping as he climbs down from his chair and takes ahold of one of his photographs - one of his mom and sister that he took for a project his first year of college. It’s in black and white, but his professor had said it was the most colorful photo Harry’d taken all semester; Anne and Gemma’s matching smiles and heads tilted back in laughter tell an entire story. It’s his mom’s favorite picture in the world, and Harry would know, considering she tells him every chance she gets. She even went as far as to print off copies and give one to every member of their family, claiming the picture shows off the two accomplishments from her life that she’s the most proud of: her children. Harry refuses to admit he cried at that.

“Well, where are you from?” he asks after a moment of silence, stepping back to admire where the photo now hangs above the nightstand. “With your West Coast prejudice, I assume you’re from one of the Carolinas.”

“Not - ”

“Or Maine .” Harry holds a slight distaste for Maine, made obvious by the way he spits the name out.

Perrie catches on, laughing at the sour look on his face. “Oh my god,” she exclaims with a confused look of joy. “Do you have something against Maine?”
“So it’s true?”

“I’m from Pennsylvania, actually,” she corrects. “But do you have something against Maine?”

“Maine is for people that want to move to Portland but also still want to live on the East Coast,” Harry explains. “It’s just an off-brand version of us.” He knows how insane he sounds - can hear it with every words he speaks - but he refuses to take it back, to downplay his wild, but still very valid, thoughts on the northern state.

Perrie nods, grinning, clearly finding Harry’s thoughts comical when she comments, “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Have you ever met anybody from Maine?”

“I have family there, actually,” she defends. “and I doubt my great-aunt Edna wishes she was in Portland.”

Harry shrugs, going back to the bed and grabbing the last photograph he brought - a selfie of him with his closest friend from home, both of them smiling widely at the camera, the beach behind them bursting with life. It’s a favorite of his, taken on his phone instead of his camera. He never turned it in, never displayed it as a part of a show, never even put it in his portfolio.

It’s just one his favorites.

“I’m just not a fan of Maine,” he tells her honestly, taking a small bit of pride in the giggles she emits.

“Message received,” Perrie confirms, nodding faux-seriously. “Loud and clear. I won’t bring up that sore spot for you.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

Harry can hear Perrie opening her footlocker as he looks for a spot on the wall for his last picture; he’s considering the space just to the left of the light switch, figuring that seeing it every time he wakes up or goes to sleep will be a good way to boost his morale when he’s feeling low.

“Let’s change the subject, then,” Perrie tries. “What’s your main reason for being here?”

Harry laughs a loud, sudden cackle at her play on the word. Everybody knows how much Harry Styles appreciates a good joke.

“My sister dared me to apply, but I figure that as long as I’m here, I might as well try to win the prize so that I’m financially secure after I graduate.” Granted, Gemma didn’t really think he had it in him to actually put his name in, but he’s standing here today, so that just goes to show how wrong she was.

“Have you ever seen the show before?”

“Every season,” Harry manages to say without snorting. He quickly reminds himself that she doesn’t know him personally, so she has no reason to know just how invested he is in it. “You?”

Harry sees Perrie nod as he goes to sit down on his bed, the final photograph having been strategically placed on the wall.

“Absolutely,” she confirms. “Think of myself as a super fan. What season was your favorite?”

“It used to be season three,” Harry answers without much thought. Leigh-Anne Pinnock won that
season, and she’s Harry’s absolute favorite competitor. “But I just finished season seven, and that’s taken the title.”

“Seven was so good,” Perrie agrees. “When Ed played that Beyoncé cover to bring more people into their show? I almost died.”

Harry knows what she’s talking about, and it’s that exact moment that made him start to favor season seven. For the entertainment week (the final week of that season), the contestants were split up into two groups, and each group had to put on a talent show. The other group had made more creative signs and banners and were drawing in a bigger crowd, so Ed Sheeran - the winner of that season - brought out his guitar and played a mellow version of *Drunk in Love*, pulling in just enough viewers to bring his group back into the competition. Because of Ed’s quick thinking, his team just barely ended up winning the round, earning them immunity and securing their place in the finale.

Harry was on the edge of his seat the entire time.

“Season five is my favorite,” Perrie states.

Harry nods along in agreement. “I still laugh about how Ellie brought *Trivial Pursuit* in her bag. She went to the bathroom twenty times a day to hide from the cameras.”

Perrie laughs along with him. “They actually never get their questions from the game, did you know that?”

“Oh, yeah. They get them from the books in the house’s library.”

“Wait - really?”

“Yeah! The producer of the show did an interview saying that’s why it’s smart to study from the library,” He tells her. “Half the questions come from those books.”

“I didn’t know that. I thought they put those there so you could use something since they don’t allow phones or computers,” she replies. They’re both silent for a minute until Perrie turns around and waves him over. “Come help me unpack, babes?”

“Sure.” Harry stands up and makes his way over, grabbing a few of the messy articles of clothing that had been thrown into the suitcase and beginning to fold them. “It’s not all the questions - only half - but even just getting half the questions right could easily push you to first place.”

“Like in season six?” Perrie jokes. “When nobody ever got any questions right.”

Harry groans. He remembers watching that season with his sister, both of them in constant agony at how little these people knew - how dumb they all were. He made a joke that even he could do better than everybody from that season. Little did he know, his sister would be daring him to apply only a year later.

“I hated that season,” he confesses. “If it wasn’t for all of the Teasdale drama, they probably wouldn’t have aired it.”

The two unpack in silence for a while, Harry taking all of her shirts to the footlocker and placing them gently next to where she’s already put her delicates.

“So what’s your best category?” Perrie asks as he’s returning to the bed.

He hesitates, not wanting to answer and give away his secrets just yet. “If I’m telling you this
information, can I trust that we’re making an alliance?”

“Babes,” Perrie laughs, “You gave me the bed by the window. I owe you my life.”

Harry chuckles and reveals, “I’m really good with arts and literature.”

“Makes sense,” she hums. “What with the whole Portland vibe you’ve got going on.”

“Make fun of me all you want, but if it comes down to that being the last category, that prize is mine.”

“Well,” she replies, voice even more confident than Harry's had been. “If it comes down to entertainment, then I’ll be taking you out faster than you can say ’Maine’.”

In no time at all, their room is unpacked and set up, and it already feels like home. It’s not been very long at all, but he and Perrie have bonded over their love for the show, have set up their room together, and are on the fast track to becoming great friends. It feels eerily similar to when he first moved into his dorm freshman year. Only this time, his roommate doesn’t smell like cheetos and toilet water.

He makes sure to keep reminding himself that Perrie is his competition, and despite how lovely she is and how close they’ve already gotten to each other, if it comes down to it, they’ll be competing head to head for the grand prize. They’re not here to make friends, even if it does come naturally.

Not long after they’ve both settled on Perrie’s bed and are looking out the window at the large backyard, a loud voice yells up the stairs, “Get down here, lovebirds!” The sound travels easily, and Harry jumps when he hears it. “Everybody’s waiting!”

He unfolds his legs and steps off the bed, reaching his hand out to help Perrie up. When they’re both standing, she grips Harry’s hand tighter instead of letting go and pulls him out of the room and down the stairs, breezing past the cameraman who’s filming from the corner of the room.

The voice was right, Harry notes. Everybody else is in the living room sitting around and talking to each other. He definitely didn’t miss much, though, because taking the time to make a personal, private alliance with Perrie could be his smartest (or worst) decision in the competition.

There’s a blonde man sitting on the couch directly across from the staircase. He’s got a Cleveland Cavaliers cap sitting backwards on his head, and he’s essentially melted in the seat. He whistles when he spots Harry and Perrie arriving.

“It’s about time,” he says.

“We were just talking,” Harry waves off, fighting the blush on his cheeks - not because anything had happened or ever would, but because this is everyone’s first impression of him.

“Just talking, eh?” The guy laughs. He turns his attention to one of the girls from the kitchen earlier. “Hey, Jade, do you wanna ‘just talk’ in the hot tub later?”

Harry can’t see Jade’s face, as she’s turned in the opposite direction, but she sounds exasperated as she answers, “In your dreams, Ohio.”

The guy - Ohio - laughs, his head falling back onto the back of the couch in between where his arms are stretched out. “You’re absolutely right about that.”
All Harry can think about is how quickly it’s starting. Season eight of *Trivialities* has officially begun, and he’s a part of it, standing in the living room with his fifteen other competitors, ready to take on all six categories and fight to win. He’s here, and in about seven weeks, the show will be broadcasted to the entire country with Harry as one of its cast members.

It’s intense, watching everybody meet for the first time. He’s seen this happen seven times before on the show, but that was when he was watching from the comforts of his own home. This is in real time. He can practically see the cliques starting to break off, groups of people separating from the larger mass. They’re all choosing their roles in the game, and it’s interesting to watch. None of them will know if they’re making the right decisions until the end of the season, but they’ve all got to choose.

Harry eyes Oli where he’s standing in a group with a few other guys and one girl, all of them nursing their drinks like this is a frat party, and immediately decides to not even consider approaching them. After the encounter in the kitchen, Harry knows that Oli isn’t someone he should be associating with, and the realization gives him a sense of relief. Surely he won’t regret his decision to stay far away.

Harry’s startled out of his reverie when a hand suddenly cards through his curls and nails scratch across his scalp, a parting gesture from Perrie before she makes her way over to sit with Jade who’s talking to perhaps the oldest-looking contestant in the room. Harry doesn’t want to follow her around like a lost puppy, doesn’t want to appear *too* dependant on her - not *yet* at least - so he goes over and sits at the end of the couch next to Ohio.

“Look at that,” the guy comments before Harry can get a word in, “Our women, making friends together.”

“I… she’s not,” he stumbles, caught off guard both by the fact that he thinks the two of them are an item, and that even if they were, she would be *his*. “She’s her own woman.”

Ohio nods in amusement and goes back to looking around the party, arms stretched invitingly over the back of the couch. Everybody around them is talking and getting friendly, sharing stories of where they’re from and how they got here and what they’d do with the grand prize. For Harry it’s a little uncomfortable, having stuttered and sputtered his way through his first ever conversation out here.

There are four cameras floating throughout the large room, trying to catch onto conversations. Harry’s not used to his every move being recorded, and it has him feeling more than a little awkward.

He pulls his collar away from his neck in an attempt to cool down his over-heated body. Despite the loose nature of his t-shirt, it feels almost suffocating. He chose not to wear one of his blouses just so he could blend into a more casual environment, but he regrets the decision immediately, not liking how tight the t-shirt feels against his skin.

Ohio seems to notice how awkward Harry is behaving and appears regretful, quickly apologizing for his earlier comment, “Hey man,” he says gently. “I’m sorry if my words upset you. I’m Niall.”

“I’m Harry,” he introduces. “And you didn’t upset me. I’m just a bit nervous.”

“Oh, me too, man,” Niall grins. “It’s pretty normal.”

Niall drags him into a conversation with a pretty girl named Sophia who’s sitting on Niall’s left and a man named Liam who’s sitting on the floor in front of them. They talk a bit about the show and their excitement for it, getting to know each other and watching as other people do the same. While
everyone chatters away, many trips back and forth from the kitchen are made as people get new
drinks and bring a couple of six packs into the living room so that the real party can start.

The night goes on like that: Harry, Niall, Sophia and Liam sharing conversation and picking mock
fights with each other. Harry makes occasional eye contact with Perrie, trading funny faces and
silently communicating with her.

Just when it seems like everybody’s finally calming down for the night, their mingling less excited
and their conversations lacking substance, Oli comes back into the room with shot glasses stacked
high on top of each other in each hand. His short friend with the feathery brown hair trails behind
him with tequila. They march towards the table in the center of the room where Oli slams the glasses
down, and his friend immediately starts pouring the tequila. They make passing the shot glasses out
look like a choreographed routine.

“I think it’s time to kick this party up a notch,” Oli announces, the returning whoops putting a sharp
grin on his face. “Everyone grab a glass.”

Niall reaches out, as well as Liam and Sophia. Harry watches Perrie and Jade lean enthusiastically
from their seats and snatch two shot glasses off the table, and he follows suit - only to be thwarted by
Oli’s hand. The redhead knocks his outstretched arm out of the way, grabbing the shot for himself
before spitting, “Not you, Henry. You’re way too good for our liquor, you pretentious fuck.”

Harry can feel his reaction both inwardly curdling his stomach and outwardly projecting onto his
face. He’s astonished at the acid in Oli’s tone. Is this just because he had denied a shot earlier in the
evening? Oli’s still got this look on his face, something ugly that Harry hopes the cameras are
-catching. He wants to be able to look back on this moment and be assured that he wasn’t
overreacting - that this really is happening over such an insignificant event.

Before anybody can really say anything, tell Oli to calm down, or laugh with him at Harry’s
expense, Liam’s hand reaches across the table and pushes the shot glass out of Oli’s hand and
sending it tumbling into his lap.

“What the fuck!” Oli yells, standing up and batting at his pants in a vain attempt to push the liquor
off of the fabric. Liam stands up as well, but doesn’t say anything. The look on his face makes it
clear that this was no accident and that he doesn’t intend to apologize.

“Woah, okay,” the feather-haired man from before who’s currently standing behind Oli speaks up,
pushing his way in between the two men as Oli and Liam puff their chests out at each other in the
oddest fighting display Harry’s ever seen in real life. “How about instead of assaulting each other on
national TV - in front of the entire country - we just introduce ourselves, yeah?”

Harry finds himself turning to where the cameras are recording, catching every angle of this
argument.

Oli and Liam continue to stare each other down for a moment before they both settle, which is likely
for the best. Liam’s got a few inches on Oli and would probably be able to snap the kid in half like a
twig. The only thing Oli has as an advantage is the tequila bottle a short distance from his hand, but
nobody wants to be the crazy asshole to smash a bottle onto the table.

At least not on the first night.

Everybody starts to settle back down into their seats at this point, and Oli’s friend, the one that
brought the tequila, smiles at his successful buffering of the fight. He looks astonished, but mostly
just proud that he was able to stop whatever was about to happen.
“Alright,” he laughs, giddy from the leftover adrenaline. “I’m Louis, and I’m a talent scout for local television in Kansas City, Missouri,” he informs everyone, taking a seat on the floor in front of Sophia. “Who’s next?”

“How old are you?” Perrie asks from the other side of the table in between them.

Louis smiles, “You aren’t supposed to ask such personal questions,” he jokes. “But I’m twenty-five.”

Harry briefly wonders who the oldest person in the competition could be. He figures it’s either Liam or the lanky dude with the floppy fringe sitting by the blonde girl in the corner, both looking to be at least twenty-eight.

He hopes he isn’t the youngest person here, but he assumes that he can’t be, not with how young some of the other contestants look. Perrie at least has to be younger than him, or if she is older, it’s probably only by a year or so.

He’s not the youngest here. He can’t be.

“I can go next,” Niall volunteers, raising his hand before letting it fall back onto the edge of the couch. “I’m Niall Horan, twenty-three - but not for long - and I’m a sportscaster in Cleveland, Ohio -”

There are a good five people that echo him with a deep rumbling Ohio, and it has Niall grinning in response. “I just want you all to take a long look at my face while you can see it this close because in about seven weeks, all of you will be watching me accept the grand prize while you’re standing far, far away.”

A few people laugh, a few more look disgruntled, but Liam just throws a wadded up napkin at Niall. “Nobody believes you, buddy.”

“Just you wait.”

“If you want to meet the real competition,” Perrie smiles from where she’s sitting cross-legged in between Jade and a girl with outstanding eyebrows. “I’m Perrie Edwards, twenty-three, from Philadelphia where I work as an intern for a chemical engineering company.”

Harry’s eyes widen at that. He hadn’t known that Perrie has such an established career. He had figured that she was just a student like himself. It makes him all the more pleased that he pulled her into an alliance before anyone else could - having her brains and go-getter attitude will be a weapon in his favor.

He raises his eyebrows in her direction, a smile dancing with it, so she knows he’s impressed. In return she winks - knowing that her credentials work in her favor for this competition. Even Jade is sitting up straighter after having heard about what Perrie does. It looks like they’re going to have a third person in their alliance.

“I’m Jesy,” the girl that was standing in the crowd with Oli and Louis earlier speaks up. “I’m twenty-five, and I’m a shot girl in Carson City, Nevada, but I’m only seven weeks away from winning the grand prize, moving my ass to Vegas, and starting my own show.”

Niall leans forward in his seat so he can see past Harry to Jesy, asking, “What kind of show?”

She only winks, leaving him with a vague, “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Now, hold on just a minute,” Louis protests, getting up to sit on the very edge of the couch, almost too close to where Sophia’s occupying her own seat. “Everybody’s getting cocky about winning, and I haven’t even gotten to say my piece -”
“That’s because you’re going to lose,” the lanky brunet in the corner chimes in. Harry finds himself laughing out loud along with a few others in the room at the joke. The man continues over Louis’ protests. “I’m Nick Grimshaw, but everyone calls me Grimmy,” he introduces himself. “I’m a radio DJ in Bangor, Maine.”

Harry immediately shoots a glare to Perrie, only to see that she’s already looking at him in absolute, pure elation. She forms a heart with her hands and blows a kiss, clearly mocking Harry and his hate for Grimmy’s home state.

Harry raises his eyebrows in response, moving his eyes quickly back and forth from Grimmy to Perrie, trying to silently tell her to just look at him and see what Harry was talking about earlier - how people from Maine look like they want to be in Portland, but can’t find the means, so they settle in fucking Bangor, apparently.

But Perrie’s too busy laughing at him to look.

“How old are you?” Oli asks, and there’s obvious distaste in his tone.

Grimmy rolls his eyes, but answers, “Thirty-two.” The room at large lets out rumblings of surprise. Harry had figured he was older, but not by nearly a decade. “Hey,” Grimmy barks. “Caroline Flack was thirty-six when she was on the show. And Lou Teasdale was thirty-one.”

“But they lost,” Harry feels the need to point out. “Badly.” Niall’s laughing in his ear, head rolling on the couch behind him, and Grimmy looks more happy than insulted, so Harry doesn’t feel awful.

“Well, thanks for your support, friend.” Grimmy grins, and Harry grins back. Despite all the negative traits that Maine gives him, Harry can appreciate somebody who’s a fan of self-deprecation and laughs at his terrible jokes.

Harry’s already beginning to see how his clique is going to look, can already see the cracks in the greater shell of the cast, and he believes he knows who he can count on to stand by his side and get them all towards the finale.

He knows he can trust Perrie, and from the dispute earlier, he thinks he can count on Liam as well. Jade and Grimmy are looking promising, and Niall’s a nice solid figure to have by his side. There are still some others around the room that haven’t introduced themselves yet that might join, but even just having these few possible alliance members is comforting.

He feels secure.

He knows he needs to be cautious when choosing his alliance, but he also can’t be too guarded. He doesn’t want to make the wrong choice and end up like Calvin Harris from season one who wasn’t careful with his alliance and ended up getting ditched because his teammates were only saving him to win the entertainment round, but he also doesn’t want to end up like Demi Lovato from season six, not having an alliance at all because she naively decided early on that she didn’t need one.

All-in-all, it’s a delicate balance, and Harry truly hopes he’s making the right choices.

“I’m Eleanor, and I’m twenty-four,” a tall brunette announces from where she’s occupying an entire loveseat by herself and nursing a bottle of Corona. “I’m a fashion blogger, just a few hours south in Pasadena.”

“I love that,” Sophia chimes in from the opposite side of Niall, her face lighting up with interest. “I do sponsored ads on my Instagram.”
Eleanor scooches over on her sofa and waves Sophia over. “Come sit over here,” she invites. “I want to know all about that.”

Sophia nods and grabs her drink, making her way over to Eleanor’s couch, the two of them immediately leaning their heads together to talk. Everybody watches for a moment, and Sophia must feel their stares because she looks back out at everybody. “Oh, yeah,” she remembers. “I’m Sophia, and I’m twenty-three. I’m studying to be a fashion designer, but in the meantime, I work as an intern at the GM building in Detroit. I live just outside of the city in Grosse Pointe.”

She retreats back to her conversation with Eleanor, and the rest of the cast is left just watching on in amusement. Even a cameraman moves in closer to catch their interaction on film.

Nobody picks up from there - they’re all waiting for somebody else to introduce themselves, so Harry jumps in. “I’m Harry, I’m from Portland, and I’m a student - I guess.”

“What’s your major?” Jade asks him.

“It’s probably being a heartbreaker, isn’t it?” Perrie jokes, smiling at him and nudging her shoulder against Jade’s. “With those dimples, it’s gotta be.”

Harry shakes his head, hoping it works to hide the red flooding into his face. “It’s photography, actually.”

"I knew you were a dirty hipster," Niall teases, wrapping his arm around Harry and pulling him in so that his head is resting on Niall’s chest. "A Portland photographer is just as bad as an indie girl named Rain selling old seashells in her elderly grandmother's used bookstore."

"I don't think that's the same thing, Niall," Liam points out, expressive eyebrows jumping in confusion at Niall's attempt at a joke.

Harry drops his head forward to scratch the back of his neck earnestly. He still can't believe he's actually here.

"I guess I can go next," the wiry blonde in the corner near Grimmy breaks in. "I'm Taylor, I'm twenty-seven." Harry didn't see that coming. She appears much more youthful, early twenties, Harry had thought. "I'm a songwriter, and I'm currently living in Albany, New York."

"Don't you mean aspiring songwriter?" Louis asks with an edge to his voice.

Taylor doesn't look at him, doesn't even dignify him with an eye roll like anybody else would. "No," she answers. "I got contracted by RCA and Syco to write songs for new artists still finding their sound. So ‘aspiring’ wouldn't really do my paycheck justice, don't you agree?" She speaks with a careless tone, one that suggests superiority. Harry doesn't warm to it.

On the other side of Niall, Louis sinks into the seat where Sophia once sat. "Why is she even here, then?" he mutters under his breath, making Niall chuckle at his solemn expression.

"If you'd like to say I'm aspiring to be anything," Taylor continues, prompting Louis to groan. "I'd say I'm an aspiring performer."

Niall leans forward again, crooked grin on his face. "I play the guitar, you know," he tells her. "I reckon we could make some beautiful music together."

"I'm a solo artist."
Without missing a beat, he responds, "Well, I'd love to see your act sometime."

About half of the room laughs, Niall smirking like the cat who got the cream and Taylor chuckling because she can't believe she walked into that trap. It's a light-hearted moment Harry can guarantee will be aired, maybe even on the previews.

He's always pretended that he had an audience watching his every move. Back home, he'd stand in front of his mirror with a hairbrush and tell it stories about his day, sing and dance in the shower, and act like he was in a music video for every song on his playlist. He's always thought it'd be amazing if somebody was there to witness how funny and goofy he could be, and now there really is. Even the moments unaired on TV will be available for viewing on the network's website.

Suddenly, Harry realizes that's a perfect way to show the world how great his jokes are.

"Knock, knock," he prompts out of nowhere, interrupting everybody's laughter.

He gets a response out of a few of them, Perrie and Niall not being a part of it. "Who's there?"

"A cow says."

"A cow says who?"

"No," Harry sings, can feel his dimple popping out with how big his smile is in anticipation. "A cow says Moo!"

Nobody takes kindly to the joke; Jesy cringes incredibly hard, and Grimmy even groans, his face melting into his hands. The only positive reaction he gets is an amused snort from Louis, but Harry suspects it's out of pity.

"Anyway," Oli barks, voice acidic and eyes slitted in annoyance. "I'm Oli from Aspen, Colorado, and I'm a ski instructor. I'm twenty-six, and I'm here to party."

Harry tries his hardest not to visibly roll his eyes as he tunes out the rest of what Oli's saying. He doesn't care about the club Oli's hoping to open up with his winnings. All he wants is to see Oli make it to the sports round so Harry can shoot an arrow into his arm. He may get disqualified, but it'd be worth it.

He never thought that he'd make any real enemies when coming here, but doing so now is almost exciting. He's definitely seen more ridiculous feuds on the show in his time, like in season five when Danielle and Briana fought over the same guy who - turns out - wanted nothing to do with either of them. But he thinks this could be legendary, like in season three when Leigh-Anne had a fling with one of her fellow contestants only to find out he had a wife at home, so she baked brownies for everyone and put laxatives in the one she gave to him. He got so sick that he missed the cars to the next trivia round.

Harry truly believes Leigh-Anne was the best contestant this show has ever seen.

The cogs in his brain are already turning.

"I'm Liam," his friend introduces himself from the floor, continuing the round. "I'm twenty-three, and I work as a coal miner back home in West Virginia."

"That's not a real job, mate," Niall argues.

"Yes it is."
As the two of them go back and forth, Harry decides it's finally safe to start drinking now with Oli a good distance away and half of a six pack of Corona staring him in the face, so he reaches forward and grabs a bottle, cracking it open on the corner of the wooden table and only displaying mild panic when the wood chips. He double checks that the camera didn’t catch that and sees when Perrie raises her eyebrow at him. Harry just shakes his head and returns the gesture, taking his first drink of the night to his lips.

Jade introduces herself as a twenty-four year old Art Curator in Seattle. Stan from Alabama goes after her and then Kendall from Hawaii after him. Harry shares a moment with Cara from Chicago when Oli cuts her off as she’s trying to say her piece.

As the night wears on, they all joke and drink and get to know each other in shallowest of ways, and it's great. They eventually move into the dining room on the other side of the kitchen and sit cross-legged in a circle, singing *Wonderwall* as Niall plays the guitar.

More drinks come out, and Niall flirts meaninglessly with Cara and Kendall. Louis goes into the kitchen and pours absinthe into a teacup, smirking when Harry watches him, intrigued by his presence.

Perrie cuddles into Harry as she begins sobering up, but then Jade hands her the ugliest green margarita Harry's ever seen, claiming she made it with the Magic Bullet. Perrie braves it out and drinks it, only gagging once, and then the night is back into play.

Harry finds Grimmy trying to hook his iPod up to the sound system and challenges him to a dance off in which neither of them win because neither of them can dance.

The last thing Harry remembers from that night is Stan mentioning that he saw a few beer bongs in the cabinet above the refrigerator. Perrie challenges him to a drink-off, and Harry howls into the night.

That's when everything goes black.

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**Monday**

Everything is white.

It's far too bright and far too hot, and it feels like a mariachi band is playing Aerosmith's greatest hits in Harry's head. Alcohol doesn't taste even *close* to good enough to warrant this nasty feeling it always leaves him with.

It takes him a minute to open his eyes, which have been temporarily glued shut by the unforgiving sun that’s beating down on him hot and blinding through the window. When he can finally see, he makes note of the white ceiling above his head accompanied by a sock-clad foot lying heavily on his face. It's not until he tries to yawn that he realizes there's another in his mouth as well.

He chokes on the foot and flounders a bit, hands coming up to shove the intrusion out of his mouth. Unfortunately, he pushes a bit too hard and ends up shoving himself out of the bed, crashing down to the floor in a move that only works to intensify his headache.

He can’t remember anything from the night before. All he knows for sure is that he needs sustenance...
- something heavy in his stomach to help stop the unpleasant churning. The painful gurgling of his stomach only intensifies when he sits up - taking a good bit of time to do so - and sees that he’s in Perrie’s bed with both her and Niall taking up the remaining space on the mattress.

Harry really needs to get out of this room. He flees, cringing only slightly when he notices the camera recording him, catching the disturbing moment on film for the entire nation to see.

Walking through the quiet house is strange. It’s his first morning here, and he doesn’t even feel human enough to appreciate it. His mind feels cloudy, pounding a steady rhythm in time with the churning of his empty stomach. He feels like a mess. The selfish part of him hopes everybody else is as unwell as he is, but he only allows the thought to stick around for a second before he banishes it from his mind.

His first impulse when walking into the kitchen is to just grab a banana and a water and hide in the quiet, dark laundry room. Doing so would give him time to still the pounding in his head and to try to piece together what happened last night, like how on Earth he ended up in bed with Niall and Perrie (fully-clothed, thank God, but still an incredibly close call), before he has to face the rest of the house, but he also has to remember that he’s here to play a game, so there can be no hiding away in laundry rooms.

The biggest part of his game is convincing everybody that he has nothing more than a big heart and good intentions. Well, that’s actually true; Harry’s the sweetest boy in the whole world - according to his mom anyway. She’s told him so on many different occasions, sometimes even in public, but he also has a malicious side. He plans to use this devious aspect of his personality to get himself to the finale, but he doesn’t want to share it with everyone just yet. He’s one-hundred percent willing to be manipulative to win this competition, but he can’t show that so early on in the game. No, he’ll have to wait just a little while longer before he can really start to get his hands dirty.

So, instead of hiding and waiting for this less than incredible feeling to fade away, Harry grabs a skillet from where it’s hanging on the pot rack and places it on the stove. He’s going to make a giant breakfast for everybody, help them all feel better, even if it is only… Eleven am? That’s not bad. Some of Harry’s worst hangovers have kept him in bed well into the evening.

The producers of the show must have dropped off some food this morning, Harry notes, because he knows for a fact there wasn’t bacon in the fridge last night. Had there been, drinking the liquor and eating every last piece of bacon would have been all they cared about. Now that he thinks about it, it’s definitely for the best that there wasn’t any bacon last night because now the housemates have some to help them get over their hangovers (and Harry can use his cooking skills to charm his competition).

As much as being on his feet and moving back and forth so often from the fridge to the stove is irritating Harry and his head, it’s easy to do, his body running on autopilot. He cooks breakfast for his mom and his stepdad, Robin, every morning whenever he’s back at home with them, and this is practically the same. The only difference here is the two full bottles of water he chugs as he cooks. He’s never been more dehydrated in his whole life.

The first person to come out of hiding is Liam, somehow looking nothing like one is expected to after a night of heavy drinking. He’s smiling, dressed in a t-shirt and basketball shorts and carrying a half-empty water bottle. There’s a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead, and he’s breathing heavily. He’s followed by a cameraman as he approaches the kitchen.

Harry doesn’t want to jump to conclusions, but he is a bit of a self-proclaimed detective, so he quickly deduces that Liam must have been downstairs in the gym actually working out on this obnoxiously bright morning.
“Hey,” Liam greets, taking a seat at the stool closest to the plate where Harry’s placing the cooked bacon. “It’s nice to see somebody else awake. Thought you all might have died after last night.”

“I think I did, actually,” Harry responds, not sure if he’s joking or not because, even though the water and the few pieces of bacon he’s been sneaking are actually helping a little bit, he still feels like a pile of shit. “I’m just the nicest ghost you’ve ever met.”

Liam laughs, “Now that, I can believe.”

Harry continues tending to the bacon, getting ready to finish the last few slices in the skillet as he grabs another pan to cook the eggs with from the rack above Liam’s head.

“I was down in the gym working off my hangover. I thought somebody else would be smart enough to do the same,” Liam starts explaining as Harry mentally gives himself a pat on the back for his A plus deduction skills, “But it’s been two hours.”

Harry cuts some butter off of the stick and throws it into the pan as he turns another stove eye on. “I woke up with Niall’s foot in my mouth,” he defends himself. “I was so trashed that I let Niall’s foot enter my mouth for who knows how long. The gym is the last place I wanted to go this morning.”

“That sounds disgusting, man,” Liam cringes, a trace of a chuckle in his voice. He reaches out for a piece of bacon, but Harry swats his hand away from the plate. “And here I thought you were a friendly ghost,” Liam huffs.

“I’m not letting you fill up on bacon,” Harry lectures. “How do you take your eggs?”

“Dunky.”

Harry gets to cracking the eggs and puts some bread in the toaster as the eggs cook. He isn’t much good for conversation just yet, not when he’s busy switching between the two pans and running to butter the toast, so the two boys fall into a comfortable silence. Despite first believing that doing this much work would only aggravate his hangover, it’s actually starting to make him feel better, his head finally feeling okay enough for his mind to stop only focusing on how much pain he’s in.

Just as Harry’s plating the eggs, the sound of footsteps slapping against tile echoes through the kitchen. It’s Cara and Kendall, Harry notes as he turns around.

“Good morning,” he greets them, grinning wide despite their furrowed eyebrows and the grumpy tilt to their mouths. “How do you take your eggs?”

Cara declares that she wants hers scrambled while Kendall requests hers over-medium. She even insists on watching, keeping guard to make sure that Harry doesn’t screw them up.

“They’re just eggs,” Liam tries to defend. He wisely drops the the subject and continues shoveling his eggs into his mouth when Kendall just shoots him a withering glare.

As everyone slowly wakes up and floods into the kitchen, Harry asks them about their egg orders. He starts having to write them on a piece of loose paper just so he can get everyone’s done in the order they arrived. Everybody is more than glad to pass their breakfast order off to him, and no problems arise - until Oli wakes up.

“How do you take your eggs, Oli?” Harry asks, putting a new line of bacon into the pan. Oli ignores him, walking into the cabinet and grabbing a bowl of cereal instead.

“I know you have something against Harry,” Grimmy starts. “But that grain is going to do nothing
for your hangover. Take the damn eggs.”

“I’m fine,” Oli retorts, glaring at the sceptical eyes watching him.

Cara laughs and tosses a piece of bacon at him, accidentally leaving a greasy stain on his boxers when he doesn’t move to catch it, and he responds by promptly throwing it in the trash.

“You lose,” she teases, returning her attention to her own abundant plate of eggs and bacon. “I’ll just sit here and enjoy my,” she shoves an entire piece of bacon in her mouth and continues with her mouth open, “crispy, greasy bacon.”

“You’d have even more if you didn’t throw pieces at people,” Kendall quips, and Cara replies by sticking her tongue out and throwing another piece of bacon, this time at Kendall’s face.

When Niall grabs his plate from Harry, he thanks him with a pat on the back before retreating to the dining room to sit with Oli and Stan. The otherwise harmless gesture leaves Harry terrified as he’s reminded that something definitely happened between the two of them and Perrie last night. Why else would they all have been in bed together this morning? He really needs Perrie to wake up so he can talk to her.

“Hey, Harry,” Cara prompts, waiting for Harry to turn around before asking her question. “If the whole photography thing doesn’t work out, would you want to move to Chicago with me? I could use a cook.” Harry grins and shakes his head as he goes back to cracking Jade’s eggs into the pan. “Could use your big hands, too.”

There’s a peal of laughter that immediately turns to coughing, and Harry knows it came from Grimmy without even turning around.

“I’m alright in Portland, thanks,” Harry dismisses with a wink in Cara’s direction as he smiles to himself. He loves how comfortable he already feels with the group he’s picked out for himself.

He hands Jade her plate, and she takes it, leaving him with a kiss on the cheek as she walks over to where everyone else is sitting. There’s only one order left on his list until the rest of the house wakes up, so Harry puts the last egg in and watches it cook quickly. It’s not until he’s plating it that he notices a hush has fallen around the room. He turns around and sees everyone watching the fridge, which is open with a body halfway buried in it.

The fridge door closes, revealing that, yeah… Harry’s almost positive he’s never seen this man before.

“Um,” Liam tries, clearing his throat as he asks, “How are you this morning?” The dark-haired man looks at Liam with one eyebrow raised critically before shrugging and opening the yogurt he grabbed.

Cara rolls her eyes and leans halfway across the counter, knees up on the stool to make her taller. “What he means is who are you this morning?” she clarifies, “Like who are you? Like why are you here, and who are you?”

Grimmy smiles into his glass of milk, turning away from the scene with shaking shoulders. Harry understands why, even feels the urge to start laughing himself. Cara’s incredibly aggressive, but this guy apparently has no fear because he’s just staring at her unflinchingly with a bored look on his face.

“I’m Zayn,” the man answers. “I’m from Tallahassee, and my plane got in late last night.” He studies the room, can see that everybody’s watching him. “But I’m alright, thanks for asking.” He doesn’t
stick around for any more questions or judging eyes, just disappears into the dining room where he’s most likely introducing himself to the rest of the bewildered contestants.

Grimmy’s kind enough to wait a solid twenty seconds before bursting into laughter, everyone else in the room quickly joining in.

“So, I saw this morning that we have a pool out back,” Liam points out after they’ve all settled back down. “I figured we could all go swimming later.”

“That sounds awesome,” Jade hums. “I could use a cold dip right about now.”

Harry could too. Some previous seasons didn’t have a pool, just like others didn’t have a gym or a hot tub. Every new season is in a new city with a new house, so the only amenities you get for the season are the ones that came with the house when it was purchased.

Harry clearly remembers somebody mentioning a hot tub the night before, and he knows now that there’s a pool and a gym, so it seems they’ve really lucked out this season.

“We could watch some movies afterwards too,” Kendall offers. “I was browsing their collection in the living room last night, and the films they have are unbelievable. I know where I’m spending all of my time.”

Liam nods. “So it’s settled!” he beams. “We’ll go for a swim after breakfast and then settle in for some movies.” Everyone nods in agreement, and then those with food go back to eating while the rest make conversation.

A few others trail into the kitchen over the next couple of hours - Taylor with her yolkless omelet and Louis with his talkative appreciation for the bacon - before Perrie finally wakes up. Despite having slept longer than anyone else, when she comes down and requests over-easy eggs with four pieces of toast, she still looks even worse than Harry felt this morning. When Harry calls her over to grab her food, she takes her plate and slaps his ass in thanks before going to sit in between Jade and Cara.

After he’s recovered from the shock and surprising sting of the slap, he remembers that he needs to find out what exactly happened last night, and more specifically why he woke up with Niall’s foot in his mouth this morning. Before he can pull Perrie aside, he’s startled by the sound of the front door slamming shut. Assuming that one of the producers is here to tell them something important, he turns off the stove because he doesn’t want to be the one responsible for burning the house down on only the second day.

It’s not the producers though. No, it’s far better. Right in front of his very eyes is James Corden, walking across the threshold into the kitchen with the camera crew swarming in behind him. The room is packed, and everybody is frozen, jaws dropped and eyes wide with excitement. Grimmy’s the only one who looks unfazed, instead only curious, but that’s probably because of the famous people he’s met through his work on the radio.

Harry’s never met anybody famous. He once thought that he saw Bruno Mars in a mall years ago, but in hindsight, the man was definitely far too tall. This is a whole new league for Harry. This is, without a doubt, the real James Corden standing right in front of him, smile wide, waiting as the people from the dining room join them in the kitchen.

“Good morning, my wonderful competitors,” James greets, arms stretched out wide. “I see you’re all recovering nicely from your night of partying, so that means it’s time to start the game.” Murmurs swim across the room. This must mean that they’re getting their first subject. Harry’s so excited.
“Now, before I tell you what your first subject is, I’m going to explain the game rules for the viewers at home and for those of you who may be unfamiliar with them.”

Harry has to resist rolling his eyes. Everybody here had better know the rules. If there’s anybody in this house who doesn’t even know the basic outline of the show, Harry doesn’t understand what they’re doing here, but he doubts they’ll be here long enough for their auditioning reasons to matter. Harry’s devoted the last few weeks of his life to rewatching the previous seasons of the show, hoping to find a pattern between each winner. He hadn’t been able to find one despite how hard he had been looking, but at least he knows the rules of the show - knows what’s allowed, what isn’t, and even knows what time the cars pick them up before each round.

“As most of you know, Trivialities is based off of the board game Trivial Pursuit - of course,” James explains. “Each week, you’ll be given two days - Monday and Tuesday - to study. Make sure you study hard because as past competitors can vouch for, the questions are more difficult than you realize. On Wednesday, a car will arrive at ten o’clock sharp to pick you up and take you to where the trivia round is held. During the trivia round, we will ask you questions based on the subject that you’ve been told to study. Now, don’t miss the car because if you do, you’ll take an automatic loss for the trivia round, and you’ll receive an obstacle, or other limitation, in the physical challenge round.”

“The winner, or winners, of the trivia round will receive an advantage for the physical challenge round, and I’ll just go ahead and tell you now that these advantages almost always guarantee their owner a win.” James pauses, giving Harry a chance to think back. He can only recall one instance where the trivia winner, Daniel Campbell, got sent home, and that was because she shared her intel with too many other competitors. She ended up losing the physical challenge round to the same people she had shared the intel with.

“When you arrive home on Wednesday,” James continues, “you’ll be told what the physical challenge is going to be, giving you the rest of the day, as well as all day Thursday, to prepare. On Friday, the cars will arrive at noon to pick you up and take you off to your physical challenge. The last three to six people to finish the physical challenge round will be up for elimination on Saturday.”

“The night of the elimination, I will arrive at eight p.m.. Those up for elimination will be required to pack their bags during the day on Saturday and be ready to leave directly from the voting tent if they are voted off. Every single contestant, even those up for elimination, will vote for whom in the bottom they would like to stay, and the person, or people, with the fewest amount of votes are to leave immediately.”

“Sunday is your day of rest. During which you can use the house amenities to their fullest and allow yourselves to recharge because come Monday morning, I’ll be back here to tell you your next subject.” James finishes explaining the rules, and Liam starts clapping. Everybody else joins in, some shouting in excitement.

“Don’t forget that at anytime in the week, you can take full advantage of our confession booth,” James gestures over to a door that’s decorated to look like a 1990s movie theatre menu, confetti and all. “We’d like each of you to speak at least once a day. Think of it as your personal link to the viewers at home, like a diary that all of America is going to read.”

Harry grins to himself. He plans on spending a lot of time in that confession booth. A big part of his strategy is to let the viewers at home know that he’s more than just big eyes and dimples. He needs them to know that he won’t be walked all over, even he’s making his competitors believe the exact opposite.

“For your very first subject, we’ve given you all History,” James continues. “So study up and be
ready to compete for the first advantage of the game. Good luck, and I’ll see you all Wednesday.”

James walks out, one cameraman following him after him, and everybody starts mumbling under their breath. They’ve just gotten their first subject - History. This is something that Harry excelled at back in school, so it shouldn’t be a hard first week. Having a topic that Harry is confident about isn’t exactly a blessing, though. It means that while he may do well this first week, as the game goes on, the amount topics that Harry’s comfortable with will run out quicker than they would have if they hadn’t been used until later weeks. Now not only will he be struggling with topics he doesn’t know much about, but he’ll also be doing so on weeks with a smaller pool of competitors.

Harry would rather have had *Sports* be week one.

“Alright, are we ready?” Cara asks, pushing her stool out and planting her feet on the ground. “I needed to be in the pool yesterday.” Everybody at the table nods, Perrie quickly scooping the rest of her eggs into her mouth so that she can join them.

Harry doesn’t think they should go swimming just yet, not when they’ve just gotten their first subject.

“Shouldn’t we go study? Work for that advantage?” he voices.

Cara just waves him off. “We’ve got a whole two days to study. Let’s have some fun in the pool first.”

“You’ll get a cramp,” Harry tries, really wanting to study but not wanting to already seem like he’s so invested in the competition that he can’t make any time for fun. That’s not a part of his strategy.

“We’ll stretch, then. Let’s go!”

It takes great effort for Harry not to protest anymore. Instead he reluctantly gives and nods at Cara before following everyone up the stairs. As he and Perrie break off from the group and head into their room to grab their bathing suits, Harry takes the time to shut the door behind himself and talk to Perrie.

“Do you remember what happened last night?” He asks right away, not wasting time or giving himself room to chicken out.

Perrie nods from where she’s reaching into her trunk to look for her swimsuit. “Of course I do,” she confirms. “I won’t tell anybody, but it’ll be on national television in like three months.”

Her words make Harry’s blood run cold. He quickly reminds himself that she could be talking about any number of things, but he’s not sure if that fact makes him feel better or worse. He could have told her his strategy or said something humiliating that could be used against him. Hell, they could’ve actually had a threesome.

“Tell anyone what?” he continues, a little paranoid now.

“That you cry when you drink,” she answers casually. “Niall and I were trying to talk you through it, but we didn’t even know what you were saying. It was intense, man.”

Harry stops short. He never knew he cried when he got drunk, has never gotten drunk enough to be able to tell. He doesn’t even know what he could’ve been crying about. Perrie said she couldn’t understand him, and he believes her, but most of all, he’s just filled with relief. He didn’t make a fool out of himself (aside from his crying, but that could actually *help* him with his strategy), and he didn’t ruin their alliance.
The situation is handled. Everything’s alright.

“Oh my god,” Perrie laughs when she notices the calm but still frozen look on his face. “Did you think we all slept together?” Harry doesn’t answer, hoping the grimace on his face is radiating enough shame that she’ll let it go. “Oh, that’s so cute. You don’t have to worry about that, babe, our clothes were on the whole night. Now let’s go. Everybody’s waiting.”

Now that Harry’s successfully humiliated himself in front of Perrie, he’s excited to just go relax with his possible alliance. He’ll go for a quick swim, watch a movie, and then come in to study, he thinks.

He doesn’t even realize he’s wasted the entire day lounging about with his competitors until he’s lying in bed staring at the ceiling - no studying done and his brain nearly empty.

I’ve been thinking this through since before I even auditioned. I’ve got my game plan, and uh - I just can’t believe I’m here. Feels like a dream.

-Harry, 23, Portland

Tuesday

Today, Harry is going to study. After wasting the entire day yesterday just sitting by the pool and watching movies, his desire to get ahead of the game has skyrocketed. Now, though, his stomach grumbles for a granola bar, but his focus lies only on the library. By this time tomorrow, he’ll be standing at a podium fighting for the first advantage of the season, and he needs to feel confident if he’s going to get anywhere.

Afterall, his strategy of coming across to everyone as the harmless, charming guy with nothing but love to give will only get him so far if he has nothing to back it up with. Making everyone believe he isn’t a threat won’t work if he can’t pull through when it comes to the challenges.

Harry finds his way down to the library, noticing a few familiar faces lying stretched out on couches around the room along with a cameraman resting in the corner to record them as he enters. Taylor sits alone in a chair by the young adult section while Eleanor and Sophia huddle in the corner, giggling over the books in front of them. All three girls look alert, almost as though they’ve been in here since yesterday. Harry really needs to step up his game.
He beelines it to the history section, hoping that the girls haven’t snagged up all the good resources before he even gets to sit down. Although none of them look like the type to play maliciously, that could very well be a key part of their plans - as it is with his.

Harry really has no clue what he’s looking for, can’t even make a guess on where to start. The topic is vague - ridiculously so - and if he grabs one book, he could be wasting his time studying a subject that there aren’t even any questions on.

He really should have been studying yesterday. Obviously James wasn’t lying when he said they’d need to study hard, but everybody just waved him off so they could all splash in the pool and watch another Christopher Nolan movie (Kendall does have a great taste in movies though).

He scans the shelves, seeing a few titles that he feels would’ve worked if they were specifically studying say, Ancient history, or the history of San Francisco for example. Seeing as the subject is just plain history, Harry needs a piece of literature that’s a bit more broad, something that he can spend the next twelve hours with his head in and feel like he has a chance in the competition. Though with how empty the library is right now, he feels like he has a better chance than any of his friends that are sleeping in right now and probably won’t even join him when they wake up.

It’s not until he’s actually crouching on the ground, taking a look at the bottom shelf, that he sees something that looks useful. It’s a book, about as large as a dictionary. The cover is plain and white, and on the front it reads: From the Rise of Civilization to the Rise of Technology: The History of the World.

It’s exactly what he needs.

It doesn’t hit Harry that he’s actually pulled through, that he’s studied and made progress in his strategy, until the library door opens and Louis walks in, slamming the door a little too loudly behind him and disrupting everyone from their studies.

“Sorry about that,” Louis apologizes to the room at large, cringing as the sound continues to echo faintly.

He heads over to the history section as well, but that isn’t what catches Harry attention. Instead his focus is on the clock that’s hanging gently above the doors, displaying a surprising five thirty-six. His entire day has been spent in the library, and despite how doing this for school would usually make him feel, upset and a little angry, this time it has him smiling. He’s about halfway through the book and so much closer to winning the first advantage of the season.

Just as he’s about to go back to studying, Louis breaks the silence again.

“Hey,” he pulls Harry’s, as well as the girls’, attention. “I was in here yesterday with The History of the World. Uh, big white book on the bottom shelf. Any of you know where it is?”

Harry looks down at the page in front of him and instinctively closes it to hold it in the air. “I’ve got it...” he confesses. He instantly regrets his actions, even if they do make a delighted grin appear on Louis’ face. He’s just offered up his only lead in the competition, and now he’s got to watch as Louis retains all the knowledge Harry’s giving up.

“Awesome,” Louis grins as he approaches, reaching out to take the hefty book from Harry’s hands. “Thanks so much, mate.”

Louis takes a seat as his table just two chairs away, Harry unable to stop himself from watching the entire time. He’s got the book, and he’s even opening up to a page that Harry had already passed,
meaning there’s essentially a zero percent chance of Harry getting the book back.

He decides not to waste too much time feeling sorry for himself, instead opening his second book and getting into the groove of things. He skips forward to around the era he was at in the better book, and hopes it treats him well enough to give him a fighting chance in the trivia round.

He gets a sufficient amount of reading done, almost into the 1990s - which doesn’t mean much with how quickly each decade reads - when the library door creaks open yet again. It’s Perrie, smiling wildly as she approaches.

“Phone call for you, Tommo,” she announces, “It’s your sister.”

Louis gets up and disappears out the door with a skip in his step as Perrie steals the seat next to Harry, settling down and folding her arms on top of the desk’s surface.

“We’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she tells him, curious eyes landing on the page in front of Harry.

“Clearly not,” Harry jokes with a waving gesture to the book, “I’ve been here all day.”

She glances again at *The History of Time*, eyeing where Harry’s thumb digs into the page he’s on. Judging by her expression, which is entirely exasperated, she isn’t at all impressed by Harry’s overzealous desire to study. She raises a perfectly sculpted brow at him and declares, “Then you’re done for the day.”

“Perrie-”

“Nope,” she denies immediately. “You’re basically done with that book, and we’re all starving upstairs. Come make us food.”

Harry can’t deny that having everybody expecting him to cook for them, being relied on for something, has him feeling giddy. If they see him as somebody to depend on, then they’ll have a reason to keep him around for much longer because hopefully the person who makes their dinner will be worth far more than anyone else up for elimination.

Not that Harry plans on being up for elimination anytime soon, but on the odd chance that he is, having something to use to vouch for himself will be a bonus.

Worst case scenario, he can always come back down and study later, he reasons. It’s been about eight hours since he started studying, and he could use a break - could definitely use some food.

“Fine…” he agrees begrudgingly, deciding that it’s in his best interest to not only rest his mind, but also to stay on the good side with his competition. “I just have to put my book away.”

Perrie and Harry part ways then, Perrie standing with a swish of her blonde hair and a satisfied smile. She pats his shoulder encouragingly to add, “You’re the best.”

And then, Harry is alone in the library, reluctantly putting his things away. He looks back down, eyes instantly falling to where Louis left his book open, still not quite as far as Harry had gotten. He gets an idea.

He looks straight into the lens of the camera nearest him, not sure if he wants this to be seen by the viewers at home. He realizes that it’s bound to happen eventually, though, and that while he won’t be able to shock the show’s audience because they’ll already know everything about him, he’ll still have the ability to shock his competition.
He grabs *From the Rise of Civilization to the Rise of Technology: The History of the World* from Louis’ seat and strides toward the exit. He fleetingly remembers *The History of Time* and decides to take that with him as well, swiping it up like a kid sneaking a piece of candy from a store. Once upstairs, he stores them both under his mattress.

When he gets back downstairs, ready to find something to make for the others, he passes by the small room they’ve designated for taking phone calls and pauses for a moment. Louis’ sat in a chair and laughing into the phone. Harry only feels guilty about stealing his main source of study material for a moment before he reminds himself that this is how the game is played and resumes walking to the kitchen.

When he enters the kitchen, he finds Grimmy, Liam, and Perrie sitting at the counter while Cara and Kendall stand on the other side. It appears this is his alliance. As much as he wanted to see Niall and Sophia with them, it seems like they’ve both decided against it if their choice of present company is anything to go by. It’s fine; Harry’s not angry, but he does want to shake some sense into them and show them it’s been proven that the bigger groups have a better chance of making it to the finale. That’s the backbone support to Harry’s strategy. He’ll still be fine without the two of them, he just wishes he didn’t have to be.

Don’t get him wrong, he does still think that his group is still a great one. He doesn’t know how things will happen later on in the game, doesn’t know how trustworthy or loyal this clique is, but what he does know is that they’re easy to get along with, and none of them ate dinner without him. They need him, just like he planned.

He hopes this works out in his favor.

Harry decides to make everybody lasagna because it’s quick, and he’s positive that nobody will have anything negative to say about it. He makes enough for his circle of friends but also leaves enough on the stove for any other hungry competitors that come through the kitchen. If he’s able to keep this up, keep everybody happy and well fed, then hopefully they’ll all always want to vote to keep him around.

"My offer still stands, you know," Cara teases, her mouth a cheesy mess. "I have a spare bedroom if you want to be my cook."

Harry grins, happy to have her on his side. "I'll let you know when I finish college," he jokes back. "I'm sure there are much better things to photograph in Chicago, anyway."

Cara nods through a bite of food, unable to answer. That's alright, though. Being able to render this normally chatty group silent with his cooking fills him with a strong sense of pride. He's always thought himself to be quite domestic, and their reaction to his food is giving him perhaps the best feeling in the world.
"That smells good," somebody comments, walking into the room. "What are we eating?"

Harry turns to see Louis entering the kitchen, eyes resting solely on him.

"I don't remember inviting you to dinner," Grimmy comments, letting Harry off the hook for not knowing what to say.

"That's probably the Alzheimer's kicking in," Louis jokes. He's still got his eyes on Harry, gaze chilling, holding him still as though he knows something Harry doesn't.

Harry does know something, but for the sake of the competition, he's going to act like he doesn’t.

"Very funny, Tomlinson," Grimmy replies dryly. "Now what can we help you with? Do you need something off the top shelf?"

Harry can't help but snort at that. Not that he's very tall himself, but compared to most of the competition, he's a damn giant.

Louis doesn't find the joke funny. He smiles at it, but his grin is sharp and his stare is still laser-focused on Harry when he asks, "Hey, bro. You wouldn't happen to know where The History of the World is, would you?"

Harry saw it coming from a mile away, but it still puts him in a cold sweat.

"It's all around us," he replies casually, but he knows that Louis sees right through him.

"I meant the book," Louis clarifies with a slight edge this time, almost accusational. It makes Harry’s mouth feel dry as he tries to swallow back the slight nervousness. "I believe you took it with you when you left the library."

