The Compulsion to Find Love

by Toomanytears

Summary

The most prestigious English third-level institution, Candling University, accepts omega students for the first time and Louis Tomlinson applies with bright eyes and brighter ambitions. There he encounters personal obstacles, traditional mindsets and a beautiful boy who inverts every prejudice Louis has ever known.

Notes

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Thank you very much for taking the time to take a look at my fanfic! I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you have any queries at all please don't hesitate to post a comment below.

Portuguese version: here!
Once Upon A Time

The tide whisks you away from me, cursing and roaring, I wait for you,

Biding my unsavoury time with senseless stories and unimaginable fairy-tales

Until finally

You

Arrive home to relieve me of my troubles

And replace them with the delicate blossom of intimacy

That characterises us so completely

The rain pounded against the windows of the train carriage in heavy, persistent droplets as it journeyed through the English countryside. Louis found himself gazing out of the window on a bitterly cold morning in early September. The rolling hills and grazing cattle enclosed by weather-worn fences passed him from his position curled up in the corner seat of the final carriage. He sipped the steaming cup of tea clutched in his hand and watched the tendrils of steam rise up, fogging his glasses and obscuring his vision slightly.

Louis' luggage - with all of his belongings packed tightly inside - rattled reassuringly as the train slowed down to allow more passengers aboard; an elderly female alpha with a distinctly floral scent accompanying her young grandchild, two male betas chatting about the atrocious weather and a middle aged omega who sat primly on a nearby seat. Louis smiled at her, noticing a faintly earthy smell wafting towards him, and she reciprocated enthusiastically before turning her attention to a thick novel she extracted from her bag.

Louis' mother, who was sat opposite him, kept smiling anxiously, as though trying to reassure herself. "We'll miss you terribly, darling," she said, folding his hands in her lap. Often, when she felt overwhelmed or nervous, she twisted her wedding band as a self-soothing mechanism. She had once confessed to Louis that she found strength and comfort in the knowledge that she always had her mate by his side through difficult periods.

"If there are any problems at all make sure you contact the campus officers," his father said. He straightened his back and pushed his glasses up his nose, an indication that he planned on lecturing Louis. "Even if someone says something about your status or makes you feel uncomfortable in any way, you must let them the officer know. Remember, the law is on your side even if many alphas aren't."

"Don't worry about me, Dad," Louis said easily. "Everything will be fine. I'm going to be one of the first omegas to go here - they'll have to give us the best facilities they can provide to save their asses."

His parents exchanged a dark look.

"I'm not sure I share your confidence, honey," his mother said. "It's not omega facilities that we're
most concerned about; it's the way you'll be treated."

Louis' father fixed him with a stare, voice firm as he recited the same words he had told Louis ever since he received his acceptance letter the previous month. "Louis, you've been very lucky. Your mother and I have made it our priority to ensure you're given the same opportunities any alpha or beta could ever be given. You attended the best omega-tolerant school in the country. We've never restricted you because of your gender- "

"I know, and I appreciate that, but- "

"Let me finish," he warned, leaning forward in his seat. He spoke more quietly as he became conscious of the other passengers eavesdropping on their conversation. "People at university won't afford you those same luxuries. Candling University is... traditional in more ways than you might believe. It's a historic, prestigious school, with conservative lecturers and board members. The fact that they opened up places for omegas at all... well, let's just say that it was completely unprecedented."

He sighed and his mother squeezed his shoulder. "I don't doubt that you'll get a great education there and impeccable omega facilities. I just-" he turned to glance at his wife, placing a hand around her waist, "your mother and I need you to understand that you're going to be treated differently than you're used to and you have to just accept that." His tone, resigned but firm, revealed to Louis just how anxious he truly was.

"Alright, but I'm not going to accept being treated as inferior in any way," he said louder than he had intended; he had attracted the interest of the other passengers. The two betas paused their conversation to listen to him, one of them sneering. Louis turned his attention back to his parents.

"And we wouldn't want you to accept that, darling," his mother assured. She smiled proudly, her eyes glittering as weak sunlight seeped into the carriage. "We're just warning you of the obstacles that you'll undoubtedly face over the next couple of weeks. I'm sure that you'll settle into a nice routine soon enough, though. The other students and lecturers will just have become accustomed to having omegas on campus first."

Her words couldn't calm the nerves that lurked in Louis' thoughts. He tried to distract himself with any positive thought he could muster, trying to ignore the scenarios he kept imagining.

They ate chicken sandwiches, and basil and tomato soup on the train and Louis' mother had brought him a slice of the homemade cheesecake he was so fond of for dessert. They were sated and comfortable throughout the journey, Louis' thoughts wandering towards the societies he planned to join, the other omegas he would be sharing a dormitory with as well as the magnificent campus he had been dreaming about. He had spent weeks admiring the Victorian architecture, the enormous library and the enchanting grounds, complete with gardens, fountains and historic statues. Naturally, his dreams had romanticised the reality, but he found immersing himself in such dreams was an excellent source of comfort whenever his thoughts unhelpfully supplied images of omegas being harassed, stalked or abused. Louis sighed, reciting the importance of remaining sanguine to himself; if he believed that his time at Candling would be without difficulty, perhaps that dream would materialise.

The train arrived in central London in the early afternoon. When they reached the bustling street outside the station the rain had stopped but the dark clouds and biting wind promised more unfavourable weather. Louis clasped the buttons on his denim jacket and held his cup of tea, still radiating some warmth. He placed his rucksack over his shoulder and his father carried his larger suitcases before they made their way through the crowds.
They passed frantic business-people wielding umbrellas like weapons, confused holidaymakers complaining about the rain and queues outside restrooms, and wide-eyed families pointing and gazing at the sights of London.

His presence received a variety of reactions as they quickly walked through the city; curious glances, unapologetic sniffing, pointed fingers from little toddlers. Louis tightened his jaw and set his gaze on the back of his father's head, unwilling to meet their stares. Male omegas were uncommon - approaching three per cent of the overall population and merely thirty five per cent of the entire omega population - but they were not unheard of. He still felt like an anomaly wherever he went.

Having spent both his childhood and secondary education in omega friendly environments, venturing into London - where opinions about omegas could be conservative or radical - meant that Louis needed to proceed with caution. Fortunately, they managed to reach the bus station that would take them directly to the university with minor difficulty.

Aboard the bus, the beta driver smiled derisively at Louis but declined to comment. Although betas could identify the gender of another through smell alone, they were unable to detect mood intensity in their mates as alphas and omegas could. Alphas had a heightened sense of smell, a trait which traditionally allowed them to distinguish between potential mates and competitors. Omegas were susceptible to identifying emotional intensity. Contrary to popular belief, no gender could detect emotions but alphas and omegas possessed the ability to perceive mood intensity.

They walked through the bus, his mother attempting to engage in conversation with him but his attention was focused on the audible gasp from one of the passengers. An alpha speaking obnoxiously into a headpiece shot him a look of undisguised contempt and aggressively opened a window on the bus. Louis rolled his eyes and coughed loudly as an unsavoury smell filled his nostrils. His father, a perceptive beta, could detect the change and placed a hand on his son's shoulder and tried to distract him, pointing out the dense crowds gathering outside the approaching bus stop.

Louis' heart climbed to his throat and swallowed uncomfortably, redundantly adjusting the strap of his rucksack as an ornate sign reading 'Candling University' came into view. He smiled nervously at his mother.

"This is it, honey," she said excitedly, bright eyes reflecting those of her son. They got off the bus, hauling Louis' luggage, his father muttering unsavoury swear words about his son's wardrobe, and walked wide-eyed towards the main entrance.

The manicured front lawn was filled with students and parents alike, small groups of freshmen with tour guides and returning students shouting greetings at their friends after a long summer. Louis and his parents were immediately approached by an enthusiastic beta with kind eyes wearing a name-tag reading 'Student Ambassador: Niall'.

"Nice to meet you, mate," he said. "I've been told to show you to your dorm whether you need help or not," he chuckled.

They passed through the thickest crowd outside the entrance building and underneath a tall archway where a group of female alphas stared at him unabashedly. Louis focused on the boy accompanying him while his parents followed the pair, both in conversation about the enormity of the university grounds. Niall spent the trip through the campus gardens, past the arts and humanities centre and to the newly-converted omega dormitory building taking animatedly about his course.
"I'm studying music, myself," he said. "Never been too academically inclined but I was offered a music scholarship for this year - my second year - so I reckon I'm doing something right." He brought his hand to the back of his neck modestly.

"Were you given accommodation here as part of it?" he asked, thinking of the astronomical fees his parents were obliged to pay.

Niall shook his head. "I'm staying in an apartment about a ten minute walk from campus this year," he said, pointing towards the general direction of his apartment. "Unless you've been appointed a roommate you get along with, you'll want to do the same next year, too," he advised.

Louis nodded and shared his uncertainty about how he would adapt to living with another person. Niall recounted a number of amusing run-ins he had the previous year with his beta roommate, Archie. ("I swear, mate, he was so intimidating - wouldn't talk to me for the entire first week. If I hadn't seen the size of his dick when he was wanking off, I would have thought he was an alpha!")

Louis decided that he would make an effort to befriend Niall. He hadn't shown any uneasiness about Louis' gender and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about learning more about Louis. He actively engaged in conversation with him, talking about his interests and the clubs and societies he planned to join.

"I played football at school as a defender so I'd really like to join the team here," Louis said, prompting Niall to speak at length about the devastatingly low position of the university football team in the league.

They walked towards the steps to the entrance of the omega dormitories. The baronial building had an attractive facade an was located directly beside a small, enclosed rose garden. In the foyer a long desk covered in large folders and university brochures was stationed with four female betas chatting excitedly behind it. They looked up in unison when Niall, Louis and his parents arrived. They were met with welcoming smiles and cheerful waves.

Niall hesitated in front of the desk, nodding towards one of the betas approaching them. "Right, this is where I leave you," he said, smiling at Louis. "I really hope you'll enjoy it here, mate." He hesitated slightly before nodding to himself. "I just want to tell you that I think it's great omegas are finally allowed to enrol at Candling."

He smiled warmly and left with a wave over his shoulder and before Louis could utter a word of thanks one of the girls from the desk approached him, a brochure and map clutched in her hand.

"Hi there, I'm Leigh," she said, smiling between Louis and his parents. He immediately warmed to her, entranced by her musky smell which was unusually potent for a beta. "Could I get your name please?" She crossed his name off a list of the fifty omegas that had been offered a place that year - "we regret that the numbers aren't higher but it's quite promising for the first year" - before briskly leading them up the winding staircase through the omega dormitory building.

"There will only be forty nine other students living here," she said as they passed doors, each separated by the names inscribed there but otherwise identical, "but we expect figures to rise significantly next year. It's a major aim of our Student President to achieve a gender balance here in Candling that's reflective of the overall population."

"What are the figures like at the moment?" his mother asked.

"Well, aside from improving omega numbers and making admittance for them easier, beta numbers are higher than most English universities but, naturally, alpha numbers are the highest,"
she said.

Betas accounted for over half the general population but alphas dominated the top universities and occupations with the most prestige. In the fields of politics, business and law alphas were found in the majority, a contentious issue which raised questions about adequate gender representation in decision-making sectors of society.

"And this is your room," she said, opening the final door on the third floor corridor. A small placard reading 'Louis Tomlinson, Year One, Law. Zayn Malik, Year One, Art' adorned the dark wooden door. Louis and his parents filed into the room behind her, nodding appreciatively at the bright, airy room. The walls were painted pale blue, two single beds separated by a small table with brochures and manuals stacked in a neat pile.

There was a large window complete with cream curtains behind the beds overlooking the expansive grounds. There was an adjoining bathroom with white marble tiles and a vast array of specialised omega products in a small hamper. Louis derived a deep sense of comfort from the fact the Candling had readily embraced their first omega students. He re-joined his parents in the room as Leigh was explaining the omega facilities provided in the dormitories.

"Each individual room has a lock setting that deters anyone entering except the omegas living there. When an omega has a-" she paused slightly, blushing and meeting Louis' eye determinedly, as though desperate to convey her acceptance of omega issues, "a heat, his or her room will be provided with extra precautionary measures including scent diffusers.

"All of the brochures include an omega-specific section which outlines the newly implemented protection laws for omegas on campus. When you look through the brochures you'll also see that there are alpha only and beta only societies where specific gender issues and requirements are discussed. I'm sure Niall mentioned it but we're hoping that some of the omega freshmen will set up an omega society too. As one of the Student Ambassadors," she said, proudly pointing towards her badge, "we'd really appreciate feedback on the omega facilities here."

Louis was astounded at her unequivocal acceptance of him and his gender. He couldn't help but smile at her. "Thank you very much," he said earnestly. "Everything you've shown us so far is fantastic. I really didn't expect Candling to launch such a great campaign for us."

She smiled sadly. "Neither did I, to be honest," she admitted. "I'm a junior and it wasn't until the end of term last year - when Candling was announced as an omega-tolerant university - that I heard of any new initiatives to accept omegas. This building here," she said, indicating around her, "was originally the quarters for lecturers and professors until three months ago."

Her phone rang in her pocket and she immediately apologised. "I have to get back downstairs for the next freshman but please don't hesitate to talk to any of the students wearing badges - we're all here to help you settle in," she said brightly before waving to him and his parents.

Louis breathed a sigh of astonishment, sharing a look with his father. "I wasn't expecting that at all," he said, falling onto one of the beds and removing his shoes.

His mother smiled at him and sat beside him, placing an arm around his shoulder. "I'm so relieved, Louis," she sighed. "I can sleep comfortably tonight knowing that you'll be sharing with another male omega."

His father nodded slowly before interrupted their musing, thoughtful expression on his face. "I've only met betas on campus so far, though. It seems as though Candling purposefully avoided appointing alphas to guide the freshman students around campus."
Louis' mother tilted her head. "That makes sense, I suppose," she said. "Candling wouldn't want to station alpha Student Ambassadors near the omega dormitories if they want to prove their commitment to provide nonthreatening facilities for omegas."

"In theory that makes sense but, when you think about it separating omega freshmen from other alphas on the first day will do more harm than good," Louis mused. "I mean, we're going to be attending the same lecturers so why not just put forward the most exemplary alphas? Show that Candling alphas have embraced changing attitudes towards omegas rather than creating a division between the genders."

The door opened slowly as Louis' father was about to respond. Louis breathed in a pungent smell - similar to hot rose infused candle wax - before a handsome male omega entered the room. His black hair was styled and he wore an mild expression. His effortlessly casual demeanour changed as he smiled shyly at the group, nodding at Louis before introducing himself as Zayn.

"Are you here with your parents, Zayn, dear?" Louis heard his mother ask.

He shook his head. "Nah, my parents are working and the journey's so long I figured it would be best to take the train early this morning from Bradford."

"Us too," Louis said. "I've been to Bradford for a footie match before."

Zayn smiled in recognition. "Odsal Stadium, is it? Yeah, my dad drags me to a few of those games every year. If he's going to have an omega son, he at least wants one who's interested in sports, 'ccording to him."

"Right," his father sighed, "I suppose that's our cue to leave, Louis."

Louis' spotted his parents share a look, evidently aware that the two omegas would soon feel the need to speak with one another privately and openly. It was in omegas' nature to seek out people of the same gender and they formed unyielding, equally-reliant bonds which could compete with even the strongest mate bonds. Omega relationships were the topic of extensive research, though their identifiable demeanour around each other and highly attuned connections were often romanticised by society. Their natural gentleness and the reverence with which omegas were inclined to treat each other was equated with innocence and exploited by the alpha community.

"You'll be careful, won't you, son?" Louis' father whispered. He clapped with a firm hand on his shoulder.

Louis' reply was muffled in his father's shirt as he pulled him in for a brief hug. His mother was watching him with a watery smile, tenacious grip on her handbag as though restraining herself from embracing her son. She was determined to speak to him before she dissolved into tears.

"Louis, my darling," she said, stepping in front of him and wrapping her arms around his slender frame. "I just want you to know that we're incredibly proud of you. We want this to be the best experience of your life and we don't want anything - not your gender or anyone else's opinions - to threaten that. We'll-" she paused, sniffing loudly before laughing at the tears collecting in her eyes, "we'll miss you terribly."

Louis embraced her, breathing in the baked goods and honey that defined her scent.

"Don't worry, mum," he whispered, keenly aware of his roommate observing them from where he sat on the second bed. "I'll call you tonight after the introductory lecture for freshmen."

She extracted them from the hug and, closing her eyes and breathing deeply, composed herself. His
parents exchanged well wishes with Zayn before leaving the dormitory.

"Your folks seem great," he offered.

"They are. I'm-" he hesitated, swallowing thickly, "I'm going to miss them."

Zayn smiled at him before standing from his position on the bed to embrace his roommate quickly, unable to ignore his quivering lip and shy demeanour.

"Come on, then," he encouraged, stepping back from the hug, "let's start unpacking before we have to leave for the lecture."

Louis nodded in agreement and the two omegas sat facing each other on the separate beds.

"So, you're studying art, then?" he asked, pointing towards one of the small bags on Zayn's bed from which he was extracting sketchbooks and pencils.

Zayn nodded, smiling at his art supplies like a mother would smile at her newborn child.

"I've loved art ever since I was young. My mother's an omega and she was determined to send me to university because she was never given that opportunity. I think she was disappointed when I told her the degree I wanted to choose but once I got accepted here, she didn't really care."

Louis smiled at him. He suddenly remembered the astonishment and pride on his parents' faces when he read his acceptance letter aloud. He heard his voice crack and his finger tremble.

"Well, you know my parents are both betas," Louis said, removing a small pile of clothing from his suitcase and dividing the items to place in the wardrobe. "They've always tried to make sure I have the same opportunities a son of any other gender would but they never really experienced the kind of systematic discrimination that we. They try to understand but...it's not the same, is it?"

Zayn shook his head and smiled privately. "You speak like a true lawyer," he said, amused. Louis raised an eyebrow in question and Zayn pointed towards the door. "Your degree in written on the sign."

"Found it difficult to choose my degree course, though," Louis said, opening his rucksack to remove his stationery and textbooks. "I considered gender studies for a while, but I eventually decided that law would allow me a certain path towards making a difference for omegas. When I pick my law modules next semester, I think I'm going to specialise my degree in gender equality."

Zayn piqued an eyebrow. "That's incredible, mate. At least I know that my degree will have a beta majority but choosing the most alpha-esque degree in the first year Candling open places for omegas," he said incredulously, shaking his head, "that's brave."
The Introduction

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The lecture theatre was filled with students in the interval preceding the official introductory ceremony when Louis and Zayn walked in. Tall rows of seats were occupied by freshmen, the atmosphere alive with introductions, chatter and nervous laughter. The vast array of scents permeating the room overpowered the omegas' senses and they instinctively leaned closer to each other as they waded through the crowds.

They approached two vacant seats beside a group of betas and Louis smiled at the boy beside him who appeared too anxious to register his gender and was instead staring intently at the vacant lecturn.

"Do you think this'll take long?" Zayn asked, leaning comfortably to speak with his roommate and subtly breathe in his grounding scent.

"It could be about an hour or so," Louis mused as the President of Candling, Sir Stephen James, a middle-aged, tight-lipped alpha with a permanent scowl approached the lecturn.

"I hear the main reason they've begun accepting omegas is because James married an omega over the summer," Louis overheard an beta say obnoxiously loudly. "Apparently she threatened to shove his knot elsewhere if he didn't change the admission restrictions for omegas."

Louis tried to suppress a smile. He had heard a similar rumour when the announcement was first made but was reluctant to believe it. He voiced his thoughts to Zayn who whispered sagely that he found it unlikely such an opinionated President would acquiesce to the wishes of his omega so readily.

"First year students settle down and take your seats, please," a female voice rang through the lecture theatre. She stood behind the podium, hands placed on her hips and reminding Louis vaguely of his mother whenever he misbehaved. When the chatter had subsided, she began speaking again, voice clear and commanding.

"Good morning, students. My name is Celine Michaels, your Vice President. On behalf of the staff and students of Candling University, I would like to formally extend a very warm welcome to all of you," she said, opening her arms to gesture to the theatre at large. "This year, Candling has accepted one thousand first year students and expanded our degree courses in foreign languages, science and technology. We've also experienced a change in the university board members and, by consequence, received donations from graduates and parents alike."

Louis heard whispers behind him about the source of such donations before she continued, unperturbed.

"Today's agenda is very tight and we have much to discuss regarding accommodation, degree syllabi and university societies. That will take place in a number of separate workshops throughout the afternoon," she explained. "Firstly, though, I would ask you to extend a round of applause for your President Sir Stephen James," she said, stepping down gracefully from the podium and smiling at her colleague as he approached the lecturn.

The alpha nodded curtly at the applause before raising his hand. His ability to silence the students
so easily spoke volumes about his character.

"Thank you, thank you all," he said self-importantly, "I'm delighted to be back for the beginning of a monumental new year at Candling. It seems like only yesterday I was sat in these very seats, surrounded by my fellow peers and itching to begin studying, to contribute to society and make a difference." He spoke obsequiously about himself and his professional success, citing his influencers and the personal relationships he formed with renowned doctors and leading politicians throughout his career.

"Typical alpha," Zayn muttered when he spoke at length of his appointment as President the previous year. Louis rolled his eyes in agreement, observing his surroundings and glancing at the beta students sitting near him as a distraction. The boy beside him was clinging onto every word that spilled out of the President's mouth while two girls seated the row in front of him were quietly discussing the interior design of their dormitory.

"Quite enough about my colourful career, though," James said, chuckling to himself while a thousand students stared at him blankly, unamused. "A central reason for my speaking to you all was the need to address the major progression Candling has made in terms of social justice," he continued, piquing Louis' interest. "As you're aware already, we have taken the decision to accept omegas into Candling for the first time in the university's history," he said. "This year we have fifty omegas studying degrees ranging from music to mathematical science and we're determined to make them an integral part of Candling."

"He talks about us as if we're not even here," Louis muttered to Zayn.

"Now, I can see quite a large group sitting directly in front of me here," he said, standing pointedly at the students opposite the lectern. Louis immediately recoiled at his patronising tone. "Why don't you stand up, omegas so we can get a good look at you?" he suggested with a mocking smile.

Louis was scandalised, turning to his roommate and sharing a look of disbelief at his behaviour. The President of Candling, who had spent the last three months publicly campaigning for omega access to university was imperiously leering at omega students.

As the group of twenty omegas stood from their seats in response to the alpha's proposal, Louis turned his attention to the others scattered throughout the theatre.

"Come on, now," he encouraged, motioning for them to stand. Although he found his tone cloying and his behaviour unacceptably condescending, Louis was obliged to follow his instruction. He and Zayn tentatively rose from their seats and looked at the ground, keenly aware of the eyes boring into them, as though the entire theatre was suddenly given permission to gawk at the male omegas.

"Wonderful," he said, nodding appreciatively before clapping his hands to hold the attention of the students. "Now that we've identified our omega population, I would ask you all to familiarise yourselves with them and strive to integrate yourselves with them. We all know of the special relationship omegas form with one another but it is one of the conditions our board of directors included at the end of last term that omegas be fully embraced in the student body."

He smiled at each small group of omegas scattered throughout the theatre - though each was determinedly avoiding his gaze - as though he was affording them a great privilege. He instructed them to take their seats again and Louis collapsed into his own, cursing his omega instincts to follow orders despite his rational thought.

"Along with promoting gender balance among our student population," he continued, "our Vice President also mentioned that we have received a number of generous donations to fund further
medicinal and scientific research this term. We're thrilled to inform you all that the International Gender Research Foundation have chosen Candling University along with fourteen others worldwide to conduct a major research project."

There was an explosion of excited whispering in the lecture theatre, students exchanging rumours about the research and estimating the figures of such a donation.

"Quiet!" he demanded, commanding voice reverberating around the theatre. He refrained from using his alpha voice, the resonance of which forces the omega at which the instruction is directed to submit, but Louis felt his head drop nevertheless.

"As I was saying," he said, regaining his composure, "first year students studying medicine, psychiatry and law will be eligible to apply to work on this project. The details of what the gender research will entail will be disclosed to those students only."

He glanced at the row of lectures and professors and nodded before continuing. "Now we're going to have our Student President, third year medicine student Harry Styles speak about about the Students' Union before you divide into groups for the campus tour."

James stepped down from the podium as an alpha of tall statute with dark hair and a confident stride walked towards him. They shook hands firmly and even at a distance Louis could recognise the typical display of dominance by both men; they maintained eye contact, stood with rigid shoulders and aggressively shook hands. The younger man then approached the lectern.

"Good afternoon, first years and welcome to Candling," he said. His voice was devastatingly deep and he spoke at a languid, unhurried pace. "My name is Harry, your Student President which means that I oversee every student society, club and non-academic initiative including distribution of student funding, accommodation and, most recently, advocating for the admittance of omega students."

Louis shared a look with Zayn, both omegas remembering the extensive campaign launched by the University to publicise its removal of the obstacles which previously prevented omegas from applying.

"As Student President," he continued, "it is imperative that I represent your views and reflect them in my work. Although you all didn't have the chance to elect me, I promise to make it my priority to understand your concerns and desires to improve student life here at Candling."

Louis was decidedly impressed. Even as the alpha listed the support facilities and the ridiculous number of societies monotonously, Louis couldn't help but sit upright and listen carefully to each promise that he made and every opinion he expressed.

Harry hesitated slightly before he spoke with a slight frown, Louis noticed, as though he was concentrating solely on the words escaping his mouth but didn't wholly agree with all of them.

"I've also been asked to welcome our new omega students, in particular. I can't wait to work with you all to endeavour to make Candling more appropriate and friendly to you all," he said, placing his palms on the lectern in front of him.

"I'm sure that's not all he'd like to do with them," Louis heard a beta whisper to his friend who guffawed unabashedly and turned to wink at Louis.

The lectures from various professors and members of staff continued throughout the afternoon and Louis learned about topics ranging from the founding of the university to the opening hours of the
main dining hall. It was five o'clock before the final information seminar about the sports facilities was delivered, receiving a particularly loud round of applause from the relieved students. Louis and Zayn stood, the younger boy stretching his back muscles, and made their way towards the exit, speaking excitedly about the information they had learned.

"To be honest, I expected the students here to be far more pretentious," Louis said as they discussed the speeches given by current students, many of whom were nothing but friendly and welcoming.

"I suppose I did too," Zayn replied. "My parents are from a working class background and the only reason I was offered a place is because of the number of art competitions I've won over the years. I guess Candling thought they'd give me a chance so I was offered a half scholarship for the first year," he explained.

"I had grown up with this view of sanctimonious upper class alphas pervading these kind of universities," Louis sighed, "so naturally I was drawn to them. The unattainable is attractive, I suppose," he said, chuckling self-deprecatingly.

"Well, you were certainly right with one of your prejudices. Stephen James scares the shit out of me," Zayn muttered and Louis laughed, nudging his roommate for speaking too loudly. "The Student President seems decent though," he mused, "for an alpha, that is."

Louis nodded in agreement, thoughts returning to the captivating rhythm of his voice and the way he could hold the attention of an entire theatre so comfortably. It scared him how willingly he would have responded to Harry, should he have behaved like the University President. As an omega, his natural instinct was to obey the demands of an alpha but he had spent eighteen years attempting to resist his omega tendencies. He fully embraced certain aspects of his gender but found that his personal desires were often in conflict with his omega reactions. He physically shook his head to free himself of his thoughts and forced himself to focus on Zayn's commentary as they were led to the foyer and divided into smaller groups.

They were jostled around by taller students in the foyer, a smaller area than the main lecture theatre and Louis found himself gripping to Zayn's belt to stay together. He was inundated with unfamiliar scents to process and felt his roommate link their hands reassuringly.

"Right, everyone in this immediate area follow me, please," he heard a low toned voice call above the chatter. Zayn pulled him towards the source with the purpose of escaping the overcrowded area.

"You okay, Louis?" he asked, concern evident in his voice as they followed a group of twenty students outside.

"I'm fine, thanks," he said, smiling appreciatively at him. "I just couldn't identify your scent for a minute there."

Zayn nodded and they approached a small, ornate garden where the group had gathered around their student guide. The other first year students parted to allow the two omegas to reach the front of the group. Louis audibly gasped when he saw Harry standing directly in front of him, green eyes gleaming in the afternoon sun. His skin was pale and unblemished and contrasted starkly with the dark shirt he wore. Curiously, however, Louis could not detect the alpha's scent despite their close proximity.

Harry, however, seemed highly affected by the two omegas' presence, stopping mid-introduction to grip the loose strands of hair at the nape of his neck and flaring his nostrils. Upon hearing the
nervous laughter from the other beta and alpha students, he pulled himself out of his reverie, smiling at the group and glancing at Zayn and Louis.

"Right. Well. I'm Harry, as you probably know," he said awkwardly. "And I'll be - erm - showing you around the campus. If you have any queries at all, please don't hesitate to ask. I'm here to help."

He turned on his heel and Louis heard him take a steadying breath before he led the group through the university gardens. He narrated the journey through winding mazes, manicured hedges and fountains, referencing the best spots for a quiet study break and the areas where shade could be found during the summertime. He remained the picture of professionalism despite the noticeable effect the presence of the two omegas had on him.

Louis was enraptured by his speech, the way he seemed to take genuine pride in the university grounds and enjoy revealing his favourite aspects to the first years. There was something about Harry, however, that irked him. Louis had spent countless hours avoiding the intense stare of alphas, rejecting their advances and displeasing them with his unconventional behaviour. With Harry, however, he sought his attention. He wanted Harry to pierce him with the same stare he directed at the other students; to observe him, breathe his scent as any other alpha would. It was not in an alpha's nature to be coy or reserved and yet Harry couldn't maintain the eye contact Louis sought.

Louis despised his omega tendency to search for attention and approval from possible mates. In the majority of cases, he was able to avoid succumbing to this instinct because most alphas paid him attention regardless of whether he actively sought it or not. Harry, however, was frustratingly diplomatic. He divided his time evenly while answering questions, treated each student equally and, despite his role as a guide, did not exercise his dominance over any of the alphas in the group that challenged him.

"And this is where our tour ends!" Harry said enthusiastically as he turned towards the group trailing behind him. They had paused outside the enormous main dining hall where delicious smells were wafting towards them from the open windows of the kitchen.

"If you have any more questions, I'll be happy to answer them," he continued. "Otherwise you can head on inside for dinner. Any students staying on campus can eat here daily free of charge and students living off campus will need to pay a small fee which you can discuss with Marissa, our head chef."

Another group of students approached them and Louis heard the infectious laughter of Niall, the beta he had met that morning.

"This here is my favourite place on the entire campus," he said, pointing animatedly at the dining hall and prompting a chuckle out of Harry.

"There and Morrisey's Pub, Horan! And don't think I haven't forgotten about the pint you owe me," Harry called as Niall laughed good-naturedly.

Louis saw the two friends walk towards the entrance as their tour groups mingled, many joining them in the dining hall. Zayn turned to Louis and they silently agreed to have dinner together, the younger omega's stomach rumbling after a strenuous evening walking throughout the campus much to Zayn's amusement.

"What?" Louis questioned mock indignantly at Zayn's chuckles as they joined a long queue in the high-ceilinged dining hall. "My stomach rumbles when I'm hungry. There should be alphas
pushing each other over to feed me," he said jokingly as the two omegas collapsed into giggles at
the thought.

"Damn straight, princess. What can I get you?"

Their laughter subsided immediately and Louis stilled before turning to face a dark-haired alpha
with a curved lip and sharp, protruding cheekbones. An appealing rustic scent surrounded him.

"I'm sorry," Louis gasped, breathing through his mouth to focus on responding to the alpha rather
than allowing himself to inhale the alpha's scent. "I was just, erm, just joking with my friend here. I
didn't mean it literally."

The alpha stared unabashedly at Louis, eyes roaming his small frame and hands clasped behind his
back - a traditionally submissive gesture when an omega wished to placate an alpha - before
noding.

"Whatever you say, princess. Let me know if you change your mind," he said before turning back
to his friend. Louis breathed a sigh of relief that the alpha didn't persist and turned his attention to
his roommate whose look of disbelief reflected his own feelings. He understood that it was in an
alpha's nature to feed and supply gifts for their mate but he couldn't believe that the alpha thought
that he - a liberal university student - would employ such old-fashioned gender roles to simply be
fed.

Louis detested when alphas took advantage of natural omega urges and had always resisted the
 Desire to exploit alpha tendencies himself - notably to provide for their match in terms of material
items to compete with omega expressions of love through care and nurturing. He didn't want this
alpha to think of him as the kind of boy that would allow alphas to take him to dinner to boost his
ego.

Omegas who fully embraced the power that they held over alphas by epitomising traditional
omega qualities of weakness and incompetence were known as sirens. They were compared to
mythical creatures whose voices could send sailors to shipwreck through the sheer power they held
over alphas. Such omegas were stigmatised by the omega community. Their tactics to gain a mate
or satisfy their natural desires went against the cause of gender equality and improving omega
rights. Louis wasn't opposed to their sexual promiscuity but the way sirens portrayed themselves as
weak and unintelligent made his skin crawl.

"I can't believe he thought you were a siren," Zayn whispered as they received generous portions of
lasagne, salad and roasted rosemary potatoes. They walked towards the end a long, dark wooden
table filled with betas and sat opposite each other.

"Not the first time it's happened," Louis sighed, moaning around the steaming lasagne on his fork.
"And it definitely won't be the last."

Zayn nodded and the two omegas fell into comfortable conversation about the societies they
planned to join the following morning. The students from second, third and fourth year would all
return and university groups would have the opportunity to advertise their clubs and societies to the
freshmen. Louis fully engaged in the conversation, learning more about his roommate's eccentric
interests and revelling in his witty comments. However, he found his attention wavering when a
tall figure with tumbling curls passed them by, surrounded by alpha friends. Louis sighed loudly,
frustrated at the alpha's non-existent scent and infuriated at his own vulnerability to the only alpha
to disregard his gender.
my tumblr!
I would love to hear your thoughts so far. Comments and kudos are hugely appreciated!
The following morning arrived with bright sunlight peaking through the cotton curtains in the omegas' dormitory. They arose early, thoughts revolving around the activities that would be organised for the freshmen to join societies and meet other students.

Louis pulled on a white, thickly-knitted jumper and dark jeans despite his roommate's urges that the weather was supposed to be warm that day.

"I get cold easily," he defended, blowing warm air on his hands to punctuate his point.

"Okay," Zayn sighed from where he stood in front of the mirror, "just don't let any alphas see you doing that or they'll be stripping down to cover you in their coats and scarves." He combed his hair meticulously as Louis wrapped a striped scarf around his neck.

"They're warm-blooded," Louis said, waving a hand in dismissal. He sat on the bed to wait for the younger omega. "What're you going to sign up for?" Louis asked.

"The Visual Arts Society," he replied immediately, shrugging on a leather jacket and tilting his body to check his appearance.

"Aren't you already studying art?" Louis teased.

"An artist must never limit his exposure to his craft, Louis," he said, feigning indignation. Louis burst out laughing at Zayn's attempt at an upper-class accent, standing up to ruffle his roommate's styled hair.

"Whatever you say," he chuckled as Zayn pushed him off. They walked out of their dormitory, making sure to lock the door carefully and activate the omega recognition sensor as the brochure had instructed.

"Football," he replied easily, "I can't wait to get back on the field again. I basically lived and breathed it at school."

"You must be a great player, then," Zayn said, opening the entrance door. The September rays of sun shone and danced over the water in the foundation of the square opposite the omega dormitories. A strong gust of wind, however, confirmed Louis' decision to wear thick clothing.

"I'm pretty decent," Louis said, shrugging modestly, "I was awful when I first started a couple of years ago, though. My coach absolutely hated me, too. He made it his mission to torment me; always pointing out my poor shots and blaming my inferior skills on my gender."

Zayn smiled sympathetically, squeezing his friend's shoulder as they walked across the courtyard.
"I was determined to prove him wrong, though," he said with a perceptible gleam in his eye. "I trained relentlessly, long hours before and after our weekly practice sessions. I improved and, eventually, I got on the senior school team on merit alone."

Zayn made a noise of satisfaction. "I'm sure your coach wasn't too happy about that."

Louis shook his head, smiling in satisfaction at the memory.

They fell into comfortable silence as they roamed the grounds of the campus. Louis noticed that the crowds became more dense as they approached Connelly Place, a huge expanse of grass at the heart of the university, surrounded by sycamore trees and benches bathed in shade. Three of the alpha residencies, all constructed in the Victorian style, stood nearby, perfectly maintained with flowers spilling out of windowsill pots.

Connelly Place was alive with students bustling around, shouting orders, erecting banners and adding the final touches to their stalls advertising the university societies and clubs. They had half an hour to spend in the morning sunlight before the event would officially begin and decided to have breakfast beforehand. Zayn spotted a small café situated beside one of the residencies and they approached it, Louis rambling about his morning cup of tea.

There was a short queue inside the café where a flustered beta was frantically pouring coffee for the impatient customers. Louis immediately noticed two male omegas peering into the glass case of delicacies at the end of the line.

"Hi, there," Louis said, smiling warmly at them. Neither he nor Zayn had met any of the other males of their gender at the university and they were anxious to get to know them. They were the same height as Louis and Zayn, with typical omega builds, though that was where the similarities ended. Both boys had appealing, faintly earthy scents and their bright smiles were a breath of fresh air to Louis who received unwelcome stares wherever he went.

"I'm William," the taller of the two, with auburn hair and glasses, said, extending his hand. "It's so good to meet you both," he said earnestly.

"Likewise," Zayn said, the rare smile on his face reaching his eyes as they shook hands. The four boys chatted comfortably, exchanging stories about their respective first days at Candling. They learned that William was studying English literature while his companion, a quiet, dark-haired omega with a tendency to dart his eyes nervously at the group of alphas seated in the corner of the café, was studying engineering.

"Mark here is an brilliant mathematician. I've always known he'd study something like that. He's certainly got the brains for it," William gushed as they sat opposite each other at a round table beside one of the tall windows. "He was offered a full scholarship to attend Candling."

The omega blushed, swatting his friend's arm good-naturedly. Louis took a liking to them both and began speaking with Mark about construction work in the London area. It was clear that, just like Louis, the omega was passionate about his degree course but needed coaxing to open up about himself.

After twenty minutes of munching jam scones and sipping milky tea (Louis' preferred order) a group of three alphas entered the café, laughing boisterously. Mark's demeanour changed instantly; he ducked his head to avoid their glances, hand tightening around his mug of tea.