"I didn't take anything," Harry lies quickly. "The crew must have put it away when you took too long to go back for it."

Their conversation is hardly private - the rest of the room, as well as the cameras, are quietly watching on with great interest. Harry tries not to let it show that he's guilty, wants nothing more than to remain innocent in the eyes of those he considers allies; he has a game to play here, after all.
Louis watches him like a hawk; clear blue eyes pierce into Harry's own green, searching for the answer. Finally he says with a coolness about him, "I don't believe you."

An amused grin slowly stretches over Harry's face. "Makes sense," he taunts. "I've been told I'm pretty unbelievable."

Louis keeps up the staring contest for a few moments more before he breaks away, shaking his head as he leaves the room.

Harry watches after him for a minute. He wants to feel bad for lying, for deceiving Louis, but it's all a part of his game. In seven weeks, he'll be winning this game and won't have time to feel guilt.

"That was intense," Liam comments as soon as Louis is out of earshot. "All that over some book?"


Harry grins to himself at the joke as they all finish up their dinners. Kendall goes on to talk about the movie she wants them all to watch afterward. Harry knows he should be studying, but there's also no chance of him making it anywhere with the book without Louis catching him. Giving up the book isn't too big of a deal to him, but being exposed as a liar this early on isn't exactly a dream come true.

So he joins them for a few movies.

Harry does himself a favor by going to bed early so he can hide under his covers with a flashlight and read the book he stole from Louis. There're a few tricks to winning this game, and Harry likes to think he knows how to play them well.

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**Wednesday**

The entire house is awoken by three loud sirens at nine o’clock sharp. Harry jumps so hard he nearly tumbles out of his bed, and Perrie groans into her pillow in exhaustion and frustration.

It’s trivia day.

Harry doesn’t know what time he ended up falling asleep last night, but it was well after Perrie got in, calling him strange for hiding under his blanket with a flashlight. He’s on the tired side this morning, but his growing excitement for the day ahead works well to quell the fatigue. He feels really confident about today’s trivia. He’s well-read on the subject, having studied through the night. Even moreso, most of his competitors spent almost no time at all even considering the subject at hand.

Downstairs, the house is alive. It appears as though every contestant is awake and ready for the competition. All four burners at the stove are being used, and Harry’s left feeling conflicted. On one hand he’s happy that he doesn’t have to cook for everybody, but on the other, he’s worried that if there are others willing to do the cooking, Harry may not be as indisposable as he first thought.

There’s also the issue that with the kitchen so crowded, Harry may not be able to make himself breakfast, and on such an important morning, breakfast is key.
Perrie calls him over to the fridge and has him help pull out some fruit - strawberries, kiwis, blueberries, blackberries, and pineapple - so that they can cut it up for a quick breakfast fruit salad. He offers some to a few people as they chop, but Stan pulls some leftover pizza out of the fridge to eat, and Niall is happy just grilling bacon (although he wouldn’t be as happy if he noticed Eleanor sneaking pieces for herself and Sophia, eating them secretly as the two girls do some last-minute studying).

By the time the car arrives, everyone is prepped to go and herded into the living room as they await the call for smaller groups to head to their cars.

It’s just as the first group is being called that Oli comes storming down the stairs, hair in disarray, breathing harshly - probably in relief that he hadn’t missed the cars leaving, and therefore given up his spot in the trivia round, Harry would guess.

When the second group is called out to their cars, Harry and Perrie latch onto Jade and Grimmy and make their way out. Harry isn’t sure exactly how far from the house they’re going, but anything more than a few moments would be intolerable if he had to spend it with the likes of someone like Oli; he doesn’t even want to think about what would happen if he were to have to ride in a car with him.

“Alright,” Grimmy shouts when they’re all loaded into the car. Harry takes a moment to look around and notices the two cameras set up to capture the ride. Some of the funniest moments of the show’s history have taken place in the cars. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

Jade laughs, “Literally!”

The car pulls out onto the road, and everybody settles in their seats. Harry stares out the window and watches the city go by as he listens to everybody express their excitement.

It doesn’t feel real yet - not to Harry. It feels like he’s started college again, made a load of new friends, and they’ve all been hanging out. They’re literally on their way to the first round of a reality tv game show - a game show that has them competing for enough money to pay off any bills that they will have for the next twenty years - that will be broadcasted across the United States and Canada, and all Harry can think about is how utterly normal all of this feels.

“I don’t even feel nervous yet,” Harry admits, cutting in when the excited murmurs stop. “I should feel anxious, but I don’t feel anything.”

Perrie waves him off, keeping her gaze on the city passing by. “It’ll hit you when we get there,” she tells him. “I’ve been shitting myself since we got here.”

“Sure…”

“Not that you could tell,” Perrie continues as though Jade hadn’t even spoken. “I’m pretty casual about everything. I’ve got a great poker face.”

The three of them all exchanges looks at Perrie’s unflappable attitude. She’s yet to turn away from the window, so she doesn’t see how they’re all looking at her. In all honesty, it seems as though she was just speaking to herself.

Grimmy rolls his eyes when she still doesn’t turn her focus from the window. “And you’re incredibly humble too.”

“Oh shut up,” Perrie laughs. She faces Grimmy and levels him with lights dancing in her eyes. “Like you’re the picture of modesty.”
“I’m not sure what you mean,” Grimmy replies, his head flicking up. Harry has to stifle a laugh into his shirt sleeve as Perrie rolls her eyes. “I’m incredibly modest.”

The car falls silent again, save for the sounds of the city passing by and the very gentle hum of the music buzzing so quietly that they can’t even make out the song, and everybody has some semblance of a smile on their face. Harry still doesn’t feel any kind of nerves for the competition, though if he did, they’d definitely have flown from the comfort his friends are giving him.

“I’m not nervous, I don’t think,” Jade announces. “Or if I am, I don’t feel it yet.”

Grimmy shrugs in his seat when he admits, “I’m nervous.” He has a small grin playing across his face, upping the humor so that he doesn’t look too worried. “I’m the oldest person here. Imagine if I got sent home first. How embarrassing would that be?”

“Not any more embarrassing than you being here is in the first place.” Harry mumbles under his breath.

Grimmy laughs hard at that, chest shaking with each breath he takes. The look he shoots Harry is somehow both amused and offended. “The worst part about that isn’t even that it’s true, it’s that I don’t know if you’re joking or not.” He levels Harry with an inquiring look, but Harry doesn’t clarify himself, just raises an eyebrow in return.

“If you win, you’ll never find out.”

“Good advice,” Perrie hums at Harry’s words, “but impossible. He can’t win if I’m the one taking home the grand prize.”

Jade laughs as soon as the words leave Perrie’s mouth. “It’s good to see you showing some humility, Pezza,” she jokes. Her smile only grows wider when Perrie blows a kiss in her direction.

When their quiet giggles die down, they’re back to listening to the settled sounds of the city and the radio. Nobody looks uncomfortable or worried or anything other than just… comfortable. Harry imagines it’s because they were lucky enough to get a car together, as a group of people who are already friends.

Hopefully it doesn’t come to that. Being in the same house as him is hard enough sometimes.

Harry’s not sure exactly where they’re driving to, but it’s a safe distance away from the house. He can see one of the other cars from the house a few cars in front of them and can’t help but wonder what’s going on in there. Evidently he isn’t the only one wondering this, which shows when Grimmy voices his thoughts.

“What do you think the others are doing right now?” Grimmy asks to break the silence. Harry nods along, trying to picture what could be happening.

“Taylor’s probably studying,” Perrie answers after thinking on it for a moment. “I bet she brought the entire library in the car with her.”

Jade hums from her seat, but she’s shaking her head along with the noise. “Oh, I cannot read in a car. I get ridiculous motion sickness,” she comments, looking like she may actually throw up if they were to continue talking about it.

“Cara and Kendall are probably trying to talk to the driver,” Harry guesses. He can see it - the two girls leaning between the two front seats, asking him countless questions about his life. Cara obviously tries to be as direct as possible while Kendall mostly laughs at her.
“Probably true,” Grimmy agrees, nodding along. “They went in the car with Niall and the guy that was digging through the fridge that morning.”

“Zayn,” Perrie supplies immediately, without her usual trace of a grin. “They were with Niall and Zayn.”

Grimmy nods again, slower this time. “Right.” He doesn’t bring up how serious she sounded or how quickly she answered. “Well he didn’t seem that social, so I can’t imagine he’s holding great conversation.”

Perries shrugs, humming to herself instead of giving an opinion, and then switches the topic. “Oli’s definitely with his little group, most likely saying something sexist and objectifying to Jesy.”

“I don’t doubt that at all.”

“He’s revolting, honestly.” Jade scoffs. She turns toward her window with a sneer on her face. She looks lost in thought for a moment before huffing and turning back to the group. “He told me I’d be better fitted as a model than an artist. I told him I was a curator not an artist, and he offered to ‘curate’ me. That doesn’t even make sense.”

Perrie groans, “Yesterday after dinner he was talking a big game about how he was going to win the show, so I casually brought up that he’s fucking delusional because he’s never going to make it to the finale -”

“Casually,” Harry feels the need to interrupt sardonically.

“As you do,” Grimmy snickers.

Perrie rolls her eyes and picks up as though neither Harry or Grimmy had interrupted her in the first place. “His reply was that the only way I could take home the prize was if it was a pair of shoes.” Jade gasps, and if they were talking about anything other than Oli treating them with disrespect, Harry might’ve laughed. As the context stands, nothing about this is funny. Perrie continues. “So I explained to him that I’m a PhD candidate, and in the meantime, I’m interning for a chemical engineer with offers already on the table for when I graduate.”

“And what did he have to say to that?” Jade asks.

“Please,” Perrie laughs, sounding both amused and annoyed. “As if he even knows what a PhD candidate is.”

Harry shakes his head and looks out the window. He can’t believe that somebody like that, somebody who can be so disgusting to his peers, is on the show. There have been some pretty disgusting people - like the man that cheated on his wife in season three - but Oli’s slowly taking the title for Harry’s most hated contestant.

“I can’t wait to watch him crash and burn in the public eye.” Harry says vengefully.

Perrie laughs, agreeing, “I hope he chokes at the podium today.”

“Oh please don’t say that,” Jade protests. “You’re gonna jinx me.” She’s shaking her head, and her arms slowly fold across her stomach.

“No, she won’t.” Grimmy chimes in with a roll of his eyes.

“Yeah, you’re gonna do great, babe,” Perrie tries to cheer her up while shoving Grimmy harshly in
the shoulder. “You’ll blow everyone out of the water.”

“I don’t exactly have the best luck in competitions, okay,” she clarifies. “The nerves get to me.”

Grimmy rolls his eyes again. “Well, what a perfect place for you to invest your time then,” he says. “We’re glad to have you,” Harry nudges him in the ribs from where they’re sitting to stop him from opening his mouth and saying anything else that might sound unsympathetic.

Perrie just glares at Grimmy before turning to Jade and rubbing her hand on the girl’s shoulder. “What happened?”

Jade doesn’t looks like she wants to answer. Harry doesn’t blame her - this early in the competition, it’s key to keep yourself guarded. Any story you tell, no matter how trite or unimportant, could be used against you. Of course, staying too guarded isn’t smart either as it could leave you without a team and get you sent home in no time at all, but sharing too much is what gets people sent home the most often.

Looking back on the show, it’s amazing to see exactly where people went wrong and ended up telling the wrong thing to the wrong person. Most often, it happens with the people you’d least expect it.

So Jade looks understandably reluctant to tell her story, but soon enough she relaxes her posture and starts talking. “When I was like nine I joined this statewide spelling bee competition,” she explains, “and I was in the finale, and my word was Aurora Borealis, and listen, to this day I will never forget how to spell it because my annoying classmates made up a song for it, but I forgot the song when I got the word.” She takes a deep breath and then in one quick exhale admits, “All my teammates were smiling because there was no way I could’ve gotten the word wrong. And I didn’t, mind you, because when I opened my mouth, instead of spelling the word at all, I threw up all over the stage.”

If Jade was expecting looks of pity or words of sympathy, she was definitely mistaken. The last words barely leave her mouth before the everyone in the car ends up folded over in laughter. Grimmy’s got his entire neck exposed with how far he’s thrown his head back, and Harry’s side spasming in pain as he roars with laughter.

It’s light, this moment. Jade has admitted something truly humiliating, has maybe even showed a weakness in her game. She’s given them leverage, something that she knows they could use to gain a leg up against her in the competition, but she also knows they won’t use it. It’s like an unspoken pact they’ve suddenly made. This moment is for only them to enjoy. As they laugh together, they’re confident that none of them are planning anything nefarious. The aura in the car is one of complete safety and comfort. It’s something Harry could get used to.

But also something he knows he definitely can’t.

The car starts to pull into the parking lot of a large television studio not too long after. Harry can see the car in front of them stopped at a gate, the driver flashing an ID out the window. The competition will be starting soon, and Harry’s still yet to feel any nerves about this.

“It looks like our night is winding down ladies and gentleman,” Grimmy says suddenly. His voice is deeper than it was before, and Harry doesn’t understand why until Grimmy leans in between the driver and passenger seat and turns up the radio. There’s a slow song playing, and he grins. “We’re going to slow things down for all you lovers out there,” he announces. “So grab someone close and show them how you really feel.”

He finishes his speech by grabbing Harry’s face with his left hand, the one the girls can’t see from
the angle at which they’re sitting. His thumb slides over Harry’s mouth, and before anybody can register what’s happening, Grimmy’s mouth follows.

Harry’s laughing as he gets closer - falling backwards as Grimmy follows, ending up nearly on top of him. Perrie and Jade are giggling as well, higher pitched and more shocked than anything. They can’t tell that it’s a fake kiss, and that just makes him laugh harder, Grimmy doing the same.

They’re parked before the moment can end. The four fall out of the car together, still giggling, and join the rest of the group where they’re accumulating near the entrance to the building.

It’s odd, competing with everyone so young, but being in your twenties, you’ll laugh at anything, and if I’m being honest, I love being the center of attention.

-Grimmy, 32, Bangor

Despite everyone coming in four cars, small cliques begin to break off as they await instructions about what to do next. Harry can’t help but feel a giddy sort of pride at how much larger his group is compared to some of the others. He’s starting the game out strong, and nothing can bring him down.

The producers don’t take too long to let them inside. They’re guided through a long corridor before being ushered into a room. Harry’s seen every episode of the show, and yet when he sees the trivia room, he feels like he’s just now seeing it for the first time. The first thing Harry notices are the explosions of color everywhere. He can hear some of his fellow contestants sharing their approval of the vibrant paint job. Jesy even mentions that it looks like a game piece from Trivial Pursuit with the way the strips of color get wider the closer they get to the ceiling.

The podiums are white this year, almost luminescent looking. Harry figures this is so when the buzzer is hit the entire podium will light up, rather than just the actual buzzer. It’s a great addition, he thinks, and the way all of their podiums are set up in a semicircle rather than in a line is another nice choice.

James Corden is standing at the front of it all, and Harry can’t help but gawk at him again. One day Harry will be totally chill and relaxed around him, maybe even ask him how his day was or something equally as menial, but today is not that day.

“Welcome to your first trivia round, contestants,” James greets. “How are we feeling?” Half-hearted cheers echo around the room. Everybody is obviously excited, but they’re all also a bit apprehensive. “To be expected, I guess,” he continues with a chuckle. “All those nerves floating around would be
enough to render even the loudest of you quiet. And after watching your car rides over here, I happen to know for sure that some of you are incredibly loud.”

Everyone starts to look around at each other, looking more alert than before. James has never watched the rides over in the seasons prior. Or if he has, he’s never brought it up to the contestants, never shined the spotlight on the shit talking or plotting or kissing done in the cars.

“Well that certainly got your attention,” He jokes, looking more than pleased at the shocked expressions everybody’s possessing. His eyes stop on Harry before moving on and looking others in the eye. He finally settles on Louis and asks, “Mr. Tomlinson, what was it you were saying on your ride in? Something about an elderly - ”

“James, what’re you doing here?” Louis interrupts before James can finish. He keeps shooting panicked looks to the rest of the group. “We’re not making enemies on day one, are we?”

“It’s day four,” James corrects, “and if you haven’t made any enemies yet, then you’re not playing the game right. Now who’s ready for some trivia?”

The cheers and hollers this time are more excited, and there’s some laughter at Louis’ expense as well. There’s no doubt in Harry’s mind that the elderly “something” was about Grimmy, especially not after the small tiff they had in the kitchen yesterday.

“That’s what I like to hear,” James grins. He turns slightly as he gestures to the platforms. “Now take your place at any stand of your choosing.”

Harry grabs Perrie’s hand and guides her to the podiums at the far right end of the semicircle. It’s a power move; They stand at the edge so that they can see everybody else, and the others can’t surround them.

Or at least, that’s what he hopes is happening. Worst case scenario, he just looks like a jackass who needs Perrie to keep him safe from the other competitors. Even then, though, he’ll just come off looking a bit timid, which is exactly what his game plan calls for, so it’s a win-win situation.

The nerves have yet to hit him, and, if he’s going off of the way everybody’s bouncing back and forth on their toes and tapping their fingers, it’s safe to say that he’s probably the only one. They’ll hit soon, though, he’s positive. It’s probably just because he hasn’t faced the pressure of the competition quite yet. Once things start getting real, start getting difficult, the nerves will definitely show their faces.

Not that things should get too difficult for him. He may not have studied as much as he had wanted to, but he still did more than the majority of the house. He may not have studied as much as he had wanted to, but he still did more than the majority of the house; he knows he’s ready to win this round and take home the advantage.

James clears his throat from the front of the room and calls for attention. “Before we begin I just want to remind you that if you know the answer to a question I ask, hit your buzzer, and if you are the first one to press it your podium will light up.” There’s the sound of a buzzer going off, and Harry looks down the line to see Niall blushing as his podium lights up green. “Once I call your name you may give me your answer. For every question answered correctly, you’ll receive two points. If you get the answer wrong, it’ll be open for anyone to answer. If nobody knows the answer, I’ll send out a few options, and the total points earned by answering the question correctly be reduced to only one.”

Everybody is nodding along. Everyone here - or at least the majority - has most likely seen the seasons prior, so all these rules are just a nice reminder. Everybody’s aware that while getting the
question when it’s at two points will get you further ahead faster, the one point questions are just as valuable. In the end, points are points, and you need them to win.

“Are we ready?” James asks. Everybody answers in the affirmative, and James smiles. “This week’s category is History. Let’s begin.”

The lights dim down suddenly, and low music begins to play. Harry feels himself smile and claps his hands once before rubbing them together, wincing at the sound it makes. Nobody pays him much mind, though, so Harry’s free to hype himself up for the game.

A large spotlight falls on James, and individual lights about half as bright as the first fall on each of the contestants.

It still doesn’t feel real.

James flips the first card in his deck over and scans the writing on it. Harry notices that the stack is much thinner than it should be. “In Egypt,” he starts with a grin, “the Sphinx is a statue with the head of a man, and the body of which animal?”

Harry’s hand flies to his buzzer, and he’s shocked when his podium lights up orange. The buzzer sound fills the room, and James calls his name. He barely understands what’s happening, but he’s shouting, “Lion,” before he can even think about it.

“Correct!” James yells, and Harry’s smile stretches so wide that his cheeks tinge. “Two points.” He looks down at his podium where “2 pts.” is now printed neatly on the digital screen.

If it didn’t feel real earlier, it definitely doesn’t now. Harry’s never felt pride like this before.

James looks at the cards, and Harry zones back in. He wants to keep on his game. “Who became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 2010?”

Again, Harry’s hand races to the buzzer. When his name is called, he answers, “Cameron. David Cameron.”

James stares at the paper and stays silent on the matter for a few moments, but he’s not fooling Harry. He doesn’t need to hear “Correct” to know he got it right.

But he still loves hearing it anyway.

Harry can feel eyes on him, but he doesn’t look over, doesn’t want to lose his concentration or, god forbid, come off as cocky. For good measure, he drops his head to look down at his buzzer and bites his lip. There’s something about modesty that makes someone likeable, and Harry’s willing to play whatever cards he needs to stay in this competition.

He hears the shuffle of the cards and somebody from across the room huffs in annoyance. Harry grins at that.

“Which famous king had many wives including Anne - ?” Harry doesn’t even wait until James is finished speaking to hit his buzzer. He doesn’t want to give anyone else the chance to take such an easy question from him. “Harry?”

“Henry the eighth.”

“Correct again!” James laughs, but he’s the only one in the room doing so. Nobody else seems to find any of this funny. “You all better be careful, else Mr. Styles will snatch this game right out of
your hands.”

The questions continue like that for a few minutes, easy and rather, well, trivial. Niall, Jesy, and Harry take a quick lead away from the pack, and Harry feels himself getting more and more unsettled with each correct answer. Every question is something he’d known previous to arriving. There isn’t one question that relates to what he’d studied, and everything feels off.

Perrie seems to realize the same thing as well when she correctly answers the question about when World War I started. She looks confusedly at Harry, the look only getting worse when James celebrates her answer as though she had answered the hardest question in the pile.

Given how easy these questions are, it very well could be.

They learn just what’s wrong when James stops the game with a smirk too cocky not to have ulterior motives. “Wait a moment,” he puts his hand up and says. With an over exaggerated flip through the cards in his hands he sighs, “These are the children’s cards. No wonder you’re all doing so well.”

And Harry’s stomach drops out. Every question he’s gotten correct is basically going to mean nothing when they get the real questions rolling.

He really shouldn’t have worried about his nerves, not with how quickly they’re coming on now.

“Since I clearly cannot be trusted to ask the proper questions,” James continues. “I’d like to welcome back the season two runner-up to ask them instead.”

Harry freezes, not sure if he’d heard James correctly. He looks around at everybody else and notices that they’re all in the same boat, frozen in disbelief at what’s happening. This has never happened in any other season.

“She annihilated the competition during History week trivia, earning her immunity from the second to last physical challenge of her season. Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Cher Lloyd.” It feels surreal, and Harry’s positive that soon he’ll wake up from this fever dream in his own bed back in Portland, but sure enough, walking into the room is Cher Lloyd, still as tiny and fierce as she was when Harry first saw her on the show.

“I’m excited to be back,” Cher greets when she reaches where James is standing. She grabs the cards from his hands, throwing them behind her before reaching into her back pocket and pulling out a completely different stack that’s almost triple the size that James’ was. She sends a sharp grin to the contestants. “Now let’s kick things up a notch.”

The questions come quickly after that. They’re ten times harder than anything James had been asking, and Harry can feel himself becoming more and more bitter with every question he answers incorrectly.

By the time the round is over, Harry’s almost dizzy with how badly his luck has changed from what it was at the beginning of the round. It’s a close call to find the winner out of the few leading people, but Harry definitely isn’t one of them. After a short deliberation, Taylor is declared the winner, with Niall only two points behind.

Harry had only managed to answer one question correctly, and his face is still red with shame. Nobody’s paying attention to him though, thankfully. They’re all either too busy wallowing in their own self-pity or congratulating Taylor.

“That was a close round,” James laughs from the front of the room, and Harry can’t help but glare daggers into the side of his head. He knows, logically, that James isn’t actually mocking him, but it
feels like it. It feels like this whole room is mocking him. Cher Lloyd is standing in front of him, and all he can think about is how fucking stupid he’s going to look when he watches this back.

He needs to calm down, though. It definitely sucks, and in the gym later he’ll probably get a few good punches out on the bag - or Liam if he needs a partner - but right now he can’t let himself look as devastated as he feels. He can’t let this get to his head.

He has to play the game.

“I have to give it to you, Ms. Swift,” James continues. “You really gave it your all in there.” Taylor clearly isn’t worried about staying humble. She knows how well she played and that she doesn’t have a group as big as Harry’s to hype her up, so she doesn’t mind gloating.

She’s got her head held high and a smirk on her face as she tips her head at James. She doesn’t look at the other contestants, but that’s fine because Harry’s certain she’d see nothing positive in their faces.

Harry really has to reign it in.

“For your advantage,” James persists, “You will have exclusive information in the physical challenge.” He walks over and hands Taylor a light blue envelope that obviously holds her advantage. Harry’s just glad that she isn’t getting immunity. That would’ve really set him off. “Your physical challenge this week will be...” He trails off, and a drum roll plays in the background.

Harry can feel himself shaking in anticipation. Perrie’s in the same boat next to him. They make brief eye contact before looking away to prepare themselves for the news of their first ever - and possibly last - physical challenge.

“A scavenger hunt,” James announces. Nobody has much time to process this information before James is shooing them out the door with a “Good luck” and “See you Friday.”

Everybody slowly makes their way down the corridor, Taylor walking taller than anybody else, and Harry tries his hardest not to drag his feet. He’s allowed to be sad, maybe a little angry, but he can’t let it get too far.

There are three types of competitors that are said to be the easiest to vote off. The first is the one that always wins. Anybody that knocks the competition out of the park every single week had better be ready to do it continuously. The very moment that a favorite to win is up for elimination, everybody jumps at the chance to get rid of them. Voting out the best competition is the smartest thing to do.

The second type is the one that isn’t useful to you. Contestants in the past who refrained from helping others - keeping intel to themselves and just not sharing with others in general - were voted home incredibly quickly. That’s why Harry’s always on top of his game when it comes to cooking and cleaning up for everybody. He doesn’t know when or if he’ll get any inside information, but he does know that he wants to stay on everybody’s good side.

The third type is the one that nobody likes. It’s the Olis of the show, the ones who think they’re God’s gift to the world and who get angry quickly. Harry knows he’s likeable, knows he has a pleasant face, a pleasant voice - he’s a pleasant person! He just invests a lot in this competition, and losing isn’t something he takes lightly. He doesn’t want to be easily eliminated.

Harry doesn’t want be an Oli.

Perrie’s been silent next to him. Harry thinks she can sense how upset he is. That’s alright, he guesses. She doesn’t seem to be in a great mood either. Everybody’s a little upset that they didn’t
win, and nobody’s expected to feel sublime after a round like that.

Except maybe Taylor.

“Now I know why I didn’t feel nervous,” Harry tries to break the silence with a joke. “It’s because I didn’t actually know anything.”

Perrie hums next to him. She bumps her shoulder into his and says lightly, “That’s not true. You got the first three questions right.”

“Great,” he laughs humorlessly. “I’ll be able to beat my six-year-old cousin at Trivial Pursuit. How wonderful. That’ll pay off my student loans.”

“I didn’t win either, babe,” she reminds him. “We’re all a little disappointed.” They continue walking down the corridor. There’s not as much talking as there was going into the room - everybody more focused on murmuring and trying not to look like a sore loser. “Would you like to go get trashed?”

“Not tonight,” he declines. “I’m going to see if I can persuade Taylor into sharing her advantage with me.”

Niall, who was walking behind them and must have been eavesdropping, peaks his head between them. “Not likely,” he interrupts. “I already asked since we were neck and neck, but she’s only sharing with Eleanor and Sophia.”

“What?” Perrie asks, stopping in her tracks. “Why them?”

“She says they’re the only ones who studied as much as she did, so they deserve it.”

Perrie huffs and stomps out the doors. When Niall gives Harry a questioning look, he just shrugs in response, not even attempting to understand the exchange.

Niall ends up replacing Jade on the ride home. With the way they were standing, Jade was on the other side of the group, and grabbing Niall to join them seemed better than Stan or Louis who were both in the same proximity to them.

They’re not as loud or excited as they were on the way in. There aren’t any stories shared or mock-kisses being distributed. The mood hasn’t exactly gone sour, but nobody seems to be up for the usual hype antics that being in groups usually brings out.

Everybody wants to reflect inward and let their emotions settle before bringing up any conversation. Harry, especially, doesn’t want to be the one to break the silence, not when the situation can easily go sour.

Even Grimmy, who got in the car with a grin on his face as though he didn’t just get demolished in the game and get four different questions wrong in the face of James Corden and Cher Lloyd, has taken the hint and refrained from trying to create conversation.

Perrie ends up being the one to speak first. She’s been staring out the window for a lot of the ride, but she suddenly snaps her head back toward the group and asks, “Is anybody else bitter that most of the questions were about other countries?”

They all jump at the sound of her voice snapping through the silence. When the question settles in their minds, Niall shrugs. “I did think there’d be more questions based in America, I won’t lie. That’s what it’s usually been in the past seasons.”
“It just doesn’t make any sense,” she wonders out loud, face scrunched up in confusion.

“I heard Eleanor complaining as we were leaving,” Grimmy adds. “She was disappointed that there weren’t more questions about California specifically.”

Harry tilts his head at that. Harry would’ve liked there to be more questions about Oregon, but he didn’t expect them. “Why would there be?” he asks.

“You know how Californians can be,” Grimmy rolls his eyes. “It always has to be about them.”

“That’s not it at all, Grimmy,” Niall argues. Harry finds himself looking straight in the lens of the camera. If a fight breaks out, he doesn’t want any part of it. “It’s because every season before has had a section in each category focused on the city they’re filming in.”

Perrie nods along with that. “That’s true,” she agrees. “They filmed in Philly for season three, and there were at least ten questions about the Eagles during sports week.”

“Were there really?”

“You’re supposedly the show’s biggest fan, Harry,” she responds, rolling her eyes at him. The gesture is playful, thankfully, and Harry can feel some of the tension leaking out of his shoulders. “How did you not know that?”

“I never really paid enough attention to that,” Harry shrugs. He never gave much attention to the exact questions - he was always more a fan of the overall gameplay and strategies. He likes watching interviews with the producers of the show and seeing if they have any good tactics that might make things go smoother. “If there was a season filmed in Portland, then I probably would’ve noticed.”

Niall laughs, loud and outright. It’s great to hear in the wake of the tense silence that overtook them only a little while ago. “You wouldn’t have, and you know it,” he teases. “What sport team does Portland have that’s on anybody’s radar?”

“I…” Harry can’t actually think of any.

“See?” Niall counters triumphantly. “You’d have been oblivious no matter where the seasons were filmed.”

He has a point. Harry’s really only occupied himself with the strategic parts of the show. He was never one the viewers that tried to keep up with the questions and answer them. This show was never his Wheel of Fortune, it was moreso his Real Housewives. He likes the drama. He likes the back-handedness. He likes seeing what other people didn’t and thinking “if that were me, I’d have done it better .”

That’s why he’s here. His sister got sick of him acting like he’d be better than the people on the show, so she dared him to sign up, and he did. He’s going to play the game to the extreme, and he’s definitely going to study, but keeping track of questions asked isn’t something he’s going do.

It’s not something he can do.

“Now that I think about it,” Grimmy brings up, a distant look in his eyes. “I don’t think there was one question about San Francisco. Not one.”

“You sure?” Niall asks. “Because I could’ve sworn - ”

Perrie sits up in her seat, jolting forwards and shouting, “He’s right!” Harry jumps in his seat at her
volume. “There was the one about the California state motto, and after that… nothing. Not one question about SF.”

“That’s odd…”

Harry can’t concentrate on the rest of the conversation, not with the look Perrie’s giving him. She looks like she’s just discovered something that could change their lives, and as on the ball as Harry wants to be in this competition, he can’t for the life of him figure out what is going on in her head.

But he really wants to find out.

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**Thursday**

Harry’s awoken at the hour of five in the morning. Perrie’s face is hovering over his own, and there’s a heavy weight on his chest. The room is mostly dark, the sun not yet even peeking over the horizon, and from what he can see of Perrie’s face in the darkness, she looks nearly manic, as though she had barely slept last night.

“Wake up, sleepy head,” she coos quietly.

“Wassit,” he starts, smacking his lips a couple times to get some of the rasp out of his voice. Harry’s not sure why he’s being woken up, but it’s definitely far too early for him to even have to guess. “What’s - hm?”

“Get up,” Perrie clarifies, voice less saccharine this time. He tries to pull the blanket up over his head, but her weight is stopping him. “We have work to do.”

Harry groans. The last thing he wants to do is wake up and work, especially not after getting his ass kicked in trivia yesterday. The wound is still fresh. “I’m still - ”

Perrie’s huff cuts him off. “I’ll give you a minute to wake up, and then we have to get going”

She gets off of him and flees to her side of the room. He doesn’t trust that she gave him a full minute because her weight is barely off his chest before the lights are flipped on and Perrie’s voice is barking a cheery “Good morning” as she makes her way back over to his bed.

Harry sits up, using all of the strength in his half-awake body to do so, and watches Perrie settle herself by his feet. She still looks alarmingly good - put together like she was expecting to go out and face the world at this wretched hour.

“What’s going on?” Harry asks as he rubs his eyes, still not awake yet.

“I know Taylor’s intel.”

Harry doesn’t hear the words at first, just nods his head to give off the illusion that he’s paying attention. “Okay.” They sink in though as Perrie continues to stare at him with a calculated look, and his eyes fly open wider than Harry thought possible at this hour. “Wait, what?”

“I figured out Taylor’s intel,” she repeats.
“How?” Harry demands. His mind is running a mile a minute, and he finds his eyes going to the camera in the corner hoping it didn’t hear what she’d just said. There aren’t many rules to this game when it comes down to tactics. You can manipulate your way to every win in the book. The only thing that can’t be done is outright stealing somebody’s advantage. “Did you steal it from her? That’s -”

“No I didn’t steal!” she cuts him off. “How could you even think I’d do that?”

“You’re the brains of the operation, Pez,” he explains himself. He doesn’t want Perrie mad at him, not when she’s got intel to share. This partnership just started, and he doesn’t want to be the cause of it ending. “I thought you’d do anything to win.”

Perrie grins. “Oh, I will,” she agrees. She keeps the grin on her face as she continues, “And don’t doubt for a second that I won’t completely destroy you if it comes down to us in the finale, but I’d never break the rules to win.”

“Then what -”

“Yesterday in the car, you idiot,” she explains. “Weren’t you paying attention at all?”

“Which way,” Harry asks, not even close to knowing what she’s talking about. “With Jade or with Niall?”

“With Niall - oh my god, okay,” Perrie’s face is pinched, clearly done with Harry - a fact that almost makes him want to laugh. “Listen, I’m going to have to teach you to always be on alert with your competitors because if I wasn’t in the car with you we’d be absolutely fucked. Now we have to hurry this up because we’re losing time.”

Harry drops his face in his hands. “What is even happening right now? Am I still asleep? Is this a dream?”

“Not that I’m not honored that you’d dream of me,” Perrie jokes, grabbing Harry’s face and pulling it out of his hands, “but no, this is very much real. Yesterday when we were talking about how there was only one California question asked, and absolutely no San Francisco questions…”

He waits for her to elaborate, but she just keeps looking at him with an expectant look in her eyes. “... And?”

“You’re the worst partner ever,” she groans. “The scavenger hunt is going to be about San Francisco history, you absolute asshole. Can we go study now?”

And that makes sense. Grimmy didn’t even realize what he was saying, probably only thought he was providing an odd fact to the conversation. Thank God for Perrie because Harry didn’t catch that either.

“That makes so much sense -”

“Yes I know,” Perrie responds, hers eyes rolling as she gets off the bed. “I’ve been sitting on this knowledge for about twelve hours. Now can we go study.”

They’re careful when they head down to the library. Some of the bedroom doors are open (Harry laughs when he see’s Niall nearly hanging off his bed as he sleeps), and they don’t want to wake somebody up and alert them of what they’re up to.

Having intel of any kind for a physical challenge is something you don’t want to inform other
contestants about. Perrie sharing this only goes to show that Harry chose correctly when teaming up with her. He doesn’t want anybody else catching onto what they know.

Because yes, any intel is great, but when too many people know about it, it’s no longer intel. After it gets passed around too much, it’s back to being fair game for who will win. Why would they want anybody latching onto them and leaching their inside scoop of the challenge?

The lights are on in the library when they arrive. Harry’s not sure if that’s because they never turn off or because somebody’s in the room.

He hopes if anything, it’s just Taylor making good on her intel.

When they walk over to the historical section, they’re surprised to see not only one but two bodies leaning against the shelves with none other than the *History of San Francisco* in their hands. It’s the only book that reads only of San Francisco and nothing else.

“Good morning, Zayn. Louis,” Perrie greets. She looks nothing less than friendly, and Harry really has to step up his game if this is who he’s being compared to. He doesn’t think he’s ever been able to pull off innocence like she does. “That’s a nice book you’ve got there.”

Zayn doesn’t respond more than just a nod, but Louis doesn’t take his eyes off Harry as a smirk forms on his lips. “Well,” he grins. “It looks like I beat you to this book, doesn’t it?”

Harry has to resist rolling his eyes. He channels his inner Perrie and acts as guiltless as possible. “I never took your book,” he lies. “I swear.”

“I don’t believe you,” Louis tells him. He pauses, leveling Harry with a look before hesitantly continuing. “But I’ll be the bigger person and move past it. Now let me guess - you figured out what the scavenger hunt is about, and you came down to study where nobody could catch you.” He turns to Perrie. “Am I right?”

“I swear everything is a competition between you men - ”

“Well this is a competition,” Louis justifies. Next to him, Zayn hides a grin in his sleeve.

“But not everyone is against you,” Perrie clarifies. Harry notices that her eyes are keeping track of the book, and again Harry has to send his thanks for having her on his team. Harry’s been acting like a bobble head, looking everywhere he can while Perrie’s been keeping their intel on her mind. “Let us take turns with the book, and we won’t spill the beans to anyone else. Deal?”

“I hardly - ”

“Shut up, Louis,” Zayn cuts his partner off. “It’s a deal.”

They all take a seat on the floor of the history section and crowd around the book. They read through it together until people start waking up. Zayn and Perrie take the book into Perrie and Harry’s room to study as that happens, and to avoid any suspicion, Harry goes to make breakfast.

After a good hour of leaving them alone, Harry goes and replaces Zayn, joining in with Perrie to read through for a little while. It continues like this, Louis coming to replace Perrie and so on throughout the day. Nobody gets skeptical when Harry says he’s taking a nap or Perrie says she needs some time to recover from a call with her sister.

They’re all getting by with it smoothly, and at one point, Harry grabs his and Perrie’s laundry to take it down and wash it, figuring it will give him a good hour of something to do, and Perrie can come
fold it when her study time ends.

It’s as he’s separating the whites from the colors that Taylor walks in the room. “Finally getting around to cleaning up, hm?”

Her voice makes Harry jump, dropping a pair of shorts in the process. There’s a sharpness to Taylor’s voice that has Harry on edge. “Well we’ve not even been here a week so - ”

“Right. Right,” she cuts him off, nodding along. “I’m not used to being away from home, so everything feels like an eternity.”

“I know what you mean,” Harry says. He knows there’s something up. Taylor hasn’t been casual with, well, anyone. At least not that Harry’s seen. Taylor either wants or knows something, and he refuses to let his guard down. “I’ve never been this far - ”

“That’s fascinating, Harry, really,” she cuts him off. “I was just wondering if you’d been down in library lately. I was looking for a book, and it’s gone missing.”

“Sorry,” he apologizes. “I can’t say that I have.”

“Hm.” When Harry looks up from his finished pile of clothes, Taylor is staring at him intensely. “Are you positive?”

Harry nods, trying to keep his cool. If Taylor’s inquiring about a missing book, and they’ve just taken the only book on the history of San Francisco, then that means they’ve got it right. “I mean, I was in the library Tuesday, but even then I didn’t take a book with me.”

“Alright,” she grins. It’s hollow, not meeting her eyes. “Thanks for your help.”

Harry smiles as the door closes behind her, proud that they had figured it out. Proud that Perrie had figured it out. When he’s watching the show back at the end of the six weeks, he’s going to be one of his favorite characters. With the way things are going so far, he’s playing the game perfectly.

He can really win this.

When he joins Perrie for some studying, he tells her about the Taylor incident, and the two spend a minute cheering before they’re back to studying.

When Louis joins switches places with Perrie, Harry brings it up to him as well and, for good measure, mentions how hard it was to lie, but that now they at least know that they’re on the right page. Louis watches him as he speaks, his lips thinned before he smiles. “I’m sure it was real tough for you,” he says with a bitter tone.

Harry frowns, hoping it comes off as if he’s done nothing to warrant Louis’ words. “It was - ”

“You’re getting quite the reputation as a book thief…”

Harry sighs at that. Looking back, stealing the book from Louis didn’t do him any good, especially with how poorly he lost the trivia round. If he’d never taken it, Louis wouldn’t be suspicious of him every moment here. “I know you truly think I took that book, but I didn’t.” He’s already dug himself a hole, and admitting to his actions this late wouldn’t do him any good. “I was with Perrie both Monday and Tuesday, all day. You can ask her, and she’ll vouch for me.”

“I’m sure Perrie will have your back like any partner would,” Louis nods along. “I’d lie for you if it would benefit me in the end.”
“I - Well,” Harry clears his throat. He had known that they were together on this due to them both having inside knowledge on the physical challenge, but he didn’t think they were anywhere close to having a partnership. “That’s nice to hear, but you won’t have to. I don’t want anybody to lie for me. Especially if I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Louis gives him a look, but doesn’t say anything. They both go back to studying, but Harry can’t shake the hollow fear of being caught. He thinks for a minute that maybe Louis is convinced that Harry didn’t take the book, and that he’s only acting this way on principle.

But that still doesn’t clear the invisible lump from his throat.

Friday

“Welcome to your first physical challenge,” James greets them as they all arrive at Golden Gate Park. They’re standing near a boat rental shop, and looking around, Harry can’t see any signs of normal city life. They’re in the heart of the city, right near the golden gate bridge, and yet all Harry can see is nature. It’s beautiful.

There are more cameras surrounding them than there’ve been all week, and Harry assumes it’s so that every contestant is shown going through their scavenger hunt. Harry and Perrie have agreed to go off together, but they might need to split up at some point, so it’ll be cool to have their own personal cameraman.

“As you’re already aware,” James continues. “You will be participating in a scavenger hunt. What you aren’t aware of is that every item you need from the list will be guarded, and in order to acquire each item, you’ll need to answer a question about the history of this beautiful city, San Francisco.”

Perrie and Harry make eye contact at that and try to keep their grins at bay. There’s not been even one moment where Harry has regretted teaming up with her. If things continue like this, it’ll be the two of them battling it out in the finale.

“I’ll leave you with your first task on the list. You’ll acquire a map of the Golden Gate Park, and then you’ll be on your way. Once you’ve correctly gotten to the last task on the list, you’ll be sent to the meeting place. The last three competitors to meet back here will be up for elimination. You are allowed to work with a partner, or in groups, but beware that clashing personalities could slow you down and that these questions are made to stump you.”

Perrie nudges him in the arm when James pauses. He looks and sees her minutely jerking her head to the left. He looks over and doesn’t see anything but a sign at first. He looks back, not sure what she’s saying, but she does it again. He looks back and again, only the sign is in sight.

He keeps his attention over there, not understanding exactly what she was gesturing to, but when he thinks to read the sign he reads the words “Information Kiosk.”

That’s where they’ll get their map.

“Your first task is to follow the arched drum bridge."

Everybody races off in different directions. There have to be a few kiosks just in the general proximity, but Harry knows for certain that there’s one close by in this direction, so he and Perrie
race that way with Jesy and Stan hot on their tails.

When they grab their maps from the attendant, Jesy’s talking to Stan in a quiet, rushed voice. “Arched bridge, that’s the Golden Gate bridge!”

Perrie and Harry exchange small smiles and wait until Jesy and Stan are running off in the other direction before saying, at the same time, “Japanese Tea Garden.”

“She thought it was the arched bridge,” Perrie laughs as they turn in the opposite direction from Jesy and make their way to the Tea Garden. “Not the Arched Drum Bridge.”

They’re the first ones to get to the garden, and they give themselves a moment to cheer before going to the attendant and answering the question, “In what year was San Francisco founded?” He gets a smile from the attendant when he answers 1776 with confidence, and then they’re sent on their way to the next hint.

On their way out, the two pass Taylor, who’s watching them both closely. She’s clearly got the head up on them, so once she’s out of sight, Perrie and Harry break out into a jog to their next location, not wanting to give up their lead.

The rest of the scavenger hunt goes smoothly, Perrie and Harry agreeing on most of the questions and allowing themselves time to talk things out before immediately answering and ruining their lead. They even run past a flustered and annoyed Jesy and Stan, still falling behind after mistaking the location for the first task.

The only two mistakes made are Perrie’s fault (which Harry does not mention, but takes great pride in). The first is that Perrie insists her answer is correct when they’re asked which district in San Francisco is the easternmost. Harry’s certain it’s Bayview, but Perrie manages to convince him to guess Potrero Hill. Harry was originally correct, and their punishment for the wrong answer is a three minute penalty where they have to wait to get the next task. The second mistake is that take the wrong path to the De Young Museum and have to backtrack.

Taylor wins first place as Perrie and Harry race back to the starting point, which is also where they’re supposed to finish according to the very last station they go to, the attendant telling them to “return to the point in which your scavenger began.” James greets them with a smile, immediately congratulating Louis and Zayn who are just barely behind them.

In the end, the final three are Grimmy, Cara, and Stan. Grimmy and Cara are speaking in hushed tones to each other about how hard they’ll be studying next week if they manage to make it through. Stan’s shaking with nerves and Jesy’s rubbing his back and whispering quiet, comforting words to him. All Harry feels is relief.

Sweet relief.

Saturday

The day has gone by slowly. It’s on everybody’s mind that tonight they’ll have to vote somebody out, and it’s not sitting well with them. Their clique has been in the living room watching movies all day and avoiding having to talk about the upcoming elimination and having to, most likely, send
either Cara or Grimmy tonight.

It’s one of the worst things that can happen to a team this early in the game - having to choose whom between them is sent home - and none of them are prepared for it. They’ve been dodging the subject every time it comes up, and they know they have to talk, have to agree on whom they’re voting for, but nobody wants to take the initiative and start the conversation.

The discussion eventually comes up when Grimmy, Cara, and Stan are all guided up to their rooms to pack. The rules state that as soon as the voting is finished, the eliminated contestant will have five minutes to say goodbye before being ushered out of the house. The only exception is the final week. After the physical challenge, there is no elimination - the losing team automatically being sent home. Because of that, tough decisions like this don’t have to be made.

Jade turns to everyone as soon as Cara and Grimmy disappear up the stairs together. “Are we going to bring up the elephant in the room?” she asks boldly, despite everybody avoiding eye contact.

“I was hoping we could put it off a bit longer,” Harry mumbles to his lap. He, more than anyone, doesn’t want to be the one making the tough decisions.

“Well, we’d better do it now. It’d be pretty rude to discuss whom we’re sending home right in front of their faces.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Liam groans before Jade has even finished speaking. His head is angled up towards the ceiling and his eyes are pinched. “We’re not choosing who to send home,” he protests. “We’re choosing who to vote for.”

“It’s the same thing, Liam,” Kendall tells him. She doesn’t look upset by the topic; she looks to be the most distanced out of everyone from what they’re discussing. “Don’t sugar coat it. Whoever we don’t vote for is getting sent home because Stan has everybody else’s vote.”

“That’s not true!” Harry argues, thinking about how they’re a big enough group to maybe split the vote and send Stan home. “We can get Taylor, Sophia, and Eleanor on our - ”

Perrie laughs shortly, cutting him off. “That’s not going to happen,” she tells him. “They think our group is too strong, so they’re going with Stan.”

“Which is why we have to choose carefully,” Liam adds. “Who would it be smarter to keep on - ”

“Yeah, I’m not doing this,” Kendall interrupts. Her face is closed off and her voice tight. “I’m voting for Cara. Everyone else can choose for themselves.” She gets up and leaves the room, everyone watching, completely frozen.

Kendall and Cara are obviously the closest of anybody in the house. Even Perrie and Harry haven’t gotten to know each other as well as the two of them have, constantly together and always whispering to each other.

They share the bed together, for goodness sake.

There’s no reason for any of the group to be surprised by Kendall’s choice. They don’t even know whom they’re voting for yet, but Harry doesn’t think anyone would be able to convince her to vote for Grimmy. There’s not enough money in the world to make her betray Cara.

Harry doesn’t know if he wants to be that attached to anybody. Perrie’s his closest friend in the competition, and he can see them keeping in close contact long after the show’s ended, but he wouldn’t put her above himself - not in the competition, at least. If it were to come between the two
of them, he wouldn’t purposefully throw the game to let her win.

You’d have to be crazy to do something like that.

“Can’t say I didn’t see that coming,” Jade comments flippantly before Kendall’s even out of sight.

“I think I’m going with Cara too,” Liam admits, nodding in the direction Kendall disappeared.

Perrie huffs, shaking her head. She doesn’t agree, which is great news because Harry doesn’t either.
“I’m choosing Grimmy,” she decides. “Cara isn’t serious about this at all, and Grimmy gave…” she trails off, clearing her throat, and Harry’s glad for it. Glad that she isn’t giving away the advantage they had in the physical challenge due to Grimmy’s words. “He gave his best effort back there.”

“Isn’t that almost worse?” Liam asks, looking torn on whether to switch his vote or stay with Cara.
“That he tried his hardest and still got bottom?”

“Maybe?” Harry considers, but for all that they know, Cara was also on top of her game and failed just as hard. There’s no winning when they have to choose whom to send home. “I’m going with Grimmy, though. He’s more useful to us.”

Jade nods. “I’m probably going with Grimmy too.”

“Why?” Liam groans. His face is taut, and it’s looking like the last thing he wants to do is switch his vote, but like he’s realizing he may have to. “It’s not smart to keep him.”

“We need to provide a strong alliance,” Jade explains. “Cara’s not serious about the game, so she’ll be in the bottom again, but I think sending her home is a bad choice too. If we start to break apart after only a week, then we lose our alliance. We need to agree”

Harry and Perrie are nodding with every word that Jade’s saying, taking it in and agreeing wholeheartedly. Harry knows there will come a week when he has to vote off somebody he’s extremely close with, and he’ll do it if he has to. They’ve formed their clique and have to stay true to it, even if that means voting off his own team. It has to be done.

“But Kendall -”

“Kendall isn’t going to last long either, Liam,” Perrie interrupts.

“Besides,” Harry supplies, speaking hesitantly. “She’ll be hurt at first, but with Cara gone, she’ll be more dependant on us, and we can use that to our advantage.”

Harry isn’t going to pretend this is a part of his game. He said it because it’s true, and they need to be thinking that way.

Liam looks shocked, surprised to hear those words. “That’s so twisted -”

Jade cuts him off, eyes stone cold and serious. “That’s the game.”

It takes a bit of persuasion, but Liam agrees to switch his vote just in time for everybody to come back downstairs, bags packed. The entire house gathers together in the dining room and has a nice dinner where they toast to the three in the bottom. Stan, Cara, and Grimmy are white in the face the entire time.

Shortly after they all finish eating, they’re called into the backyard by a producer. Everybody takes their time getting there, nobody excited to send a friend home.
“Good evening, everybody,” James greets them, a solemn look on his face. He knows as well anybody that eliminations aren’t fun. He’s been here for seven seasons of them. “As you all are aware, it’s time for your first elimination.”

Grimmy lets out a shaky breath from where he’s standing next to Harry, so Harry reaches out and grabs his hand. He holds it through James’ speech, wanting to let the other man know it’ll be alright.

“We’ll let you all enter the tent,” James breaks in his speech to gesture to the thin canopy behind him, “individually, where you’ll vote for who you’d like to stay. When voting is over, the eliminated contestant will have five minutes to say goodbye before being escorted to the car awaiting them outside. Liam, you’ll begin. Good luck.”

Writing Grimmy’s name down didn’t feel great, but it’s a competition, and at the end of the day, it’s like - what can you do?

-Liam, 23, Beckley

One by one, everybody goes into the tent and casts their vote. It’s exciting, being in the tent for the first time and writing Grimmy’s name on the small blue slip of paper, but Harry knows that once everybody’s voted, they’ll have to face the consequences and watch Cara leave.

Which is exactly what happens.

Harry had hoped that maybe the other teams voted for Cara, and that maybe nobody liked Stan and wanted him gone, but there’s no such luck. Not much longer after Jesy leaves the canopy and the voting is over, James is announcing for Cara to say goodbye.

There’s a group hug with the clique, but that’s short lived. Cara’s much more interested in monopolizing Kendall’s arms, falling into them gracelessly as she pinches her face tightly, holding back tears, it appears. She spends her entire five minutes embracing Kendall and exchanging words with her. When Cara’s told it’s time to go, the look on both of their faces has Harry’s heart aching.

Everybody watches Cara leave, getting smaller and smaller until she’s climbing into the car and driving away. Harry knows that Grimmy’s relieved to be staying, but just looking at him, he can see the grief of losing Cara. There’s no doubt in his mind that this is the worst part of the show.

Behind them, Oli drags Stan into the house to drink. They throw out an open invite to everyone else, but nobody feels like joining the celebration. It only makes sense that the night ends early.
Week 2

Sunday

It’s silent when Harry wakes up. The air around him is still, and there’s a slight chill seeping through his blankets from the air conditioner that must have been running sometime in the night. He turns to face the window and sees the sun is only halfway risen. Perrie’s dead asleep across from him, and the clock’s saying it’s just past six in the morning.

He knows he could probably go back to sleep for a few hours, but there’s a pressure on his bladder that’s become impossible to ignore, so he reluctantly decides to get up.

He wrestles his way out from under the covers and sits up with his legs dangling off the side of the bed. He allows himself a moment to stretch his limbs, and winces when his back pops. It’s not that the beds are uncomfortable, per se, it’s just that Harry tends to sleep much more stiffly in a twin bed than in the full-sized mattress he has at home.

Harry’s still half asleep. His vision is still a little blurry around the edges, and when he goes to stand up, his sleep heavy legs take a moment to actually start moving.

As he’s exiting his room, he walks straight into the plastic wrap and immediately starts stumbling. Instead of backing up, which would have been the logical thing to do, Harry keeps walking forward, allowing the plastic to wrap around itself and trap him inside. As he crashes to the floor in a clumsy pile of limbs and plastic, the only two things he can think about are the cameras aimed down the hallway that are recording every second of Harry’s unfortunate situation, and that this moment is soon going to be aired on national television, broadcasting Harry’s humiliation to anyone with a tv and cable provider.

He quickly yanks the cling wrap off of his face as he ducks back into his room to hide from anybody who may come to check out what the loud thump and shriek had been. After taking a moment to collect himself, he runs off to the bathroom.

Later, he’ll tell everyone that the reason he didn’t notice the shiny plastic wrap covering the doorway of their room was because he was still half asleep. When he tries to explain this to Perrie, though, she just says it wasn’t his state of alertness making him ignorant to his surrounding, but rather his total lack of awareness, and that she really has to teach him to be more observant.

He doesn’t know who put the cling wrap up for sure, but if he had to take a guess, he’d guess Oli. Sure, it technically could’ve been anyone in the house who just wanted to play a harmless prank, but Harry’s not going to dignify it with any more thought when he already has the best revenge plan for Oli forming in his mind.

Growing up, Harry’d always had Gemma around, and because of her constant presence, he often found himself falling victim to her pranks. He’s never been one to let himself get pushed around, so he eventually learned to fight back just as craftily.

And if Oli truly was the one to place the wrap on Harry’s door (or even if he wasn’t; Harry doesn’t mind placing the blame on him either way), then he has no problem putting his expertise to use.

He first spares a thought to putting plastic wrap under the toilet seat - an eye for an eye - so it
splashes back at Oli next time he goes, but there’s no way to guarantee Oli will be the next one to use the bathroom. He also doesn’t want to throw out any pranks that are too simple or ineffective. Rubbing lemons on his white shoes or putting salt in the sugar shaker - those are far too juvenile, especially if they’re being aired on national television.

He knows exactly what he’s going to do, but it requires Oli’s room to be empty, and at six in the morning that isn’t probable. He runs back to his room, careful to check for wrap. It’s unlikely somebody would’ve come to replace it in the less than two minutes he was relieving his bladder, but he just wants to be safe. It’s all clear, and he goes back to bed.

When he wakes up for the second time this morning, he’s much more comfortable, and the bed across from his is empty. There’s a piece of fabric lying over the clock, so he can’t see the time until he gets out of bed and makes his way across the room to remove Perrie’s shirt from blocking the numbers. It’s thirty minutes past eight, which isn’t exactly as late as he was hoping for, but it’s still better than waking up with the sun.

Standing here, he can hear voices from the other side of the window, and assumes some of his housemates are spending their day off in the pool, which sounds like a great idea, but Harry can’t enjoy the water himself until he acts out his plan.

He goes downstairs (throwing Perrie’s shirt through the doorway first, just to be careful, in case the plastic wrap was put back), passing by Oli’s occupied room on the way, to see Niall lounging across one of the couches in the living room. The lad’s still in pajamas, there’s a half-eaten plate of bacon on the table, and golf is playing on the television.

Harry’s careful not to create too much noise as he makes his way across the room and settles into a seat. Niall isn’t sleeping, but he’s transfixed by the screen. The old saying about not waking a sleepwalker feels appropriate for the glazed look in his eyes.

Eventually, Niall huffs when the golfer on screen misses what should’ve been an easy hit. Harry deems it an appropriate time to strike up a conversation. “Nobody try to fight you for the tv?” he questions.

“Nah,” Niall responds, his hand idly flapping in Harry’s direction, not even looking away from the television. “Everyone is going swimming instead.”

Harry doesn’t answer at first, not sure how to continue a conversation when it feels like it’s been finished. After a wait that was probably too long, he asks, “And you’re not joining them?”

Niall moves his gaze slowly to Harry and looks at him as if he has two heads. “This is Rory McIlroy,” he explains. “I can swim any day I want, but I’m not missing this live.”

Harry hums but otherwise doesn’t make a move to say anything else, not really sure he has the energy to start an entirely new conversation out of thin air. He leans back in his seat and settles in to watch the match.

Niall, it appears, is the type of person who can spend the night partying like a madman, throwing crazy shapes as he drinks every person in the room under the table, but in the morning, wolf down an entire bag of bacon as he watches presumably the most boring sport on the planet (Harry thinks this objectively, as he himself has been known to spend enough time watching golf in his dorm that he misses two classes and a seminar in one day).

Playing it, though, that’s an entirely different story. Harry’s only been known to successfully play two sports in his life, and those are tennis and volleyball. He’s got the type of body that flies around
without much purpose, and only those two sports have managed to help him control his limbs and play a decent game.

This is why he hopes sports week comes sooner rather than later. The worst thing in the world would be for his worst subject to come when it matters most - when it decides whether or not he makes it into the finale.

Because in that case, he’ll need a miracle to make it to the finale.

“Remember in season four when the sports challenge was golf?” Harry finds himself asking when the action and commentary stops long enough for a commercial break.

“Nobody but Leigh-Anne even hit it within par,” Niall answers with a laugh, leaning his head back on the arm rest. “That’s when she was pinned favorite to win.”

Harry doesn’t argue, because he’s not wrong. That challenge was when the media started putting her name at the top of the brackets, but that’s not when the viewers took notice of her. Harry knew from week one Leigh-Anne was going to take home the prize.

She had a strategy not too far from his, only hers wasn’t to be too nice and useful to send home, it was the exact opposite. She was cut throat and hand intel on every contestant. She was only in the bottom once, but almost everyone voting saved her, wanting her help in the later rounds. Sure, it helped some of them get further, but there was never a chance for them, not when Leigh-Anne was playing. She’s perhaps the best contestant this show has ever seen, and sports week was just the first time she made it obvious.

“I hope something like that happens,” Harry thinks out loud. “That there’s a challenge and I’m the only one who can do it.” He’d love to get to show his genius in a physical level, to let everyone know he’s the man to beat.

Not this early in the game, of course. But later, when it starts to count a little more.

Niall laughs out loud, the first move he’s made since Harry’s joined him that couldn’t be described as ‘lethargic’. “Let’s hope operating a record player is an event for your hipster ass,” he jokes, and if Harry were next to him, he’d give Niall a good shove. He settles for flipping him off, and laughing good-naturedly with it.

They both settle back to watch the rest of the match when the commercials end, and despite his earlier inability to fall back asleep, he finds himself dozing off.

Harry doesn’t realize he actually fell back asleep until he’s waking up to a sore neck and the sound of Oli and Stan racing down the stairs, through the living room, and out the sliding glass door into the backyard. He’s too drowsy to be aware of anything just yet so he lets himself finish waking up, and as his brain’s starting to get into gear, he remembers needing to get into Oli’s room, but the reason escapes him. He heads up, leaving Niall alone to watch the last hole, and as he reaches the now empty room, it hits him.

His hands don’t want to cooperate just yet, still numb from the awkward way he fell asleep on the couch, but Harry knows he doesn’t have much time, so he forces his body to wake up. He gets to work throwing Oli’s comforter and top sheet to the floor. Harry never would’ve pegged him as the kind of guy to make his bed, but it only serves to work in Harry’s favor.

He straightens out the fitted sheet around Oli’s mattress, taking extra care in making sure it’s straight...
- too many folds will give his plan away and lead his victim on to what’s going down.

It’s as Harry’s folding the sheet under the head of the mattress that a hesitant voice sounds from behind him, “Harry?”

Harry jumps instantly, losing his grip on the mattress and dropping it back to the bed. “Hey,” he answers, voice higher and louder than usual to mask the loud thump of the bed. “What’s, uh - what’s up?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Louis replies, openly staring with a quirk in his eyebrow at where Harry’s got the sheet tucked in the wrong direction. “What are you doing by Oli’s bed?”

“I’m just - ”

“Are you short sheeting his bed?” Louis accuses before Harry can even consider saying anything in return to his first question.

And he doesn’t know what to say to this question, either. Because short sheeting Oli’s bed is exactly what he’s doing. There was something so funny about the thought of Oli trying to get into his bed, and not being able to actually do it. There’s no denying the man has an anger issue, and if Gemma’s frustrated screaming is anything to base Oli’s reaction off of, Harry has a lot to look forward to.

Not now though. With Louis witnessing Harry in the action, there’s no way he can get away with it. It would’ve been a different story had Perrie or Grimmy or even Taylor caught him, but this is probably the worst possible scenario -

“You want some help?”

Harry doesn’t think he heard Louis right, until he sees the look he’s being leveled with. This could be a trap, and Harry could get it back twice as hard from Oli later. Or maybe, just maybe, Louis’ playing a game with Oli. Just like Harry. “Sure.”

Louis approaches and gets to work helping Harry finish the job. He does an amazing job, and keeps his eyes out for any wrinkles or signs the bed isn’t set up as it used to be. It has Harry wondering if Louis’ done this often, if he maybe has an older sister that initiated prank wars when they were kids.

“So what brought this on?” Louis asks as they’re putting the duvet on to cover their handy work.

“Someone put saran wrap in my doorway, and I walked into it this morning,” Harry tells him honestly, prompting an immediate laugh out of Louis. Harry wants to be upset, or at least bothered enough to keep his face set, but he can’t seem to do much more than laugh himself at the absurdity of it, of the image of his long limbs walking right into the trap. “It wasn’t that funny at six in the morning.”

“How do you even know it was him?”

“I don’t, actually,” he confesses, “but I hate him enough that I feel no guilt in blaming him.” Louis smiles wider at this, and it further confirms Harry’s thoughts that Louis’ in the game to win, just like the rest of them, and he doesn’t mind putting his alliance with Oli in the back of his mind. It makes something warm settle in his chest, and he makes a mental note that the more people who hate Oli, the quicker he’ll be gone from the show.

Louis goes to say something in response, but a familiar laugh echoes into the room shortly followed by footsteps thudding up the stairs signalling that Oli’s on his way. Louis grimaces. “You’d better go.”
“I’d better.”

Harry manages to escape just before Oli turns down the hallway. Oli doesn’t go to bed just then, obviously, but Harry has patience. This prank has delayed gratification, and later that night, after a phone call home to his mom and sister, when Oli’s angered yells can be heard through the house at bedtime, Harry can’t help but smile to himself and hope that Louis’ doing the same.

Tuesday

Harry’s so happy to have Perrie on his side this week. They’re studying science and nature, and while Harry can tell you anything you want to know about plants and animals, he’s absolutely fucking useless at any science requiring math. Or theory. Or anything that isn’t plants and animals.

Or water (Harry likes to think himself a mermaid in that respect).

They spent their entire Monday in the library, only leaving once, and that was because Jade wouldn’t stop complaining about food. Then they were all back to studying. Perrie’s done her part to explain things Harry doesn’t understand, and it’s working. Harry can feel himself retaining all the knowledge he’s reading, but he feels like he might go insane sitting here.

The only reason Harry’s not actually tearing his hair out is because he’s being allowed the chance to study to heart’s content (soon to be discontent) without having to keep up appearances as not caring. Now that everyone is doing it, he doesn’t have to hide.

Not that everyone’s doing it. The group’s size has decreased by just under half since the day before. Included in that is Jade and Kendall, both of whom have decided to spend the day watching movies in the living room while Stan and Oli tag along and argue with each of their choices.

Harry knows he’s making the smart choice by staying here and studying. After last week’s tragic trivia round, there’s nothing in the world that could justify him walking out of the library doors, but boy does he wish there was. He’d rather spend the next two hours listening to Oli complain about Molly Ringwald’s acting than sit here and study for a moment longer.

But he knows what’s best for him, knows that while he has people here with him to warrant his excessive studying, he needs to be here doing just that. And no matter how much more fun watching a movie would be, it’s not worth giving up his chance for a prize big enough to pay off his student debt and move him out of his parents’ house.

He has to save the fun for Sundays.

They’ve been in the library studying for almost a full day, only breaking for sleep, and throughout they’ve been sharing fun facts with each other. Not even a full ten minutes can go by without Liam throwing in an interesting tidbit he’s reading about and it was fun at first, but Grimmy’s been getting sassy, and Perrie looks about one comment away from locking them all in a closet overnight.

It’s gotten to the point that every time Liam’s posture changes, Harry starts tensing up, afraid it may be the one ‘fun fact’ that sends everyone in their small group into a mental breakdown.

They only have wait about seven minutes after Liam’s last comments about the strength of the
human femur before he’s back at it again. His voice light and almost excited when he supplies, “Did you know that a group of frogs is called an army?”

Harry holds his breath as Grimmy’s lips thin out and then purse. Although he really has nothing to worry about when Grimmy replies, “Then why isn’t Harry in the military?”

Harry’s flips off Grimmy at the comment, but then aims it at Perrie when she begins laughing. “Did you know that a group of unicorns is a blessing?”

“Unicorns aren’t real,” she scoffs, still laughing from the frog comment.

Harry’s eyebrows furrow, voice just a little bitter when he replies, “Neither is your imagination.”

“Who needs an imagination when you’re going to win the game and take home the prize?”

“Oh look,” Grimmy grins. “She does have an imagination.”

Perrie doesn’t grace him with a reaction, not even an eyeroll, and just goes back to her book. They all follow her lead and study a little while longer, even with Liam still reciting his tidbits of information to the group.

Even when Sophia and Eleanor walk out the library doors, only Grimmy decides to follow their lead. It literally aches not to get up and leave with them, but Harry’s doing what’s best for him, he’s sharpening his mind and expanding his horizons and -

“Fun Fact,” Liam blurts, “there’s enough DNA in the human body to stretch from Pluto to the sun seventeen times.”

Harry’s never felt this much frustration in his life. All he wants to do is curl up and die right here in the library, and it’s the only thing he can think about.

“Fun fact,” Perrie counters wearing a sickly sweet smile. “This fucking blows.” And Harry lets out a surprised laugh at the shocked and almost insulted face Liam’s wearing at her comment. “Can we please go do something else for a little while? Before I melt into a pile of goo.”

“Not possible!” Liam chuckles. “Not with all your bones and DNA - ”

“Shut the fuck up about my goddamn DNA,” she manages not to shout. “Please.”

Harry pulls them both up from their seats before Perrie starts throwing punches and Liam starts crying. The group walks in just as Kendall’s putting a new movie in, and Harry’s chest instantly feels lighter, the crushing weight of their constant studying lifting up at the promise of being able to kick back and relax. Although he is slightly bitter when he learns they’ve been watching Animal Planet between every movie they put in, meaning all of their studying could’ve been done up here as opposed to in the library, which has been feeling much more like a dungeon than anything else.

Grimmy comes in from his solo swim a while later, after the movie’s over and they’re turning Animal Planet on, which means the entire clique is together and studying. Harry decides to spare the group his sappiness at the risk of being hit with a pillow (Perrie’s very wishy-washy about emotions).

Harry takes to the kitchen to make lunch for everyone about the time that Grimmy mutes the show and starts a running commentary of his own. Not that he doesn’t find this funny, but his stomach kept interrupting the jokes, protesting its need for food. He settles on mac and cheese, figuring that it’s quick, easy, and if anybody complains he won’t have
put much effort into it. Especially when his mind blanks out as he cooks it, the process so menial that he doesn’t need to put too much thought into his actions.

He only zones back into reality when Louis walks into the kitchen commenting, “That smells good.” as he’s pouring the butter, milk, and cheese mix into the pan with the noodles


“Did they force you into the kitchen again?” Louis asks, sliding into a seat at the counter. His hands find a pen sitting there, and he occupies himself with spinning it. Harry looks back to the pan.

“No at all,” he waves off, continuing his stirring. “I like cooking for them.”

“Right,” Louis agrees, voice light and almost passive. “Providing a service to make you valuable.”

Harry’s hand slips at that, as soon as the words are out of Louis’ mouth, and a few spare noodles go flying out of the pan. His eyes go wide and he stares intently at the wall in front of him. “I’m sorry?”

“Well,” he returns, and Harry can hear Louis sliding out of his seat. He has to put some effort into not flinching. “You’re less likely to get voted off if your team relies on you, right?”

He goes back to stirring the cheese when he can hear Louis’ voice getting closer. He can feel himself slipping, getting nervous and anxious - his palms are sweating. It feels like the floor is falling out from under him and he has to try immensely hard not to let his voice shake when he asks, “What are you trying to say?”

“Just that your team definitely relies on you,” Louis answers. He’s leaning against the counter next to Harry, staring at the side of his face. “It’s a compliment, man. Don’t act so serious all the time.” Out of his peripheral vision, he sees Louis’ finger reach out and dip into the pot, scooping up a noodle from the spoon to taste. “Could use a little more milk,” are all he says before he walks out of the kitchen and Harry feels like he can breathe again.

Harry’s silent over dinner, thinking through what Louis said, thinking that maybe he’s not being as subtle as he thinks he is. Thinking that maybe other people are catching on as well.

Later that night, when everyone offers to go back to study, Harry waves them off and suggests they all play a dancing game on the system set up in the living room. Blame it on his paranoia, but he doesn’t want to give his strategy away this soon, if at all. And when they decide to watch movies for the rest of the night and forget studying, Harry resolutely doesn’t sneak off to study.

It’s got nothing to do with Louis or what he says. It’s to prove to himself that he can do it.

Or so he tells himself.

*Wednesday*
The trivia round really sneaks up on everybody. Harry almost can’t believe how quickly the first half of the week went by, and almost doesn’t believe it’s Wednesday until he’s standing at his podium as season five’s Gigi Hadid asks this week’s science and nature questions (and even then he still doesn’t believe it).

He’s glad it’s happening though, because completely reverse from the week prior, Harry’s actually doing a great job. They’re in the last few questions of the competition and Harry’s tied for first place with Niall. Any question could be the last, which means Harry has to gain the lead and steal the advantage.

He’s almost scared that the questions are going to be children’s questions again. Every time James so much as shifts his weight, Harry can feel himself gripping onto the side of his podium in anticipation.

“What is the most common type of blood in humans?” Gigi reads off of her cue card. Harry’s hand slams on the buzzer, and he’s afraid one of these days it’s going it break with how aggressive he gets. “Harry?”

“Type O.”

“Correct.”

And Harry exhales a harsh breath he didn’t realize he was holding. This is more stressful than last week when he didn’t know anything. They say knowledge is power, but Harry’s feels like the weakest person in the room, only moments away from losing all of his control.

Gigi flips the cards and recites, “Ceres is a dwarf planet that lies between the orbits of which two planets in our solar system?” Harry doesn’t know this one, and at the same time hopes Niall doesn’t either, or else they’ll be tied again, and Harry may just will sweat off every single layer of skin he has.

No such luck gets thrown Harry’s way when the buzzer sounds and Gigi’s calling Niall’s name, and saying he’s correct when he answers, “Mars and Jupiter.”

Niall smiles at him as he gets two points added to his board and Harry can’t find it in him to return the gesture - though he is careful not to frown or scowl or do anything that looks less than innocent. He may be strung tight, but he can’t give up his game.

“Last question,” Gigi announces and Harry’s head flies up towards her, not quite believing that if he doesn’t get this right, he won’t get the advantage. Well, that’s not true. If Niall doesn’t answer the question either, they’ll tie for the advantage, but something about the way his standing, tells Harry that it’s unlikely.

Maybe if it was Perrie he was going head to head with, they could share the week two trivia title, but instead he’s stuck with Niall who, on any other day of the week, has proven to be a great person. It’s only today that Harry wants to wring his neck.

“What group of animals are referred to as an ‘army’?”

Harry’s eyes go wide and he slams his hand down as hard as he can, lighting up like a fucking candle when the buzzers sound around him. Grimmy’s joke is echoing through his head and it has Harry wanting laugh in pure elation. He’s actually going to -

“Niall?”

Harry’s head whips over to where Niall’s standing, his green podium lit up showing that it was him
Harry’s world crashes beneath him as Gigi informs him that he’s correct and the winner of this week’s trivia. It’s all he can do not to crumble to the ground chanting “no, no, no” in absolute agony. He came so close to winning the round, the trivia, the advantage, but instead he’s stuck feeling like a complete loser, embarrassed at how excited he was despite not hitting the buzzer first.

“That was incredibly close, gentlemen,” James simpers, igniting a desire in Harry to smack the smirk right off his face. He can feel Perrie looking at him concerned, so he does his best to school his face into just a slightly disappointed look. He doesn’t want to look like a sore loser. No matter how sore he truly is. “Congratulations to all of our competitors for a game well played.”

Harry doesn’t throw his shoe at James for this comment, and he likes to think that’s progress, especially when the urge to do so is so strong.

“For your physical challenge on Thursday, you’ll be enjoying the science of nature on a hike at the Marin Headlands,” James announces. Harry can’t even get excited about hiking, something he’s actually a fan of, because he won’t have that advantage. “For winning the trivia round, Niall,” James continues, and Harry doesn’t scowl. “Here’s your advantage.”

He hands Niall a pink envelope, and it’s immediately opened. “The quickest route,” he reads. “Ace!” he’s laughing towards the middle of the semicircle, and Harry lightens up. Niall’s a good guy, and Harry doesn’t want to let such a close call ruin his place in the competition. Hating Niall is like kicking a puppy, and Harry doesn’t want to have that reputation on the show.

He’ll stick to hating Oli instead.

James sends them on their way after that, and to avoid Perrie’s concerned eyes, Harry ends up cutting Sophia off and climbing into the car behind Eleanor. He’s going to have to face everyone eventually, but spending the ride home with Eleanor, Stan, and Louis will give him enough time to calm down.

He knows he’s not mad at Niall, not mad at anyone, really, but he owes himself a bit of space from his clique just so he can put himself back together. He never realized how emotionally draining the trivia round could be, but he’s starting to feel wrung out.

Nobody else seems to want a bit of silence, Stan and Louis immediately going into a conversation about what they’re going to do when they get home, what movies they love, what they think of specific actors. Eleanor pops in and shares her opinion on whatever they’re talking about at certain points, and altogether, the mood of the car ride is pretty lighthearted.

Which means it’s not Eleanor’s fault for noticing how upset Harry is, feeling obligated to bring up conversations. “You were amazing in there, Harry,” she smiles. “I can’t believe you didn’t win.”

“Thanks,” Harry grunts. He doesn’t mean to sound so dismissive, especially because she wanted to make an effort - he just isn’t in a mood to share stories and get to know each other.

“Ah, don’t be all sour about it,” Stan teases. “You’ll get him next time.”

Harry hums, lips set in a thin line as he nods his head, but otherwise doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t want to open his mouth and say something harsh or negative, doesn’t want his sadness at losing to ruin everyone else’s mood. So he stays quiet.

“Have I ever told any of you that I know Niall?” Louis interjects, dragging Eleanor and Stan’s frowns away from focusing on Harry. “Like, from before the show.”
Louis must be some sort of mind reader, Harry thinks. He seems to know exactly what’s going on at every moment in the game, knows exactly what’s going through Harry’s head, and knows when the top comes to talk about something, and when it’s time to change the subject.

“Really man?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Louis nods at Stan. Leaning back in his seat as he continues, “So you know I’m a talent scout for a television station, and Niall’s a sportscaster, well - I actually got him his first job on TV.”

That peaks Harry’s interest. “Really?”

“Oh that’s so cool,” Eleanor adds, smiling widely.

“You see,” Louis begins, and takes a deep breath. He’s gearing up for a long story, so Harry makes himself comfortable. “We knew each other growing up. We both grew up in, uh, Columbus. Or just outside of it at least. Anyway, we weren’t exactly great friends. You see Niall’s all brains and sports, and I was far more into the arts. We didn’t actually socialize with each other until our junior year of high school. His dad was really big on him playing basketball, he was the coach actually, but Niall, you all know him, he’s this bright light that can do anything and make friends with anyone. So he actually tried out for the musical and he got callbacks.

“Now I’d been in a bunch of the school’s plays and musicals at this point, and I’ll admit that I could’ve been nicer to him, but it was his first audition and he got the lead. Just like that. I was jealous, obviously, so I talked to his teammates, and they helped me and a few of my friends sabotage Niall and his girlfriend, Gabriella. His dad ended up getting crazy upset and moving away to Los Angeles to be a TV presenter. All these years later and Niall joins as a contestant on his dad’s TV show and he’s being showed favoritism. He shouldn’t have won, Harry. His dad helped him cheat.”

The car is silent for a while after the story, everyone trying to wrap their head around what they’d just heard. “That’s - ” Harry starts, cutting himself off as he thinks about what to say. “I don’t - ”

“That sounded really familiar…” Eleanor supplies, and Harry’s thankful because he didn’t know where he was going, didn’t have any clue what he wanted to say - what he could say - to that story. He knows that it wasn’t true, the details too theatrical to have any connection the the real world, but he can’t place his finger on it. “Was that High school musical?”

Louis nods, “Yeah!” and Harry finds himself wanting to laugh for some reason. “With a twist, though,”

“Were you sharpay?”

“I was,” he laughs. “I wouldn’t settle for being anything less than the best.”

“Wait,” Harry interrupts Louis and Eleanor’s conversation. “So none of that was real?”

“Nope.”

“You’ve never met Niall?” Harry asks.

“Not until last week,” Louis denies.

“Then what was the whole - ” Again, Harry doesn’t know how he wants to put this, doesn’t understand the point of what Louis’ trying to say or what it even means. “How is that supposed to
make me feel better then?"

“It’s not,” Louis answers, looking far from apologetic for wasting Harry’s time with the story. “He beat you by one question. It sucks, but you have to get over it. Just work harder and hope you can beat him next week.”

Harry rolls his eyes, upset that he sat through the whole story and it had no pay off other than Louis thinking he could teach him a lesson. On top of the still sore spot of losing the trivia round, now he has to deal with the embarrassment of Louis calling him out in the car.

He avoids everyone’s eyes for the rest of the drive, sulking. Harry knows he’s over reacting, but he allows himself this time to do so before he goes to find Perrie and comes up with some story about wanting to be alone. Before he has to put the wall back up between how he really feels and how he should act like he feels.

Louis does have a point, but Harry doesn’t tell him this. The other man already knows everything going with Harry, so he thinks he deserves some time to act like Louis doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

Later that night, long after Harry’s talked to Perrie, and the two of them have gone down to the gym for some yoga to prepare themselves for the hike, Niall corners Harry as he’s waiting for the shower.

“Hey, man,” he greets. He looks timid and Harry hates that look on him, hates seeing him being hesitant about anything. “I just wanted to make sure things were okay between us.”

“Yeah,” Harry nods, surprised to find he really means it. “Of course we are.”

“You seemed upset when we left - ”

“I was - ” he cuts Niall off. Realizing his voice has an edge to it that’s far too off putting, he clears his throat and relaxes a bit. “I was, obviously,” he continues. “I came really close, and lost. Of course I’d be upset. But not with you, definitely not with you.”

“Good,” Niall grins, loosening up himself. “I’d hate to ruin our friendship with something so - ”

“Trivial?”

Niall laughs and shoves his shoulder hard enough it hits the wall. Harry finds himself laughing along. “I take it back,” Niall jokes. “We were never friends.”

The bathroom door opens and Niall waves Harry off, going down the stairs to do whatever occupies his time on nights like this. Harry steps into the bathroom and turns on the water. It’s as he’s standing in the shower that he feels all of the drama of the day washing off his body and cleaning him from every negative emotion he’s had.

It’s the best he’s felt all day.
Friday

Harry hasn’t gone to the gym this often since the summer after graduating high school, but he’s avoiding doing any heavy workouts. It’d be terrible for his body to go too hard in such short notice before an important day like today.

Liam, on the hand, is at the gym everyday anyway, so he has no trouble immediately loading up the benches and going to town. His body is used to the hard workouts, and his body is primed. Not like Harry, having to do a third day of light cardio and yoga, followed by a risky bout of cycling just to clear his head.

He leaves the gym Friday morning sweeter than Liam, and if that’s not a blow to the ego…

Harry tries not to let it get to his head, though. Sure, he’s not in the best shape of his life, but he’s more prepared for this challenge then say… Grimmy, the likes of which has spent his time preparing by doing laps in the pool. Or Sophia who’s done her training in the kitchen, munching on pieces of bacon. Or Oli, who’s been… Harry’s not sure where he’s actually been, but he knows he’s safe to assume it’s either illegal or unethical.

So while he can’t bench press an entire horse and jog two miles only breaking a mild sweat, he knows he’s more prepared than some of his housemates, which is good enough for him to justify the hour he’s just spent in the gym doing hot yoga.

“Hot indeed,” Liam had joked when he saw the pants Harry decided to wear.

Harry has a different advantage in the competition, though. He’s smart, and he can read nature like a book. In fact, on top of his previous knowledge on the subject, he actually has read nature like a book. Just this week, in fact. He spent a full two days wanting to tug his hair out because of how much reading he actually did.

All this time only expanded to previous knowledge, only helped him understand a bit more about the outdoors. So walking out of the gym behind a barely-affected Liam doesn’t hit his ego as hard at it would’ve had this been sports week. In fact, it has him feeling pretty confident. Excited, almost.

“Were you both in the gym again?”

Harry looks up from where he was watching his steps on the staircase to see a sleepy Louis, looking ruffled and confused. He looks completely harmless like this, and Harry allows himself a moment to appreciate it before Louis goes and ruins it by telling Harry that he knows about the time in his junior year when he cheated on his final exam for Economics, or something of the like.

Harry doesn’t actually believe it would happen, but if Louis were to casually bring it up in conversation, Harry wouldn’t so much as flinch. He’s come to expect to have no privacy when it comes to Louis when he’s popping up around every corner.

“Absolutely,” Liam, the more grounded of the two of them, answers Louis. “We’ve got to be completely aware on this hike. Can’t let anything catch us off guard.”

“Right, right,” Louis nods along, looking more like a bobble head than anything else. He can barely keep his eyes open. “And the best way is to wake up at ass o’clock in the morning.”

“It’s a morning hike,” Harry defends. He’s glad they woke up early, glad they’re aware of everything right now as opposed to looking half-alive like Louis. “We haven’t exhausted ourselves or anything.”
“Well I know you haven’t, Harry,” He grins, actually moving into Harry’s space. He watches as Louis reaches out and actually squeezes Harry’s bicep. “It’s a good thing you didn’t win the trivia round. Wouldn’t be fair of you to have two advantages.”

Harry can feel all of the blood in his body rush into his cheeks, knows he’s absolutely red, and he can only hope that Louis’ too tired to comment on it because he’s not sure how he would even respond. He doesn’t know why his stomach is positively twisted at the exchange, but he can’t force himself to even react.

He watches as Louis trots down the stairs looking as though nothing just happened, which is even more wild than the fact that it did. He almost convinces himself that that whole exchange was an elaborate hallucination, but given that he can still feel the phantom grip around his upper arm, he gives up.

Liam starts laughing as soon as Louis’ out of sight, and Harry turns around to glare at him. “You can have the shower first, bro,” Liam teases. “Looks like you’ll need it.”

Harry ignores him completely and stomps up the stairs past him, immediately going into the bathroom. He may have spent the last hour in the gym, but he isn’t awake enough to deal with any of what just happened yet.

Maybe if Louis had that hard look in his eye and the sharp tone in his voice Harry could put it all off to Louis playing more mind tricks on him, that he’d gotten tired of predicting Harry’s entire life and has now taken to putting the man on edge and make him question everything, distracting him long enough to send him into elimination.

But he was sleep soft and innocent-looking. He didn’t level Harry with that look that says he’s reading him like a book, didn’t (rightfully) accuse of him of playing his friends like a fiddle and manipulating his way onto everyone’s good side.

The exchange was seemingly harmless, and it throws Harry for a loop. He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to react or even if he should react at all. He never thought just one sentence could throw him off his game, and so easily too, and it’s messing with Harry’s head in a way that he didn’t come to expect this early in the game.

It’s as his shower’s turns cold from how long he’s spent contemplating the one moment that Harry realizes he’s falling right into Louis’ trap, that he’s allowing his mind to run wild trying to figure it out. Those few words are consuming all his focus, and he needs to get away from them if he wants to have any chance of centering himself before they head off for the hike.

He goes to get dressed and spends the entire time before the cars arrive eating the leftover bacon from breakfast and trying to meditate. It doesn’t completely pull his mind away from everything, but it does allow him a moment of peace that everyone puts down to his being from Portland.

Harry ends up in the car with Kendall, Niall, and Jade. He had intended to sit with Perrie, but James showed up alongside the cars and informed them that they’d have assigned seating on the way to the trails.

They’ve all got their own designated starting points, James explains, that the cars will take them to. They’ll each be given a canteen and a walkie talkie with which they’ll await further instructions before starting. He tells them they’ve each got a path that’s the exact distance from the starting point - aside from Niall, of course - and that the last three to arrive will be up for elimination.

The last piece of information they’re told before being sent into their cars is that their paths are not
linear. He doesn’t explain it further, and before Harry can blink he’s sharing his ride to their second physical challenge with the three people sitting next to him. All-in-all, it’s not a terrible morning.

They’re barely on the road before Kendall’s wondering, “So are we all getting dropped off with Niall or -”

“You fucking wish,” Niall grins. He looks to be about the most excited person in the car, and Harry’s managing to be only slightly jealous this morning. “I’ll be about a mile closer to the checkpoint than you.”

“Kid wins one damn challenge and he forgets about the little people,” Kendall jokes, turning to face the window. The grin on her face gives away the fact that she’s not upset in the least.

“Speak for yourself,” Jade challenges, her lips pulled back into a sharp grin. “I don’t care if he’s three miles in front of me. I’m still going to win this game.”

Niall rolls his eyes and Harry can’t help but laugh. It seems as though every ride they’ve had in the past two weeks has been filled with somebody claiming they’re lightyears ahead of the competition, and that the others have no chance at taking home the prize.

It’s predictable, and every time someone says something Harry finds himself laughing because he hears it every night before bed, and nobody is ever going to top the things his roommate has said after a hard day of studying.

“Just be glad Pez isn’t here,” he comments, watching the Niall smiles even wider.

“Last time I said I wanted to win this, she tried to arm wrestle me,” Kendall chimes in.

“Oh yeah,” Harry nods along, knowing exactly what she’s talking about. “Don’t actually do that. She beat me on Monday and still won’t shut up about it.” Harry isn’t put off by their laughter. In fact, he finds himself chuckling along, happy that he can confide in this group of people and not be mercilessly teased for losing “to a girl.” Because Harry doesn’t think he could bite his tongue if somebody said something like that.

“I think she’s my biggest competition,” Niall states, looking like he was speaking introspectively more than anything. Harry tries not to be too annoyed by the comment.

“Wow, okay.”

“Yeah,” Jade agrees. “Thanks for that.”

“Well, I’m just being honest,” Niall reasons. He’s not disturbed by their protesting to his comments at all. “I’m glad to call you my friends, but in the finale it’s going to me, Perrie, and somebody else, probably.”

“And Jade,” she adds about herself, leaning forward in her seat to further emphasize her point. “You, Perrie, and Jade.”

Kendall turns to Harry from where she’s sitting next to him and faux-whispers, “I bet all three of them are gone by week four.”

“Please,” Jade scoffs. “If I’m gone before week four I give you permission to throw a party to celebrate that your best competition is out of the race.”
Nobody thinks of me as serious competition. It's alright, though. I'll be the one laughing my way to the finale - just you wait.

-Jade, 24, Seattle

“Deal,” Kendall accepts, reaching her hand between them so they can shake on it. “I’ll even make pina coladas. The real stuff. None of that fake shit.”

“What are fake pina coladas?” Niall puzzles.

“Made with mixers instead of the actual fruit,” she answers. “I had a pina colada at the airport when I was waiting to be picked up and it was so disgusting. Not like we make it at home, that’s for sure.”

“You can make a drink with fruit?”

Jade laughs at the genuine look of wonder on Niall’s face and Harry doesn’t blame her. He looks confused and amazed, like he’s just been given the world. “Oh, buddy.”

“Don’t make fun of Niall,” Harry chastises her jokingly. “Out in the midwest the only thing they have is corn, and you definitely can’t put corn in alcohol.”

If he was expecting a laugh after his quip, he’s sorely disappointed. Nobody so much at smiles at him. In fact, Jade gives him the same look she just gave Niall, and Harry feels like he’s missing something extremely important. Niall scoffs at him.

“Whiskey is made with corn,” Kendall tells him, explaining the looks he’s receiving.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes,” Jade adds. “It is.”

Kendall places her hand on his shoulder and it’s all Harry can do to shrug it off because he feels like he’s being told Santa isn’t real all over again, and it’s really messing with his mind. “There’s even a country song about it,” she continues.

“Well see,” Niall supplies, and before he even speaks, Harry knows it’s going to be a joke at his expense, can see it in the way Niall’s lip tilts at the corner and his eyes dance in anticipation. “Harry wouldn’t know that. If it’s ever been played on a radio before, Harry won’t listen. Those Portland ears are too pure.”
“But my Portland feet aren’t,” Harry returns, “and I’ll shove them up your ass if you -”

“This is the weirdest foreplay I’ve ever seen.”

Laughter rings out around the car and they spend the rest of the ride making jabs at each other and telling embarrassing stories about themselves. It’s light and enjoyable, and Harry doesn’t let his mind wander away from the moment. It’s more effective than both yoga and meditation in getting Harry to loosen up and prepare for the hike they’re all about to go on. It lets him forget about the morning and center himself.

Niall gets dropped off first, and the other three left in the car boo him as he gets out at his starting point, reaping in the benefits from winning the trivia round. Harry doesn’t feel any anger or bitterness arise as they drive off to put the next person at their spot. He likes to think he’s over the ugly feelings.

If he’s in the bottom three this week, it may just be a different story, but for now he’s settled.

Harry’s the third to get dropped off, and he notices a cameraman waiting at his stop, standing next to two white pieces of tape crossed together in an ‘x’ shape. Harry assumes that’s where he has to stand, so he makes his way over and waits for further instruction. He wasn’t given a map, so he just has to assume the walkie talkie attached to his belt will lead him on the right path.

He’s been standing on his ‘x’ for not even five minutes when his walkie crackles to life.

“Contestants, please stand on the white ‘x’ marked for you,” James’ voice tells him, and even though Harry’s already on his, he looks down and shuffles his feet to make sure he’s standing on the center of it. “When I tell you to begin, you’ll walk straight onto the path until you come across a white marker. Inside will be a compass and part of a map that will lead you to your next marker. You’ll continue this until you find me, and when that happens, you must place your compass on the oak table where your name will be written. The last three compasses turned in will be up for elimination.”

Harry can feel like presence of the cameraman just to his left, and part of him wants to spark up a conversation with him, but the majority of his brain is telling him to get ready because the challenge could begin at any moment, and Harry doesn’t want to be even a second behind where he could be.

Chances are, he’s not going to get first place. With Niall a mile in front of him, it’s unlikely for him Harry to beat him. Second place, though? That’s not as impossible. In fact, with his knowledge of nature and the fact that he’s in better condition than some of his competitors, he could easily take the lead on all but one.

When James’ voice tells him to begin, Harry runs forward, his cameraman hustling to keep up with him. If Harry was a better man he might feel bad, but all he has on his mind in the idea of winning and the knowledge that walking slowly to let his cameraman keep up won’t win him any games.

Occupational hazard, Harry tells himself.

The white marker is a post going up to Harry’s ribs and it has a clear top, inside of which is a piece of paper. Harry opens it and is more than excited to feel the weight of the compass in his hand. He’s less excited when the map tells him to walk fifty paces in the northwest direction. It may sound like he’s moving forward, but he’s actually going back the way he came, only straying slightly from the path.

Logically, Harry knows everybody is going the same distance, but irrationally, he can’t help but feel disappointed that he has walk back the way he came. Especially when in the far distance he can see somebody (he thinks it might be Eleanor, but from this far out he can’t be sure) advancing even
farther forward (south).

The hike continues like this for a while, feeling a bit like last week’s scavenger hunt but with fewer questions and more bugs - maybe fewer bugs too actually, considering the density of them in the Japanese Tea Garden. He sees some interesting wildlife, and wishes he’d been able to bring his camera, just so he could remember some of the things he finds.

Harry comes across a marker, but as he’s making to open it his cameraman stops him and points to the top of it where “7” is etched onto it. Harry’s confused until he’s pointed to his compass where “12” is etched. Harry figured some paths would cross, and he applauds the producers for thinking of a way to lessen the probability of Harry ruining everything. It could’ve pushed him closer to the goal, but given his luck, that’s probably about three steps behind where he actually is.

After walking for a while, finding four out of however many markers there are, Harry runs into not one but two of his competitors. Harry, Jesy, Louis, and their three camera men all cross paths at the same time.

“Fancy running into you,” Harry grins, putting on a friendly front, but secretly hoping he’s closer to the finish than them. He’s been walking so long in so many different directions that he doesn’t actually know which direction James should be in.

“You must be way off track if you’re over by us,” Louis comments, and Harry didn’t even consider this. He didn’t think about how he was in a car with three completely different people and that if his paths were meant to cross with somebody, it should probably be one of theirs.

“Or maybe I’m just way closer to the finish line.”

“I doubt that,” Louis scoffs, grinning as he does so and completely unbalancing his joke. “You clearly went the wrong way.”

“Well maybe - ”

“As much as I want to,” Jesy interrupts, and Harry’s loath to admit he’d forgotten she was there with them. “I’m not watching this play out. I’ll see you losers at the finish line.” She walks away, her cameraman walking off with her in the complete opposite direction from where Louis and Harry are standing.

They watch as she disappears behind a few trees. “I should get going too,” Louis comments.

“Well, yeah.” Harry agrees, realizing if he wants to have any chance of winning, he’ll have to get moving. “You’ve probably got to move twice as fast to go the same distance with legs that small.”

Louis shoves into his shoulder as he passes by, a disgruntled look on his face, Harry allows himself a moment to bask in the moment. He finally got the last word and it feels great. He doesn’t cheer for long because he’s got to move.

Harry loves nature, he concedes as he’s working his way through his maps. He doesn’t see much of it back home. Not that there isn’t nature, he’s just been the type to spend summers swimming in his friends’ pools. His parents always took him on vacation to Los Angeles or New York, never into the woods.

He feels like he was missing out, thinks there’s something to the quiet chirp of the birds and the crispness to the air. He likes to think he could spend his life walking along the edges of small hills.

That is, until he slips on a rock and crashes to the ground. The cameraman asks if he wants help, and
Harry denies it, knowing that getting medical attention will take time he doesn’t have. He’ll deal with a sore thigh if it means making it through to next week.

Harry’s been walking for a good two hours, he thinks when he starts nearing the end. He’s positive he heard James laughing a few minutes back, and now he’s just waiting to come across the oak table that’ll represent his freedom.

He comes across Zayn before James, though. The other man is leaning against a tree and… Well, he’s smoking a cigarette as his camerawoman is sitting on the ground, her back against a tree. Her camera is aimed at Zayn, but she’s not doing much else. Harry can almost feel the jealousy rolling off of his own cameraman.

“That can’t be safe,” Harry finds himself commenting, watch as Zayn looks up, confused, at the new voice.

“Sorry?”

“Smoking in the woods,” he clarifies, gesturing to the lit cigarette in Zayn’s hand. “Especially as dry as it’s been this year.” Zayn shrugs but otherwise doesn’t say much else. He takes another drag and Harry can’t stop himself from asking, “How’d you even get cigarettes this far?”

Zayn rolls his eyes, answering as casual as ever, “I carried them.”

“No I mean - ” Harry knows every minute he stands here is another second he’s not finishing the challenge, but he’s so confused about everything happening, and getting answers feels much more urgent than finishing. “Like, in the competition.”

“They didn’t confiscate them when I got here or anything.” Zayn expands. “I’m twenty-four years old, so I can have them.” That answers that, Harry thinks, not quite believe himself, still puzzled over it. “You want a hit?”

“No, thank you.”

They both stand there in silence after that. Harry hears James’ laugh again, but he still doesn’t make the effort to seek it out just yet. He can’t find the motivation to do so when he has an anomaly standing in front of him, smoking a cigarette when he’s got to be so close to the finish line.

“You gonna go anytime soon?” Zayn asks. “Don’t you want to win?”

“Yeah, I should…” Harry pauses to consider that Zayn’s asking this question while he himself is standing so close to the finish point. “Don’t you want to win?”

“No really.”

“Oh.”

Zayn stubs out his cigarette then walks in the opposite direction leaving Harry even more confused than he thought possible, watching as Zayn’s camerawoman stands and walks after him in no rush whatsoever.

He tries to forget everything he just witnessed as he walks forward through a clump of trees, and, in the middle of a clearing, he sees James Corden. The man is standing with five of his competitors, and to the left of them is the oak table that holds the compasses.

Harry goes forward and excitedly places his on the table, moving to stand near where Perrie is
already waiting. He can accept that she beat him. Hell, after the confusion he just faced in the woods, Harry can accept just about anything.

As the game goes on, more people make their appearances, placing their compasses on the oak table and securing a place in week three. Harry’s less than thrilled to see Oli make it through, but he ignores it, waiting in anticipation for whom the final three will be.

It’s no surprise when Grimmy and Zayn don’t make it in time. Zayn clearly didn’t want to make it through for some reason, and Grimmy isn’t exactly the hiking type. What is a surprise is when the last person to stumble through the trees is Jade looking worse for wear, her shirt torn, and her hair a mess. She doesn’t any explanation to why, just stands among the other two and awaits the ride home.

She goes straight to bed when they get home, and Harry wonders if they’ll ever hear about what happened or if he’ll have to wait until the airs to see. He hopes it wasn’t anything too bad, but he doesn’t have the energy to stick around and gossip about it.

As everyone plans on spending the night drinking or going for a swim, Harry takes Jade’s lead and goes to bed earlier. He’s got elimination to think about and just whom he wants to send home.

Saturday

Harry doesn’t get to sleep in. He wants to, and fights the best he can against his body's wish to get up, but it’s all for naught once Kendall and Liam come in to wake him and Perrie up, wanting to make their decision sooner rather than later.

Harry disagrees with this wholeheartedly. He likes their previous way of doing it when the bottom three go to pack their bags. It gives them a time limit, forces them to make their decision quickly, and allows them to separate emotions from the choice. Doing it before anybody wakes up gives them more time and lets emotions get involved, which isn’t smart at all for tactical thinking.

Plus, Harry wants to put off the decision for as long as possible. If he could avoid having it at all, it’d be even better, but he knows this is a conversation that needs to be had. He only wishes he hated one of them. It’d make everything easier.

“I hate that we have to do this again,” Perrie says, expressing exactly what Harry’s thinking as she sits up in her bed.

“It’s what we get for having a clique this big,” Kendall shrugs, making her way over to sit on the edge of Harry’s mattress. Liam mirrors the move, taking his seat on Perrie’s bed. “If we went smaller we could probably get by with only having to save one person a week like Zayn’s group.”

“Or not at all like Eleanor and Sophia,” Liam supplies.

Harry understands where he’s coming from, but he’s not looking into the big picture of it, can only see what’s currently right in front of them. “They’ve been okay for now,” Harry explains, “but they’re not safe at all.”

“Yeah,” Kendall agrees. “I guarantee the second one of them is in the bottom, they’ll be gone. They don’t have anybody on their side to save them.”
Harry’s waiting for that moment to happen, for one of them to be stuck in the bottom and get eliminated. It’s morbid, but with their group thinning out every single week, they need to pick up some extra housemates to join them. Once Eleanor or Sophia goes home, the other will be vulnerable and then she’ll join the clique.

And with her so desperate to make a place in the clique, she’ll become quite useful. If an advantage is won, it’ll be shared with the group for sure. Harry’s put a lot of thought into it, and there’s almost no end to the possibilities gaining one of them could have on his clique.

It’d be better for the group if both of them would join, but Harry knows that won’t be happening. The strange alliance they’ve got with Taylor is enough to keep them independent, and unless one of them gets sent home and jeopardizes the other’s position, they’ll be fine on their own.

“Which is exactly why we have to keep doing this,” Perrie justifies the meeting. She looks more awake now than a moment ago, more awake than Harry feels, that’s for sure. But then again, betraying your friends is enough to wake anybody up. “We have to stay unified even if we don’t all agree.”

“Right, Kendall?”

“Fuck off,” Kendall shouts at Liam. “I voted Cara and I still stand by that decision. If she was still here and in the bottom this week too, I’d vote for her again. You all know that you’d do the same for somebody.”

I won’t be faulted for being loyal.

*Im not going to take any shit about voting Cara last week. If I could have, I’d have voted her every week until she won. I won’t be faulted for being loyal.*

-Kendall, 21, Kapolei

Harry and Perrie make eye contact, knowing exactly what she’s talking about. Harry knows that in the end, Perrie could easily beat him if it were to be the two of them in the final, knows that she has the ability and the drive to win, but even so, Harry would save her.

Even if Perrie stopped playing the game, even if she lost all motivation and strive to win, Harry would save her every single time. They’re partners, it’s what they do.

“You’re not wrong,” Harry tells her.
It gets quiet and allows Harry time to think. Not about whom they’ll vote to save, of course, that’s obviously going to be Grimmy, but about just what Harry would do if it were him in the bottom. Their alliance is dwindling down and given a few more weeks, it could just be him and Perrie. If he gets to the bottom, it’s very probable he’ll be sent home.

They need to be smart with their votes, need to keep the people that will help them later in the competition, but who don’t have the ability to beat them if it comes down to it.

“I don’t even know why we’re meeting,” Perrie offers quietly. “It’s obviously going to be Jade.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Kendall nods in agreement and Harry’s confused on when this decision was made.

“Wait a minute -”

“I wanted Grimmy gone last week,” Liam adds, looking more serious than he has throughout the entire competition, “and I want him gone this week. He’s the weakest link on our team.”

Perrie nods, continuing on his point, “She’s the one who deserves to stay the most. Grimmy was in the bottom last week and he’s there again. It’s his time to go.”

“But Grimmy has helped us more than Jade,” Harry argues, staring meaningfully at Perrie, hoping to convey that they literally owe last week’s success to Grimmy. They already hurt him by not sharing the intel Grimmy gave them with the man himself, the least they can do is offer him one more week. “He’s proven to be more helpful than her.”

“Well if we’re going with helpful, then we should just give Zayn our vote,” Perrie fights back, and Harry almost wants to flinch at the ferocity in her tone, but he knows he has to stand his ground. “He’s helped us more than either of them.”

“Because that’s smart.” Kendall snorts, letting her head roll back to rest on her shoulders as she stares at the ceiling. “Let’s let everyone else decide who gets sent home from our clique.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Perrie rolls her eyes, and Harry’s right there with her, unsure of how Kendall missed the sarcasm in Perrie’s statement. “I’m saying that Harry’s keeping last week in mind as he votes this week and it’s dangerous. When people stop being useful then you have to let them go.”

“Jade was never useful to us,” Harry supplies.

Perrie gapes at this, and for this first time since this conversation started, Harry fears that he may have shown too much of his strategy. Perrie’s one of the most tactical people in the house, but even she looks burned by what he’s just said. “She’s your friend.”

“So is Grimmy!”

“But Jade was on your side last week,” Liam defends. “She, more than anybody, knows about needing to be an alliance, which is exactly what we have to be right now.”

Harry doesn’t know how to get his point across without sounding cruel, doesn’t know just what to say to explain to the group that keeping Jade could be one of the worst mistakes they make. He doesn’t know how to explain that winning is his main priority without actually saying that winning is his main priority.

Nobody else seems to be worried that Jade could easily win this game and that this may be the only
chance they have to get her out of the competition, and Harry doesn’t know how to tell them this without saying all he cares about is getting rid of everyone better than him.

Because that’s not it at all. Harry’s pretty sure Perrie’s smart than he is, but he’d never vote her off. He has faith in his tactics and believes they’re better than Perrie’s, enough to push him to win. He doesn’t need to get rid of everyone who could beat him, but thinning out the competition isn’t a bad idea.

He doesn’t know how to say that without sounding like an absolute jackass.

“I vote Jade,” Kendall decides before Harry can even try to defend his choice.

“I second that,” Perrie chimes in and Harry’s getting frustrated with them. “Liam?”

When Liam agrees, Harry’s ready to throw in the towel, just for the sake of agreeing. He doesn’t want to be like Kendall was last week and vote ignorantly. Sure, keeping Jade is a bad idea, but not as bad as giving up his game.

A throat is cleared and everyone turns their attention to the doorway where Taylor’s standing. Harry hopes, for everyone’s benefit, she opened that herself. He hopes the door wasn’t wide open as they were choosing whom they wanted to vote off.

“What are you doing here?” Liam asks, eyebrows narrowing at her intrusion.

“Yeah,” Perrie backs him up. “This is a private meeting.”

Taylor laughs at this, small chuckles gently ebbing her body away from where she’s leaning against the door. “I was coming to say that the first of the bottom three have woken up and that you might want to keep the yelling down,” Taylor recounts, “but I heard your arguing and I have to say you’re going about this the wrong way.”

“You have literally nobody on your side Taylor,” Kendall deadpans. “Why should we listen to you?” Harry fights against laughing at her tone and the look on Taylor’s face because of it. It’s something Cara would’ve said, and it makes Harry see why they got along so well.

“Because I’m going to be in the finale,” Taylor insists, sounding so final about it that Harry finds himself believing it. “I know how to play this game, and even without a ‘clique’ I’m still going to make it further than any of you. I don’t have to help you, but I’m offering to give you some advice that you don’t even have to take. Now do you want to hear it or not?”

“Not - ”

Liam, having predicted that Kendall was going to yell back, had already begun to launch himself across the room, shoving his hand over her mouth before she can say anything to offend Taylor. “She’s still upset about Cara,” he explains. “Likes to mouth off at the worst times.”

Harry’s not sure what happens next, but Liam’s ow before he releases his hand, leads Harry to believe Kendall bit him.

“What’s your advice?” Harry asks before things turn physical between the two.

“You’re going about this the entirely wrong way,” Taylor says after a bit of thinking. “You’re letting your friendships in the way. Think of Jade and Grimmy as competitors, which is what they are. You keep talking about who’s more useful, but at the end of the day, they’re only useful to themselves. You need to think about who’s going to be easier to beat. Vote off the best competition.”
Nobody says anything in response to this. Nobody can say anything to this.

“But that’s just my opinion.”

She turns around and walks out of the room and down the hallway, leaving the door wide open behind her. Everyone sits silently and thinks about what she just said - none of it new to Harry. It’s exactly what he was trying to say earlier, but Taylor has no qualms about looking vicious in the competition, so she was able to say what he couldn’t.

“I hope she chokes on her own tongue,” Kendall bites after Taylor’s been gone for a long enough time that she shouldn’t be able to hear.

“She had a point, though,” Harry argues.

Liam, from where he’s still sitting next to Kendall on Harry’s bed, nods. “As much as I hate to say it,” he begins, looking more than hesitant to continue, “we all know who needs to go home then.”