"Mark!" a voice exclaimed as footsteps approached their table.
"Shit, it's him," the omega muttered to his friend. Louis and Zayn, unsure how to react simply watched the interaction develop in front of them with wary eyes.

"How have you been, Mark?" the alpha asked, placing his hands on the table, teapot spilling over in the process. Louis observed the alpha. He was attractive, with tousled hair and broad shoulders, and seemed enamoured by the omega in front of him.

"I'm very well, thank you," Mark replied stiffly. Louis could sense his discomfort but the alpha had done nothing to aggravate his fellow omega. He had experienced many uncomfortable conversations with persistent alphas, however, and was ready to support his fellow omega if necessary.

"Good, good," the alpha nodded, bringing a hand to the nape of his neck and smiling at Mark. "I've been thinking we should meet up, you know. You're father mentioned that you're interested in theatre. We should go together sometime," he proposed, leaving little space for argument.

"Sure," the omega said, earning him a disbelieving look from William. "I mean, yes. I'll, erm, I'll think about it," he amended, eyes trained on the puddle of tea on the table.

The alpha looked vaguely disgruntled but didn't comment on his lack of enthusiasm. "Excellent," he said, turning to glance at his companions in the queue. Both were staring intently at the group, a brown-eyed alpha was looking at Zayn with parted lips.

"Well, I'd better get back," the alpha said. "It was great to see you, Mark. I'll text you the details."

With that, he walked towards his group, one of whom wolf-whistled and shot a wink in Mark's direction. The alpha who had been looking at Zayn almost banged his head on the glass door and was only saved an injury when his friend held out an arm to stop him. They left the café after retrieving their beverages and Mark released a sigh of relief, leaning his forehead on the table.

William rounded on his friend as soon as the door shut. "What was that all about? Why didn't you say that you're not interested?" he asked, tone disapproving.

Mark groaned against the table before straightening his back and meeting the curious expressions on his companions' faces.

"That's Edwin Hardy," he explained to Louis and Zayn. "Our parents are business partners - his mother and my father work in the stock market. Edwin is incredibly wealthy but they want to improve their business position and consolidate the link between our families."

Louis gasped in realisation. "They want you to mate to secure their business?" he asked incredulously. Mark nodded in confirmation.

Bonds between alphas and omegas were revered in England, treated as sacred practice. With a substantially lower omega population, the culture in the country had adapted over time with marriage between betas and alphas rising and, gradually, becoming acceptable. It was widely acknowledged, nevertheless, that bonds between alphas and omegas were the strongest and most fulfilling, satisfying the inherent natural desires of both genders. Bonded alphas and omegas were reliant on each other and, for a bond to successfully form, both alpha and omega needed to be deeply committed. Enforcing a bond on two people against their will, therefore, was unfathomable to Louis.

Mark, noticing the look of astonishment on Louis' face and that of disgust on Zayn's, was quick to reassure them. "Edwin is great," he said sincerely, "I've known his family for years. He's respectful
and courteous and everything an alpha should be."

Louis raised an eyebrow, urging Mark to continue. He sighed and toyed with the unclasped button on his shirt.

"But I'm just not ready for a relationship at the moment," he conceded. "I want to focus on my studies right now but he's ready to begin dating immediately, settle down together, even. Obviously, my father wants that too but I've had a tough time convincing him to let me finish my degree first."

Louis stared at him in shock, mixed emotions rendering him speechless. He sympathised with Mark, an omega he had only known for a short time but already felt affection for, and he felt relieved that his parents would never allow such a proposition to be even considered.

William placed a consoling arm on his friend's shoulder but he was cautious about such a display of sympathy in a public setting. Louis momentarily worried that the group of alphas would approach them to comfort Mark if they saw that he was upset - a natural alpha reaction. When alphas became angry, omegas placated them through words of consolation and praise - "Hot tempered and insecure, that's all alphas are," someone once told Louis. In contrast, when omegas were upset, alphas alleviated their distress through physical affection, oftentimes scenting their mate.

William noticed Louis' glance and retracted his hand. "How about we head over to Connelly Place?" he proposed, aiming to distract his friend.

The omega nodded, apologising to Zayn and Louis for his behaviour. The two boys shook their heads, assuring him that they would help him in any way they could. The two boys smiled gratefully before they gathered the remaining scones and left the café.

Noticing the colourful banners and jovial laughter emanating from the area, their mood lifted. Zayn dragged Louis to a photography stall, both boys waving at Mark and William as they walked in the opposite direction.

"Poor guy," Zayn muttered when Mark was beyond hearing distance. "I hadn't realised arranged relationships still took place."

Louis nodded solemnly. "Let's hope that this Edwin guy is willing to wait until Mark is ready, at least."

The two betas behind the photography stall waved as the betas approached them.

"Are you hoping to join our team of university photographers?" the students asked, smiling between the two omegas.

"Oh, absolutely not," Louis said, sniggering at the thought. "Sorry," he amended, noticing the look on her face, "I mean you wouldn't want me. I'm rubbish at anything artistic. Zayn, here is the man you're looking for."

Zayn smiled at the beta they began discussing his own landscape work. Louis found his gaze wandering around Connelly Place, eyes flitting over signs promoting various sports clubs and societies. The stalls were decorated with balloons and streamers, some had music playing on loudspeakers while others were distributing chocolates to attract the freshmen wandering through the square.

His attention peaked when he saw a sign reading 'C.A.S - Candling Alpha Society: Improving inter-alpha relations, addressing alpha-specific issues and striving to create a more just society for
all students’. Louis scoffed. If there was a place to find egotistical alphas who thought they were superior to other genders, he reasoned that this was the place.

"Zayn," he said, pulling at his friend's jacket.

"One minute, Louis," he muttered, finishing his conversation with the beta and writing his name on the list of available photographers for university events and functions. "What is it, man?"

"Look at that," Louis said, pointing towards the sign. Zayn rolled his eyes unsubtly and pulled Louis in the direction of the sign.

"Wait, what are you doing? You're not seriously going over there?" Louis asked, gaping at him.

"I'm not going to speak to them," Zayn explained, sidestepping a group of betas crowded around the drama club stall. "I just want to confirm my suspicion that these are the biggest bunch of knotheads I'll ever see behind one table."

Louis laughed along with his friend until they approached the stall when the scents emanating from the alphas there caused him to close his mouth. Tobacco smoke, newsprint and leather invaded his senses before he could look properly at the four alphas situated behind the long table. Harry Styles was speaking animatedly to the brown-eyed boy Louis recognised from the café. The other two students were talking to a broad, pale alpha with thick tufts of blonde hair. From their position leaning against a tall sycamore tree, Louis strained his ears to hear them.

"- bad reputation, really," the dark-skinned alpha said. "It's unfortunate that the figures aren't higher but, of course, C.A.S try to encourage co-operation between the genders. We hold social events to try and promote integration between alphas and betas." Louis noticed Harry lean towards the alpha to interject. "And now that we've omegas on campus, we'll make sure to extend the scope of our focus," he said emphatically. "We really want to create an atmosphere on campus where gender isn't the first thing that people notice about someone."

"That'll be pretty difficult with fucking omegas floating around like they own the place," the alpha interrupted harshly. Harry and his brown-eyed companion narrowed their eyes noticeably but allowed the alpha to continue. "Alphas need time to consider their needs. What with omegas suddenly given all these new rights, I think it's more important than ever to highlight that separation. I thought this was the kind of society where alphas could be in each other's company, like a fraternity."

Harry shared an amused look with the other alphas, as though he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing, before shaking his head vehemently. "Not at all. We're trying to avoid division between genders. From what we all know," he said knowingly, "alphas spending too much time with each other can foster a certain kind of, ah, unhealthy mentality."

The blonde-haired alpha squared his shoulders and lifted his chin and a scent resembling petrol wafted towards the two omegas, the potent smell alerting them to a strong emotion.

"Right," he gritted out, glaring at each alpha in turn before putting the pamphlet he had taken back on the table. "I'll know to look elsewhere to find a society that isn't run by a bunch of spineless alphas."

Harry's jaw tightened. "Listen here, -" he began angrily before the dark-skinned alpha that was originally taking to the freshman placed a firm hand on his shoulder and muttered into his ear. Harry crossed his arms, resigned but dissatisfied, his biceps protruding beneath his white button-up as he allowed his friend to take over.
"If you're not interested in joining C.A.S," he said diplomatically despite the coldness in his almond-shaped eyes, "then you're free to leave. Please don't spew that bullshit about omegas to my face again. All of the ones I've met so far have been nothing but humble about having the chance to study here. And you're the spineless alpha if you believe they deserve anything less than the same opportunities we have."

Louis watched in awe before he walked directly towards the table just as the alpha left with clenched and the line of his shoulder rigid. Louis didn't realise he had approached the table without considering his actions until he was stood right in front of the table. He felt Zayn follow to accompany him, shooting a look of questioning at his friend. Louis suddenly felt completely overwhelmed, the eyes of four alphas observing him with various degrees of curiosity.

"I've never heard an alpha defend omega rights to another alpha like that before," Louis blurted out, internally cursing himself for approaching the stall in the first place. He could feel the eyes of onlookers boring into his back.

The dark-skinned alpha - who Louis could identify as emitting the scent of freshly printed newspaper - smiled at him. "I didn't realise I had an audience," he chuckled. He tilted his head thoughtfully, contemplating Louis' words before his features contorted into an expression of concern. "That's terrible you haven't seen anything like that before," he said.

"It doesn't happen very frequently where I'm from," Louis explained, speaking rapidly from nervousness as four alphas gave him undivided attention. That is, except for the brown-eyed alpha, who periodically shot Zayn furtive glances. "I mean, there are plenty of omega rights activists and legislation is being implemented to improve omega rights but it always seems as though we get minimal support from the alpha community at home. Here in London, at least, there seems to be more alphas involved in the social movement."

The four alphas stared at him in astonishment and Louis felt heat rise into his cheeks. He knew from Zayn's subtle nudge that his scent was intensifying and tried to calm himself. Louis noticed the alphas change their stature, straightening their backs and imperceptibly leaning closer to the scent.

"I didn't get your name," the dark-skinned alpha said suddenly, the most collected of the group. "Oh, it's Louis. Louis Tomlinson," he said, slightly confused at the change in topic. "Well, Louis, I'm George, the President of C.A.S.," the alpha said, extending his hand for Louis to shake. His hand was engulfed and he had to force himself to pull away from the comforting hold. The alpha continued, unperturbed by Louis' instinctual reaction to seek further physical contact with the alpha. "You certainly seem to be aware of the omega rights process," he stated as Louis nodded. "This may seem a little abrupt," he said sheepishly, "but would you be interested in setting up an omega society here at Candling?"

Louis felt his friend look at him and the two exchanged a look; Louis was unsure, Zayn was encouraging.

"He'd love to," Zayn answered, pride seeping into his voice. "Louis is the best person for a job like that."

The brown-eyed alpha emanating an appealing musky, leather scent seemed to take Zayn actively engaging in the conversation as an excuse to gaze at him unabashedly and he nodded enthusiastically along with the omega.
"It wouldn't involve a huge amount of effort and definitely wouldn't take away from your studies," George assured. "It's just, as our Student President here will tell you," he said, clapping Harry - who was looking at Louis as though he was a particularly challenging maths equation - on the back, "we aim to improve alpha/omega relations on campus as early as possible to set a good tone for the rest of the term."

"We just need an official body to consult about issues pertaining to alphas and omegas," the other alpha said, glancing at Zayn to gauge his reaction. "That's where an omega society comes into play."

"What do you say, Louis?" Harry asked quietly, still looking at the omega contemplatively.

Louis' hands met behind his back and he rolled forward on his heels, turning his attention to the dark-haired alpha. "I suppose I could think about it," he said, receiving a sigh of satisfaction from George.

"Wonderful," Harry smiled, flashing his gleaming canines at the omega. Louis felt his movements halt.

"Well, that makes matters a whole lot less complicated," George said, scribbling into a notebook on the table. "We thought we'd have to talk to each omega on a case by case basis to understand their experience of alphas at Candling and to receive pointers on how to make the campus-wide attitude more omega-friendly." The alpha looked up, from where he was bent over to write in his notebook, face close to Louis. Harry stepped closer to his friend behind the table.

"Oh, yes Harry!" George exclaimed, seemingly interpreting Harry's sudden proximity as a reminder to him. "Louis, you can work with Harry to set up the omega society."

"That's not why I moved -"

"He's the head of communications for C.A.S. - very important for a society of our magnitude. He'll show you the ropes to establish it. That'll make things easier for when you start working together to organise any alpha/omega events," George said, smiling excitedly. "I must thank you for this, Louis. You've saved me a lot of tedious work."

Louis merely nodded before uttering a weak "not a problem, really." His thoughts, meanwhile, revolved around the green-eyed alpha and the prospect of working with him. Louis suppressed the anticipation that bloomed in his stomach.

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The remainder of the day passed at a fast pace. After exchanging phone numbers with both George and Harry and the former thanked him profusely, the omegas excused themselves and continued their journey navigating the other rows of stalls. It was late that night, after a crescent moon had appeared in the sky, when the topic was raised again.

Louis voiced his concerns - that setting up an omega society would be time-consuming, that working in unnecessarily close conditions with alphas was never a good idea and Harry's completely neutral scent unnerved him - all of which Zayn refuted.

"I simply don't understand why I can't detect Harry's scent," Louis sighed from his cross-legged position on his bed. Zayn glanced at him from where he was removing his dark jeans to change into his pyjamas.

"I couldn't identify any particular scent either," he admitted, sprawling out on his newly-made bed
adorned with comfortable blankets. He absentmindedly played with the label on one of the pillows. "Why do you care, anyway? Do you like him?" he asked, glancing at his roommate.

Louis' eyebrows furrowed and he shook his head slowly. "I don't know him. I'm just confused," he explained. "Alphas relish the power their scents have over omegas. You know as well as I do how they can distort our priorities and make us vulnerable. I'm just -", he paused, sighing loudly, "concerned. It was just the two of us talking and I was able to hold a normal conversation without being affected by his scent."

"That's a good thing, right?" Zayn asked cautiously. "I mean, you didn't succumb to natural instincts or anything."

Louis nodded, smiling in realisation. "I suppose so, yes. I'm just not used to it yet. I could almost pretend I was talking to a beta."

Zayn burst out laughing, eyes welling with tears as he stared at his friend in disbelief. "Harry Styles?" he gasped. "A beta? Are you serious, Louis?"

The older omega frowned, pausing his undressing with his arm caught in the collar of his jumper. "Well, yes. Obviously his physical appearance resembles that of a typical alpha but I've always been particularly susceptible to their scents alone. With that gone," he reasoned, shrugging, "Harry seemed like any other beta."

Zayn continued to laugh obnoxiously, shaking his head at his roommate. "You keep telling yourself that, Louis. I know you were raised by betas but trust me, there's more to alpha and beta distinction than their scents."

Louis tilted his head before nodding in agreement. "I suppose I'll have to learn, then."

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear your feedback. What are your theories about Harry's scent?
The first lecture Louis attended took place in an enormous hall with endless rows of freshmen students. Constitutional law - a subject he was anxious to study - was taught by a tall beta clothed in dreary, grey shawls. Her tone matched her attire and by the end of the two-hour lecture the majority of students were struggling to keep their eyes open.

Louis spent the lecture frantically taking notes, fascinated by the beta's thoughtful comments about the national constitution and the amendments to it that had been proposed in recent years.

A constitution, ideally, expressed the most fundamental beliefs of a country; the rights and responsibilities of every citizen and demands placed upon them by the government. The English constitution had undergone major changes over the last three decades to coincide with improved omega rights and address social issues in the country. The piece of legislation stated that omegas were equal citizens to their alpha and beta counterparts. The social reality, however, was drastically different.

The beta explained how reception to the changes was received throughout the country and how unconstitutional practices, especially by medical practices and businesses, were addressed by the legal system. At ten o'clock, when the beta announced their assignment - a five thousand word paper on discrepancies in the most recent constitutional amendments - Louis heard an obnoxiously loud groan from a student seated behind him. He rolled his eyes at the student's behaviour while gathering his notebook and stationery.

The breeze swept Louis' hair in front of his eyes as he stepped outside. He felt an odd sense of both relief and accomplishment after the lecture. It had proceeded with merely curious glances directed at him and slight pushing in the crowd as some students tried to get close to him to perceive his scent.

"Cranberry, elderflower and a hint of sweet vanilla," he had been told by numerous friends and family members when he had tentatively asked upon his presentation as an omega.

Whenever he asked his mother, she always pressed a kiss against his forehead and smiled warmly at him. "You smell like my Louis," she would say. He would predictably groan in response and protest that such a description didn't give him any indication about his scent. She would laugh and embrace her son, flooding his senses with her comforting, feminine scent.

Louis thought of his mother in front of the kitchen stove, cooking and swaying to the music on the radio. She would absentmindedly move to the beat of the music and narrate her cooking process like she was on a cookery show, much to the amusement of her son. Louis would recounted a day at school and she would listen intently, giving him undivided attention.

His father would come home after a tiring day and sigh contently at the sight of his wife, dancing to the music in a floral apron, before wrapping his arms around her from behind. They never concealed their love for each other. Their relationship, their utmost commitment to each other made Louis yearn for something similar. As he crossed the courtyard, map clutched in his hand to find the lecture hall for his Tort Law seminar, he vowed to call his parents that evening.

He collided with a cotton jumper covering a strong chest and fell backwards onto a patch of grass.
"Watch where you're- oh, Louis. Are you okay?" he heard a gruff voice morph into one of concern.

Louis looked up from where he sat on the grass, map on his chest and satchel beside his leg, and saw Harry Styles staring at him with guilt written over his face.

"I'm fine, sorry," he answered, holding up the map in his hand. "Wasn't looking where I was going." He chuckled self-deprecatingly.

Harry offered a hand to help him up which he rejected, hoisting himself on his knees before he realised the compromising position he was in, kneeling directly in front of Harry. He blushed profusely, standing up immediately and throwing his satchel over his shoulder.

"Do you need help finding somewhere?" Harry asked kindly, eyes locking with Louis'.

"Oh!" Louis said, allowing Harry to take the map from his hands. "Actually I'm trying to find Watson Hall for my Tort Law seminar."

Harry nodded in response, smiling at the omega. "I'll show you."

"Thank you but you really don't have to, I -"

"Louis," he sighed, feigning exasperation. "I'm going that direction anyway. It's not a problem."

The omega closed his mouth and nodded, allowing Harry to lead them past an ornate garden with a decorative pond.

"So, you're studying law?" Harry asked, tucking his hands into the pocket of his dark jeans. "Law lectures usually take place in Watson Hall," he explained when Louis raised an inquiring eyebrow. "It was named after Matilda Watson, one of the first female betas to pass legislation to reduce the gender wage gap in politics."

Louis nodded in recognition of the name. "And she became the longest serving female politician in government," the omega continued. "I remember learning about her work to boost female representation in government, especially among minority groups."

Harry smiled proudly at him. "Exactly, omega," he said. Louis peered at him curiously. Usually, when someone specified his gender while speaking with him, it was said in a condescending tone, aiming to make him feel inferior. The way Harry said it was completely different. He treated the word with reverence and respect, as an honorific address. "So, what inspired you to study law?"

Harry asked as the pair passed one of the beta dormitories at the edge of campus. Louis could hear the bustling people on the streets of London, the shouts and laughter, the cars honking and squealing to a stop.

"Well, I suppose I've always been interested in social justice and politics," Louis said, shyly tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. "Law seemed like the perfect balance of both subjects to me when I was deciding my degree. It kind of regulates aspects of our lives that we don't even realise - why we consider certain behaviour acceptable and punish unacceptable behaviour accordingly, how societal attitudes change over time and how legislation reflects that."

Harry nodded enthusiastically. He walked with long strides passed a tall, manicured hedge and Louis quickened his pace to keep up. "Yeah, that sounds really interesting," the alpha said, smiling at him. "Are you enjoying it so far?"

"I've only been to one lecture so far," Louis chuckled. "But I'll be sure to let you know what I think of this one," he said, hoping that his voice didn't sound embarrassingly hopeful. Harry nodded in
response, slowing his purposeful strides as they approached the baronial hall. The area was surrounded by groups of alphas, many of whom were looking at him with interest.

"Definitely, I'd love to hear what you think," Harry said warmly. He combed his fingers through his hair, glancing at the students waiting outside the lecture hall. "Listen," he said, voice adopting a commending tone as he shot one of the groups observing them an unamused look, "we should meet up to talk about setting up an omega society soon. When are you free?"

Louis stumbled slightly, crossing one leg behind the other before looking up at the alpha in surprise. "Oh! Well, erm, I have lectures all morning and then I promised to meet Zayn for dinner," he said, willing himself to ignore his instincts instructing him to cancel his plans to cater to the alpha in front of him. "But I'll be free tomorrow afternoon, before my first football practice," he assured.

Harry nodded, satisfied. "Perfect," he grinned. "We should probably meet somewhere neutral, like, not the omega dormitories," he said, laughing nervously at the thought.

"How about the library?" Louis proposed, hoping to complete his paper beforehand in the magnificent building. The library was three stories high, furnished with mahogany wood, bookshelves teeming with novels and textbooks covering every genre. Louis hadn't yet had the opportunity to roam the endless bookshelves and lose himself in the tales contained there.

"Law students," Harry smiled, shaking his head in amusement. "I should've known you'd want to meet in the library."

Louis ducked his head shyly, unsure how to respond.

"That's great. I'll see you at the library at four o'clock tomorrow," he confirmed, light green eyes gleaming in the morning sunlight. He stepped backwards, eyes still trained of the omega, nodding to himself.

Louis breathed a sigh of relief when he turned around and strode in the direction of the medical practices building. He ambled towards the entrance of Watson Hall, resolutely ignoring the stares directed at him, thoughts revolving around Harry.

..."So, what are you two going to be talking about?" Zayn asked from his position sprawled across his deep plum-coloured bed sheets. He was sketching Louis' mug of unfinished tea, periodically glancing at the older omega adjusting his jacket and frowning at his reflection.

"I'm not too sure, Z," he sighed. "I presume he's going to explain how the alpha society works and how they set it up to give me an indication of how to do the same."

Zayn hummed in response, shading the mug absentmindedly. "Well, just know that alphas have a tendency to take advantage of situations like this," he warned. "Obviously I trust your judgement, Lou, but when an alpha is well-versed on a topic," he sighed, "they often use that as an excuse to boast and demonstrate their superiority."

The omega's tone had turned to one of disdain, memories of alphas patronising him and treating him as inferior for his lack of knowledge on a subject returning. To the omega, it often seemed as if people of his gender could never win. If they were uninformed on a subject, they were dismissed as vacuous. If they proved their intelligence, they were treated as overbearing and boastful, socially deemed unattractive traits in omegas.
Louis smiled appreciatively at Zayn's advice. "I know that, Z," he said softly. "I'll be cautious around him, I promise."

Zayn seemed to accept his assurance and turned his attention to the omega's outfit instead. "Change your jacket, Lou," he said, reaching for his leather jacket to hand to Louis. "This would look great with that pink jumper I saw in the wardrobe."

Louis nodded appreciatively, grateful to have such a fashion-conscious roommate, and began undressing.

"I'd better go now," he said, checking his watch. "I'll see you for dinner after football training this evening."

Zayn smiled broadly at him, discarding his sketch to embrace him quickly. "You'll do great, I'm sure of it. Don't let those other players knock you over, now."

Louis pushed him off jokingly. "I could take on those huge alphas any day of the week," he scoffed, sticking out his tongue at Zayn when he chuckled loudly.

Louis slung his training kit over one shoulder and held his satchel in his free hand before waving to his roommate.

The walk to the library was short but involved passing the main alpha residence where a large group were sitting on the grass area enclosing the building. Louis concentrated on the path ahead of him, closing his mouth and tightening his jaw as he walked by three female alphas poring over a camera and chatting amicably. Their attention peaked when they noticed Louis, and one of the girls jumped to her feet to approached him.

"You look like you need a hand," she said, smiling warmly and indicating at the bags he was carrying. Her platinum blonde hair was cut to accentuate her prominent cheekbones and she carried an aura of authority about her.

"Oh, I'm really okay, thank you," he protested, smiling at her before making to continue past the alpha residence.

"Nonsense," she said, waving her hand in dismissal before taking his football bag and throwing it over her shoulder easily. "I'm Gemma. Now, where are you headed, Louis?"

Louis paused and looked at her in disbelief. "How do you know my name?" he questioned, eyebrows pinching together.

She sighed and directed an expression of incredulity at him. "You're one of twelve male omegas in the entirety of Candling and you happen to be studying law, just like me," she said. "I make it my priority to find out things like that."

Intimidated by the knowledge that people on campus knew his name before he had ever formally met them, Louis remained silent.

"So, where are you going?"

"Oh, eh, the library," he said, pointing redundantly at the building in the distance.

"Great," she said, walking briskly along the path. "So, tell me. How are you finding the course so far? Is it challenging?"
"It's, eh, really great," he said feebly, still feeling overwhelmed by the idea of students knowing about him simply by virtue of being an omega. He glanced at the slightly disappointed look on her face and quickly amended his answer, determined to satisfy the alpha with a more adequate response. "I mean, law is such a fascinating subject. I've only been to five lectures so far and I'm already really interested in the way law affects our lives both directly and indirectly."

She nodded. "That's very true. We make moral decisions everyday on the basis of what the law dictates, even when we don't realise it."

"And when our behaviour and collective opinions oppose the law, there is always a reaction," Louis said confidently as Gemma smiled at him, impressed with the omega.

She opened the entrance door to the library and they walked inside, Louis gasping audibly at the tall ceilings and innumerable books lining the shelves. There were mismatched armchairs grouped together at regular intervals, though many were bare given that it was only the second official day of lectures. Louis spotted the dark-haired alpha sitting with his legs spread, feet firmly on the floor, engrossed in a book.

Gemma followed him towards Harry, raising an eyebrow when she saw him stand up abruptly.

"Louis!" he exclaimed loudly, receiving glares from a couple of betas sitting nearby.

"Hi Harry," Gemma said, smirking at her younger brother. "Fancy seeing you here."

Harry turned to her, confusion written across his face. "What are you doing here?" he asked more harshly than intended.

Gemma removed the sports bag from her shoulder and placed it on the accompanying patterned armchair. "I was just helping Louis here carry some of his stuff. The poor boy was drowning in bags. You really should have offered to help if you were planning to meet him, Harry" she chastised, ignoring Louis' spluttering that he didn't need Harry's help.

Harry frowned at his sister. "Right. Well he's here now so I'll thank you to leave us be," he said.

Gemma laughed as though he was an entertaining comedy programme. "Whatever you say, little brother," she sing-songed. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Louis," she said earnestly, smiling at him before turning on her heel and striding out of the library with the kind of confidence most people could only dream of possessing.

Harry released a sigh of frustration. "Ignore her," he advised. "She likes to be in the know about other students. It makes her feel like she holds a kind of power over them."

Louis stared at him, appalled.

"Oh, don't worry. I can already tell that she likes you," he assured.

Louis pinched his bottom lip in uncertainty before nodding at Harry. They both sat down, sinking into their armchair respective armchairs. Louis noticed that he had a thick folder on the small table between them.

"Right," Harry sighed, leaning forward to pick up the folder. "This contains information about the structure of Canding Alpha Society, the kind of issues raised and the initiatives launched. It's quite general but hopefully it'll give you an indication of what your omega society should focus on, at least for the first year of its formation."
He handed the folder to the omega and leaned over the table to guide him through each file.

"Firstly we have the structure within the society. The President - that's George in our case - who oversees every major decision taken by the society and acts as chairman for the formal meetings."

Louis discreetly extracted a notebook from his satchel and began taking notes. The alpha smiled at him, revelling in his attentiveness.

"Next is the Vice President - Liam, my best mate who you saw the other day."

"Is he the alpha who was drooling over Zayn?" Louis asked, smiling amusedly at the memory. He had teased his roommate relentlessly after they had returned to their dormitory.

Harry laughed loudly. "Yeah, that's him alright," he confirmed, smiling widely at the omega.

"So what's his role?" Louis asked, pointing at the sub-heading reading 'Vice President' in his notebook.

"He's in charge of organising all the events within the society. Those include debates on alpha related issues, internal elections on C.A.S policies and making sure that all our members are treated equally," he explained.

"And finally, there's the head of communications," he said. "That's me. So, I'm involved in recruiting members and working with the beta society - C.B.S - to hold a number of social events during the year. We try to encourage alpha/beta integration, promote healthy relations and support alpha/beta relationships."

"That's wonderful that you're doing work like that," Louis said ardently. "Relations between alphas and betas are often very strained, it's nice to see alphas making a real effort to improve the situation."

"Well, it's not always our fault that relations are like that," Harry countered. "We're lucky that C.B.S are so co-operative. Since George became President, he's made it his priority to prevent the divide between the two genders from widening. Before that, the two societies were completely separate."

Harry sighed loudly, crease forming on his forehead. "The board of directors at Candling want it to remain like that; no integration, with each society following its own agenda. Obviously, they don't have as much control over extracurricular societies but when they heard of the reforms George was making a couple of years ago, they tried to create single-gender lectures in retaliation. It didn't work, clearly, but they still dislike the new direction C.A.S is headed."

Harry placed his fingers to his temples. "As you've probably gathered the board members are quite old-fashioned in their beliefs," Harry said, glancing up to gauge the omega's response. "Which is precisely why we think it's so important for an omega society to be set up. Show them that gender-specific issues can be addressed within separate societies but that, ultimately, the three can band together to create a more inclusive environment here at Candling," he finished, smiling at the omega.

Louis stared at him in awe, unable to string a sentence together that would express his wholehearted agreement with the alpha's words. He was overcome with emotion, having never heard such a well-informed alpha speak about gender equality so openly.

Harry seemed to accept Louis' silence as consent and continued his explanation. "Once you've created a core group of society members, then you can start recruiting the rest of the omega
community at Candling," he instructed. "I'm sure you'd make a great President."

Louis felt his cheeks blush, suddenly extremely warm under Harry's intense gaze. "Oh, eh, that's very kind of you, Harry. We'll have to see, though. After I set up the omega society, it might be clear that someone else is more suited to the role," he said, removing the leather jacket and placing it on the back of his chair.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

The omega tilted his head in question and was surprised when he saw Harry avoid his glance, raising a hand to the nape of his neck sheepishly.

"Sorry, oh, I-" he stuttered, "it's just that you smelled, eh, not like yourself in the jacket."

Louis stilled his movements. Harry was resolutely staring at the folder. It would be considered highly inappropriate for an alpha to comment on an omega's scent when the two were not family members or in a relationship. Harry looked accordingly embarrassed.

Louis realised that it was the ideal opportunity to ask the alpha about his own scent or lack thereof. He didn't want to make him uncomfortable with such an invasive question, however, and decided to change the topic before his curiosity obscured his sound judgement.

"What's the next stage, Harry?" he asked carefully, gaining the alpha's attention once again.

They spent the remainder of the hour discussing the social initiatives Harry had launched with his beta counterpart in C.B.S. the previous year. The alpha told rambling anecdotes about the annual Candling Ball, the inter-gender debates and the day he had met the board members officially upon his election as Student President. Louis found himself enraptured by the alpha. His deep, melodic voice was calming and he seemed to derive great pleasure from the laughs he elicited in the omega.

Louis left the library unwilling, for the first time in his life, to attend football practice.

"That's about everything, really," Harry said, handing Louis the folder to study.

The omega smiled warmly, thanking him as he placed the folder alongside his notebook in the satchel.

"We'll see each other again before you officially launch the society," Harry vowed, taking a step outside in the frigid September wind. He pulled his jacket tightly around him. "You sure you'll be okay to train in this weather?"

"Of course," Louis assured, despite the biting wind whipping his hair in front of his eyes. "A little breeze has never stopped me before."

Harry laughed as a particularly strong gust made them stumble slightly, gripping onto each other. Upon noticing where his hand was placed on the alpha's bicep, Louis retracted his hand as though burned. He laughed nervously, toying with the strap of his satchel.

"Well, maybe I'll get to see you play sometime," Harry suggested, taking an unwilling step away from the omega.

"Yeah," Louis nodded, eyes finding Harry's hopeful gaze, "I'd really like that, Harry."

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact: England actually doesn't have a written constitution. I realise this probably isn't a 'fun' fact. But I'm a law student so I get to have my own sense of humour and it's fun to me so there you go.
The biting wind swept across the pitch and whipped Louis' fringe in front of his face. He clumsily pushed it out of his eyes while trying to focus on the football coach standing in front of him.

"Let me get this right," the beta sighed, shaking his head in disbelief. "You were part of the team that won the Northern England inter-school competition in? The top league?"

"That's right, Sir," Louis confirmed, tucking his hands beneath his armpits for warmth as the bitter wind numbed his fingertips.

"And you're a freshman student here? At Candling?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And you want to join our university football team?"

Louis nodded, slightly exasperated. "Yes, I do."

"Right, well," he said, toying with the hair at the nape of his neck and looking at Louis like he was the answer to eternal happiness. "Welcome to the team then, son," he said, beaming down at him and shaking the omega's hand enthusiastically. "Go ahead and start warming up your muscles on the pitch with the rest of the team."

Louis was taken aback at the coach's enthusiasm but followed his instructions, running towards the group of twenty students, burly alphas and athletic betas alike observing him.

"Louis! Good to see you, lad," he heard a cheerful voice with a delightful Irish lilt call across the field.

"Niall," he said, face breaking into a smile and demeanour changing when he saw the familiar beta approaching him.

"Looks like coach has already taken a shining to you," he said, nodding to where the beta was talking to his assistant and regularly pointing excitedly in the omega's direction. "He probably thinks we finally have a chance of making it far in the inter-university competitions this year, what with so many freshmen joining the team." Niall indicated at a group of students standing cautiously at the sidelines, shooting furtive glances at the coach.

"The team can't possibly be that bad," Louis said kindly, lunging forward to stretch his calf muscles.

Niall cackled, chest muscles moving with the pitch. "Trust me; we are," he assured.

"Right, freshmen line up here," the coach barked, voice adopting the assertiveness is lacked while speaking individually to Louis. He assumed that he felt the need to demonstrate his authority before the alphas on the team, whose natural instinct was to oppose or challenge the beta.

Louis, along with the twelve other first year students, jogged towards the sidelines of the pitch. He noticed their vast assortment of clothing; heavy jackets, ill-fitting sports shoes and thick tracksuits.
He was relieved to have suitable sports leggings and his former football jersey from school to keep him adequately warm but agile as they began more strenuous stretches.

"I'm going to assess each of you on basic but necessary skills," the beta said, walking along the row of students. "And then we'll play a match as a whole team. I'll decide whose made it on the team and assign substitutes before the next training session. If you don't make the cut then you're welcome to apply next year."

Louis wasn't sure whether or not he had already been given an automatic place on the team but he knew better than reserving himself. He exerted himself on the pitch, applying the defending skills he had honed during years of training and running gracefully across the field. He passed the ball effortlessly, light-footed and nimble beside the hefty alphas.

"Wonderful, just wonderful!" he heard the coach exclaim when he made a particularly impressive block with the tip of his football boot. The alpha who had lost control of the ball shot him a look of contempt. The coach blew his whistle, signalling the end of the match and dictating his team as the champions. One of the defenders he had been on the team with, a beta with a warm smile and a talent for slipping the ball out from underneath the feet of unsuspecting alphas, congratulated him on the result.

"Right, gather at the sidelines, lads!" the coach bellowed. Niall ran towards Louis, clapping his back and singing his praises as they walked briskly to where the beta stood. His breathing was laboured and his skin glistened from the sheen of sweat beneath the floodlights of the pitch. Louis noticed how the sky had darkened considerably since they began the training session, dark clouds threatening rainfall looming above.

The remainder of the team huddled together, sheltering at the entrance to the changing rooms as the ominous clouds began spitting rain. The scents surrounding him became more potent; the alphas' sweat and frustration generating an overpowering aroma that invaded Louis' senses.

The scents which, unbeknownst to the alphas, were competing for this attention, made the omega want to submit to their display of physical strength and relieve the anger he sensed in some of their scents. Sore losers, he thought to himself. As the alphas gathered around him, Louis physically shook his head and willed himself to concentrate on the coach's feedback.

"- excellent new additions to the team. It's early days yet but I've already got a very promising set of players standing right in front of me," he enthused, eyes bright with ambition. "With proper dedication, we could be in with a chance of winning a couple of lower league games."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, now, coach," Niall teased from his position beside Louis. He heard chuckles from the older players.

"Lose the attitude, Horan," the beta said but there was no venom in his voice. "Now, I'm going to organise two training sessions a week plus friendly games every second Saturday from now until Christmas. I want to make sure that you're all going to be -"

A low growl emanated from someone behind Louis. His chest raised and his eyelids fluttered as a thick, all-consuming scent of damp wood and roasted chestnuts invaded his senses. The scent quenched a thirst he didn't know he had and simultaneously made him yearn for something more; something fuller, something perpetual and reliable. His instincts to succumb to the alpha obscured his thoughts. He felt his teammates whip around in astonishment at the noise but he stood resolutely still.

"Reynolds, control yourself!" he heard the coach bark.
Louis felt figures pass him by, eyes directed between him and the source of the offending growl. He was unable to move, head lowering slowly but perceptibly in response to the growl.

Louis heard distant shouts and pleads directed at the alpha, attempting to pull him out of the dream-like state that the prominence of the omega's scent had submerged him into.

Louis lowered his eyes to the short blades of wet grass stuck on his football boots, the concrete beneath his feet. His arms dangled uselessly at his sides and he fought with himself not to clasp them behind his back, still keenly aware of the watchful gazes of his teammates. They knew that he was affected by the growl and the potent scent rolling off the alpha in waves of desire and frustration as his emotions guided his actions. The omega just didn't want them to see how affected he was.

"Louis? Louis, are you okay?"

The omega made a noise of affirmation, forcing himself to ignore his instinct - to succumb to the short, low growls of the alpha. This was where acceptable social behaviour and biological instincts came into conflict with each other. The coach and players shouted at the alpha to fight against his urges but all knew that, unless he was an extremely strong-willed alpha, he had absolutely no control over his actions.

"Resist it, Jack. Come on, man," he heard an urge from a beta beside him. A threatening growl followed and he felt the beta remove himself from Louis' side.

"He's essentially inebriated," he heard the coach explain to the rest of the team. "He won't emerge from this state of mind until he scents Louis." His tone was resigned but firm and Louis swallowed thickly, anticipating and seeking the alpha's presence.

"Reynolds," the beta sighed. "You need to scent the omega."