And later that night, after they’ve had their dinner and toasted to their bottom three, after they’ve voted and watched the color drain from Jade’s face as she got sent home, they all get drunk in her honor and Harry allows himself one sweet moment where he can smile. Because while it sucks that he sent home one of his close friends, watched all of her hopes of winning this competition disappear because of him …

At least he’s still here.
**Week 3**

**Tuesday**

Harry stays in bed until he physically cannot go back to sleep, and even then he doesn’t get up. They’d stayed up studying far too late last night, and Harry has no problem sleeping his morning away. The subject this week is entertainment, something he knows well, so he knows studying shouldn’t be as big of a deal as it has been before. That’s not to say he shouldn’t study at all, no. Studying this week, just the same as any other, is important, so once Harry is awake enough, ready to rejoin the living, he’ll head on down to library and study with the others.

For now, though, it feels nice to just lie back and stare up at the ceiling as he thinks about everything and nothing at the same time. It’s relieving to have this moment to himself where he isn’t stressing himself out about having to study more, the chance that he may have given his game away, or worse yet, the fact that he had sent his own friend home without so much as a goodbye.

Alright, there was a goodbye, but it had been too abrupt and had left him feeling completely unsettled with the way things had ended. There wasn’t much that could’ve been done to give him more closure, but Jade hadn’t even tried to reconcile, her goodbye cold in the wake of realizing her own friends had sent her home.

Sunday, Harry had allowed himself time to mope, but tonight he doesn’t allow any of the “what ifs” to linger. The moment to grieve has passed, and Harry needs to focus on completing his next goal: sending Oli home. Or something like that. He’s still not sure exactly what he wants to accomplish next, but what he does know for sure is that the moment Oli is gone, his focus will be clearer, and he’ll be a happier man.

On the other hand, Oli hasn’t been giving him much trouble this past week, that is, other than plastic wrapping the doorway. Harry’s not complaining, he’s just confused. Part of him wants to think that it was just a small rivalry, but he knows it’s probably something bigger. He has a feeling that there’s something bigger being planned behind the scenes, and when Harry least expects it, Oli will show him his full wrath.

To be honest, Harry’s more excited than he is scared for this break in their unspoken truce.

When the clock strikes noon, Harry figures it’s time to get up. He’d like to sleep for longer, but he needs to study so that he can finally win an advantage. After lazily throwing on a pair of sweats and a hoodie, he makes his way down to the library only to be stopped on the way when he hears Perrie’s laughter filtering out from the living room.

He follows the noise to find everyone in his clique, along with Niall, Eleanor, and Sophia, watching television. It feels familiar, like their first week when nobody wanted to study and instead spent their days swimming around in the pool. Harry hopes they haven’t resorted back to that mentality, or else he’ll have to feign sleep in his room just to get a decent reading in.

“What’s everyone doing?” he asks from the doorway, silently hoping that they don’t invite him to join them.
“Morning, Sleeping Beauty,” Perrie teases, grinning from her place next to Grimmy on the couch. They’re both tucked into each other, and even Harry has to admit that they look cozy. “Did Prince Charming come and wake you?”

“No, I must’ve slept in…” Harry counters, not having it in him to joke back. He feels like he’s still asleep and everything around him is surreal, like James could pop out at any moment saying they were children’s cards all over again. “Why’s everyone out here?”

“We’re studying,” Kendall answers. She doesn’t look up from where she’s watching the screen.

“Yeah,” Grimmy adds. “So keep it down, why don’t ya.”

Harry turns to see what show or movie is playing on the television and is surprised when it looks like they’re actually watching a Youtube video. In the video, there’s a man standing on one side of an office room, and he has what Harry assumes are his friends sitting in spinning chairs across from him. This doesn’t look much like studying. “How is this - ”

“It’s TMZ,” Niall interjects, not even letting Harry finish his question.

“Yes,” Kendall agrees. “Now either take a seat or shut up.”

Harry chooses to take a seat, deciding that if it turns out that they really are studying, then staying could benefit him, and if it turns out that they aren’t, then Harry could always make an excuse and slip away to the library. Besides, a little bit of media-influenced studying can’t be too bad. It’s a lot less frustrating than reading for two days straight.

TMZ, it turns out, is a tabloid but in show form. The show includes snippets of videos taken of famous celebrities, and the hosts discuss the speculation surrounding the romances and rumors of the industry. Most of the videos are taken on shaky cameras, and the group of loud mouth ‘anchors’ give an unnecessary running commentary. It’s absolute garbage, and Harry can’t stop watching it.

The episodes are each only half an hour long, so the group does its best to hop around throughout seasons. They don’t want to get stuck with just recent information, so they make sure to go back even as far as the first episode.

Obviously the questions won’t only be about rumors from the industry and all the what-have-you that’s on this show, but it’s better than forcing themselves to go over the cultural information that they already know and that’s been ingrained in them for years.

Celebrity gossip? This is something they don’t hear about everyday, especially after being locked up in this house for the past couple of weeks.

At least, that’s what Harry tells himself as he wastes the next four hours watching this nonsense. There’s just something so fun about mocking celebrities with his clique, something comforting about throwing popcorn at the screen when somebody they all mutually hate comes on. Whenever an old rumor is mentioned in a newer episode they’re watching, they have to stop the episode they’re currently watching and then go watch all of the older episodes until they can find one that mentions the rumor.

Harry’s favorite parts by far are when something about Trivialities is mentioned. Whenever an old cast member, or James, or even just the name of the show is mentioned, everyone throws their hands up and screams. The entire living room sounds like when Low by Flo Rida comes on at the bar, everybody hollering in excitement.

It’s all he can do not to stay lying on the carpet in front of Perrie’s seat for the rest of the day. He’s
tempted - oh man is he tempted - but he figures that somebody should fix dinner so they don’t have to survive solely on popcorn and Mountain Dew for the rest of the night.

He gets up as Perrie and Grimmy squabble over which episode to watch next - they’re making their way into the newer episodes, but have decided to leave the most current episode for last as their reward for the night - to cook up some food easy enough to make.

He finds some chicken in the fridge that somebody took out yesterday and did nothing with, so he takes advantage of it and decides to make everybody fajitas, one of his specialties. As his pan is heating up, he runs down into the library and grabs a book to read while he cooks. He’s proud of himself for making sure that everybody that everybody has something to eat and making sure that his studying doesn’t slip at the expense of a good meal.

He reads about world records as he cuts the tomatoes and grates the cheese into a dish to set out on the counter. As he puts tortillas on the stove top to heat them up, he cringes at some of the more disgusting records in the book. He multitasks to the best of his ability, and allows himself to easily fall into a pattern of reading and cooking.

It’s as Harry’s finishing up his searing on the chicken that he hears people walking into the kitchen, their footsteps echoing on the linoleum. It’s Louis, Stan, and Oli. Part of Harry wants to see what would happen if he threw a tomato at Oli’s face, but the other part is just hoping that this doesn’t go the same as last time. Harry likes to think he’s played the game pretty confidently so far, but he doesn’t know how much longer he can stay that way with Louis constantly calling him out on his strategies and reading him like he’s an open book.

“Something smells good,” Louis comments, walking closer and getting a view of all the food laid out on the counter.

“I’m making fajitas for everyone,” Harry tells them as he drains the excess juice from the chicken out of the pan and into the sink. “Want me to put a few tortillas on the grill for you guys?”

Oli scoffs behind him. “I’d rather you put your hand on the grill instead,” he mumbles, but Harry ignores him and sets the pan back on the stove.

“I’ll take a fajita,” Louis says with a quick glare in Oli’s direction.

“Yeah, I’m pretty hungry too,” Stan agrees with Louis. “Would you mind if I stole one?”

“Not at all.” Harry walks over to the bag of tortillas and grabs a few more to put on the stove. He’s secretly pleased that Oli’s own friends ignored his insult in favor of asking for some of Harry’s cooking. It feels a lot like winning. Even if they’re just too lazy to cook for themselves and this was the quickest way to eat, it’s better than them joining in on Oli’s hate train.

“Enjoy your poison,” Oli spits as he backs out of the kitchen. “I’ll be studying.”

Harry waits until Oli’s out of sight and - hopefully - earshot to murmur, “Don’t hurt yourself.” He keeps his voice down but if Oli had heard, he wouldn’t have minded - not when Louis and Stan are in front of him laughing as they take a seat at the counter. Their response makes something warm settle in his chest.

It’s like last week when Louis helped short sheet Oli’s bed, revealing that maybe he doesn’t care for Oli as much as he acts like he does. Harry doesn’t want to be optimistic, doesn’t want to start thinking that this might be the start of Stan and Louis switching sides and joining Harry’s clique - because that’s definitely not happening anytime soon - but he can’t help the little shred of hope
blossoming in his chest.

No, his clique won’t be gaining any new members today, but that doesn’t mean Harry can’t bask in the glory of the cracks starting to show in their alliance.

“I did chicken instead of steak,” Harry tells them as he places the strips of grilled chicken onto a plate to set on the counter. “I hope that’s alright with you.”

“Anything is good with me,” Stan approves.

“Makes no difference to me,” Louis says. “I’ll eat just about any meat.”

Stan laughs, and Harry wants to join him, but when he makes eye-contact with Louis, Louis’s giving Harry a flat look with his left eyebrow raised in an unspoken question. Harry gives a weak chuckle, not sure what else would be considered an appropriate reaction, and his face warms as he does so. Somehow, Louis gets under his skin in the worst of ways.

Wednesday

Walking into the studio is different this week than it has been the past two. James is waiting for them as always, standing at the front of the room with his cards in hand as he offers a friendly, albeit mischievous, smile to the contestants. He gestures to the podiums, and everybody takes their spots.

“Welcome to your third trivia challenge,” James greets everyone as they settle into the game. “After today, you’ll be halfway through your trivia rounds. How exciting is that?”

Nobody reacts with the confetti and dancing James’ tone indicates he’s expecting. It’s exciting to be a part of the show, and it’s exciting that he’s that much closer to the grand prize, but now that they’re eliminating more people each week, he’s having to say goodbye to even more of his friends.

Being halfway done with the trivia rounds is a win/lose situation, much like everything else on the show, but even the winning part of the situation isn’t enough to throw Harry into a party mood. This is something his housemates seem to agree on, given how the room goes still after James’ question.

“Today, your trivia round will go a little differently than in the past,” he continues, not saying anything about the overwhelming lack of a reaction. “As you may have noticed, your podiums are currently displaying a color. When you look around the room, you’ll notice that only one other person shares a color with you.” He pauses, looking around the room with a smug grin before dropping the bomb, “The person who shares your color is going to be your partner for the week.”

This news is what finally pulls a reaction from the group. Everyone frantically looks around at the other podiums to see who their new partners are. This new twist means that not only will they and their partner’s trivia rounds count as a joint score, but that they’ll also be partnered up with these people during the physical challenge. Whoever they’re stuck with today is who they’ll have to rely on to make it through to next week.

Harry’s overwhelmed with relief when he sees that both his and Perrie’s podiums are displaying the same color. He makes eye-contact with her and they squeal in excitement. He’s never been so happy to have been paired with one of his friends for a group project before in his life. If he had been given someone like, say, Oli as a partner, Harry might have been inclined to purposefully lose just so the
other man would be up for elimination.

Perrie and Harry’s celebration is cut short when James continues, “There is a twist, though,”

*Harry and I have been waiting for the team challenges so we could finally work together, and it’s like, the second everything starts looking up, James pulls another fucking joke on us. I swear he’s out to get us.*

-Perrie, 23, Philadelphia

“You won’t know who your partner is until after the trivia round. This way, nobody can rely on their partner’s speed. After the last question is asked, we’ll reveal the colors, which will differ from the current color of your podium. We wouldn’t want to be predictable, would we?” He’s got a charming smile on his face, and Harry bitterly thinks it’s appropriately deceptive for every new twist he’s throwing in. “Now please welcome this week’s guest host, Ed Sheeran!”

Harry immediately starts clapping as last season’s winner walks into the room wearing the same trademark grin that was always plastered on his face when he was a contestant in the house. Harry’s a big fan of Ed. He had loved Ed’s everyman personality and how he showed that there really is no stereotype for who can win the show. Ed had proved that so long as you do your studying and practice for the physical challenge, you’ve got as good of a shot as anyone at winning the competition.

The questions start as soon as Ed reaches takes his spot next to James, and right off the bat, Kendall takes a lead over everyone. She’s hovering directly over her buzzer, so she’s nearly always the first one to buzz in. Even when questions from last night’s TMZ study session come up, questions Harry’s positive he knows the answers to, Kendall’s answering before he can even consider pressing his button.

It’s oddly humbling, watching Kendall - somebody who hasn’t done the best in previous trivia rounds - answer every question that gets thrown at them with startling certainty. It gives Harry hope that maybe a week will come where he knows all of the answers to the trivia questions - and can press his buzzer in time to answer them. The chances of that happening are slim, but watching Kendall answer each question with ease makes it feel more possible.

The second half of the trivia round is more of a free-for-all, Kendall knowing less information on what’s being asked. She still manages to get a few questions right in a row, but for the most part, there’s a good spread of contestants who are acquiring points. The group morale goes up
exponentially when they realize that there’s a bigger chance of them scoring points now than there was at the beginning of the round.

Harry thinks he’s done a decent job by the time the round ends. He has one of the higher scores, and if he’s lucky enough to be paired with Niall or Sophia, then there’s a chance they can pass Kendall’s score (if she’s partnered with Oli, Zayn, or Jesy). If he gets partnered with Kendall herself, then he’s basically guaranteed the advantage. The podiums start flickering through the different colors without so much as a verbal prompt from James, and Harry watches as his podium stops on blue. His eyes search out Kendall’s podium before anybody else’s, only to find that hers stopped at green. When he gets over the minute bout of disappointment, his eyes land on Taylor whose podium is displaying the same bright blue as his.

Being partnered with Taylor isn’t the worst thing to happen to him since arriving at the house in week one, but it certainly isn’t the best. He’s certain her tenacity paired with his game play will get them safely to week four, but is safety worth having to spend the next three days in her company? He wants to say no but knows that when he’s holding the grand prize after winning the finale, he’ll be thankful for being paired with one of the better players - even if she isn’t necessarily very pleasant to be around.

He hears Perrie let out a dispirited sigh from her spot on the left of him, so he checks to see whose pink podium matches hers. It’s Stan, and that puts Perrie in an even worse boat than Harry. He can only hope that she does well in the physical challenge because it would be hard to convince the group to vote for her if both her and another group member get put up for elimination. She’s easily the toughest competition in their clique both mentally and strategically, so trying to convince the others to keep her in the game would be a difficult feat.

“Alright!” James claps his hands together, pulling everyone’s attention to him. “Kendall and Louis, congratulations.” Harry’s eyes look back over the group, and he notices that Louis’ podium is glowing the same basil green as Kendall’s. He’s smiling bigger than Kendall herself at the news. “Here is your advantage.”

James’ hand holds out a purple envelope, and instead of immediately running for it, Louis gestures for Kendall to grab it. It’s a smart move, one that keeps him from looking like he’s taking the credit for winning the round when it was actually all Kendall.

Kendall opens the envelope, and everyone groans when she pulls out a black card instead of the typical white card. Every regular possible advantage, a leg up in the competition, intel on the physical challenge, being a team captain of some sort, comes written on a white card. The black card, though, means -

“That’s right,” James announces. “Your advantage this week is Immunity. You do not have to compete in this week’s physical challenge, and you will not be up for elimination. Everybody else, I won’t tell you what the challenge is, but just know that you and your partner will be joining together with other teams. But don’t worry, I’ll make it fair.”

Harry’s concerned about what the emphasis on fair could mean. It could be anything at this point. Harry’s not even going to pretend he understands what some of the hints they’re given mean. There’s a chance he may never figure this hint out, may even completely forget about the word until he’s back at home and watching this episode from the comfort of his living room. He lets his mind wander from the topic.

As they’re dismissed from the room, everyone drifts over to their partners - albeit reluctantly for some. Harry’s not thrilled about having to be attached to Taylor’s hip for the next few days, but nothing is going to stop him from doing the best he can, and if he has to accompany her to the
Taylor and Harry end up in the car with Grimmy and Liam who were also partnered together. Harry would be jealous that they get to keep things within the clique, but Grimmy looks unbelievably tense in Liam’s company, probably due to the stressed and angry look on Liam’s face.

“You okay, buddy?” Harry asks as they’re pulling onto the highway and after the silence has brewed on too long. “You look a little -”

“I’m pissed,” Liam spits furiously.

“Okay.” Harry doesn’t want to try and cheer him up if Liam’s not willing to elaborate, doesn’t want to be the jackass to try and coax an explanation out of him if he doesn’t want to talk about it.

“We all studied our asses off yesterday,” Liam huffs out. “Grimmy actually did decently for once.”


“We were so close,” Liam keeps going. “And then because of the stupid teams Kendall and Louis - Louis of all people, honestly - got to take home the immunity.”

“Well without the teams, you wouldn’t have even been close to Kendall,” Taylor counters, showing no sympathy for Liam or his anger. “Or me for that matter.”

“Kendall got almost every one of their points for them,” Liam bites. “She would have beat us without Louis, but now Louis gets to reap the benefits of her win.”

Harry hums, not wanting to say something that might infuriate Liam further or risk the alliance they have together, but Liam’s not being honest with himself. He’s trying to justify his anger by insisting that Louis did no work, but the truth of the matter is, Louis earned a decent amount of points all on his own - even more than Liam and almost as many as Grimmy. Harry doesn’t want to add fire to the flames, but Liam can’t get away with justifying his anger with lies. “That’s not true -”

“It is,” Liam cuts him off. “He did nothing.”

“Even if it is true,” Taylor adds thoughtfully, “which it isn’t, why are you so upset? What you’re saying is that with or without a partner, Kendall would’ve beaten you.”

“But now Louis gets to benefit from it,” he clarifies.

“Had it been you, you’d be excited,” Harry points out, feeling more free to speak now that Taylor’s made herself the voice of reason.

“But it wasn’t!”

Grimmy leans forward, speaking for the first time since the beginning of the car ride, “I think maybe we should all -”

“Shut it, Grimmy,” Liam snaps. “Just bring your A game on Friday or I swear to god I’m making sure you go home this week.”

It’s silent for a while after that, nobody wanting to be the victim of the next threat Liam throws out. Grimmy looks reproachful but doesn’t say anything spiteful to Liam, even in his own defense.

The city passes by outside as slowly as always, and the radio hums quietly in the background. Seeing
the same people every day and not getting to deviate from the usual schedule has been taking a toll on everyone. Emotions are running high, and things are getting tense. There’s a huge difference between the way everyone was during the week one car rides and the way everyone is now, and Harry can’t help but mourn the change.

The camaraderie will come back the closer to the end they get, but for now, they’re stuck in a loop of stepping on each other’s toes and getting frustrated over things they can’t control. For example, Harry’s almost positive he offended Perrie this morning by saying her shirt was “very blue”.

As they’re pulling onto the more residential streets of the city, Liam sighs and turns to face Grimmy. “I’m sorry I was saying that shit,” he apologizes earnestly.

“It’s alri -”

“No it isn’t,” he interrupts Grimmy’s acceptance. “Louis and I had almost the same amount of points, and he still beat me. I’m just mad that because of Kendall, he doesn’t have to compete. What I said wasn’t cool.”

“It wasn’t,” Grimmy agrees. “But I get it. I was doing really well on the music portion, but Kendall creamed me when it came to movies. I should’ve done more reading.”

“We both could’ve done more reading,” Liam puts in. “I had no idea she’d be that good.”

“Me neither.”

The car falls back into silence after that, but only for a moment, before Liam’s insisting again, “I’m still sorry.”

“Oh my god!” Taylor yells, arching in her seat next to Harry. “Are we almost home? This car smells like pain, and I’m getting fucking sick of it.” Harry holds in his laughter for as long as he can, but when Liam cracks as well, he loses his composure and honks out an obnoxious laugh that leaves his stomach aching.

Thursday

Harry wakes up on a trampoline.

No, that’s not right. He wakes up to Niall jumping on his bed aggressively enough that Harry’s in mid-air when he startles awake. He panics for a moment, not sure what’s happening or why he’s suddenly falling down when he should be resting on his soft, cotton mattress.

He realizes just where he is, what’s happening, and why he feels moments away from cardiac arrest when he see’s Niall’s face grinning down at him from where his feet are suddenly planted on either side of Harry’s stomach. “Rise and shine, partner!”

Harry’s confused, mostly, his tired mind not being able to register the oddness of the morning or why Niall’s suddenly southern. “What is -”

Niall jumps up in the air again, stopping Harry mid sentence as he raises his arms up in defence, unsure if he’ll be safe from Niall’s knobby knees. The man lands with his knees bracketing Harry’s
hips, his manic grin even more wild than before. “We’re partners,” he says. “You and Taylor are with Sophia and I.”

“Really?” Harry asks, barely registering what Niall’s just said, let alone the full context of the situation.

“Really.”

He does his best to stretch out with Niall still sitting on his hips, but it isn’t an easy affair. “How’d you-”

“It’s on a letter that was sitting in the fruit bowl this morning,” Niall explains to him.

“What’s the - ”

“If you get out of bed, we can go discuss things,” Niall suggests. “We’ll be the prettiest team in the whole wide world,” he jokes, grabbing onto Harry’s cheeks mid sentence.

Harry swats his hands away, not knowing what he did to deserve such treatment from such a touchy man. “Get off of me.”

Harry gets up, taking his time stretching and throwing a shirt on. He refuses to rush just because Niall’s standing by the door tapping his foot impatiently. He even allows himself a moment to fix his hair in the mirror, something he wouldn’t do if he’d been woken up patiently and with kind words, but given the trauma Niall’s inflicted on him, he believes this is completely warranted.

When he feels like he’s sufficiently irritated Niall and wasted an unnecessary amount of time, he gears up and follows Niall into Sophia’s room where Taylor and Sophia are waiting.

“Finally,” Taylor huffs, sitting up from where she was resting against the wall under the window. “We’ve been waiting for you to get up all morning.”

“You guys could’ve woken me up,” Harry points out.

“We did,” Taylor gestures to where Niall’s making himself comfortable on one of the beds. “We just didn’t want to do it too early.”

“What time is it?” Harry asks.

“Eight,” Sophia answers, not even looking up from where she’s drawing something on a spare piece of paper.

Harry groans, not enjoying the way his morning is going at all. “Why are we up this early?”

“Because we just got our teams, and we really need to plan things out.” Taylor orders, “Now, either get over here, or you’re going to be the next Calvin Harris. Understand?”

Harry nods and rushes to sit down on the same bed Sophia’s resting on. He’d hated the way Calvin was treated in season one, deserted and then sent home by his own teammates who had only been using him to get through entertainment week.

Niall laughs at the exchange, stretching out across his bed comfortably. It figures that Harry would be put in a group with both the highest strung contestant and the one who’s most relaxed. Looking over at Sophia, he thinks maybe it’s not too bad. They’ve got a good variety in their group, and they can easily make it through the physical challenge.
“What’s the challenge?” Harry wonders, realizing he’s the only one in the room left out of the loop.

“We're going to have to make a charity booth for a fair,” Sophia tells him. She lays her notebook down on the bed, and Harry sees a sketch of a stand that looks similar to those he saw at the carnivals he went to when he was younger. “We have until 10 AM tomorrow to come up with a concept and then design the two signs for our booth.”

“Plus design signs to hang up around the fair,” Niall jumps in.

“That’s not required,” Taylor expands on Niall’s point, “but we were discussing it before you woke up, and we think it’d be smart.”

Niall nods and continues on, “We have to raise more money than at least one other team. Whoever raises the least amount of money is up for elimination.”

“And it’s a double elimination,” Taylor informs him with a nudge to his shoulder, “so we really have to be on our A game. You know… awake.”

Harry’s nodding along, trying to keep up with all the information being thrown at him and wishing he’d have been awake when the letter was found so that he wouldn’t be so behind. It’s like his group has done all the work without him, and now he’s left to struggle with catching up. “I feel kind of useless now.”

“Don’t,” Niall waves him off, far more relaxed than Harry is, which should be strange given that Harry’s only half-awake. “We haven’t come up with a concept yet, and we need your help.”

“I thought we could do that thing where you pop balloons with a dart,” Sophia offers, “but - ”

“But we’d be blowing up balloons all day and pinning them each individually to the board,” Taylor argues.

Harry understands. He hates how put out Sophia looks and that they have to turn down her idea, but he knows it won’t get them much money. Harry’s never stopped for those types of booths, and he can’t imagine anyone else will. “There’s always the hazard of a dart hitting someone as well.”

“Plus it’s boring.”

Sophia frowns at Taylor’s harsh words and protests, “Well we could put paint in the balloons!”

“Even then,” Niall says, “it’s still replacing balloons all day.”

Harry notices how upset Sophia’s getting, her demeanor becoming closed off at how casually her idea is being thrown out, so he puts his hand on her arm. “It’s a great idea,” he encourages, “but operating it would be too difficult. Especially if we only have a few hours to raise money.”

“You don’t have to sugar coat, Harry.” She shakes him off, but Harry notices her tight grimace smoothing out, more neutral than before. “There’s a better idea out there. I just don’t know what it is.”

Harry can’t think of anything better to do himself. Everytime he tries to think of what booths he saw at the carnival growing up, the only things that come to him are basketball hoops and trying to shoot a target with a water gun. He never did much else because he was always obsessed with trying to beat those two games
As he grew up, he stopped going to the game booths altogether because he didn’t like the idea of spending money to play a game that he most likely wouldn’t win. When he allowed himself to spend money, it was usually on something he knew would pay off. Like food. Or a t-shirt.

Harry doesn’t want to spend his day at the carnival handing out hot dogs and modelling t-shirts.

“Did anybody else think of anything?” he asks.

“We could let people throw pie at us,” Niall suggests.

Harry frowns, thinking about how much pie they’d have to bake and how much time it would take to prepare and bake them on top of the time it’s going to take to design and build their booth. “That’s a lot - ”

“It’s a lot of goddamn pie, we know,” Taylor rolls her eyes before leveling Niall with a glare. “We went over this morning how difficult it’d be to do - ”

“It’s not actual pie!” Niall yells, sitting up from where he’s been stretched out. “It’s pie tins filled with whipped cream!”

“It’s a cheaper version of a dunk tank,” Taylor seethes. “The customers are paying money to humiliate random strangers, and I don’t want to spend the day covered in pie or soaked in water!”

“Besides…” Sophia starts, looking trepidatious about interrupting the argument. “We’re not exactly the blockhead, weasel-faced douchebags people want to throw pies at. We’re the type of people others want to kiss.”

Niall rolls his eyes, falling back into the pillows and stretching out again. “That’s a little big-headed of you.”

“Well she’s right,” Taylor defends. “We’re conventionally attractive. Think about this, the teams running the other booths are great at hurling insults and goading people into wanting to hit them, but I guarantee that I’m the only one out of our team who can sound sincere hurling an insult. We can’t compete with the other teams when it comes to being obnoxious. Here, let me show you. Call me a bitch, Harry,” Taylor demands.

“What?” Harry looks up from where he’d started to stare down at his lap. “Why?”

“Just to prove you can,” she shrugs as an answer.

“I don’t want to call you a bitch,” Harry says honestly. He’s not a fan of what’s being asked of him, doesn’t like the idea of saying something so harshly. Whether he’s been prompted or not, he doesn’t like using harsh language. “Why would I call someone walking past me a bitch? I’d call them a wimp if anything.”

“See.”

“We can work with that,” Sophia assures. “We don’t have to swear at citizens.”

“Fine. Call me a wimp, Harry,” Taylor coaches him through her sigh.

Harry gears up to do just that, feeling… not nervous, but a certain type of way, as the others watch him. He starts to smile and can feel his dimple popping. Smiling might not be the best thing to do while insulting someone, but he can’t stop it from happening. “You’re a wimp.”
He’s barely even finished before everyone starts groaning at his poor attempt at jeering. “That was bad,” Niall complains.

Harry knows it was. Heck, he had known it was going to be bad before he had even opened his mouth. He knows not a man made for goading and hollering, but that doesn’t stop him from frowning at their disapproval.

“Yeah,” Taylor agrees. “Thanks, Harry, for proving my point.”

“I was trying my hardest!”

“Your eyes honest to god twinkled,” Sophia marvels.

“You’re right, Sophia,” Niall begins, “I kind of wanted to kiss him.” Harry can’t help but grin at Niall for his compliment (even if it wasn’t intended as one, Harry’s still honored). “I would’ve paid to kiss him.”

It’s silent after that as the four of them continue brainstorming about possible booths silently. Harry runs over their conversation, thinking about everything that’s been said and all the ideas that have been thrown around.

He’s still stuck on the idea of a booth that doesn’t offer prizes. He really likes the thought of giving the customers something the moment they come through. He wants them to have a reward with no risk where they don’t have to wonder if the booth is worth their money.

Harry runs through every word they’d exchanged since he woke up, hoping that maybe there was something in there he can bounce off of. When he thinks about what Sophia said and Niall’s joke about paying to kiss Harry, his head springs up, only to see the rest of the group already looking at him.

Taylor raises her eyebrow, and that’s the only approval he needs before they’re off and working on the posters and signs.

Sophia uses her skills to pick out a color scheme and coordinate everyone’s outfits so they aren’t identical, but also don’t clash with each other or the signs. She does so with a smile on her face, and Harry likes to get the sneaking suspicion that she takes great joy in going through everybody’s clothing. She seems the snooping type.

Taylor’s in charge of the design for the booth. She takes Sophia’s sketch and adds on a few more features before handing the book off to Harry who writes the words. He’s got decent penmanship, better than Niall, and it’s something that keeps him busy as Niall starts making the signs to hang around the fair.

They’ve got great momentum going as all four of them come together to cut the letters out of cardstock (Taylor’s idea, so that the letters stick out more on their background). Sophia draws a cartoonish image of a pair of lips, and Taylor praises her work with an amount of earnestness that Harry didn’t know could come from her.

They allow themselves a two hour break that evening. Taylor suggests it to clear their minds so they can come back to their work after the break with fresh eyes and a new perspective. Harry thinks it’s a load of baloney, but he isn’t going to say no to a break. Especially now, when the other groups are still working on their booths, so the house is quiet enough that Harry can relax without anybody bothering him.

He spends half of his first hour watching television. There’s nothing on, really, so he spends his time
flipping through the channels. When he finally settles on something, it’s the tail end of an episode of *Cupcake Wars*, and it ignites in him the desire to make cupcakes of his own.

Harry heads into the kitchen, checking the fridge and cupboards for ingredients. He does a happy dance when he finds cocoa powder which will allow him to make a chocolate frosting to go on top. It’s as he’s starting to throw everything into the mixing bowl that he hears someone walking into the kitchen. This has become such a regular occurrence that Harry doesn’t even have to look up to know it’s Louis. If it had turned out to be anybody else, Harry would’ve smacked himself in the face with his own measuring cup.

But it *is* Louis, and the man is grinning gleefully as he takes in the ingredients lining the countertop. “Are we making cupcakes?”

Harry takes his use of the word ‘we’ instead of ‘you’ to mean Louis’s offering to help him cook. “If you want,” he answers, desperately wanting him to say yes.

“I do!” Louis opens up the pantry and grabs one of the aprons hanging up on the door. Harry isn’t wearing one of his own, but he can’t stop from smiling when he sees Louis struggling to tie the strings behind his neck. “It’s a shame we don’t have those big white hats.” Louis uses his hand to gesture above his head, signifying that he’s talking about a chef’s hat as Harry chuckles under his breath.

He finishes pouring in his ingredients as Louis makes his way over, watching carefully as Harry measures everything out exactly so that he doesn’t mess up the recipe he knows by memory. Him cooking cupcakes from scratch wouldn’t look nearly as impressive if he completely screws up the recipe.

“What would you like me to do?” Louis asks.

“You’ll be mixing this,” Harry answers, holding up the electric mixer. “Put it to the lowest setting, and slowly stir everything in the bowl.” he instructs. “You okay with that?” Louis nods and reaches for the mixer. Harry hands it off and allows Louis to take care of that as he puts the liners in the cupcake pan, getting them ready to place in the oven.

As he’s doing so, he hears precisely three sounds in quick succession: the mixer turning on, a horrified gasp, and then the mixer turning off. Harry has to steady himself before turning around to see what Louis could’ve *possibly* done in such a short time.

After turning around, he sees Louis with vanilla batter splattered across one of his cheekbones and a look of pure, unadulterated shock on his face. Harry can’t help bursting into laughter so strong he bends in half, his head angled down at his hands resting on his knees as his giggles roll through him. Louis isn’t joining him, but he also doesn’t look angry; he’s just standing still, eyes wide and mouth open.

Harry takes pity on him and straightens up, approaching Louis slowly and taking the electric mixer from his hand only to replace it with a whisk from the drawer. He goes to turn back around, but Louis’ baffled “What the fuck is this?” stops him in his tracks.

He stares at Louis for a moment, trying to gauge if he’s being serious or not. It almost sounds like he’s joking, but the genuine confusion on his face tells Harry otherwise. “It’s a whisk.”

“How do you whisk?” Louis asks incredulously. And that’s how Harry ends up spending the next few minutes pressed up against Louis’ back trying to teach him how to properly hold the whisk and use it to gently mix the batter. Being this close to him reminds Harry of how in older movies,
somebody would teach their date how to hold a pool queue just like this, and the thought has Harry flushing red and quickly stumbling backwards towards the cupcake liners.

They work together fine for the rest of the time, Louis even building up the courage to try his hand at the electric mixer again when they go to make the frosting. It all goes well, and Harry can’t stop wishing that he had his camera so that he could capture Louis’ carefree smile as he floats around the kitchen and helps in whatever ways he can.

At the end of his two hour break, Harry goes back to working on the signs feeling lighter than he has in the past three weeks, and his newfound good mood has everything to do with Louis.

He doesn’t even mind when Taylor sends everyone to bed at 10 PM, pestering them about being on top of their game and needing to be alert at the fair. “We don’t need a repeat of this morning, do we Harry?” she questions, condescension lacing her tone.

And still, Harry doesn’t mind any of it. He goes to bed far earlier than normal with the phantom feeling of Louis against him and the taste of cupcakes on his tongue.

Friday

Harry’s not sure what deity he pissed off in a previous life, but he doesn’t think he’s ever been this hot in his entire life.

The location they were given for their booth is directly in the sun, and unfortunately, their design did not include anything to shield them from the sun. The producers are making sure to keep them covered in sunscreen so that they don’t burn, but that doesn’t stop the heat from boiling Harry alive from the inside out.
The plus side to the hell he’s being put through is that the kissing booth is gaining a lot of attention. He can’t see the other booths, but there’s no way they’re doing as well as his. There’s been a constant line of people since they opened the booth, and there’s yet to be a break.

For the booth, that is. Harry’s had a few breaks since the beginning. They knew last night that they all wouldn’t want to have to man the booth the whole time, so they decided that they would trade shifts every half an hour. Taylor and Harry have been sharing shifts but haven’t taken any breaks together. He’s not complaining, far from it, but it strikes him as odd; every contestant he’s seen so far has either been manning their own booths or spending their breaks with their partner.

Every time Harry’s seen Perrie walking around, she’s right next to Zayn, the two of them spending their recesses together. Well, they’ve shared their breaks together every time other than one. For the most recent break, Perrie and Harry’s time off aligned, and the two of them are taking great joy in spending it together scouring the fairgrounds and talking about how each of their days of planning went and how terribly they missed each other during the time they spent apart.

As it turns out, Perrie and Stan are teamed up with Zayn and Jesy, and because all four of them have some artistic ability, they put up a tattoo and face painting booth - fake, of course. Stan and Perrie, the two with the least amount of artistic talent, are using fake tattoo sheets, but Zayn and Jesy are freehanding all of the face painting and the customized art.

Harry’s only a little jealous that they’ve got such a great booth.

Eventually he and Perrie have to go back to their respective booths and finish working. Upon his arrival, Taylor has a stick of cotton candy that she forces Harry to eat half of, insisting that it will make him taste sweet and have customers wanting to come back for more. Harry doesn’t exactly argue with her logic, but it does make him feel a bit used - if not by the customers, then by Taylor. She’s got a very business mindset and has him feeling less than human in this operation.

By the end of the day, the heat is still overwhelming, and Harry’s kissed more lips and cheeks than he even thought possible. The whole experience has been draining, but the fact that the competition is over in an hour is all the motivation Harry needs to keep doing what he’s doing and not pass out on the pavement.

Even the dunk tank is looking good right now.

When Niall and Sophia come back, they beg Harry and Taylor to man the booth for another ten minutes while they go ride the ferris wheel. They’d found tickets lying on the ground and wanted to go for a ride before they have to head back to the house.

Taylor turns them down, saying she wants her break and walks away without even trying to negotiate. Harry agrees to stay, and they thank him with a kiss on the cheek before taking off for the ferris wheel.

Harry’s nearing the end of the ten minutes when he hears, “Business must be booming with lips like yours.”

“Lovely as ever, Kendall,” Harry greets sarcastically when he see Kendall and Louis approaching the booth. “What can I help you with?”

“We’ve been going around and trying every booth,” Kendall tells him, looking around at the design on their sign.

“Did you get a tattoo?”
They both nod in response. Kendall flips her hair off of her face and points to a sparkly pink broken heart next to her right eye, and Louis flips his wrist around to show Harry the rope painted on. “We also dunked Liam and Oli in the dunk tank,” Louis says as they show their art to Harry.

“I dunked Liam and Oli,” Kendall corrects with an eye roll. “Louis doesn’t know how to aim.”

“Bite your tongue. I’ve got a great arm.” Kendall just rolls her eyes at Louis’ protests and continues to look around at everything they’ve displayed on the booth. Louis looks to Harry and continues speaking, “I thought there were supposed to be two of you on at a time. Where are your partners?”

“Niall and Sophia wanted to ride the ferris wheel, so I held their places,” he explains. “In return, I get a dollar to dunk Oli.”

“What if it’s Eleanor in the dunk tank?” Louis asks.

Harry grins, “I can be very patient when I need to be.”

“Noted.”

“Alright,” Kendall interrupts with a sigh, slamming a dollar onto the booth. “Enough of whatever this is. I want a kiss.”

Harry huffs but takes the dollar and places it in the cash box they’ve stored under the countertop of the booth. He leans across the barrier and presses his lips to Kendall’s for a moment before pulling away.

Before he’s fully back in place, Louis’ hand slides a dollar across the table and levels Harry with a look, one eyebrow raised. It’s a challenge, Harry thinks. Louis’s probably testing him to see if he’ll actually go through with it, but Harry’s not going to play into his hand. He won’t turn down the money. Kissing Louis isn’t a hardship at all. If anything, the circumstances of the competition they’re on right now are the only things that would stop him from -

“We’re back!” Niall sings as they approach the booth. He takes notice of the dollar and looks at the two standing on the other side. “Ooh, who is this from?” Niall questions, and when Kendall points to Louis, Niall jumps forward, grabbing Louis by his cheeks and pulling him into a kiss. He grabs the dollar from the counter and slaps it into Harry’s hand, sending him on his way with a smile and a salute.

Harry smirks and returns the gesture as he walks away from the booth and towards where the dunk tank is located, excited to get to dunk Oli.

There’s a line, of course. Oli’s been shouting vulgar insults at everyone who so much as glances at his booth, and now everyone and their mother wants a chance to dunk him.

As Harry’s gearing up to go next, Grimmy catches his eye, and a large smile takes over his competitor’s face. Grimmy hands him three large softballs and directs him to stand on the white line when he throws.

“Oh, look who it is!” Oli taunts as soon as Harry’s starting to aim. “Boy won’t even take a proper shot with his housemates, and yet he wants to try this?” Harry tries to tune him out as he throws the first ball, but he still misses. “You’re wasting your time!” Harry can hear Grimmy cheering him on to his right, but it’s not enough to overpower the sound of Oli’s jeering. He tries again with the second ball, only to miss again.

Harry’s beginning to get frustrated at this point, and he hates that no matter how hard he focuses, he
can’t seem to hit the target. Before he can doubt himself any longer, he throws his third ball. It misses of course, but he ignores Oli’s laughing and runs full-speed to where the target is and throwing his whole weight against the button. He takes great joy in Oli’s scream as he gets dumped into the ice-cold water below.

The crowd around Harry is hooting and hollering, and Grimmy looks extremely pleased where he’s standing over by the cash box. Harry can see Kendall and Louis standing in the crowd of onlookers, both of them clapping. Even the cameramen don’t look like they’re displeased. All-in-all, Harry feels great about his choice, confident that he’s finally gotten the last word in.

That is, until Oli emerges from the water, absolutely livid. “You little shit,” he screams, his arms smacking down on top of the water. “You better watch yourself, kid! He told me to leave you alone, but fuck that. I swear to God, my number one priority is going to be sending your sorry ass home, you hear me?”

Harry doesn’t know who told Oli to leave him alone or why the man is so angry about being dunked when he’s literally working a dunk tank, but Harry refuses to take the words to heart. Oli weighs about ten pounds soaking wet, so Harry doesn’t feel too threatened.

Harry decides not to dwell on what Oli said and instead pushes it all to the back of his mind. He doesn’t believe the other man will actually follow through on his threats, so it’s pointless to spend all day obsessing over what it was all about. After Grimmy has congratulated him for the fourth time, Harry goes back to his booth and finishes out the rest of his shift. A producer comes by after time is called to collect their cash box so the crew can count their profits.

Harry’s completely calm as he helps his team pack up the booth; he knows without a sliver of doubt that they’re safe. Throughout the day there were only a handful of times when their queue line was empty, and most of the time there had been a near constant stream of customers. He hadn’t seen much of the dunk tank or tattoo booth, but what he did see from them wasn’t all that great.

When everything is packed away and there’s nothing left for them to do but wait for the results, Harry finds Perrie, Grimmy, Kendall, and Liam and decides to walk around the fair with them for the rest of the time that they have. There aren’t many times (if any at all) where the contestants are allowed to have unsupervised time out of the house. Even now, when they aren’t scheduled for anything, when they’re allowed to free roam the fairgrounds, there’s a small camera crew following them.

It’s nice - being able to have a moment with everyone. None of them feel the need to say much, and nobody mentions that at least one of them will be going up for elimination. They’re just peacefully enjoying each other’s company while they still can.

Perrie’s got her head leaning on Harry’s shoulder and is talking about some of the ridiculous stuff customers wanted Zayn to draw on them. Liam’s on Harry’s other side, laughing quietly at the stories as he and Kendall bump shoulders as they walk.

Harry doesn’t know when it happened, or how, but these people have become his friends. He’s stopped thinking of them as his competition and instead started thinking of ways for all of them to keep in contact with each other after the show is over. Coming into the show, he never intended to let any of his competitors make a lasting impression on him, but damn it, they did.

And Harry can’t find it in himself to mad about that.

A producer finds them as they’re exiting the funhouse. He looks understandably surprised to see the group leaving a ride considering none of them had been given tickets. What the producer doesn’t
understand is that they have Nicholas Grimshaw who can charm anything with a pulse, and in an attempt to make the most out of the time they had left at the carnival, Grimmy had managed to talk the carnie for the funhouse into letting them take a turn for free. Instead of questioning them, the producer just shakes his head and rushes them to a specific spot on the boardwalk that they’ve closed off for filming.

James is standing in the perfect spot for the cameras to catch the ferris wheel behind him, and there’s a crowd forming around the surrounding perimeter trying to catch a glimpse of what’s going on.

Once they reach the boardwalk, Harry has to separate from his friends and join his team by where they’re standing on top of a white ‘x’. He doesn’t think they’ve been here long themselves, not if the relaxed expression on Taylor’s usually tense face is anything to go by. She actually gives Harry a smile as he approaches. Based on what he’s seen of her in the three weeks they’ve been in the house together, had she been forced to wait for Harry to turn up, she’d be far more tetchy with him.

A producer, different from the one who came to retrieve Harry, does a final check to make sure everything is in place before giving his men the okay to begin rolling and gestures for James to begin.

“Congratulations, everyone, for officially making it halfway through your physical challenges,” their host announces. The contestants cheer, the sound growing louder when the crowd they’ve attracted joins in. “We’ve counted all of the cash brought in during the round, and we’re happy to report that while we have the results, it was an incredibly close call. There was less than a twenty dollar difference between first and last place.”

That’s a close call, closer than Harry - than any of them - could’ve anticipated. Harry can’t explain it, but he still isn’t worried. He doesn’t know if it’s because of his team or because he knows his clique won’t allow him to be voted off, but he feels overwhelmingly unconcerned about being in the bottom.

“We’d like to introduce a prize for the winning team as well,” James continues. “There’s been a total of two-thousand and forty-three dollars collected in this challenge, and we’d like to offer the winning team the opportunity to choose which charity the proceeds will be donated to in their name.”

An excited rumble makes its way through the crowd. Harry already has a few charities in mind, places he’d love to see the money go to, whether it be in his name or not. Niall’s whispering to himself on Harry’s right side, and he can hear Sophia doing the same on the opposite side of Niall.

“But before I name a winner,” James picks up, talking over the murmurs, “I’ll name the second place team.” That’s fair, Harry thinks. With all of them so close in profits, it makes sense to keep the winning and losing teams in suspense for as long as they can, especially when winning comes with such a nice prize. “In second place, safe from elimination is...”

Niall grips Harry’s hand, so Harry does the same to Taylor. They may not be friends, or even friend ly, but they’re a team, and Harry wants to show that they’re unified. He may be playing for himself, but he’s also playing for his team, and he wants everyone to know that.

“The kissing booth.”

Harry’s hands tense before slackening in relief and disappointment. As happy as he is to be safe, he really wanted that prize. He sighs dejectedly but claps at the announcement. They’re safe, they won’t be going home this week. That’s something to be happy about, something to be proud of.

“And now,” James goes on, “Your first place winner, taking the title for entertainment week and
gaining the power to donate all of the profits to a charity of their choice is...”

There’s a long pause, the silence stretching on. Even the crowd has managed to quiet themselves for the big reveal. Harry always assumed the producers edited the footage so that the pause was lengthened. He never thought that the hosts really waited half of a minute to announce the winner, but James is proving him wrong.

One thing Harry can say about taking second place is that he’s glad this anticipation isn’t holding his fate in its hands. He’ll be going back to the house, no lingering fear of elimination plaguing him, and he doesn’t have to hold his breath as he waits for the reveal.

He does anyway - hold his breath, that is. If Perrie’s in the bottom, her future in the competition is being put on the line, and without her awareness and conniving demeanor, Harry’d be more likely to show his strategy. Not to mention the fact that she’s, at this point, the closest thing to a best friend Harry’s got. Sure, he has his friends back home, but he hasn’t been able to talk to them while he’s been here, and he and Perrie are basically living out of each other’s pockets.

On the other hand, if Grimmy and Liam are up for elimination, there’s going to have to be yet another talk about who on their team they’re sending home. Liam definitely deserves to stay more; he actually studies and prepares for the physical challenges, but he’s got a better chance to win than Grimmy does, meaning they’d be smart to get rid of him.

Grimmy’s been in the bottom three times, and keeping him could be smart in terms of keeping the easiest competition around the longest. If it were Harry and Grimmy in the finale, it wouldn’t matter who the third party is, Harry could beat Grimmy with both hands tied behind his back. Although, if Grimmy actually managed to take home the grand prize, every member of the clique would be beating themselves up for not voting him off when they had the chance.

The possibilities are endless, and Harry’s torn between who he wants to win, but amidst the competing ideas in his head, one thought stands out: just how lucky he is to be safe.

James lifts up his cards and Harry’s entire body tenses in suspense. “The tattoo booth!”

From the other side of the makeshift stage the producers created for them, Perrie’s squeal can be heard. She’s gripping Zayn in a tight hug and jumping up and down despite the look of indifference on the man’s face.

Harry’s relieved it was Perrie, though he doesn’t feel great about it. He’s still upset that they’ll have to have a third meeting to discuss who they’re saving, but Perrie’s his lifeline to get him safely through the competition, and with her safe… Harry’s safe too.

He spares a look over to the losing team. Eleanor is practically shaking where she stands next to an irate Oli whose hands are clenched tightly at his sides as he glares holes into the winning team’s heads. Liam just seems worried, and Harry understands that completely. Had it been him in that situation, he’d feel the same.

Grimmy, though… Grimmy looks completely settled. There’s a bit of shock on his face, but it’s quickly wiped away with a nod of his head. He’s made a decision, it seems, but about what, Harry isn’t certain.

He figures out what was going through Grimmy’s head the very moment they walk through the front door of the house, the man pulling the clique aside to speak with them privately. The ride home was
tense - all five of them managed to sneak into the same car, but none of them said anything on the drive back to the house. Perrie didn’t spend her time celebrating her win, Harry and Kendall didn’t express their relief about not having to worry about elimination, and Liam and Grimmy didn’t share their worries.

There had been a calm silence between them, everybody taking the time to reflect on their own thoughts, but the silence made Harry uneasy the entire ride home. He felt like Grimmy and Liam just knew he was weighing the pros and cons of who to send home, but it turns out his fears were unwarranted.

“T’m not staying,” Grimmy informs them once they’ve found a secluded room to talk in. “This is my third week in the bottom, and Liam put too much effort into that booth to go home. If you vote to keep me, I’ll just walk out.” There’s no hesitation on his face, no uncertainty. He’s thought about this, Harry realizes now. For how long, he doesn’t know, but Grimmy has probably been set on this decision since it was revealed that him and Liam are in the bottom.

Liam doesn’t appear relieved. Shocked, definitely, but it’s obvious that he’s not comforted by what Grimmy’s just said. “Grimmy - ”

“No more talking about it,” Grimmy cuts him off, his words sounding final. “I want to get trashed.” He leaves them all standing there in shock as he walks away from them and into the kitchen where almost everyone else has gathered. “Who wants some shots?”

The four of them left standing in his wake don’t say anything to each other. Harry can’t think of what to say. Grimmy seems insistent on going home, and given that both he and Liam are a part of the clique, they have to respect his wishes and give their votes to Liam.

It’s honorable, Harry has to admit. He can see Grimmy going down in Trivialities history as the goofy martyr who may not have played a good game, but definitely had everyone’s best interests in mind.

Once they get over their initial shock, they all follow Grimmy into the kitchen to watch as he pours shots. Oli, Jesy, and Stan all decline his offer and retreat upstairs. Harry isn’t surprised. With Oli in the bottom (something Harry can really drink to), he’s probably going to mope, complain, or yell - whatever it is he does to vent his feelings - about how unfair everything is with Jesy and Stan.

Harry doesn’t say anything, but he notices that Zayn and Louis resolutely do not follow Oli’s lead. If anything, they look almost excited that Oli’s leaving and that he won’t be there for the drinks - the drinks that they’re both eyeing as Grimmy pours them.

Kendall announces that she’s making Piña Coladas - authentic Piña Coladas - and Harry’s looking forward to that the most. Anybody who knows him knows that he loves a good fruity drink. If it’s got alcohol in it, it’s only better.

Taylor bids them goodnight once Grimmy and Kendall start passing out the drinks, claiming the day has inspired her and that she wants to write down a few melodies she’s just thought of before she goes to bed. She gives both Harry and Niall a quick sort of half-hug, and it’s incredibly weird. Even after she’s disappeared up the stairs, nobody laughs, the moment too odd for anyone to even try to understand.
Eleanor just shrugs in response to Taylor’s odd behavior before walking over to the wine shelf, grabbing a bottle of merlot, and then going about popping the cork out and some glasses for Grimmy, Harry, and Sophia, which they all promptly clink together.

Not long after, people start separating into smaller groups that are oddly related to what their current drink of choice is. Louis drags Perrie away, drinks in hand as the two of them race to the gym so that he can show her how fast he can go on the elliptical. Liam rushes after them, his concerned yelling about safety procedures echoing down the hallways.

Everything feels different from the first night. This isn’t a party. They aren’t celebrating their arrival or being in a new place or meeting new people. Nobody’s getting insane, testing their limits, or getting blackout drunk.

Everything is calm. There’s a steady flow of alcohol coming from the kitchen, but Harry doesn’t feel out of control. He doesn’t feel the need to do anything wild just for the sake of it. Sure, they’re all acting a little goofy - cue Grimmy giving Kendall a piggyback ride to the fridge when she complains about being hungry - but tonight feels more subdued, like a final get together among friends before one of them leaves on some sort of “soul searching journey”.

Harry feels like he says this often, but tonight really is the best night in the house so far, and he doubts anything will top the feeling of being in the company of this group of absolute weirdos. He’s going to be sad when everyone gets sent home.

Kendall suggests they grill up the three packages of bacon sitting in the fridge, and while Harry knows it’s a dumb idea and that the others in the house will be upset in the morning, he still cheers when Niall pulls a skillet out of the cabinet.

As if they could sense what’s happening, Louis, Perrie, and Liam all come trailing into the kitchen as Niall’s opening the second package of bacon. Louis has a thin sheen of sweat on his face, and Perrie is giggling as she comments, “Louis, you get amazingly energetic when you’re drunk.”

“That’s nothing,” Louis laughs. “The first time I was drunk at a party, things got crazy. I woke up in an airport that had to be at least an hour from my house. I have no clue how I got there, but I had to call my mom in the morning to pick me up. She brought all of my sisters along. It was the most
embarrassing night of my life.”

Grimmy grunts from where he’s placing Kendall back down on the floor. “You didn’t purchase a flight, did you?” he quizzes. “That would’ve been tragic.”

“No, definitely not,” Louis denies. “I had no money, poor highschool student that I was, which means I couldn’t have paid a taxi, so again, I have no clue how I got there.” A few of them laugh gently at the story before the room gradually quiets down, the only sound being that of the bacon sizzling on the stove.

“The first time I was drunk,” Eleanor speaks slowly, watching as her wine swishes around in her glass. “I had to be fourteen or so. I was a freshman in highschool, and my friend was having a sleepover. I snuck into my parent’s liquor cabinet before my mom drove me over to her house, so I had this entire fifth of vodka.”

She’s smirking as she thinks back on the story, and Harry can see everybody eating bacon and drinking, listening intently to the slow story she’s telling - Sophia even goes as far as to rest her chin on the palm of her hand. There’s not one person trying to deviate from the conversation or start one of their own, it’s just a room full of tipsy adults respecting each other enough to listen to nostalgic stories from everybody’s pasts.