Louis knew that this was the protocol for such a situation. Alphas generate claiming growls extremely frequently; they weren’t considered uncommon and the natural response to such a growl was for onlookers to encourage the alpha to scent the omega. Louis had never been scented by someone whose face he had not yet memorised but, due to the growl, felt an intense affinity for. He was reliant on an alpha he had just met and that fact alone scared him.

Louis heard purposeful footsteps approach him, sensed the alpha's presence, felt himself submit further to the alpha.

"Omega," he breathed, relief and satisfaction colouring his guttural voice. Louis felt a warm, gentle fingertips on the nape of his neck and he rocked backwards on his heels, searching for pressure on his unmarked bond area. The alpha dug his fingertips more firmly against his searing skin and sighed audibly. The alpha scented him fully, without reservation, and Louis felt a deep sense of completion consume him. The fundamental natural desire inherent to both alpha and omega genders - to claim and complete one another - was momentarily sated.

"Jack, you need to let go now," he heard the coach instruct.

Louis felt a low grumble originate in the alpha's chest.

"Jack if you don't let go now you might hurt him."

The alpha removed his hand and stepped away from him as though burned. Louis felt a suffocating, intoxicating fog lift and he raised his head. He met a pair of wide, regretful eyes and a pained expression. Louis recognised the alpha from during the match. He was one of the few talented
members of the team, a fast midfielder who tackled cleanly and joked boisterously with his teammates. He felt like he was staring at a familiar stranger.

The entire team was observing their interaction, curiosity etched across their faces as they realised that the alpha no longer posed as a threat.

The strength of the alpha's scent was waning. Louis saw him take another step backwards, eyes penetrating Louis' own before he turned abruptly, breaking into a run. Three alphas and Niall made to follow him but the coach called for them to return to the pitch.

The beta coach ran his fingers through the thick strands of his greying hair and sighed heavily.

"He needs some time to compose himself, as does Louis," he explained before raising his voice to call a name to the group. "Matthews? Hero Matthews?"

"Yes, Sir," a ringing voice responded. Louis saw an alpha with a mop of curly hair and freckles step forward in the group.

"Matthews I need you to check in with Reynolds; make sure he doesn't do something he'll regret. Clarify everything that happened. He won't remember but I don't want him drawing any inaccurate conclusions," he instructed as the alpha nodded. "Training's over for tonight, lads. I trust you not to spread rumours, now. About either of the boys. You're a team; you have each other's backs. Act like it."

The beta eyed the entire team, nodding in Louis though the omega couldn't understand what he was trying to communicate in the gesture. He turned around and strode towards the exit, prompting the players to amble in the direction of the changing rooms.

Louis was relieved that his bags were waiting for him on the sidelines and that he didn't have to face a room full of alphas, many of whom were affected by the scenting. He dragged his feet to the sidelines and felt the stares of his teammates on his back.

"Hey, Louis, do you have a minute?"

The omega turned around to find an alpha with unruly curls covering a nervous expression.

"I'm really sorry that happened to you. I'm Hero, Jack's friend, and I just want to say that this is not like him," he said earnestly. Louis nodded. Generating a claiming growl and scenting an omega wasn't like anyone; it was a natural urge, not a personality trait.

"Can I walk with you?"

Louis felt his stomach churn at the proposition. In his state, however, his omega desires to mediate a situation and please the alpha took precedence. He nodded in response. "Yeah, sure. It's fine, by the way. I can talk to, eh, Jack tomorrow if that would make things less awkward. I mean, we're going to be on the same team so it would probably be healthy to clear the air."

Hero laughed loudly. "No pun intended, I'm guessing."

Louis blushed profusely, still keenly aware of the powerful scent he was emitting.

Hero, sensing the omega's discomfort, shook his head at the comment. "Sorry, sorry, stupid thing to say. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't," Louis assured. "If you're close with Jack I'm sure your familiar with his scent
anyway.”

Hero's long strides slowed. His expression became thoughtful. "I suppose but it's different when it, eh, combines with, eh, with someone else's scent."

Louis glanced at the alpha beside him and saw a faint blush rise up his neck. Alphas rarely displayed signs of embarrassment, preferring to express such emotions. Individual scents were a sensitive topic, however, and Louis felt slightly relieved that the alpha could recognise his mistake. "Listen, Louis," he sighed. They rounded the archway before the omega dormitories. "I know it's no excuse for his behaviour but I just want to let you know - in confidence, obviously - that Jack's rut is coming up next week and I know that these past couple of days he's been showing some, eh, unusual signs of aggression and," the alpha avoided Louis' eyes, "overwhelming arousal."

Louis swallowed heavily. "Oh, eh, that's- eh, well, thank you for, eh, letting me know."

Hero looked appropriately uncomfortable at flustering the omega. "I just thought I'd tell you so that you know that he's never usually like this," he amended.

Louis nodded, thoughts wandering to his first heat the previous year and the preceding week of unrelieved ugh. And feeling a twinge of sympathy for the him. He smiled at the alpha in front of him. "It's not his fault; alpha nature and all that," he said.

Hero sighed in relief. "Thanks for understanding. I just know Jack's going to be kicking himself when he comes back to himself later."

Louis nodded and, sensing the finality of the alpha's tone, indicated towards the entrance to the building. "Well, I should head back to my dormitory now," he admitted.

"Yeah, of course. I'm really sorry, again, that happened to you. You shouldn't have been put in that position," he said sincerely, eyes locked with the omega's.

They parted and Louis walked towards his dormitory with renewed anxiousness at the thought of Zayn's reaction.

...

"An alpha directed a claiming growl at you? And scented you?"

Louis made to cover his ears at the high pitch of his roommates' incredulous voice. Zayn's concern was ringing through his questioning but the older omega was unwilling to provide answers, suddenly unwilling to disclose details about something that made him feel so vulnerable.

Before Louis had fully stepped inside the omega had rounded on him, springing up from his bed in response to the foreign scent. Louis simply dropped his satchel and training bag carelessly and embraced him, unabashedly showing his need for comfort (something that he would resolutely deny at any other time).

Zayn had willingly responded, wrapping his roommate securely and pressing his cheek against the top of his head. He had soon grown restless, however, needing answers from his roommate and assurance that he had not been scented against without his agreement.

"I couldn't have agreed Zayn, my body just reacted immediately after he growled. I was- fuck, my mind was paralysed. There was nothing, nothing I could have done," Louis said quietly, anxiety shading his hushed tone.
Zayn nodded, considering his words. "I suppose it's a good thing the coach knew to let him scent you. With the other alpha players around threatening him, who knows what could have happened if "When he stepped away, though," Louis sighed, "you should have seen his face. He was so scared, like he couldn't even recognise himself. And he was ashamed. I- I felt it," Louis said, the alpha's wide, hazel eyes appearing in his mind.

"You felt it?"

Zayn walked towards him and observed the nape of his neck, stroking the skin there gently.

"There's only a small mark where his thumb was," he confirmed. "Nothing that will leave more than a bruise and definitely not enough to forge a connection between you two."

Louis released a sigh he hadn't realised he had been holding. "Okay, that's something I can handle."

Zayn's expression softened. "Of course you can, Lou. How about you take a warm bath tonight and I'll get us a Pakistani takeaway. We can watch one of those omega-empowerment films you're so fond of too," he said, rubbing his friend's back comfortingly as he nodded in agreement, smiling appreciatively. "Tomorrow morning I'll put some concealing cream on the mark, okay? And if the scent stays I'll give you my deodorant that doubles as a neutraliser to use. It isn't nearly strong enough to subdue your natural scent but it will definitely mask the alpha one."

Louis sighed heavily. He felt like he couldn't express his gratitude to his roommate, setting on thanking him and returning the hug before bringing his tired muscles to the bathroom.

Late that night, after Zayn had fallen asleep a mere hour after having his fill of aloo tikki and chicken korma and watching an old episode of Downton Abbey as per Louis' insistence, the older omega extracted himself from the plum-coloured bedsheets and climbed unceremoniously into his own bed, limbs still aching. He opened a new tab on his laptop and silently typed 'Meaning of alpha growls and scents' into the searchbar.

The entire screen lit up with results and Louis found himself overwhelmed with the sheer volume of information available on the topic. He clicked on a research paper conducted by a PhD student in an American university and began reading.

Stake and Claim: An in-depth paper discussing alpha-typical growls and the responsive scenting process

The claiming growl, the provocative growl and the mating growl are three distinctive noises traditionally associated with alphas, although omegas have been known to release a growl of similar tone to a claiming growl when provoked by another omega who threatens his or her bond. These alpha-typical growls are an inherent part of the biology of both male and female alphas and, while not widely considered acceptable behaviour in modern, civilised societies, repressing such growls goes against an alpha's natural instincts.

A claiming growl is distinguished from the other two alpha-specific growls by the alpha's complete lack of control over the noise he or she emits. The alpha experiences an insatiable desire to claim an omega (reasons for this desire - including an omega in heat, an omega releasing copious amounts of natural scent due to strong emotion or sweat excretion or an omega in the vicinity of another alpha perceived as a threat - are studied in greater detail below). The alpha releases an unpreventable claiming growl, though it must be noted that the alpha possesses the ability to control the volume of such a growl.
Louis remembered the low, resounding growl Jack produced and sighed in relief. There was restraint in his tone, the noise penetrating the vast football pitch but not damaging his sensitive ears, attuned to picking up such sounds.

Following the initial claiming growl and the appropriate omega response (see below), the alpha approaches the omega. The legal protocol in the United States and most of the developed world is for the alpha to scent the omega to satisfy the desires of both parties involved. The length of time an alpha's scent remains on an omega in the aftermath of the scenting varies depending on both their emotional connection of the the two parties (ie whether or not there is romantic/sexual attraction on the part of both the alpha and the omega) and the strength of the alpha's claim.

Opposed to a mating growl and subsequent scenting on the part of the alpha, neither parties experience an affinity for each other or emotional connection following a claiming growl.

A mating growl, often romanticised and dramatised in cinema and the media, is defined as the growl released by an alpha directly before he or she mates with an omega through mating mark at the nape of the neck. Biological reasons for the position of the mating mark include visible concealment and scent repression. This facilitates exploitation by so-called sirens who accentuate this area and manipulate the scent emerging from it to attract an alpha mate.

The mating growl is a low warning to the omega that the alpha is preparing to bite the mating area. As mating takes place (in the vast majority of cases) during sexual intercourse, the mating growl, unlike the other two alpha-specific growls, is emitted solely for the omega to hear and respond to. As such, the pitch and tone of the growl is noticeably different.

Zayn stirred in his sleep, pulling his bed sheets higher before blinking his eyes open.

"Can't sleep," he mumbled. "Your scent is keeping me awake. My body can't relax."

Louis smiled sadly at his admission, closing the laptop and retrieving one of his jumpers from the tall wardrobe. He handed it to Zayn wordlessly and saw the omega breathe in the soothing scent before climbing into his own bed.

"Good night, Z."

He fell asleep dreaming of regretful eyes and tentative fingertips grazing his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Promise Harry will be in the next chapter!
Louis awoke to sunlight streaming into the room, dancing over his cream and light blue bed sheets from the small gap between the curtains. Zayn snored softly from where he was curled on his own bed, clutching onto Louis' jumper. Louis let the events of the previous evening play over in his head, like a film he had seen hundreds of times where he discovered something new with every watching. He considered his teammates' reactions, the coach's instructions and the alpha's - Jack's - scent.

Louis inhaled a shaky breath at the thought of his barky scent with a hint of roasted chestnuts. Alpha's scents, by virtue of him being an omega, affected him physically and emotionally. He no longer felt a connection to the alpha but the memory of the his scent alone and the feeling of completion his presence brought made the omega feel an affinity for him. He wanted to speak with him, to assure him that he understood the situation and that he didn't want their relationship on the pitch to be awkward simply because of his alpha instincts.

Louis stepped out of bed quietly, aware of Zayn's quiet snores, but with renewed determination. He pulled on a grey turtleneck jumper to cover the faint marks and slung his satchel over his shoulder. He scrawled a short note for Zayn to reassure him that he was meeting Jack and that he would see him for dinner later that evening. He debated spraying himself with Zayn's scent neutraliser and decided against it, putting the small bottle into his bag to bring with him instead.

He walked down the hallway, cautious not to alert any of the other omegas of his unfamiliar scent. The alpha's scent had faded significantly overnight but still lingered around his neck and shoulders. He wasn't ready to explain why his natural scent had been contaminated by another when he wasn't yet mated.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he reached the entrance door of the omega dormitories. He stepped outside into the stinging cold and regretted not bringing a jacket. The heatless sun shone across Connelly Place as Louis walked towards the main alpha residence. He was taking a risk, depending on the group of alphas he saw lounging outside the dormitories to know whether Jack stayed in their building. He didn't have an alternative plan, however, and he wanted to find the alpha as soon as possible.

"Louis?"

The omega strained his eyes to confirm that the alpha calling his name was, in fact, the very person he didn't want to meet in his state. He smiled warmly and waved at the curly-haired alpha sitting on a patch of grass with his friend Liam.

"Morning Harry, Liam," he replied, eyes scanning the area for someone, anyone else to ask for Jack's whereabouts. He had a lecture in criminal law and a three-hour seminar on the American judicial system that afternoon and he didn't want to wait until after Jack's scent had faded before meeting the alpha. Other than the two alphas looking expectantly at him, the area was bare.

"How was football training?" Harry asked, eyes bright as Louis approached them, remaining a noticeably large distance from them. Harry frowned momentarily at the omega's stance and nervous smile.

"It was great. The other players are really nice and I, eh, I was given a place on the team," he said modestly, eyes finding the daisies scattered around the grass.
Harry's face lit up, dimples appearing as the alpha flashed his canines.

"That's amazing, Louis. I knew you could do it."

He made to get up from his position on the grass but Liam placed a firm hand on his knee. The two shared a curious silent conversation before Harry conceded and lay back down on the grass.

"I bet you're one of those super fast players," he continued as his friend watched him amusedly. "Like a fairy on the football pitch."

"A fairy?" Louis laughed, feeling his nervousness seep out of him in the alpha's presence. "What are you insinuating, Styles?" he asked teasingly, causing both alpha's to laugh.

"Nothing really," Harry drawled. "Just that you're, well, y'know, small and petite. And you walk kind of gracefully, on your toes - just like a fairy."

Louis cursed his omega response as a blush rose to his cheeks.

"Firstly, I am not small. I'll have you know that I'm five foot nine, actually, which is well above average for an omega," Louis said, raising his voice in mock indignation.

Harry snorted obnoxiously. "Five nine," he muttered, shaking his head incredulously.

"Secondly," he continued, unperturbed by Harry's interruption, "I don't walk like a fairy." He strode towards them to prove his point, marching his feet and squaring his shoulders as an alpha would which caused Harry to cackle loudly and slap a hand of his jean-clad thigh. Liam chuckled and shook his head at the omega.

"You're something else, Louis," he said fondly. "I'm glad Harry convinced you to lead the omega society."

"Yeah," Louis agreed readily, sitting opposite the alphas, "I am too." He played with the dewy grass and plucked a couple of daisies to join together. Harry's nostrils flared and his shoulders went rigid. Liam shot his friend a questioning glance, not detecting the altered scent of the omega.

"I've been talking to Zayn about it and we're going to start distributing leaflets and spreading the word this weekend," he said, oblivious to the alpha's change in demeanour. "I'm hoping to hold the first meeting on Monday. We're going to discuss the main aims of the society and that we can begin co-operating with the C.A.S and C.B.S."

"That sounds great," Liam said earnestly. "Is, eh, is Zayn going to lead the society with you?"

Louis noticed how the alpha had become nervous, tentative even. He was smiling shyly at him, fingers twisting in his lap - an uncharacteristic habit for an alpha.

"Probably," he confirmed. "He's interested in addressing omega-specific issues on campus. Plus, joining would mean attending all of the social events to integrate the genders and that would be a great place to meet new people."

Liam smiled brightly, fingers ceasing their ministrations. A wave of natural scent - leather with traces of fresh lavender - rolled off him and the omega made a mental note to casually comment on the appealing scent to his roommate.

Louis turned to the other alpha, expecting him to voice his agreement and perhaps suggest some social events he had been considering but when he saw the hard line of his neck and his narrowed
eyes, he stilled.

"I, eh, sorry I just remembered that I actually came here for a reason," he said, tugging at the turtleneck neck that had suddenly become suffocating. "I need to find someone before I go to my morning lecture."

"Sure," Liam said brightly. "Who is it?"

"Jack Reynolds."

"Oh, yeah, of course. I almost forgot Jack played football last year. He stays just down the hall from Harry and myself," he answered, getting to his feet. "I can get him now, if you want."

Louis smiled at the alpha's offer. "That would be really helpful, thank you. I was worried I'd have to search the entire campus to find him."

Harry jumped up suddenly, fists clenched. "I'll do it. I'll get him, Liam."

"It's okay, Harry," he said slowly. "You stay here and I'll bring him outside in a minute."

Harry glowered at his friend. "Fine," he gritted out before dropping onto the grass grumpily.

Liam left the two sitting in uncomfortable silence, sending a furtive glance at Harry before walking inside the building.

Louis swallowed uncomfortably. "So, do you have any social events in mind, Harry?" he asked kindly, determined to talk to him despite his obvious unhappiness.

"No, not particularly." The alpha crossed his arms and glared at Louis' chain of daisies beside his feet as though it personally insulted him.

"Oh, well I guess you and George work together to organise those kind of things together," Louis said quietly, shocked by the alpha's dismissive tone. "Perhaps Zayn and I could organise a proper meeting with you and George talk about an alpha/omega day trip somewhere? I was thinking that it might be nice to encourage integration and breaking down barriers in a neutral setting so that nobody feels like they're at a disadvantage."

Harry smiled genuinely at the proposition but then shrugged a shoulder, as though remembering that he was supposed to be put out.

"Yeah, I suppose we could do that."

He gripped a clump of grass and pulled its roots out. Despite his unappealing petulance, Louis couldn't help but notice his magnificent, long fingers. They furrowed deep at the base of the grass roots, twisting and intertwining and prompting a number of improper images to develop in the omega's mind.

A familiar barky scent with intense yet pleasant connotations filled the air and he glanced up to see Jack approaching him. He looked tired; dark circles coloured the pale skin beneath his wide, blue eyes. Louis could appreciate his tall stance at such a distance, however, and quickly jumped to his feet to avoid craning his neck.

"Morning Louis," he said, voice hoarse as he scratched his neck absentmindedly and smiled at the omega.
"Hi Jack," he replied, keenly aware of Liam's periodic glances as he attempted to give them privacy and Harry's unconcealed glare. The alpha got to his feet and nodded at Jack when he greeted him.

"Jack," he said nervously, "I was wondering if we could talk for a couple of minutes. You don't have a lecture before nine, do you?"

"Yeah that's absolutely fine," he replied, tired eyes brightening at the suggestion. "And no, I study physics so I only have afternoon lab work most days."

Louis nodded before turning his attention to the other two alphas. "Eh, it was great to see you both again," he said, lifting his voice.

"You too, Louis. Hopefully I'll see you during the preparations for Candling's first omega society initiative," Liam said, tucking his hands into his pockets and using his elbow to nudge Harry whose furrowed eyebrows impossibly closer together. He didn't respond.

"Let's grab a coffee. I'm exhausted," Jack said, seizing Louis' attention. He had to remind himself of his main concern - forging a relationship with Jack so that neither had felt uncomfortable about their situation.

His thoughts, however, seemed to revolve around Harry's irritation; the sharp angle of his jaw when he swallowed, the tension in his neck and shoulders that Louis wanted to soothe, even his endearing petulance when he detected another alpha's aroma combined with the omega's natural scent. Louis considered how Liam hadn't noticed anything astray and figured that Harry was particularly in tune with his senses. The alternative reason - that Harry had come to recognise his scent and didn't want it defiled by another alpha - was one that Louis wasn't ready to consider.

"So, eh, I have a fair idea of what you wanted to talk about but before we do," Jack said as they walked across Connelly Place, "I want to apologise. I was in a really bad state of mind yesterday - kind of, eh, emotional, I guess and I was particularly in tune with all of the scents around me."

Louis wanted to interrupt, to reassure the alpha but he talking seemed to help Jack, relieve him of the regret he had felt.

"I'm nearing my rut," he confessed self-consciously. "Alpha biology near a rut gets complicated as fuck and I should've known not to go to a pitch full of sweaty players and, eh, omegas." Jack resolutely avoided eye contact with him, embarrassed at addressing the his gender and its influence so directly.

"So, I know it's not going to change what I did, but I wanted you to know that I'm really sorry," he said sincerely, stopping in his tracks to look at Louis. The omega's heart sunk at the regret written on his face.

"Jack," he sighed. "Please don't apologise. I know that it wasn't your intention to growl or scent me or anything." Louis smiled at the alpha's sigh. "I actually wanted to talk to you to assure you that I'm not upset with you. I really don't want things between us to be awkward just because that happened," he assured.

Jack nodded emphatically. "I'd really like that."

He opened the entrance door to the café and they breathed in the warm air and smell of cream and coffee appreciatively. They paused their conversation to order delicious hot drinks as well as to avoid students in the queue overhearing their conversation. They sat down at a corner table for privacy and munched on croissants and pastries. Louis held his tall mug of tea between two hands
and blew gently on the contents, prompting the alpha to smile at him.

"I, eh, also wanted to ask you about your scent, if you don't mind, of course," Jack said between a bite of apple strudel.

Louis shook his head and indicated for him to ask.

"It's just that I notice you still have my scent on you," he said, smiling instinctively at the thought but attempting to subdue his reaction. "It's really faint and I'm not sure anyone but us would noticed. I just wanted to know if keeping it on you was a conscious decision you made or if you just didn't notice." His eyes darted around the café to confirm that they couldn't be overheard before settling on the omega's curious gaze.

Louis smiled and tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear. "I thought you would've known why I decided to keep the scent on me," he said, surprise seeping into his voice.

The alpha pondered his suggestion for a moment. "I don't know," he admitted.

Louis smiled at him before answering, relishing the opportunity to explain something to an alpha who was willing to listen - something that happened rarely.

"I've read before that when an alpha scents an omega when they are in a certain state of mind - when they are intoxicated or near their rut, for example - they feel a kind of claim over that omega," he said, determined to explain his decision despite the sensitive topic.

"I wanted to meet you this morning to reassure you but I also knew that, since your, eh, alpha instincts are highly perceptive at the moment, it would help you get past this faster if you knew that I wasn't opposed to being scented in the first place. If we met and you couldn't detect yourself on me, it might make your alpha think that I didn't want to be scented."

Jack stared at him with awe colouring his features. "I, eh, Louis, I -", he stuttered, shaking his head. "Thank you. I really don't know what to say. Just-, thank you for understanding and for being willing to do that for me."

Louis smiled at his expression. "It's not a problem. I think it's important for us to be more open about these kind of things. Since I've come here, I've realised that there's so much I don't know about gender biology. I really don't think it should be as taboo as it is," he said earnestly.

Jack smiled as the omega spoke. "Yeah, I totally agree. I'm a science student and I never knew what you just said," he admitted. "I guess a lot more awareness will be raised at Candling with the whole study with the International Gender Research Foundation being carried out later this term."

Louis remembered what the Candling President had explained during the lecture on the first day. "That will be great," he agreed. "They announced that law students would be involved in the research but I'm not sure how we would be involved in something like that."

"Maybe you'll provide legal advice for the researchers," Jack mused as he drank his coffee. "Or there could be legal adjustments made new research conclusions are reached."

The two fell into comfortable conversation, then, chatting amicably about possible ways Louis could be involved in the research. As a physics student, Jack's field of study differed completely but the alpha was interested in learning about the research where a huge amount of the university funding was directed.

"The board of directors are extremely invested in this research. Obviously, it's going to be carried
out in conjunction with other leading universities but I get the impression - at least from the mood around campus - that Candling is going to be the major focus of the research," Jack said. "To be honest though, I just hope they don't re-locate the physics department funding in the process."

Louis nodded sympathetically. "I'm sure that won't happen. Then International Gender Research Foundation will be supplying most of the funds and, besides, the board of directors can't exactly show a preference over what degree programmes to fund," he reasoned.

Jack shot him an incredulous look. "They can," he assured. "I've only been here for one year and I already know that there is huge corruption in the board of directors. How do you think Harry was appointed Student President?"

Louis gaped at him. "What do mean?" he asked. "Harry won the election at the end of last year, didn't he?"

Jack took a long sip from his coffee before signing exaggeratedly. "Listen, Harry's a great guy," he said earnestly. "He stays just down the hall from me and he's always talking with the other alphas, giving advice and everything. But, there's no denying that being one of the board member's son can't hurt your chances in a student election."

"Harry's father's is one of the board members?" he asked, mouth agape with incredulity.

Jack shrugged. "That's what I've heard at least. I noticed you were talking with him this morning. I don't want to change your opinion of him or anything, I'm just saying that it's one of many examples where the board shouldn't be trusted," he said, tone grave.

Louis nodded, unsure how to utilise such information. He knew that there was much ambiguity about Candling's unprompted decision to accept omega students but, otherwise, he hadn't suspected anything illicit about the university bureaucrats. He could only be thankful that the research he was going to be working on and the legal programme received an enormous amount of funding.

"I should probably get going," he admitted, glancing at his leather-bound watch. "But, eh, I'll see you at training next Monday."

"Eh, you probably won't," Jack chuckled before Louis belatedly remembered the alpha's impending rut.

"Oh, right, sorry," he said, smiling self-deprecatingly. "I guess I'll see you the following week."

"Of course," Jack smiled easily. "Looking forward to it."

Louis left the café to return to the bitterly cold wind with unanswered questions about Harry Styles consuming his thoughts.

The omega hurried to his lecture hall, slipping inside the restroom to spray his neck with Zayn's scent neutraliser before it began. He was relieved when he found the restroom empty of any students. He used liberal amounts of the spray to conceal the alpha scent, automatically sighing in frustration when the appealing scent was masked. He looked at his reflection in the mirror, noticing the faint blush on his cheeks and slight redness of his nose from the wind.

The door opened dramatically and and two female alphas strolled inside, talking animatedly. Louis frantically put the neutraliser back into his satchel.

"And obviously my father was furious. He kept cornering him in the weeks beforehand to -," the familiar alpha's voice abruptly stopped. "Hey Louis."
The omega saw dark red lips drawn into a smirk in the mirror.

"Morning Gemma," he replied, lifting his satchel over his shoulder and smiling tersely.

"My baby brother hasn't got tired of you yet, has he?" she teased. Her friend mumbled into her ear and they shared a knowing look.

"I haven't really have a chance to find out," he said, determined not to let her know that the taunting got to him. "I've been so busy with schoolwork."

"That's good to hear," she said, much to the omega's surprise. "They'll be talking to all the first years about some very exciting news today, if my sources are trustworthy."

Louis internally rolled his eyes at her mention of having sources in the university. It seemed the Styles family had the entire Student body at their fingertips.

"Anyway, you'll want to be paying that piece of news your full attention. There's no time to focus on trivial matters like meeting alphas in the library," she advised, smiling knowing at him like she knew he was attracted to Harry.

"I wasn't -, we weren't -," he tried to clarify. He closed his eyes and tried to recollect his thoughts. "We were discussing the new omega society - it was all extracurricular activities."

"Oh, yes, extracurricular activities I'm sure," she winked before giving her handbag to her alpha friend, who was smiling at their interaction in amusement, and briskly turning into the toilet cubicle.

Louis stared at the closed door before physically shaking his head, shooting a glance at the other alpha who was observing him. He re-adjusted his satchel and walked out of the restroom to the lecture hall, exponentially more confused than when he entered.
Dreaming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Louis sidled as discreetly as he could into a seat at the back of the lecture theatre beside a tall alpha. He emanated a faint ginger and nutmeg scent. It reminded him of his mother's cooking and he closed his eyes and breathed in as he settled into his seat. The alpha smiled warmly at him before returning his gaze to the social law lecturer taking her place at the podium.

The lecture hall was one of the largest in Watson Hall, complete with tall rows of seats circling a central podium and large windows displaying the miserable London weather. It was teeming with students - more than just first year law students - chatting loudly and exchanging rumours.

"Settle down now, please," the social law lecturer, a jolly female beta with tight blonde ringlets, called. "Now, as all of my freshmen students are aware by this stage, we are joined today by quite a few guests. Your second year counterparts are here - hence the slight squeeze - as well as our President, Sir Stephen James."

Murmurs sounded around him and he shifted in his seat to get a better view.

"He has brought three representatives from the International Gender Research Foundation to speak to you today about the research they're planning to conduct with a select number of you," she announced through a smile. A chorus of excited noises rang around the lecture hall. "So without further ado, please give a great round of applause to Doctor Matilda May, specialist in the application of gender knowledge to our legal system."

Applause erupted throughout the hall and Louis craned his neck to see a slender alpha with chestnut hair twisted into a knot approaching the podium, humble smile on her face. She didn't strike Louis as an alpha until she started speaking, her voice high and commanding.

"Thank you all very much indeed," she said. "It's my pleasure to speak with you all today. Stephen mentioned that very little information has been supplied to you about the research we're planning to conduct so I'm delighted to share that with you. Both in this university and many others throughout the world will be the centre point of our focus over the next three months."

She smiled appreciatively at the attentiveness of the students, how they were leaning forward in their seats and listening to her every word. Her evident desire for attention and admiration verified her gender more than her unintimidating appearance could.

"We're going to be availing of the top biology, medicine and law students Candling has to offer and all of your work will naturally contribute to your degree credits," she assured. "What we aim to focus on is the social expectations of alphas, betas and omegas versus the biological realities. How all of you law students will be involved is to explore how our research will be suitably applied to change our legal system to protect the rights of every citizen, gender aside."

The students were roused by this statement, whispering excitedly at the prospect of working with such a renowned organisation.

"We'll begin our research in early October which should give us plenty of time to review your applications and decide the most appropriate candidates," she explained. "Please note that we'll only be accepting a select number of students to work alongside us." She glanced at the front row
of seats where Louis assumed her colleagues were communicating with her.

"Now we don't wish to disclose everything just yet as our research is going to be focused on a number of sensitive matters; alpha and omega biological cycles, gender dynamics in the workplace, gender discrimination to name but a few. If this research goes according to plan," she said, voice adopting a more serious tone, "then our work will be groundbreaking and could lead the way towards real and appreciable changes in the way both society and the law regards alphas, betas and omegas."

Louis was entranced by her speech; the determination of her voice and her undeniable passion captivating him. He watched her step down gracefully from the podium and joined in with the applause enthusiastically.

The three members of the organisation passed him, led by the President, on their way out of the lecture hall. The lecture proceeded normally after that, social justice issues regarding race and the law being the main discussion topic of the lecture.

Louis struggled to remain focused, however, his train of thought returning to the prospect of working with the International Gender Research Foundation. They had led the most extensive research on omega biology in modern history. Their gender research had emphasised omega intellectual equality with alphas and betas as well as demonstrating that their capabilities laid beyond reproduction and childcare.

The lecture ended two hours later and Louis picked up his satchel immediately, rushing outside to get a cup of tea before the beginning of his seminar. The inclement weather persisted and he held his bag above his head to shelter from the downpour. He made it inside the corner coffee shop without dampening his hair, letting out a sigh as he joined the slow queue of students.

A familiar faintly earthy scent flooded his senses and he saw one of the few other male omegas, William, ahead of him in the line. He smiled at Louis and waited for him to pick up his order.

"Hey Will," he said, taking a long sip of his cup of tea. "How have you been?"

"I'm good, just a little tired," he replied, breathing in Louis' relieving scent. They stood close to each other, basking in the sense of relief being surrounded by other male omegas can bring. "I heard you're settling up an omega society."

Louis nodded happily. "That's right, yeah. I'm really looking forward to getting to know all of the other omegas here and making sure all of our needs are addressed by Candling," he said earnestly.

William smiled proudly at him. "I'm looking forward to joining, then," he said. "I should get going." he admitted. "Got a lecture in ten minutes on the other side of campus. When will the first meeting be?" he asked bringing the hood of his raincoat over his head.

"I haven't decided the details but once I talk to Zayn tonight we'll put up posters around the dorm," he assured.

They walked outside into the heavy rain and shared a brief embrace before parting ways. Louis could feel the stares of the other customers inside the coffee shop. Inter-omega bonds were viewed in many different ways by society; as aberrant by some alphas, romanticised by others and condemned by traditional alphas who thought that omegas should solely dedicate their attention to their alphas. Despite the various opinions on omega relationships, it was understood that they found comfort and support in each other. Louis was determined to meet and form relationships with the other omegas he hadn't yet spoken with. He made his way to the seminar, thoughts about the
omega society and what he wanted to achieve for it springing to mind.

"Louis you need to calm down," Zayn advised from his position sprawled across his bed drawing a pair of attractive doe eyes.

"I can't calm down, Zayn; I've too much to organise before the meeting begins," a frazzled Louis replied through a mouthful of crisps as he scribbled last-minute notes into his folder. "I haven't had time to fully revise everything Harry gave me to prepare." His eyes frantically scanned the folder of information about the alpha society as he attempted to further prepare himself for the first meeting of the omega society.

"Lou, you need to relax or everyone will sense your nervousness," Zayn responded, rolling over and placing his notebook on his bedside locker. "You've been prepared for days. Trust yourself."

Louis glanced up to find his roommate's concerned expression and instantly softened. He breathed deeply and nodded. "You're right, I know you are I just hope that people show up tonight," he sighed, defeated. "I mean, we're already at a disadvantage - there's only forty eight people even eligible to join. C.A.S has hundreds of members across campus."

Zayn stood up from his bed and crossed the room to where Louis was seated at his desk. He stood in front of the older omega and forced him to maintain eye contact. "And that's the alpha society for you. They're at a systematic advantage and, even if we could, I wouldn't want our society to compete with them," he said earnestly. "You're going to do great tonight and I promise you that C.O.S will be a success."

A smile threatened to overtake his features as Zayn spoke to him and he couldn't help but agree. "Thank you, Z," he whispered, locking the omega in a tight embrace. "And it won't just be me; I want you right there beside me tonight."

Zayn shifted on his feet. "I'll be there, Lou, but I'm not speaking publicly," he said vehemently.

Louis sighed but acquiesced to his wishes. "Fine, but try to mingle with any of the omegas we see at dinner to encourage them to come along tonight," he said, reaching for a stack of leaflets informing about the new society. "We need all the members we can get."

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The cramped common room in the omega dormitory building was filled with scents; spiced honey, roasted oats and sandalwood emanating from the three girls in the front row as Louis took his place at the top of the room. The room fell silent immediately and he internally rolled his eyes at his stereo typically deferential audience.

"Good evening, everyone," Louis said, smiling at the omegas and feeling himself relax in their presence. "Thank you all for coming to our first ever meeting of the Candling Omega Society."

Polite applause, led by Zayn and Will in the corner of the room, sounded.

"First on the agenda is some housekeeping matters," he continued, remembering the extensive notes Harry had written for him to follow. "As you know, this is an omega-only society in which topics which are personal in nature and directly pertain to our lives will be discussed openly. To ensure that everyone's privacy is protected and that people feel comfortable opening up, I would ask you all to leave your phones off or in your dormitories from now on."
There were a few frustrated grumbles but most omegas agreed easily to his request, much to his relief.

"Next, I'm going to let you all know the kind of things you can expect from being a member of C.O.S.," he said, retrieving his folder from his bag, despite knowing the notes he had previously written for himself. He must have seemed nervous as one of the girls in the front row smiled supportively at him. "Firstly, we intend to make a supportive, inclusive and non-judgemental society for omegas to join. We want to promote links between each other and establish a healthy omega community here on campus," he explained to a chorus of approving noises.

"We want to address omega-specific issues like overcoming natural urges versus embracing them, battling prejudice and dealing with heats," he said. "We also want to promote better relations with betas and alphas at Candling."

"What do you mean by better relations?" a dark-haired girl with iron gray eyes asked with distaste.

"I mean that we want to minimise the divide between the genders here at Candling," he said calmly. "The only way we can feasibly encourage any kind of equality is to break down barriers between ourselves and betas and alphas." He looked around the room to gauge the reactions of the other omegas. He felt distinctly unnerved by the undivided attention they gave him. Judging from the wide eyes and agreeable nods, most of the omegas were open to such a policy for the omega society.

"How are we going to encourage gender integration when it's too dangerous to even allow alphas to enter the omega dormitory?" questioned the same girl in a sanctimonious tone. "Shouldn't we focus on elevating omega status without alphas?"

There was minimal agreement across the room but her comment sparked debate among the other omegas.

"That's a fair point," Louis said cautiously, "but I think we need to move away from that 'us-and-them' mindset. All major omega movements in the past have succeeded through at least partial participation of alphas and betas. They have the strongest representation in all the decision-making platforms so it only makes sense to work alongside them."

"And the Candling Omega Society shouldn't be any different," Will supplied from across the room. The omegas gathered in the room whipped around to hear his reasoning. "I support Louis here. I think we need to involve alphas and betas in order to address issues relating to us. It's obvious that we need to promote higher omega student numbers but they can't possibly be aware of issues like heats and scenting reactions."

"Exactly," Louis agreed happily. "We can show them how Candling can better cater to omegas."

The girl pursed her lips but remained silent. Her friend began speaking animatedly to her and she nodded in agreement.

"Right," Louis continued, looking at the general consensus in the stuffy room as the other thirty omegas smiled at him in encouragement. Zayn motioned for him to proceed with his speech. "Well, the next thing we'll do is start to get to know each other and find out the main omega matters you want to address."

Louis, helped by Zayn, then organised the large group into a shape resembling a circle. Everyone sat on mismatched armchairs and beanbags. Louis then extracted another notebook from his bag and before plonking himself down onto a paisley cushion beside Zayn. His eyes crinkled as he
smiled at him, relieved at how the meeting had gone so far.

"So we'll begin by going around the circle and I'll write down any topics you want to talk about," he explained. "The alpha and beta societies have a custom where they organise monthly debates to discuss gender related issues. We're going to join the September debate and I think it would be helpful to have the things we want to discuss prepared in advance."

This prompted approving smiles and excited chatter around the room. Louis felt slightly saddened that something as small as participating in a debate to bring attention to such important matters could excite the omegas.

The following hour was spent exploring omega topics to raise during the debates. The omegas proposed possible points to raise during the debates and Louis was delighted with their responses. The gray-eyed girl - Lily, he learned - was surprisingly informed on gender discrimination and made a number of insightful comments on omega empowerment. "I think that omegas need to completely reject the stereotypes associated with them. We don't have to disregard our natural tendencies, just adopt new ones too; using our emotions in a different way by showing passion and dedication to the omega cause," she had argued. By the end of the meeting, Louis found himself supporting a lot of the views she expressed.

Later that night, when Louis and Zayn were lying next to each other on the younger omega's bed, he allowed himself to feel proud of his work. He secretly pictured Harry's reaction when he told him about the success of the society's first meeting; the alpha's sincere smile, the way he would reach forward to touch him and embrace him - a natural alpha instinct to express happiness with an omega - and the way he would restrain himself, aware that such behaviour might not be welcomed.

"That was great, Louis. Really great," Zayn said, disentangling him from his thoughts. He rolled onto his side to face him. "Everyone was really involved in the conversation at the end about reactions to alpha scents," Zayn continued. "They seemed genuinely interested in joining the society. Plus, when you mentioned the inter-society excursions a group of girls practically pounced on me for more information."

"Well," Louis said, shaking his head with amusement, "that's not really the kind of attitude we want to promote but I guess we need everyone we can get at this stage. There can't possibly be any sirens at Candling anyway."

Zayn nodded in agreement and they fell into comfortable silence, observing their room and absentmindedly commenting about all the changes they planned to make.

"I'm going to visit the campus engineering centre tomorrow," he explained. "I want to see if a couple of students will build us a bookshelf for cheaper than any of the London homewear stores. We need space to hold all of my art supplies and your ridiculously huge law books."

Louis hummed in agreement, not really listening to Zayn's description of the pale yellow he planned to paint the walls as well as the lights he wanted to string across the ceiling. He loved listening to him speak passionately about his art, however and closed his eyes to listen, making noises of consent to his plans for their room where appropriate.

They fell asleep entangled in thick woollen blankets with Louis' folders and notebooks on top of them. Louis peeked an eye open in the early morning when he felt the edge of Harry's folder digging into his waist. He followed the alpha's neat cursive with his index finger and smiled sleepily at the short note enclosed in the folder.

Louis -
I hope this helps. Let me know how the first meeting goes.

H.

The navy blue ink stained his finger but Louis find that he couldn't care, drifting back to sleep with memories of the alpha's hopeful gaze and theories of a comforting, unidentifiable scent consuming his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

I apologise that this chapter is a little later than usual but I'm currently on holidays ("vacation" as my American readers call it)!
"What're you wearing?" Louis asked, tangling his fingers in his hair frustratedly.

Zayn glanced up at his roommate rifling through their shared wardrobe. "This, probably," he said, nodding at the white shirt and navy bomber jacket he was wearing. "It doesn't matter too much, Lou. It's just a meeting."

Louis ignored his reasoning and pulled out a light blue jumper. "It's just a meeting, sure, but it's also the first time we'll be able to talk about the issues the others raised at last week's omega society," he argued. They were preparing for a meeting with the members of the alpha and beta societies to organise the inter-gender debates that would take place the following day. Louis was determined to make their presence known and ensure that the topics proposed by the other omegas were raised.

"We need to make sure that we secure the main omega topics on the agenda for tomorrow's debates," he explained. "Otherwise, we won't have any credibility as an omega society."

Zayn nodded slowly in agreement, sitting up on his bed and placing his sketchbook on his bedsheets. "Yeah, I know," he said patiently. "But what does that have to do with what you're wearing?"

Louis' cheeks coloured. "I just -," he said, hesitating. "I want to wear something sensible."

Zayn snorted loudly. "Sensible?" he questioned incredulously.

Louis waved him off. "You know what I mean," he said. "All of the other Candling students dress so formally. And all of the students we're meeting this afternoon are older and can actually pull off wearing button-down shirts to lectures without looking like they're going to church. I don't want to make it any more obvious that I'm -"

"Different?" Zayn supplied. He stood up from the bed and approached Louis, hooking his chin over his shoulder to look inside the wardrobe. "You don't need to dress like the pretentious Candling student you're not," he advised. "Wear what you want, Lou."

Louis leaned his head against Zayn's and sighed happily, breathing in his scent.

"And besides," Zayn added with an audible smirk, "there's no point trying to blend in - you attract attention no matter what you wear."

Louis gave him a playful shove. "Says the broody model."

Zayn gasped in feigned indignation. "I do not brood."


Zayn laughed and shook his head at his roommate's antics. "Okay," he said suddenly, clapping his hands decidedly. "You're going to wear your white jumper and the dark blue jeans that make your ass look good."
"Just good?" Louis asked, winking as he began removing his sweats.

Zayn rolled his eyes playfully and averted his eyes, collecting the materials they would need for the meeting from Louis’ desk.

Half an hour and a struggle to squeeze into his jeans (one that Louis would adamantly deny) they ventured into the bitter cold September wind and reached the Student Centre.

"How many people are going to be here?" Zayn asked as they walked briskly up the stairs towards the meeting room the beta receptionist directed them towards.

Louis hesitated, counting on his fingers. "About twelve, I think," he said. "You, me, five alphas and five betas, assuming that the alpha and beta numbers are in proportion, of course."

Zayn placed a comforting arm around his shoulder as they stood in front of the heavy mahogany door. "Everything will be fine," he said sincerely. "You're more prepared than half the people in here, I bet."

Louis smiled appreciatively at him before taking a steeling breath and pushing open the door. They were greeted with a dark room with long, oak table seating the ten students whose heads instantly turned in their direction. The two omegas tried not to breathe in the overlapping, conflicting scents. Louis figured that it was better to hold his breath and look mildly constipated than submit to the overwhelming alpha scents permeating the room.

"Louis!" a voice called brightly.

He found Harry smiling at him from the head of the table, beneath an ornate, venetian chandelier. His gaze was unwavering and Louis felt slightly vulnerable. He felt the eyes of every alpha and beta in the room directed at them. He cleared his throat and stepped further inside the room, quickly followed by Zayn who shut the door firmly.

"Welcome to the inter-gender pre-debate meeting boys," George - the President of C.A.S - said warmly, standing up to greet them from across the room. "Everyone this is Louis and Zayn, our representatives from the omega society."

A chorus of greetings and well-wishes sounded throughout the room.

"Good to see you again, Zayn," Louis heard Liam say shyly. He made a mental note to ask his roommate about that later and settled for raising a curious eyebrow at him, one which Zayn resolutely ignored.

They took their seats on either side of George, Harry directly opposite the older omega. Louis felt assaulted with George's potent scent - freshly printed newspaper - and he noticed the alpha take a deep breath as the two omegas sat down before he resumed what was evidently a welcoming message to all of the students seated around them.

"Now that everyone is here," he began, "I'd like to formally thank you all for joining the alpha society in our aim to integrate all students at Candling. We want to make this a more supportive, inclusive environment for all and, to achieve that, we need to overcome our divisions through dialogue."

Liam reached under the table to retrieve a small folder of information for each of them. Louis smiled as Harry eagerly passed him one of the folders, their fingertips brushing.

"These packets detail the layout of the debates," another alpha at the opposite side of the table said
with a low drawl. He had large amber eyes and a thick curtain of black hair hanging over his forehead. A faint cedarwood scent surrounded him as he focused on him. "They're a little vague at the moment because obviously we have omegas on campus this year. As such we're going to be changing some of the usual topics we've been discussing the last couple of years so we kept things open to add all of the changes."

The alpha gave a pointed look at Louis and Zayn as he spoke though his expression was not unwelcoming. Louis got the impression that he simply wanted to engage with them.

"As always," Harry interjected, his deep voice catching the attention of everyone seated at the table, "we'll begin by going around to the heads of each society and they'll call out the major issues their members raised. Maria, our secretary," he continued, nodding at a pretty alpha with olive skin seated next to him, "will take note of all the topics raised."

Louis placed his notebook and folder on the table beside a tray holding an ornate tea set. He opened the correct file and felt his heartbeat increase at the prospect of speaking to the group.

"I must remind you all to remain respectful and behave as you would during any normal debate," George said evenly. "No topic is out of question for the debates and all societies will be given time to argue why their issues should be put on tomorrow's agenda."

Louis watched the way his eyes swept indiscriminately across the table, never landing on any one person. He could see why he was an ideal choice for the President of the alpha society; his tone was commanding but not overbearing and he was remarkably calm. Harry, in contrast, epitomised the typically alpha quality of confidence and had a great presence in the room. He, however, lacked the control that George seemed to exude. From what Louis could tell, Harry was extremely in touch with and, in many cases, ruled by his emotions which made it difficult for him to overcome his natural tendencies.

"We'll begin with you, Aisling, if that's alright," George continued, glancing at the head of the beta society who smiled gratefully and stood up.

"Afternoon everyone," she said kindly, looking around at the students. "It's great to see so many new and familiar faces here. We held our first beta society meeting of the term last Monday and it lasted almost four hours." A number of sympathetic groans sounded around the room as she nodded in confirmation. "Yeah, we had quite a few topics to address. We notably discussed quite a few issues relating to omega and beta relationships and, in that spirit," she said, smiling at Zayn and Louis, "I'd like to extend a formal welcome to the omega society reps joining us today."

Louis was struck by the sincerity that rung in her voice, despite the formality of her tone. He figured that she was a politics student by the ease with which she spoke to the group.

"We covered quite a few areas relating to betas on campus and the role of betas in our wider society which I've condensed into four main issues." She pulled a slim laptop out of her bag and began reading from the screen. "You should consider all of these as important topics for tomorrow's debates," she said earnestly. "The first subject is the lack of beta representation in top government positions as well as the gender wage gap between betas and alphas."

Louis sensed George nod stiffly beside him and saw Maria type rapidly across from him. He silently agreed that beta numbers in the upper government circles were appalling low considering betas made up almost half of the entire population. His concerns, however, were primarily focused on omega issues which were far more critical.

"Secondly, we talked extensively about beta couples' access to adoption services," she said,
prompting many students to nod in agreement. Louis was among them, aware that infertile or same-sex beta couples were often denied requests to adopt alpha and omega children because they were considered uninformed on their gender-specific requirements or incapable of dealing with them. Many alpha and omega orphans weren't given to loving beta parents because of such beliefs. As the omega son of betas, he was a firm advocate for improved beta access to adopt alpha and omega orphans.

"Thirdly, now that we will surely have omega support on this issue for the first time, we want to increase the prominence of beta and omega relationships on campus and discuss the lack of social acceptance afforded to these couples," she continued. Louis nodded adamantly and smiled at her to express his agreement. His attention was diverted, however, when the alpha with dark hair opened his mouth and leaned forward to object.

"Aisling, I think you'll find that supporting those kind of relationships would be to the detriment of the alpha community," he said. "Omega numbers are dwindling as you know and campaigning for omega/beta relationships at this stage really isn't a priority."

Before he had finished speaking betas had stood up in their chairs, objecting and shaking their heads vehemently.

"What are you talking about, Ryan? Omegas aren't fucking extinct, you knothead."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ryan. You're just being letting your selfish alpha control you."

Louis turned towards Zayn, bypassing the glare George directed towards his alpha friend for disrupting the peace. Zayn was shaking his head, silently communicating with his roommate not to engage in the argument. Louis leaned towards him to argue otherwise but his movement was halted by a frustrated growl emerging from the alpha directly in front of him. Harry pushed himself to his feet, chair scraping against the dark wooden floorboards loudly before stalking towards Ryan. The alpha was arguing with three of the betas and seemed to relish getting a rouse out of them.

Everyone watched with bated breath as Harry approached him, placing a large hand on the back of his chair and leaning down to whisper in his ear. His eyes were narrowed and jaw tightened as he spoke. The room had fallen silent and even with his sharp hearing Louis was unable to decipher Harry's words. Though he strained his ears, he could only read Ryan's sigh of acquiescence. Harry abruptly stood up, nodding towards George and sending him a charged look before returning to his seat.

"Right," George breathed, glancing at Ryan's tight-lipped expression. "We'll continue with Aisling, if you're ready. And I shouldn't need to remind you of the importance of listening and respecting others' points of view."

Aisling stood up again, readjusting her hair before continuing unperturbed. Louis found that his attention drifted towards the alpha sitting opposite him, however. His head was hung and his hair fell in front of his eyes in loose ringlets. He seemed to be chastising himself for his behaviour, mouth twitching as though he was arguing with himself. Louis felt an immense desire to reach forward, card his fingers slowly through Harry's hair until he looked up again. He longed to provide the comfort and gentleness that only an omega could. He wanted to curl up in Harry's lap, stroke his cheek and reassure the alpha.

"The final issue is one that I have raised at every single debate preparation meeting I've attended since I joined the beta society," Aisling said, interrupting his wandering thoughts with her change of tone. "And one that has been turned down every single time." She looked pointedly between Harry and George, both of whom determinedly maintained eye-contact with her. "The issue is the
romanticism of alpha and omega sexual relationships in the media to the detriment of betas."

A betas nodded in support while another released an uneven breath she was holding, evidently impressed by Aisling's resolve to bring up the topic. George leaned forward in his seat while Harry leaned back comfortably, clasping his hands on the table.

Louis felt unsure about the topic, having never considered that what was obviously a contentious one among the group to be an issue. He knew that omega and alpha relationships were widely glorified in the media, eclipsing the time and resources afforded to promoting beta relationships.

"Aisling, our answer remains the same," he heard Harry drawl, condescension lacing his tone. "We're not debating the topic as it's unnecessary and sensitive."

"We hold these debates to inspire change," George added, tone more patient than Harry's. "We don't want to cause arguments when it's clear to both parties that a resolution won't be reached."

The was a thick tension permeating the room, materialised in the scents released by the four alphas in the room. Louis concentrated on Harry, unworried about the questioning look Zayn was shooting him, in order to detect any scent change. He remained frustratingly scentless, however, despite the fact that everything from his confident demeanour and the unwavering eye-contact he was making with Aisling pointed towards his other alpha features. It was clear that all five alphas were united in their opposition to the topic, irritating the betas in the room.

"Listen to yourselves," she sighed in annoyance. "I'm sick of the lack of beta sexual and romantic relationships shown in films, books, magazines, everything. You don't consider this an actual issue because you have no problem watching omegas fall hopelessly in love with alphas, have films portray alpha and omega sex accurately and have huge areas of society based around your relationships. We aren't afforded any exposure to accurate beta relationships in the media."

Louis scoffed loudly. The entire room turned towards him and he regretted his reaction instantly, cheeks colouring under their gaze.

Harry raised an eyebrow at him in amusement. "What's your opinion on the matter, Louis?" he asked boldly.

Louis struggled to collect his thoughts before answering. "It's, eh, well, it's just that alpha and omega relationships aren't portrayed accurately either," he explained, looking at Aisling. "That's not to say that beta relationships don't get proportionate representation in the media," he amended, noticing the slight frown on her face, his omega instincts compelling him to resolve the issue. "They definitely aren't given enough presence in cinema or literature, like you said. I just think that omegas and alphas experience different issues as a result of our relationships being romanticised; we have unrealistic expectations to meet and, in reality, almost every alpha/omega romantic comedy follows the same ridiculous trajectory."

"And the sex is completely idealistic," Lucia, whose attention didn't waver on Louis, added to which the omega stuttered an agreement that sounded more like an unattractive choking noise.

George, ever an alpha who was unaffected by topics others might consider delicate or controversial, nodded in agreement with both of them. Aisling opened her mouth to reply and then closed it, seemingly unable to reply.

"Thank you, Louis," Harry said sincerely, eyes penetrating his own. "I think you've successfully ended this long-standing debate."
George voiced his agreement before thanking Aisling for her contribution. "Well, Louis, if you're ready to speak on behalf of the omega society I think I speak on behalf of all of us when I say that we'd be delighted to hear what you discussed," he said, resuming his note-taking after Louis agreed.

He wiped his palms on his jeans and took a steadying breath before standing up. He cursed his height when he noticed that he was the same height standing as George was hunched over his notebook.

"I'm sorry about the interruption earlier," he began, succumbing to his instincts to resolve any tension or unwanted situation amongst alphas. "I just think it's important that we acknowledge that we all experience different issues and that, only by talking can we really understand each other better," he said, voice surprisingly confident. He could feel Zayn smiling proudly at him.

"We have just two main issues regarding the omega community here at Candling and we feel that it's important to raise awareness about them so that they can actually be addressed," he continued, glancing at his notes in the folder on the table. He suddenly regretted the sensitive topics the members had approached, realising that he would have to recount aspects of omega biology that would surely make the other students uncomfortable. He frantically wracked his brain for ways to approach the topics without mentioning the word 'heat' in front of five attentive alphas.

"The main thing we talked about was making the university more omega-friendly," he explained. "The issue that we wanted to discuss was providing omegas exceptions in certain aspects of our experience at Candling. These might include permitting exemptions in certain school material when we go through annual, eh, omega-specific biological changes." He glanced around to gauge their reactions and was surprised by the eagerness of both the alphas and betas to hear his suggestions. "Also, these could involve permitting omegas to use permanent scent manipulators on campus. This would allow everyone to focus on academic studies as omegas wouldn't distract and entice other students."

"If you think it's just your scent we're enticed by, darling, then you're sorely mistaken," Harry said amusedly.

Louis shut his mouth abruptly, unsure how to respond. The term of endearment made him feel hot beneath his thick jumper. Harry was still sprawled out on his chair, legs spread invitingly and fingers digging into his thighs.

"Well, we thought it would be an interesting topic to include in the agenda," Louis said finally, eyes never really finding Harry's penetrating gaze. He cleared his throat before continuing. "Finally, our second issue is bringing awareness to specific struggles faced by omegas on campus," he said, looking around the room anxiously to see their collective response to the proposition. "We thought we could debate implementing a mandatory lesson on omega rights, struggles and our gender movement."

This time, the reaction of the other students was audible. There were noises of approval, contemplative humming and Harry actually beamed at him from across the room.

"I'm not even sure that should be a debate topic," Harry said. "That should proposed to the board of directors." There was a chorus of agreement and Maria hummed loudly from where she was frantically scribbling in her notebook.

Liam shot him a curious look. "You don't seriously think he'll agree to that, do you?" he asked quietly.
Louis pretended to be busy clasping his satchel over as Liam and Harry engaged in a silent argument and George thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

"Maria and a few student ambassadors distribute the agenda tomorrow morning, giving you until five to prepare beforehand," he explained loudly as Louis saw Harry mutter into his friend's ear.

Before he could listen further, however, he was pulled away by a potent smell - rose infused candle wax - that seemed to be growing stronger. He felt Zayn tug the sleeve of his jumper and pull him out of the room before he could register what had happened: Zayn was going into heat.

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear your thoughts down below. What do you think is going to happen to Zayn? What are your theories on Harry's father and his own lack of scent?
Comfort

They rushed passed oak doors, trotted along corridors and ran down flights of stairs until they reached the main reception of the Student Centre. Louis ignored the receptionist when she stood up to ask what was wrong with the omega in his arms. Zayn had begun breathing frantically and releasing strong pheromones; his scent was assaulted Louis' senses. His scent was familiar - candle wax infused with rose - but Louis felt disconcerted by the slight alteration; the scent had gained a kind of desperation, a plea for help. The older omega gained a sudden sense of clarity and purpose: he needed to bring Zayn to safety.

The university had implemented extensive measures to ensure omega safety during heats. However, the alpha-repellent scent neutralisers available to deter alphas and the passcode security features were only available in the omega dormitories themselves. Louis was keenly aware of the vulnerable position Zayn was in and he steeled his breath, picking up his pace to get to their shared dormitory as quickly as possible.

The evening sun shone on the damp blades of grass as they crossed Connelly Place. Louis purposefully directed the omega leaning on him away from the other students scattered throughout the area. His heart beated wildly in his chest and his grip on Zayn's shoulder tightened as his eyes shot around at the groups of students. He imagined alphas approaching them and taking advantage of the inebriated state of mind Zayn was headed towards.

The omega had started muttering beneath his breath, begging Louis for safety. Louis whispered in his ear, attempting to reassure him but he knew that Zayn was still mostly lucid and that he knew the dangerous position he was in. The first stage of omegas experienced during a heat was to find a place of comfort and, preferably, familiarity. During mating, it was paramount that the omega felt equable and calm. As such, Louis knew that his roommate was desperate to return to their shared dormitory.

The crunch of shoes on the gravel of the footpath alerted Louis to the two sets of footsteps approaching them. He instantly knew by the integrity and wholeness of one the scents that Harry was the second alpha as he could not detect another scent to accompany the footsteps. Seeking an alpha's help was part and parcel of being an omega but Louis knew that he couldn't rely on Harry, too concerned about his friend and unsure about Harry's ability to resist his natural urges.

Musky leather flooded his nostrils before he needed to identify the voice calling out above the breeze.

"Zayn! Zayn, what's the matter?" Liam's tone was ruled by concern for the omega as he ran towards them. Louis whipped around, noticing both alphas walking briskly towards them. Before he could call out to them Harry stopped abruptly in his tracks, nostrils flaring and face contorting in realisation.

"Liam," he said gravely. "Liam, stop."

Louis saw the dark glint in the alpha's eyes as Harry placed a firm hand on his shoulder to stop him. His other shoulder jerked forward and his hand clenched into a fist as though he wanted to run to Zayn. His face, however, told a different story. His eyes, previously dark with desire, saddened with concern.

"You need to go, Louis," he said desperately. "Get out of here!" Liam's whole body was now being restrained by Harry but he kept calling for Louis to run. Both alpha's were fixing him with austere
faces and he had to fight his natural instinct to submit to them both. He steeled his breath and nodded once before pulling a whimpering Zayn in the direction of the omega dormitories.

Liam's shouts had garnered them attention from the students dotted around the area and a group of betas whispered as they passed. A couple of the girls in the group offered to assist them reach the dormitory but Louis, feeling particularly protective of his roommate, declined. The others leered at Zayn, unashamedly breathing in his scent and voicing the profanities in their minds.

They made it to the omega dormitories just as the rain began pouring. With Zayn leaning most of his weight on him and emitting high-pitched whining noises he struggled to extract the key from his pocket. He could hear shuffling and frantic talking behind the door and a second later it swung open to reveal a group of ten omegas wearing identical expressions of shock and consternation.

"Get inside quickly," Will, standing at the front of the group, commanded, ushering them inside.

"What happened?"

"Are you okay?"

"Did anything happen to him, Louis?"

The older omega shook his head in response at the same time Zayn shut his eyes and released a loud whimper. The other omegas collectively made sympathetic sounds, gathering closer around Zayn to embrace him in their scents. The omega sighed contently in response.

"I'm going to bring him to our dorm," he explained to Will, though the entire group heard him. "He wasn't expecting his heat. It wasn't due for another month at least. I don't know what set it off."

"You were around alphas, though, weren't you?" a girl wearing a curious expression said.

"Yeah," he sighed. "But nobody scented him and it came on pretty suddenly, right at the end of the meeting."

"How did the meeting go?" Lily, the opinionated gray-eyed girl from their first omega society meeting, asked.

Louis shot her an unimpressed look. "Later. I'll get Zayn sorted with the essentials to get through the first day right now."

The omegas parted to allow Zayn - supported on either side by Will and Louis - up the stairs. Louis activated the security settings on their door before they lifted Zayn to help him onto his bed. Zayn let out a stream of unintelligible words as he kicked off his shoes and tucked himself beneath the bedsheets. Louis and Will could only watch as he breathed in deeply and tunneled beneath his plum-coloured blankets. Although both omegas had each only had one heat, they understood the deep desire to find refuge and familiarity that he was experiencing.

Louis crouched beside Zayn and rubbed soothingly up and down his back.

"How are you feeling, Z?" he asked quietly.

The omega opened his eyes, blinking slowly. "Fine," he sighed. "At least for the moment. I just -" he cut himself off, shaking his head. "I'm happy to be back here."

Louis got the impression that there was something Zayn wasn't telling him but he let the thought pass.
"Do you know where your supplies are?" Will asked kindly, aware that Zayn could slip under and succumb to his inebriated, heat-induced mindset any minute.

"In the blue bag in the bottom drawer," Zayn instructed. Will retrieved the bag and placed it at the foot of his bed.

"I'm going to get you something to eat, Z," Louis explained. "And then you should try to get some sleep before you slip under."

Zayn sighed but nodded in acquiesce. He knew that the following week would deny him of much sleep.

Louis slipped out of the room, relieved that Will stayed to sit beside Zayn on the bed for the omega to sense both his scent and comforting presence. During this stage of a heat, when omegas reached a location they could experience their heat without fear, their alpha became territorial; they often didn't allow other people, regardless of their gender, near their omega. As such, Louis knew that Zayn was craving the sense of security that only an alpha could truly provide. Will giving him his undivided attention and Louis providing sustenance for him - steps alphas took to care for their omega in heat - were only second to what (or who) Zayn really desired.

Louis returned moments later carrying a tray stacked high with water, fruit, sandwiches, muffins and a steaming mug of tea. He found Zayn in a state of reduced awareness than when he left. Will was whispering reassurance but Zayn, leaning towards his hand stroking his hair, kept whispering a single word: alpha. His tone was desperate, eyes alert as they darted around the room as though he expected an alpha to walk into the room. It was intrinsic to omega biology to seek an alpha to spend the heat with. Louis could only sigh and crawl to sit beside Zayn in the bed.

"You're not going to have an alpha to help you through the heat," he forced himself to say, though it pained to hear the omega's responding whine. It was necessary, however, to be completely unambiguous so that he understood not to seek the assistance of an alpha. "But you're going to be fine without one. I promise you'll be just fine," he said calmly.

Will nodded vigorously beside him. Zayn looked between them before sighing heavily and bowing his head, a typical omega sign of resignation or acceptance. They remained like that, Zayn curled up between the other two omegas, sipping milky tea and breathing in their scents until he fell asleep.

Louis spent the next two hours absentmindedly stroking Zayn's shoulder until his arm felt numb. His mind was preoccupied, however, images of hypothetical situations flashing in his mind, each one ending in Zayn being dragged away from him, limp and whimpering, by a tall, faceless alpha. He resolved to do something - anything - to ensure that Zayn and any other omega at Candling would find themselves in a similar situation again.

"As you all know, Zayn won't be joining us for today's inter-gender debate," Louis said to the large group of forty-eight omegas seated before him. His voice was raspy and strained as it always was after a sleepless night. He had awoken early to hear Zayn whimpering and grinding against his mattress and had left the room immediately, only pausing to grab his clothes and toothbrush to get ready in Will's dormitory.

"While I have you all here," he said, "I'd like to thank everyone who helped us last night. Both of us really appreciate your care." He took a deep breath, audible in the high-ceilinged, almost completely silent room before continuing. "What happened to Zayn shouldn't have happened. It's
my responsibility to look after him, a fellow omega and a friend and, because of the conditions at Candling, I couldn't do that yesterday."

Sad expressions and sympathetic smiles encouraging him to continue looked back at him.

"After today's debate I'm going to arrange a meeting with the board of directors," he explained to the group, many of whom were staring in disbelief. "If they agree, anyone who wishes to join me is more than welcome to fight for improved omega protection."

"They aren't going to agree to that," an omega who had remained noticeably silent during the first omega society meeting said from across the room. "The board is composed of traditional alphas. They were the ones most against us being here in the first place. It took a student movement and the President's agreement to change their minds."

"But they're the only ones who can implement changes to the university," Lily added, glancing at Louis to gauge his reaction. He nodded in response and she continued. "Even if we want something as small as allowing omega scent manipulators or represents they're the ones to allow it."

"I'm speaking to them whether I think they'll agree to it or not," Louis said, more confident now that he knew many of the other omegas agreed with him. Their determined gazes and the talking that had broken out among the omegas were strangely reassuring. Louis was relieved that the omegas were so determined to argue for better conditions. He didn't doubt that any omega at university would disregard the major inequality people of their gender experienced. However he knew that some omegas were more strongly ruled by their desire to pacify others and that sparking a controversy by demanding better conditions was not in their inherent nature.

"Before we get ahead of ourselves," he said, garnering the attention of the group once more, "we should focus on the main reason we're gathered here: the debates." He had left his dormitory early to get the schedule for the debates from Maria, the secretary for the alpha society. She had told him about the protocol for the debates, explaining that each society should initiate a discussion about each of the topics so that they had general points prepared to discuss.

Louis had been slightly dismayed that the other alphas hadn't been there as he had spent much of his morning lecture deciding what he would say to Harry and Liam. They had been regretfully absent from his short discussion with Maria and he vowed instead to talk to them before the debates.

The group of omegas spent the following two hours proposing points both for and against the various motions. The alpha society had compiled a list of six topics - two for each society - that would be given an allotted time to be argued between the students.

By the end of the afternoon, a mere half hour before the debates were set to begin, Louis clapped his hands to break up the smaller groups they had divided into, instructing them to get ready to leave. Their was excited chatter among the group as the omegas rushed to their rooms to prepare.

Louis smiled as they passed him, giving last minute advice to some of the students who planned to speak on behalf of the omega society and answering their questions. He eventually managed to get away, rushing upstairs to check on his roommate.

Zayn was writhing around in his bed, having reached the second definitive stage of his heat: an insatiable desire to be knotted by an alpha. Louis gently knocked on the door to make his presence known to the omega but it was redundant; his inner omega had decided that he was in a safe place and had let down his barriers. Had he been with an alpha, he would be completely be at his mercy and vulnerable to his demands.
Louis changed into a light pink jumper and black jeans hurriedly, aware that he wouldn’t appreciate Zayn lingering in the room had the roles been reversed.

"I'm going to leave in a minute," Louis said clearly. He knew that Zayn was distracted and paying him his full attention. "Do you need anything before I leave?"

Zayn let out an aggrieved noise.

"Okay," Louis said carefully. "I'll leave you be. See you later, Z."

He combed his hair into a modest quiff as quickly as he could and bundled up, prepared to face the bitterly cold wind blowing outside. He scuttled out of the room, feeling particularly sympathetic for Zayn. By the time he arrived at the main entrance of the omega dormitories most of the students had already left. He rushed outside and made his way to the main lecture theatre of the Student Centre.

He arrived with ten minutes to spare, a faint blush colouring his cheeks from the biting wind. He was faced with an enormous hall with tall windows and seating almost one thousand people. The place was already alive with discussion, hundreds students huddled in smaller groups, shouting greetings to friends and enjoying the environment of the debates.

He saw Harry and Liam standing at the front of the room and caught the younger alpha's eye. Harry smiled warmly at him, gesturing for him to approach the podium he was leaning on. He wore a cream, sheer shirt with the top buttons undone. A cross necklace was nestled in his chest, the tattooed wings of two swallows curling around the cross chain. Louis' thoughts, however, were far from religious.

"Louis," he said contently, his demeanour instantly becoming more gentle. "How are you feeling? How's Zayn?"

Louis smiled at the alpha's earnestness. "Zayn is doing well. Thankfully we made it back to the dorm okay," he said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind his ear, suddenly shy under the alpha's gaze.

Liam's interest peaked at Zayn's name and he stepped closer to Louis, eyes compelling him to listen. "Louis, I just want to say that I'm really sorry for how I behaved yesterday," he said sincerely. "If I had known what the situation was, I never would have run after you." He ran a hand through his hair aggressively, eyes wide with worry. "Fuck, I put you in such a bad position by approaching Zayn like that."

Harry placed a hand on his shoulder to steel him.

"It's okay, Liam, I understand," he replied easily. "You didn't do anything wrong; you were just looking out for Zayn."

"You don't think that being around us could have set it off, do you?" Liam asked worriedly.

Louis considered what he said before shrugging. "Honestly, I don't know. I'll just have to ask Zayn in a week's time," he said.

There was a lull in the chatter around the room.

"You never answered my first question," Harry said, smiling when Louis immediately returned his attention to him.
Louis smiled, amused. "And what was that?" he said coyly.

"I asked you how you're feeling," he said, slipping his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans.

Louis couldn't stop his smile from widening under the alpha's intense gaze. "I'm pretty good. A little nervous about the debates, to be honest. I just hope we get all of our point across," he said.

"You will," Harry answered confidently. "And it's completely normal to be nervous the first time. I'll be there the whole time if you need my help, omega."

Louis had to force himself to keep his head high, an overwhelming need to bow his head and succumb to Harry surging through every fibre of his being. Hearing Harry say his gender with such reverence and respect, rather than in the condescending tone that was often used, made his heart soar.

"Thank you, Harry."
"One minute remaining!"

"We're all highly aware that, up until the recent past, all omegas were systematically oppressed," Louis said to the enormous group. He was growing more comfortable giving his views by the minute but every time he looked out into the ginormous crowd his heart beated wildly in his chest.

"Naturally, every person faces their own challenges specific to their gender. We are given restricted job opportunities, lower wages and, because we can bear children, we're expected to stay at home and spend our lives raising them," he said emphatically, sweeping his eyes across the front row to find inquisitive and engaged students.

"Betas constitute the largest percentage of the population but stereotypes about their biology pervade the media and they hold few of the high power occupations because of their inherent lack of dominance," he continued, noticing the vehement nodding of a red-haired beta in the second row.

"Even alphas occasionally experience reverse discrimination, some issues of which - stereotypes of unemotional alphas, pressure to conform to social norms - have been raised tonight," he said, careful to spend extensive time addressing the alpha issues that had been debated extensively. He heard the small bell, prompting him to finish his speech. "In conclusion, I think it's important, as a community here at Candling, to address problems such as these to open our eyes to the fact that none of us, by virtue of our gender, are without problems."

A chorus of loud applause rand throughout the lecture theatre; over one thousand students, including fifty ebullient omegas, standing to their feet as he stepped down gracefully from the podium. He smiled gratefully and felt an unfamiliar sense of pride in himself surge through him as he sat in the front row beside Will who was whooping loudly.

"Alpha society candidate to respond!" the chairperson of the debates called. For each topic, one representative of each society was required to speak for ten minutes each. If the topic was proposed by the beta society, a beta would speak first and articulate his or her views before one omega and one alpha would respond.

Louis saw Harry walk purposefully towards the podium and his heard raced. He smiled at the admiring compliments being shot at him and thanked the wide-eyed omega on his other side who wouldn't stop singing his praises but his attention remained on the alpha standing mere feet away from him.

Harry lifted the microphone, smirking almost imperceptibly at him, before clasping his hands on the podium and speaking, his voice ringing through the theatre. "I completely agree with Louis," he said earnestly, speaking as slowly and pausing thoughtfully before making a point. Despite his languid pace, the audience were captivated by every word that emerged from his mouth.

"Discrimination against one group doesn't necessarily benefit another group," he continued. "In the media, for example, when omegas are portrayed as submissive, malleable and unable to consent to sex, alphas automatically are depicted as overly-aggressive and, should they act on their urges, rapists."

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He paused to let his words settle with the audience.

"This is a major issue that pertains to and hurts both genders," he said gravely. "And the twin discrimination doesn't stop there. I may have been born a gender that offers me far greater opportunities than betas or omegas but that doesn't mean that I can't recognise social norms that affect others."

Louis was enthralled. Harry possessed the ability to beguile even the most impenetrable of people with his deep, resonating voice alone. It was his measured tone, his insightful points and openness to learn new information that captivated Louis. He leaned forward, lips parted and eyes admiring as he unashamedly gazed the alpha.

The inter-gender debates had been in full swing for hours; alphas, betas and omegas alike sharing opinions, arguing and, in the process, learning more about social issues. The indirect aim was to spark interest and bring awareness to gender-specific issues and to create a more inclusive environment at Candling.

Harry's speech was followed by an enormous round of applause, Louis giving Harry a subtle thumbs-up when he caught the alpha searching for his response. He smiled appreciatively and nodded at Louis before making his way back to the seat.

"Our final topic is one submitted by the beta society regarding the adoptive services available to same-sex beta couples," the chairperson called above the applause. "Can I have the beta representative at the podium to present his points?"

The following half hour was spent proposing solutions to the lack of adoption services available to same-sex betas. Louis was delighted to see that Niall was the beta candidate and that he spoke seriously about the issue. The topic of betas being able to adopt alpha or omega children was raised and Louis itched to get up from his seat, to tell his story to the audience.

He was relieved when Lily, the omega society candidate, explained in her speech that betas could easily access the research and information to learn about the special needs of alpha and omega children which, in the past, only people of their gender knew. Niall had also mentioned that, although rare, beta couples could naturally birth alphas or omegas and Louis had proudly nodded.

As a male omega and the son of two betas, he was a rarity. Growing up, he had learned hugely about beta relationships and his parents had taken great care to learn about the needs that pertained to his gender. The month preceding his first heat at the age of sixteen his mother had purchased four scientific and gender behavioural books about heats so that she would be adequately prepared to provide for him and help him to have the most painless heat feasible. To Louis, the notion that betas were unable to raise alpha and omega children because of their supposed lack of experience of the specific gender issues was simply untrue. His kind, supportive mother and father were evidence of that.

"And that just about rounds us off," the chairperson said through her microphone as a brunette alpha with an hourglass figure stepped down from the podium. She had spoken adamantly about the needs of the orphaned children being placed above preconceptions about betas. "Thank you all for joining us tonight for what has transpired as a fruitful and highly productive debate. On behalf of the students I'd like to say how much more interesting and informative the debate was with our omega community here. Your presence was hugely appreciated."

Applause erupted throughout the lecture hall, Louis joining in enthusiastically. He had done it; seemingly endless hours of preparation and unnecessary worryingly had culminated in a successful initiative - the first of the omega society - and he had led it.
George and Aisling approached him, flanked by Harry and Liam who smiled supportively at him. George shook his hand firmly, ever the formal alpha, and Aisling sung praise about his speeches. Louis couldn't help but notice Harry glancing at him almost periodically out of the corner of his eye.

When George and Aisling started a conversation among themselves, Harry shuffled to stand closer beside him. Though Louis felt slightly disconcerted by his lack of scent, the alpha had a distinctive presence wherever he went. He stood with broad shoulders and his head held high as all alphas did but there was a slight reservation about him as though he knew the power he held and didn't want to abuse it.

"We're going to start organising the next alpha society event next week," Harry began, bringing his hand to the nape of his neck. "George and I were wondering if you were, eh, interested in doing the alpha/omega excursion we spoke about? I mean, if you don't want to that's fine, we have loads more events that we could do but I just thought that, you know, considering how successful this was, you might, eh want to," he finished somewhat lamely.

Louis beamed up at him. "That sounds like a great idea, Harry," he said, prompting the alpha to smile serenely, stopping him in his thoughts by the sheer expression on his face. He paused to recollect his thoughts. "There will be a lot of details to sort out though; transport, insurance, accommodation and all for a few hundred people."