“We mixed the vodka with gatorade,” Eleanor remembers. “We were in the garage - I don’t recall how we got there - and we mixed it with gatorade. I can’t say if it was even good, my memory’s fuzzy, but we played flippy cup and got drunk off our asses. It didn’t take long because it was our first time drinking, but we all took turns crying, and it was so embarrassing but so innocent.” She looks up from the countertop and notices everybody watching her with avid interest. “Sorry,” she flushes, looking back to the counter. “It just all came back to me.”

Nobody addresses her apology. Harry, personally, doesn’t feel like she even needed to apologize. He enjoyed the story and having that personal connection with Eleanor, someone he’s never really had a full conversation with.

“Did you end up getting caught?” Kendall asks.

“Oh yeah,” Eleanor laughs, looking back up at everyone crowding around the kitchen. “I got home, and my mom was livid. I got my phone taken away and wasn’t allowed to hang out with my friends for two months.”

Harry laughs along with the rest of them. Eleanor’s shaking her head as she grins, and she downs the rest of her wine in one go which has Harry wanting to laugh even harder. If everybody’s sharing drunk stories, he has a feeling he’ll need a few more glasses of wine as well.

“At least you had friends with you when you were drunk,” Grimmy comments. “I was seventeen when I first got drunk. I was a bit of a chubby kid, had bad acne, and was far too interested in listening to old Casey Kasem recordings to even try to be social.” He shakes his head laughing, and Harry’s glad he can find humor in it. “I went to a party that my neighbors were hosting, and they decided - when everyone was good and wasted - to start a game of truth or dare.”

Harry can feel Zayn wincing next to him, and if he’s thinking the same way Harry is, then he’s had some bad experiences with truth or dare as well. Any game that’s played while sitting in a circle drunk is not a good game and won’t have any good outcomes.

“Well everyone is tossing around dares and answering truths, and there I am, poor little Nicky, nursing this toxic mix of lemonade and Jack Daniels that I thought was going to taste so good as I
was mixing it - "

“Why didn’t you dump it out and get a new drink?” Louis asks, interrupting Grimmy’s story.

“Because I’m not a fucking quitter, Louis,” Grimmy replies, smiling as he does so and not coming off half as biting as he would’ve had it been week one. “As I was saying, nobody was asking me anything, so I loudly sighed like seven times until somebody finally included me in the game. I chose dare because, as I said earlier, I’m not a quitter. Instead of telling me to lick the toilet bowl or eat from the garbage or really do anything disgusting that would’ve still probably tasted better than my drink, they dared me to leave and go home.”

The resounding hollers of sympathetic “OH”‘s echo through the kitchen, and Grimmy hangs his head in mock shame. Across from Harry, Liam’s shaking as he tries to restrain his laughter, and next to Liam, Perrie isn’t even attempting to hold hers in, guffawing at the story. Harry doesn’t think he’s ever felt secondhand embarrassment this bad before.

He can practically a seventeen year old version of himself at somebody’s house party, all alone, getting drunk off of a heinous drink and - well, Grimmy’s lived that story. Getting dared to go home? That’s a whole other ballpark, and Harry’s tempted to give Grimmy a hug.

So he does.

Grimmy groans as Harry’s arms wrap around him, and he flushes red. “Get off me,” he shoves a giggling Harry off of him and, to the rest of the group, demands, “somebody else go. I can’t take all this sympathy.”

“I’ll tell a more lighthearted story,” Sophia voices. “I don’t think anything can top that travesty.” She regards Grimmy with a smirk. “My older sister took me to a Katy Perry concert when I was fifteen, and she bought herself a beer that she kept next to us on her seat. Every time she’d put it down, I’d wait until she wasn’t looking, and I’d take a drink. She got like four beers, saying how she didn’t feel affected; meanwhile, I was completely faded, screaming the lyrics to *I Kissed a Girl* like it was a goddamn anthem. She didn’t realize anything was wrong until we were back at the car, and she had to buckle me into my seat because I had forgotten how to do it.”

There’re no outbursts or giant reactions this time, just grins and chuckles at the story. Personally, Harry likes picturing Sophia, who’s always so put together, struggling to buckle herself into a seat with how absolutely sloppy she is.

“Did she tell your parents?” Harry feels the need to ask.

“No,” Sophia answers in a sigh. “Thank God. I don’t think I would’ve gotten off that easily. My parents would’ve thrown me into Lake St. Clair.”

Harry reaches out for a piece of bacon as they await who’s going to speak next. He’d go, but his most interesting stories are from childhood, far before he discovered alcohol.

“I’ve got one!” Louis announces, jumping up as his hand shoots in the air.

“You just went,” Zayn complains.

Louis waves his friend off, shoving his way past Liam so he can lean against the island everyone is crowded around. “I went to this party right after I graduated, and it wasn’t really my scene,” Louis starts. “The music they were listening to was shit, and there were too many people in flannel. It was well, it’s how I imagine Harry and Grimmy like to party.”
Grimmy flips Louis off for the joke, and Harry makes a move to protest, but he can say anything, he spots Perrie laughing and halts just so he can regard her with raised eyebrows and a dropped jaw to properly display how betrayed.

“I didn’t stay at the party long,” Louis continues. “I had maybe one drink, if that, and I ended up having my mom pick me up.” Harry opens his mouth to comment, but Louis cuts him off before he can. “Yes, my mom was my usual source of transportation. I didn’t get my license until I was twenty.” Harry snaps his jaw shut and allows Louis finish the story. “Anyway, I get a text from my friend Hannah the next day asking what happened at the party, and I told her I wasn’t feeling it and went home. She then tells me that there was a rumor going around that I did four lines of cocaine. First of all, I left before you, dumbass. Second of all, who do you think I am?”

Harry laughs, mostly out of shock, the story not at all ending how Harry had anticipated. He can see Eleanor mouthing “Oh my god” to herself. Louis looks to be still upset about it, and Harry can’t resist asking why.

“The rumor is still going around,” Louis clarifies. “My sisters go to my old school, and every time they’re invited to a party, somebody makes a joke about keeping them away from the coke.”

Harry understands that well. He attended the same highschool as his sister and had to hear rumors about her. Some were true, she’d told him when he went to her with questions. The ones that weren’t though, those pissed her off. Her face was similar to the expression Louis’s wearing now. It was moreso an anger that Harry was subjected to the bullshit than the fact that people were talking about her.

“I once ate sand from a sandal,” Niall announces suddenly, and Harry’s head whips around to see if that’s really something Niall said or if his drunken brain is playing tricks on him. “Sand sounds like sandal,” Niall justifies. “It felt right at the time.”

“How drunk were you?” an astonished Liam asks.

“Ah,” Niall laughs. “I did that completely sober.”

Harry would like to say he’s surprised, but he isn’t. He doesn’t think anything Niall says could surprise him. The man is a mystery in himself, and anything in the world would sound normal coming from his mouth. He could open his mouth now and have sand come flooding out, and all Harry would think is why am I not wearing flip flops?

Next to him, Zayn’s nodding along as though it’s a perfectly sensible story, and this does surprise Harry. Zayn seems like the most reasonable of the bunch, but looking at him now, completely chill with what Niall’s saying, Harry finds himself questioning his judgement.

Nobody makes a move to pick up the torch and tell another story, so Harry decides to take a whack at it. “When I was younger, I called my older sister stupid and -”

“You rebel!” Louis gasps in a mock-scandalized tone, and Harry flips him off just to hear the giggle that comes afterwards.

“Back then, I thought it was a swear word,” Harry picks up. “My mom used to yell at my sister when she’d say it about a teacher or a classmate, so when I said it, I thought I’d said a swear. I figured I had to be punished and that I should do it myself, so I went into the bathroom and squirted liquid soap down my throat and spent the next twenty minutes throwing up into the tub.”

He can still taste the flowery cleanser, can still feel the way it slid down his throat slow as molasses,
thick as it as well. The overpowering smell and -

Harry gags harshly at the thought, and both Zayn and Sophia immediately back away from him with wide eyes as they watch Harry lean his head on the countertop in an effort to try and get ahold of himself.

“You okay?” somebody asks prompting Harry to shake his head, only for him to immediately stand up straight and nod.

“Yeah,” he confirms. “I’m good now.”

“I used to get bullied a lot growing up.” Liam immediately starts speaking, moving on from Harry’s moment, and Harry’s glad for it, doesn’t need to think about it again. “A few guys at my school told me they’d stop picking on me if I went home that night and shaved off both of my eyebrows, so of course I did it.”

Sophia gasps “no” next to him and raises her hands to her mouth.

“I shaved them both completely off, and my mom threw a fit about it. She made me keep going to school as they grew back, and then the boys kept picking on me because I basically gave them material.”

“Why would you believe them?” Niall asks.

“I was young, I guess,” he shrugs.

“I shaved my eyebrows off too,” Kendall admits. “My family is super into makeup and fashion and everything, and my older sister, Kim, actually draws her eyebrows on. So I saw her shaving her eyebrows one day when I was in the bathroom with her, and then the next day I was like ‘I’ll just follow Kim’s morning routine’, and I shaved them straight off.”

“Did she draw them back on for you?” Liam questions, and when Kendall nods in response, he rolls his eyes, looking almost insulted.

Harry can’t imagine ever shaving off his eyebrows. Or his head. He can’t imagine somebody consciously scalping themselves for any reason whatsoever. He raises his hand and runs it through his hair, just to make sure it’s there. He’ll blame his actions on being drunk if anybody questions him.

Not that any of them are exactly drunk. They weren’t hammered when the stories started, and with all the bacon they’ve each been consuming, there’s no reason any of them should be drunk enough to - well, to make another one of these stories come to life.

“I once pretended to know sign language to impress a girl,” Niall brings up suddenly, and Harry, again, has to whip his head around because it feels like every story out of Niall’s mouth is about to be a joke. “Turns out she knew it. Fluently.”

Harry winces, can here the air Sophia sucks in through her teeth. “Buddy,” Perrie sympathizes.

Things continue like that well into the night, everybody sobering up and sharing stories with each other. They eventually migrate into the living room where Harry finds himself curling up and dozing off on the couch with his arms wrapped around Grimmy. Kendall’s sharing the couch as well, resting at their feet, and it’s altogether comfortable and familiar. Harry goes to sleep feeling utterly and completely warm.
He wakes up awhile later - probably closer to morning than night - to the sound of hushed whispers. He opens his eyes to see Perrie and Zayn sneaking out of the room and up the stairs. He isn’t able to give them much thought, though, as sleep quickly pulls him back under.

_Saturday_

Harry’s sitting on the edge of the pool, his bare legs submerged in the water, as he watches the crew take down the elimination tent. Grimmy’s long gone, his shirt stained with Harry’s silent tears, the same ones he wiped away before anyone could see them. He doesn’t think he had to be discreet about it, though. When Liam and Kendall pulled out of their hugs with Grimmy, their eyes were suspiciously red as well.

However, nothing compares to the sobs wrenched from Sophia as she said goodbye to Eleanor. That was too heartbreaking to watch, Harry having to turn a blind eye to it all, lest he go off into a new set of tears all his own.

(After Eleanor had been driven off, leaving an inconsolable Sophia in the backyard, Harry took the time to talk to her, letting her know that she has place in their clique and that they’d be fools not to take her but also that if she doesn’t want to join them, he’s always available as a shoulder to cry on. She just kissed his cheek in thanks before retreating to her now empty room, teary-eyed and hollow.)

Harry knows that Grimmy’s departure is for the best, but that doesn’t stop him from taking a moment for himself to reflect in the wake of Grimmy’s absence. He’s upset, understandably, but he won’t let this ruin his game. Come Monday, he’ll be back on top, studying his ass off for whatever subject gets thrown at him next.

For tonight, though, he’ll just sit on the edge of pool and quietly miss his friend.

That’s how Louis finds him later that the night. The crew’s finished packing up the tent and has stored it in the garage on the other side of the house. Louis crouches next to him, not fully sitting, which makes his visit possibly less permanent. “What’s got you all alone?” he asks.

“It sucks that Grimmy went home,” Louis consoles him. Harry doesn’t know whether he’s pandering or not, but Louis sounds sincere, and he’s thankful for that. The small gesture is doing a bit of good for Harry’s mental state. “I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s been a long time coming,” he recites what’s been on his mind since writing Grimmy’s name on the white sheet of paper. “He’s my friend, and I’m going to miss him, but we all knew this would happen.”

“Still sucks.”

“Still sucks,” Harry agrees, nodding along.

The silence wears on, but it’s comfortable. Harry’s more relaxed now, and he knows it’s all because of Louis. He doesn’t voice this thought, though, doesn’t even look at Louis, not wanting to ruin the serene moment they’re sharing.
They’re both thinking about two separate things, Harry’s sure, but they’re also both enjoying the night together. He likes to think that he could get used to the heat Louis’s radiating against Harry’s side, thinks that he could get used to Louis silently cheering him up when he’s feeling low.

“Do you feel like going for a walk?” Louis asks suddenly.

“Not really,” Harry declines. He appreciates the time he’s getting with Louis but doesn’t think taking it on the go will change much. He likes this moment the way it is. “I just want to sit here for a while.”

“Okay,” Louis nods and makes to stand up, but Harry puts his arm on the other man’s arm to stop him.

“You don’t have to go,” he offers.

“You sure?”

Harry looks at Louis for the first time, sees the sincerity in the other man’s face. Harry smile gently, insisting, “I’m sure.”

Louis grins and slips his shoes off before joining Harry in sitting on the edge of the pool. His feet enter the water, and Harry can’t help but grin to himself at the refreshed sigh Louis releases. They both get more comfortable, and then the silence is back.

It’s still nice, but this time it’s filled with words unsaid - thank yous and this means everythings. All the things they could say, floating in the air in front of them, holding the two captive as they stare at the sky.

Louis looks like he wants to say something, wants to start a new conversation, and Harry - he doesn’t want to ruin what they have.

So he kisses Louis.

The other man freezes, eyes wide as his lips part when Harry presses his own against them. It’s a quick, barely there thing, but it’s so sudden that the moment seems to stretch on. When he pulls away, Louis’s frozen, tongue flicking out to lick his lips and head quirked to the side in question. Not knowing what else to say, Harry jokes, “Just wanted to make sure you got your money’s worth.”

Louis looks confused for a moment before his eyes light up. He laughs, eyes crinkling as he bumps his shoulder against Harry’s. They don’t talk after that. They don’t need to. The silence says it all for them.

Chapter End Notes

A big thank you to Stephanie, Alexandra, Christa, Felise, Emily, Nina, and Mickey for all of the stories that are exchanged!
Arts & Literature

Week 4

Monday

Harry wakes up feeling more than a little worse for wear. They’re getting their next category today, and while Harry’s excited, this’ll be the first week without Grimmy making jokes as they study or keeping the morale up during car rides. Harry knows he would have had to go home eventually, but he had underestimated how unsettling it would be to move on and act like everything is still normal.

From the amount of noise he can hear coming from downstairs, it seems he’s, unsurprisingly, one of the last to wake up. After spending all of Sunday doing laundry and talking on the phone with his mom and sister, he stayed up all night watching a classic movie marathon on cable. He hadn’t gone to bed until at least three in the morning, so the fact that he’s even awake this early is a miracle in and of itself.

“That’s so morbid,” Liam’s voice echoes throughout the kitchen as Harry enters. Perrie’s standing at the counter cooking up bacon for everyone, and she flashes Harry a smile as he takes a seat next to Niall unknowingly putting himself in the middle of a heated debate.

“No it isn’t!” Kendall yells from where she’s stirring her cup of coffee. “They did it on Jersey Shore, remember?”

Harry opens his mouth to question what’s happening but stops himself just in time, reasoning that it’d be smarter - and more entertaining - for him to keep quiet and let the bickering continue as is.

Louis clearly doesn’t have the same mindset, given the way he sarcastically retorts, “What a great television show to model your morals off of.”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t watch it and compare yourself to Pauly D,” Kendall rolls her eyes.

“He’s more of a Vinnie,” Perrie laughs from where she’s plating a few pieces of bacon. “If we’re being honest with ourselves, that is.”

“How very dare you!” Louis’ tone indicates that he’s angry, but his grin is far too wide to be anything but amused. “I’m a Deena,” he insists. “I come in, and I get shit done.”

The arguing continues, but Harry’s not exactly sure what’s going on. He’s not nearly awake enough to be dealing with everyone yelling about this and that, especially when he’s not sure what this and that even are. “What is going on?” he asks, leaning toward Niall and hoping for a genuine answer.

“Louis used to watch Jersey Shore,” he answers through a mouthful of bacon. “And Kendall’s being a total Angelina right now.”

If Harry didn’t know what that comparison implied before - which he didn’t - the glare Kendall is currently shooting them certainly shows that it couldn’t have meant anything good.

“I have no clue what that means.”

Niall turns to him, eyebrow quirked and shock plastered across his face. “You haven’t seen Jersey Shore?”
“No,” Harry denies. “I watch *Trivialities*.”

“So do I,” he returns, “but I also have room in my life for more than just one reality TV show.”

“Well I don’t.”

Niall laughs, his head dropping back on his shoulders. Harry’s confusion outweighs his disgust about seeing leftover bits of bacon in Niall’s mouth. “You’re so loyal, Harry,” he teases. “What would James Corden be without you?”

“Still wildly successful,” Harry assures.

Niall hums, “That is true.”

Niall’s face is serious enough that Harry’s mind flashes back to when Louis told the ridiculous story of how James is actually Niall’s dad, and suddenly, Harry’s more thrilled with the image than he was dunking Oli at the fair.

It’s just funny to him, picturing James and Niall as father and son, and the image almost makes him want to confront both of them and ask, just to see what they’d say. It’s a wild conspiracy theory, and Harry wishes it were true - even if just for the sheer ridiculousness of it.

“No!” Harry’s stunned out of his thoughts by the sound of Liam’s hands slamming against the counter. “That’s final, Kendall, it’s not happening.”

“But think of the benefits!”

Harry turns back to Niall, “Is this still about *Jersey*?”

“Nah,” he shakes his head, still as casual as ever. “This is because Kendall wants to turn Grimmy’s old room into a room for sex.”

“Who are you even going to take in there, Kendall?” Liam demands. “Nobody here is sleeping together!”

Perrie lets out a hiss where she’s standing by the stove, and Harry looks over, noticing how her face is drained of any color. “You okay, Pez?”

“Just a grease burn,” she claims. “I have to be more careful.” She laughs, and it sounds completely forced. Harry squints suspiciously in her direction, but she just ignores him and turns back to the pan.

He thinks about Friday night when Perrie disappeared up the stairs with Zayn right behind her after everybody else had fallen asleep. There’s no doubt in his mind that something happened that night - something may still be happening. He’ll have to talk to her about it later, if only to clarify and to keep ahead of the competition when it comes to his teammate’s activities.

“It’s the principle of the thing, Liam,” Kendall debates. “If I wanted to sleep with Niall, I could. I wouldn’t have to wonder about who’s in either of our rooms - we wouldn’t have to worry about kicking our roommates out.”

“Well...”

“It was an example,” she continues, cutting Niall off before he can really even start. “Don’t get your hopes up, you’ll only end up disappointed.”

The conversation is pulled to a stop by the sound of the front door opening, announcing what could
only be James’ arrival. The small group that’s gathered in the kitchen quickly triples in size as the rest of the contestants, as well as the camera crew and two producers, join them.

Only four people have gone home since week one. It feels like more, but as Harry stands in the large kitchen that’s currently filled to the brim with people, the lack of eliminated competitors becomes more obvious.

“We’ll finish this discussion later,” Kendall dictates as she turns in her seat towards where a producer is trying to garner everyone’s attention.

Liam scowls and reluctantly looks away from Kendall, biting out a sharp, “No we fucking won’t,” harshly under his breath.

James is standing just under the entryway with his hands clasped neatly in front of him and sporting his trademark bright smile. “Good morning, my wonderful competitors,” he greets as Harry has a brief flashback to week one when he had been so unbelievably starstruck by the host’s presence. Standing here today, it almost feels as if no celebrity will be able to fluster him again. “How is everybody faring after Saturday’s double elimination?”

The response is quiet and lacking enthusiasm, and James seems to pick up on the general mood. Nobody’s doing great, is the short answer.

The long answer is that Harry spent Sunday occupying himself with menial tasks as he felt sorry for himself, wallowing in the absence of their friends instead of doing anything productive. Even Oli screaming about the dirty dishes piling up couldn’t pull them out of their misery.

James’ smile is paper thin and lacking his usual joy. “I hate to spring this on you so soon after,” he apologizes, “but it is Monday, which means it’s time to get your topic. What better way to follow up your week of Entertainment than with the Arts & Literature that fuel it!”

The sadness Harry has been feeling in the wake of Grimmy’s elimination is momentarily dissipates at the news. Arts & Literature is the one category Harry is completely confident in. He’s already well read on the subject as it stands, but with the extra studying he plans on doing over the course of the next two days, there’s not a chance he’ll get anything less than first place.

He can hear the groans coming from his fellow housemates, but he can’t share the sentiment because it’s taking everything in him not to jump for joy at the news. He was made for this week. Sure, a part of him wishes it would have come on week six so that he could’ve shot straight into the finale, but this is good too. Harry’s just happy they’ve been given a category that he’s guaranteed to win.

“You’ll be working in teams again this week,” James explains, “but you won’t find out with whom until the trivia round - just like last week. Good luck, and I’ll see you all on Wednesday.”

James never lingers around the house on Mondays, only staying long enough to announce the week’s subject before disappearing to do whatever other project he’s got going on while hosting Trivialities. Hosting the show is only a part-time job, really - one where James only needs to pop in for short periods of time during the week, so it makes sense that he’d have other things going on at the same time.

James leaves, taking the producers as well as a few members of the camera crew with him. In the ensuing silence, Harry takes a moment to study the other competitors’ reactions. Nobody else seems to be as excited as Harry is about the news, which is just fine for him. He knows nobody else has as much of a leg up this week.
Everything’s finally looking up for him.

Later that day, after everyone’s eaten and cleaned up their messes, their group meets up in Sophia’s room. Harry’s the last to arrive, and he’s surprised to see books piled up all around the room. It looks like the library threw up the physical forms of every book from the bestseller list onto the floor.

“These are all so perfect, Sophia,” Harry praises, collecting some dust on his finger as he runs his hand over the well worn cover of *The Complete Works of Ernest Hemingway*. “Where were they?”

“Eleanor and I went through the library, found the best books for each category, and hid them,” Sophia answers, pulling a small stack of books out of the trunk resting against Eleanor’s old bed.

“When did you have the time to do that?” Kendall asks.

“The day we all arrived,” Sophia answers. “While all of you were getting absolutely trashed, Eleanor and I snuck away and had some wine in the library. We secured our titles, and it’s done us a bit of good, I’d like to think.”

“Not too much good, obviously,” Liam comments under his breath to Harry, not realizing that everybody else can hear him, “if Eleanor’s gone and Sophia’s yet to win a trivia challenge.”

Sophia’s glaring at him before he can even finish speaking, but she waits until he looks back at her to say, “You’ll be eating your words when I make it further than you.” Harry looks over at Perrie, only to see her already looking back at him, the two fighting back laughter at the indignant look that takes over Liam’s face.

With one last aggravated huff, Sophia grabs a book off the top of pile and gestures for the rest of them to do the same. One by one they each grab a book before finding a spot to settle down in and start reading. The afternoon is spent stretched out across every available piece of furniture and floor space in Sophia’s room, speed reading through all of the books. Harry’s skimming through the information he knows, only reading long enough to refresh his knowledge on each subject before moving on to the next book. He’s going through each piece of literature at almost triple the speed of his teammates, which does nothing to curb Harry’s confidence about this week.

The first time someone speaks is when Harry is going through *The Painted World*, comfortably stretched out across Perrie and Liam’s laps and valiantly fighting back a yawn. The silence has been nice, a great soundtrack for Harry to really focus on studying, but he can’t says he’s not relieved when Perrie breaks it by closing her second book and asking, “Do you think the teams will be the same as last week?”

“Yeah,” Kendall agrees. “There’s no way they’d repeat partners. That’s just dumb.”

Perrie shrugs in a way that she probably thinks looks casual, but that Harry can see right through. “I was just thinking that sometimes teaming up with the same person for the second week in a row can make for a stronger bond, you know?” She looks down at where Harry’s head is resting in her lap and continues, “I know you’re not her biggest fan, Harry, but you’d do better with Taylor this week than the last”

Harry grins, realizing that Perrie’s trying to come up with an explanation for why she would be asking that doesn’t give away the fact that she wants to be partners with Zayn again. As her closest
ally, he needs to help her out.

“That’s just because I wouldn’t be facing Kendall in her prime again,” Harry responds quickly. Thankfully, his diversion works, and Kendall preens at his compliment from where she’s sitting against Sophia’s headboard. Harry wants to be upset about losing to her even though he had been confident in his knowledge about last week’s topic, but it’s been a week, and now he knows she studied her ass off and was ready for the challenge. Besides, this week isn’t something she seems to be confident about, and Harry knows she won’t be much - if any - competition to him.

“All I know,” Harry sighs, flipping through a section of the book that he’s already familiar with, “is that if I’m partnered with Oli, I will purposefully lose.”

Everyone laughs, and Harry can feel himself pouting in offense. “No you wouldn’t,” Liam challenges.

“Oh, watch me.” Harry’s not joking around when he says that winning a challenge isn’t nearly as important to him as sending Oli home is. “If I get partnered with Oli, I will drag us both to the ground.”

Liam shakes his head, clearly not believing Harry, and goes back to his reading. Everyone else follows suit, and eventually they’re back in the swing of things. At one point, somebody’s stomach growls loud enough for everyone to hear, and Perrie volunteers to go get food.

When twenty minutes go by without her return, Harry decides to go and see if he can find her. He heads down to the kitchen first, but there’s a distinct lack of life downstairs. Harry decides to complete Perrie’s original mission from before she went M.I.A. and puts together a quick snack of various fruits and crackers before heading back upstairs.

He realizes that he must be walking slower as he retraces his steps because this time he hears a noise - a thump - coming from inside Grimmy’s old room that he hadn’t noticed on his way down. The door is closed, so Harry can’t see what’s happening, but he doesn’t get the chance to open it. Just as he’s reaching for the doorknob, he hears Perrie’s very distinguishable voice saying something Harry can’t quite make out, followed by a deep groan that most definitely did not come from Perrie. The sound startles Harry enough that he springs away from the door like he’s been burned and runs back to Sophia’s room, taking a second to compose himself before going inside.

And because Harry’s loyal, he says absolutely nothing about Perrie’s whereabouts.

Wednesday

“Congratulations Harry and Liam,” James says as Harry’s heart nearly stops, “for beating the competition and earning yourselves your first advantage.”

Two podiums over, Liam’s losing his mind in excitement, laughing brightly at the announcement, but all Harry can hear is the air rushing through his ears as he stands stock still, the good news having not quite sunk in yet.

His mind is still stuck on some of the questions they had been asked, questions he hadn’t even
known that he knew the answers to. There’s no doubt that some of the answers Harry uttered were pulled straight out of his ass. For most of the questions, Harry had pressed the buzzer - more due to reflex than actually knowing the answer - and had yelled out the first answer that crossed his mind. Every time he heard James claim that he had won two points for correctly responding he had been left more shocked than excited. He’ll admit that even he thought some of his guesses that ended up being correct were truly out there. Of course, sometimes he would get things wrong, and his competition would get the chance to steal, but more often than not, Harry was taking home points.

Even though Harry managed to do well, he’ll be the first to admit that the competition was rough. He and Niall were neck and neck through the entire round. Every time Harry seemed to get a leg up in the competition, Niall was right there with a big stick to knock him back to second place. There were more than a few times when Harry questioned his own intelligence on the subject - questioned his own intelligence in general.

But against all odds, here he is, standing at his podium as James tells him that he’s won first place. Sure, having Liam, someone who managed to score a considerable amount of points himself, as his partner didn’t hurt, but he feels a whole lot like Kendall must have last week. His score may not be as impressive as hers was, but he knows that it’s still something to be proud of.

And, God, is he ever.

Every season that he’s watched - every season that there has been - Harry’s been the guy sitting on the couch and claiming that, if only it were him in the competition, he could’ve answered that question correctly or won that challenge or solved that issue, but being here has proven to be far more difficult than he ever could have imagined.

This show is proving itself to be more difficult than nearly anything he’s done in his life up to this point, actually. Every trivia round consists of too many questions that he doesn’t know the answer to, and his competitors have shown that they’re willing to work just as hard, if not harder, than he does to win the competition.

He holds more respect for Leigh-Anne Pinnock - his favorite cast member who had known more trivia than anyone else, won a majority of the physical challenges, and fought her way to safety week after week until she won the whole thing - now more than he ever had when all he did was watch the show because this time he knows how hard she had to fight to earn her place in the finale. And she managed to do all of this while still getting some side action with the married man, including (but not limited to) sneaking around with him and then sabotaging his place in the competition when she discovered his dirty secret. In short, Harry idolizes Leigh-Anne Pinnock.

Getting back on topic, it’s hard work. This show is hard work. Harry could never tell watching it on the small screen in his dorm room, but standing here with everyone else that wants to win just as badly as he does, he realizes that this show isn’t all black and white. There’s a lot of color in the form of all of his fellow contestants - color that would send him home in an instant if it meant having a better chance of winning.

Harry is startled out of his reverie when James approaches him with an orange envelope in his hand, and Liam runs over to stand with him. James hands off their advantage, and Harry opens it eagerly without feeling any remorse about not even letting Liam touch it. Harry’s score was higher, he’s the one that really won it for them. He deserves this.

Harry pulls a white card out of the envelope, and while he can’t say that he’s disappointed, he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t been hoping for a black immunity card.

“Team Captains,” Liam reads off, and Harry flips the card around show everyone.
“That’s right,” James verifies, clapping his hands together gleefully. “You’ll be separated into two
teams and compete against each other in the physical challenge. Oh! And you’ll be choosing your
teams right here, right now.”

“What’s the physical challenge going to be?” Liam asks.

“You won’t find out until you arrive on the scene Friday afternoon,” James tells them. He starts
walking back towards the front of the room and waves them over. “Now come on up and take your
places, captains.”

This is dangerous, Harry thinks. While they’ve gotten used to not knowing what the physical
challenge is, having that and needing to choose an entire team to support them… that’s dangerous.

The number one thing that almost every single winner has claimed got them to the finale is strategy,
and Harry can’t exactly draw out a complete tactic if he doesn’t even know what kind of team he
needs to put together. Any team is a risk. He could make a well read team, get lucky, and end up
with an artsy challenge, or he could go for a physically strong team and get the same.

The possibilities for how this could turn out are limitless, and they’re nearly all bad. Harry’s at a loss,
not sure if he should just grab his clique or if he should gather the smarter contestants, or maybe the
most physically fit, or…

Harry’s completely lost.

“Harry,” James greets him as they come to a stop at the front of the room, “as you have a higher
score than Liam, you get first pick.”

Harry’s not completely sure what he’s going to do, but he does know who he needs to have standing
beside him no matter what. “I’ll have to go with Perrie.” Perrie was grinning before he had even
finished his sentence, and on hearing name get called she skips up to stand next him. She knew she’d
be the first one he called.

Liam waits until Perrie’s settled in her spot next to Harry before calling out, “Zayn.”

Harry’s head jerks towards Liam, not sure if he had heard him correctly. Objectively, it’s not odd for
Liam to choose Zayn, taking into account his first place win last week, but what is strange is Liam
choosing somebody who’s in a completely different alliance from his own. If anything, he would’ve
thought that Liam’s first choice would be Sophia or Niall or probably anybody except Zayn.

When Zayn steps onto the stage and exchanges a discreet fist bump with Liam, Harry begins to
wonder if maybe he missed something. Liam must have some knowledge that Harry doesn’t, and
knowing he’s been left in the dark is more aggravating than Harry cares to admit.
I'm an English major with an Art History minor. I know what I'm doing this week. If I actually wanted to win this game, I could.
- Zayn, 24, Tallahassee

“I'll go with Niall,” Harry chooses, reasoning that if Liam’s going to pick somebody so completely random, then Harry’ll have to nab the person in closest competition with him.

Liam smirks before pointing his hand out toward the podiums, and Harry looks to where he’s gesturing. “Louis.”

Again, Harry whips his head around to look at where Liam’s standing. More than anything, it feels like Liam’s switching alliances, or at least playing both sides of the house. Harry will have to start paying more attention to Liam - he can’t let himself be thrown under the bus because Liam’s teaming up with everyone else behind his own team’s back.

“Kendall.”

“Taylor.”

Harry can feel his lips pulling into almost a snarl. He doesn’t know what’s going on, but Liam’s not going the expected route, and Harry’s more confused now than ever. “Jesy,” Harry picks.

“Sophia.”

Only Stan and Oli remain, and Harry almost snorts at the idea of choosing his enemy to be on his team. He plans on winning this challenge, and the thought of letting Oli in on that success is downright laughable. “Stan,” he decides, trying his hardest not to grin when Oli’s the last one standing at his podium.

“Oli,” Liam shrugs, “I guess.” Harry can’t even begin to imagine how embarrassed Oli must be, but he sure is happy about it.

Oli trudges up to the front and reluctantly stands with Liam’s group. He looks livid at being chosen last, and despite Harry’s hesitation toward where Liam stands in their alliance, Harry can’t help but be giddy. All he can think is that this is hands down one of the best things to happen in the game.

“Alright, teams,” James laughs. “Now that you’re evenly separated, you’re safe to go back to the house. I can’t tell you what the challenge is just yet, but when you find out,” he pauses. “I’m sure you’ll be exchanging some colorful words.”
In the car on the way home, Harry’s surrounded by all five of his teammates, but they ride in silence. He’s too busy thinking about what they’re going to be studying - because he will make them study - to bother with trying for small talk. He already knows that they’ll meet up in his and Perrie’s room and work on, well, whatever they need to.

Clearly the challenge is going to be focused moreso on art than literature. Of course there’s a chance that it’ll be a mix of the two, but art will definitely be the prevalent theme - colors to be more specific. James had been smirking like he’s in on some big secret, and Harry has no doubt that the clue holds a far deeper meaning than he’s letting on.

Harry thinks he’ll put his group through an art training of sorts. As a photography major he’s sat through enough art classes to last him a lifetime, each one more out there than the last. Of course there are the basics - shades, tints, and other trivial terms - to go through, but then there are also the more advanced subjects. He’ll have to take the time to teach them about color schemes and harmony, unity, and how to work with monochromes.

It’ll be long and tiring, and they’ll all probably hate Harry by the end of it, but if it’ll help them win, goddammit, Harry doesn’t care. They’ll probably thank him by the time Saturday rolls around.

It’ll be an Art Basics 101 masterclass, and he hopes it’ll win them the round.

Harry’s not excited about having to go over everything, but he’s feeling confident that they can pull this off. That is, he was feeling confident until Jesy approaches him as they’re all piling in his room to study. “I know you’re probably thinking about how we’ll prepare,” she says, “but I have an idea of what might be going on in the physical challenge.”

Harry’s not completely sure how he feels about having someone on his team - the team he’s captain of - telling him what they think should be studied. He’s all for creative input, especially if it helps, but he knows there has to be a balance. He may be playing the game as someone approachable that nobody expects to make it through to the end, but he refuses to be walked all over.

“And what’s that?” he asks.

“The past two seasons have focused on Literature during this week,” she explains, “so they aren’t going to do that again. This challenge is going to be one-hundred percent art.”

“Well when he said colorful, I - ”

“Exactly,” Jesy cuts him off, not even giving him enough time to rolls his eyes. “He said colorful . Meaning that it won’t be creating anything or making art ourselves, it’s going to be about color. Not shading, not tinting, not anything that’s going through your pretentious art mind right now - ”

Harry jumps in, “I wasn’t - ”

“You were ,” Jesy insists. “We need to focus on nothing but color itself. The difference between periwinkle and cerulean. Why eggshell is different from white. That’s how we’ll win.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” he asks.

Jesy’s face holds nothing but disgust. She’s offended, and Harry really can’t blame her. “Are you kidding me?” she snaps. “We’re on the same team. I wouldn’t sabotage myself right to the bottom, you asshole. You don’t have to trust me, but I’m not going to waste my time studying anything but colors. James basically gave us a map to figure this out, and I have no doubt in my mind that Zayn’s already thought of the same thing.”
Harry watches Jesy for a minute. She doesn’t look nervous, doesn’t sound dishonest, and Harry’s going to have to trust her - it’s their best shot. He registers Kendall and Niall walking into the room and shutting the door behind them, everybody settling in for a long night of preparation.

“Alright, team,” Harry addresses everyone. “Jesy’s going to be leading the meeting. She’s got some great ideas.”

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**Friday**

Harry wakes up late.

His sleep schedule has been a mess since week one. He fluctuates between four to twelve hours of sleep a night, and he never goes to bed or wakes up at the same time as the day before. He’s at the point where an ideal physical challenge advantage card would have read “A decent week of sleep.”

Not that there’s anything that’s really stopping anybody in the house from obtaining a normal sleep schedule. In fact, as far as competitive reality television shows go, *Trivialities* is one of the tamest ones when it comes to scheduling in general. There aren’t many restrictions on when they have to wake up, eat, or study. As long as on Wednesday and Friday they’re in the cars and heading to the challenges, all is well.

Of course, there are some people who still can’t even manage that, but there’s always going to be a weak link in the house.

As Harry’s leaving his room to join the rest of his team and go over the last few points of focus before the challenge, Harry runs into Louis. It wouldn’t have been a big deal at any previous point in the competition, but it strikes him that this is the first time they’ve been alone together since the kiss - almost a full week ago.

“Morning,” Harry greets, trying his hardest to sound natural. He doesn’t think anything should be awkward between them - even on Saturday night, directly after the kiss, they spent the next two hours out by the pool bantering back and forth. It’s been a long week, though, and for all Harry knows, Louis’s had some time to think and decided that Harry’s not someone he wants to associate with.

“Good morning,” Louis returns. He doesn’t sound angry, but that could be because his sentence got interrupted by a yawn. “You ready for the competition?”

“I’m always ready.”

Louis grins, and as he goes to continue speaking, Harry finds himself leaning against the wall to settle in for the conversation. “How’s it feel to be team captain?”

“Really great, actually,” Harry nods. “I have a good feeling about today.”

“How’d you prepare?”

Harry squints at Louis suspiciously; he can’t stop himself with all of the questions Louis’s throwing his way. The glint in Louis’ eye as he interrogates Harry is a little off-putting if he’s being honest. He
shakes it off, though, not wanting to get caught up with such trivial things. Louis’ always trying to throw him off, it’s what he does.

“I’m not just going to give away that information,” Harry smiles, well aware of how fake it looks. “How did you prepare?”

“The same as you, of course.” Louis shrugs, somehow managing to look sinister and casual all at the same time. “We studied colors. The difference between periwinkle and cerulean. Why cream is different from eggshell.”

His words stop Harry’s heart for a solid moment. He’s positive that Louis’s reciting Jesy’s exact words from Wednesday, or pretty damn close to it. There’s a difference between being on the same wavelength as someone and thinking the exact same thing as that person, or group of people in this case, and Louis’s just crossed that line with a vengeance.

“How did you - ”

“I could be honest and say we spied on you,” Louis confirms Harry’s thoughts, making the man’s lips thin out and his heart hammer against his chest. “But I’d rather lie and tell you that you’re just that predictable.”

Not wanting to cause a scene over Louis’ team stooping low enough to spy, not this close to the competition anyway, Harry simply huffs and tries to move on from that frustrating news. “I’m not predictable,” he weakly protests.

“Yeah you are,” Louis challenges, not catching that Harry isn’t in the mood to continue with this back and forth. “You’re a walking machine. Every week is the same with you - you think through everything you say and do.” Despite always trying his hardest to keep his emotions in check, Harry lets the surprise show all over his face. This is the last thing he expected to come from Louis. “You never let your guard down, do you?”

“Of course I do!”

“Not really,” Louis counters. Every word he speaks is calm and collected, and it’s slowly pulling Harry apart at the base. Nobody should be this relaxed when calling someone out. “Everything you do is calculated. It’s all an act, and it’s fooling almost everyone. Even Perrie thinks you’re just a clumsy hipster from Portland.”

And that’s about the last straw for Harry. He’s sick and tired of Louis trying to throw him off his game, coming along with accusations - though, yes, some (most) of them are true - about Harry being fake and playing everybody like a violin.

Harry does have strategies, of course he does. The whole point of this game is to be three steps ahead of your competition, but he doesn’t design his every move to win. Some of his actions are planned out, like the things he does to make himself worth keeping around, but that doesn’t mean that he’s not a real person with real feelings who knows how to be open with his friends.

Having to put up with Louis - always having to be paranoid about whether or not he’s going to say these things in front of everybody else and always having to wonder what new things he’s going to use to attack Harry with yet - is becoming such a waste of time.

It’s getting to be more exhausting than the physical challenges and Harry’s… well, he’s just done with it.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Harry starts, lowering his voice as he continues, needing to get it
through to Louis that he’s not playing innocent anymore. “And while I may not be completely honest about my strategies, that doesn’t mean I’m not genuine. I consider my teammates to be my friends, and there’s nothing calculated about my friendships.”

Louis smirks, arms folded across his chest as he leans heavily against the doorway. “So you’re admitting to - ”

“To what?” Harry spits, letting his shoulders jump. “Playing the game? Yeah, Louis, that’s what everyone is here for.” Louis doesn’t suddenly look threatened or upset, his posture doesn’t slip at all, but the cocky grin he’s wearing gets more subdued, and Harry’s going to count that as a win. “I’m not going to let you intimidate me. You know I cook to make myself valuable. You know that I study longer than everyone thinks I do. You know I’m playing a game. Great, but I’m not letting you get to my head anymore.”

Louis huffs, and it’s clear that it’s just a show. “I didn’t realize I was getting to your head in the first place,” he comments haughtily.

“Bull- shit, Louis,” Harry bites. Louis isn’t going to show that he’s affected by Harry’s sudden turn in attitude, but Harry knows he isn’t as confident as he’s pretending to be. “Every time we’ve been alone you’ve insinuated that you know exactly what I’m doing, but then you go back to being perfectly nice as soon as somebody else comes in the room. Your strategy is fucking with me, and I’m done with it.”

“I don’t do that every time we’re alone,” Louis defends himself, and Harry has to fight the urge to scream. Louis always manages to be so put together - even in the worst of times. “You’re forgetting about last week,” he pauses to smirk. “In the pool.”

Harry hasn’t forgotten about their kiss, not even for a moment. Every thought he’s had since then has been laced with the image of Louis’ smile, the sound of his laugh, and the taste of his lips. Their kiss hasn’t left his mind, and having Louis bring it up just makes his mind flash with the memory even brighter.

He wants to hate Louis for bringing it up, wants to be mad at him for making this private moment about the competition. Harry wants to yell even more, to throw a fit, but he can’t. Because all he really wants to do is kiss Louis again.

He often finds himself wanting to kiss Louis again.

“Louis!” Before he can even consider leaning in, Harry’s stopped by the sound of Oli’s irked voice echoing up the stairs. “Get your ass down here. Cars show up in five!”

Louis parts with Harry, giving him one last sneer, and Harry only wishes he could do something to get rid of it. Then he’s left standing alone in the hallway, wondering if any progress was made or if, maybe, they’ve just started a rivalry. Either way, he can’t make heads or tails of this morning’s conversation, and that frustrates him to no end.
"Welcome to your Arts & Literature physical challenge!" James is standing in front of a colorful curtain, donned in the Trivialities logo, and it would probably look a lot more official if the wind wasn’t blowing with a vengeance and the producers weren’t holding onto the curtain with all their might to stop it from flapping too high and revealing their location.

Because nobody knows where they are. The teams were driven into a warehouse of all places, and the scene behind the building was sectioned off by a large fence. Producers swarmed them as soon as they climbed out of the car and very intentionally didn’t give anyone enough time to look around before throwing them all out of the building through the back entrance.

Now they’re standing in front of James and this curtain, not sure of what’s happening at all. It doesn’t help that there are two cloth covered tables - one on each side of James. The tables clearly have something on top of them, but Harry doesn’t have a clue of what those things could be - the wind only blowing the tablecloths up long enough to make out shadows of the objects.

“First off, I just want to say how proud I am of both teams for figuring out the hidden meaning behind ‘colorful words’,” James praises everyone.

Harry’s team stiffens as they realize that they were not the only ones to figure out the advantage, but while they all seem to be in shock, all Harry can feel is how angry he is at their competition for spying on his team instead of figuring out the clue on their own. Spying isn’t technically against the rules as long as the person spying doesn’t steal the advantage someone else won in the trivia round, but Harry still can’t help but feel like doing so is immoral.

This time, Harry calls himself out on his hypocrisy. If it had been the other way around, Harry would’ve been proud of whoever had thought to spy on the other team because that’s how the game is played. You have to be conniving to make it all the way to the end. In short, Harry can’t be mad just because his team is the one that was spied on.

Correction: he shouldn’t be mad.

But he sure as hell is.

“But I’m even more proud,” James continues, “that nobody really figured out what this physical is
going to be.”

Harry looks over to his team, but none of them seem to be concerned with this news. They all know that Jesy prepared them as well as she could and that they’re lucky they had her to get them as far as they did, and the news that they don’t know what the physical challenge is… well, that’s not news at all. Harry’s been confused about what their physical challenge could be from the moment they stepped out of the car.

“Today we’ll be playing Paintball by Number,” James announces as he reaches out to rip the fabric clean off of the table and the curtain behind him drops to the ground. As the dust settles, they’re left staring at quite possibly the largest playing field Harry’s ever seen on Trivialities outside of sports week.

There are stacks of hay bales and the type of mats that Harry remembers seeing piled in the corner of his gym back home set up throughout the field to make one giant course. On each end of the field there’s a white banner that’s about thirty feet tall and hangs ten feet above the ground. Harry can’t quite make out what the image on the banner is supposed to be a picture of, seeing as there’s no color, but he imagines that’s what they’ll be painting.

“What the hell, Harry,” Kendall hisses at him. “We didn’t practice for this?”

“We know our colors.” Jesy looks to be the most calm of anybody, and Harry sends out a thankful prayer that he had the right mind to choose her for his team. “This will be okay.”

“What good is knowing our colors going to do us in this challenge?” Niall argues.

Kendall’s lips are set in a thin line, and she looks livid. “We should’ve never listened to Jesy.”

“Hey,” Stan barks, pushing past Niall to glare directly at Kendall. “Without her we’d be even further behind the other team. Just be thankful she helped us in the first place,” he defends Jesy. For a second, Harry wonders why he hasn’t gotten close with either of them yet, but then he remembers that the reason is because they’re both a part of Oli’s alliance.

They’re all on the same team today, though, so they can’t let something this petty get in the way of the group doing their very best. Liam’s team is just as behind as Harry’s on knowing about paintball, he reminds himself. This is new territory for everyone.

“Every member of the two teams will gear up in a moment,” James before beginning to list the rules. “This challenge will be played just like a regular game of paintball. Your goal is to run around and shoot the other team’s players. Only, instead of being taken out of the game once you get shot, you’ll be placed in a ‘time out’ for three minutes. This may not sound like a lot of time, but those three minutes could cost you the game.”

“If we’re only out for three minutes,” Taylor sasses, “then how do you win the game? It’ll be impossible to get the entire other team out.”

“Great question!” James grins. “Each team will have a mural to paint and a mural to defend. And just like the coloring books you had when you were younger, each section on the mural has different numbers in place to tell you which colors go where.”

“What about…”

“I will take questions at the end, Miss Swift,” James cuts Taylor off, and Harry has to hold in his laugh at the affronted look that takes over her face. She’s obviously not used to being shut down so easily. “There will be containers of paintball pellets hidden around the course. Some will be magenta,
some fuschia, some pink. It’s your job to figure out which is which.” The longer James talks, the more confident Harry feels about the challenge. He’s already assigning people roles in his head based off of their strong suits. “If you shoot a number with the wrong color, not only will that number have to be painted over with the proper color, somebody else on your team will have to do it because you’ll be taken out of the game permanently.”

That’s the harshest punishment in this challenge, and a sure-fire way to get yourself voted off should you end up going up for elimination. Being completely taken out of the challenge and therefore lowering your team’s chances of winning… that’s unforgivable.

“You’ll know which number corresponds with each color because at your own base, there will be a paper listing the distinctions,” James gestures to each end of the field, where the murals rest. “Each team’s numbers correspond with different colors, so you’ll have to take the trip between each mural multiple times. We don’t call it a physical challenge for nothing!”

“Well we’re fucked,” Kendall comments under her breath.

Harry has to fight back his urge to yell. They aren’t fucked. He has faith in his team. “No we aren’t,” he mutters. “We’ve got a strong team.”

“I’ll let you go suit up now,” James finishes. “The game starts in twenty, so be ready!”

The producers immediately begin to lead them back into the warehouse. Harry can see now what he couldn’t before: changing areas. There are six mannequins, each with a name over its face, wearing paintball uniforms. The guns are outside on the tables, and the pellets are on the field. And although Harry’s never played paintball before, he’s knows that’s all the gear needed.

“I’m thinking our best bet is to have Stan and Kendall defend,” Harry brings up as everyone begins undressing the mannequin with their name on it. Liam’s team is on the other side of the warehouse and can’t hear what they’re saying, so he feels safe to talk strategy now.

Although Harry wouldn’t put it past them to spy again.

Stan is clearly upset at being put on defense. “Why should I - ”

“You weren’t as strong as the rest of us at identifying the colors,” Jesy begins explaining, her words doing a much better job at clarifying Harry’s intention without sounding cruel. “Nothing personal, but having you defend will be good. You’re quick on your feet, and you could do a better job than, say, Harry or I.”

“Exactly,” Harry concurs. “Jesy and I are going to grab the proper colored pellets, and Niall and Perrie are going to be shooters. They’ll be the ones getting the paintballs from me and Jesy and shooting the mural. If at any time Kendall or Stan get timed out, I’ll run back to defend.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Perrie nods.

“Oh hell,” Niall hollers. “We’re gonna wipe the competition away!” The group allows themselves a minute to cheer. It’s loud enough that the other team starts glaring over at them, and even that feels like a small victory.
After the two teams have finished getting dressed in their gear, they’re all led back out to the field and shown by professionals how to load and unload the guns. They’re even taught the key areas to aim, and James butts in to emphasize that any headshots will result in immediate dismissal from the show as a whole. Harry makes a mental note to not aim anywhere other than the chest.

Before he knows it, they’re set up at their home base, and the canon is going off to start the game. Immediately Kendall and Stan go off in search of stray paintballs. They’ll be defending home base, so they’ve no reason to look for a specific color. Not like Niall and Perrie, both of whom are subject to relying on Harry and Jesy to supply them with the proper colors.

Harry approaches the large sheet of paper pinned to the side of a stack of mats. Immediately his eyes spot “1. Sangria”, and he’s tempted to go search for it, but Jesy barely looks at the sheet before she’s running off, and Harry has no doubt that’s the color she’s heading for.

So Harry looks a little farther down the list, and then he’s off searching for his color. He hears an indignant yell, and, already, he knows that somebody has gotten shot and is being put in time out. Somebody getting shot so early in the game is unsettling. That could’ve been him if he’d run off first thing, and the thought of it happening has him sneaking more carefully along the outskirts of the course.

Eventually, he comes across two containers of pellets, both of which are startlingly close to the color Harry needs, but Harry knows that somebody has gotten shot and is being put in time out. Somebody getting shot so early in the game is unsettling. That could’ve been him if he’d run off first thing, and the thought of it happening has him sneaking more carefully along the outskirts of the course.

He has to weave farther into the course to find the color that he needs, but he soon stumbles across three containers of pellets resting against mats. Two of them are lime and neon green, but hidden behind them is Kiwi, the exact color he needs. He picks it up and starts stealthily looking for Niall and Perrie.

Before he’s able to find either of them, though, he comes across a familiar, yet infuriating, head of red hair walking along the other side of a particularly low stack of hay bales. Harry rushes to the other end and counts to four before peeking out and aiming his gun. He shoots, hitting Oli’s arm, and watches as a referee comes in to escort Oli to time out.
Harry allows himself a moment to cheer victoriously before he’s off again, searching for his teammates. He finds Niall crouched in a cubby of mats, gun aimed outwards. He hands off the container of pellets and tells Niall “Number four” before leaving him to shoot the mural and running back to home base to figure out what color to search for next.

He can see the mural they’re supposed to be defending as he sprints towards it and is glad to see it’s void of any color. That means Kendall and Stan are doing their job, and Harry doesn’t have to regret choosing either of them, which is the best news to have at this point given his lack of strategy when picking his teammates.

Perrie approaches Harry as he’s almost back home, but he has to send her to look for Jesy, quickly explaining that he’s already given his color to Niall. He only hopes that she’ll be able to find Jesy before either of them can be shot. Losing somebody before they can put a single color on the board wouldn’t be great for team confidence.

Harry gets back to home base just in time to see Louis approaching the mural, gun in hand. He doesn’t even think before he’s firing off seven bullets at his opponent’s back, letting himself cheer when the referee comes in and forces Louis to drop his pellets before taking him off the course. The other team was moments from placing their first color on the board, and Harry stopped it.

He’s bursting with a feeling of joy on par with winning the Trivia round.

It’s short lived, though, as he doesn’t even get to look at the color list before Stan’s voice is yelling out, “Kendall’s shot,” and Harry has to run and take her place. He’s glad to see that Stan managed to shoot Liam before he could take out both of their defenders, but it still isn’t great news that Harry’s unable to help Jesy with searching for the colors, stuck here instead for the next three minutes - three minutes that could make or break their team.

In the time that Harry’s stuck on defense, he catches Stan shooting Taylor and Oli - who’s back in the competition - and Harry himself shoots another bullet off at Louis whom he catches snooping around where he was forced to drop his pellets earlier. There’s a sick joy in watching Louis get escorted off the field after being shot for the second time by Harry’s own hand. The conversation they’d had earlier in the day only serving to fuel Harry’s aggression in getting him out of the game. It’s almost cruel - the way he feels compelled to seek Louis out and assure he doesn’t make it back to those damn pellets.

After what feels like an eternity, Kendall arrives and Harry hands off his pellets to her, not wanting her to have to find new ones when he’ll be running back onto the field anyway.

When he gets back to home base, he squints across the field at the mural they’ve got to paint - there are two colors on the board, and Harry considers it a win. He quickly addresses the list, taking note of the colors they’ve already found, and then he’s off again.

(If he picks up Louis’ dropped pellets, that’s between him and the viewers at home.)

Harry runs back onto the course in search of champagne. The color, of course, not that he would protest having something to drink at this point in the game. He stumbles across Liam running back onto the field but avoids him, wanting to find his color more than get anyone out of the competition. Though had it been Louis or Oli, Harry would’ve been firing his gun before he could even think about it. Harry’s got his priorities straight.

As he’s looking around for more barrels, he catches sight of Jesy tossing a container of pellets to Niall while telling him to go after color three, and Harry’s reminded of why he chose her to search for the colors with him: she’s almost more productive than he is.
He finds champagne resting alongside coral and crimson, the difference in hues almost too easy, thankfully, and immediately waves Perrie over to him from where she’s hiding behind a hay bale. He tells her to aim for number nine, and then he’s racing back to the starting line.

He doesn’t make it, though, a sharp pain in his thigh stopping him in his tracks. At first he thinks it’s just a cramp, but then when he looks down, he sees a purple splotch on his uniform - he’s been shot. A referee approaches him and empties Harry’s pellets out onto the ground where he was shot. Louis walks over with a smug grin, and swipes Harry’s pellets for himself.

Harry reluctantly goes to the timeout, paying more attention to the timer counting down his break than either mural. He knows that they only have five colors left, which is great news, but making sure he doesn’t spend even a moment longer than he has too in this box is more important. Especially when he plans on going back for Louis’ blood… figuratively.

The three minutes go by much faster than he would’ve thought, and by the time he’s being allowed back into the game, there are only four colors left for them to shoot on the mural. Though the fact that Niall’s being taken out as Harry’s going back in isn’t exactly a good thing.

Harry runs back to home base, ducking down to grab a container of navy blue pellets on his way. The mural tells him that they need number eight, and the list tells him that it’s jasmine, a color he doesn’t have to go very far to grab.

Once he’s got the jasmine pellets in hand, Harry sees Niall running back into the game. “Niall,” he shouts, not even waiting to throw the pellets. Niall catches them with ease and doesn’t stop running as he loads them into his gun. Harry grins to himself, proud of how fucking cool that was, the whole thing looking and feeling like something from an action movie, and then he’s running back to see what else they need.

The game is moving a lot quicker than Harry had thought it would, with only three colors left to get - two if Jesy’s on top of things - there have got to be fewer than ten minutes left in the whole thing.

Harry doesn’t even make it back to the list. Jesy runs straight into him, panting, with her gun held defensively in her arms. “Go grab mauve,” she demands. “It’s number nine. I’m getting chartreuse. You worry about mauve.” Harry nods and starts running back towards the center of the course, hearing Jesy’s “Number nine, Harry,” echo after him.

He finds mauve, but it’s in a mix of lavender, lilac, orchid, and something else that Harry wants to assume is mulberry, but knows he’s probably dead wrong about. It doesn’t matter, he tells himself. He’s got mauve, and he can see Perrie’s blonde head over the hay stacks.

He chases after her, not wanting to throw the pellets and risk her dropping them (although he still can’t get how unbelievably sick Niall’s catch was out of his head). He pulls her into a cubby and hands over the pellets, telling her it’s number nine.

A cannon goes off then, and everybody freezes. Harry’s terrified that the other team has won, but before his imagination can go too far, James’ tinny voice is booming through the arena, “Sophia is out. The assigned color is lavender, and it’s been mistaken for mauve. Please evacuate the field.”

Perrie looks down at the cannister in her hands and then back at Harry, wide-eyed and skeptical. Harry has enough common sense not to to be hurt by her trepidation. It’s nothing personal, he knows, she just doesn’t want to be completely taken out of the challenge if Harry’s wrong.

He isn’t though.
“It’s mauve,” Harry insists, pushing Perrie on her way. “You need to trust me.”

They’ve only got one color left, he realizes upon getting back to home base. It’s marigold, and Harry goes wild trying to find it. He doesn’t know if he can trust his senses, though. Not when he’s this close to the end.

He finds a pile of orange-looking colors, but he can’t distinguish which one it is. Jesy interrupts him before he can make the mistake of pulling up a wrong color and confidently picks up a cannister, running off to find Niall or Perrie. Not even thirty seconds later, a bell is ringing, and Harry’s grin takes over his entire face.

They’ve won.

At least, that’s what he thinks until he hears Oli’s excited laughter in the background. In the distance, Harry can see Stan throw his gun to the ground, and Kendall doesn’t exactly look happy from where she’s standing right next to him.

He feels numb as a producer comes up behind him and starts guiding him towards the entrance of the field where James is standing with a smile on his face, rubbing his hands together. “That was a close game, everybody,” he sings. “The winning team was only 3 spots ahead of the losing team. It could’ve been anybody’s game!”

*But it wasn’t, Harry thinks, and now he’s up for elimination.*

“The entire losing team will be up for elimination this week,” James repeats what they already know, only this time he adds, “and everybody will have two votes to give instead of one. I wish you all luck, and I’ll see you tomorrow when we’ll be sending two of you home.”

The producers start packing up, and Liam’s team cheers. Louis’ voice is the loudest, and it grates on Harry’s nerves to a degree he didn’t know he could experience. He’s taken over by his anger, and the second James is faced away, Harry shoots Louis three times in the back.

Louis whips around to glare at him, his face holding an emotion Harry’s never seen before.

They’re barely in Harry’s room before the door is slammed shut, and Harry’s thrown against it. He doesn’t have time to react before Louis’ lips are slamming against his, angry and bruising, letting out all of the pent up aggression they built up during the challenge.

Harry’s filled with adrenalin, the intensity of the game, and the hurt of losing - it’s all coming out in teeth and tongue as he chases Louis’ mouth every time the man starts to pull back from the kiss.

“I can’t believe you shot me,” Louis comments when he manages to pull back and take a breath.

“Stop complaining,” Harry rolls his eyes. “It’s not like you’re going to do anything about it.” He pulls Louis back in, flipping them so now Louis’ pushed against the door.

It feels like time is standing still. Hands are roaming, and they’re kissing - only kissing. Harry doesn’t think he’s made out with someone without the intention of going any further since he was in high school. He’d say it’s innocent, but there’s nothing pure about the noises Louis is making.

Harry doesn’t know how long they’ve been attached to each other, dancing around the promise of more, when they’re pulled out of their bubble by footsteps coming from just outside the door.
“Fuck,” Louis groans. “We have to stop.”

“Yeah,” Harry agrees, not making a move to step backwards. He leans back in and takes Louis’ bottom lip between his teeth.

Louis lets it happen until the door across the hall closes. He turns his head to the side in an effort to stop Harry, but it only serves to have Harry tracing a path down Louis’ neck. “No seriously,” Louis protests. “Someone could see,” Louis continues, but Harry keeps going, dipping below the collar of his t-shirt to suck a bruise that won’t be visible before he’s being pushed back by Louis. “Later, I promise.”

Louis places a gentle kiss - peck, really - on Harry’s cheek before disappearing out the door. Harry has to adjust his pants and wait two minutes before he’s deems himself presentable enough to leave the room. It’s not exactly where Harry saw himself ending up after their fight this morning, but he’d be lying if he said he was upset about this turn of events.

Saturday

Harry carefully writes his name down on the paper, making sure it’s completely legible, not willing to risk his vote being thrown out because it’s not readable. It’s bad enough that he even has to vote for himself - he shouldn’t be up for elimination. He should be voting for the other team - Liam and Sophia.

That’s not the case, though. He’s got to vote for himself and Perrie and hope that it’s enough. He knows that at least one of their clique is going home tonight and that he’ll have to say goodbye to Perrie or Kendall, or maybe even the entire house. Their alliance is far too small to be able to keep everyone.

Harry’s not even being selfish when he says he wishes it were the other team up for elimination. If that were case, they’d be able to save everyone. It’d be the first week in which they’d all be safe, not having to worry about whom to send home or whom their clique will be missing the following week.

Despite the less than stellar odds, Harry’s confident that he’ll be safe from elimination. Of course there’s a part of him that’s nervous that something’s happened and he’s no longer valuable to everyone or that maybe his team blames him for losing and is refusing to vote for him, but a bigger, stronger part of him is optimistic about making it through.

Harry leaves the tent, refusing to make eye contact with anybody. He doesn’t want to see Kendall’s face, doesn’t want her to know that he prioritized himself and Perrie over her. Oli takes Harry’s place with a smug grin, and Harry already knows who he’s voting for.

Or, who he isn’t voting for.

The rest of the contestants go in and out of the tent, submitting their two votes for who they want to stay, and before Harry knows it…

“The results are in,” James reports, holding a thick orange card in his hand. “This week, we must say goodbye to...”
The silence goes on, and Harry’s heart rises into his throat. If he stays, he’ll have to say goodbye to at least one of his teammates, but if he goes, he’ll have to say goodbye to Perrie and Liam and Niall, and he’ll never get to finish whatever Louis and him started last night. It’s a lose/lose situation, and all of this could’ve been avoided if only Liam’s team would’ve lost.

“Stan and Kendall,” James says suddenly. Harry didn’t realize how concerned he had been about the results until he heard Kendall’s name. He knew their alliance would be getting smaller, but actually watching it happen - having to let Kendall go - hurts more than he had anticipated.

I’m not even mad. Like, of course I’m upset, but you can’t tell me this wasn’t expected. Harry and Perrie have only been protecting themselves this whole time. I was obviously going home the moment I hit the bottom.

- Kendall, 21, Kapolei

Kendall doesn’t say goodbye to anyone - just stands up from her seat and walks out to her car. Watching her leave without so much as a goodbye stings, but Harry knows better than to let something like this affect his game. Just like last week, he’ll allow himself a little time to mourn the loss of a friend, but then he’ll be back to business come Monday morning.

Perrie offers to take Harry’s packed bag upstairs (another reason why he was upset about being in the bottom - he’ll have to put all of his pictures back up on the wall, and who knows how long that could take) stating that she’s already going up there anyway.

It’s over an hour later when Perrie comes back down. She’s freshly showered and barely even settled on the couch before Zayn’s coming down as well - his hair also suspiciously wet. Harry doesn’t need to be a detective to know what they’ve been doing. Perrie’s wink is enough of a giveaway itself.

They aren’t subtle.

Everyone slowly breaks off at about midnight for bed. Harry’s one of the last ones up, but he doesn’t quite make it into his room. He’s only halfway down the hallway when the sleeve of his shirt is yanked, and he’s pulled roughly into a room.
The door shuts behind him and he squints as his eyes adjust to the darkness. “Hey,” Harry greets when he finally makes out Louis’ figure standing in front of the door. “What’s this all about then?”

From what Harry can see, it looks like Louis shrugs. “I was just testing out Kendall’s theory.”

“What theory?”

“Grimmy’s old single,” he clarifies. “Perfect for hooking up.”

“Yeah?” Harry grins, suddenly understanding where Louis’s going with this. “Is that - ”

“Stop talking.”

The order is barely finished before Harry feels Louis’ lips against his own and the other man’s hands cupping his neck to hold him in place. Harry doesn’t know what it is about Louis, but he feels like he could do nothing but kiss him for the rest of the night and never get bored.

Time doesn’t pass like usual when they’re together, Harry realizes. Whether they’re fighting or kissing - or both - time seems to go impossibly slow. In the morning, Harry thinks, it’ll feel like all the moments zipped by too quickly, but for now, time stands still, and Louis’ tongue does wicked things.

There’s no hesitation in the way Louis’ hands roam over Harry’s body, leaving him wanting to be closer, closer, closer. From his neck to his waist to his ass, Louis’ hands are all over Harry’s body. The way he’s touching Harry feels like a promise, one that’s getting Harry so excited that he doesn’t know if just kissing will be enough to keep him satisfied for long.

Louis reaches up to grip Harry’s hair in tight fists, and he uses the leverage to pull himself onto his tiptoes. The new leverage puts Louis at a better angle, and Harry will be the first to admit that having his hair pulled is doing something for him.

Louis doesn’t seem as content as Harry with the way things are going, and he sighs as pulls back from the kiss. “You’re so tall,” he complains - because it really does sound like a complaint.

Harry smiles and mumbles against Louis’ lips, “You should see me in boots.”

“I’d rather see you on your knees.”

“Fuck,” Harry pulls completely back from Louis and hides his face in the man’s shoulder. He knows he’s wide-eyed, but the thought of taking this further, of having Louis in his mouth, makes him bite at Louis’ shoulder as he takes a moment to gather his bearings. He pulls back and nods, “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Louis asks. His voice is light and reassuring, and it just makes Harry nod harder.

“Yeah.” He drops to his knees, cringing when the impact is harder than he’d expected. He allows himself a second to take a deep breath, and then Louis’ hands are back in his hair, pushing stray strands off his forehead and behind his ears.

Harry reaches his hands up, taking the time to graze his hands along the inseams of Louis’ jeans, trying not to gasp at the muscle underneath the denim. When Harry reaches the hem of Louis’ shirt, he rucks it up just enough to reveal a sparse scattering of hair that trails down from his belly button to the button of his jeans.

Harry leans in and places a small peck to the curve of Louis’ stomach, following with another one slightly lower. He works his way down until he’s sucking a bruise into Louis’ hip as the man tugs...
reflexively at Harry’s hair, breathing shallowly.

Harry’s hands have just started reaching for the button of Louis’ jeans when a loud “are you fucking kidding me?!” is heard through the walls. Harry chooses to ignore it, pulling his focus back to the task at hand.

The peace doesn’t last - soon there’s a thud, and Louis pushes a disgruntled Harry away.

They make their way out of Grimmy’s room, not even caring what it’ll look like, not when there’s some sort of chaos going on in the hallway. The moment they’re out the door, they run into Perrie and Zayn. “What’s going on?” Harry asks.

“Yeah,” Louis back him up. “What’s - ”

“Zayn,” Perrie bites, looking angrier than Harry thinks he’s ever seen her. “Tell them what’s happening. Tell them what you’re doing to me - to us.”

Zayn visibly flinches as Perrie says ‘us’, and Harry finds himself mirroring his reaction. It’s not like Harry didn’t already know that they were sleeping together, it’s just that hearing her state it where anybody could hear isn’t what he expected, and it could make the following few days - weeks even - in the house awkward.

“Don’t be like that, Pezza,” Zayn mumbles. “You know it’s not like that.”

“Do I?” Perrie’s voice is loud. She has no shame in yelling, and it’s such a stark contrast to Zayn who’s been trying to keep this quiet. “Because it sure as fuck feels like you’re throwing everything - and I do mean everything - away.”

A door creaks open, followed by another one, and then Liam, Niall, and Jesy are all suddenly in the hallway witnessing everything going on. It reminds Harry of what he’s so used to seeing on this show - actual drama, not just stolen books and a slight prank war that barely lasts a day. This is real, actual drama. And as terrible as it sounds, his friend’s emotional distress is the best thing to happen in this tame season.

“It’s not - ”

“Zayn,” Louis interrupts as he can see how hard Zayn’s grasping for a way to explain himself, “why do you have your bags?”

It’s then that Harry notices the two duffel bags lying on the ground at Zayn’s feet. “Are you - ”

“He’s leaving!” Perrie shouts. “Just backing out of the competition like a fucking coward.” It’s clear in her tone that she doesn’t care about him leaving the game as much as she cares about him leaving her.

“I didn’t want to come in the first place, Perrie you know that,” Zayn justifies, and Harry has a brief flashback to week two when Zayn literally stood just behind the finish line, refusing to cross. He willingly put himself in the bottom… because he wanted to leave. “It’s been hard enough staying this long. I just need to go.”

Perrie’s eyes narrow, and her voice gets quieter than it’s been the whole time. “You were just going to leave without saying anything to me.”

Another door opens, and Taylor and Sophia come out into the hallway with all of them, witnessing this midnight break down.
“Well do you blame me?” Zayn asks. His voice is still the most calm out of anybody who’s spoken, and Harry’s almost jealous of how put together he seems. He doesn’t look like he wants to fight, not with the intensity that Perrie does at least. “I didn’t want to cause a big scene. I planned on contacting you after - ”

“Don’t pull that shit with me,” Perrie barks. “Don’t fucking lie. You never had any intention of doing that.”

Zayn doesn’t say anything in response, and Harry allows himself to feel proud of Perrie for a moment, quietly cheering “got ’im!” in his mind. It’s not too weird for somebody to leave the house willingly, Harry’s never understood how somebody could just walk out on the chance to win so much money. It doesn’t happen every season, but it has happened two or three times before.

But Zayn’s not only walking out on the money, he’s walking out on Perrie too, and that’s just insane.

“Z,” Louis speaks up, walking forward cautiously. “Why don’t you sleep on it and see how you feel in the morning?”

“That’s what I did last week, and it didn’t get any better,” Zayn claims.

“You were going to leave last week too?” Perrie asks, sounding more hurt than angry at this point.

Zayn sighs as he bends down to pick up his bags, an action that has more than just one person gasping. “I really don’t want to be here, Perrie.”

“But you never told me you thought of leaving,” Perrie murmurs. “You just led me on.”

“You wouldn’t be acting this way if I’d have gotten voted off - ”

“That’s because you would’ve been forced to leave,” she cuts him off, refusing to let him finish his thought. “Now you’re just voluntarily walking out, not even saying so much as a see ya.”

“I didn’t want to make it a big deal,” Zayn repeats.

Harry has to hold in a laugh; looking around, it seems like everybody in the house has joined them in the hallway to watch everything that’s go down. There are even two separate camera men standing alongside them, not to mention the stationary security cam on the ceiling.

“Well how did that work out for you?” Perrie deadpans, saying exactly what Harry’s thinking.

“Perrie, I’m sorry,” Zayn apologizes, watching as the woman herself rolls her eyes at his words. “You know how much I like you, and had we met anywhere else - ”

“Save it,” she shakes her head. “Just go.” Perrie storms off back into her bedroom, the door slamming behind her. Zayn doesn’t chase after her or even try to explain himself any further, just walks out without even saying goodbye to anyone.

Everyone stands still in the hallway, shocked in the wake of Zayn’s leave. Harry’s the first one to move, chasing after Perrie to try and talk to her, console her, anything she needs.

It’s going to be a long night.
Kendall leaving doesn’t have the same impact on the group as Harry had expected. It wasn’t like any of the previous exits - she left without so much as a goodbye. There was nothing civil about the way she stormed off, and it left an unsettled and unsatisfied feeling within the clique.

The departure that hit the hardest was definitely Zayn. Everything came out of nowhere - no warning preceding it - and nobody knew quite how to react. Perrie herself had been up all night crying and Harry had been right alongside her, wishing he could somehow make everything better, or even just make it hurt a little less.

She’s still upstairs, passed out. Harry’s told everyone that she’s “nursing her hangover,” but the alibi is pretty translucent, and not a single person believes it.

Currently, Harry himself is poolside, lying back and enjoying the sunshine. Liam and Sophia are alongside him, all three enjoying a fruity drink that, as much as Harry hates to admit it, isn’t half as good as Kendall’s Pina Coladas.

It’s been a quiet afternoon. With more people leaving, there’s less chaos around the house; contestants have their own weekly routine and stick to it. It’s nice, Harry has to admit, that he isn’t constantly bumping shoulders with anybody, having to apologize for so much as standing in the same room as them.

“I know this may sound cruel,” Liam comments, his words coming suddenly, followed by a loud slurp from his drink, “but it’s a lot quieter without Kendall here.”

“You’re right,” Sophia agrees, nodding along as she flips through a book she brought from the library, looking far more serious than Liam. “It does sound cruel.”

“It’s true, though,” Liam justifies. “She was always yelling about some movie or something. Or trying to turn rooms into sex palaces. It’s just a lot quieter without her constant talking.”

She hums, but doesn’t look up from the pages. “Still cruel.”

“It’s not -” Liam flounders for words, his eyebrows caving in under their own weight as he turns away. “Back me up, Harry.”

“Liam’s right,” Harry answers.

“See!”

“It is cruel,” he interrupts the victorious moment Liam was having with himself.

“Alright, screw all of you.” Liam slams his drink onto the thick glass of the table and stands up. With a stretch that deters the frustration from slipping into his voice, he declares, “I’m going to relax in the pool.”

Harry waits until Liam’s submerged himself into the water before he turns to Sophia, a large, alcohol-laced grin plastered across his face, and jokes, “More like relax in the cruel -”
“Honestly, Harry, don’t make me regret voting to keep you.” Sophia cuts him off, finally closing her book and placing it on the table. He would take that as a success, finally pulling her full attention, but the aggravated look in her eyes tells him that he shouldn’t start celebrating. “I’m allowing you one joke a week, and you’ve just used this one up.”

“Oh, Sophia,” Harry grins - he can’t help himself, not when she basically baited him into saying it. “You and I both know that’s - ”

Harry doesn’t get to finish his joke, doesn’t get to say cruel like wanted to. Before the words can make their way out, a torrent of water sprays across the side of his face, completely cutting him off. His hair is falling in his face, dripping, and he has to use his hand to push it back. Looking for the offender, he catches Liam with a pool noodle in his arms, lips pressed against one end of the spongy tube.

Still, he doesn’t see the second spray coming.

Harry can hear Sophia cracking up next to him, loud, obnoxious guffaws from deep inside. It’s not like she’s some stoic figure - Harry’s heard her laugh, seen her smile, but never like this, and witnessing the phenomenon is enough to keep Harry from getting angry. It doesn’t, however, stop him from running into the pool to attack Liam.

Coming to the show, Harry knew he’d be friendly with his fellow contestants. It’s nearly impossible to completely isolate yourself, though sometimes, he thinks, Taylor might be pulling it off.

He thought it’d be more of an alliance, though. Just like when Perrie that first day and Harry saw immediately that she’d be a great partner - somebody to be the brains of the operation and make Harry seem miles more demure than he actually is. He didn’t know that she’d be the closest to a best friend that a competitor could be.

And that’s just the thing - Harry stopped seeing his friends as competition long, long ago. Even when he’s standing next to Perrie in the bottom, both up for elimination, he really hopes that they both make it out alive.

So, yeah, he’d known he’d be friendly, but it was never supposed to be like this. He wasn’t supposed to lose sleep comforting his heartbroken friend, but still wake up early to make people laugh and have mock-fights in the pool over cheesy puns. Harry knew he’d fall in love with the game, but he wasn’t supposed to fall in love with the people.

He can’t find it in himself to regret it, though.

He keeps thinking about how well Perrie would get along with his mom - how they’d both tease him endlessly over some of the more ridiculous things he does. He thinks about how Liam would fit alongside all of Harry’s school friends, how he’d bring Harry to work harder in class or at the gym. He thinks about having Sophia model for him, how everytime he sees her smile or pout or do anything, he wants to put her in front of the camera and see what happens.

He wants this ragtag group of weirdos in his life forever, and though he knows that isn’t likely to happen, it doesn’t stop the thoughts from coming. The show is venturesome. It has had Harry doing things he never thought he’d be willing to try. He’s making memories that will live forever - not only in his heart, but also in the TVs in homes across America.

It makes the impending end all the more heartbreaking.

“Get off me,” Liam yells, the chuckles in his voice giving away his lack of seriousness.
Harry manages to successfully dunk Liam completely underwater before he actually does get off, and, at that point, he just eases onto his back and floats around the pool, leaving Liam to keep blowing water through his pool noodle.

Harry enjoys the competition. The trivia and physical challenges are something he’s been looking forward to since the first season aired. Harry was still in high school at the time, and he didn’t know a lot of the season one questions, but he still sat in front of the television every Saturday and told Gemma how one day he’d compete, and he would win.

What he didn’t know, though, was how much he would love Sundays. This rest day is a true savior to him. Sure, studying and challenging himself in the physical rounds is great fun, the rounds are everything he thought they’d be, but sitting back, enjoying the sunshine and letting his brain take a break, it’s more than he ever could’ve anticipated.

Monday will come around as fast as usual, but for now, Harry’s keen to enjoy the quiet.

That is, until a splash right next to his head sends him flailing under the water in surprise. He struggles to make his way back up to the surface, and when he finally does, another splash on the opposite side of him nearly sends him right back under.

“Good morning, everyone!” Niall’s loud and chipper voice echoes around the backyard, invading Harry’s head before he can so much as wipe the chlorinated water out of his eyes.

“It’s three in the afternoon,” Sophia argues from across the pool.

“Why is she such a ball buster?” Niall asks. “Are we not allowed to have fun near her?”

“She limited Harry to one joke a week this morning, so I’d say so,” Liam responds, his voice closer now that it was before.

Harry finally opens his eyes and manages to catch Louis’ teasing grin as he laughs, “That’s not busting balls, that’s community service. Nobody needs to hear Harry’s jokes as often as he tells them.”

“Hey -”

“Thank you Sophia!” Louis cuts Harry off.

“Just doing God’s work,” Sophia laughs and though Harry has every right to be offended, he keeps thinking back to the bonds he’s formed with everybody, and he knows the comments are more loving than anything.

Everybody starts separating, finding their own part of the pool to float around in - or, in Sophia’s case, staying on the patio. There’s shallow conversation being tossed back and forth, something to occupy the silence, but it’s nothing overtly important.

They aren’t bringing up the competition or their friends who have since said goodbye, only speaking of trite things, getting to know each other in the most basic of ways and sharing memories that mean absolutely nothing other than sentimental value to the storyteller.

“It’s really beautiful out,” Harry comments after a lull in conversation goes on for too long.

Niall nods, adding on, “Why do I want to go back inside so badly?”

“Because you don’t appreciate nature,” Liam argues. He’s still got the pool noodle with him, but he’s
not spraying people anymore. Harry, personally, thinks it’s because he doesn’t trust anyone not to splash him back.

“I won science & nature week,” Niall counters, his face blank. “Trivia and physical.”

“He told you,” Louis laughs, narrowly managing to avoid Liam jumping in his direction. Harry watches on as Louis strikes back and wrestles the pool noodle out of Liam’s hold, managing a weak spray in the man’s direction.

It’s silly, childish, and probably something they shouldn’t be doing on national TV. Harry doesn’t care, though. He even joins in after a while, carefree about how his strategy isn’t what it was before. He isn’t faking it when he spends the rest of the day pruning up in the pool, spraying water at Niall and trying to goad Sophia into joining. It may be silly behavior, but when he spends all day laughing, enjoying his friends’ company, who cares?

\textit{Monday}

The house has finally managed to run out of bacon, Harry realizes when he wakes up Monday morning. Everyone knew the moment would come; the greasy snack was a side to nearly every meal each week. Harry didn’t make a big deal out of his discovery, just simply moved on and grabbed a watermelon out of the fridge as a breakfast substitute.

He only gets halfway through cutting before he realizes what a chore it’s become and gives up. Trading his knife for a spoon, he takes one half of the melon’s shell in his hand and eats the fruit out of it like a bowl.

It’s innovative, Harry thinks, but Jesy’s looking at him from across the counter like he’s an alien. “Why don’t you just cut it up?” she asks.

“That takes time,” Harry explains through a mouthful of watermelon. He can feel a bit of juice slide out the corner of his mouth, but continues, “I’m a busy man with a busy schedule. I can’t afford to waste a moment.”

“You just dropped watermelon on your shirt,” she points out.

Harry flushes, but doesn’t look down toward the spill. “You think I can’t feel it?” He queries. “I did it on purpose.”

Jesy, most likely catching on that he’s not going to be ashamed of his meal, rolls her eyes and turns back to where she and Oli - who has been watching the entire exchange in disgust - were having a conversation. Sophia, on the other hand, who’s also been listening in as she drank her glass of orange juice, feels compelled to start a new conversation. “You’re honestly one of the weirdest people I’ve ever met,” she says, “and that’s saying a lot.”

“Does this have anything to do with my jokes that I’m not allowed to tell?” Harry wonders out loud. He’s making sure not to speak through a full mouth again.

“It sure as - ”

Sophia’s reply is cut off, mid-sentence, by Niall’s appalled gasp and the fridge door slamming shut.
“Where’s the bacon?” he demands. “Why isn’t there any bacon?”

Harry completely avoids eye contact, staring determinedly down at the makeshift bowl in his hands. Nobody rushes to say anything - it isn’t until after a moment of complete and utter silence that Liam comments, “It was bound to happen sometime, man.”

“Yeah,” Taylor adds with trepidation, “I’m pretty sure you’ve all eaten nothing but bacon since getting here. Might I suggest a vegetable?”

“I can’t live in this place anymore,” Niall groans, throwing himself onto the granite counter. “I have to leave.”

“Now, now, Mr. Horan,” a familiar voice interjects, and it has everybody turning towards the entrance of the kitchen. It’s James Corden, standing in the doorway, his camera crew surrounding him. “That’s a bit extreme isn’t it?”

Harry’s shocked that nobody heard him come in. Usually at least one person knows exactly when he arrives, enough noise being made by the front door to draw some attention, but no - Niall’s temper tantrum blocked it all out completely.

“There’s no bacon left!” Niall complains loudly, straight to the host’s face.

James doesn’t say anything for a moment, watching the distress as it lingers on Niall’s face. “The producers are bringing in some groceries now.”

“Oh, thank God,” Niall sighs out in relief, trudging forward and actually hugging James. Harry snorts into his watermelon, his mind flashing back to the car ride where Louis told the story of James being Niall’s dad and -

“It’s alright, son,” James laughs as he returns the hug, and Harry laughs so hard he chokes on his watermelon. He has to put the fruit in the sink, completely unable to continue eating at this point, as he coughs from laughing too hard.

Eleanor and Stan are no longer in the show, and Louis isn’t in the kitchen alongside them to witness what Harry just did. Everyone is giving him strange looks, but he doesn’t know how to explain the story. It was a ‘you had to be there’ moment, and until the show airs, nobody’s going to understand just why the moment’s so surreal and just… hilarious.

A producer comes into that room, and, luckily, he has Louis following close behind. There’s no trace of Perrie, though. Harry frowns, really wishing Perrie wasn’t feeling so low. She deserves to be out here, he thinks. Zayn shouldn’t have been able to get into her head that harshly.

“What’re we dealing with this week, James?” Louis asks, hopping up to sit on the counter to signal his arrival.

“Yeah,” Oli goes on. “Give us all the good news we’ve been waiting for. It’s sports week, right?”

Harry takes a deep breath to stop himself from letting Oli know that he’d enjoy nothing more than kicking the man swiftly in the head like a football to get him started on sports week.

“I’ll get to that shortly,” James insists, waving his hands in Oli’s direction. “Now I know you’re all wondering how Zayn’s departure will affect the game. Well, it will have a very big effect on your physical challenge round - one that I can’t tell you of right this moment, but won’t change anything in the trivia round.”
That’s a relief, Harry knows. Having to change things around so suddenly can’t be an easy feat. There are six different categories that have to be planned each season, and they’ve yet to repeat a physical challenge between seasons. Having to change something last minute on a show that relies so heavily on being new and innovative every single season… well, that’s got to be frustrating.

James said there would be a change in the physical challenge, but Harry can’t see that being anything more than changing the trivia advantage or maybe switching up preplanned teams. It couldn’t have been anything too serious, not with how calm James has been about the whole thing.

It doesn’t matter, though - not to Harry, at least. Regardless of what was changed around, Harry still plans on making it through this week and towards first place. There’s only one more elimination he has to sit through, and that’s what he’s latching himself onto as motivation. There’s no elimination in week six, he keeps reminding himself, and that’s what’s going to launch him to the finale.

“And your category this week is…” James teases, trailing off.

“Sports!” Oli shouts excitedly, forcing Harry to suppress an eye roll.

“Geography.” Harry doesn’t know if it’s just a trick of the light, but James almost looks pleased as he delivers the news Oli doesn’t want to hear. The boy groans, and Harry swears James’ smile gets bigger. “You’d better get studying. Good luck.”

James promptly turns around and leaves the house, the producers and his personal camera crew following along. The kitchen starts bustling, Oli, Jesy, and Louis all vacating the room. Harry tries not to think too hard about how both Niall and Louis are managing to play both sides of the competition, something Harry knows he could never pull off.

Sophia’s discussing the books she has saved away, her voice hushed as she speaks to Liam and Taylor - though Harry’s not sure just what her plan really is. He invited her into the alliance in week one, but she turned him down. Yet here she stands.

Harry isn’t complaining, though. He can’t, not when their alliance is already so small. They could use all the extra people they can get.

“Why don’t we all take a half an hour or so,” Liam suggests as they’re preparing to begin their study session. “It’ll let us have a moment to gather ourselves. We can meet up in Sophia’s room afterwards.”

Everybody agrees, and Harry finds himself considering the girl upstairs. “I’ll go tell Perrie and see if she wants to join us,” he offers.

“You know she won’t,” Taylor remarks casually. “She’s too busy feeling sorry for herself about Zayn leaving.”

“She’s going through a break up,” Sophia defends, and Harry smiles to himself and how much different things are now from the very beginning. He never thought he’d see Sophia fit in so smoothly, but it almost feels like she’s been alongside them the entire time. “It’d be tough for anyone.”

“Look, I’m not saying she can’t be a little sad,” Taylor argues, her entire demeanor completely calm. “I’m just saying that she’s going to let this get to her head. I’m not going to stop her, and neither should any of you. She’s probably some of the biggest competition we have. Forgive me for my wishful thinking, but she’s going to let this distract her long enough to send her home.”

“You’re absolutely cold,” Sophia bites. She’s tense, almost as though she’s stopping herself from
doing something. “I hope you know I’m voting you off the very second I get the chance.”

“Don’t be mad at me for thinking exactly what everyone else is,” Taylor cautions. “You’re only bitter because ever since Eleanor went home you’ve nobody to keep your sheets warm.”

Liam and Harry both breathe in through their teeth, sharp hisses at the jibe. Nobody’s brought up Eleanor or how close she and Sophia were since the night she and Grimmy were eliminated. It’s clear as to why that topic’s remained unspoken when Sophia slams her fists onto the countertop and in a low, almost unrecognizable tone, spits, “Fuck you.”

She disappears in a fury, hair whipping around as she storms up the stairs. Taylor simply shrugs at the display, gently humming to herself. “I’ll be in the library then, I guess,” she says coolly before she stands up and goes in the opposite direction of Sophia.

I’m not here to make friends. I’m here to win. I’m not going to pause the game just because some girl got played by her competition. It’s a lot like Romeo and Juliet. Let’s just hope she takes the plunge and makes it easier on me.

- Taylor, 27, Albany

Harry doesn’t know what to say, and it seems like Liam doesn’t either, the two of them making uncomfortable eye contact for a moment before they go off in different directions.

“Hey, Pez?” He asks, knocking on his own bedroom door as he makes his way inside. The lights are out and the curtain is closed, a dusty cover settling over the room. “We got this week’s category,” he continues, hoping for even the smallest response. “It’s geography.”

She doesn’t answer, so Harry leaves and closes the door behind him. He pops into Sophia’s room on his way back downstairs and informs her that he’s going to make Perrie something to eat and he’ll be down in a little bit.

“I just want to make sure she’s alright,” he explains.

Sophia nods along from where she’s taking books out of her dresser. “You’re a really good person, Harry.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“I mean it,” Sophia continues. She looks nothing but sincere, and Harry’s inclined to believe she
means her words. “It’d be so easy for you to take the Taylor route and be mean - even easier to be like everyone else and ignore Perrie, but you’re bringing her food and checking in on her and just… you’re a good friend. Perrie’s lucky to have you.”

Harry didn’t expect to be praised for doing what anybody should be doing in such a situation. She’s his partner, he wants to say, it’s his job. He doesn’t say it, though. It feels like a cheap way out, like he’s only helping Perrie because he’s obligated to as her teammate. That’s not why he’s doing it. “I would’ve done it for anybody,” he tells her honestly.

“I know. Because you’re a good person,” she grins in response. “I hope I win this game, but if something happens and I get sent home, I hope it’s you. You deserve it.”

She walks forward and stands on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. It’s sweet, but completely unwarranted. He doesn’t feel like he’s done anything special, and he’s not sure what just happened, but if anything, he knows Sophia will be voting for him if he’s up for elimination.

There’s nobody left lingering in the kitchen when Harry makes his way down, which is great news in itself. There are a few grocery bags on the counter that Harry doesn’t remember seeing earlier, so they must be what the producers brought in after James left.

Harry starts putting everything away, figuring that it’ll just go bad if he leaves it here for somebody else to take care of. Besides, it’s in one of the bags that bacon is hiding anyway, and he thinks that Perrie would really appreciate having an entire package of it to herself.

Well, most of a package, at least. Harry knows himself well enough to say that he’ll probably take a slice or two as he cooks it.

Harry sits at Perrie’s bedside as she eats the food, and he can’t help but feel bad for her. She’s one of the strongest players in the competition and the fact that she’s laying here, reduced to a heartbroken mess as she lets what’s supposed to be one of the most amazing experiences in her life pass her by… it sucks. And Perrie deserves more.

She takes her time eating, and when Harry stops in to tell Liam and Sophia that he’s almost ready, an hour’s already passed. He makes his way to the kitchen to wash the plate, intending to head right back upstairs, and in doing so, he runs into Louis, the man standing at the counter and making himself a sandwich.

“Hey,” he greets. He look up and notices a red and black snapback resting on Louis’ head.”Nice hat.”

Louis smiles in response as he closes the bag of bread. ”It’s the Buffalo Bills,” he points out. ”Did you know they went to the Superbowl four years in a row and lost every single time?” Harry hums, but doesn’t have much to say in response. Louis must notice that his mind is otherwise occupied because he asks, “How’s Perrie doing?”

“As well as she can be, I suppose,” Harry answers. He puts the dish in the sink, not even bothering to so much as turn the water on. “She’s pretty down.”

“Mm,” Louis hums. “I don’t blame her. Zayn leaving was pretty harsh.”

Harry sighs and turns back towards Louis, taking a seat on one of the stools. He knows it isn’t smart to bring up his partner’s personal life, but he feels like he can trust Louis. “I honestly, haven’t seen anybody react so badly to a breakup before.”

“Really?” Louis seems to be genuinely surprised at the news.
“Yeah.”

“I have five little sisters,” Louis says, “I’m no stranger to operating Heartbreak Hotel. The moping in the room? It’s mild compared to some of the breakdowns I’ve seen.”

“So you play the threatening big brother role to ex-boyfriends?” Harry teases, imagining Louis walking up to some casanova that dared to play one of his little sisters for a fool. It’s a sweet image.

“No at all,” Louis denies, laughing at the thought. “I bring them ice cream and rub their backs and watch all their favorite movies. I’m a lover not a fighter, Harry. I expected you to know this by now.”

Harry grins. “I can see that, actually.”

He means it in the most innocent of ways, of course, despite the fact that Harry has actually seen Louis as a lover. The thing is, he can see Louis always taking the clean route, never using his fists when the situation calls for it. Even way back in week one, he was the one to stop Liam and Oli from killing each other.

He’s a lover, and Harry wouldn’t expect anything less.

“What about you?” Louis asks “Do you have any siblings? Any little sisters to annoy you?”

“Big sister, actually,” Harry admits, a minute grin forming as he thinks of Gemma, back home waiting for Harry to come home so they can watch this season together. “And I never had to help with her heartbreak. She was always pretty casual about guys.”

“You’re lucky then,” Louis says. “A man can only overhear his sister talk about what she’d like to do a guy so many times.”

Harry opens his mouth in a honk of a laugh, “I know all about that! There was one time, actually, when Gemma and I went to the movies together, and we ran into this guy she liked, and I told him my sister wanted to blow him.”

“Oh my god.”

Harry remembers fondly when that happened. The theatre was showing Love Actually, and he’d pestered Gemma for weeks to take him to go see it. When she finally had, they’d run into her crush, somebody who had no clue she existed, according to Gemma. By the end of the night, she’d taken to a pact of silence between them. “She didn’t talk to me for like a month after that, I don’t think.”

Louis laughs brightly at that, his eyes crinkling in the corner, and goes to say something but before he can articulate his thoughts, Liam’s voice booms down the stairs, “You almost done, Haz?” And Harry has to bid Louis goodbye as he runs upstairs to study with his clique.

The entire time, Harry’s mind can’t help being drawn back to a certain crinkly eyed lover-not-a-fighter, and it’s not the first time either.
It’s a chore getting Perrie out of bed the morning of the trivia round. She’s the most stubborn person Harry’s ever met, it seems. Every single task is an absolute struggle.

Waking her up? It’s the biggest hassle Harry’s ever faced. Perrie does nothing but groan every time Harry does so much as attempt to pull her off the bed. He tried gentle coaxing, but that doesn’t do anything. Eventually, he just has to grip both of her upper arms and rip her out of her safe haven of blankets and pillows and onto the floor.

He shoves Perrie into the bathroom and makes her shower, telling her that if she doesn’t make the move to do it herself, that he’d be going in and doing it for her. He’s seen her change before, helped her chose outfits as they both stood around in just their underwear - it’s what friends do - but Harry knows that assisting each other in the shower is a step too far, even for them.

Harry forces her into an outfit (something he’s seen her wear before, so he knows she won’t absolutely hate it or plot his murder when she’s back to being herself), runs a brush through her hair, and gets her downstairs just as the cars arrive.

They share the ride with Sophia, Liam, and Taylor, though none of them speak. Perrie’s head is resting in Harry’s lap, and he’s stroking his hand through the strands of her hair. When they pull up, he pulls her hair up into a ponytail (an act he’s managed to perfect, given all the practice he’s gotten on his own head of hair) so she looks good for television.

From the very beginning of the trivia round, Harry and Niall take an automatic lead off of everyone else. And just like the previous week, it feels like a competition between only the two of them. Sure the others manage to answer a good portion of questions, but the majority of the points are going to Harry and Niall.

Perrie doesn’t ring her buzzer even once, just slouches at her podium and looks sad the whole time. Not that it matters, even if she’d been on top of her game, she would’ve been no match for Niall, who grabs the last three questions of the game and takes first place. Harry’s upset, of course he is, but this entire week has been so completely off that it makes sense he didn’t win. He’s surprised he got the points he did.

“Congratulations for your second win, Mr. Horan,” James laughs from the front of the room, and while Harry’s happy to consider Niall a friend, he’s the furthest from excited that this is his competitor’s second win. Harry only won once, and that was the standard. Niall’s gone and created a whole new rank that Harry really has to fight to reach. “Here is your prize.”

James reveals a green envelope and passes it off to Niall. Upon opening it, everyone is exposed to the black card inside. Everybody groans, save for Niall who lets out an excited, “Sweet!”

“Why don’t you go ahead and read it as well,” James prompts, and immediately everyone is confused.

There’s never, in the history of the show, been writing on an immunity card. There’s never been a reason for that to happen at all. The point of immunity is that you have the biggest advantage of all - and automatic boost to the next round. Adding something on top is that is… unfair.

Well, Harry says that, but he knows for certain that if it were him in Niall’s position, he’d be gloating. Niall has nothing to lose at it stands, he won’t have to face another elimination, so no matter what he does from here on it is completely consequence free.

“Winner chooses partners,” Niall reads. “What does that mean?”
“It means, Niall, that you get to partner everybody up for their physical challenge,” James explains, and Harry’s heart stops. His eyes automatically snap to where Oli’s standing, equally as frozen. Harry knows he could work fine with anybody else. It’s just… Oli.

Harry’s been on Niall’s tail the entire competition. Whenever Niall wins, Harry’s always in second place. Whenever Niall loses, Harry’s the one winning. They’re neck and neck in this game, and Harry knows that Niall’s a good guy, but he’s also a great competitor, and partnering Harry with somebody he hates is a sure fire way to launch him into elimination.

And Harry wouldn’t put doing that past anybody to this late in the game. It’s probably the best strategy at this point: put your best competition on a team with their arch nemesis.

“This is amazing,” Niall laughs. “Do I start now?”

“In just one moment,” James responds. He then turns towards the rest of the competitors and continues, “Before Niall chooses, I’d like for you all to know that only the winning team will be safe from the elimination. The team that wins the physical challenge will automatically advance to week six, and, as for the rest of you, only one member from each team will move on.”

Harry physically gasps at that. Because of this, no matter what happens or how good anybody does in the physical challenge round, if they don’t win it all, they’re up for elimination… against their own teammate.

With this news, Niall could put him with Perrie or Liam or Sophia, somebody whom it would kill Harry to be fighting for votes against. Niall’s basically just been given a golden egg to win the competition - he can really hand-select those going to week six if he chooses right.

And Harry wouldn’t expect him do anything less than put these teams together with expert strategy.

“Allright,” Niall starts. He moves his neck to the side, cracking it and squints his eyes at everybody staring back at him. “So many different options here.” Harry takes a deep breath and prepares for the worst. “Well, first I want to start with Sophia and Taylor, right off the bat. They had a fight in the kitchen on Monday and there’s been some tension between them ever since.” He’s right, Harry notes. There’s been palpable animosity floating in the air between them every time they’re so much as in the same room as each other. “And it’s not the first fight they’ve had, mind you.”

Taylor and Sophia continue on with wide eyes after exchanging equally shocked looks. This is brand new information to Harry. He was never under the impression that the two of them were best friends, but Taylor shared her intel with Sophia and Eleanor during week one, going far enough as to credit them for being the only people in the house studying half as hard as Taylor was. Harry doesn’t know when the fighting could’ve started, but if it wasn’t for Niall, he would’ve thought their distaste toward each other started over Perrie.

“You all seem to think that I don’t pay attention, but I do. I know a lot.” Niall starts looking at the rest of the group before stopping on Harry with a grin. “Just like I know that Jesy and Harry have only had about two conversations since arriving, and that they don’t know each other at all. That could make for some hardships as a team.”

Harry’s jaw actually drops at that. Niall’s already moved onto looking out for his next pairing, but Harry and Jesy are looking at each other in surprise. They aren’t friends, sure, but it’s clear that they both know somebody else they would’ve been worse with.

Harry was certain that Niall would pair Harry with Oli, and yet, he’s with Jesy who - Harry will admit that he doesn’t even remember where Jesy’s from, let alone the intimate details of her inner
working, but they don’t fight. They worked together the week before and Jesy saved their asses. Harry has absolutely no negative feelings towards her; in fact, he thinks they could learn to work pretty well together.

The only thing Harry’s certain of now is that Niall’s an absolute fool.

“Liam and Louis,” Niall considers before shrugging, “I don’t have a reason to put you together, other than I would like to see Perrie and Oli work together. I think it could be interesting.”

Liam and Louis both nod from what Harry can see, but his attention is quickly pulled to where Oli slams his fists down in outrage, yelling, “Are you serious?”

Harry flinches back at the intensity of it, and even James looks startled at the reaction. Oli’s slowly slipping into the angry shell he formed for himself on the first week. Little cracks in his armor have slipped through at various points in the competition, but never to this level.

“Oh yeah,” Niall grins, not seeming to sense how close Oli is to the edge.

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I have to hand it to Perrie; she’s really playing this pity card well. Nobody’s going to want to send her home… Which is exactly why she’s partnered with Oli. I don’t want to see him in the finale.

-Niall, 23, Cleveland

“Fuck you, Ohio,” Oli bites, and Harry almost smiles, the throwback from Niall’s nickname before people actually started calling him Niall is a nice thing to hear, though maybe it’d be better if it wasn’t fueled with such rage. “You know damn well that she’s deadweight! I’m automatically going to be up for elimination with her.”

Harry frowns at the insults to his friends, and despite wanting to stay as far from an angry Oli as possible, he lets out a pointed, “Hey.”

“Oh, shut up, Harry,” Oli rolls his eyes. “Stop defending her, she’s already fucked. She let Zayn get into her head, and now she’s going to be sent home because of it. Don’t get mad at me for speaking the truth.”

Harry can feel himself wanting to charge towards Oli, not just for being the asshole he’s been everyday for the past five weeks, but because he doesn’t even understand why everyone hates him. “I’m mad because every week you open your big mouth and say something offensive, and nobody
stands up to you. I’m sick of it, and I’m sick of you.”

“Deal with it, man,” Oli shrugs, a sardonic, twisted laugh tumbling from his lips. “I’ve got the right to free speech and I’ll say whatever I want. Maybe you’re a little too sensitive if you’re getting your panties in a twist over a few words.”

There are a lot of things Harry’s tolerated in his life. He’s dealt with shitty people. He’s heard the bigoted words people can spout, but never in his life has Harry wanted to react in such a violent way to a sentence.

Harry lowers his voice and tells Oli honestly, “I hope Perrie drags you down enough to keep you up for elimination because I can’t wait for my chance to vote you out.”

Oli narrows his eyes. “You want to say that to my face, huh? Say it again, I fucking dare you.” He starts to charge over in Harry’s direction, but Liam catches his arms. Harry’s not sure what everyone else is doing because he’s so hyperfocused on making sure he doesn’t miss a thing Oli does.

“Calm down, maybe, bro,” Liam advises. “It’s just a game.”

“Says you ,” Oli spits, ripping himself free from Oli’s hold. “I can’t wait to send you home. All of you. Your alliance was a failure since day fucking one and it’s about end, so help me God.”

There’s a silence after that, as Oli goes back to his podium and Harry stares him down. The entire room has gone tense, and it takes James’ drawn out, “Well ,” to pull everyone out of the moment. “For one of the most tame seasons yet, things have gotten quite dramatic in the last few days. I’d love to stay and chat, but it seems that that would be awfully risky .”

Harry knows it’s a clue towards their physical challenge, but he has no fucking idea what the it could be. All he knows is that he came incredibly close to actually fighting with Oli today. The entire ride home, Perrie plays with Harry’s curls, the exact reverse of their car ride on the way in.

When they get home, she kisses his cheek and thanks him before going back upstairs and spending the rest of the day in bed.

Thursday

Thursday is spent entirely with Liam cuddled in Perrie’s bed. Sure, there are breaks where one of them runs down for food, but that’s hardly anything at all. Harry’s knows for certain that the bed can house all three of them, their week one experiment with Niall proof of such, so having it be Liam instead is nothing too dramatic, especially when they’re both cuddled so tightly into Perrie’s sides.

Harry doesn’t know if it’s helping her, doesn’t know if their constant attention is making her feel any better, but she’s yet to complain, so he’s taking that as a positive sign. It feels good to be at Perrie’s side, comforting her. He likes to think she’s slowly recovering, getting better with each snuggle initiated.

A card found in the kitchen this morning told everyone that the physical challenge this week is a game of Risk . At first, Harry had assumed it meant that they’d be taking a chance, but alongside the green note were copies of rules for the boardgame Risk , a game of conquering other countries and downright strategy. Harry himself has never really played the game, but there’s nothing stopping him
from winning.

He waves off Jesy’s invitation to study together, saying he’ll do it in his own time. He knows that Taylor’s kidnapped Sophia into a full day of preparing, and he feels for her, but he doesn’t have time to do anything about it, not with Perrie being so helpless in her bed.

That being said, Harry does read the rules to Perrie that night, stays up well after midnight to list them off and review. Harry doesn’t want to go into this challenge unprepared, and he won’t let Perrie do it either.

She may not be herself, but they’re still partners. Harry has her back.

Friday

Just as it was two days prior, getting Perrie out of bed and ready to go is a difficult feat, one that a man like Harry wasn’t meant to do twice a week. He still helps, though, not wanting to leave Perrie on her own, lest she misses the cars and gets sent home - especially when her odds of staying are so strong now that she’s partnered with Oli.

They actually make it downstairs early, something Harry puts down to the fact that he didn’t force her into a shower this time around. Having everything ready to go feels like something of a miracle, and Harry wishes there were a glass of champagne lying around he could toast to himself with.

Not that the small victory matters anyway, not when instead of a producer coming inside to lead them to their cars, James Corden is walking inside, shutting the door behind him.

At this point, Harry feels like he should be used to having things unexpectedly thrown at him. There shouldn’t be anything else that can surprise him, but there James stands, a small grin on his face like he knows something nobody else does.

Which he does. That’s his job, actually - knowing things before the contestants.

“Well don’t all of you look nice,” James compliments everyone, acknowledging the group with a nod. Nobody goes along with it; instead, there’s a collective groan of disappointment. It seems that everyone is as tired of James’ surprises as Harry is. “Today the cars won’t be taking you to your physical challenge,” he explains. “It’ll be happening right here in the Library. So turn around and make your way over.”

With minimal complaints, they make their way through the house and in through the library doors. Harry himself hasn’t been in here in two weeks, but it feels like it’s been centuries. Though, despite having been away from it for so long, everything looks exactly the same - save for a game board in the middle of a table. The producers must have set everything up early in the morning.

“I’m assuming you’ve all studied up on the rules because there will be no recap this morning,” James tells them as they take their seats at the table.

And then the game begins.

Harry’s played Risk about once in his life, but it was with his mom and Gemma, and they went easy on him. For all intents and purposes, Harry’s never played a single round of the game, and he doesn’t
know if a quick reading of the rules is going to help him.

Jesy’s sitting across the table from him so she can better control the other side of the map, and Harry makes eye contact with her, happy to note the determination he sees. He has faith they can work their hardest together.

Jesy takes the initiative to grab the blue pieces from the table and split them evenly between herself and Harry. The other teams are doing the same while James sits back. He said he wouldn’t be there to recap the rules, so Harry thinks he’s waiting around as a referee in case somebody does something the wrong way. Someone will, Harry assumes, because this game can go on forever and after a while, less and less attention will be paid to the ‘proper’ way of playing.

“I think we all roll first,” Liam says, sounding unsure as his hesitant hands reach into the box. “To see who goes first, right?”

There’s no response from James, so one person from each team - Harry allows Jesy to be their representative - grabs a die and rolls. Harry can see Perrie pressing her lips as Oli snatches the dice before even talking it over with her. She’s annoyed, which is completely understandable given her partner, but furthermore, she’s showing an emotion other than complete detachment, and for that Harry’s grateful.

Liam and Louis roll a five, so they go first.

They each begin claiming territories at that, going around - the circle starting at Liam - and placing their pieces on the board one territory at a time. Harry and Jesy seem to be on the same team strategy wise, which is to place all of their pieces on countries heavily surrounding others. Harry knows he’s doing so to make sure they’ve got more options for invasion when the game begins, and he would like to think Jesy has the same reasoning.

Once the gameplay starts, involving Risk cards and attacking the territories, things move smoothly, everyone more sure of what they’re doing. There’s a steady gameplay, one that has every setback followed by great progress and vise versa. It’s great news for each team individually, but as a collective, it means that the game will not be ending anytime soon.