"All the better," Harry said, tilted smile blooming on his face. "Then we'll get to spend more time together."

Louis spluttered before closing his mouth and nodding. He couldn't bear the silence that Harry seemed to enjoy as he observed the flustered omega.

"Did you have anywhere in mind for the excursion?" he asked, clasping his hands behind his back, a typical omega position to express willingness to please.

Harry's eyes followed the movement hungrily. He considered the question before responding. "I had a few ideas but I want to tell you another time, when it's less crowded and we have time to discuss things."

Louis nodded in acquiesce, happy to have another excuse to speak to him. The crowd around the podium had begun to disperse, only smaller groups lingering.

"Can I walk you outside? You don't have any night lectures, do you?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, of course. And no, I only have morning lectures and I tend to spend my evenings in the library," Louis said as they strolled towards the exit. "Bit too sleepy to study now, though" he said through a yawn.

Harry smiled endearingly at him. "I know how you feel. Gotta head to the hospital for a night shift now, though."

Louis gasped. "I almost forgot that you're a medicine student! What department are you planning on studying?"

"Paediatrics. That's the department I'm working in now. I love children," he said, glancing at him as they stepped outside into the fierce wind. "I knew as soon as I started interning there last year; getting to diagnose and treat kids was something I wanted to do. I couldn't imagine anything more rewarding, actually."
"That's amazing, Harry. It's good that you're so passionate about your degree," Louis said earnestly. He gripped onto his coat tightly and hurried to catch up with him.

Harry stopped in his tracks to wait for him upon noticing Louis scuttling behind him. He raised his arm, making to place it around his shoulders before snapping it back to his side just as fast. "I think so too. You have to be passionate about work. It's a cornerstone of who we are as people; it reflects our values and ideals. You must know that, too."

"Yeah, I think so too," he agreed, raising his voice slightly above the wind as they passed through an unsheltered area. "Part of the reason I became interested in law in the first place is because I thought that changing the law would change the system to help omegas." He sighed heavily. "Turns out it's just as important to change social views as well as improving legislation."

Harry nodded slowly. "That's why it's so good to talk about social problems," he said, pointing in the direction of the building they had left. "Talk sparks action and action leads to change. Every new law, new protection for omegas, new movement begins with one person talking to another. Just like we were this evening."

Louis had never heard an alpha speak like that before. He spoke eloquently but there was wisdom behind his language, worlds apart from the rhetoric used by alpha politicians to justify their sexist views.

"It's really great that Candling encourages that attitude; that we're able to openly discuss these kind of issues. I just wish we could actually implement all the changes that we agreed upon," he said determinedly. They passed Connelly Place, only the blowing of the wind and the trickle of water in the foundation providing company due to the late hour. "I can't wait to start bringing about more changes for omegas."

"You'll be applying for the International Gender Research Foundation study, then?" Harry asked excitedly.

Louis was surprised by the way his whole body had turned towards him with enthusiasm. "I've been so busy this week I haven't finished my application form yet but I definitely will," he admitted.

"Good," Harry said firmly. Though Louis knew he was only expressing agreement with his choice, he couldn't help but preen at the alpha's praise. Harry coughed nervously. "I, eh, I've know quite a few people overseeing the research and I know that they do fantastic work. I'm certainly looking forward to getting involved, if they pick me, of course."

They reached the entrance to the omega dormitory building as the sun went behind the London skyline.

"This is me, then," Louis said, suddenly nervous about how they would part. Thoughts raced through his head; should he wait for Harry to arrange their next meeting or simply thank him and walk upstairs?

Harry looked at the dormitory, observing the vines crawling up the Victorian-style building and breathing in the faint scents of its residents, completely obvious to Louis' internal debate. "This place is great. I'd never been close to it before; didn't really have an excuse to see it after it was being constructed," he said.

"I'm there," he said, pointing at the white window on the third floor where the raspberry-coloured curtains Zayn had chosen hung. Louis immediately cursed his impulsive mouth when Harry turned
to him, raising an eyebrow in confusion. "I live there," he amended. "That's the dorm I share with Zayn."

Harry nodded in realisation and looked up at the window intently.

Louis admired the stretch of his neck and the sharp line of his jaw.

Harry seemed to shake himself out of his reverie after a moment and snapped his neck, turning to find Louis looking at him with a pink hue creeping up his cheeks. He smirked.

"I better get going," Louis said, thumbing towards the door. "And I'm sure lots of little kids at the hospital need your attention more than I do."

Harry sighed heavily. "This is the first time I haven't wanted to start my night shift," he admitted. "Usually that's when we deal with kids in post-surgery and take care of them."

"Well then you'd better get going," Louis urged. "You can't be late for your shift. Make sure the kids recover perfectly. Do your job, Doctor Styles," he teased.

Harry smiled widely before nodding. "Okay, okay, I'll go and let you get to bed. But I'm not Doctor Styles yet, though," he said before pausing thoughtfully. "At least not to you," he winked.

Louis, who was about to start walking up the steps leading to the door, stopped with one foot raised. He didn't know what Harry meant but, judging by his suggestive smirk, it wasn't innocent.

"Right, well, I'll, eh, I'm going to," he stuttered, tucking a few strands of hair blowing in the wind behind his ear.

"Go to bed?" Harry suggested, smile growing wider as he watched Louis stumble over his words a mere hour after he had spoken to hundreds of students. "I'd love to see you again soon, Louis. To talk about the next alpha/omega event, of course. Are you free next Monday?"

Louis nodded and the two made plans to meet for coffee (or tea, in Louis' case) the following week. Harry waved at him, walking backwards and almost bumping into a potted plant.

Once he was out of sight Louis walked into the omega dormitory, sighing and leaning against the door, ecstatic smile on his face. He dragged his legs upstairs to find Zayn snoring softly. Their room thick with his potent scent and Louis felt a surge of sympathy for his roommate, aware of the sense of emptiness and vulnerability he knew that the omega was experiencing.

"Good night, Z," he whispered, switching the lamp on his bedside locker.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for reading.
"Good morning, this is Jennifer speaking on behalf of the Candling board of directors and associated administration institutions. How may I help you?" 

The bright, chirpy voice of the secretary rang through Louis' ear from where he sat cross-legged on his bed. Zayn's eyebrows shot up in interest from where he was drawing a plan for an art construction project he was working on. It involved working with engineering and architecture students too and, though Louis knew it accounted for a large portion of his grade, Zayn had been curiously secretive about the project.

He cleared his throat, prepared to imitate an alpha timbre in his voice. "Hello, my name is Louis Tomlinson and I'm the President of the university's omega society," he said, attempting to convey confidence but falling short of his mark. "I was hoping to arrange a meeting with the board of directors."

Louis heard her hesitate. "Have you made contact with any of the board members about the omega society in the past?" she asked.

"No," Louis sighed, already anticipating her rejection.

"Do you have a personal relationship with any of the senior members of board of directors?" she questioned.

"No," he replied, defeated.

Her audible sigh on the other end of the phone pierced the room. Zayn sat up fully, motioning frantically for Louis to continue talking and persuade the secretary to give him a chance to make his argument.

"I wanted to speak to them about a number of critical but feasible changes Candling can make to improve omega safety on campus," he said quickly, smiling at his roommate once he heard frantic typing through the phone.

"Right, Mr. Tomlinson," she said, enthusiastic typing matching her tone, "as you're probably aware, we rarely accommodate these kind of requests. We also tend to avoid facilitating student meetings with the board members themselves - they most often consult a third party intermediary to sort out those kind of issues. However, given the nature of this matter, where student safety is concerned, I'm able to make an exception."

Louis collapsed back onto his bed in relief and Zayn smiled endearingly at him, returning his attention once more to his sketchbook. "Thank you very much," he said emphatically.

"My pleasure," she said sincerely. "Now, the next full board meeting won't take place for another month but there will be a senior board meeting on Sunday at ten o'clock. You can meet them in the Westbloomington Hotel at that time. They'll know to expect you."

Louis checked his calendar before replying quickly. "That sounds perfect," he said, hesitating momentarily before adding, "how should I, eh, approach them? Like, do I give them a PowerPoint presentation or should I just explain the reforms the omega society has requested be made?"
Jennifer laughed softly at the mention of a PowerPoint sideshow. "No, no, there's absolutely no need for that," she said amusedly. "The board members are all businessmen, judges, politicians or retired ones, in a few cases. They want to hear from you; hear your case, your argument. You need to use your words; convince them of the changes you think should be made and they might well agree to them."

Louis sighed. Implementing what he believed to be fundamental protections for omegas was beginning to seem more and more like a fantastical dream. "Okay, thank you for the advice," he said, exchanging goodbyes with her before hanging up the phone and throwing it onto their carpeted floor.

"Zayn," he moaned, throwing his arms over his head dramatically.

The omega barely raised his head, sketching intently in long, sweeping lines across the page. "I know what you're thinking, Lou, and you're wrong. You can do it."

Louis turned his head to face him, their twin beds separated by two bedside cabinets and a collection of paintbrushes sprawled across the carpet. "I'm less worried about whether I can or not and more about them expelling me from the campus," he said, gesturing wildly.

"Don't be ridiculous, why on earth would they expel you?" Zayn said, smiling at his roommate's wandering imagination.

"Haven't you heard of the board of directors?" he said incredulously. "They're a bunch of traditional knotheads who never wanted omegas here to begin with. Trust me, they don't need to find an excuse to expel an outspoken omega; someone who wants to spend the university money on security features and omega education classes for alphas and betas. They're going to laugh in my face when they hear what we want."

Zayn tilted his head to consider Louis' words but didn't tear his eyes away from his sketch. He lifted his head slowly as he replied. "I suppose you're right about their opinions but that doesn't mean they'll expel you, Lou. Honestly, you're such a drama queen sometimes," he said, shaking his head at his friend's antics.

"The only thing you can do is try to reason with them," he continued. "Explain what happened to me and how it could have gone a lot worse had Liam not been able to, eh, restrain himself." Zayn's voice became quieter at his mention of the alpha's name and he resolutely looked at his sketchbook though he made no move to continue drawing.

Louis nodded in agreement, interest piquing at his reaction to Liam's name. "I'll prepare something to say to them. They're all alphas probably so it's in their nature to respond to a story about a vulnerable omega in heat, anyway."

Zayn shot him a warning glance. "Don't take advantage of their instincts, Louis," he said, eyebrows furrowed. "Just, try to be rational with them. Explain it from your point of view and hope that they'll see sense, I guess."

Louis smiled at his roommate from across the room, thankful for his advice and relieved that his heat had finished the previous day. Louis had tried to act as normally as possible all morning by starting conversations about trivial matters and teasing the omega about the lack of sleep his heat had afforded him. However, he was desperate to find out more about the sudden and unexpected onset of Zayn's heat. He didn't want to force him to discuss such a sensitive issue, however and knew that the omega would tell him when he was ready.
"I better get going," Zayn admitted, gathering his art supplies into his faded grey rucksack. "I have to meet with my team for my construction project. They've probably got so much work done in the past week, though."

"Don't worry," Louis reassured. "Once you come waltzing into the room, they'll listen to your ideas for the project."

"Doubt it," he said dejectedly, throwing his bag over one shoulder. "I mean, there's a couple of decent people on the team but I just hate group work in general."

Louis made a sympathetic noise. "You'll be fine, Z. You don't need to tell them anything about your heat. Just show them those complicated-looking sketches," he said, waving his hand at a few diagrams discarded on his bed, "and they'll bow before you like the art god you are."

Zayn's face cracked into a wide smile, sniggering at the thought of the burly engineering students (many of whom couldn't tell Picasso from Rembrandt) praising his artwork. "Thanks, Lou. I'll let you know how it goes," he said, waving over his shoulder as he left Louis lying on his bed, surrounded by mismatched blankets and assignments.

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The final lecture of the day ended at three in the afternoon. The sun had long since disappeared behind a looming cloud mass when the wind started to blow more fiercely. Louis left the hall hurriedly, avoiding the jostling and shoving of the taller alphas from his lecture. He was met with an even larger crowd outside.

Sheets of paper - an endless number of the same three-page booklet as far as he could see - were being swooped throughout the courtyard by the blowing gusts of wind. Throngs of students were gathered around long tables stationed outside the lecture theatre, people distributing booklets from the tall piles on top of the tables.

"They must be the application forms," he overheard a female alpha say to her friend. "Gemma mentioned they'd start recruiting the law students they want for the research soon."

Louis made his way though the crowd, cursing his height as he put his weight on the balls of his feet, standing on tip-toe to see above the shoulders of the surrounding students. He sighed in frustration and, though he hadn't thought anyone had heard, he felt the boy in front of him in the crowd turn around abruptly.

"Here you are, darling," the alpha with unruly dark hair covered by a beanie said, handing him one of the booklets.

Louis thanked him, grateful that, for once, his omega status favoured him in situations where alphas were naturally more forceful. Despite the jostling, Louis knew that alphas relished the opportunity to help omegas and provide assistance for them in any way. It gave their inner alphas deep satisfaction to know that they had succeeded in providing for an omega, no matter how minute the gesture.

Louis scuttled along the edge of the crowd and managed to reach the omega dormitories with the booklet clutched in his hand only ten minutes later than usual.

The minute he stepped inside the dormitory, Zayn sprang on him exuberantly. Louis, taken by surprise, could hardly listening as he unravelled and removed the endless layers of clothing he wore for the weather.
"And they chose my idea above the fourth year architecture student's one!" Zayn finished just as Louis whipped his hat off his head. "It was all thanks to Liam, really."

"Wait, Liam did what?"

Zayn's cheeks turned a rare shade of pink. "He, eh, he took a look at my diagrams when I first arrived and convinced the rest of the group to scrap part of the work they'd done last week in favour of doing my idea," he said excitedly.

"That's amazing, Zayn," he exclaimed as the younger omega shrugged modestly. "Liam sounds like a great alpha," he added casually. He noticed that Zayn's scent had become more potent, something that would have caused Louis to delve a little deeper into his relationship with Liam had the omega not finished his heat the previous day and as such was still prone to scent fluctuations.

"I think he just felt bad about the whole heat thing and wanted to make it up to me," Zayn said. "He didn't mention anything about my heat to the group, which was good of him." The omega took a steeling breath before continuing. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Lou; about why I went into heat like that."

Louis nodded, demeanour instantly becoming serious as he sat in his desk chair across from Zayn.

"I think it was because of two things but I want your opinion so that I can pinpoint exactly how I missed the signs," he said, toying with the rubber of his pencil. "First, it could be because of the change of environment; new living space, being around unfamiliar alphas, new experiences and everything could have changed my body click."

Louis nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that's a possibility," he considered. "Though it hasn't happened to any other omega on campus."

"That's what I thought too," he said, sighing. "The main other option is that my body was reacting to one of the alpha's in the room."

Louis nodded in agreement.

"One of them would have had to be suppressing an urge or strong emotion of some kind or else experiencing pain that I instinctively wanted to heal, even if I wasn't aware," he explained. "If one of them felt that way but resisted releasing a scent then my body could have reacted without me knowing about it. I would have sensed the change in emotion but not in scent and my body would have been disconcerted, reverting to going into heat early as a default."

Louis stared open-mouthed at him. "Okay, but why wouldn't I have reacted too?"

"That's what I thought and the only realistic explanation is that you didn't feel affiliated to this alpha. Your body could resist the urge to succumb to whichever alpha felt the need to suppress their scent because you didn't feel obliged to soothe their pain."

"You said it was an alpha that suppressed his scent," Louis said, preparing to ask him about if he thought Harry had prompted Zayn's early heat. He recalled the alpha being particularly impassioned during the debate preparations and thought that it was perfectly feasible that he attempt to avoid filling the room with his scent. Louis felt an irrational surge of jealousy at the thought of Harry initiating Zayn's heat, a feeling that he quickly berated himself for.

"I know what you're thinking, Lou, but I don't think so. You definitely would have noticed if Harry was trying to resist his body reaction. You seem quite in-tune with him and he was looking at you during most of the meeting." Louis opened his mouth to argue but Zayn held up a hand to silence
him. "And besides, neither of us have even noticed Harry releasing a natural scent let alone suppressing one."

Louis remained silent for a moment, lost in thought. "So you just think one alpha trying not to let everyone know that they were annoyed or hurt triggered your heat," he said incredulously.

Zayn nodded glumly. "I looked it up in the library before I came back and it's a pretty rare reaction; generally only long-term couples and mates react to each other like that. Even then, that doesn't happen often because they communicate with each other and the alpha tell the omega what's wrong before their body reacts so extremely."

The two omegas sat in charged silence, processing what Zayn had revealed.

"All the more reason to have better omega protection in place to make sure nothing like that happens again," Louis said eventually.

Zayn nodded agreeably, looking up at where his friend sat, feet perched on his desk. "What's that, Lou?" he asked, pointing towards the booklet at his feet.

"The application form I have to fill out for the research that the International Gender Research Foundation are doing," he explained, sitting on the floor beside Zayn so that they both could read the booklet.

He hadn't had the opportunity to so much as glance at the first page after being handed the form and so eagerly read each question. They ranged requiring standard details about his schoolwork and areas of interest within his degree course to his views on omega advancement movements and the pockets of exclusively beta societies throughout England. The final page contained the terms and conditions he would have to comply with, should he be chosen to be part of the research team. Zayn had simply rolled his eyes, muttering "lawyers" under his breath when Louis began to read that page.

"It says here that I'll be involved in 'active study and experiments'," Louis said confusedly.

"Wait, they'll be doing research on you?" Zayn questioned, glancing up at him.

"Hang on," Louis said, scanning his eyes over the rest of the final paragraph. "Essentially, yes," he sighed. "It says that the research work is going to be conducted internally, within the research groups in all the universities taking part."

"Are you prepared to do that?" Zayn asked cautiously.

Louis shrugged indifferently. "I guess I don't really have a choice. Working with the I.G.R.F would be an incredible experience not to mention it would account for most of my final grade for the term," he said, scrawling his signature across the dotted line. "Let's just hop they don't hook me up to any wires."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be a lot more eventful, I promise! What do you think will happen when Louis speaks to the board of directors?
Author's note: The bond mark and the main place where the inherent scent of each person is released are in the same place: the back of the neck about three centimetres below the base of the hairline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wind howled outside as Louis thrashed in his sleep, scenarios flashing in his mind; being cornered by brutish, faceless alphas demanding his subservience, instructing him to leave the university, telling him that his life had been predetermined before he was born.

They whispered in his ear that he would never work or earn a wage; he would be wholly reliant on his alpha, destined to serve and submit, required to act in accordance to his alpha's will and never his one. A thunderous voice rose above the others, laughing cruelly.

"Any decent, respected alpha wouldn't accept you and your ridiculous beliefs, anyway," he said loudly.

Louis shut his eyes tightly, sensing a huge mass of alphas rotating around him, hissing insults.

"You'll live homeless, as a siren. You'll never have a mate to care for, children to raise, a job to maintain," an alpha whispered. Louis opened his eyes to push him away but he was gone, voice resonating in his ear but body replaced by smoke from which another alpha emerged, cold eyes boring into him. "You will fulfil the wishes of every alpha you cross because you will have nothing but unrealised dreams."

Louis woke with a shout, blinking rapidly to adjust to the lighting in the room. His head whipped around and he found Zayn crouched beside him, stroking his arm gently, eyes worried. Louis opened his mouth to speak but Zayn whispered for him to try to breathe evenly first. He handed him a bottle of water, never stopping with his soft touches. Louis drank eagerly before sitting upright in his bed.


"It's okay, Lou," he soothed.

"It's still early," he responded, pointing at the sliver of early morning light shining into the room through the parting of the curtains. "I should try get some sleep. Busy day tomorrow and everything." He tried to laugh but it came out forced and unnatural.

"Louis," his friend sighed. "It's normal to be nervous about tomorrow. You're taking on so much by yourself."

"I know," he acquiesced, "but I want to help us, help all of the omegas here." He sighed heavily. "Nobody else is prepared to defend us, Zayn. It's always been apparent to me that omegas need to fight their own battles."

Zayn privately agreed with him. Though alpha and beta co-operation was essential for laws
granting improved omega rights to be passed, history dictated that omegas needed to lead their own movements, prove their their abilities and capacity for change.

"Maybe I can come with you," he suggested, already anticipating Louis resolute shake of his head.

"No," he said, fixing Zayn with an adamant expression. "They'll just question you about why you were around alphas so close to your heat and find a way to blame you for what happened."

"But my heat wasn't -"

"I know it wasn't expected," Louis sighed patiently, "but do you really think they'll believe you? Look, the board will find any excuse not to provide funding for better omega protection on campus. If you're there, they'll spend the entire time questioning you or saying that it was your fault you weren't prepared for your heat or some other alpha bullshit like that. We can't let that happen."

Zayn couldn't argue with Louis' logic and resigned himself to climb on his friend's bed and collapse beside him. Louis lay back defeatedly after a couple of moments of Zayn's coaxing.

"Go back to sleep, Lou," he said through a yawn as his friend turned towards him to breathe his scent in more deeply.

...

Zayn woke up a couple of hours later to Louis pottering around the room, gathering his supplies for the meeting. He was humming absentmindedly and his eyes kept darting to his pile of notes as though expecting it to grow legs and run away.

"Sorry, I meant to go back to my own bed," Zayn said guiltily, stretching and whipping the bedsheets off him.

Louis raised an unconvinced eyebrow. "Just admit it, Z," he said, smiling at him and relieved to have his favourite distraction awake. "You're secretly obsessed with my scent and that's why you hibernate in my bed whenever you get the chance," he joked.

"I think you're mistaking me for Harry, there," Zayn said, laughing at the faint blush that adorned Louis' cheeks.

"Harry is not obsessed with my scent," Louis said firmly, though his nervous fingers toying with the buttons of his shirt suggested otherwise.

"He always leans towards you whenever he speaks to you," Zayns said casually, counting on his fingers. "When he isn't talking to you he finds any excuse to stand slightly to your side or behind you just to be nearer to the back of your neck."

"I can't believe you noticed that," Louis said, trying to change the subject but inwardly ecstatic at the thought of Harry appreciating his scent.

Zayn shrugged. "He's not very subtle," he said. "And it wasn't just me; Will told me that Harry kept looking at you during the debates too."

Louis' open mouth snapped closed and he turned on his heel to rifle unnecessarily through the clothes in his wardrobe solely to avoid Zayn's teasing smile.

"Are you free this afternoon? I've never been to the Westbloomington Hotel before," Louis said. He hoped that he could convince Zayn to help navigate his way through London.
Zayn didn't miss his tactical change of topic but answered him nevertheless. "Yeah, I finished my sculpture base work on Friday so I've nothing due tomorrow. Give me ten minutes and I'll be ready to go."

Ten minutes transpired to be thirty-five minutes, three cups of tea and a very impatient Louis.

"Hurry up, Zayn," he groaned, glancing at his watch. "The meeting starts in an hour and we still need to take the university bus to the city centre not to mention actually finding the place."

"Okay, okay, I'm ready now," Zayn said, rushing towards the door.

Louis sighed in relief and threw his satchel over his shoulder, hurrying to run down the stairs.

They saw the university bus approaching in the distance and ran towards it, raising their hands above their heads to wave down the bus. They ignored the amused smirks from the passengers on the bus as they climbed aboard and searched for two spare seats.

An alpha with unruly dark curls in front of them turned around and Louis almost gasped at the proximity. "Louis," the familiar voice said around a smile, canines flashing. The omega smiled at the way Harry seemed to love stating his name in place of greeting him, pronouncing it slowly and articulately.

"Hi Harry," he said, voice breathy. He noticed Zayn nod at Harry from beside him before busying himself texting on his phone. Louis knew that his uninterested demeanour was simply a cover and that he was listening intently to their interaction.

"Where are you both going?" he asked, turning fully to face Louis.

Louis' breath hitched, eyes widening. He frantically wracked his brain to respond to Harry's question with anything other than the truth. He didn't want anyone outside the omega community on campus to know what they were requesting in case they were denied by the board members. Omega protection in schools and in the workplace was still a contentious issue and, though he trusted that Harry would support him, he didn't want the alpha to interfere until they were guaranteed funding from the board.

It seemed Louis had waited too long to reply because when he looked up, Harry's eyebrows had pinched together and he wore a scrutinising expression. "I can sense your distress, omega," he said quietly to avoid catching the attention of the other passengers. "What's the matter?"

Louis floundered. "Nothing," he said in a foreign, high-pitched tone. His omega instincts roared at him for lying to the concerned alpha but he persevered and tried to ignore them. "I was just lost in my head, sorry. We're just, eh, going shopping. In London. Yeah, we're going shopping for- " his eyes swept around the train for inspiration and he noticed the beta beside Harry munching on a tuna sandwich, "food."

"Food?" Harry repeated, tone amused. He evidently didn't believe the omega and swept the hair out of his eyes frustratedly. His inner alpha was hurt that Louis wasn't being honest with him; that he didn't trust him enough to tell the truth.

"Yes," Louis said, desperate to apologise to the alpha for lying but aware that he would have to wait for the board members' verdict before revealing the truth to Harry. "Zayn's allergic to some of the food at the dining hall so we want to stock up on food to take back to the dorm," he said. He inwardly cursed his inability to lie convincingly.

Louis thanked the high heavens that Zayn didn't look perturbed at being dragged into the
conversation and was willing to continue his charade.

"We're just going to head to the supermarket for an hour or so to buy some supplies," the younger omega added. "Where are you going?"

"The hospital," Harry said as the bus driver's voice called that they would arrive in fifteen minutes' time. Though he was replying to Zayn his eyes never left the older omega's face, still searching for any clue as to why he felt the need to deceive him. "I sometimes have a Sunday afternoon shift if it's very crowded and they need me to attend to a few patients."

"Oh, yeah, Lou mentioned that you worked part-time at the hospital," Zayn said.

Harry beamed. "You were talking about me?" he asked, eyes curious as he noted the way Louis tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ear shyly.

"I might have mentioned you," he replied, voice unaffected despite the nervousness he felt. "Tell me about your work."

Harry quirked an eyebrow at the question but responded eagerly, detailing his job, its advantages and challenges for the remainder of the bus journey. Louis listened attentively, enraptured by his slow, engaging voice and carefully chosen words. From the anecdotes he told Louis, he knew that Harry took pride in his work and his passion stirred something warm in Louis.

"Last week I attended a little omega who broke her arm when she fell off her bike," Harry said, already smiling at the memory. "Her mother and twin brother were there too and she was really upset that she had to wear a cast. I kept trying to tell her that it looked cool and that all her friends at school could sign it but she kept crying no matter what I said."

Louis smiled at the thought of Harry had to trying to console the young omega.

"But then her twin brother - who had refused to leave her side the entire time - announced really loudly that he wanted a cast too," Harry said, smiling at Louis' soft chuckling. "He said that if his sister was going to get one then he was too, just to make her feel better."

Harry took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to Louis, their hands brushing momentarily. Louis couldn't help but notice the alpha's huge hands and elegant, ring-clad fingers. "This is them," he said, showing him a photograph of two identical twins, each wearing a white cast on their left arms. The girl had tear-stained cheeks but a huge smile while the boy had a determined expression on his face.

"He was so serious. Wouldn't even accept a lollipop after the nurse finished applying the cast. He just wanted to make his sister feel better," Harry said approvingly.

"That's very sweet," Louis cooed, smiling at the photograph of the children. "It's no wonder you liked the little boy; he sounds just like you."

Harry fixed him with an inquisitive expression, taking his phone back from Louis, fingers resting for a beat at the side of his wrist. "What do you mean?"

"You obviously care a lot about your sister," Louis began.

"You haven't been speaking to her, have you?" Harry interjected worriedly, sighing in relief when Louis shook his head.

"And you're very serious too," he added, collapsing into giggles at the affronted noise Harry made
in response to his comment.

The bus driver's voice announcing their arrival at St. John's hospital interrupted the alpha's reply.

"I'm not serious," Harry said firmly, standing to get off the bus and looming over him. Louis knew that his warning tone was feigned and that he was merely teasing the omega but he still felt overheated beneath his jacket. Harry's parting tone before he stepped off the bus left Louis imagining his genuine warning tone. Thoughts of Harry using the tone to instruct him to follow his will in bed flooded his mind.

"See you tomorrow, Louis," the alpha said, waving over his shoulder as he stepped off the bus.

Louis barely had time to call a weak goodbye before the doors shut and he was left to gaze at Harry's retreating figure.

"I don't like the food at the dining hall? Seriously, Lou, that's the best you could think of?" Zayn asked, rounding on him.

"Serves you right for almost making me late," Louis said, poking beneath Zayn's denim jacket.

"What am I supposed to do for food the rest of the term?" Zayn questioned, voice still incredulous at Louis' lie.

"Just tell people you managed to seduce the head chef into making you your own meals," Louis joked. "It's certainly believable."

Zayn spent the remainder of the journey on the bus drilling him for information about his conversation with Harry. They made their way through the congested London streets using the vague directions of the bus driver and unreliable WiFi until they found the hotel.

They stood outside the enormous front entrance with undisguised awe. Plush carpet lined the steps and four footmen held the doors open, revealing a marble-floored reception area with bouquets of flowers covering every available surface.

They walked inside slowly, eyes registering the chandeliers dangling above them and the expansive windows looking onto the street below them. Snobbish couples sipped tea through pursed lips in the adjoining restaurant, a couple eyeing them suspiciously. Louis suddenly felt under-dressed, despite the expensive dress trousers and smart shirt he had selected days prior to the meeting.

A beta whose hair was twisted into an elegant knot approached them, heels clicking on the marble floor. "May I help you two gentlemen?" she asked.

"Oh, yes please," Louis replied politely. "I'm looking for the Candling board meeting in the Edmondson Suite."

She nodded uncertainly before walking behind the desk and typing frantically. Louis shared a look with Zayn before they scrambled to follow her.

"Your name?"

"Louis Tomlinson."

She smiled happily, as though hearing his name solved all of her problems and added ten years to her life expectantly. "Fantastic, Mr. Tomlinson," she purred. "Follow me, please."
"I'll wait here, Lou," Zayn said, pointing towards the lounge area. He saw the anxious tilt of Louis' eyebrows and gave him a sympathetic look. "You'll be amazing, I'm sure of it. Be confident, stick to the points you practised with me and don't let them walk all over you."

Louis nodded silently in response to Zayn's advice, heart beating wildly in his chest. He took a steeling breath. "Thanks Zayn," he said, voice cracking slightly. He turned to follow the beta who had been observing their conversation with interest. He glanced back at Zayn before entering the elevator and saw his concerned expression immediately morph into a smile of encouragement.

"You're perfectly on time," she complimented, pressing the button for the fourteenth floor with the tip of a perfectly manicured nail. "The meeting began an hour ago but Jennifer made a note to place you near the end of the schedule so that, when you meet them, it's a little less formal."

Louis smiled appreciatively, attention partially focused on the points the beta and still trying to calm the rapid beating of his heart. The numbers flashed in front of him as they rose above each floor, eventually stopping on the fourteenth. He swallowed thickly.

"And here we are," the beta said brightly, walking him along the corridor until they reached a sign reading 'Edmondson Suite - Private Party - Candling Board of Directors - 25th September'. In Louis' opinion the elegant calligraphy should have read 'Candling Board of Directors - All welcome except those who are not privileged, male alphas instead.

She stepped around the sign and the accompanying flower arrangement to knock on the door. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said, standing at the doorstep. "I have Mr. Tomlinson here to speak with you."

Louis heard a few gruff noises of approval before she stepped back. "I'll return in half an hour," she said. "You'll have to finish within that time-frame as they have a final appointment then."

Louis smiled, thanking her profusely until she shook her head in dismissal. "My pleasure. Good luck," she said earnestly. Louis thought he saw concern flicker in her eyes before she composed herself and returned in the direction of the elevator.

He knocked once more on the door before entering the room and shutting it carefully. He was immediately confronted with a wave of potent scent, invading and assaulting his senses.

A singular scent - an unusual combination of mint and pine needles - dominated the room of twelve men, consuming Louis' attention and activating his omega instincts with worrying ease. He had never met someone whose natural scent was so powerful and felt his legs dragging himself further into the room without his consent. He found the source of the scent sitting on the other side of the room, his back warmed by the roaring fire.

The man's had thick waves of dark hair with small greying patches above his ears and his mossy green eyes implored him to speak. Louis immediately recognised him as Harry's father though his face lacked his son's warmth.

"Good morning," Louis said, forcing himself to smile at the alphas seated in patterned armchairs around the room. They were of varying ages, some retired and others middle-aged, though that was where their differences ended; they each wore a similar suit of expensive cut and a disdainful expression to match their quivering nostrils. Louis took satisfaction at the knowledge that they affected by his scent.

"Don't speak until you're spoken to, omega," an alpha wearing a look of disgust behind his thick glasses spat.
Louis adhered to his instruction, lowering his head instinctively despite his desire to give the alpha a piece of his mind.

"Lighten up, Marcus," an exasperated voice called from across the room, prompting Louis to sigh in relief.

He saw Marcus shoot the other man a look of outrage.

"You can lift your head, omega," the alpha seated closest to him ordered begrudgingly.

Louis obliged, lifting his head to meet the penetrating stare of Harry's father. "We don't have all day, omega. What is it you felt a need so significant to tell us that you interrupted our meeting?" he demanded. Louis felt distinctly unnerved by the fact that his voice was reminiscent to Harry's; resonant, deep and with a languid pace, despite the man's impatience.

"I didn't interrupt," Louis said firmly. "I arranged this meeting to inform you about the inadequate omega safety features on campus."

A chorus of outraged cries rang throughout the high-ceilinged room, mainly from the older alphas seated around Harry's father.

"How dare you suggest such a thing. Know your place, omega," an alpha with a sour expression called, shaking his finger at Louis.

Louis tightened his jaw and tried to focus on something other than his instincts which demanded that he rescind his claim and apologise to the insulted alphas.

"Silence," Harry's father called lazily, crossing his legs and fixing Louis with a piercing gaze. The other men shot him angered looks, perturbed by the fact that another alpha had instructed them. It was in an alpha's nature to give orders rather than follow them.

"You may explain your concerns," he said, crossing his arms, "but know that we decide what happens afterwards. You will do well not to step out of line, omega."

Louis nodded solemnly. He despised his condescending tone but knew better than question the alpha's authority before he could even make his points. He closed his eyes momentarily, picturing Zayn's encouraging smile and imagining that he was standing in front of him in their dormitory.

"When I was first offered a place at Candling I didn't believe the letter; I thought that it had been sent to the wrong student by accident and it was just unfortunate that I was the person who had received it," he began. "When my father got the newspaper the next day and the headline read that Candling had accepted fifty omega students for the first time I started crying in the middle of Tesco."

"Typical omega," one of the men muttered. Louis ignored him and noticed that a couple of the men seated beside the window cracked smiles.

"I was absolutely shocked. For weeks I convinced myself that there had to be a catch; a drawback of some kind that would impede me from studying here," he continued. "Until last week, there wasn't. When I first arrived, the omega safety features in our dormitory were perfect. We've had no issues with the security system preventing alpha entry into the building so far."

"So why are you here, then, boy?" one of the nastier-looking alphas beside the fireplace demanded. He didn't wait for an answer before turning towards Harry's father. "Harold, why are
you still entertaining him? Can we proceed with the meeting without the omega?"

Louis glanced around the room and noticed that, despite the alpha's protest, most of the men (including Harold) seemed prepared to let him finish.

"That's enough," Harold warned. "You may proceed, omega."

Louis nodded, smiling at the man gratefully. He was met with a blank expression.

"The issue that the omega society has isn't with the security settings of the omega dormitories; it's about the cultural attitudes to omega safety that pervade Candling."

Their attention was piqued at this point.

"Alphas and betas simply aren't informed about omega-specific issues that can impact their well-being. One of the omegas unexpectedly experienced his annual biological cycle last week. Due to the lack of awareness surrounding that as well as the security features in buildings aside from the dormitories he was put in a position of serious danger."

There was outcry among the group. The two alphas seated beside the window actually stood up in outrage at the prospect of an omega being placed in such a vulnerable position. Traditional alphas valued omegas and considered it their duty to protect them but they refused to permit them equal rights. Louis steeled his breath, ready for the onslaught of questions.

"Why wasn't he prepared, boy? Didn't he know to inform his alpha beforehand?" Marcus asked furiously.

"He didn't anticipate in the same way that some alphas can't detect when their cycle begins. And he doesn't have a mate," Louis responded.

"Harold, we cannot let this happen again."

"Every omega on campus needs to be guaranteed top security or I won't be able to sleep peacefully at night."

"We just allowed them in this year, Harold. We can't have an incident happen to any of the om students or an inquiry will be launched."

"Think about what could happen to the funding from the I.G.R.F if that happens."

Louis noticed that Harry's father had become the recipient of earnest requests and advice from almost every alpha in the room. He held up his hands to silence them, directing his attention to Louis instead.

He leaned forward in his armchair. "What do you propose, omega?" he inquired.

The alpha's glare forced him to acknowledge the scent surrounding him, paralysing his brain and inhibiting his train of thought. He needed to breathe through his mouth simply to think clearly.

"One of three propositions," he said. "Firstly, to set up an omega-safe room with security features in every major building and lecture hall on campus."

Louis ignored the unimpressed looks some of the alphas shot him.

"Secondly, to have mandatory classes for alpha and beta students to take telling them how to react to situations where an omega's safety is threatened."
There was an appreciable number of affirmative nods and a hum of approval in the room.

"Finally, allow omega students to wear scent suppressants to prevent alpha student from acting on their instincts and to -"

"Absolutely not," Harold bellowed, standing to his full, intimidating height. "We'll agree to your first two requirements, omega, but nothing more." He let out an aggrieved breath before drawing his face into a forced smile, something which made his eyes wince. Louis was relieved to find that the alpha didn't boast of Harry's characteristic dimples. He didn't think he could have bared it if the repulsive man before him had something that was so unique to Harry. "Thank you for informing us of this development," Harold said finally, ignoring the stares of his colleagues. "You may leave."

Louis made to protest but, upon seeing the glint of fury in the alpha's eyes, sighed, resigned to following his order. "Thank you for your time," he said, determined to leave a positive impression despite their treatment of him.

Louis closed the door and stood in the hallway, breathing in the clean air hungrily. He still had five minutes before the receptionist would return. He collapsed on the floor outside the suite, unbothered about his appearance when he found the area clear of hotel guests and staff. He felt emotionally drained, his inner omega both vexed at his behaviour and distresses after being surrounded by so many cantankerous alphas. He closed his heavy lids and tried to centre his thoughts.

"Mr. Tomlinson?"

His eyes shot open at the sound of her voice and he jumped to his feet unsteadily.

"Are you alright?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes, of course," he said with more conviction than he felt. "Sorry about that; I was just feeling a bit tired."

She sighed in relief. "Well, I'm ready to take you back as soon as you're ready," she assured. "Your friend will be quite pleased to see you, I'm sure."

As soon as they reached the lobby, Louis felt Zayn embrace him immediately. His back stiffened in response to the unfamiliar scents staining Louis' clothes. "Come on," he whispered, rubbing his back to comfort him. "Let's get you home."

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear your feedback! What are your thoughts on Harry's father?
The two omegas trundled back to catch the bus later that evening, relieved and drained after their day. Zayn drilled Louis for information about the meeting, clapping his hands in excitement when Louis announced that he had been granted two of their requests for improved omega safety features. He drew the attention of the passengers aboard the half-empty bus but leaned forward in his seat to hug Louis nevertheless, pride surging through him.

"What about the scent neutralisers?" Zayn asked after Louis had pried him off, chuckling at the younger omega's excitement. "Did you ask them about allowing us to wear moderate ones?"

Louis shook his head regretfully. "The minute I mentioned it Harry's father stood up from his chair and roared at me for even suggesting the idea." Louis shuddered at the memory. "That's when he agreed to our other two requests and sent me away."

Zayn narrowed his eyes and fixed him with a thoughtful expression. "Were the other alphas that angry about the idea?" he asked eventually.

Louis thought for a moment before replying. "I can't be sure," he sighed. "He definitely seemed the most angered but, to be honest, my focus was mainly on him anyway; his scent was so powerful." Zayn had instantly identified the alpha's scent lingering more prominently that those of the other board members on Louis' clothes.

"He sounds like the kind of alpha that's opposed to any kind of scent manipulation if he's willing to continue working normally without subduing his own strong scent. It's not unusual," Zayn said quietly. "Alphas with unusually potent scents or very distinctive ones embrace that part of them like it's their identity. They like the power that they have over omegas and other alphas."

"I suppose that's pretty typical alpha behaviour. I just hate that there's a double standard and that they think they have the right to control decisions we make about OUR bodies," Louis said frustratedly. "They're able to release their scent without fear of being taken advantage of; our situation is completely different."

Zayn nodded agreeably but didn't voice his empathy, keenly aware of the alphas aboard the bus who could overhear their conversation. Unlike Louis, who was indomitable to the point of stubbornness in defending his beliefs, it was in Zayn's nature to avoid unnecessary conflict.

Louis couldn't help but ponder the question that had been racing around his mind since he met Harry: why the alpha didn't release an olfactible scent. Equipped with the knowledge that his father was in the minority of alphas who emanated such a potent scent, he felt sure that the alpha was deliberately manipulating his scent - something most alphas would bristle at the thought of removing something that felt inherent and familiar to them.

"Candling University: final stop," the bus driver's voice announced as the bus grinded to a halt.
directly in front of the main entrance.

They gathered their belongings hurriedly, including two Victoria's Secret shopping bags containing cotton briefs and a pair of platinum white panties Zayn had insisted on buying Louis as a congratulatory gift for introducing new reforms for the omegas at Candling.

The older omega had blushed profusely in the dimly-lit dressing room when Zayn wolf-whistled loudly upon seeing him wearing the panties, catching the attention of the sales assistant. The pretty beta had rounded the corner, previously providing them with limited privacy, and had gushed about how Louis looked even better than the catalogue model wearing the same pair of elegant panties. Louis had simply smiled shyly, toying with the elaborate lace waistband.

"See, even the beta knows how gorgeous you look, Lou," Zayn had whispered as they joined the queue to pay for the items.

"Stop flirting with me, Zayn," he had teased. "And besides, it's her job to say things like that. It boosts sales and she gets a better commission."

As they stepped out of the bus, avoiding a huge puddle in the process, Louis couldn't help but touch the lace adorning the panties. It was intrinsic to alpha conduct that they provided for their omega. While Louis placed little importance on material items as a measure of an alpha's love, receiving such a gift from Zayn made him long for someone to treat him; gift him small, meaningful reminders of love that he in turn could reciprocate.

They reached the omega dormitories before another downpour of rain fell, rushing upstairs to remove their thick layers of jackets. While Louis took a long, warming shower Zayn informed Will, Lily and a couple of omegas lingering in the small laundry room about their trip into the city centre and Louis' success at the meeting. While Louis applied scent-free cleaning products to his skin to remove any persisting alpha scents, word about his meeting on behalf of the omega society was spreading like wildfire.

When he stepped out of the small bathroom, cloud of steam following him, he found their dormitory full of omega students chatting excitedly.

"Zayn?" he called, stepping back into the bathroom and closing the door to cover his bare chest. The omegas immediately turned towards him and crowded around his partially hidden form.

"Louis, the man of the hour!" Will shouted dramatically.

"We're so proud of you, Louis. I can't believe you managed to do that by yourself," a girl Louis recognised from the omega society meeting said earnestly.

"Those board members are total knotheads," Lily said, shaking her head in admiration. "I can't believe you managed to talk to them and actually get them to agree to better security without wanting to knock them on the head with their canes." She paused momentarily before adding, "Or whatever snobby old alphas carry to compensate for their tiny dicks."

Louis giggled at the omega's comment, lightly squeezing her hip to chastise her.

Once the crowd had settled down he stepped out from behind the door, spotting Zayn speaking to Will, the auburn-haired alpha gesticulating wildly. He quickly slipped on a pair of grey joggers and an old concert 'The Rolling Stones' t-shirt with the distinctive tongues depicting the faded flags of the countries the band had toured.

The group of early childhood education students who had showered Louis with praise left soon
afterwards, leaving only him and Zayn in the room.

"I hate small talk," Zayn groaned, dragging his feet towards his own bed and foregoing removing the bags of shopping before diving straight underneath the bedsheets.

Louis laughed loudly from where he sat cross-legged in the corner of the room. His knee jerked uncontrollably and he suddenly became aware that of the fact that evening had settled onto the landscape, hues of orange light visible through the parted curtains and long shadows cast across the carpet.

"What's the matter, Lou?" Zayn asked, sensing the omega's change in emotion.

"It's Sunday evening," he stated without further explanation.

Zayn sat up on his bed unwillingly solely to direct an inquiring glance at him.

Louis sighed. "It's Sunday evening which means in a couple of hours' time it'll be Monday."

"That's generally how time works, Louis."

Louis grabbed a magenta cushion and threw it across the room in Zayn's direction. He heard a satisfying thump as the pillow made contact with Zayn's knee.

"What I mean is that tomorrow's Monday, the same day I'm meeting some of the guys from the alpha society to talk about the alpha/omega excursion," he said.

"Oh, yeah, the meeting," Zayn said exaggeratedly, drawing quotation marks in the air. "Don't be nervous about it, Lou, otherwise he'll sense it. He's quite perceptive, that Harry."

Louis smiled at the mention of the alpha's name. "It's hard not be be nervous when your faced with alphas simultaneously demanding to hear your thoughts on every issue and requiring you to agree with everything they say. While also concentrating on not being nervous."

"Harry, George said Liam aren't like that. I'm sure they'll be more than willing to hear the suggestions we talked about," Zayn interjected. "I'm still in shock that we have enough funding to go abroad for the trip."

"It's not all subsided by the university. We have to pay our own travel fees and we have to stay in Europe," Louis warned though he couldn't keep the excitement from his voice. "There are so many options, though. We'll get to encourage better integration and get to explore a new country at the same time."

Louis leaned his chin against his palm, imagining Harry lounging on a towel beside him, sand between his toes and the sun heating his skin; Harry leaning into his space, whispering "Turn around for me, omega," before placing a huge hand on his searing skin and applying suncream to his back gently, kneading his muscles. He was jolted out of his daydreaming by Zayn's curious tone.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Everywhere," Louis sighed. "But if we're being realistic we have to eliminate a few countries simply because of their treatment of omegas. We need to find somewhere that'll be safe for us and won't have the alphas acting like personal bodyguards the entire trip. It's supposed to be mutually beneficial and that just can't happen in a place where we'll be treated like second-class citizens."
Zayn hummed in agreement.

"What about you?"

"I've never been abroad before," he confessed. "But I've heard that Paris is a beautiful city; art, architecture, food, everything I'm interested in, really."

Louis sighed at the prospect of visiting France before jumping up from his bed and crossing the short distance to where Zayn was sprawled across his blankets.

"Budge over," Louis instructed, reaching for his laptop on the bedside locker. "We're going to find the best places to visit for the trip."

They spend the rest of the evening curled into each other's side, pointing out the captivating sights across Europe - the Norwegian fjords, the Spanish fiestas, the Italian landmarks, the Scottish countryside - as image after image appeared on the screen. They even went onto a holiday planning website and called their London office, Louis pretending to be a gruff alpha hoping to visit Portugal and his ridiculously deep, baritone voice sent Zayn into fits of giggles.

They fell asleep like that, Louis' head resting gently on Zayn's shoulder, his mouth slightly agape and drooling unattractively, dreaming of diverse, contrasting landscape - rolling hills, snowcapped mountains and expansive oceans alike - but the same pair of captivating green eyes every time.

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Louis arrived at the coffee shop - a quaint building whose interior was designed to replicate an old cottage - fifteen minutes early. He waited at the cash register awkwardly, unwilling to sit at one of the tables when he wouldn't be ordering until the alphas arrived.

After asking if he needed assistance, the barista behind the counter proceeded to strike up a conversation with Louis. He was undoubtedly an alpha, tall stature and musky scent which infused with the coffee bean smell separating him from the other betas scuttling around the busy shop.

"I'm in my final year at Candling," he said, pushing his glasses up his nose every time he looked down to make eye contact with Louis. "Political science. It's why I'm stuck working here. A degree in anything to do with politics is pretty useless unless you want to become a journalist or a politician."

"I'm guessing you want to become neither," Louis asked amusedly.

"Yeah, I'm just interested in the subject I guess," he said, shrugging. He leaned forward on the countertop, propping his chin on his knuckles and smiling serenely at him. "Tell me more about you, though."

"Archie! Stop terrorizing the customers and get back to work!" a frazzled voice called from the staff room.

Louis' cheeks tinted a light pink but the alpha shrugged, smirking at the omega before taking a stack of plastic cups and separating them in an attempt to seem productive.

"I finish my shift in about half an hour, if you're free," he said boldly, re-stacking the cups.

"Oh," Louis sighed, casting his gaze to his fidgeting fingers.

He detested this part: rejecting the advances of an alpha. His instincts demanded that he acquiesce
and agree to the date solely to satisfy the alpha. He forced himself to focus on the alpha he knew he would be meeting instead; the alpha with charming smiles and gentle whispers of reassurance; the alpha that, in spite of his haughty father's attitudes, showed nothing but respect and kindness towards him and every omega on campus.

"I really appreciate the, eh, offer, Archie but I'm actually meeting someone here," he said, staring resolutely at the jam jar with a handmade sign reading 'Tips'.

The alpha stood at his full height, slamming a clenched fist on the countertop. His scent became heavier, encasing Louis and the surrounding customers for a brief moment before the alpha steeled his breath. A middle-aged beta couple stopped their conversation to shoot dirty glances at him. Louis sent them an apologetic look.

"Fine," the alpha finally spat out. He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. Louis felt the scent around them subdue and took that as a cue to leave the alpha to battle his instincts. He knew that remaining near him would inhibit his attempt to control his urges, to refrain from scenting the omega or punishing him for his disobedience.

Louis spotted a corner seat beside a small window just as the bell chimed, indicating that a new customer has entered the shop. Harry strolled inside, dark curls slightly windswept and eyes scanning the room until they landed on Louis. He smiled warmly and ambled towards him, squeezing between the backs of chairs and side-stepping a pram in the centre of the crowded space.

"Louis," he sighed by way of greeting, collapsing into the seat opposite him.

"Hi Harry."

The alpha's smile grew impossibly wider as he glanced at the ornate plates lining the walls and the hand-crafted teapots on each table. "This place is lovely," he said approvingly. "It's no wonder George advised we come here."

"It's kind of charming, isn't it?" Louis said, eyes dancing around the room.

His gaze returned to Louis, eyes raking his feathery hair and soft skin, the white jumper he wore which engulfed his small frame and revealed his collarbones which protruded whenever the omega leaned forward. Harry's tongue darted across his lips.

Louis was still observing the features of the coffee shop when his gaze landed on the pram in the middle of the room. His face lit up at the sight of a young toddler swaddled in thick layers of blankets, eyes blinking slowly. The boy saw the omega and instinctively smiled at Louis' endeared expression. Louis felt his nurturing instinct blossom inside him but he knew he couldn't run over to cuddle a stranger's child, settling instead on waving at him and pulling funny faces. The toddler returned the wave shyly and exploded with laughter when Louis crossed his eyes.

Harry watched the entire exchange with a fond smile plastered to his face, chuckling at the sound of the toddler's laughter.

"You're good with kids," he noted, talking more to himself but drawing Louis' attention back to him in the process. "You should visit me at the hospital sometime."

"I- yes," Louis stuttered out. "That would be really good. I love children. Probably wouldn't be of any help to you while you work though."

Harry chuckled loudly. "I'll bet. You're quite the distraction."
Louis' cheeks coloured and before he could reply Harry stood up from his seat abruptly. "So what can I get you to drink? Or eat, if you're hungry."

Louis raised his eyebrows in question. "I thought we would wait until George arrived to start the meeting," he said.

Harry shook his head. "George was feeling a bit sick this morning; he thinks it's the early onset of his rut," Harry said through a smile. He didn't look particularly concerned about his friend's wellbeing as he looked at the omega. "So it'll just be you and me today."

Louis nodded and tried to hide the smile that overtook his face. "Eh, I'll take an English breakfast tea if you don't mind," he said, squirming to remove a five pound note from the pocket of his tight jeans.

Harry looked down at the proffered money and shook his head once. "My treat," he said, flashing his canines and turning towards the barista station.

When he returned with two steaming mugs of tea and a plate of apple strudel, Louis promised to buy their next meal.

"So," Harry said, taking a large bite of the pastry, "we have four main things to cover. First is actually choosing a place, then finding out costs, getting insurance which, for a trip with alphas and omegas only is going to be a struggle and finally sorting out a schedule that will include all of the integration activities George has been droning on about."

He removed a thick black folder with neat subsections from his bag. "This contains information about the alpha/beta trips from the last four years," he said.

Louis leaned forward excitedly. "Where did you visit last year?" he asked.

"Prague," Harry said. He smiled at the memory. "It was amazing. We spent a weekend just wandering around and looking at the old cathedrals and museums. And the integration part of it was actually great; it's where I got to know Niall really well."

Louis smiled at the thought of the spirited Irishman. "And what about the year before?"

Harry's face darkened slightly and he itched below his ear. "We, eh, we went to Istanbul," he said, looking appropriately sheepish. "Obviously we won't go there this year," he said adamantly.

Louis smiled tightly, highly aware of the Turkish election the previous year that had given the Premiership to a radical right-wing alpha. He had since stripped omegas living in the country of basic travel rights and body autonomy, reducing their pay and giving incentives for omegas to quit their jobs.

"Have you or George had any ideas for this year's excursion? It has to be memorable; my popularity in OSoc is counting on it," Louis said.

"OSoc?" Harry asked through a smile.

"It's what Zayn came up with to call the omega society for short," he clarified, closing his fingers around his mug of tea and sighing contentedly as the warmth seeped into his fingertips.

"I like it," Harry said, devouring a chunk of apple strudel. "And yeah, George wants to go to Austria because he went skiing there once. I was thinking more somewhere closer to here, though. I'm a bit of a homebird."
Louis smiled at his admission. "Somewhere in England, then?" he asked excitedly. "You could show us around your hometown in Manchester."

Harry's face split into a wide smile. "You can tell I'm from Manchester?"

Louis refrained from rolling his eyes but his eyebrows in disbelief at Harry. He cleared his throat and impersonated the alpha's thick accent. "Loueh tha' trip to Turkey was well bad," he drawled much to the alpha's amusement. He took an enormous bite of pastry as Harry had been taking. "Me stomach thinks me throat's been cut," he said, patting his stomach. He shot another incredulous look before adding, "No, Harry, I couldn't tell."

Harry cackled loudly, eyes welling up as he tried to subdue his laughter. "Okay, okay that's enough teasing, omega," he admonished, though his endeared expression suggested that he didn't mind in the slightest. He noticed that breadcrumbs rested atop of Louis' lip from his enormous bite of pastry. He picked up a napkin and leaned forward, brushing the crumbs off.

Louis' body went rigid at the alpha's touched, eyes wide and unsuspecting. Harry's thumb gently stroked his cheek.

"Strudel," Harry clarified prompting Louis to smile at him.

"Right, well," Harry said, folding the napkin. "Let's get back to business."

They spent the next hour discussing insurance costs and the distribution of payment between the students and the university. Harry explained how the gender integration aspect of the alpha/beta trip - involving shared rooms and inter-gender competitions and challenges - were conducted by the alpha and beta societies.

"Obviously we can't have a couple of differences this time," Louis sighed as they turned the final pages of the folder. "Obviously the room sharing is out of question but the main issue is the gender ratio. I already know that there are quite a large number of omegas interested - probably about forty out of fifty - but alpha numbers at Candling are extremely high."

Harry nodded solemnly. "Last year we had four separate groups of two hundred each go to Prague, along with about the same number of betas so it was pretty even," he said, tangling his fingers in his curls.

"There's no way we can have any kind of integration with that gap in numbers," he said before sighing heavily. "And I know that basically the entire alpha population on campus wants to go." Harry looked particularly vexed at this fact, as though he didn't want to share the small group of omega students with his fellow alphas.

"We'll think of something," Louis assured, his inner omega prompting him to reach across the table to place a tentative but comforting hand on the alpha's own hand. It felt soft and steady beneath his gentle touch. Harry looked directly at him then, smiling warmly as Louis caught his lower lip between his teeth shyly.

The moment was interrupted by a musky scent invading Louis' senses. He felt an unfamiliar hand on his shoulder, close to where his untouched bond mark was hidden beneath his jumper. His jerked away from the unwelcome hand and he retracted his hand from Harry's touch to curl in on himself.

Before he could register the look of hurt on Harry's face the alpha had stood up in his seat to face Archie. His small pout adorning his face had rapidly turned to a thin line to match his narrowed
eyes. Louis took pleasure from the fact that he was three inches smaller than Harry, holding his chin high to make eye contact with him.

"Can I help you, mate?" Harry demanded, tone unimpressed. He glared at the place on Louis' shoulder where his offending hand had touched.

The alpha looked between Harry and Louis, assessing his options before responding. "Just admiring the view," he said before turning his gaze to Louis. "Do you need anything else to drink, sweetheart?"

Harry growled lowly, glaring at the other alpha. Louis felt his head drop instinctively in response to the growl, eyes trained on his lap a small whimper escaping his mouth. He heard the entire coffee shop fall silent apart from the distant smash of a teacup on thr hardwood flooring.

"Leave," Harry whispered to the other alpha, a threatening undertone colouring his tone.

Louis clenched his jaw to quash the second whimper that hung from his lips. He felt Archie take a step back from Harry, his scent becoming more subdued.

"Don't order me around, pal," the alpha warned. "You may be Student President but you don't own any of the omegas at Candling."

Harry laughed humourlessly. He stepped closer to the alpha, jabbing a finger into his chest and looming above him, relishing the height difference. "Don't lecture me on ownership, knothead," he said coldly. "You and I both know that you don't give a toss about respecting Louis' or any other omega's wishes."

The omega felt a surge of affection for Harry, thankful for his level head; he knew alphas who wouldn't hesitate to punch Archie for laying a finger on him.

Louis heard Harry mutter darkly into the other alpha's ear before stepping back once more. "He's clearly not interested so take a fucking hint and leave," he said. Louis hoped that the toddler's mother had covered her son's impressionable ears.

Archie opened his mouth to object but, upon seeing the menacing glint in Harry's eyes, promptly closed it and nodded once. He returned to the countertop on the opposite side on the shop, any semblance of control over the situation gone.

The clanking of teapots, eruption of chatter and diffusion of the conflicting scents of the concerned customers alerted Louis to the alpha's departure. He felt Harry kneel beside him, hand placed on the back of his chair.

"Omega?"

The concern in Harry's voice elicited a soft whimper out of him. He felt the alpha surge forward, making to embrace him before steeling himself. He seemed to be battling his instincts, gripping tightly onto the chair to restrain himself.

"Please, Louis, can you look up for me? I need to make sure you're okay."

Louis raised his head at the alpha's request, finding piercing green eyes gazing back at him. "I'm okay, Harry. Thank you for, eh, defending me," he said with small smile.

Harry waved him off, returning to his seat once he was assured that the omega didn't require immediate help. "I'm sorry for growling," he said quietly, frowning at the thought of his behaviour.
"That was out of order. It's not- I don't-" he fumbled before sighing heavily. "That's not like me."

Louis returned his eye contact and smiled warmly. "I know," he assured.

Their conversation picked up speed from there, returning to the prospect of the alpha/omega excursion. Louis told Harry about the time he went on a holiday to the Isle of Man with his parents and lived in luxury for three days because there wasn't a single omega inhabitant on the island and the entire population were captivated by him. He recounted a slightly creepy story about one of the cleaners of the hotel had tried to steal his suitcase to savour his scent. Harry had bristled at that.

Louis explained how the hotel staff had showered him in lavish gifts and, when he said that he had been treated like royalty Harry teased him and refused to call him anything but his "little prince" for the rest of the morning.

The walked back to the university for Louis to attend his Criminal Law lecture.

"Would it be a crime if we meet up again soon to sort out the schedule and numbers for the trip?"

Louis raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "Not if you're going to keep making law-related puns," he said.

"Okay, okay," Harry sighed holding his hands up. His tone adopted a more nervous tone. "Are you free next Monday? That'll give us both enough time to gauge interest in the trip and get quotes for hotel prices and insurance."

Louis nodded in agreement. "That sounds perfect." He glanced quickly at the other students rushing inside to the lecture hall. "I should really go now," he sighed.

Harry nodded once.

Louis climbed the steps as slowly as he could turning at the entrance to find Harry standing in the same spot. "See you soon, Harry," he waved, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

"Stay safe, omega."
"You're going to Ireland for the trip? Without me?"

Niall Horan's loud, incredulous voice rang through the football field, prompting the pair of alphas jogging in front of them to turn around in interest. Louis huffed and panted as the completed their final lap but Niall, unbothered by the strenuous warm-up, continued complaining to him.

"Seriously mate, I won't be visiting home until Christmas break. Can't we make a beta/omega trip visit Ireland instead? You're going to have the most amazing time there."

"I don't doubt that I will, Niall," Louis chuckled, stretching his hamstring muscles and wincing slightly. "I'm just saying that we can pick somewhere else for our trip with beta society." Louis stretched his arms above his head and tried to ignore the hungry eyes of a couple of the alphas staring intently at the sliver of skin exposed on his stomach.

"You give into the guys in the alpha society too much," Niall said, shaking his head in feigned disapproval. "I'll bet it was their idea to travel there."

Louis shrugged before bending to place his hands on the floor, sighing at the comfortable stretch in his calves. He had made sure to stand at the edge of the group to prevent the wandering eyes of alphas to land on his behind. "You can try to convince George and Harry to change the destination if you want," Louis suggested, though he and Niall both knew he would never bother trying to change the minds of two ardent alphas.

Niall scoffed. "Have you ever tried to convince Harry to do something he doesn't want to do? I wouldn't wish him on my worst enemy when he's determined about something."

"That's enough out of you, Horan!" the coach called from the centre of the small group. He divided them into two teams and they played a full ninety minute match.

There were twenty-two players in total - eleven on each side - which meant that only half of the team would be chosen to play the first match of the inter-university league. Louis felt confident that his performance over the three weeks had secured him a permanent place on the team but he knew that the coach had reservations about him. After the incident with Jack, the coach had spoken with him privately in his bright office, cabinets filled with gleaming trophies and medals lining the walls.

He had spent five minutes praising a particularly excellent save Louis had made during their training session before taking an audible sigh and lowering his voice.

"You're a fantastic player, Louis, no doubt about it," he had implored. "But I know that after the whole debacle with Jack you're probably a bit wary of him and some of the other lads on the team."
Louis had shook his head vehemently before the coach had even finished. "I've spoken with Jack and we're good," he said. "I assure you there's no issue at all."

The coach hadn't believed him, that much was made clear to Louis. It pained him to hear that his gender was the sole contributing factor to the coach's hesitancy about letting him play.

"I just don't want another incident like that to happen to you. The football field is a highly charged environment. I know that you're quick on your feet but the alphas on the team are fuelled by competitiveness and testosterone. They and any other teams we play won't hesitate to take advantage of your size and, eh, omega tendencies." The beta coach hadn't quite met Louis' eyes as he muttered the last part.

Louis had known that it would be fruitless to debate his immunity to the ease with which any alpha could control him. He had simply nodded, smiling tightly before thanking the coach for his concern.

"I'd like to make sure that you spend as little time around the alpha players after training as possible," he had continued. "I know that probably seems contrary to our team bonding ideals if you're not there to hear my post-match feedback but, as you know, football is taken very seriously. There's almost always a winning and a losing side in football. I know from experience that alphas by nature of their gender detest losing and every week after practice there will be a few pissed off alphas. They tend to get frustrated and impulsive and I really don't want you or any other omega student to be exposed to that."

Louis had nodded in agreement, silently relieved that he wouldn't be exposed to their hormone-driven rages. Although his parents were betas and he had attended a small omega majority school, his father used to warn him of the angry outbursts (or "alpha tantrums" as he liked to call them) of his colleagues when business deals had fallen through.

"Should I wait at the sidelines until you're finished the team talks?" he had asked.

"No, I think you should head straight to the dressing rooms afterwards so that you can have a shower and get dressed in private. I'll make sure to give you individual feedback at another stage."

Louis had smiled at the coach's obvious dedication to the team and genuine care for his players' wellbeing. That night as he ambled back to his shared dormitory, however, he had felt a familiar wave of sadness, a feeling of inadequacy that accompanied every decision he made that could be labelled as typically un-omega. He had vowed to leave the coach in no doubt as to who his first choice defender should be at their next training session, striving to prove himself worth the coach's worry and extra measures to ensure his wellbeing.

Louis breathed a sigh of relief when the coach placed Jack on his team at the training session. He resolved to work closely with him in order to show the coach that he wasn't intimidated by the alpha or daunted by the prospect of playing with him. He noticed the watchful glances of the other players when Jack smiled and stood next to him near the goalposts.

Throughout the match Louis focused his efforts on his technique and speed, making impressive saves and identifying the opposition's weak points. He had better balance and co-ordination than any of the alpha players which he used to his advantage, darting past the players with practiced ease. What they had in physical strength and power he made up for with agility and tactical skills.

He played tremendously with Jack; they were perfectly compatible on the football field, anticipating each other's next moves and reacting accordingly. Louis knew that Jack had been surprised by his willingness to play alongside him as well as the way the omega actively sought
him out on the pitch. He soon overcame his surprise, keeping near Louis and complimenting the omega's dexterity with his own endurance and strength.

By the time the final whistle was blown their team had scored four goals and conceded none. Their team shouted with glee, Niall jumping on his back and both of them toppling onto the muddy grass. The beta extended a hand to help him up which Louis gratefully accepted.

"Niall," Louis groaned, examining his (previously white) shorts and turning to look at his grass-stained behind. "My bum's covered in grass," he complained quietly to avoid giving the alpha's in the vicinity an excuse to look at his behind.

His teammates were embracing, shaking hands and congratulating each other on their success. Louis made eye-contact with Jack, whose face shone with pride from across the pitch and walked towards him, ready to praise one of his impressive dives.

He saw an internal battle flash over Jack's expressive face as he approached him. The alpha had his one arm raised, making to clap Louis on the back as he had done with their other teammates. The omega knew, however, that he was battling his internal instincts to embrace the omega, scent him perhaps and hold him close to his chest. Even if his physical or romantic attraction to Louis was minimal it was intrinsic to alpha biology to express admiration for and pride in an omega by close physical contact.

Louis knew that the alpha would have to physically restrain himself from pulling Louis close to his chest if he came too close to his scent. He quickly held up a hand as conflicted blue eyes met his own and gave him a high-five instead. He heard Jack sigh with relief, worry leaving his frantic thoughts.

"Great match, Louis," he said, beaming at the omega.

"Thanks, man," Louis said sincerely, cheeks tinting an attractive rose colour. He stepped back from Jack, maintaining a safe distance from him. "Brilliant slide tackle at the end there."

The alpha looked like he wanted to continue the conversation but Louis turned to walk towards Niall. He was keenly aware that Jack was emotionally invested in him whether the alpha knew it or not. He was the last omega he scented before going into rut which meant that he felt affiliated with him even if Louis did not return those feelings. He had shown the coach that he could handle himself and even work alongside the alpha; now he needed to distance himself from Jack before the alpha interpreted their co-operation as attraction.

When he glanced up however, he saw the six alphas on his team huddled together and jumping up and down shouting 'We Are The Champions' off-key.

Hero, an alpha with a mop of curly blonde hair and freckles noticed Niall and Louis and shouted at them to join them. The omega knew that surrounding himself with a group of rowdy alphas, elated and energised by their win would never have a favourable outcome and waved them off. The coach nodded at him from the sidelines as he passed, singing his praises while leading him to the empty dressing rooms.

Once the beta left to return to the team on the pitch Louis peeled off his training clothes and folded them neatly on the bench, tucking his socks into his trainers. He gathered his scent-free shampoo, conditioner oil and body wash as well as his enormous towel and made his way towards the shower. The windows had been opened earlier in the day to eliminate the thick, suffocating scents of the alpha players. This meant that the dressing rooms were cold but Louis persevered, focusing instead on the searing water cascading down his back.
He spent far longer washing himself than he had previously intended, hearing the boisterous laughter and jeering of the other players when there was still shampoo in his hair. He willed himself not to get nervous about the prospect of walking back into the dressing room in just a towel lest his teammates notice his change in scent.

"Everything's going to be fine," he whispered to himself, taking a steeling breath as he turned off the shower. He wrapped the towel around his waist and cringed at the way it trailed on the floor. He yanked up the sides of the towel to avoid tripping over it, looking something like a half-naked princess walking down the staircase to the ball.

"Look at the way he folded his little shorts. Bet he'd do all our laundry if we asked him too."

Louis stilled at the sneer of one of the alphas and stood behind the wall separating the dressing room from the showers. His heart plummeted and he forced himself to stay still, repeating in his head the crucial advice that every omega was compelled to follow: do not provoke an angry alpha.

"Shut up, Damien," he heard Hero say and his heart leaped that the alpha was so ready to defend him. "Just because you lost doesn't mean you can take it out on him because he's an omega."

"And besides," an Irish lilt called from across the dressing room. "Louis doesn't want to touch your filthy laundry. Your underwear probably smells of piss anyway."

"Keep your opinions to yourself, beta," a loud voice spat.

There was a lull in the discussion though Louis could sense that the air was thick with tension.

"He needs to get off the playing field and back in the kitchen where he belongs."

"Preferably on his hands and knees scrubbing the floor with that arse of his in the air."

A chorus of guffaws sounded and Louis' blood boiled. He turned the corner, aware that he had begun releasing stronger pheromones and unwilling to wait for the alphas to leave the dressing room. His eyes met a wide room filled with alphas and betas in various states of dress, staring unabashedly at him. He felt their eyes rake up and down his body but ignored them and the pink tint colouring his neck.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't talk about me behind my back like that," he said, unwilling to dig himself a deeper hole by disrespecting the group of four alphas crowded around his pile of clothes. They were torn between lust and fury while staring at the half-clothed omega chastising them. "And I would especially appreciate it if you didn't make derogatory remarks about omegas. I deserve to be here just as much as you do."

"More," Jack added from the opposite side of the dressing room. He had taken out his contact lenses and was unable to admire the omega. Hence he was the only alpha who could speak as the remainder were staring at him open-mouthed. "You deserve to be here more than those knotheads, Louis. You kicked their asses."

"Shut your soft mouth, Reynolds or I'll do it for you," a nasty alpha snarled from beside Louis' training bag.

The alphas seemed to regain clear vision upon hearing Jack's voice, seeing beyond the cloud of Louis' scent and appearance to understand that an omega had stood up to them. They rose to their full, intimidating heights and collectively narrowed their eyes.

"How dare you, omega," spat the brutish alpha at the centre of the four. Louis suddenly recognised
took in the sharp cut of his jaw and the harness of his eyes and recognised him as a law student. "You dare voice your opinion to us when you should know that it is never valued."

Scents of musk oil, bergamot and damp wood blended in the dressing room and Louis stepped backwards from the assault and closed his eyes. He knew that it wasn't in any decent alpha's nature to force themselves on an omega or purposefully exploit their vulnerability. Louis also knew that the broad-shouldered student before him was no decent alpha. He felt an infuriating urge to lower his head, to submit to the alpha looming above him as his omega instincts reacted to his anger.

"That's enough, Andrew," he registered someone say firmly. "Leave him alone."

Louis sensed the rumble of Andrew's chest even before he heard the growl escape his mouth. He shut his mouth and clamped his tongue between his teeth to quash a whimper, releasing a high-pitched noise instead. He released a thick wave of his own scent in response to the alpha's threatening tone.

The entire dressing room seemed to come alive in response to that. Alphas who had been observing Louis were shaken out of their reverie and rushed to his side to protect him. Betas who were versed in omega biology ran to his aid and pulled him away from the alphas. He felt arms tug him out of the dressing room.

Scents followed him like gusts of wind as he was led down a corridor by six of his teammates. They brought him into a small room with one chair and a small cabinet with first aid supplies. He hung his head and breathed deeply to calm himself. He felt the concerned stares of the betas on him and opened his mouth to reassure them when he heard voices arguing outside the door.

"No, Jack."

"But -"

"He doesn't want an alpha near him."

"Yes he does. I can smell his fear, fuck. I could comfort him. I promise. Please, Niall, I need to help him," a desperate voice accompanied by frantic footsteps said.

"No. He's not in the right state of mind to agree to being scented. It's your inner alpha that wants to calm him by scenting. Ignore it, Jack."

He heard an aggrieved noise.

Louis tried to focus his thoughts on breathing deeply. He didn't want Jack to scent him; he longed for a different alpha, one he wasn't sure even could scent him. He wanted Harry's strong arms wrapped tightly around him, his soft curls tickling his skin and his slow, reverberating voice whispering words of adoration in his ear.

"I need to leave," he said to the group.

The betas exchanged worried looks before nodding in acquiesce.

"I brought your change of clothes," the dark-haired goalkeeper said quietly, passing him his bag and trainers.

Louis thanked him and changed quickly into a loose t-shirt and sweatpants. When he slung his bag over his shoulder Niall opened the door to enter the room and the noise from slamming lockers and
shouting alphas entered the small first aid area.

"I'll take you out the back entrance, Lou," he said, taking the omega by the hand. "Best leave the animals in the dressing room to be tamed by Jack and the lot."

"Fucking alpha couldn't keep it in his pants. I can't believe he growled like that. He had no right."

"I never thought Andrew was such a backward knothead."

Louis heard the betas mutter profanities about the small group of their teammates under their breath. He didn't feel a surge of relief that they didn't share his views. He thanked them for coming to his aid and followed Niall further along the corridor. They pushed the bar of the emergency exit door and breathed in the evening breeze pinching their cheeks.

The walked the trip to the omega dormitories in companionable silence though Louis could tell from Niall's uncomfortable fidgeting that he wanted to speak before they parted.

"I'm going to tell coach about what happened," he said decidedly as though he expected Louis to protest. When the omega merely sighed and nodded in agreement he continued. "I'm also going to request that Andrew's place on the team be revoked."

"Niall you really don't have to -"

The beta held up a hand to silence him. "I'm doing it Louis. What he did shouldn't be normalised around campus."

"I know that but -"

"But nothing," he said before sighing heavily. "I can't believe you have to deal with that on daily basis."

Louis laughed humourlessly before noticing the sincere look on Niall's face. He hoisted his bag over his shoulder and shrugged. "It's not usually like that," he explained as they took a short cut, bypassing Connelly Place and walking beneath a tall archway. "Obviously I hear remarks like that a lot but it's dealing with all the scents that's the hardest part. It's when I don't really have control over my own body."

Niall made a sympathetic noise before facing directly towards him and fixing him with a determined stare. "You deserve better, Louis."

... 

Harry Styles was seething.

He paced his large dormitory, hardwood floors intensifying the sound of his footsteps striking the floor. He tangled his fingers through his hair aggressively and shot his older sister a furious look, as though she had personally insulted him rather than delivering the news.

"How could this have happened?" he demanded. "Were there no halfway decent alphas to intervene before Andrew fucking Harrison growled at him?"

"Calm down, Harry," Gemma replied exasperatedly, shifting her weight to lift her legs onto his cream sheets with gold embroidered flowers.

"Look, I'm Student President," Harry said firmly. "I'm responsible for the wellbeing of Candling
students. The legality and fund distribution is the college's job but when it comes to anything non-curricular I am supposed to represent them. I feel like I can't do that with these fucking knotheads running their filthy paws all over the omegas."

"That's not what they were doing, Harry so calm down. You're letting your desire to protect him cloud your judgement. Louis reacted to Harrison's comments apparently. The knothead made some inappropriate comments about him but he didn't react to Louis' presence until he annoyed him."

Harry abruptly turned on his heel. "He was defending himself!"

She raised the corners of her mouth into an amused smile, unaffected by her younger brother's menacing glare. "You like him," she stated. "That much is obvious."

Harry glowered at her. "Not the time, Gemma. Right now, I'm responsible for his wellbeing, feelings aside." The alpha sighed heavily. "I'll have coach Martin look into Harrison's profile and decide whether or not to keep him on the team. If Louis decides to pursue legal action, however -"

"He won't."

"What?"

"He's an omega," Gemma explained. "It's not in his nature to aggravate a situation even when that's what that bastard deserves; plenty of people to hear about what he did so his reputation is ruined."

"Yeah, that and a nice punch in the jaw," Harry muttered, clenching his fists.

Gemma raised her eyebrows in surprise. "What's gotten into you? The last couple of weeks you've acted more like an stereotypical alpha since -"

"Don't," Harry gritted out. "I just-fuck, I don't know what it is." He released his grasp on the door handle and sat on his bed next to Gemma.

"Have you been around dad recently or something?"