Niall’s nowhere to be seen, Harry realizes, and that’s all for the better. Harry himself would want nothing less than to watch a twelve hour board game go down in the fluorescently lit library when he could be, say, doing any other task in the world.

Sophia is surprisingly great at the game. There’s a small fury behind her eyes every time she loses a territory, which makes her fight back tenfold. She and Taylor take a quick lead on the competition, and are the first to take over an entire continent. It’s only Australia, not worth too much, but that’s beside the point.

Liam, on the other hand, is absolutely terrible at the game. He doesn’t quite get the gist, and at one point ends up attacking Harry’s territory, one that holds twice as many armies as his own. It’s a mess and if it weren’t for Louis, he’d have been out of the game within the first hour.

As it stands though, Harry wouldn’t mind losing if it meant he could stretch his legs and get something to eat. He and Jesy work well together and hold only one territory less than Taylor and Sophia, but he’d give up everything for a nice, leisurely walk.

There’s one moment in the game when Louis manages to overtake one of Harry’s largest territories - though it isn’t a big loss, more of a shock if anything - and in celebration, Liam leans over Taylor and Harry’s bodies to pat Louis’ leg in excitement, and Harry, for a reason unbeknownst to him,
stares at Liam’s retreating form and places his own palm on Louis’ leg. He taps it twice before removing it and focusing his attention back on the game.

Harry’s excuse is that they’ve been playing the game too intensely for too long, and losing a territory as large as he did only serves to push Harry even further out of his present mind.

(Later, when he tells Louis this, he’ll laugh at Harry and pretend they both don’t know that he’s just an overtly jealous person.)

They’ve been playing competitively for what feels like 13 days, but according to the clock on the wall, it’s only been five hours (“Only,” Harry scoffs to himself) when there’s a loud knock on the library door. Harry assumes it’s Niall as the poor guy has been all alone for so long, but James opens the door to reveal a producer holding -

Good God.

“You, uh - ” Louis pauses in the middle of his sentence to bite at his lips. “Are you going to eat that? James?”

“Oh this?” James asks, gesturing to the large cardboard box of pizza in his hand. Harry would kill for just about any food, but there are oil stains on the box, and Harry’s never wanted to be covered in grease so badly in his life. He can smells the spices from his seat at the table, and he’s pretty sure the soundtrack of the night is just his stomach’s constant rumbling. “No, I don’t think so. I had a pretty big breakfast. Do, I don’t know, do you want it?”

“Please!”

James looks on at the eight of them, all having answered his question in the most pleasant of way. “Hm,” he hums considering something in his head before adding, “How about the next person to conquer a country gets the pizza? That sounds fair, doesn’t it?”

The rounds continue and when Sophia goes next she tries invading a country. She loses the battle and her chance at the pizza, which makes her lips turn down in frustration. Harry feels almost sorry for her, because Sophia’s clearly the best player at the game, but that just frees up an opportunity to win the pizza for himself.

Surprising every single person in the room, Perrie is the next person to steal a territory. She does so with a determination not yet seen in this week’s game from her, and Harry’s almost proud. James hands her the greasy box with a giant grin on his face, one that Harry finds himself emulating. Today seems to be a big step forward for Perrie’s mental health.

She takes only one slice of pizza and passes the box around to everyone else, allowing them all to grab a slice, something the group expresses their appreciation for audibly. Oli, though… Oli looks pissed at Perrie’s kindness, and Harry can’t wait to send him home.

The game goes on for another three hours, each team slowly fading out - Liam and Louis first - until it’s Sophia and Taylor versus Harry and Jesy. In the future, looking back, Harry won’t be able to remember what happens in the final thirty minutes of the game. All he’s sure of is that he and Jesy are communicating nonverbally over the table as they strategize the best way to invade the other countries, and the game ends twice as quickly as it began.

The final showdown isn’t climactic at all and nobody’s standing in their seat excitely. There’s a roll of the dice and then it’s over.

“Taylor and Sophia, you are both safe from elimination, and I look forward to seeing you next
week,” James announces, clapping his hands excitedly. Neither of the girls seems too excited to have won - they moreso just look happy to be able to stand up and breathe after such a long haul. “As for everybody else, pack your bags and be ready for tomorrow night. We’ll be seeing three of you off. Goodnight.”

I’ll be honest, this game kicked my ass. I’m just glad I have an alliance on my side to vote for me to stay. I just feel bad for Louis - bro doesn’t stand a chance.

- Liam, 23, Beckley

Harry can’t say he’s upset with the outcome of the game. He wishes he would’ve won, and now he’s up for elimination, but all he really cares about is getting something in his stomach and then going to sleep for as long as his body will let him.

James leaves the room before anybody can finish stretching their aching limbs, but replacing him with barely time at all is a curious-looking Niall. “They wouldn’t tell me what was happening,” he complains. “How did it go?” Oli grunts out an unintelligible answer, slamming his shoulder into Niall’s as he storms out. “I’m guessing it went well, then?”

And despite the fact that almost everyone in the room is up for elimination, they can’t help but laugh. It feels good for some kind of release after such a stressful day. They can worry about elimination in the morning.

Saturday

“I cannot believe I actually have to sit through another one of these,” Liam’s complaining as they make their way down to the living room. “I thought we finished with this when Grimmy basically threw himself out of the competition.”

“This isn’t about the alliance, though,” Harry explains. “Jesy thinks we should all have a chance to defend ourselves before we vote.”

With so many people up for elimination, Jesy thought it’d be smart for everyone to gather together
and let the bottom six justify themselves and give everyone a reason to vote for their security in the competition. With it being the very last time they’ll all get to vote, Harry doesn’t think it’s a bad idea. He’d love some insight from Liam and Louis, something to help him choose whom to keep.

He knows it should be Liam. They’re an alliance, they’ve been at each other’s sides since week one. Liam even defended Harry from Oli’s irrational anger on their very first night. The choice should be easy.

It isn’t. It’s probably the most difficult choice Harry’s been saddled with since getting in this damn competition.

“She’s only doing this because she knows we’re all going to vote for you,” Liam scoffs, and Harry has to give it to him - that’s exactly why Jesy’s having the meeting.

“Then she should get her chance.”

For all that he’s worried about who to give his vote to, Harry’s pretty fucking confident that he’s staying. He doesn’t know one person - other than Oli and possibly Niall - that would choose Jesy over him, especially after everything he’s done for everyone. He’s so self-assured about making it into week six that he has no issue whatsoever about Jesy trying to sway the vote her way. It’s almost peaceful.

Everyone is set up in the living room, drinks in hand and a plate holding nothing but crumbs on the table between them. Harry didn’t realize they were cutting it so close to time, but they had been upstairs with Perrie, trying to get her to join them at the meeting.

The group gathering together in the main room would look completely normal if it weren’t for the way that Jesy’s sitting stock-still, a tense mess next Oli, who seems to be ten seconds away from bouncing out of his own skin.

“I’m so glad you could join us,” Oli barks upon Liam and Harry’s entrance. “Now would you sit the fuck down?”

Harry doesn’t answer to him, doesn’t know if he has it in him to say anything without it being followed by his fists. Sophia - thankfully - takes the conversational reins from Oli and, in a sincere voice, asks, “Perrie still doesn’t want to come down?”

“No,” Liam responds, pouting as his head shakes mournfully. Harry’s glad that he’s not the only one that’s caring about Perrie’s wellbeing. It makes him think he chose correctly when forming the alliance. “She’s still in bed.”

“Perfect!” Oli grins. “Then you don’t mind letting me go first, right?”

Harry has to force himself to take a seat on the couch instead of reacting violently. When he’s standing, Oli’s head is at the perfect level for Harry to dropkick. Not that he would - it’s just a fun fact.

It’s also tempting.

“I figured we could go by pairings, you know?” Jesy suggests, intercepting Oli’s attempt to steal the spotlight. “Let each team defend themselves so that everyone can decide which one they want to vote for?”

“Well my partner is literally upstairs, like she has been all week, refusing to be a part of this television show.” Oli’s voice raises an entire octave in his exasperation and his right arm is thrown so
aggressively towards the hall as he gestures that Harry’s genuinely worried he’s about to pull it out of socket. “If that’s not a reason enough to vote for me, then maybe you should all think of the fact that she’s some of the toughest competition you have. If she suddenly bounces back, you’re all f*cked.”

Nobody says anything at first, not wanting to be the one on the receiving end of Oli’s sure-to-be hostile reply. The air between them all is thick, crackling with a spark that the wrong words could set off.

Niall eventually takes the initiative and says harshly, “I’m still not seeing why we should vote for you.”

“Because I deserve to be here,” Oli insists, “and you all know that.” Liam rolls his eyes, his mouth curling in an amused manner, and Harry accidentally lets a small chuckle slip through his lips. Oli’s eyes immediately focus in on him. “Why don’t you go next then Harry?” he hisses. “Why should we vote for you?”

Harry doesn’t want to even try and endorse himself to everyone. He’s not going to throw Jesy under the metaphorical bus just for the chance of an extra vote. It’s petty, and it goes completely against the image he’s built over the course of the season.

“I don’t know?” Harry shrugs, doing his best not to let his aggravation show. “Because you want to, I guess, I don’t know how to defend myself. I deserve to be here, but so does Jesy. Vote for whichever one of us you want because I’m not going to talk down about her just for some votes.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” Oli scoffs in Harry’s face. He turns back to the rest of the group, the majority of which has been staring on in an interested silence. “He doesn’t give a f*ck about fairness, he’s playing you all. And you’re all falling for it. If you vote him, he’s just going to f*ck you over. Jesy, why aren’t you fighting him?”

“Harry,” Jesy addresses him, ignoring Oli’s harsh words and the way he’s throwing his limbs around trying to prove his point. “If you want to continue, go ahead.”

“I think I’m done,” Harry decides. With Oli behaving the way he is, Harry doesn’t think saying anything will even make an effort anymore. “We almost took first place, and that was an equal effort between Jesy and I. We both did our best, and we both deserve to be here.”

“I’ll be honest, I was expecting you to say something in your defense,” Jesy confesses, “but I agree with you.”

Harry nods, ready to leave it at that, call it a day, and go upstairs with Perrie, but Taylor suddenly sits up, her eyes fierce and calculating in Jesy’s direction. “What were you going to say before?”

“What was it?” Taylor demands, cutting the other woman off. “Were you going to say shit about Harry? We deserve to hear that.”

Harry’s eyes instantly meet Niall’s. This isn’t the first time Taylor’s done something under the context of being on either of their sides. It’s weird. Ever since they were paired together, she’s been downright nice to them. The sudden change in her mood towards the two of them - not Sophia either, mind you, even though she was also on the team with them - leaves both Niall and Harry aghast.

“I was just going to say that Harry’s actually won a trivia round and I haven’t,” Jesy clarifies. “He’s better competition so you should vote him out while you can.”
“Exactly!” Oli snaps, hands flailing again as he drags the attention back to him. Harry would one day like to do an experiment where he puts twenty people in a room with Oli, but wouldn’t let any of them acknowledge him. It’d be some kind of breakthrough in science if Oli would manage to stay calm. “They’re better competition. Harry and Perrie should leave.”

Liam sighs, and Harry feels for him, he really does. He’s not even been a part of the conversation yet, but he’s had to listen to Oli’s screaming the whole time. “Let it go, Oli, honestly,” Liam begs. “Everyone is voting you out tonight already.”

Oli’s face turns an intriguing shade of red at that. “What about you?” he badgers. “Why don’t you shit all over Louis to defend yourself then.”

“Stop trying to start a fight, Oli,” Louis speaks up for the first time, and Harry’s immensely thankful. Louis is probably the only person in the house with any chance of getting through to Oli. “You’re hands are literally shaking.”

“That’s because all of you are considering friendships before anything else, okay?” Oli explains, his voice edging on hysterical. “And you know it.”

Oli’s dramatics have gotten to be too much. The past week has had the most drama Harry thinks he’s ever seen, and he doesn’t know if he can sit through another moment of it. “Can I go back upstairs?” he asks, trying, and failing, not to sound as bored as he feels. “I think we all know who we’re voting for.”

Oli’s glare is sharp on the side of Harry’s face. The animosity is unmistakable at this point. “Not until you stop babying your fucking girlfriend up there,” he snaps, whipping his shaking hand in the direction of the staircase.

It takes a moment for the words to register, but when they do, Harry’s eyebrow skyrockets on his forehead. He looks out and sees Liam, Louis, and Sophia all looking close to laughter. Harry knows he and Perrie are close, but the last thing he expects is for somebody to assume they’re sleeping together.

Especially when she’s literally moping over Zayn upstairs.

“You can go, Harry,” Jesy excuses him. “I think we’re all done here.”

Harry gets up and makes his way towards the hallway, but he’s stopped. He doesn’t pause when Oli’s rage-filled voice yells “Hey! Don’t walk away from me,” but rather when the sound of glass shattering echoes around the room.

In turning, Harry’s wide eyes meet where Oli’s holding his beer bottle, now broken in half, so the jagged edges are aimed in Harry’s direction. The moment of absolute disbelief only lasts a moment because Louis’ grabbing the weapon by its neck and dropping it on the ground. He shoves Oli out of the room, chastising him the entire way, and Harry’s left staring at the space they once stood in.

Oli’s finally hit his peak, and there’s not a single person in the room still wondering who they’re voting for.

And that night, when the eliminated three are announced, Oli gets escorted off the property, unwilling to leave himself. Jesy goes home as well, not that Harry’s exactly surprised, but she leaves amicably with a smile as she does. Liam parts with a bone-crushing hug, as he makes Harry promise to win the game. There may also be some tears on Harry end, the shame of voting out his own friend hitting hard, but Harry tries his best to blink them away.
He thinks he’s always known who he was going to vote for. There was never any contest between them. It’s not that Liam’s is better competition than Louis, or that Louis is worth more to Harry in terms of the game - it’s just that Harry doesn’t think he could ever make Louis go home. There’s something about the other man that pulls Harry in and consumes every inch of him. They’ve barely had alone time this week, having to resort to sly looks and passing touches, and yet, Harry feels like they haven’t even been apart.

Once the cars pull away, all of the guilt Harry has been holding since he wrote down Louis’ name on the slip of paper, since he chose his own attraction to someone over an actual alliance, lessens. Harry feels like a weight has been lifted off his shoulder. He’s made it through his last elimination, and he can practically taste the finale.

I don’t have much to say about why I didn’t vote for Liam - I did what felt right at the time. Besides, the bigger news here is that Oli is finally gone. I think we can all celebrate about this.

- Harry, 23, Portland
Sports

Chapter Notes

The biggest shout out in the entire world to Mickey for his GENIUS work with the smut in the chapter. Without him, I would be dead and this fic wouldn't be written, and he's basically my reason for living. So thank u !!!!!!!!

Week 6

Sunday

Sunday morning, Harry wakes up feeling less than great. He wants to catch a few more hours of sleep, but his mind is wide awake. It takes actual, strenuous effort for him to open his eyes, but when he finally manages to do so he’s met with the sight of Perrie’s empty bed. For a moment he’s convinced that he must still be asleep. The sight is shocking to say the least, but even after blinking his eyes a few times, he realizes that he’s not seeing things; Perrie actually is out of bed before him.

Harry assumes she’s in the bathroom, and he hopes she’s feeling better. The last week has been a tough one for her, and if she doesn’t put in at least a little effort studying this weekend, she could be going home - Harry knows that’s not what she came here for.

After lying awake in bed for who knows how long, Harry gives in to his stomach’s demands and heads down for breakfast. When he reaches the bottom of staircase, he sees Perrie walking towards him. Her hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail, and she’s decked from head to toe in fitted athletic wear, looking fresh-faced and… happy?

Harry’s baffled.

“Perrie?” There’s no way he’s awake right now. He has to be dreaming. There’s no other explanation.

“Morning, Haz,” Perrie greets him with a happy grin stretched wide across her face as if she hadn’t been completely bedridden less than twenty-four hours ago. “You slept in today.”

Harry spares a glance to the clock on the wall. “It's only eight in the morning,” he points out.

“Early bird gets the worm, right?”

Harry doesn’t know what to say. Everything feels so surreal, like a bad dream. Just, Perrie can’t be acting so… normal after being hit by the metaphorical train that was Zayn’s leaving. Instead of letting Perrie in on the utter confusion he’s facing right now, he settles for a neutral, “What are you up to?”

“It’s sports week, right?” She asks, eyebrow quirking. She seems puzzled by Harry’s behavior, which is just fine as Harry feels the same towards her. “I was working out a little to get myself ready for the physical challenge.”

“It’s Sunday.” Harry doesn’t know what else to say. He’s still having trouble processing the fact that he and Perrie are actually having an active conversation right now. “That’s when everybody rests.”
“I just had a rest week, didn’t I,” she jokes. She’s smiling bigger now than anyone’s seen her smile in the past week. “Not really, actually,” she amends, shrugging. “I’ve been studying sports in our room. Grabbed the books out of Sophia’s stash last Monday night and read all of them in their entirety through the week.”

Again, Harry’s rendered silent. He doesn’t know whether he wants to yell or laugh. Heck, he doesn’t know what he’d even be yelling or laughing about. There’s a litany of questions on the tip of his tongue, but none of them will come out.

“You alright, Harry?” Perrie asks, a small pout forming. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

It takes some force, but eventually he manages to blurt out, “Zayn!” He’s surprised by his own volume, but more than anything, he’s glad that he can finally (sort of) articulate the thoughts going through his head. “You were depressed - correction, completely inconsolable - all week because Zayn left you!”

“Oh, that?” Perrie’s face scrunches up tightly before a giggle breaks through. “Babe, c’mon. You know me better than anybody else here. Do I really seem like the type to let a boy take me out of the game?”

“Yeah.” he spits.

“Oh my God,” she laughs. “You’re mad. Like you’re actually pissed about this. Why?”

“You lied to me, Perrie,” He shouts, feeling less than proud at the way she flinches. “I nearly took a hit from Oli over how he was treating you.”

“Yeah, I know,” Perrie nods. “You’re welcome by the way.”

Harry laughs hollowly, letting the bitterness and uncertainty ring through. “What are you even talking about?” He demands. “I feel like I’m talking to a stranger right now.”

“You’re not!” Perrie shouts. She stops for a moment and takes a deep breath before speaking again - more gently this time. “Don’t do this to me, Harry. Don’t start hating me over something so simple. I did us both a favor with this one.”

Harry doesn’t respond right away, instead allowing himself a moment to think through what he’s going to say next. “I don’t know how you did yourself a favor,” he decides on, “let alone one for me.”

“I made everyone pity me, obviously,” Perrie rolls hers eyes, but the movement is bouncy, and there’s a quirk to her lips. There’s no doubt in Harry’s mind that his friend is proud of her plan. “They all thought I was so sad and pathetic that I wasn’t going to be any competition, so they all felt safe sending me through to week six. Which, might I remind you, has no voting at the end, so even if everyone finds out I faked it - which they won’t - nobody is going to be able to send me home for it.”

Perrie stops there, but Harry still doesn’t say anything - can’t say anything. He’ll be the first to admit that her plan is brilliant, but there’s still an echo of hurt lingering not only because she didn’t tell him, but also because he doesn’t understand why she’d go to such lengths just to make it through to week six when she’s probably one of the best competitors in the game already.

“There’s also the fact that last week was geography,” Perrie continues, “so I knew that sports was the only category left. I figured there was no use in studying for a category that I’m absolutely no good at, so while you were all stressing out over everything, I’ve been preparing for sports week.”
“Thats - ”

“It’s genius,” she cuts Harry off. “And in the meantime, you were taking care me, and everyone thought you were such a good friend. So you’re welcome. I got you into week six.”

He can’t say that she’s wrong. Sophia pulled him aside last week expressly to give her admiration for him as he was taking care of Perrie. It worked to some extent, but Harry’s certain that the plan wasn’t really needed for them both to make it to this week. “I still don’t understand why you did this.”

“Oh really?” Perrie responds, her expression going flat. “You can’t think of one reason why I would fake something to further me into the competition? This is sarcasm, if you haven’t caught on yet.”

“Oh obviously,” Harry scoffs, rolling his eyes. He can sense her tone very easily, he just can’t figure out why. “I just don’t know why you had to lie. You’re one of the smartest - ”

“Oh stop it with the bullshit,” Perrie interrupts. “Don’t let this thing get in between us, okay? We both have our strategies. I’m not the type of person to cook everyone food and be the house nurse, okay?” She looks at him pointedly, and Harry can feel his face burning red. “You take care of people, and you’re good at it. I’m good at hiding and pretending to be bothered by some guy breaking my heart, when in reality, I knew he was going to leave all along. Don’t be mad at me. You and I both know that we’re not the only ones playing the game, babe.”

“Wh - ” Harry clears his throat and takes a deep breath. “Why couldn’t you just tell me? Why did you have to lie?”

“Because you’re a terrible actor,” Perrie tells him, laughing only slightly along with her words. “I needed your reaction to be genuine.”

“I’m not a terrible actor!”

“Oh, please! Every - ” she stops and refocuses. “No. I’m not going to get into this with you now. We all have our strategies. You cook, I lie, Niall acts like everybody’s friend, and Taylor actually studies her ass off, which is wild because we’re here in a giant house with more amenities than we could dream of.”

“I - ”

“Harry, please.” Harry nods and lets Perrie continue her point. “Me lying about this is no different than anything else going on in this house. Hell, you and Louis are both pretending to like each other to get intel. That’s just how the game is played, okay?”

Perrie’s looking at him expectantly, but it’s all Harry can do not to spiral down a mental highway to hell filled with thoughts of doubt. ‘Pretending’ keeps echoing through his mind, beating against his head like an offbeat dance song. He doesn’t know what Perrie’s insinuating when she says that they’re both ‘pretending’ because Harry’s never been anything but sincere with his emotions towards Louis.

So Perrie’s words not only confuse him, but they hurt too.

“Okay, Harry?” Perrie asks again.

“Yeah,” he affirms, nodding absentmindedly. “Yeah.”

Perrie huffs, and Harry doesn’t know what he’s doing to make her so irritated with him. “What’s wrong now?”
“Nothing…” Harry assures. “I just - what do you mean Louis and I are pretending to like each other?”

“Oh, please,” Perrie grins. “Anyone with eyes can see how awkward you are whenever he steps too close.” Harry’s still lost on how him not knowing how to react around somebody he has a thing for could turn into Perrie interpreting that it must be fake. “And don’t even get me started on Louis. He always looks like he’d rather be anywhere else than with you when you’re together,” Perrie explains. “You don’t have to act like it’s real, babe. You’re a terrible liar, remember?”

I’m not a dumb blonde; I know what I’m doing, you have to remember that. Harry’s mad now, but when it’s he and I facing off in the finale, he’ll get it. I did it all for us.

- Perrie, 23, Philadelphia

She laughs lightly, giving him a final pat on the back and a smile before running up the stairs and leaving Harry standing alone at the bottom, unable to move and rethinking every interaction he’s ever had with Louis, and how Louis could possibly be faking it. Because Harry knows he himself wasn’t. Every moment has been real - every kiss was real.

Or at least - it was on Harry’s end.

Monday

On Monday morning, the kitchen is alive and full of a pure, positive energy that the house has been lacking. There’s laughter and conversation and not an ounce of genuine animosity present. As always, there’s some bickering, but it’s all in good fun, and there’s an air of humor that wasn’t present when Oli was still around.

Harry isn’t participating in this morning’s activities the same way as everybody else. He’s giving his input every so often so as not to raise suspicion about his quiet behavior. The fact still stands, though, that after Perrie’s comments this morning he’s not ready to fully engage with everyone. What she
said about everyone, about Louis, is still plaguing his mind with doubt.

Perrie came downstairs yesterday after taking a shower and changing back into pajamas looking miles less intact than she had earlier. She walked into the living room and announced that she was starting to feel a little bit better. She apologized for spending so long moping and declared that she refused to let Zayn drag her down any longer.

There was an entire speech, something Perrie must’ve been preparing all morning, where she raised key points about the power of women and the strength of the human mind. It was all very theatrical, and had Harry not known the truth behind her performance, he’d have been cheering her along right alongside the rest of his housemates. Sophia even initiated a group hug full of praise that Perrie fell into with honest-to-god tears in her eyes. She winked at Harry, and he didn’t know whether to be insulted or impressed by her act.

Perrie’s standing at the stove now with Niall, both laughing as they take turns flipping the bacon, the grease splashing back on them. The good news is she’s getting away with her week of self-inflicted exile, but the bad news is… Harry’s not quite sure what the bad news is, actually, but with the show she put on, there has to be at least something negative.

Over to Harry’s left, Taylor and Louis are in the middle of a heated argument that’s far more sarcastic than it is angry. It’s as lighthearted as it can be for two people who aren’t friends. The debate is over whether breakup songs are the staple of the music industry (Taylor) or if love songs actually hold the title (Louis). They’re throwing out harsh words, and Louis’s clearly irritated, but his insults are all hollow. Neither of them are truly upset, which is wonderful because it just goes to show how civil everyone can be now that Oli’s out of the picture.

Taylor makes a joke about something regarding a popular song and Louis snorts into his drink. They still don’t like each other, Louis makes that clear with his pinched face, clearly unhappy about finding her joke funny, but at least he shows that he liked it, which is more than Harry would’ve expected.

Harry’s still hesitant about Louis. They haven’t had any alone time since Perrie flipped Harry’s thoughts on their relationship upside down, and the absence of an actual conversation with him has made Harry overthink everything. He’s unsure if anything Louis does is genuine, and he doesn’t know how to ask him.

When Louis catches Harry watching him, he smirks and raises his eyebrow smugly. Harry, of course, smiles in return because he’s a lovesick fool, but… is any of it real?

The sound of the front door shutting brings Harry back to the present moment, but nobody else seems to have the same reaction. Not anyone involved in a conversation, but especially not Sophia, who’s been sitting at the table and flipping through a book on women’s basketball since Harry walked into the kitchen. James walking into the kitchen can’t even pull her attention.

Everybody continues to go about their business, and James almost looks put out by the lack of a welcome. Harry waves kindly at him, but the host just huffs.

“This isn’t quite the celebration I was hoping for,” he jokes, but there’s a stiffness in his voice. Clearly he’s not used to being disregarded.

“We already know it’s sports, James,” Niall speaks up from his place by the stove. Sophia nods along as she flips a page in her book.

James clears his throat. “Actually - ”
That seems to grab everybody’s attention. Louis and Taylor stop bickering, Sophia looks up from her book, and Niall even turns completely away from the bacon. There’s an urgent sense of panic that courses through the group, and Perrie looks particularly disturbed.

Harry understands why, too. She’s spent the last week going over sports. She’s truly prepared for this subject, but if something’s happened to completely change the course of the game in a move that’s never been done before… well, Harry would be scared too.

“No, I’m just kidding,” James laughs, and Harry suspects he’s feeling much better now that he’s finally gotten a reaction out of the competitors. “It’s absolutely sports. Could you imagine if we introduced you to a brand new category? How fun would that be?”

“It wouldn’t be, James,” Taylor spits, looking just as upset as everyone must feel. “It would be terrible.”

“Well nobody’s started studying yet,” James teases, looking directly at Perrie as he says his piece, “so it wouldn’t be too much of an extra task.” Perrie’s blushing, which is probably what James wanted, and she looks away from where the host stands. “I guess I’m not even needed here, am I?” James says, slowly backing away from the group. “I’ll just leave you all to your studying, then.”

He leaves, his crew following behind him, and the moment the front door shuts, Niall mentions that he’s got some sport documentaries recorded if they want to watch those as they read. It seems as though this week will mark the first time the entire cast studies together as even Taylor happily includes herself.

“I can go get all of my books from upstairs,” Sophia offers as everyone swipes some bacon and makes their way into the living room.

“Harry and I can do that for you actually,” Perrie volunteers, and Harry knows why. Perrie took all of the sports books from Sophia’s room to study, and she doesn’t want to get caught. “Why don’t you finish eating?”

“You’re the best,” Sophia grins, and as they’re walking away, they overhear Sophia mentioning how it seems like every week, there’s more and more people reading her books.

When they get upstairs, Perrie turns into Sophia’s room, and Harry’s left standing at the entryway, confused. “Aren’t the books still in our room?” he asks.

“No, I’m not an idiot,” Perrie laughs. She walks towards the drawers and grabs all of the books she must’ve recently replaced. “I put them back Saturday while everyone was debating over who to send home.”

Harry nods and goes to help her, stopping when he realizes that Perrie still wanted them away from the group, even though it wasn’t to cover up her act. “Then why did you insist that we come up here?”

Perrie sighs, “because you’re obviously still mad at me - ”

“I’m not mad.”

“If you’re not mad, then what?” she interrupts. “You’re walking around like I’m some unpredictable animal.”

Harry has been trepidatious, but that’s only because he’s unsure of how he’s supposed to be. He doesn’t want to pretend to feel a certain way, but he doesn’t know how he actually feels about
everything.

“I just - ” he pauses, not wanting his words to come out wrong. “I don’t know how to act around you. I feel betrayed.”

Perrie laughs, and Harry tries not to be insulted. “You’re so dramatic, Harry, honestly,” she shakes her head. “I’m not different than before. Pretend last week never happened if you have to, but please don’t start pushing me out. We’ve only got one more week together before everyone goes home to prepare for the finale. Let’s at least be friendly until then, okay?”

“Okay.”

Perrie presses her lips together. “Harry…”

“Okay, Perrie.”

She hands off half of the books to him and grabs the rest for herself, and then they’re headed out the door. It’s awkwardly silent, which is unusual for them, until -

“Tell me a joke,” Perrie demands.

Harry doesn’t question why, doesn’t even think to. Call it a force of habit, but Harry just automatically starts, “Why can’t the flower ride a bike?”

“Why?”

Harry waits before delivering the punchline, “because his petals fell off.”

Perrie’s smiling at the joke, and it only grows as Harry lets his own shine through, dimple and all.

“There we go,” Perrie praises. “This cheesy fool that doesn’t know any good jokes!”

Harry doesn’t even take it offensively, just goes on to tell another one as they head into the living room. “Knock knock.”

“I only needed one, Haz,” Perrie protests, but after a particularly sad pout from Harry, she sighs loudly, her face pinched. Harry’s glad they both have books in their arms because he’s nearly positive she’d be hitting him at this point. “Who’s there?” she asks instead.

“Hula.”

“Hula who?”

Immediately after the words leave her mouth, Harry’s following it by popping his lips to make a ‘p’ sound. It takes a moment for Perrie to get the joke, but when she does, she shoots him an exaggerated eyeroll and stomps off into the living room.

They study well into the night, watching every sports special that Niall managed to record over the course of their six weeks in the house and reading through all of the books Sophia has to offer. Harry finds himself getting jealous over Perrie’s week long study session. She’s reading through these books for the second time and undoubtedly has a stronger grasp on the information, but Harry can only hope that he can manage to retain even some of what he’s reading. Any facts he misses are just that - missed. Perrie gets to go back and pick up anything she dropped, which is why Harry has no doubts that she’ll win the trivia round on Wednesday.

There’s good conversation as they study, too. Everyone talks about what they hope the physical
Wednesday

Wednesday comes sooner than Harry anticipated. It’s the morning of their last trivia round, and
Harry feels sentimental. He sees Perrie fast asleep in her bed, the sunshine illuminating the room, and Harry’s thrown back to all the Wednesday mornings that have started off just like this.

The past few weeks leading up to where they are now have truly been a journey. Each one was more intense than the last, and now they’re at the final trivia challenge. Harry knew this day would come, but waking up in the glow of the morning, with a possible advantage on the horizon, it truly hits him that this is their last trivia challenge. He almost wants to go back in time and relive it all again.

When he walks into the kitchen, he’s greeted with the familiar sight of Niall grilling up bacon and frying eggs in a separate pan. Taylor is standing a little farther down the counter buttering pieces of toast as they pop up. Louis’s chopping fruit, and when he catches Harry watching, he waves him over. The two of them get to work making a fruit salad to have alongside breakfast.

Perrie and Sophia come downstairs just as Niall is finishing up the food, and the two begin bringing the dishes into the dining room and then helping to transport the food as well. Once everyone is seated around the table, they enjoy a quiet but nice breakfast together. When the cars pull up outside, they’re forced to quickly clear the tables and clean up the food before all piling into the same car together.

“This is our last ever trivia,” Niall brings up as they pull away from the house. He’s smiling, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Harry understands, because even though it sends a thrill up his spine that they’re getting so close to the end of the competition, this is also just one step closer to saying their final goodbyes. Sophia isn’t even trying to hold in her sadness. She’s frowning, and her eyes are clouded over with unshed tears. “I don’t want this to end.”

Harry nods along, feeling the exact same way. “Now that Oli’s gone I feel like I actually like everybody,” he jokes, hoping the humor masks how vulnerable he actually is.

He’s become close with everyone at this point in the competition. Even Taylor - sure, she probably likes him more than he likes her, but he can at least tolerate them being in the same room, which is far more than he could say at the beginning of the season. Once Oli left, it was as if all of the tension Harry felt towards his competitors completely vanished, and all that was left was complete and total ease.

“I hope you’re using the term ‘everybody’ loosely,” Louis argues, but it sounds empty, like he doesn’t actually mean the harsh words he’s saying. “Because contrary to the atmosphere, there are some people here that I don’t like.”

Taylor rolls her eyes, pressing her lips together tightly, and without so much as looking in Louis’ direction, she says, “I know he’s talking about me, but I’m not going to give him the pleasure of acknowledging him.”

“And if you were in a voiceover, that would totally work,” Louis fires back, “but seeing as I’m sitting right next to you, the point was moot.”

The fighting is lackluster at best. Harry remembers on the first night when Louis turned his nose up at every single word Taylor said, but now it seems like an act, like something they’re only doing for the sake of doing it. If anything, their banter now looks more like a friendly sibling rivalry.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Perrie cuts in before Taylor and Louis can continue to throw half-hearted insults at each other. “There’s no fighting allowed, okay? This is our last trivia ride, and I refuse to let either of you taint it.”

“Should we all just sit in silence then?” Taylor asks sarcastically, and Harry has to fight the urge to
laugh at how irritated Perrie looks. It seems like Taylor has always been the exception to every sense of calm they feel, and it doesn’t appear that that’s going to change.

“Well, no,” Perrie huffs. “Why don’t we - let’s all go around in a circle and say our favorite moment from this season.”

Everybody mumbles their agreement, and Harry himself likes the idea of finding out what part of the show they each enjoyed most (Harry’s ego is excited to find out if any of those moments involve him). Taylor, on the other hand, looks almost insulted that Perrie’s asking this of them. “Are you being serious right now?”

“I think it’s sweet!” Sophia encourages, loud enough to cut off anything Perrie might try and fight back with. “I’ll go first. My favorite moment was probably when we all got drunk on Kendall’s piña coladas and told stories. That was probably the night I’ve loved most here so far.”

Harry remembers that, remembers the pleasant, floaty feeling that Kendall’s fruity concoction left him with and how nice it was to leave his shame at the door and share stories. Nobody was too drunk, they didn’t get reckless, it was just nice. Harry doesn’t even remember the exact stories shared or who did the sharing, but it was such a wonderful, pivotal moment for the housemates.

It was Grimmy’s last night, too. That was the last moment they had together that wasn’t plagued with the negative thoughts of his impending elimination. They got to drink together and share some of the best and worst memories they have. That’s why Harry likes it, he thinks. Because everyone he cares about was there and open with themselves. The competition was so far from their everyone’s, and there was nothing but positive vibes. It was almost like it is now, only with more people and alcohol, two things that make Harry prefer the memory.

“I wasn’t a part of that,” Taylor points out bitterly.

Louis looks like he’s biting back a comment, and if Harry had to guess, it’d likely be a simple good. The thought of that alone has Harry laughing. Before Taylor can say anything else about it, Louis says, “The best moment for me was in week four.” Harry tries not to blush when he remembers that week four was when they almost hooked up in Grimmy’s room. “When we spied on the other team and stole what they knew about the physical challenge,” he adds, and Harry’s mood instantly sours. Perrie’s does too, it seems, if her indignant “What?” is anything to go by.

“I forgot we did that,” Sophia laughs loudly.

“We would’ve lost if it weren’t for that, I think.”

“Oh my God,” Niall comments, looking angry himself. “No wonder you won!”

Louis grins, a self-satisfied little thing that shouldn’t be as attractive as Harry finds it. “The look on your faces right now makes it all worth it.”

“Half of you shouldn’t even be here, then,” Perrie argues as though Louis hasn’t even spoken.

Taylor shrugs, looking completely unapologetic. “Well, it’s not like Stan and Kendall are missed,” she inputs. “They had no business in the finale anyway.”

“That’s not for you to say - ”

“Eavesdropping is allowed, Niall,” Louis interrupts the man. “We didn’t break any rules, and you’re only upset that you didn’t think of it first.”
Niall looks like he wants to say something but nods instead. “You’re right.”

“I know.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

A silence follows that has Harry grasping for straws in the depths of his mind to try and fill it. The ride was going decently well, and he doesn’t want it to be ruined just because a rather competitive part of the season was brought up - especially when said part is over and has no lasting impression on the current standing. Taylor’s right: Stan and Kendall wouldn’t have made it to the finale. Sure, Kendall won entertainment, but that was her only good subject. Stan was barely staying afloat in the competition as it was. There’s no use in letting the past get to them when they only have so long left.

Harry clears his throat because the tension filling the car is ruining what’s supposed to be a great ride, where they’re supposed to be reminiscing about the past. Not wanting the good mood to be tainted any longer, Harry supplies, “I think I really liked our first car ride, to be honest.”

He watches as the memory reflects on Perrie’s face in the form of a grin. “That was so nice.”

“It was Jade, Perrie, Grimmy, and I,” Harry clarifies for the confused passengers in the car. “And it felt like going on a fieldtrip with your closest friends. I don’t know why, but it was such a great ride, and all I could think was that I never wanted to get out.”

“He says that like it was the atmosphere that he enjoyed so much,” Perrie butts in, “But I know the truth.”

She’s smirking, looking at Harry like she’s about to spill a giant secret, but Harry’s confused; he genuinely doesn’t know what’s happening or what she could possibly be talking about. All he remembers from the ride is a pure elated atmosphere, so Perrie’s sly look doesn’t make any sense.

“What’s the truth?” Louis questions.

In a move that absolutely nobody saw coming; Perrie grabs Harry’s cheeks in between her hands and pulls him towards her. Her lips land on top of his, and Harry’s eyes widen to a size he never knew possible. There’s no tongue or even an opening of their mouths, but Perrie holds them together for a solid ten seconds before pulling away.

All around him, Harry can hear the rest of the car hooting and hollering, but Harry sits like a statue, as frozen as stone. He can’t process what’s just happened, none of it registering in his mind. He’s unsure of why Perrie kissed him, or how long she’d been planning it, or why Perrie kissed him.

“I - ”

“That’s why,” Perrie answers, cutting off whatever Harry was going to say - not that it was going anywhere. He couldn’t form a sentence right now if his life depended on it.

“Are you guys…” Niall trails off, his voice thinning. He looks confusedly between Perrie, Harry, and Louis, and Harry knows where he’s going. “I could’ve sworn it was Harry and - ”

“Grimmy did that to him in the first car ride,” Perrie laughs, her voice booming and her face filled with joy. Harry knows she’s acting so heavily to pull attention away from Harry and Louis, and he can’t thank her enough.

And then the words hit and Harry squawks, upset that Perrie’s completely misread what actually happened and that she’s spreading this false information to the rest of the car. Most of all, he’s just
upset that Louis now thinks he and Grimmy were more than friendly at their first trivia challenge.

“He put his hand over my mouth so it wasn’t real,” Harry clarifies, feeling the need to defend himself. It’s not because of Louis.

It’s not.

“Oh…” Perrie groans. “That kind of ruins things a little.” She’s pouting, but Harry refuses to feel any guilt over ruining that memory.

“My favorite memory was the kissing booth,” Taylor breaks in.

Sophia laughs, but it doesn’t sound completely there. It’s almost confused. “Really?” she wonders out loud. “I hated that.”

“I was in the company of some decent people,” Taylor shrugs. “I feel like I made connections that day.” She’s grinning at Harry and Niall, and Harry feels obligated to smile back, but it’s weird. Taylor, for some reason, feels attached to Harry and Niall, but neither of them can understand how or why.

Niall literally thought he was one of the people she likes the least in this competition just last week, but she still spent all of Monday and Tuesday stapled to him as they studied. There’s some kind of unshared delusion that the three of them are best friends, and Harry can’t understand it for even a second.

“My favorite was going to be taking home the grand prize,” Perrie grins, her smile only growing wider when everybody else groans.

“Cheater,” Sophia complains. “It has to be something that’s already happened.”

“And it has to be believable,” Niall adds on.

“Well then it was on Saturday,” Perrie huffs. “When we got to watch Oli go home? That was the best moment of my life.”

Harry nods eagerly, leaning forward in his seat. “I’d like to change my answer to that, actually,” he agrees. “That was my favorite one.”

The rest of the car follows his lead, and soon the other four people nodding along eagerly, and Harry has to laugh. Everyone’s feeling the same way: Oli created all of the tension in the house, and until he left, they were all suffering.

“My favorite was when Harry got so drunk on our first night, that he spent two hours in bed with Perrie and I crying about Portland,” Niall answers last, and his words leave Harry absolutely horrified.

“I never knew what he was saying!” Perrie laughs. “Was it Portland?”

“I think so,” Niall responds sounding almost certain. “He was saying something about how Portland is the live music capital of the world, which is wrong, by the way, and then he started insulting Maine.”

“Oh my God,” Harry groans. He completely forgot any of that had even happened. It was the very first problem he had in the house, and it just disappeared. “You said you’d never tell anyone.”
“And I didn’t,” She defends herself. “Niall did.”

Harry’s offended, but the feeling slowly melts away as everyone laughs along with Niall and Perrie.

Their reminiscing ends when the car pulls into the studio lot, all waiting for their turn to get out of the car. They make their way inside the building together. This has been their routine every Wednesday for the past five weeks, and now they’re making their final trip - so the group walks slowly, trying to commit each step to memory.

The room is still the same as ever, the colors climbing up the walls in an attention grabbing show of pride for the board the place is based off of, and the podiums shining with six different colors. Harry doesn’t want to forget for even a moment what it feels like to be here.

“Welcome, all, to your very last trivia challenge,” James greets them once they’re all standing at their podiums. “I have it on good authority that your car ride was nothing but pleasant and reminiscent of your time spent here. Unfortunately, that friendly camaraderie must come to end as we compete… for the final advantage.”

Everyone cheers, but it’s missing the usual enthusiasm. Harry feels like he’s clapping absentmindedly, doing so out of habit more than actually meaning it.

“And here to ask your questions is season three winner, Miss Leigh-Anne Pinnock.”

Harry doesn’t think he heard James correctly, is certain that he couldn’t have. There’s no way in hell that Harry did anything good enough in his life to blessed with the presence of his goddamned hero.

But walking through the doors and into the room, is his love, his heart, Leigh-Anne Pinnock. She looks every bit as fierce and lovely and wonderful as she did stealing the Trivialities title all those seasons back, and Harry’s certain that if he doesn’t get ahold of himself he’s going to completely black out.

Leigh-Anne greets the contestants, and while everyone else seems to be in the right mind to say something in response, Harry’s starstruck and stuck, body taut and mouth gaping wide open. He knew, on some level, that the possibility of Leigh-Anne reading questions was pretty high as she’s probably the most iconic winner the show’s ever had, but thinking it and seeing it are two completely different things. And having the real, physical person in front of him is akin to meeting the lead singer of his favorite band in Harry’s mind.

Harry knows that there’s nothing in the world that could top this moment. He could win the entire game and take home the grand prize, and when he’s asked in interviews about how it felt, he’ll have to say it still came second to how he felt meeting Leigh-Anne Pinnock.

Harry’s forced to reign in his astonishment because Leigh-Anne doesn’t wait before immediately starting with the questions. He, of course, misses the first two as he’s too busy fawning over his idol being five feet in front of his face, but after that he’s back in the game, paying every bit of attention to the questions that he has in the previous weeks.

The questions vary between different sports, statistics, and key players, and Harry’s not ashamed to admit that he knows barely anything about the players themselves, but everything else is a little easier for him. He’s great with knowing the rules and exceptions, and whenever a question of that caliber comes up, he feels more than confident in hitting his buzzer.

Sophia manages to answer every question about Detroit that comes up, shocking everybody. She’s very proud of her hometown, that much is clear, but it seems like every other question goes in one
ear and out the other, leaving her with no idea of how to answer.

The real MVPs are Perrie and Niall. The both of them are in a head-to-head showdown the entire round. Any time one of them takes the lead, the other is right around the corner, ready to shove their way into first place. It gets so aggressively close that when James calls the game to a close, nobody’s surprised to see that the two of them managed to actually tie.

James congratulates them, his grin a mile wide, and hands them a red envelope. Niall allows Perrie the honor of opening it, something Harry’s excited for, given it’s his friend’s first win.

“Team captains,” Perrie reads off of the white card.

“Correct,” James picks up. “And to choose who gets first pick, we have one last question for you,” he explains. “The first one of you to buzz in with the correct answer gets first choice.”

Leigh-Anne clears her throat and reaches into her back pocket. She withdraws a red index card, and after a moment of hesitation, recites, “Steve Bloomer scored the most League goals for which -”

Niall’s hand is pressing the button before the question’s even finished. “Derby County,” he answers confidently. It’s correct, of course it is, and he’s given the first pick.

“I have to go with Harry,” Niall chooses, and immediately Harry’s jaw drops. He’d been absolutely certain he’d get picked to be on Perrie’s team, they’d win, and then he’d get to compete in the finale against her - a competition between the two of them almost. He doesn’t even want to move, not after seeing the heartbroken look on Perrie’s face.

“I - ”

“Get on up here, Mr. Styles,” James encourages him, completely ignorant to just how much this is hurting Harry. He makes his way to Niall’s side of the room slowly and unhappily. When he gets there, Niall pats his back, and he figures that Niall must have faith in him for the physical challenge, whatever it may be.

“I, uh,” Perrie looks lost, and Harry’s heart goes out to her. Neither of them were prepared for this. “I guess Sophia.”

“Taylor,” Niall chooses before Sophia can even start her walking.

“Louis come on over,” Perrie waves Louis over.

The air of excitement is gone for Harry. He was looking forward to, more than anything, going into the finale with Perrie, but now that’s been taken from him. There’s nothing he can do about it obviously, but it still stings because now they’re actual competitors, and on Friday, one of them will be completely out of the competition. Despite their alliance, there isn’t a thing either of them can do to save the other.
I know Harry and Perrie are close, but I also know that he’s adaptable to nearly any challenge, and that he wants to win as much as I do. I don’t like seeing him broken, but he’s my best bet to make it into the finale.

- Niall, 23, Cleveland

“The team you’re standing with now will either be your competition in the finale, or who you’ll be sitting next to as you watch the other team go through the finale,” James announces, breaking Harry’s heart even more. “This week, your physical challenge is volleyball. Good luck practicing, and happy competing.”

Perrie and Harry make eye contact from across the room, and Harry can see how this is tearing Perrie up just as much as it is Harry. Neither of them wanted this to happen, but they both know that they can’t do anything to change it.

The contestants start to separate once the door closes behind James, and Perrie immediately runs forward into Harry’s arms. “We didn’t get to be on the same team,” she whispers into his shoulder.

Harry smiles, hugging her tightly against him. “I’m always on your team.”

The hurt of not being on with Perrie for this is something Harry will have to get over, and it seems Niall and Taylor know how to help him do just that: volleyball drills. As soon as they get back to the house, Harry’s pulled away like a piece of taffy and spends the rest of the night getting ready for Friday, the pain of being separated from his friend quickly being overtaken by the burn in his thighs.

Thursday

Harry’s woken up at six in the morning on Thursday by Taylor pulling him out of bed. Literally. He’d been lucky enough to forget what it was like being on Taylor’s team and dealing with her aggressive approach to each challenge, but now the memories are coming back full force.

After eating Taylor’s idea of a healthy breakfast (egg white omelet and a bowl of cut up melon), Harry, Taylor, and Niall find themselves outside in the front yard doing more volleyball drills.
Harry’s certain that the other team is better-versed in actual team drills, but together, Harry and Taylor manage to come up with enough things to do to occupy themselves until lunchtime - after which, they go back out front to play a couple of intense 1-v-1 matches against each other, switching out periodically so that all three of them have a chance to play.

Volleyball has never been a sport that Harry thought was incredibly active. Sure, there’s a strong physical aspect to it, but he’s never sweated this much during a simple volleyball match. It’s taking every inch of his power not to completely collapse on the ground in a puddle of his own sweat, tears, and pain (there’s no blood… not yet at least).

The entire day is filled with the soundtrack of Taylor’s positive reinforcement. There’s a litany of praise coming from her that’s full of compliments and kind words. It’s a side of her that Harry’s never seen, one that probably would’ve made her a lot more likeable had she shown it earlier in the competition. She’s a great coach and gradually becoming someone Harry wouldn’t mind getting to know.

As it gets closer to sundown, Niall mentions how sore his thighs are, and Harry agrees wholeheartedly. His entire body is sore, but with all of the crouching and squatting they’ve had to do, a lot of the tenderness is definitely focused in his thighs.

Harry takes them all to the gym, and for a solid hour talks them through beginner’s yoga. It’s not going to work any miracles on them, but it definitely loosens them up. It also gives Harry the added benefit of seeing how inflexible Niall is. He’s as stiff as uncooked pasta, and he falls on his ass more times than not which makes Harry laugh enough that he truly loosens up.

All in all, they’re having a good time. After a while, Sophia comes in for Taylor, interrupting their session, and making Taylor’s good attitude towards her team disappear entirely as she bids the two boys goodnight. He and Niall part soon after that, and Harry goes to take a long, hot shower. It helps, but his thighs are still aching, so he makes the decision to throw on a pair of swim trunks and go out to the hot tub to relax.

When he walks into the backyard, he spots Louis already in the pool. He’s floating on his back with his eyes closed, looking incredibly peaceful. Harry picks up a pool toy and tosses it at him, laughing when it hits Louis’ stomach and makes him briefly sink under the water. When he comes back up, he shoots Harry a menacing glare.

Harry slowly submerges himself into the hot water of the tub, which is located at the corner of the pool, connected by a stone wall that separates the water. Louis watches him as he does so, and once Harry’s fully immersed, swims to the border between the two.

“Good evening,” he smiles. Harry nods at him in response, but is otherwise too occupied with adapting to the temperature to respond. “I heard your team worked pretty hard today.”

Harry hums. “Did you?”

“I did.” Louis lingers at the border between the pool and hot tub. Some of the water in the pool is cresting over the wall, but Louis doesn’t seem to notice, his eyes locked on Harry. “We didn’t even have to spy this time, either,” Louis teases. “I could hear your screams of agony from a mile away.”

Louis seems so happy with his joke that Harry finds himself laughing. “They were screams of delight!” He defends, “I love a good game of volleyball.”

“At least that makes one of us.”
“Awe, you’re not a fan of volleyball,” he observes. “Can I guess that means you’re terrible, and you’re going to lose?”

“Hey now,” Louis laughs, and Harry thinks he could get used to the sound. “Just because I don’t enjoy it doesn’t mean I won’t kick your ass tomorrow.”

“You think?”

“I know.” Louis looks determined, but there’s the slightest playful glint in his eye that makes Harry smile.

He thinks about what Perrie said on Sunday - about how she insinuated that Louis’s only playing a game with Harry - and he can almost see it now. He just brought up that he’s planning on beating Harry in the physical challenge. He’s saying like he’s joking, but he’s still bringing it up. Had it been any other week, Harry wouldn’t have thought anything of it, but Perrie’s words haven’t left his head, and now he’s second guessing everything.

He refuses to let his anxiety ruin things, though. There’s a possibility that Louis is faking everything, of course there is, but on the off chance that this - what they’re doing - is real, he doesn’t want to let his doubts affect the odds of this really being the start of something great.

“What are you doing all the way over there?” Harry asks, waving his hand at where Louis’s still standing on the other side of the wall. “Come join me?”

Louis does the exact opposite by swimming backwards as soon as Harry reaches out, and it makes both of them laugh. “I think I like it more in here,” Louis comments through his giggles.

Harry bites his lips and shrugs, trying to not to outright protest at the distance. Louis’s clearly going to make Harry work for his attention, and it’s not that Harry’s opposed to working, but he’s not going to give in so easily, not when the faux-indifferent look he’s sporting makes Louis’ smile shine that much brighter.

“So…” Louis sings. He floats closer to the border but doesn’t fully approach the ledge. Harry suspects it’s a move to tease him, but he can’t say he’s complaining. “We’ll all be going home in two days.”

“Only three of us will be back,” Harry continues.

“That’s not true, actually. Every contestant is coming back.” Louis starts floating on his back again. Harry likes that he can see the drops of water slowly breaking and dripping down his chest. “So you’ll be able to watch me take home the grand prize.”

Harry laughs abruptly, tearing his gaze from Louis’ chest at his cocky tone. “Oh, please,” he scoffs. “There’s no way you’ll make it to the finale. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“Do you?” Louis wonders out loud.

“Do I, what?”

“Have anything to say about it,” Louis turns his head to Harry, awaiting his response.

Harry grins - more predatorily than friendly - as he lets his eyes do another scan of Louis’ body. “I have a lot to say about you.”

Louis hums. “Like what?”
He always finds himself thinking about Louis, thinking things that it wouldn’t be wise to share with all of the cameras watching. He finds himself thinking of what would’ve happened if they met somewhere else. Had they bumped into each other the street, would it have been an instant connection, or would they have had to work to get closer like they do now? He thinks about all the things he loves about Louis and all the things he’d love to do to him.

Harry has a lot to say about Louis because he feels a lot for him. He just doesn’t know if Louis feels the same. If he doesn’t, then spilling everything could be a dangerous venture for Harry. He’s got to be careful and safeguard his heart. If the worst rings true and Perrie was right about Louis’ intentions, then Harry doesn’t want to be the one left broken.

Harry’s smile lessens as his face heats up. He shakes his head bashfully and looks away. Louis lets out a shriek of a gasp and then swims over to the ledge again. “Tell me!”

“I think we’re all entitled to our secrets,” Harry says darkly.