Harry shook his head vehemently. "Fuck no," he whispered, eyes trained on a small hole in his dark jeans. He swirled a long finger around the hole slowly, caressing the skin and enlarging the hole.

"Jesus, stop fingering your jeans and listen to yourself," she sighed exasperatedly at her younger brother. "I've never seen you this affected by an omega you barely know. It's clear your behaviour has changed ever since there have been omegas on campus." She placed a comforting hand on her brother's tense shoulder. "You just need to regain control over your immediate urges."

Harry shook his head slowly. "It's not that," he said with more patience than he felt like extending to her. "It's not having the omegas around that is making me a little more in touch with my instincts." He sighed heavily, deciding to disclose his thoughts to his sister before she drew her own conclusions about his behaviour. "It's having other alphas around them," he muttered, slightly ashamed of the competitiveness he felt when a certain omega student directed his attention to an alpha other than him.

"So you're jealous of other alphas. Is what you're saying?"

Harry knew that she didn't need clarification and simply wanted him to admit that he disliked seeing Louis around other alphas.
"Possessiveness isn't attractive on you, Harry," she warned.

He aggressively rubbed a hand over his face. "That time in the coffee shop when I growled at the alpha hitting on Louis was the first time I'd ever felt that protective over an omega other than mum." Harry couldn't quite meet his sister's eyes when he added "I needed to scent him but I knew that I couldn't. It scared me to feel that out of control. I haven't let my inner alpha lead my decisions in years."

"And you're not going to let it happen again," she assured. "I know that you've learned from that and I'm proud of you for it. Don't let your feelings for this omega eclipse all the changes you made to be a better alpha, Harry."

"My feelings for Louis are the problem and I know that they impede progress I've made. Being around him doesn't change my behaviour until another alpha comes along and- " he paused, exhaling heavily, "fuck, my instincts scream at me to do something to make sure he looks at me and only me."

Gemma directed a look of concern at him. "At least it's an issue of jealousy. You may feel like you can't control it right now but I promise that you will."

"I know that I will," Harry said frustratedly. A pang of guilt sounded deep in his chest, stirring inside him and extending outwards. "But I can't even tell him I feel like a possessive, insecure predator. It's not me and he knows that. I'd freak him out before we can even start something."

Gemma sighed, aligning herself on the bed to face Harry directly. "Harry you recognising that feeling like this isn't right is the first step to overcoming it. Just keep telling yourself that he's not your omega and you haven't any right to feel like this."

Harry nodded solemnly, highly aware that he would have to control his urges and allow time for their relationship to develop to a point where he had earned right to feel protective over Louis.

"At least you're not experiencing the same instincts as before," she sighed, undisguised relief colouring her voice.

The look Harry shot at his sister silenced her.

Alpha-specific instincts were both broad ranging and precise; a desire to protect, care and provide for their omega indelibly marked alphas from betas. Just like omegas, alphas were led by their emotions while betas made decisions most often based on logic and rational thinking. As such, they were considered to be be the least impassioned, amorous of the genders and the most level-headed.

In contrast, alphas were highly emotional and perceptive of their mate and companions. Their instincts urged them to take drastic steps to achieve their aims - including finding a mate - and often they were inclined to react physically to unfavourable circumstances leading to high violence rates among alphas.

Harry was highly aware that, along with jealousy, alphas were associated with excessive pride, ambition and assertiveness. Though he had always been taught to embrace his natural inclinations, his inner alpha had never responded so emphatically to an omega before he met Louis.

"Don't tell him that you know about the incident," Gemma advised after a short pause. "Otherwise you'll your instincts will be on alert. If you somehow convince him to date your sorry ass," she said, easily dodging the blanket Harry flung at her head, "then you can tell him about everything -
including the heightened alpha senses you feel around him. Until then: suppress your urges before they control you."

Chapter End Notes

I would really appreciate hearing your thoughts on this chapter.
Louis spent the following day distracted by thoughts of the previous night's events; the alphas' derogatory remarks, his impulsive reaction and Andrew's guttural growl in response. His mind replayed the growl like a broken cassette, a sense of outrage building inside him throughout the day. He couldn't focus on his coursework and resigned himself to jot down key points from his lectures instead of his usual meticulous, detailed case summaries.

The growl sounded again and again in his head, consuming his every thought. He thought for a moment that becoming accustomed to hearing it would somehow make him immune to it. He knew that developing resistance to an alpha's growl was paramount to overcoming his urges to submit. Cases of success when omegas overcame their biological reaction to an alpha growl were extremely rare, however.

Louis' anger at the alpha fluctuated and subdued, replaced by a bitter hatred of his inherent tendency to acquiesce to the demands of others. His desires to make his voice heard and to defend himself, however, stood in direct contrast to such tendencies. By the time his final tutorial finished that evening, his shoulders felt tight with tension and the optimism with which he had begun the day had long since evaporated.

He returned to the dormitory to find it empty, Zayn's usual presence replaced by a tall, beautifully crafted bookcase. There were tiny, ornate roses engraved in the mahogany wood and Louis ran his finger lightly over the detail.

He remembered Zayn telling him about asking one of the engineering students to build a bookcase to hold his art supplies and Louis' enormous law books. He hadn't expected the masterpiece before his eyes. He pictured Zayn painting the flowers in shades of white and red to compliment the wooden shelves and absentmindedly thought that whichever engineering student he had commissioned to build the bookcase must have been head over heels for Zayn.

Louis fell into his bed, physically exhausted although his mind was whirring as events flashed before his eyes. He anticipated another night of navigating his thoughts and feelings alone. He reached into the pocket of his satchel and extracted his phone, fingers dancing over the keys and dialling the number that had been engraved into his head from the moment he could speak.

"Louis?"

"Mum?" He was surprised by the surge of emotion he felt upon hearing his mother's voice after so long. It laced with concern, as though she was worried about his reason for calling home. "I've been meaning to call you for a while now and. I'm sorry I didn't before," he admitted. "I just-something happened and I needed to talk to you."

"Oh, honey," she sighed. "Of course you can talk to me. Let me pop on the kettle and we can have chat."

They spend the entire evening talking to each other. It felt comforting to know that, although Louis' mother was hundreds of miles away, neither of them had left behind their customary cup of Yorkshire tea while opening up to each other. Louis described the events from the night before to her attentive ears and noises of sympathy and concern. He told her how he felt like he was battling
his instincts to defend himself; through the hot tears steaming down his face he described how he had lost the battle, instantly lowering his head in submission after Andrew's rough growl left his mouth.

"How can they feel like it's their duty to protect and care for us when they're ready to pounce if we dare to question them?" he exclaimed, sniffing and heaving another heavy sigh.

"Honey, I know," she whispered, wishing with every fibre of her being that she could wrap him in her arms. "It's not fair. It really shouldn't be the case but you have to believe me when I say that they're not all like that."

"It sometimes feels like I can only place my trust in a few of them."

"And so you should," she assured. "If even one alpha opens his eyes to understand that they're the ones at fault then you're doing exactly what you told me Osoc wanted to do. You're teaching alphas that you're ready to fight back and not to be ignored any longer."

"It's so difficult," he said quietly. "Every little improvement for the omegas - for Osoc - is a challenge. It all comes with complications. But trying to change their mindsets when they abuse their powers over us is just something we can't surmount."

"But you can, honey," she said earnestly. "It's not just your battle to fight, Lou. All omegas are in the same position and, collectively at least, you have the power to bring about change even if it's just within the university walls."

She took a deep, reverberating breath and the sound of her voice imploring him to take her advice prompted Louis to clutch the phone closer to his ear.

"You may not be able to resist your omegas instincts but you can teach them not to act on them in the first place," she said. "They hold a power over you that they relish and take advantage of. But only omegas know the full extent of that power, Louis. And you can share that."

"I sometimes feel like it's becoming too much," he whispered, vulnerability tinting his voice. "It feels like I have to work twice and hard to fight my instincts in order to achieve anything. Last night, when he growled, it's like all of the fight in me left and I just wanted to obey him. Sirens have it easy; embracing their basic desires and being in control of their omega instincts. I don't have that."

He heard a heavy sigh. "Honey, it may seem like they've more control over their omega instincts because they're so familiar with them, but you have to remember that, in reality, they're the ones being controlled by this alpha-dominated work. Don't give in to your instincts, honey. Don't let them control you."

... Shadows were cast along the cobbled path winding past Connelly Place as the tall Victorian-style lecture theatres blocked the sun's evening light. Louis glanced at the thick folder of research tucked in his satchel as he made his way to the private library room Harry and had arranged to meet him at the previous week. Though he wouldn't admit it, Louis was looking forward to spending an evening working without interruptions and with Harry's undivided attention.

The library building stood behind a tall archway flanked by statues of former Candling pupils. The poet wore a frown and an enormous top hat placed at a jaunty angle. Louis scurried past him through the entrance to the library. He climbed up the stairs to the third floor where the private
rooms were located. They were generally reserved for tutor sessions and practice centres for exams and he voiced such knowledge when he entered the fourth room, surprised that he had managed to get them a room on such short notice.

"I have my ways," Harry replied through a smirk, stretching his back muscles as he stood up to greet Louis.

Number four was easily the best private room. The cream coloured walls were lined with thick encyclopedias and dictionaries and a huge map of the world hung proudly opposite the round table at the centre of the room. An expansive pane of glass took the place of the fourth wall, providing spectacular views of the London skyline and the faint glow of the setting sun. When Louis turned to Harry to comment on the view, he found the alpha admiring him instead. Words escaped the omega and he blinked coquettishly, surprised by Harry's open gazing.

"How are you, Lou? Enjoying your lectures?" he asked.

"I'm okay," he said sincerely, watching Harry's eyes sadden. "My lectures are great and I love my course," he assured. "I just- I don't know. I think adjusting to college life is a little harder than I expected."

Harry allowed a silence to settle around them as he observed the way Louis' eyes darted to his lap, unwilling to meet his own look of concern. He longed to embrace the omega, to comfort him and change his circumstances. He leaned forward and placed a hand on the back of Louis' chair, their knees touching opposite each other. His action received the desired effect and Louis looked up to meet his unwavering gaze.

"You carry so much on your shoulders, omega," he whispered, aware of the sensitive nature of the topic. He carefully chose his words to avoid mentioning the incident on the football field - something that Louis didn't know he had been informed about. "College life is what you make it and you have been so open to every opportunity that has come your way. It's okay if you feel a little overwhelmed at times but just don't overburden yourself, omega," he said, raising his other hand to stroking his thumb slowly across his upper cheek, revealing in Louis' soft intake of breath.

"Thank you, Harry," Louis whispered, tilting his head almost imperceptibly towards his hand and lengthening the line of his throat. "I really appreciate hearing that from you." He sighed contently as he felt a soft swipe against the lid of his eye as though Harry was calming him to rest. He closed his eyes when the short movements of Harry's thumb ceased. He fought the pout that threatened to appear on his face.

With Harry's hand no longer holding his attention, he opened his eyes and found the alpha staring at him with a tight jaw as though restraining himself. His fingers dug into his strong thighs, spread open now, his knees bracketing Louis' own with light but noticeable pressure.

The omega sensed Harry's uneasiness, the stiffness of his position and the way his eyes wouldn't meet Louis' own. Though he wanted to ask the alpha what was wrong he wasn't sure he would appreciate his probing. He vied for Harry's attention to return to him once more instead and change the direction of the conversation to something more impersonal.

"So, what did the insurance company say about travel costs?"

The tension escaped the room immediately and Harry laughing at the abrupt change in topic. His omega instinct was satisfied at Harry's change in demeanour, becoming more engaged in the discussion and leaning closer to him. Harry latched onto the distraction, removing a pile of documents from his briefcase to show him the developments of his various phone calls with the
company. They dived into a comfortable conversation about the rates for travelling they had been offered, both aware that their emotionally-charged discussion could have escalated very quickly.

After much deliberation the previous week the representatives of both the alpha society and OSoc had decided to limit the number of alphas permitted on the trip in the interest of balance. A group of fifty alpha students along with the same number of omegas would be eligible for a place on the trip depending on a lottery system.

Though George had spent the previous week in the throes of his rut, as President of C.A.S they had needed to hear his opinion and permission to proceed with the planning and booking. Harry had been nominated by the other students in the alpha society to enter his room during his rut to talk to him.

"They were too scared to go into his alpha layer, I think," Harry chuckled. "But I did it anyway. He was predictably out of it and kind of just moaned along to every cost I listed off and every event we suggested for the itinerary."

"I actually think he gets off on organisation and putting labels on his shit," Harry continued, smiling at the high laugh the comment elicited out of Louis. "Seriously, when I mentioned keeping folders with divided sections for every activity on the trip he let out this long, throaty moan."

"Stop it!" Louis squealed, covering his ears with his hands. "I don't want to hear about George doing God knows what!"

"Oh yeah, baby, tell me more about how you organise your folders," Harry whispered in an exaggerated sultry voice that sounded eerily similar to George.

Louis collapsed into fits of giggles, threatening to call George if Harry ever impersonated his stationery fetish again. Harry simply smiled at the endearing omega, relishing the way he could make him laugh, the way his whole body reacted; his head shot back, shoulders shaking and feet tapping on the floor. He also tried to ignore the rosy blush that coloured his neck and cheeks and suppressed the urge to stroke his thumb over them again.

"Okay, okay, back to work," Louis said finally, sending Harry a warning glance when the mischievous smile on his face threatened to appear. "What are we going to do about travelling between the hotel and all of the day trips? Do you think we should rent a double-decker bus for the week instead?"

Harry pulled his lower lip between his thumb and index finger, pinching lightly as he considered Louis' suggestion. "That's a very good idea," he concluded. "It'll prevent us having to pay for public transport and it will ensure we stick together as a group."

Louis blushed at Harry's appraisal of his proposal and lifted his shoulder. "We can probably hire a driver too. We'll just have to give him a copy of the schedule."

"Oh no," Harry said, smiling conspiratorially while shaking his head slowly. "If we're going to rent a proper tour bus to travel to all of the places we're going on the trip then I'm driving."

"Can you drive well?" Louis teased.

Harry made a noise of indignation. "I certainly can. Best driver you'll ever see," he said, sticking out his chest.

"Okay then," he shrugged. "I guess we'll save a bit of money if we don't have to pay a driver. I'm going to warn you now, though, that we're going to have to navigate some small country roads in a
big bus. It's going to be very different to driving around London in your BMW i8."

Harry waved him off. "It'll be fine. I've driven my entire family to- wait. How do you know I drive
a BMW i8?"

Louis resolutely ignored the look of glee on Harry's face and shot him a look of incredulity instead. "It's a little hard not to notice it in the student parking zone next to all the second hand Toyotas."

Harry shrugged modestly. "I got her a couple of years ago for my eighteenth from my, eh, yeah it
was a present. She's the best thing I own."

Louis decided not to focus on the way Harry had skilfully avoided mentioning who had bought him
the car though he was certain it had been his father. He figured Harry would disclose more about
his family when he became comfortable opening up to him. "You refer to your car as a female?" he
asked instead, voice teasing. "You know that doesn't make you any more manly or make people
think you have a big knot, right?" The words escaped before he had a chance to clamp a hand over
his mouth.

Talking to Harry, without his scent surrounding him and inhibiting his rational thoughts, felt
comfortable. When he was sitting beside him, hands on the table and eyes focused on him he felt a
charge of energy rush through him, freeing his inhibitions.

Before he could apologise to the alpha, afraid that he had insulted him or taken his teasing too far, Harry let out a loud honk of laughter. He turned his entire body towards Louis, flashing a wide
smile at him while shaking his head. "It's not an alpha thing, I swear. And trust me, being well
endowed has nothing to do with owning an expensive car. I have nothing to compensate for in that
department," he said, winking at the omega.

Louis' behaviour instantly became bashful, his eyebrows raising at the implication and fingers
toying with each other in his lap. "I never- I mean I didn't mean that to suggest that- you know, that
you, eh, needed to," he stuttered, avoiding Harry's gaze.

"I know that, Louis. I was only teasing, darling." Harry spoke softly as he watched the omega, internally cooing at his shy demeanour. He admired the way Louis was relaxed and unrestrained
when he spoke, willing to probe and tease the alpha - something which drove him mad with desire -
and equally endearing when he blushed and stuttered in response to Harry's teasing.

Louis smiled at him gratefully, thanking him quietly before pulling his chair closer to the table and
resuming their discussion about renting a bus. The way he could discuss the trip and make
pragmatic, intellectual comments impressed Harry hugely and his inner alpha savoured the way he
pruned when he praised his ideas for the trip. Louis was quick to make suggestions but always
listened attentively whenever spoke, something which gave him great pleasure to know that they
were equals when they worked together.

The sky outside was rapidly darkening, streaks of evening blue interrupted by dark clouds. Louis
commented on the late hour to Harry who sighed defeatedly and agreed that he needed to leave for
his night shift at St. John's. The alpha's pout reconfigured itself and his face lit up.

"Why don't you come with me tonight?" he asked suddenly.

"Come with you where?" he asked though he knew that, in reality, he would follow Harry wherever
he proposed.

"To the hospital. I've a two hour shift as an advising junior doctor. You can meet the kids who have
permanent residence there and all the nurses I work with," he said, smiling warmly at the omega. Though a little overwhelmed by the idea of meeting Harry’s colleagues and patients, Louis was delighted by the idea. "Yeah, as long as you don't think I'll get in the way of your work then I'd love to, Harry."

"Oh, I don't doubt you'll get in the way of my work, darling," Harry said, winking cheekily and throwing his coat over his shoulder. Louis noticed that whenever Harry let a flirty or suggestive comment slip out, his Manchester accent thickened and his voice became rougher, more coarse. He blushed profusely and busied himself with collecting his belongings.

They walked through the eerily silent library to the grounds outside where the wind cooled his burning cheeks. They took the long route past the maze garden and listened to the water splashing in the fountains as they made idle conversation.

"I love that sound," Louis sighed quietly, closing his eyes mid-stride and stopping to listen closely.

"What sound?" Harry whispered as though afraid to interrupt. He turned to look at the omega and saw his feet planted on the cobblestones, eyes closed, lips parted and arms slightly raised. Harry almost expected him to spurt wings and fly upwards. "What sound, angel?" he repeated.

"The water trickling down the rocks in the fountains," Louis said patiently. He opened his eyes and motioned for Harry to stand closer to the basin of the fountain. "Listen."

He walked closer to him with careful footsteps, suddenly afraid to interrupt the noise that seemed to be calming the omega. They stood beside each other, Louis' lower back and Harry's upper thighs resting against the basin. They allowed the silence to consume them, Harry breathing in the evening air and Louis' scent: cranberry, elderflower and a hint of sweet vanilla. A thought rushed through him that he wouldn't mind staying beside him forever.

"We'd better go to make sure you're not late for your shift," Louis said, fixing his hair across his forehead when he felt Harry's gaze return to him.

Harry surreptitiously breathed in his scent once more before nodding in agreement. They walked towards the bus station and he couldn't help but notice how Louis leaned slightly closer to him during the bus journey.

Although he hadn't wanted to leave their position beside the fountain, the look on Louis' face when he met all of his regular patients in the Paediatric Ward made Harry wish to bring him to work every day simply to bring such a smile on his face. His entire demeanour relaxed and he was gentle and affectionate with the children. He was enamoured by the omega crouching beside the group of young children gathered around him and listening to them as they talked about everything from their favourite colour to the funniest character in the television programme they watched.

Harry had to attend to his usual patients and consult their parents on updates regarding their children's conditions and illnesses. He left Louis talking with the carers in the Nursery, three middle-aged beta women who gushed about his natural maternal inclination.

He whispered to Louis that he had a couple of consultations to complete and left the room regretfully to complete his shift. His colleague's mate had gone into labour early and he was given a new timetable to cover her own patients, leaving Harry frazzled as he had to revise new patient files and frustrated as he couldn't give Louis the tour around the hospital he intended to take.

He passed by the Nursery periodically between consultations to see the children dancing and doing
finger painting. Louis' hands were constantly held by two of his regular patients - a five year old girl called Molly with Alopecia and a three year old boy who had recently received a liver transplant - and his heart warmed at the sight before he was whisked away to greet the next set of concerned parents. His job was equally heart-breaking and immensely rewarding. It was moments like these, seeing Albert, the boy who had spent the previous month confined to a hospital bed, painting an enormous green sun with an equally bright smile on his face that made all the pain worthwhile.

When Harry returned at the end of his shift, exhausted and wincing as his back muscles strained from the long day he was greeted with an image of the children in the Nursery preparing for bed. Louis sat on an enormous beanbag reading a storybook to a group of toddlers (many of whom were siblings of the permanent patients) positioned around him. Their heads leaned sleepily on his chest and they giggled when he put on a comically deep voice for the alpha character in the story.

"That's you, Doctor Harry!" Albert called from across the room and the other children began shouting that he was like the alpha in the story, Louis smiling up at him serenely.

"All right then, Albert. Tell me more about this alpha, then, if you think he's like me," Harry said, walking towards the group and sending a smile at the carers who were whispering. They smiled knowingly between him and Louis and Harry knew that he didn't imagine the faint blush that bloomed on the omega's cheeks.

"Maximus is a big alpha just like you!" Albert said excitedly. "And he's sad because when he finds the omega he wants to mate with - Edin - she is already going to be married to a bad King."

"But then," Molly interjected, clutching Louis' left hand, "he secretly meets his omega when the mean King isn't looking and he knows that, even if he can't have her, she is still perfect!"

"That's Lou!" Albert announced to a chorus of "yeah!" from the children who jumped off the beanbag with excitement.

"Okay, everyone, settle down," he said, chuckling. "I'm not Edin although Harry does look a little like Maximus," he said with a wink.

Harry averted his gaze and tugged at the collar of his shirt uncomfortably. Louis frowned at the movement.

"But you are! You're the omega in the story, Lou!" Molly proclaimed, pointing at the illustration to emphasise her point.

Harry walked closer and sat tentatively at the edge of the beanbag. "I think Louis is much more beautiful than her," he said softly. "Don't you agree, Molly?"

She examined the picture more closely before nodding firmly, as though the proposition that the illustration was even comparable to Louis was insulting. "Definitely, Doctor Harry. Lou is way prettier."

Harry turned to find Louis stuttering out weak protests and blushing profusely. "See, Louis, Molly has settled it for us," he said, much to his patient's happiness.

They announced their departure soon after, apologising to the group of toddlers gripping Louis' leg and claiming that he needed to see their newly-completed paintings. He knelt before Molly and Albert and repeatedly promised to return until they were satisfied. By the time they left the hospital the sky was pitch black and the moon hung directly overhead, illuminating their path back to
"Thank you for tonight, Harry," he said as they stopped outside the omega dormitories. "I loved meeting all of your patients."

"But I didn't even get to show you around," Harry insisted. "Next time, when my co-worker's back I'll have a lot more breaks to show you around."

Louis nodded happily. "As long as you're not too busy," he said shyly.

The rustle of leaves in the wind from the small gathering of trees outside the omega dormitories filled in the silence.

"Can I take you to dinner, Louis?" he asked, voice guarded and nervous. "I just- I want to be with you without any obstacles or obligations and no talk about the trip or insurance rates or anything."

Louis shuffled his feet nervously and nodded once, clasping his fingers behind his back in a typical omega position. "Yes. Yeah, of course, Harry. I'd really like that."

"Okay," Harry said, more to reassure himself and quash the anxious feeling in his stomach. "Good. Can I see you again soon?"

"Of course. I really like spending time with you," he said quietly, unwilling to disturb the sound of the breeze rushing through the trees.

"I love being around you too, omega," he said, feeling a warmth flood his stomach at Louis' words. "I don't want to leave, if I'm honest."

Louis chuckled softly. "I'll go then," he said finally, though his voice hinted that he wanted to do the opposite. "I've a mystery bookcase to ask Zayn about and a Constitutional Law seminar at half past eight."

Harry made a sympathetic noise and nodded, inserting his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out to Louis as he walked up the entrance steps.

"Good night, Harry. And thank you," he said, turning to meet his eyes, shining at the base of the dimly-lit porch.

"You're welcome, darling. Sweet dreams."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I felt obliged to write some fluff to balance the angst in the last chapter!
Heavy droplets pounded against the window of their shared dormitory and the rhythmic noise provided a distraction for Louis as he lay in bed watching shapes form on the ceiling as the sun peered out from behind the clouds. He had woken with a jolt an hour previously and hadn’t been able to fall back asleep, resigning himself instead to listening to the stormy weather outside. He pulled the white and blue bedsheets around himself more tightly, wrapping himself in the soft fabric to provide more warmth.

“We really need to get that heater fixed,” Zayn muttered from across the room.

“Didn’t expect you to be awake early on a Saturday,” he said. Zayn grumbled in response and rolled over to face Louis. “But yeah you should ask that miracle man engineering student who made us the bookcase if he knows anything about plumbing.”

“Doubt it. But I guess there’s no harm in asking,” Zayn mused.

“Who is it, anyway? We should take him out for a drink or something. Can’t believe he made us that for free,” Louis said, gathering his bedsheets around him so that they would cover him like an oversized cape when he walked towards the wardrobe to get dressed.

“We don’t have to do that,” Zayn rushed out, leaping from his bed, suddenly immune to the cold dormitory. “Don’t worry about thanking him. You don’t know him, he’s kind of shy. Not really one for accepting praise or anything.”

Louis eyed him curiously. “Okay,” he drew out suspiciously. “If you’re still working on that project with him then let him know I say thanks.”

“I will,” Zayn said with a sigh before crawling back to his bed and curling up under the sheets.

Louis changed at rapid speed to avoid exposing his skin to the cold air permeating the dormitory, whipping his flannel pyjamas off and pulling on straight leg jeans and a thick cable knit jumper.

“Wait, seriously?” he exclaimed. “I was only joking with you ‘cause I know he studies engineering.”

Zayn shrugged beneath the bedsheets piled on top of him. “We were in the engineering block preparing for the project when I mentioned to Alicia – one of the omegas studying Visual Arts – that the foot of my bed was becoming a place to put all of my supplies but that all the big bookshelves in London were either antique, mega expensive or both. Liam overheard us and offered to build one. Said that he studied woodwork at school and his dad’s a carpenter.”

“I’m sure he was more than happy to help you,” Louis winked.
“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zayn squawked.

“I think you and I both know exactly what that means,” Louis said. “It’s obvious he has a crush on you.”

Zayn shook his head adamantly. “Don’t be ridiculous, Lou. That incident before my heat was purely a physical reaction to my scent. He doesn’t actually like me.”

“Than why didn’t Harry pounce when he noticed your scent? He was coherent enough to restrain Liam who, I might add, was the only alpha perceptive enough to notice your changed scent, even before me,” he countered.

“He might be particularly in tune with his alpha instincts,” Zayn suggested. “And besides, Harry’s head over heels for you. He barely notices any other omega when you’re around.”

“Doesn’t mean he can mute his instincts when he notices an omega entering heat,” Louis said, struggling to pull a thick coat over his jumper.

Zayn huffed out a defeated breath, visible in the bitterly cold dormitory. “Where are you going, anyway?”

“Announcement for which students got a place on the International Gender Research Foundation work,” he said, combing his hand through his hair.

“You think you’ll get a place?” Zayn asked.

“Probably not,” Louis said, though he felt a warm glimmer of optimism blossoming inside of him. Though statistically he had a small chance of being offered a place as only three law students were chosen in total, he was confident that he had completed his application form perfectly and had an impressive academic record to match. He also knew that the students chosen to be part of the research would be involved in practical work and experimentation and that the I.G.R.F would need at least one omega student involved. Very few omegas were studying medicine, biology and law, the three subjects required to apply for the project. Though it was incomparable to the discrimination and prejudice surrounding omegas, he knew that his gender gave him a distinct advantage in this case.

“Okay,” Zayn said through a yawn. “I was supposed to finish my landscape portraits today but judging from the weather outside it looks like I’m going to have to begin my Year One Project.” He groaned at the thought of commencing the 3D model that would compose of two-thirds of his overall grade.

“Any ideas for what you’ll do?” Louis asked, wrapping an impossibly long striped scarf around his neck.

“Actually, yeah,” he said, shifting up his bed to sit on his pillow in search of further warmth. “I’m going to explore how our clothing gives us an identity.”

“Interesting. Bit like how I look like I’m drowning in all of my oversized jumpers is symbolic of how I’m drowning in uncompleted law assignments.”

“Such a drama king,” Zayn said, though he continued to smile at him from where he was swaddled in bedsheets. “Actually I’m going to buy a mannequin and start producing clothes that typically represent the different genders and blend them into one another on the mannequin. I also want to use visual expression to show how socio-economic class, gender norms and imposed ideas affect personal style. And I want to show how clothing is used for seductive reasons or to impress
“Sounds amazing, Z. That’s one of your art concepts I can understand for once,” Louis said earnestly.

“Yeah, it’ll be good,” Zayn said, pleased to hear his roommate’s support. “At least I hope it will. Issue is I’m going to have to take part of my project on the alpha and omega trip to complete it in time.”

“Should be interesting to see how the alphas dress when they’re trying to impress, though,” Louis said, glancing at the leather-bound watch adorning his wrist. “Listen, Z, I’d better go.”

“Pick me up one of those herbal teas in the dining hall on your way back. And good luck!” Zayn called, returning Louis’ small wave as he pulled the door closed.

Louis’ teeth began to chatter as he made his way across the predictably uninhabited campus towards the main Student Centre lecture theatre. The biting wind pinched his cheeks and turned them a rosy pink despite the scarf protecting half of his face. He arrived with ten minutes to spare, falling into one of the seats beside a beta emanating a modest verbena scent. She smiled at him and they fell into a comfortable conversation about the Gender Research Foundation. He learned that her name was Emilie and that, though she studied general biology as her major, she was passionate about employing science to discover more about gender biology. She wanted to prove widely-held societal beliefs about biological features of alphas, betas and omegas wrong through research and experimentation but very few organisations and even fewer government bodies were willing to fund such work with the sole exception of the I.G.R.F.

“The work they do really is phenomenal,” she gushed. “And I can’t believe Candling’s going to be part of their next major research project. Even if I don’t get a place just hearing about the work and seeing how the results are going to bring about changes to gender-specific laws is going to be great.”

Louis smiled agreeably. “Yeah, it’s going to bring about such a great change in attitude towards gender norms and preconceived concepts about our differences and similarities. It’s all been quite secretive though, hasn’t it?”

“Oh definitely,” Emilie said gravely. “I heard that a lot of their practical experimentation is sensitive and the don’t want students to know about it in case they can prepare for it or interfere in some way. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what it all entails.”

Louis felt mildly concerned about what would be involved in the practical application of the research in the project Doctor Matilda May approached the podium before he could reply. Louis noticed the lecture theatre was teeming with attentive students waiting in anticipation for their names to be called.

“Good morning,” she called cheerfully, her commanding tone effectively silencing the whispers dancing through the back rows of seats. “Thank you all for joining us despite the unfortunate weather. I’m sure it’ll all be worth leaving your cozy beds for the announcement of which students will be joining me and my research team at the I.G.R.F though.” Despite her evident excitement she maintained a collected exterior that was characteristic of her gender. “We are fully aware that many of you will be receiving disappointing news today but we encourage anyone who wasn’t accepted to join the volunteer team to promote and represent the organisation. And now, without further ado, here are the candidates chosen for the Gender Research Project.”

Louis felt nervous energy rush though him and he leaned forward in his seat, clutching his satchel
solely to occupy his fingers which kept tucking a loose strand of hair behind his ear.

“The students whose names I call out should immediately make their way to the adjoined room at the front of the lecture theatre so that we can fill you in on precisely what we require of you as well as what this project entails.” The alpha extracted a sheet of paper from her briefcase and cleared her throat. “From the biology students: Dorothy Andrews, Adam Cassidy, Benjamin Lawrence, Emilie Montgomery and Fernanda Nelson.”

Louis congratulated Emilie who beamed at him, gathered her belongings hurriedly and rushed in the direction of the room at the front of the hall, leaving a faint verbena scent behind her.

“From the medicine students: Elena Bentley, Luke Donnelly, Catherine Holland, Laura O’Connell, Harry Styles and Christian Thompson.”

He shifted to the edge of his seat to watch Harry amble towards the front of the lecture theatre, faded blue jeans hugging his long legs and unruly curls tamed by a grey hat. Louis knew that he had noticed him by his scent and watch Harry’s eyes scan the lecture theatre determinedly until they landed him. Louis gave him a wide smile and a small wave, aware that the students seated in his vicinity were staring at their nonverbal interaction with piqued interest. Harry motioned that he would talk to him afterwards before following the group into the room, allowing the door to shut closed behind him loudly.

“And finally, our three law students,” Doctor May said, turning the sheet over in her hands.

Louis felt a familiar anxiousness surge through him. He knew that Catherine Holland, a kind-faced girls with an infectious laugh, was an omega. She had attended the omega society meetings and actively engaged with all of the discussions. Louis felt envious of her, however, aware that she could have been the only omega accepted on the research programme. Images of her working with Harry late into the night, conducting experiments together and bonding over their shared degree course flashed in his mind before he could even reason with himself.

“The final students that will be working with us are Jennifer Cotter, Sabrina Rashford and Louis Tomlinson.”

He vaguely registered applause sounding around him and felt an encouraging pat on the back before he rose from his seat and was whisked through the lecture hall. A hand guiding him brought him into a high-ceilinged room with a roaring fireplace and an assortment of patterned armchairs before he could fully appreciate what had happened.

Eleven students and four representatives of the I.G.R.F turned around from where they had been huddled around the fireplace to face them. Harry immediately smiled warmly at him, pride characterising his features. Sabrina and Jennifer (both third year beta students) stood on either side of him at the door and all three quickly joined the larger group, talking animatedly about what was to come.

Doctor May entered the room and in a flurry of papers exchanged between her and her four colleagues, she was left alone with the fourteen students. “Please, sit down,” she said, gesturing to the paisley matched armchairs. “Make yourselves comfortable, all of you.”

Louis noticed that her voice was as assertive as any alpha’s but that it had a surprising nurturing, maternal quality, something more frequently associated with omegas. He vaguely wondered whether or not she had children as he sat primly on a beige armchair directly opposite from Harry. He didn’t fail to notice that the six alpha students in the room had positioned themselves so that he and Catherine could sit closest to the sputtering fire which was alive with huge logs and twigs
burning. He could appreciate her scent filling his nostrils: freshly applied paint which was all consuming and intoxicating.

Doctor May stood furthest from the fire, beside a tall window which shone a dim light on her dark hair twisted into a knot. She opened her arms in a gesture of welcome and extended a warm smile to them. “I’m absolutely delighted to welcome each of you here today,” she said. “Working with such bright Candling students is going to be an honour and I’m sure we’ll learn a lot from each other, especially considering the impressive strides this university has made in recent years to make progress in the area of gender equality. That is, of course, thanks in no small part to the work of your Students’ Union and Student President.” Everyone in the room directed their attention to Harry whose often impassive face suppressed a smile.

“Now, you’re probably all very curious about what’s going to be involved in this project, all of which will be shown in greater depth in e-mails that have been sent to your inboxes. Firstly, however, I’ll give you a brief overview of the research you’ll be undertaking.”

"Firstly, the Gender Research Project will begin on October fifteenth and should take us right up until Christmas time, all things going to plan. You'll be exempted from the unessential modules of your degree and won't be required to sit any Christmas exams apart from your core modules. In exchange, you will spent twelve hours a week working with me and my colleagues to expand scientific knowledge of the genders and apply that knowledge to our legal system to propose changes to every country in which this research is conducted, including the UK and Ireland, France, Germany, Australia, the United States, Brazil and South Africa.”

“Secondly, we need each of you to sign a non-disclosure agreement in advance to ensure that you reveal none of the sensitive information we deal with over the course of the research. You'll be able to tell friends and family the basic idea of the work but you'll be informed in advance whenever we begin a sensitive topic.”

“Finally, I'm going to tell you a little about the work itself. It's going to balance research, experimentation and examination of results. For the biology students you're mainly going to be focused on looking at the physical attributes of the genders and the neurological differences that dictate their gender-specific response. Medicine students will be examining the physiological make-up of the genders and how drugs can enhance or exacerbate a genetic-specific response. Meanwhile law students will be observing how advancements in this research are can be practically applied to the law and society as a whole. At the same time you’ll all be taking part in a variety of pre-designed experiments to test the hypotheses we form.”

The door opened abruptly to reveal two betas Louis recognised as chefs at the dining hall. They both carried trays of tea, crumpets and piping hot croissants, placing the items on the long, oak table beside the window. He, Catherine and Harry thanked them before everyone crowded around the plates of freshly baked croissants.

"Could you tell us more about the practical work? And why are we the ones our testing is carried out on? Surely that would make our results biased?” Dorothy, an alpha with long auburn hair and a scent of honey and cloves said.

"An excellent question," Doctor May said, beaming at her. "The practical work is mainly going to involve a series of simulations to place each of you in a situation whereby society perceives it necessary or acceptable to respond in accordance with gender instincts. We're going to demonstrate the capacity for us all to resist many of these urges through experimentation.”

Scenarios raced through Louis' mind; him forced to succumb to the desires inherent to his gender, overpowered by an alpha, scented heavily and spoken to in alpha tongue and then forced to resist
his urge to submit. To him, the idea was unfathomable.

"The reason that you're the ones we're applying these tests to is so you can get a real knowledge of what we're working with so that the areas where we can make real changes are focused. We want you to experience the forces that apparently force us to acquiesce to our basic genetic urges so that you can truly appreciate the work being conducted and so that our research stays within this small group. To respond to your comment about bias: on the contrary, we believe that exposing you to these stimuli might initially force you to accept socially-held beliefs and could inhibit our work. After all of our past research though, as you've seen, we're confident that by the end of the four weeks you'll have gained full recognition of our ability to resist gender-specific instincts to a certain degree."

"What implications do you think that will have for the legal system? Do you think consent laws regarding scenting and responses to alpha ruts and omega heats be more rigid?" Louis asked.

Doctor May nodded vehemently as he spoke and smiled widely before answering. "From the work we’ve produced thus far I’m very optimistic that, with the correct mindset and drugs, we’ll be able to gain enormous control to overcome our natural instincts when they come into conflict with our actual desires. I think that once we’re able to prove this, the grey area in our legislation regarding how we can and cannot behave – especially surrounding consent – will change significantly," she said.

The alpha scanned her eyes briefly across the room. “Overwhelmed?” she asked to vigorous nodding. She laughed loudly before adding, “I’d be surprised if you weren’t – it’s a lot to take in. Do any of you have any questions."