“Really?” Harry asks, deadpan.

“For some reason, Louis thinks they’re still teasing each other, his mood and his body both open and almost flirty. Harry really doesn’t want to fall into him with an open heart, but it’s impossible not too. “I’m an open book.”

Harry makes his way over to the ledge between them in minute movements. He’s trying not to bring attention to how close he’s getting, afraid Louis will flinch away like the flighty animal he’s pretending to be. “So I could ask you anything, and you’d give me a straight answer?”

“Well I don’t know about straight.” Louis smirks, and once the joke hits, Harry laughs almost too hard. He’d be embarrassed, but it’s hard to feel anything but joy when Louis’s smiling so sweetly.

Harry finally reaches the ledge, and Louis doesn’t float away, but he does have a glint in his eye that convinces Harry that he knows what Harry’s doing. Harry clears his throat. “So what are you here for?”

“In the pool?”

“No,” Harry laughs at the incredulous face Louis’s making. “In the competition.”

“I don’t know, really” Louis shrugs. He starts floating backwards, but Harry thinks that this time it’s moreso to do something to occupy his body as they speak and less to do with teasing Harry. “It’s something to do, I guess. I’ve always loved the show, and I liked to think I could win. Now I’m testing that theory.”

“And if you lose?” Harry asks.

“Then I lose.” Harry isn’t sure if he understands Louis’ answer. He seems so cavalier about the competition, and even though he may not be as into the game as some other contestants, he should still be more excited now that he’s so close. He should be devastated at the idea of losing. Unless… “It’s not that deep, Harry.”

Harry wants to believe that Louis’s genuine in his feelings, he really does, but there’s always going to be that doubt in the back of his mind, and he’ll just have to keep shoving it down.
What were you doing with Oli?” Harry questions suddenly. He figures if he can get an honest answer from Louis, then he should take advantage of the opportunity - especially if it’ll keep his thoughts from spiralling to a place nobody wants. “Throughout the competition, I mean.”

“He told me all his intel,” Louis grins. “Like on everybody in the house.”

“Did he really have that much?” Harry thinks back to everyone Oli ever talked to, and Harry doesn’t think the guy ever had a normal conversation that didn’t involve fighting. “He was basically talking about himself or attacking people his entire time here.”

“Not Jesy,” Louis points out. “Stan, Zayn, even Niall and Taylor. Oli got to know their weaknesses, and he kept me on the inside.”

Louis never seemed to be aggressive in the competition. He’s always been casual about every challenge they’ve come across. The only exception was in week four when he made it his mission to attack Harry, but actually… Harry thinks it might’ve been more him who was attacking Louis. Louis was completely laid back, only shooting Harry as a personal vengeance. There was never a passion to win the game. At least, not that Harry could see.

“And what did you give him?” Harry wonders.

“Nothing.”

Harry blinks. He doesn’t think he’s hearing Louis correctly. “Nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Harry sits silently after Louis‘ affirmation. He’s a little pressed about believing that Louis did absolutely nothing to earn Oli’s respect and intel. All Harry did was say no to a shot, and Oli declared him an enemy of the state. Louis would’ve had to show absolute loyalty to get Oli’s intel and that… if Louis doesn’t care about the game, why would he go to such lengths? “Can I ask you something?”

Harry’s startled by Louis’ voice, but the words register, and then he’s nodding. “Go ahead.”

“Why did you steal my history book?”

Harry has to sit up as a loud, honking laugh forces its way out. “Oh my God,” he yells, not even the slightest bit worried about how loud he’s being. “Are you kidding?”

Louis doesn’t seem to be sharing his amusement, his eyebrows furrowing and mouth turning downward. “I’m dead serious.”

Harry won’t stop laughing - can’t stop laughing. The fact that even so long after it happened, Louis’s still pressed about the book, even going so far as to bring it up when they’re getting so close to each other… it’s funny.

“I never stole your book,” Harry manages to say when he’s left with only chuckles. He can’t look Louis in the eye, or he’ll never be able to stop laughing. “Why are you so insistent on it?”

“Because a book doesn’t just disappear, Harold!” Louis accuses, and his serious demeanor just makes Harry more giddy. “There were only three other people in the library day, and they all had stacks of books. They didn’t need to steal mine.”

“Have you thought maybe they took it as a prank?” Harry tries. “Or to screw you over?”

Louis watches him for a moment, considering, and Harry’s almost at the point where he’ll admit to
taking it, but then Louis says, “I will never forgive you for stealing that book, but maybe if you owned up to it, I’d be a little friendlier,” and Harry wants nothing more than to stay ignorant to the fault.

“I’m innocent,” he lies. “I promise. If it were stolen at all, it wasn’t me.”

Louis hums, and it’s clear he doesn’t believe a word out of Harry’s mouth, not that Harry expected him too. If there’s anything Harry knows for certain, it’s that he’ll never be able to convince Louis that he’s telling the truth about this.

That doesn’t mean he won’t try, though.

“I have another question,” Louis brings up, much looser than before.

“If it’s about the history book - ”

“It’s not that,” he stops Harry before he can finish.

Harry nods. “Then you can ask.”

Louis licks his lips as a grin forms, and Harry’s eyes are immediately drawn to the action. “Can I join you?”

“Of course,” Harry insists, moving away from the border so Louis can jump over. He wasn’t expecting the question, but the answer is always going to be a resounding Hell Yes. “There’s plenty of room over here.”

“So I could call everyone out to join us?” Louis jokes as he pulls himself onto the ledge.

“You could,” Harry agrees, trying to keep himself from drooling over the way Louis looks, dripping wet as his arms tense with his weight and show off the muscles underneath. “But you won’t.”

“Why not?”

Louis plops into the water, and the tension in his body drains in an instant with the heat of the hot tub. Harry makes his move, not even waiting until Louis’s opened his eyes to grab the back of his neck and pull him over. They meet in the middle, and Harry kisses Louis - nothing explicit, just a gentle peck on the lips - but as they pull away, Louis smiles like it was something more.

“That’s a pretty good reason.” Louis’ laugh is immediately followed by him leaning back into Harry. He rests his hands on Harry’s love handles, pressing his smile against his neck. Harry pulls Louis’ head back towards his own, fingers carding through feathery hair.

“How about I show you an even better one?” Harry asks, a smirk finding its way onto his face. He reaches down between them, no preamble as he puts light pressure on Louis’ length. He’s not even hard, despite the warm bubbly water surrounding them, but it doesn’t take long for Louis to thicken up a bit in his trunks. Harry pulls his hand back, leaning in to kiss Louis again.

Before he can deepen the kiss, Louis skims his hands down from Harry’s hips to squeeze his ass cheeks. With a squawk, Harry ruts up into Louis’ hips, the grope taking him by surprise.

“Oh wow, over the pants touching? You’re right, Harry, this is a way better reason,” Louis mutters, his voice dripping with sarcasm. His eyebrows are raised in a challenge, and Harry groans.

“Lou,” Harry whines, dragging out the vowel sounds, “it’s called foreplay.” Louis lets out a huff,
rolling his eyes.

“I guess I’ve got to do all the work around here, since somebody can’t be fucked to follow through.”

Without anymore discussion, Louis’ clever hands move to Harry’s cock, pulling it out of his trunks. Louis wraps his hand around the base, giving it a few teasing strokes. Harry lets out a loud gasp, his head falling onto Louis’ shoulder.

It takes Harry a few more moments to gain his bearings, head fuzzy with the feeling of Louis stroking him, but once he does, he reaches for Louis’ cock and fishes it out of his trunks, his large hand engulfing it with ease. He shoves Louis’ hand away from his own cock, opting to wrap his hand around both of them.

Louis lets out a soft moan, his breath landing warm and damp on Harry’s neck, causing him to shiver in anticipation.

Harry can feel the slick, firm flesh of Louis’ cock against his own, and he’s positive that this is what heaven must feel like. He can’t bear to think of how good he’ll feel when he finally gets to do more with the boy in front of him. Preferably somewhere a bit more private, with more time to open him up and tease. As it is though, it’s almost more than Harry can handle to keep them both waiting.

He strokes up, twisting his hand just a bit as he nears the heads of their hard cocks. It draws a gasp from Louis, and Harry can’t keep his own low moan to himself. The glide is made easy by a combination of precum and chlorinated water, and Harry thinks that he’ll always associate this moment with the biting smell of chemicals.

After a few more strokes, Louis is leaning completely onto Harry, held up by only the other man’s hand around his cock. He’s letting out these high pitched whines that are driving Harry wild. He feels on the edge of cumming just from being so close to Louis. It’s intoxicating.

Harry quickens his pace, his chest heaving like he’s run a marathon. Louis isn’t much better, keening into Harry’s collarbones as he rocks his hips back into Harry’s hands.

It only takes a few more strokes for Louis to paint Harry’s hand and chest in cum. He’s shuddering as Harry works him through it, still trying to get himself off in the process. The feeling of Louis’ softening cock against his own eventually tips him over. He lets out a loud groan, falling back against the lip of the hot tub and consequently taking Louis with him.

Louis’ forehead is still mushed into Harry’s shoulder, and his arms are gripping loosely to Harry’s biceps. Harry’s feeling more relaxed than he has since he won the trivia round two weeks ago, and he can’t help but card his wet fingers through Louis’ hair, watching the droplets travel down his neck.

After they’ve both been leaning into each other along the edge of the hot tub, bodies loose from release, Louis chuckles quietly and murmurs, “Why haven’t we been doing that every night?”

Harry takes a moment before answering, needing it to catch his breath. “There’re usually more people in here with us,” Harry points out. “And cameramen.”

“That’s a shame,” Louis hums. His eyes are focused on Harry’s torso, and soon his hands make their way over to trace the lines on his stomach. “I’d be all over you at every opportunity if there weren’t always cameras watching.”

“That didn’t stop you just now.”
Louis’ hand stills, and he looks up and into Harry’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

Harry points up towards where a camera is sticking out just hardly from the corner of the house. Louis’ gaze follows where he’s pointing, and when he sees the camera, he breathes in sharply. “I didn’t even know that was there,” he admits. “Huh.”

Harry doesn’t know what Louis’ tone means, and he’s flooded again with the doubts that this was all for the game, and that he didn’t intend to be caught on camera because he didn’t intend for anyone to know he was with Harry.

“You don’t regret it now, do you?” Harry’s trying to sound casual, like he’s only joking, but there’s a strain in his voice that gives him away.

“What?” Louis sits up straighter, eyes wide in shock. “No.”

“Oh.”

Louis watches him closely, hesitating in a deafening silence before he finally mutters, “Do you?”

“No,” Harry assures, hoping more than anything that Louis believes him. “No.”

“Why are you getting all weird right now?” Louis shifts away from Harry, and even in the heat of the water, the space leaves Harry cold. “Do you actually regret it?”

“No it’s just - ” Harry stops himself before he vomits out a speech about what’s bothering him completely and how much he feels for Louis. “Well, Perrie said something about strategies earlier, and it got me thinking, like... is any of this real?”

“Is any of this...” Louis trails off and has to clear his throat. Harry’s heart breaks a little at the uncertainty in Louis’ voice. “Harry, what do you think just happened here?”

“Well, obviously I know what just happened,” Harry begins, “but was any of it, like...”

Louis huffs, demanding, “Just say what you’re thinking, Harry.”

Harry doesn’t answer right away. He allows himself time to work up the nerve. Every doubt that’s been on his mind this week comes running to the forefront of his mind, excited for a chance to voice themselves. He eventually settles on what to say, and even then, he has to talk himself up before he can finally talk. “Was this just part of the game?”

“It wasn’t,” Louis answers, and there’s a stability in his tone, something firm, and sure, and honest, that has Harry breathing a sigh of relief. He begins to feel better about everything until Louis adds, “But now I’m not so sure,” followed by him vacating of the pool and stomping back in the house.

Louis disappears through the door, and by the time Harry manages to shake himself out of his stupor and chase after him, the man has already vanished, no trace of him anywhere that Harry can think to look.

And that’s even more frustrating than the doubt-filled thoughts he had in the first place.
Walking out onto the warm sand of the beach isn’t as exciting as Harry thought it’d be. He’s buzzing with nerves for their last physical challenge, but he can’t even properly register how nervous he is because all he can think about is Louis. It’s all he can do not to storm over to Louis and demand that he allow Harry the time to explain himself.

Even in the car, Louis sat in the front seat, something that’s not been done since season fucking two. He’s going to great lengths to avoid Harry, and it hurts. After they had such an intimate experience the night before, not being able to be close to Louis is driving him insane. He can’t even get the other man to look at him.

To top it all off, now they have to compete against each other and play the game their absolute hardest so that they can get the other kicked off the show. Harry has the feeling that Louis’s going to play particularly viciously against Harry.

“Welcome, contestants,” James begins, “to your final physical challenge.”

They all cheer, but it’s hollow. The group has gotten close to each other these past few weeks, and even with the tension, they’re still all incredibly fond of each other. There’s no way Harry can find it in himself to be thrumming with positive energy.

“As you know,” the host continues, “your sport this week is volleyball, something that two out of the six of you have played on an official team and the rest of you have played recreationally in recent history. You’ve all got a leg up in this competition, it seems. So let’s get this show on the road.”

There’s a volleyball net farther down along the beach, and they all make their way over, setting themselves up on opposite sides of the net. Niall’s decided he’ll start with serving, and Taylor’s great with hitting the long shots, so Harry finds himself in front of the net, right across from Perrie.

He gears up for a long game.

The game starts, and Harry gets lost in it. Every hit, serve, and spike jumbles together, and if Louis weren’t avoiding having any contact with the rest of the cast, Harry might actually be having fun with this. There’s a point where Harry runs to bump the ball at the same time as Taylor, and the two of them crash into each other and tumble down into the sand. It’s a funny moment, one that has everyone - even Taylor - laughing, but once he catches sight of Louis watching, Harry can’t find it in himself to laugh anymore. He goes back to just focusing on the game and trying not to let Louis get to his head.

The teams are pretty evenly matched, too, Harry likes to think. Yes, Perrie and Sophia were both on an actual volleyball team, but Harry and Taylor both play recreationally often, and Niall’s some kind of sports guru and can master anything that’s thrown at him. They stay at a matched score through almost the entire match, and the rounds go on far longer than Harry had been anticipating.

At about halfway to twenty-one, the score that would win a team the game, James calls a break and allows everyone a chance to catch their breath and grab something to drink. Harry’s team is winning 13-11, so Harry thinks things are looking up, and he uses the break as an opportunity to try and make some progress with Louis.

It’s difficult, though, when the other man is avoiding him with everything he’s got. He disappears into a bathroom farther up the beach, but Harry follows and waits until Louis comes out to talk. “Please, just talk to me.”
Louis jumps when he sees Harry, but he covers his reaction up by rolling his eyes and ignoring Harry as he starts walking back towards the game. “I have nothing to say to you, Harry.”

“Louis - ”

“I can’t believe you’d even think I was faking any of that,” Louis spits. He stops walking, and Harry almost bumps into with the suddenness of it. “I don’t want to talk to you, and I don’t want to hear you out.”

“What do I have to do - ”

“What do you have to do?” Louis cuts Harry off again, his laughter sounding cynical and fake, a sound Harry doesn’t very much fancy hearing from his Louis. “Are you kidding? What do I have to do to prove to you this is real? Because I thought I was being a pretty genuine guy, but I guess not.”

Harry hates the hurt way Louis’s speaking of him, hates that in less than twenty-four hours they’ve come to this. “Louis,” he begs, voice breaking. “Please.”

Louis doesn’t grant him the gift of prolonging their conversation, just turns and walks away, back towards the net. Harry follows, dragging his feet. He doesn’t like how one stupid conversation with Perrie had him ruining everything they had, and he doesn’t like how it’s affecting Louis’ spirit. Everything hurts.

The game starts back up, and they’re all thrown into it again. It’s no more of a challenge than before, and the score stays tied. Perrie manages to pull an awesome move where she uses her palms to lift Sophia up to help her spike the ball, something Harry’s only seen in movies. The two of them must have practiced it a thousand times the day before. Harry’s too impressed with them to even care that his team lost the point.

On the final point of the game, they’re both tied at twenty, and James declares the next point a winner (not without debate from Sophia and Perrie that the rules state a win has to be by a two point margin at least that goes completely unheard, James insisting that the goal was to only play until somebody hit twenty-one). Harry finds himself serving, while Louis is up at the net across from Taylor.

They go a few rallies, the ball flying back and forth, each team trying their hardest to get the other team out and secure their own fate in the finale. Unlike the other physical challenges Harry’s sat through where the end seems to fly by in a flurry of moves, Harry sees this one in striking definition, passing him by in slow motion.

Harry hits the ball, and immediately, he knows that he’s lost them the game. The ball is barely going to sail over the net, and it’s headed right towards where Louis’s crouched, ready to jump and spike the ball for a point. He’s looking at Harry, hurt flooding his expression, and Harry aches just watching. The only thing that’s able to make this worse is that he just lost them the game.

But then something happens.

Louis jumps up to hit the ball, but his hand just hardly grazes it, letting the ball roll over his fingertips and fall sadly to the sand behind him. Nobody makes a sound as the ball drops, nobody can say anything. Everybody was certain that Perrie’s team was going to win, but Louis——

He threw the game. There’s no way it was an accident, not now that Louis’s shooting Harry a meaningful look, like he’s just proved a point, but before Harry can ask why any of that happened and what the fuck Louis was thinking, Taylor and Niall are screaming excitedly and charging him
They’ve made it to the finale, but they shouldn’t have. It should’ve been Louis’ game. He should be the one with all the praise right now. But instead he’s walking… he’s walking off the beach, and Harry can’t even go after him. He’s stuck standing in the middle of his team’s hug-sandwich eyes wide, mouth agape.

He’s shocked - that’s the only word for it. Louis didn’t look mad or sad or anything as he turned away from everyone. He looked determined, and Harry thinks he knows what this is about.

It was never about the game for Louis. He was never here for the grand prize. When Harry asked him in the hot tub, Louis was being honest. He was here for something to do, and his relationship with Harry had nothing to do with the competition.

And Louis just proved it. He threw the goddamned game because Harry means more to him than some ridiculous television show, and Harry hurt him when he insinuated otherwise.

He needs to find Louis.

Harry doesn’t know where to start, and his thinking is cut short when Perrie comes running over to him. He opens his arms on instinct and allows her to throw herself into them. She’s sobbing, and Harry is too. The day was long, and they’re both filled with adrenalin, and it’s hard to show excitement when the game is over, Perrie’s out, and they both have to say goodbye to each other.

Harry doesn’t want anyone to go home.

“'I'm going to let you all go back to the house now,'” James nods, his voice tinged with a solemn edge. It’s the first time the host has looked like he’s sad with the turn of events, and Harry gets it. In the past seasons, the groups haven’t been completely friendly with each other,,at least, not to this degree. “'Some of your flights leave tonight, and some leave tomorrow. I’ll see you all back here in a week and a half when you return to watch Niall, Taylor, and Harry face off in the finale. Good night, and good luck.”’

Their ride home is melancholy. Nobody wants to say anything at the risk of sounding too cheery (for
some of them) or bitter (for the rest). Perrie’s almost in Harry’s lap with how close the two of them are, neither one wanting to separate as they’ll have to say goodbye soon.

Louis isn’t in the car with them. After he stormed off, he must’ve gotten an earlier ride back to the house. And on top of that, his flight must be leaving tonight because when they get back home, there’s no trace of Louis, and his room is completely empty. Not a single sign of the man left behind.

That night, after spending the rest of the afternoon moping, he falls into Perrie’s bed, the two of them cuddling close. Harry’s flight leaves first thing in the morning, and then they won’t see each other for an entire week. After that… nothing. They’re both back home on two separate sides of the country.

Harry’s still got Louis in every corner of his mind, but tonight he just wants to hold Perrie and go to bed without letting any of this damned competition get in his head.

“You’re going to win this, Harry,” Perrie whispers to Harry’s collarbone when they’re both almost asleep.

Harry’s hands stroke through her hair, and he wonders, “You think so?” Perrie hums and snuggles closer to Harry.

“I know so.”
Finale

Friday

Harry lands at San Francisco International late Friday night and is quickly chartered off to his hotel, which is located near where the finale will be taking place. At first he’d thought that everyone would be returning back to the house for the finale, but as it turns out, that’s not until after the finale when the show’s producers throw a celebration for this season’s cast and all of the contestants get to spend one last night in the house.

For tonight, though, Harry’s staying in the hotel. The hotel is incredible - much nicer than anything he’s ever stayed in before - and he wishes he could explore the place a little more while he has the chance, but to be quite frank, he’s exhausted. He doesn’t even get to enjoy the luxuries he’s been given for the night because as soon he sets his bag down in his room, he flops onto the bed and promptly passes out.

Saturday

Harry wakes up Saturday morning to the sound of birds outside his window. He has just enough time to groggily take in his surroundings and climb out bed before one of the producers barges into his room, grabs his suitcase, and pulls him down to where a car is waiting to take him to the finale. He hadn’t even had enough time to get dressed before having to leave the hotel, but during the car ride, the producer assures him that he’ll be able to change when they get to the venue where a professional hair and makeup crew will take over to help get him ready for the finale.

And get him ready they do. As soon as the car arrives on set, Harry’s ushered to a bathroom where he’s told to take a long, hot, and well-deserved shower before reporting to the dressing rooms. The moment he walks into the dressing rooms, he gets escorted to one of about twenty chairs around the room, and the stylist gets to work primping him for the show. His hair is blowdried and styled in a way that will “make him look good enough for cable TV” - or so the stylist tells him.

This morning has gone nothing like the way Harry had pictured it. Originally he thought that he was going to have a nice, lazy morning and show up to the finale with the rest of the cast where they would all hang out together and joke around while they got ready, but he hasn’t gotten a chance to see any of the other competitors just yet. Even those that were eliminated haven’t shown up. So instead it’s just Harry, his stylists, and racks full of clothes that are eerily similar to Harry’s wardrobe - only more expensive looking.

“It’s for the celebration afterwards,” the stylist explains when she notices him looking at the nice clothes. “For the actual competition, you’ll be in athletic wear.”

So this season’s finale is going to be have a more physical aspect to it than previous years. Good to know. This isn’t necessarily bad news, but Niall’s far more athletic than Harry is, and Taylor’s coordination is… well, she’s actually coordinated, something Harry can’t say about himself.
The longer Harry sits in this chair, the more nervous he becomes. It’s not long until the nausea starts setting in. Sure he’s been anxious since day one of being in the house, but things have only gotten worse now that he’s mere hours away from either walking away with the grand prize he came here for or walking away empty-handed. The idea of walking away from this experience with nothing to show for it does nothing to quell his rising nerves.

After a few fittings where his stylist tries to put together an outfit the network finds suitable for him to wear during the celebration and after being dolled-up for the actual competition portion of the finale, Harry’s summoned to join the other contestants in the greenroom as they await the announcement of their final challenge.

Harry’s the last one in, Taylor and Niall already both standing around a white round table that’s been placed awkwardly in the small room. When they notice Harry walking in, Niall rushes forward to gather him into a hug, and Taylor joins in right behind him. Harry’s been looking forward to catching up with them and finding out how their time at home has been ever since he boarded his flight. It may have only been a week, but it feels like so much longer, especially with their reunion taking place in this small, unfamiliar room instead of the house they’ve all made their home.

James walks in right as Taylor’s retelling the story of how much music she managed to spin out after her stint on the show, prompting the three finalists to cheer with an enthusiasm not yet seen during this stage of the competition. Honestly, they were all expecting a producer to be the one telling them about their final challenge, so this is a nice surprise. Alongside the host is a cameraman, and Harry immediately knows that this isn’t just going to be a refresher. James has news.

“It’s great to have you all back for the finale,” James greets as he lets the cameraman in. There’s another following right behind him, and the room quickly fills up. “You might be wondering, ‘James, what are we doing in this dressing room?’ Well, I’m here to tell you,” He pauses, and the room goes silent in anticipation. “Only two of you will be facing off in the finale.”

When the words register, Harry’s jaw actually drops, and he just about chokes on his own gasp. He can feel the color drain out of his face, and he can see the other reacting pretty much the same way. This is something that’s never happened before. In the past, whoever made it past week six competed in the finale - no matter what. It’s the biggest security blanket the show has. If you win the final physical challenge, you’re in.

Being told that one of them is going to be eliminated before even competing in the finale has Harry’s mind racing. He doesn’t know if one of them possibly broke the rules and is being kicked off the show or if they have to compete for the opportunity with another trivia round or if this is just another quirky joke James is playing. Whatever it may be, Harry’s going to be sick.

James watches silently as the gravity of his words takes hold on the competitors. Harry would like him to take pity on the group and just tell them already, but he’s standing by the door with a stony expression on his face as he lets them process the bomb he’s just dropped.

Harry’s new fear of being the one who doesn’t even get to make it to the final finale competition is far greater than any, now seemingly trivial fears he had about the actual challenge. He can’t help but think of what would happen if he was forced to walk out and sit in the stands with every other eliminated contender, watching as these two competed for the title that Harry’s so close to having himself. He would be devastated.

James finally begins talking, but Harry can barely register it over the blood rushing past his ears. “Upon their arrival this morning, we asked each one of your eliminated competitors a question: Who, out of the three finalists, do they think most deserves to be in the finale,” he explains. Harry remembers seeing videos from each season online, posted after the final episode aired, where the
eliminated competitors had been asked who they thought would win the finale just to show if the winner had been in line with everyone’s expectations, but this is completely different. His ex-competitors hold his fate in the finale in their hands. “And unlike the seasons prior to this,” James continues, “their choice actually matters. Are you ready to watch and find out?”

The three competitors slowly nod, and in the corner of the room, a television comes to life. There’s a moment of static, and then the video starts. It focuses, and then Cara is standing on screen, smiling brightly and… Harry hasn’t seen her in forever. He knows she was the first eliminated, a casualty of the alliance, but he doesn’t remember much else about her.

“Who are the choices again?” Cara asks. She’s standing at the entrance to the set. Harry remembers loving the floral decorations around the door, now they’re the background to Cara’s interview. “Niall, Taylor, and Harry? Fuck, is it bad that I only remember Harry? He had the hands - nice big hands,” She brings up, and Harry feels the blood rushing back into his face. He had blissfully forgotten about her obsession with his hands, but now the memories are back. “I vote him, I guess.”

At the bottom of the screen, a graphic pops up. All three of their names are spaced a decent distance from each other, each in a different color. A thick, white tally is animatedly drawn next to Harry’s orange name, and the happiness that bursts inside him is indescribable. He’s the first with a point on the board, and it’s a great feeling.

Cara fades off of the screen, and Jade follows her up. The difference in their attitudes is immediately recognizable. Where Cara was bright and positive and happy, Jade looks angry.

“Honestly, I liked Harry the most when I was here,” she says on screen, “but that asshole sent me home because I was a threat.” Harry smiles at that. He knows he isn’t getting her vote, but the thought of Jade being competition is laughable. While she was here, she did nothing remarkable. “I’m going with Taylor, and I hope she tears him apart.”

The tally appears next to Taylor’s name on screen, and Harry looks over to see her grinning while Niall lets out a shocked sort of half-laugh.

Jade fades out, and this time both Grimmy and Eleanor are on, standing next to each other. They were eliminated together, so Harry figures that’s the order the interviews are being shown.

Grimmy laughs, and the sound makes Harry smile. He’s missed Grimmy - more than anyone else in the video so far. “Why are you even asking me?” He questions. “You know it’s Harry. He’s going to take this home.”

“I think I have to say Harry too, actually,” Eleanor agrees, and they’re answers are music to Harry’s ears. “He was always there for Sophia and I, always extended an olive branch to us.” Harry’s waiting for the tallies to be added, but then she’s speaking again. “No, wait. Is this who we want to win, or who we think will win?” she asks. “Who we think? I used to always see Niall in the laundry room studying well into the night. He’s got the drive to do it.”

It’s news to Harry that Niall studied more than he showed, but then again, it isn’t too surprising. All three of the finalists studied more than their fellow competitors knew. It’s part of the reason they made it this far.

“I guess my secret’s out,” Niall jokes, and Harry laughs alongside him, watching as both of their names gain a tally.

Stan and Kendall appear on screen next, and Harry will be honest, he had completely forgotten about them both. There’s a moment where he’s actually surprised to see their faces. He isn’t going to feel
guilty about it; they weren’t the best competition, after all.

Stan laughs on screen, bright and sudden, while Kendall stands next to him with her clenched in anger and her fists balled tightly at her sides. “That’s not who I expected to be in the finale,” he comments. “I’m just glad Oli isn’t there.” Kendall’s nodding along - as are Niall, Taylor, and Harry. There’s not a single person, other than Oli himself, of course, that wanted to see him make it this far. “I don’t know, though. Niall, I guess.”

“Yeah, Niall,” Kendall concurs. “Taylor was a giant bitch, and Harry can go fuck himself. At least Niall never pretended to be something he wasn’t.”

Two tallies are marked next to Niall’s name on screen, and Harry tenses up. As the competition bore on and got harsher and more personal, people started showing more of their true selves. Harry’s afraid that could be detrimental in the voting.

Zayn comes on screen next by himself. “Does my opinion even matter?” he voices the exact thoughts going through Harry’s head. He quit, abandoned the house in the middle of the night, his opinion shouldn’t matter, and yet... “I don’t know. Niall, probably.”

The tally is marked, and as of now, Niall has four tallies, Harry has two, and Taylor has one. Things aren’t looking very promising.

The screen fades in and Oli, Jesy, and Liam are all standing together. Oli’s red hair matches his face with all the rage he’s holding. Harry thinks that before the day is done, he’ll send out fifty different prayers to fifty different deities in thanks for Oli not standing next to him as a finalist.

“I’m going with Taylor,” Jesy declares. “She’s always been focused more on the game than anything else. She’d rather win than make friends, and that’s something the other two would never do.”

Jesy’s very honest with her opinion. One thing Harry had always struggled with while on the show was finding a balance between his friendships and the competition. He likes to think he did a decent job, but it would’ve been nice to be able to pull off Taylor’s strategy. She would’ve thrown her own family under the bus if it meant winning. She’s cold-blooded, and it definitely paid off.

She’s here after all.

“I can’t stand any of them,” Oli bites. His entire body is tense. If Harry had to guess, he’d say that Oli’s holding in the urge to start throwing a tantrum right on camera. “But if I had to choose, it’d be Niall. I’ve hated him the least amount of time.”

“That’s a shitty way to vote,” Jesy argues.

“But Niall’s - ”

The camera moves away from them, cutting Oli off, and zooms in on Liam’s face. “We all know it’s going to be Harry,” he says confidently. “It was always going to be Harry.”

His words are followed by each of the finalists having a tally added to their name. The camera zooms out and then, for the final time, a new group is on screen. It’s Perrie, Sophia, and Louis. The two women are both so happy and gorgeous, absolutely glowing, and Harry can’t believe how much he’s missed them.

The feelings for them, though, don’t hold a candle to how much Harry absolutely aches at the sight of Louis. Louis left the house before Harry could explain anything or even say goodbye, and he burns with all the things he left unsaid. Even as the video is close to ending, and they’re all about to
go into the competition, all Harry can think about is what he’d say if Louis were in front of him right now.

Instead of each of them giving their votes separately, they simultaneously agree, “Harry”.

Three tallies are added next to Harry’s name, and his heart grows far too big for its cavity in his chest. “There’s no question about it,” Perrie grins. “I got extremely close to Harry over these last six weeks, and he knows this game like nobody else. He’s got it in the bag.”

“Harry’s the only person up there that knew the difference between when it was time to compete, and when it was time to be a _friend_,” Sophia adds. “I know he’s going to win it.”

Harry’s eyes find their way back to Louis. He’s smiling bashfully, and it’s all Harry can do not to run out of the room and go find him for himself. “I think we all knew the minute we saw Harry that he was something special. I can’t wait to see him take home first place.”

All of the anger that was there when they last spoke, all of the disappointment, is gone. Harry doesn’t know what happened to make that happen, or if it was just the week they had at home, but there’s something there, something beautiful and positive, something Harry wishes he could see in person.

“Good luck, Harry!” Perrie cheers. “We’re rooting for you.”

The screen fades, and then the television is turned off, leaving the three contestants standing in silence. Harry knows he had the most tallies, but he doesn’t know what it means. He doesn’t know if he _wants_ to know. He doesn’t have it in him ask, content to just wait for James to tell them.

He got the most tallies. Six people think Harry’s going to win the game and take home the grand prize. It’s an incredible thought, and Harry feels surprisingly humbled by it. More importantly, though, the thought that has his heart skipping a beat is that _Louis_ has faith in him. Even after things ended so poorly, even with all the tension between them, Louis thinks he can win this.

“Well, there you have it!” James announces from the front of the room. “Miss Swift, I’m so sorry, but we will not be seeing you in the finale.”

Taylor goes still next to Harry, and Niall lets out a brief, insulted laugh. Harry’s shocked, not sure he heard the words right.

“Wait, are you serious?” Niall asks.

“Completely,” James confirms. “The course we designed is made for two competitors, and given that Taylor received the least amount of votes from your competition, she is the third-place winner of _Trivialities_ and hereby eliminated from the finale.”

The room goes silent again. Harry can hear his pulse pounding in his ears. Just like that, Taylor’s gone.

“Are you _fucking_ kidding me?” Taylor asks, voice gone low and - quite frankly - frightening. “I worked my ass off all season, and because I didn’t spend the whole time kissing ass, I don’t get to even compete?”

“I’m sorry, Taylor,” James apologizes. “The winner of _Trivialities_ must be able to do it all, and you just couldn’t.”

Taylor laughs, but it’s a hardly there, sarcastic thing. “Because I couldn’t socialize? You’re joking right? I swear I’m - ”
“For the two of you,” the host cuts off her speech as he opens the door. He gestures for Niall and Harry to walk out. “If you wouldn’t mind following me out, we can begin the challenge and get you both one step closer to the grand prize.”

“Don’t ignore me, James Corden!”

Harry and Niall are escorted out of the room, but Taylor is forced to stay. Harry walks in a daze, taken aback by what’s just happened. He can still hear Taylor’s protests echoing down the hallway after them, but he doesn’t do anything about it. It’s a shame and a little unfair that she was stripped from her chance at the grand finale without even getting to compete, but the competitive part of Harry’s brain is glad. Better her than him.

The crew and remaining two contestants walk down a few hallways, turning through the building until they’re walking through a set of double doors together and onto what could possibly be a football field, only it’s about four times larger with stands full of thousands of people and something resembling a giant bush on the field.

By giant, Harry means that it takes up the field entirely, only leaving a tiny space on each end. It stands about triple Harry’s height with a flat top. During the competition, Harry liked to throw random guesses out about what the physical challenges might be, but he has absolutely no goddamn idea what they could possibly be doing for this one.

“Welcome, everyone,” James heralds out as they come to a stop on the field. Giant screens are hanging above, showing Niall, Harry, and James. Harry suspects they’re also going to show what’s happening inside of the shrubbery once the competition starts. “Welcome to the season eight Trivialities finale.”

The crowd goes insane. Harry’s certain they should have earplugs just to block the intensity of the screams.

To his left, he hears a familiar voice. When he turns, he sees the entire cast - all 13 eliminated members - standing on the field with them but far enough away that they can’t exactly communicate. Perrie and Sophia are cheering Harry’s name, and next to them, Louis is smiling at Harry. Harry grins back and waves.

It feels like a weight has been lifted off his chest when Louis starts yelling Harry’s name alongside the girls. There’s not much they can do to explain themselves to each other right now, but just seeing Louis in front of him, supporting him, gives Harry more determination to win it.

There’s also the promise of being able to make up at the celebration tonight, and Harry definitely plans on taking advantage of the many bedrooms to do so.

The screams die down, and Harry turns back towards James. “This season we’ll be tackling our last challenge in a giant maze,” the host declares and… Harry can see it. It is a giant bush, but one he’s about to be competing inside. “You may notice it’s the same one from History week in season two, but we’ve gone ahead and made a few adjustments.”

Harry remembers that challenge. The competitors had to choose turns based on the answers to history questions etched onto the wall. He doesn’t remember who ended up winning, but he does remember how fun the entire thing looked.

That episode actually introduced a new audience to the show and aided in its surpassing of Survivor in ratings. That episode helped launch Trivialities into being a mainstream competitive-reality TV show - helped make it what it is today.
“Harry and Niall,” James explains, “you’ll both start at opposite sides of the course, and you won’t ever cross paths. As you navigate your way throughout the maze, you’ll be answering questions pertaining to each subject you’ve been given during this season of *Trivia†ies*. Every wall you come across will have a button resting next to it. Upon being pressed, a question from one of the categories will be asked. If you answer the question correctly, the wall will open, and you’ll be able to pass through. If you answer incorrectly, however, you only get two more tries. After three incorrect answers, you are eliminated from the competition, and your rival wins. So make sure you’re not throwing out random guesses, or else you won’t make it to the final wall. The walls you want to go through follow the order of this season’s subjects.”

Harry’s heart is racing. He can feel anticipatory sweat forming along his hairline, and he can’t keep his hands still to save his life. He’s nervous, simply put.

“The very last wall will have questions about this season of the show,” the host continues. “I hope you really paid attention to your surroundings over your six weeks here because you must answer three consecutive questions correctly for the wall to open up. If you get three in a row wrong, you’re eliminated from the competition.

“I’ll be standing in the middle of the maze waiting for you both to finish. The first person to open their final wall and approach the center of the maze will take home not only the title as our season eight winner, but also 500,000 dollars.”

With that much money, Harry could pay off his schooling, a place of his own, and basically anything else he needed. With that much money, Harry could live comfortably for quite a few years.

“Now let’s send you to your entrances! I’ll see you men at the finish line.”

Two producers come and take Harry and Niall to their different starting points. The crowd starts cheering, and they don’t seem like they plan on stopping. The sound is completely deafening, but once Harry is inside of the maze and the door has slid shut behind him, the noise almost completely disappears. There must be a soundproof element to it, Harry guesses.

With the intensity of the audience gone having faded to only faint background noise, he gives himself a moment to breath, collect his bearings, and repeat the order of the subjects.


And repeat.

The sound of the buzzer going has Harry running before his mind even processes what his body is doing. The hall is dark, the roof blocking out all of the outside light and leaving the maze completely enclosed. The shrubbery outside must have only been for decoration. Harry can see cameras resting in every corner as he passes them by.

The first wall he comes across has *Entertainment* written in giant, thick letters, and he turns and runs in the opposite direction when he sees it. He doesn’t think about finding the button, not when he knows entertainment wasn’t the first week’s category.

He passes his entry point while retracing his steps, and is upset with himself. So early on, and he’s already messed up. He can only hope it doesn’t make a big difference.

He finds *History* soon enough and approaches the wall. There’s a light blue button placed to the right of the labeled wall, and Harry doesn’t hesitate to push it. Static sounds over a speaker, and then a robotic voice is asking “What date in 44 b.c. was Julius Caesar assassinated?”
Harry, without pause, blurts out, “March 15.”

The wall opens, and Harry can hear distantly the crowd roaring. He lets out a victorious whoop and then runs off in search of the next subject. He’s just happy that the first question was something that’s nearly common knowledge. At least, in the world of trivia, the Ides of March is a topic that everyone should know without hesitation.

He finds the Science & Nature wall easily enough and hits the pink button.

“What is the fizz in soda?” the wall asks.

“I don’t know,” Harry thinks out loud. “Carbon dioxide?”

There’s a pause, but then the wall is opening. Harry absolutely cackles because it was a total guess, something he really shouldn’t be doing, and yet it got him past the wall.

The smile stays on his face as he runs down the halls. He passes a few turns but ignores them because they don’t feel right. He reaches a dead end, which means he has to backtrack his steps, passing a few wrong walls before he can finally let out a sigh of relief when he spots the Entertainment wall. He eagerly slams his hand against the purple button.

The speaker sizzles to life. “What notorious ‘80s comedy features two employees who get into shenanigans with their boss’ dead body?”

Harry instantly remembers the night Kendall kept them up late as she talked about her absolute hatred of unnecessary movie sequels. She figures that if the only reason the story is being continued is because the first one was so successful, then the sequel’s not going to be any good.

Her lead example in the argument is the exact reason why Harry’s grinning. “Weekend at Bernie’s,” he answers, far from surprised when the walls opens and allows Harry through.

As he’s running and searching for his door, he hears the crowd roaring in what must be excitement, and Harry can only assume it means Niall must be doing something right. It has Harry stumbling as he comes across a Geography wall, where he presses the green button without thought.

“What - ”

Through the wall, the crowd starts yelling this time, only now Harry can distinctly hear boo and no being shouted. Taking a closer look at the wall, he realizes that geography was week five, and that he shouldn’t be standing in front of it just yet.

“Oh, fuck,” he curses, not staying to listen to the rest of the question. He abandons his post and races off again. The panic of knowing he almost went through the wrong wall leaves him a little disoriented.

Harry almost passes by Arts & Literature. It’s hidden in the smallest nook, one he would have certainly looked past if it weren’t for the odd angle at which it’s placed. He reaches for the orange button, glad when the crowd doesn’t start up with their yelling again.

“What is Ray Bradbury’s Illustrated Man illustrated with?”

Harry’s out of breath, but through his gasping he manages to answer, “Tattoos.” He knew the answer immediately as it used to be a favorite book of his when he first got to college. He’s moved on to different styles of literature now, but it’s a work that’s stuck with him ever since.
He runs through the wall, knowing that this time he actually should be looking for the Geography wall. He finds it, along with another green button, but he’s hesitant to press it. He knows he’s where he should be, but last time he was at a wall like this he almost went through without being ready.

The speaker crackles to life, and then it’s reciting, “St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas are part of which U.S. territory?”

Harry’s not sure, is the bad news. The good news is that he knows a few U.S. territories, and he can take a chance on an answer. “Puerto Rico?”

A buzzer sounds, and the volume of it makes Harry flinch. He wasn’t prepared for such a sound, and it only adds to the way his mind is spinning. Everything feels like it’s going by too quickly and not fast enough at the same time. There’s sweat dripping down his back, and he’s exhausted from all the running around and overthinking everything.

He randomly throws out, “Virgin Islands,” with his hands over his ears in case the buzzer sounds again.

It doesn’t. The passage opens easily enough, and Harry’s dragging himself through in search of the next the wall. He finds it quickly, the bold, thick-lettered Sports yelling out to him, and Harry presses the red button before he can even think about it, so close to the end.

“What football team team went to the Superbowl four consecutive years, but never won?”

Thank goodness. Harry wants cry, the answer is so familiar. It must’ve been week four - no, week five when Harry came downstairs to see Louis in the kitchen with his hat on, telling Harry an interesting fact about the sports team he was honoring.

In the moment, Harry thought it was an insignificant little anecdote, but now? Now he’s standing in front of a wall that can give him 500,000 dollars with that trivial fact.

“The Buffalo Bills,” Harry answers, a small, sappy smile on his face as he thinks of what knowing Louis has gotten him.

He starts running as soon as the wall opens, but is stopped almost immediately by his next wall. There’s a button on the wall that’s decorated like a trivial pursuit piece, and Harry nervously presses the button. This must be his last wall now.

The speaker comes alive, and the robotic voice asks, “Which of your fellow contestants resides in Seattle, Washington?”

Harry remembers on the first night in the house and who he spent so much time talking to about art and all that comes along with doing it in such a popular city. “Jade.”

“Correct,” the robotic voice announces. “Which contestant walked out of the house and the competition in week four?”

“Zayn,” Harry huffs, irritated at the phrasing of the question and everything that happened after his departure. How terrible the week following it was.

“Correct.” Harry lets the chagrin roll off of him. He only has one more question left, and then he’s through the door and into victory. “Upon elimination,” the speaker begins, “which cast member was quoted saying, ‘Harry’s going to take this one home. He’s the only one playing the game correctly’?”

Harry’s not sure what the answer could be, but he’s too caught up on how funny the robot voice
sounded while reciting the quote that he doesn’t think too hard before he’s guessing, “Grimmy?”

“Incorrect. It was Oli.”

Harry can feel the shock showing on his face, eyes wide and cheeks pale. The fact that Oli had ever once thought Harry had it in him to win is enough of a shock to send Harry’s mind in a wonky direction.

He thinks back to when Oli was eliminated. It was after the game of Risk. Week five, if he remembers correctly. There was such anger, such animosity. He even tried to hit Harry. Knowing that it wasn’t just distaste fueling it, knowing Oli’d thought Harry was going to win… it’s the best (read: weirdest) news Harry’s heard all day.

“Starting over,” the robotic tone announces. “What guest judge asked the trivia questions in week two?”

“Cher Lloyd,” Harry answers, cringing immediately. He knows it’s wrong the moment he says it.

“Incorrect. It was Gigi Hadid,” the voice confirms. “Starting over. Which contestant had immunity in week five?”

Harry’s certain it’s Niall, but he has to give himself a moment to think. Week five was, like he was just thinking about, when they played Risk. Everyone was a part of the game except for… “Niall.”

“Correct.” Harry laughs in relief through a gasp. Had he gotten the question wrong, he’d have been out of the finale. “Cast member Liam Payne works in what industry?”

“Coal mining,” Harry laughs, remembering in week one how insulted he was when Niall told him it wasn’t a real job.

“Correct. Season eight’s budget was near triple the previous seasons for this particular item. What was it?”

Harry thinks about everything they did in the house. From week one until today, what they possible could’ve used three times more than any other season. He goes through his mind and considers everything

And then it hits him.

He’s so close to victory he can almost taste it. And it tastes surprisingly like… “Bacon.”

There’s a lull, a quiet moment where Harry waits to know if he’s correct. A moment where he realizes that he hasn’t heard the crowd yelling during the entire exchange - something he doesn’t know if he should put down to how much he’s been concentrating or to how close he was.

There’s static over the speaker, and then the tinny voice is announcing, “Correct.”

The wall opens, flooding Harry in lights that seem to be brighter than sun, and along with it comes the roar of the crowd. The lights dim as Harry walks out of the maze and into the clearing, and just like that, the season is over.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Another huge thanks to my betas Mehgan, Ella, and Nina. They all put a lot of work into getting this fic where it is, and I owe them my life. Y’all are the best!!

Epilogue

Sunday

They slam into the room just after midnight. Harry braces his arms against the door, trapping Louis between them as he traces patterns along the other man’s collarbones with his tongue. He can feel Louis arching forward to reach behind himself, but his squirming is putting him at the wrong angle for Harry, who’s trying to place lovebites on his skin.

When Louis goes to turn around towards the door, Harry huffs in annoyance and grabs Louis’ hands with both of his own, holding them against the door to keep him from moving again so that Harry can keep going.

“Honestly, Harry,” Louis sighs, finally pulling himself free from Harry’s grip. “I’m trying to lock the door so nobody walks in on us.”

Harry reluctantly steps back so that Louis can finish locking the door, and as soon as he turns back around, Harry grabs him by the neck and pulls him into a kiss.

They kiss lazily - they’re in no rush. Downstairs the celebration is still going on, everyone getting drunk and doing embarrassing things together for the last time. The season’s officially over, and the winner’s been announced. Harry doesn’t care to participate in the celebrations much, though, because he likes to think that he’s holding the best prize of all right here in his hands.

After the winner was announced, everyone loaded into their designated cars and rode back to the house where food and alcohol - lots of alcohol - was served. Because of all of the chaos and excitement, he and Louis didn’t get a moment alone together right away, but Harry paid close attention to make sure the two of them stayed sober throughout the toasts and all of the congratulatory speeches.

And now here they are, inside Grimmy’s old room, getting heated in the most leisurely way possible. Sure, getting drunk with everyone downstairs could’ve been fun, but Harry’s glad he doesn’t have any alcohol hindering his focus. Looking back on this moment in the future, Harry wants to remember the exact way Louis’ hands grip at his sleeves to pull him closer. He wants to be able to memorize the smoky, saccharine taste of Louis’ mouth and how sweetly he moans when Harry takes his bottom lip between his teeth.

Louis’ hands are slowly trailing their way down Harry’s body, still moving much too fast for Harry’s liking, so he reaches down and interlocks his fingers with Louis’ to stop him. Harry definitely wants to go further with Louis - much further - but the buildup is just as good as the main event, and Harry wants to take his time getting there.
“What’s the rush?” Harry asks as Louis’ hands fidget in his hold. Louis groans and tries to pull his hands free, but Harry just grips his hands tighter and kisses Louis softly, letting their lips rest together for a moment before pulling free. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been waiting all night for this,” Louis explains. Harry hums and goes back in towards Louis’ neck, untangling their fingers so he can collect Louis’ wrists in one of his hands and hold them up, above his head and against the door. He lets himself marvel at the size difference between their hands. Two of Louis’ wrists fit easily in his palm. It would be so easy for Harry to manhandle Louis, and he breathes in sharply at the revelation.

“What’s wrong with taking things slow?” Harry sighs next to Louis’ ear. He lifts his hand and slides it under Louis’ shirt. “What’s wrong with a little,” he runs his thumbnail gently across Louis’ nipple, “teasing?”

Louis whines high in his throat and arches towards Harry’s hands. “Fuck,” he moans.

Harry watches, a smirk playing on his face at Louis’ reaction. Louis looks like he wants to say something, but Harry claims his mouth before he can get it out. This night is for them - they’ve got until tomorrow morning with each other, and with Louis pressed up against him like this, it’s safe to say they probably won’t be getting much sleep.

Harry’s content to just keep kissing - he’s always been a fan of foreplay - But Louis’s going back and forth between testing Harry’s hold and relaxing into his grip, and it makes Harry want to do unspeakable things to him.

They’ve been building up this moment for weeks. Even though their rendezvous in the hot tub was a quick, dirty, wonderful affair, during the competition, there was never any time to really get to know each other’s bodies. There wasn’t time for Harry to lay Louis out on the mattress and map out every inch of his skin like a canvas custom made just for him. Now they have all the time in the world.

Louis starts mumbling against Harry’s lips, words that have no clear meaning, just bits and pieces, so Harry starts kissing a trail down Louis’ neck to give him a chance to say what he wants to.

“Please, please, please,” comes tumbling out, and Harry has to stifle his laugh in Louis’ neck. Louis’s already so into it, completely wrecked, just from kissing. The way Louis looks, the way he moans, under Harry’s hands, has him wanting to just go for it - to throw Louis on the bed and completely ravish him. He could do it so easily, but there’s still a thin line of tension still running between them, and Harry has to be careful not to snap it - not just yet, at least.

He runs his free hand down Louis’ sternum, loving the way he can feel the other man quiver under his fingertips at the sensation. His fingers skate around the button on Louis’ pants, revelling in the harshness of Louis’ breath and how it seems like every touch warrants another beautiful reaction.

He skirts around the edges of Louis’ zipper before extending his hand and palming at the front of Louis’ pants. Louis’ reacts beautifully, letting out a breathy whine and arching his hips into Harry’s hand.


Harry chuckles darkly against Louis’ mouth at his desperate tone, proud of himself for being able to make Louis sound like this. At least, he’s proud until Louis presses one of his legs in between Harry’s and grinds against him, and Harry realizes why Louis is so ready to rush things.

“We have all night,” Harry bargains, hands trying to still Louis’ hips.
“Yeah,” Louis agrees, equally as breathless as Harry feels. “So you can tease me later.” Harry finally gives in and pulls Louis away from the wall, loving the way his partner laughs at his sudden eagerness.

They make their way to the bed slowly, stripping out of their clothes along the way. Harry shucks his shirt and jeans off first, and gives himself time to just watch and memorize the curves of Louis’ body and how his skin seems to glow in the dim lighting.

As soon as Louis is down to just his boxers, Harry pulls him onto the bed and covers his body with his own.

“Hi,” Louis greets.

Harry smiles down at him. “Hi,” he returns, grinning dopily and swooping down to kiss Louis sweetly.

They kiss for a while, Harry not even trying to go any further as he relaxes into the kiss, instead taking his time to enjoy the feeling of Louis’ skin beneath his own and the sweet taste of his tongue. He thinks of all the times they’ve toed this line but never quite crossed it, and how now it’s finally, finally, happening.

Louis takes advantage of Harry’s relaxed state and wraps his legs around Harry’s body before flipping them over so that he’s sitting in Harry’s lap, his lips tracing a pattern down Harry’s throat.

“What happened to going slow?” Harry asks, laughing as Louis’ hands go to attack the waistband of Harry’s boxers. He catches Louis’ hands before the other man can get too far.

Louis sighs, sounding more put-out than anything that he can’t rush into things. “I thought we agreed to go slow later.”

“We agreed that I could tease you later,” he reminds Louis. “That didn’t mean I wanted to rush things now.”

“Well why not?” Louis wonders out loud, a smirk on his face as he pulls his hands from Harry’s grip and starts trailing them down his sides.

Harry allows Louis’ hands to explore his body, lets him place open-mouth kisses down his sternum all while he grapples for something to say, something that will slow Louis down and let Harry really take his time with Louis, but he’s coming up blank.

Louis reaches over to the bedside table and opens the top drawer. Harry suspects he’s looking for lube, but, instead of pulling out a bottle, he squawks and pulls out a book. Harry doesn’t know what it is or why Louis looks so scandalized, but when Harry reads the title, sees From the Rise of Civilization to the Rise of Technology: The History of the World, he knows exactly what has Louis so upset.

“I can explain,” Harry tries, but Louis just glares down at him, book in hand, and refuses to say anything. He seems more insulted than anything, which Harry can understand, but instead of finding a way to defend himself or to break the tension, his mouth opens, and he asks, “Is that enough to slow you down?”

He’s almost afraid he said something wrong, made the joke at the worst possible time, but then Louis smiles.

“Not even close.”
Harry chuckles, breathing a little sigh of relief internally, and then closes in on Louis. Finally, the tension between them snaps and they fall into each other, bodies melting together until they both become one.

After, when they’re lying tangled up in the sheets, sweaty and sated, Louis tentatively asks him, “Are you mad that you lost?” His mouth is resting against Harry’s collarbone, his hand tracing patterns on Harry’s chest, and he looks and sounds sleepy enough that Harry’s heart skips a beat.

Harry considers everything that’s happened over the course of his time in the house, but he can’t find a single thing to be mad about. He kisses the top of Louis’ head, smiling as his hair tickles his mouth. “It doesn’t feel like I lost anything.”

End Notes

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