“Yeah,” Luke, a beta with auburn hair and thick-rimmed glasses said. “Why us? Like, why use students to be the forerunners of the project when you have highly trained doctors and scientists at your disposal. I know Candling has great labs and technology to conduct the work but that surely can’t be why you’re working with us.”

“Don’t you see,” Harry interjected, slight impatience colouring his tone. “They're not just availing of the technological and medical equipment at Candling and all the resources here. They want to use students because we’re at an age where our hormone levels are fluctuating the most. If it can be proven that we can exercise control over our instincts then anyone can. Plus, we're part of the demographic that encourages this kind of social change to leaders and politicians who implement it. When we shout the government listens.”

Louis watched in admiration and with unconcealed pride in Harry as he spoke, reason and logic being the source of his argument. Doctor May, it seemed, was equally impressed. She thanked them for their time and reminded them to check their e-mail before dismissing the group and asking to speak with Harry alone.

Louis waited in the foyer of the Students’ Centre and way halfway through wrapping his scarf around his neck and lower face when Harry emerged.

“Oh good!” he exclaimed. “I thought you might have left already.” He watched as Louis shook his head beneath his inordinately long scarf and chuckled to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Louis asked, feigning indignation as Harry continued to observe his ministrations.

“Your scarf is twice as long as you are tall,” Harry stated before laughing uncontrollably.
“Not all of us are born with long stems like yours, Harry,” he replied but the alpha wasn’t paying attention, chest heaving and as reverberating honks of laughter escaped his mouth.

“I could probably tie you up with it it’s so long,” Harry teased before he realised the connotations of such a comment and clamped a hand over his mouth.

Louis’ face had turned a perfect scarlet shade and he resolutely avoided Harry’s eyes, peering instead at his shoes and then at the buckets of rainfall collecting in puddles outside.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that,” Harry rushed out nervously. “I mean if you’re not comfortable with that then I definitely shouldn’t have said it. But even if you did, you know, like that sort of thing I’d be more than happy to help you out but obviously, still, that was grossly inappropriate. I apologise, Louis.” With the omega’s eyes darting around the foyer, looking anywhere except at him, he craved his attention.

Louis willed his flaming cheeks to return to their normal shade. He nodded once before meeting Harry’s searching gaze, his inner omega exhorting him to propitiate the alpha. “It’s fine, Harry. I’m not uncomfortable, just wasn’t expecting that kind of comment at this time of the morning is all.” He coughed loudly, the noise echoing around the empty foyer. “Where are you off to next?”

“Back to my dormitory probably,” he sighed. “I’m required to give a talk to some of Candling’s benefactors. They want to know that the Students’ Union is spending their donations appropriately. We had a drop in funds when we informed them about omega admittance last term. Obviously, we’ve gotten huge funds thanks to the I.G.R.F but they’re centred on developing technological and scientific research equipment rather than money for extra-curricular events. I’ve got to use tomorrow to convince them to continue making financial contributions.”

Louis didn’t know how to respond to the knowledge that his mere presence at Candling had affected university fund distribution. He cast his eyes to the laces of his shoes. Though he knew that Harry hadn’t intended for him to feel like an inconvenience to his work, he felt slightly wounded by the comment as well as frustrated by the fact that allowing fifty omegas to attend the college could cause such outrage.

“Louis?” Harry said gently. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans in order to keep from reaching out to soothe the omega. “I know how you must be feeling at that news but just know that I’m trying my best to make sure we secure increased funds from the benefactors who actually support your presence. And trust me, everyone on the Students’ Union agrees that those are the kind of people we want supporting us financially.”

Louis smiled broadly at Harry’s words, the corners of his eyes crinkling as they met Harry’s concerned gaze. “Thanks for saying that, Harry. It’s really great that you’re so supportive of omega rights. Most people would have tried to retain those benefactors and strike some kind of deal with them in order to continue being supported.”

Harry shook his head adamantly. “Our philanthropists generally have power when it comes to making important decisions about the college and its political standpoint. In that case, they were overpowered by our student movement to allow omegas to come to Candling. Generally, though, they work closely with and advise the board of directors. Bunch of arrogant bureaucrats with money if you ask me.”

“Don’t tell them that tomorrow,” Louis teased. “I’m not sure London’s elite former Candling students would appreciate hearing that they’re arrogant.”

“They might appreciate the sentiment,” Harry mused. “I’d only be telling the truth, anyway.
Besides, I’m still stuck on how I’m going to convince them otherwise. I might have to resort to
insulting them if all else fails.”

Louis chuckled good-naturedly. “If you’re stuck you could always practice in front of me. I could
give you some tips on how you can convince them to continue funding the Students’ Union.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Would you? That would be such a good help. My Vice President is at home
because of family issues and she’s usually the one to listen to me practice for these kind of talks.”

Louis nodded happily, switching the shoulder holding his satchel. “Where do you want to practice?
The library?”

Harry shook his head. “All the private rooms are booked out.” He pulled his lower lip between his
fingers before shooting a cautious glance at Louis to gauge his reaction. “We could go to my
dormitory. There’s no rule forbidding omegas from entering the alpha residencies and Liam texted
me saying he’s fixing a heater or something so he won’t be in our dorm.”

Louis caught his bottom lip between his lip in a futile attempt to suppress a smile. “Okay,” he
agreed quietly. Thoughts of being alone with Harry, listening to his deep, unhurried voice raise an
issue of blatant omega discrimination rushed through his mind before he could conceive of the
dangers of such a situation. “Do you want to leave now?”

Harry looked like a young boy whose parents had just told him that Christmas morning had arrived
three months early. “Yes, of course,” he said, taking a step closer to the omega. He glanced at the
rain filling up the cracks on the pavement and spilling over onto the waterlogged grass. “We’ll
have to run. Doesn’t look like the rain is going to stop anytime soon.”

Louis nodded in agreement pulling a hat tightly over his ears and walking towards the door,
steeling himself for the downpour.

“Wait,” Harry called as Louis opened the door. “Just- before we leave I want to say that when we
arrive at the dormitory there will there might be a few people who’re, eh, surprised by you being
there. Try to ignore them if they say anything inappropriate. They’re trying to rile me up and get a
reaction out of me by teasing you. Omegas have been in our residence before just none with me.”

Louis took satisfaction from the fact that Harry had never brought an omega back to his dormitory
and smiled up at where his hand was placed beside his own, both standing on either side of the
doors. “Don’t worry about it, Harry. I deal with those kind of comments a lot,” he said, shrugging.

Harry stared at him with a slight frown.

“Is there something wrong?” Louis asked tentatively.

“I just wish that wasn’t the case,” he sighed. “You shouldn’t have to deal with that on top of
everything else.”

Before Louis could respond, the alpha had breezed past him to run across Connelly Place, leather
boots splashing water on his jeans. Louis gripped his satchel on his shoulder and rushed to catch up
with him, gracefully leaping over the puddles Harry ran through. They ran until their limbs hurt
and their breathing was laboured. Harry waited for him under a gathering of oak trees near the
omega dormitories, his hands gripping his knees and panting heavily. Louis caught his breath
beside him and they laughed at each other’s dampened hair and clothes.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Harry commented as a particularly strong gust of wind blew the rain
in their direction.
“Better keep going then. Your dormitory isn’t far,” Louis said, squaring his shoulders. He then shot Harry a mischievous grin. “Race you,” he called before sprinting past the rose garden and through the tall archway.

Harry squawked, not pausing to catch his breath before pursuing him through the scattering of trees and in the direction of the main alpha residence. His long, athletic legs gave him a distinct advantage but Louis raced ahead of him, periodically glancing back at Harry following closely behind him.

“If I win I get to choose where we go on our date!” Louis shouted above the howling wind.

“Absolutely not!” Harry called, shaking his head at the omega’s temerity. “I’ve already decided where I’m taking you!”

Louis arrived at the formidable Victorian-style dormitory building before him, skin searing hot and electrified. He didn’t consider the unsuspecting alphas that would be in the entrance hallway and opened the door impulsively to get inside before Harry did. He was met with four pairs of startled eyes and strong scents of tangerine and cloves, spearmint, freshly ground coffee beans and wood varnish. His eyes widened and he stuttered to justify his lone presence in the alpha building until the door behind him swung open rapidly to reveal a soaking Harry.

The alpha’s eyes jumped between Louis and the four students observing them curiously. “All right, Jamie?” Harry said, nodding at the broad-shouldered alpha with watery blue eyes. Harry stepped closer to the omega, noticing how his clothes clung to his skin, cheeks heated from the run. He tensed his shoulders and clenched his jaw, restraining himself from sweeping the omega away from the yearning eyes of the four alphas.

“I’m good, man. How’re you? And who’s your friend?”

Harry tried to pull his face into a smile but it turned into something more similar to a grimace as he gently pulled Louis’ elbow to lead him out of the entrance hall. “This way,” he instructed, bringing him up two flights of stairs.

Louis didn’t miss the way Harry had stepped slightly in front of him, blocking him from the view of the alphas. He felt conflicted, his inner omega satisfied that he had demonstrated such alpha-typical jealousy while his rational mind argued that Harry had no reason to act on his jealously when the four alphas hadn’t threatened to him or their relationship.

They reached the dark wooden door with a small sign reading ‘Harry Styles, Medicine. Liam Payne, Engineering.’ Harry pushed open the door to reveal a large dormitory painted light blue. Liam’s side of the room was decorated with minimal belongings, pristine clothes piled in neat, even piles in a chest of drawers. Louis found the contrast with Harry’s chaotic side of their dormitory amusing.

Harry had a mountain of warm blankets and pillows on his bed There were posters of old rock bands - ACDC, The Stone Roses, Sonic Youth - on the wall behind his bed and photographs pinned to a noticeboard depicting Harry at various different ages, constantly surrounded by friends and relishing being in the centre of attention. A tall bookcase was tucked into the corner of Harry’s side of the room, medicine books spilling over on every self except a secluded corner in the bottom self where a small, antique collection of fairy-tales stood proudly. He opened his mouth to comment on this when he noticed another alpha sitting cross-legged on Harry’s bed whose scent – fresh permanent marker – assaulted his senses.

“Gemma? What are you doing on my bed?” Harry asked, tone unimpressed as he crossed his arms
and glared at his sister.

“Waiting for you, obviously. You could pretend to be grateful, little brother, even if it was just to amuse me,” she said, though she didn’t seem affected by Harry’s greeting. “Hi Louis,” she added, magenta red lips tilting upwards into a reserved smile.

Louis smiled at her in return and watched Gemma’s eyes land on her brother’s similar green ones.

“Well, Louis and I were planning on practising a couple of - ”

“Can I talk to you for a moment, Harry?” she interrupted suddenly.

Harry gaped at him but, upon seeing the pointed look she had been directing at him he nodded. “It’s fine, we can stay here,” he said, indicating towards Louis.

Gemma looked like she was going to protest but eventually sighed and walked directly towards her brother. “The meeting tomorrow is being held at the Sharpenstone Hotel, right?” she muttered under her breath, briefly glancing at Louis who busied himself rifling through his satchel in search of absolutely in particular but making a copious amount of noise in an attempt to show her that he wasn’t eavesdropping.

Harry followed her gaze before nodding. “Yeah, why?”

She sighed deeply, returning an urgent look to Harry. “It’s dad. He’s going to be there tomorrow. I called his secretary to ask about fee payments for this term and overheard her talking to someone else about arranging a car to drive him there.” She fixed him with a calculating look. “You’re old enough to make your own decisions, Harry, but don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

Harry’s face had become impassive and his entire upper body had tensed noticeably, shoulders straining underneath his wet clothes. “I can’t make a promise I won’t keep,” he said through tight lips.

Gemma exhaled defeatedly. “I didn’t expect anything else. Send him my best wishes.”

“Don’t joke about this, Gemma,” he said sternly.

She looked appropriately apologetic and nodded once at him before turning towards Louis, who had begun typing a message to Zayn to tell him about his acceptance for the Gender Research Programme. “It was good to see you again, Louis,” she said sincerely. “Take care of my little brother, alright?”

Louis found it endearing that she referred to the man with a twenty centimetre height advantage and a commanding alpha aura as her little brother. “It was good to see you too,” he said, toying with his jacket nervously at the same time Harry indignantly said, “I don’t need taking care of, Gemma.”

She glanced between the two, amused smirk dancing over her features before she shared a meaningful look with Harry and left the room. Heavy silence permeated the dormitory.

“A one year age gap must have made you two pretty close,” Louis commented in an attempt to restart their conversation.

“One year? No, Gemma’s three years older than me. And we’re definitely not close, despite what she likes to tell everyone else,” he said. Upon seeing Louis’ curious expression, he clarified. “She’s a senior and I’m in third year because I changed university after spending a couple of years in
Manchester. I started at Candling as in first year when I was twenty.”

“Why did you change university?”

Harry’s gaze fell to the soft rug beneath his feet where he shuffled nervously. "Let's get practising for tomorrow, shall we?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading :)
“Try that last bit again,” Louis encouraged. “Maybe you could mention alternative sources of funding.” Everything he said was spoken like a gentle suggestion rather than an order, something that was typical of omega behaviour.

“Right,” Harry said, nodding and flicking back a page in his notebook. When he spoke again, his voice had adopted the kind of commanding timbre necessary to engage and reason with alphas. Louis tried to suppress the feeling such a tone prompted, a warm bloom that began at the centre of his chest and extended outwards, pushing him to submit to the alpha’s assertive voice.

“As head of the Students’ Union and the official representative of Candling students, I consider it my duty to fund our initiatives and co-curricular activities, no matter the source of income. Naturally, receiving a reliable amount each semester from you all - our benefactors – would be ideal.”

Louis nodded and smiled supportively at him from his position perched on Harry’s bed. He shifted his weight backwards to sit cross-legged, the soft white material of the bedsheets brushing his bare feet.

“I should inform you, however, that I represent the needs and desires of the students, not the university professors or board of directors,” Harry continued, voice dynamic and in direct contrast to his usual distinctive drawl. “Me and my team on the Students’ Union as well as in the alpha society will not hesitate to continue our work with or without your support. We require financial donations to fund exchange programmes, monthly debates, information evenings and inter-gender trips abroad, all of which are vital to ensure Candling students receive a well-rounded education and learn about topics outside of their course material. With or without you, we will succeed in creating an active body to represent students so I strongly advise you not to be like our last group of benefactors and, instead, embrace the progressive changes taking place here.”

He threw his notebook on the bed triumphantly and Louis noticed the alpha’s aggressive scrawl covering the faint lines on the pages. He clasped his hands around his ankles and looked up at Harry’s hopeful stare. It was times like these that he fully appreciated their height difference.

“So?” Harry asked. “How was I?”

“Amazing, Harry,” he replied softly. “So strong in your argument and convincing. You’d make me want to donate money, that’s for sure.”

Harry turned his back on him and stalked towards Liam’s bed, tangling a hand through his curls frustratedly. “Yes, but you’re an omega. Of course you’d say something like that,” he muttered.

Louis eyed him cautiously, smile dropping from his face. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked defensively.

Harry looked up at him, noticing the omega’s crossed arms and waved him off. “Nothing, it’s just you’re far more likely to praise my speech than the alphas at tomorrow’s meeting are. It’s in your nature to agree with alphas in general because you don’t want to cause anger or upset.” He walked over to where Louis sat and picked up his notebook. He began rifling through the pages
impatiently and searching for something, anything that would give him a better indication on how to approach a group of traditional alphas.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t lecture me on my own gender, Harry. It may be part of who I am to try to resolve arguments but that doesn’t mean I can’t have my own opinions and defend myself when necessary,” Louis said coldly after a moment of silence, the sound of flicking pages filling the space between them. He was thankful for the first time that the alpha didn’t emit a scent that would distract him and compel him more fully to succumb to his instincts. He knew, however, that his own scent was becoming thicker, encircling them both and reaching to seep into every corner of the room.

Harry looked him directly, eyes sincere and lips thin as he drew them into a straight line. “Sorry,” he said, shaking his head at his own behaviour. “That came out wrong. I didn’t mean to sound so patronising. I’m just saying that I need to convince the alphas tomorrow that we’re worth investing money in and they will have high standards for me.”

“And I don’t?” It went against every instinct in his body to question the alpha rather than try to resolve the situation. He longed to return to their previous conversation, where Harry would practice a point and Louis would praise his work. He knew, however, that it was important to show Harry he wasn’t docile and agreeable when someone made incorrect assumptions about his gender.

“Of course you do, I never said that you didn’t,” Harry protested, quickly becoming impatient. Louis’ determination to test him vexed the alpha. He forced himself to ignore the voice in his head whispering that Louis should know his place and acquiesce to his desire to end the argument. The omega’s scent was all-consuming and he struggled to concentrate, eyes falling closed and nostrils flaring as he spat out a response with little consideration for the effect it might have on Louis. “You’re just inclined to agree with me because you’re programmed to please alphas.”

“Programmed to please alphas?” Louis said incredulously, rising to his feet and staring up at him with a determined gaze. His reservation about contesting Harry’s comments evaporated completely, replaced instead by a sense of anger and lingering disappointment as Harry voiced his inner alpha’s perception of omegas.

Harry’s eyes startled open as he realised what he had just let slip out of his mouth. “Fuck, Louis, I didn’t mean -”

“Excuse me for not kissing the ground you walk on, Harry, but believe it or not my life goal isn’t to please knotheads like you,” he spat, rising to look determinedly at him. “After everything we’ve discussed about omega rights you don’t think I can resist my tendencies when something matters or I don’t agree with an alpha? Isn’t that what the whole research we’re supposed to be doing together is about?”

“Louis, I really didn’t mean to say that, you have to believe me,” Harry said desperately, closing the gap between them and reaching out to the omega. “Fuck, I know it’s no excuse but I’m just so stressed about tomorrow. I wasn’t even thinking properly. I don’t really believe that.”

Louis stared at him resolutely, eyes calculating and expression unreadable. “I’ve met enough alpha knotheads in my life and I thought that you weren’t like them, Harry,” he whispered.

“I’m not, Louis, I promise. You know I don’t actually think that,” he said, placing his hand on the omega’s chin tentatively. Louis flinched and Harry felt his chest tighten. “Please, Louis, you have to believe that I don’t actually believe that bullshit.”

Louis stared at him, assessing for any signs of dishonesty. “Say it,” he whispered.
“What?”

“I want to hear you say exactly what you don’t believe.”

Harry sighed and agreed to the omega’s request. His instincts were inclined to resist, to show the omega that he was in charge and that he wouldn’t take orders from an omega. He gritted his teeth and quashed his urges, willing himself not to breathe in Louis’ scent deeply. “I don’t believe that it’s your aim or any omega’s aim to please alphas. You’re more than capable of overcoming your biological urges.”

Louis nodded once, satisfied with his response. “Thank you,” he huffed. “Now, I’m going to leave you because I think you need to take a break from practising. You shouldn’t beat yourself up about tomorrow. If you’re frustrated and angry while talking to them, the alphas won’t respond well.”

“I know that,” Harry said gently, removing his hand from Louis’ chin and dropping it to his side. “I’ll try and control my frustration.” He stared imploringly into his eyes, willing him to understand. “I really am sorry, Louis. I don’t know what came over me.”

Louis shook his head. “I understand. It happens to all of us, really.” He thought for a moment before a small smile coloured his features. “Just don’t tell Doctor May about your little outburst or she’ll have you categorised as an aggressive alpha and start the tests on you immediately,” he teased.

Harry’s chuckles rang around the room. “You really test my limits sometimes, you know that?” he said, sigh of frustration only partially feigned. As the tension between them began to dissipate, he became increasingly aware of Louis’ potent scent lingering in the room.

“And yet you’re the one who asked me out, not the other way around,” Louis said, bending down to pick up his shoes.

Harry’s eyes lit up as he remembered their date, scheduled for the following Tuesday night, the only time Harry didn’t have a night shift. “I’m going to make it up to you then,” he declared. “I promise.”

He looked up from where he sat on the carpet tying his laces. “I look forward to that,” he said, glancing up from beneath his eyelashes. “Where are you taking me, anyway?”

Harry shook his head, mischievous smile spreading across his face and eyes shining with mirth. “I’m not telling,” he sing-songed. “It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises,” he grumbled, though the look on his face suggested otherwise. “Can you at least give me a clue?”

Harry hummed thoughtfully before agreeing. “Okay, it’s in a place where we’ll be doing this activity thing. And there will be food, too.”

“So, a restaurant?”

“Sort of.” Harry smiled at him conspiratorially. “I think you’ll like it.”

“I’m not sure I trust you, Styles,” Louis said, placing his hands on his hips and scrutinising him.

“Oh, you definitely shouldn’t.”
“And you forgave him?”

They were sitting side-by-side, the newly fixed radiator warming their backs, with cups of steaming tea clutched in their hands. When Louis had arrived home from the alpha dormitory that evening Zayn had immediately noticed his distracted smile and the slight slouch of his shoulders beneath his damp clothes. Louis had told him the story of his time with Harry and Zayn had listened attentively, making noises of sympathy throughout the telling.

Louis sighed. “It wasn’t as bad as I’m making it out. I honestly think he just let his inner alpha take him over for a minute. He became so tense; pacing the room and clenching his fists. I’ve never seen him like that.”

“I still can’t believe he’d say something like that, though,” Zayn said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Louis privately thought that Harry’s unexpected remarks were connected to Gemma’s mention of their father coming to the meeting with prospective university benefactors the next day. He hadn’t mentioned that to Zayn, however, fully aware that the topic was sensitive and that Harry always avoided questions about his father.

“I know,” he sighed, blowing gently on his tea and watching small ripples form. “I think he’s just under a lot of pressure at the moment. When I see him on Tuesday the meeting will have finished and he’ll be able to relax.”

…

The next three days passed in a flurry of lectures, assignment deadlines and a conclusive omega society meeting. By Tuesday evening Louis’ thoughts were distracted and he closed his European Union Law book with a heavy sigh. Though he had an hour until he would have to leave for his date, he decided to begin getting ready, anticipation growing low in his gut.

He took a long, soothing shower, washing his hair thoroughly with scent-free shampoo. He shaved his face until it felt completely smooth before rinsing and stepping out of the shower and wrapping an enormous white towel around him. He lay on his bed and rubbed moisturising cream into his skin carefully, relishing the feel of his skin beneath his touch.

The door swung open without forewarning and Zayn hurried inside, ignoring Louis’ (amusingly loud) gasp of surprise and rushing to crouch beside the heater between their beds.

“Jesus, Zayn. Knock next time, mate. You almost gave me a heart attack,” he said, grasping his towel.

Zayn looked at his smooth, moisturised skin and soft hair with inquisitive eyes. “You preparing to bond with Harry or something?”

It was a common pre-bonding ritual for alphas and omegas to prepare their bodies for each other in order to present themselves in their most perfect state before consummating their relationship. Bonding was a ritualistic process, following steps which dated back to the first civilisations, though many had been adapted to suit modern times and attitudes. The central ideas, however, of holding bonding to great importance and combining the untainted scents of alpha and omega, remained the same.

“What?” Louis spluttered. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous, Zayn. We’re going on a date, that’s all.”

“Where to?” he asked, blowing lightly to heat his hands.
Louis faltered. “I’m not sure,” he said slowly. “Harry said that it’s a surprise.”

Zayn eyed him curiously. “Give me Harry’s number,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“Give me his number,” he repeated patiently. “I want to know where you’re going in case something happens and you can’t contact me.”

“Oh! Yeah, of course,” he rushed out, passing Zayn his phone immediately. Louis watched him type a carefully-worded text to the alpha and smiled at his roommate. “Thanks for that, Z. I really appreciate you being so concerned about me.”

Zayn glanced up at him and nodded, shrugging slightly. “I know that you’d do the same for me, Lou.”

Louis dried his hair with a smaller towel before walking towards their shared wardrobe. “Will I need to anytime soon? Got any dates coming up that I should know about.”

Zayn stood up with an enigmatic smile, walking towards Louis and taking the jumper out of his hands to replace it with a light lilac button-down. “We’ll see. For now at least my sole concern is this Visual Art Project, nothing and nobody else.”

Louis nodded in agreement and slipped on the shirt before shuffling around the room with his black jeans mid-thigh until he tugged them over his hips. He threw a blanket and Zayn when he heard soft chuckling at the sound of him jumping around the dormitory. Louis glanced at his reflection briefly before sighing. “I’m ready. Did Harry text you back?”

Zayn nodded. “Immediately after I texted him. He’s head over heels for you, man.”

Louis turned his gaze away from Zayn to hide the blush blooming on his cheeks. “Where did he say he’s taking me for the date?”

“It’s a surprise, Louis,” Zayn tutted teasingly. “For Harry to know and you to find out.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Fine. But if we end up at an open mic night or slam poetry contest or something then I’m blaming you for not warning me in advance.”

“I don’t think even Harry would force you to listen to slam poetry,” Zayn chuckled. “You should head soon, though. Judging from his eager texting it sounds like Harry’s already rearing to go.”

Louis nodded, suddenly feeling the onslaught of nerves return as he pulled a jacket on. “Wish me luck,” he said, biting his lip.

“You won’t need it. But good luck!”

He closed the door gently and trotted downstairs, opening the door to a strong gust of wind. He made his way across the university grounds, through the old archway and passed Connelly Place until he reached the bus stop. He saw Harry observing at him, evidently having noticed his scent approaching him. He wore suede jacket over a white shirt with vertical blue stripes. The shirt billowed and gathered in the wind, revealing the top of his expansive upper chest. Previously perturbed by the cold, Louis began to feel uncomfortably hot beneath his heavy winter jacket.

“You’re early,” Harry noted happily as Louis stopped three feet away from him.
“And you’re earlier,” he countered.

Harry shrugged, unbothered. “You ready to go?”

“Yes, I forget where we’re going again for some reason, though,” he said thoughtfully, pulling his lower lip between his thumb and index finger. “Might just ask this nice man where the next bus is heading,” he said, making his way towards a burly beta with greying hair leaning on the lamppost.

“Nice try, sweetheart,” Harry said, smirking at the his antics as he easily grabbed the back of his collar to pull him back towards him. His heartbeat faltered when Louis compliantly fell into his touch. The ease with which he handled him prompted thoughts to flash through his mind; Louis listening to him and following his instructions, him praising Louis and allowing Harry to have his way with him. “You’ll just have to be patient.”

Louis turned to face him and crossed his arms, raising a mischievous eyebrow. “Maybe I don’t want to be patient.”

Harry had to stamp on his own foot to distract himself from the thoughts flooding his brain this time. He had little indication of Louis’ bedroom preferences, however, and didn’t want to distress the omega by promising him a spanking if he wasn’t patient. “I guess this will teach you a lesson in forbearance, then.”

After three and a half minutes of Louis’ pleading, Harry eventually acquiesced, handing him a leaflet of their destination.

“Couples’ cooking classes at the renowned, Michelin Star Sherrythornton Restaurant’,’” he read, eyes widening at the prospect of eating at a such a lavish place. “You really shouldn’t have booked such an expensive place, Harry,” he said chastised gently. “And besides: we’re not a couple.”

“We’re not a couple yet,” Harry corrected, reaching to pull Louis’ hand and waving his other hand at the approaching bus with the other.

They climbed aboard and rushed upstairs to sit at the front to admire the sights on the bustling London streets as they passed slowly through early evening traffic.

“And it’s not just cooking classes, either,” Harry revealed excitedly. “After we each cook a meal we’re going to try each other’s in the pitch dark restaurant. It’s the main attraction of the Sherrythornton, aside from the amazing food, of course.”

Louis was at a loss for words. “That all sounds great,” he said, voicing his appreciation, “but I really should warn you that I’m an atrocious chef.”

Harry laughed loudly before turning to see the earnest look on his face. He waved him off good-naturedly. “I’m sure you’re not that bad.”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing you’ll be eating in the dark otherwise you probably wouldn’t even come within ten feet of my concoction,” he said darkly.

“Well, I’m not an awful chef myself,” Harry said modestly. “So if your food really is that bad – not that I’m saying it will be – then we can share mine.”

Louis smiled at him and subtly moved closer to Harry, their hands brushing momentarily before he clasped them tightly in his lap. His eyes darted around the carriage nervously and he resolutely avoided Harry’s amused gaze.
“Do you want to hold my hand, omega?” he asked gently.

Louis abruptly turned to meet his eyes, cheeks tinted rosy pink and lips parted in surprise. “Oh! Yes. I mean, if you want to, of course,” he said, voice unusually high-pitched. He felt guilty, as though he had been caught stealing one of Harry’s touches.

“Don’t be shy, Louis. You always get so flustered whenever we touch,” Harry said with the ease of someone commenting on the weather. He locked his finger with Louis’, savouring the feeling of capturing his dainty hands in his own.

Louis’ mouth closed and he smiled serenely up at him. They talked amicably for the rest of the half hour journey, topics of discussion ranging from assignments and Harry’s work at the hospital to Louis’ football and their shared appreciation for the ideal cup of tea – strong, splash of milk, no sugar. Harry was relaxed, laughing freely and caressing the back of his hand with his thumb whenever he made a joke. Louis took this to mean that his meeting with the benefactors was successful but he didn’t want to change the course of their discussion, deciding instead to raise the topic only if Harry indicated he was ready to discuss it.

They arrived directly outside the tall, redbrick building complete with baskets of pink camellias hanging out of the windows. Harry led him inside the building, both sighing contentedly when they reached the warm foyer and joined the queue.

“We’re here for the cooking class and subsequent meal,” Harry said to the omega waitress.

“The reservation is under what name, Sir?”

“Styles.”

Louis smiled at her as she looked between them and breathed in the scent of bubbling caramel she emanated. She returned the smile, a common gesture of comforting support that omegas tended to share with one another, particularly in alpha-dominated environments.

“Right this way,” she said, leading them through a long corridor until they arrived at the restaurant kitchen. “You’re the last couple, I believe so prepare to get started right away. Chef Bastianini will be instructing you today.”

They entered the room and their coats were removed from their shoulders and replaced by aprons before they could register what had happened. Harry thought that Louis looked particularly cute in a frilly white apron with a small bow tied at his waist. Louis thought that Harry looked a bit like a walking polka dot explosion with good hair.

“Welcome to our September Cookery Class!” a small beta with a balding head and a thick Italian accent – Chef Bastianini – called from the opposite side of the kitchen.

Louis and Harry thanked him and were promptly brought to their work station beside a beta couple with matching sour expressions.

“We are so delighted that you all could join us,” he said to the group of ten couples, most of whom were decades older than Harry and Louis.

“That’ll be us in about fifty years,” Harry said, nudging him gently as he nodded towards an elderly couple smiling serenely at each other and completely ignoring Chef Bastianini’s instructions of preparing their work stations.

“Today we are going to make seafood ravioli with a lemon breadcrumb sprinkling – a speciality
here at the Sherrythornton. Now, as your partner will be trying your food in the dark he or she will have no indication whatsoever about what your dish looks like. As such, we will be focusing on taste, taste, taste!” he said merrily, punctuating his words with three clangs on a frying pan on the surface beside him. “Understood?”

There was a chorus of approval and Harry whispered “taste, taste, taste!” in Louis’ ear, prompting him to collapse into fit of silent giggles.

“Let’s get started. First you are going to apply an egg coating to the pasta. Then we’ll begin preparing the sage and rosemary to add to the breadcrumb mixture before we roast that at a low heat. Everyone crack an egg white into your bowl and begin applying that to the long strips of pasta al dente.”

The following forty-five minutes continued like that; Chef Bastianini gave an instruction and Harry followed along diligently, even adding his own personal touches to the recipe, while Louis struggled to tell the difference between a whisk and a slotted spoon.

“How are you getting on, Louis?” he asked, sliding across their work surface to peer into a large pot which had begun steaming profusely.

“Very well, thank you,” he replied stiffly, holding a bowl of breadcrumbs close to his chest and stirring the contents unsurely.

“You sure, darling? I could give you a little help if you needed it,” he said kindly, leaning on the steel countertop to peer into the suspicious thick liquid in one of the smaller pots.

“There’s no need, Harry, honestly. I’m handling it all perfectly well,” he replied firmly.

“We should get a kitchen like this one, Tony,” a beta woman sighed loudly, admiring the furnishing and appliances in the restaurant kitchen. She turned to her husband with an expression of annoyance. “My kitchen is far too small and yours has such a horrible colour palette that I can hardly stand to be in there longer than a minute.”

Harry and Louis raised eyebrows at each other, noticing the beta couple speak for the first time that evening. They had both spent the first half of the cookery lesson exchanging dirty looks with each other.

“Honey, I told you already that you’re moving in with me. I can’t afford a bigger place at the minute,” the male beta said impatiently, washing a bowl vigorously.

“I should’ve married you’re brother,” she huffed. “At least the lawyer of the family could earn a decent income.”

Louis and Harry exchanged a look, eyes wide with disbelief and faces contorting as they attempted to suppress amused smiles. Louis busied himself with removing a tray of crusty haddock from the oven while Harry inspected a dark liquid simmering on the stove, periodically glancing at the couple.

The male beta made an irritated noise. “Well, why don’t you work, then? It may come as a surprise to you, princess, that most couples actually share their income.”

“I have better things to do than work, Tony. I need to dedicate time to myself. God knows you certainly don’t,” she said, glaring at his navy blue suit with distaste written across her features.

Louis pretended to be busy arranging the pots and pans as he and Harry overheard the betas’
conversation, occasionally exchanging glances before quickly looking away to avoid bursting out in laughter.

He threw his hands in the air in annoyance. “Would you stop being so shallow for just one minute or are you incapable of looking past someone’s appearance.”

“They’re a happy couple and they both manage to dress well,” she remarks, nodding her head at Harry and Louis. “I bet they have a far more interesting sex life than we do too.”

Louis quickly looked away, face burning a fantastic magenta at the comment. Harry, in typical alpha fashion, grinned in self-satisfaction. He watched the male beta turn around to find him looking directly at them. Harry raised his chin and stared at the male beta, refusing to avoid confrontation and keenly ready to defend the beta’s assertion.

The male beta eyed the pair but didn’t reply, unnerved by Harry’s glare. His nose twitched, searching for the alpha’s absent scent. The fact that he could only distinguish the omega’s alluring scent worried him further, theories on Harry’s true scent consuming his thoughts. “Let it go, darling,” he said frustratedly, returning his attention to his wife.

“Alright everyone!” the chef called, clapping his hands loudly. “We’re going to begin plating up in five minutes’ time. Make sure you include only the ingredients that have been fully cooked. We don’t want any complaints filed for seafood poisoning.”

Harry shot Louis a pleading look. Louis resolutely ignored him, turning his attention to the pasta that was rapidly breaking apart in the pot of boiling water.

Once they had finished adding the final touches to their respective dishes – garnish adorning Harry’s exquisite, creamy linguine and a precariously-perched, undercooked shrimp on top of Louis’ pasta – their aprons were removed and they were escorted out of the kitchen.

“That was actually a lot of fun,” Louis exclaimed. “I definitely learned a lot, at least.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Harry joked, though he was internally worried about what Louis had managed to create out of minimal ingredients.

They were led into the main restaurant by a visually impaired beta and were immediately plunged into darkness. They heard chatter from the other groups seated around them but the seemingly unsourced noise was extremely disconcerting. Louis stopped in his tracks and Harry bumped into him from behind.

“Are you okay, Louis?” he asked, concerned.

“Sorry, yes. Just a bit darker than I’m used to.”

Harry chuckled and placed his hands on Louis’ hips carefully, thumb dipping into the curve of his waist.

Louis heard his own breath hitch.

“I’ll guide you, okay? I can kind of make out the waiter in this lighting anyway,” Harry lied. He managed to lead him to their table and successfully avoided any obstacles of patrons seated nearby.

“I’ll be right out with your meals,” the waiter said as they sat down at a circular table with a heavy white cloth. The clinking of glasses, subdued talking and sounds of a piano player fiddling with the keys filled the room.
Louis laughed giddily. “This is all a bit strange, isn’t it? I can’t sense your scent nor can I even see you. I feel like I’m talking to myself.”

Harry laughed but he knew it sounded forced. Louis had broached the topic he was most keen to avoid. Though he hadn’t phrased it as a direct question about his lack of scent, he was determined to distract the omega before he could question him. “Well, I can see you just fine,” he boasted. “Superior alpha sight and all.”

“That’s a myth, Harry, and don’t try to convince me otherwise,” Louis chuckled. “You and I both know that you can’t see a thing.”

“Okay, okay, aside from me being able to see you,” he said, ignoring Louis’ scoff, “I want to hear more about you, without any mention of work or anything. We do enough of that at the alpha society and OSoc meetings. Tell me about you.”

Louis instantly understood the benefit of complete darkness as he felt a blush rise to her cheeks. “Okay,” he drew out nervously. “What exactly do you want to know aside from the fact that I’m a terrible chef?”

Harry chortled loudly. “Tell me about growing up in Yorkshire.”

Louis nodded in agreement before he realised that Harry couldn’t see him clearly. “Sure. Well, I grew up with just my parents – they’re betas – and I’m an only child. Pretty sure I was too high-maintenance for them to want another one,” he chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Went to this great omega-tolerant school in Doncaster and mostly had an amazing childhood. It’s been hard to keep in touch with my friends from home but we’ve all been making an effort.”

He decided to omit mentioning his ex-boyfriend of his final year at school, an intelligent but dismissive alpha who loved Louis like a prized possession. Louis had realised how he had viewed him after six months of blissful dating and avoided the alpha’s company wherever he could, arguing that he had to focus on his final exams. It had ended soon afterwards with a fantastically dramatic fight between the two when Louis announced that he was leaving for London.

Their dishes arrived, piping hot and delicious (at least in the case of the meal placed in front of Louis). They thanked the waiter before he left them to continue their conversation.

“That sounds great and I’m sure- wait, beta parents?” Harry’s incredulous voice filled the space between them.

Louis made a noise of affirmation around a bite of linguini pasta.

“Wasn’t expecting that,” Harry said, twisting his fork in the dish in search of something that resembled pasta in texture.

“You weren’t? Why not?”

“It’s just- you’re so educated on omega rights and social justice between the genders,” he said, shrugging. “I guess I expected you to have an omega parent who was outspoken about those things too.”

“You’re not wrong,” Louis said fairly. “Both my parents have always been supportive of my choices and made sure I took advantage of every opportunity afforded to me, despite my gender. Despite some peoples’ reservations about beta parents not being suitable to raise omega or alpha children they both informed themselves on the intricacies of my gender when they found out that they were having an omega son.”
“They sound like great parents,” he said through a smile, though his thoughts returned to his father and he quickly shook his head to distract himself. “If I had a beta son or daughter I’d definitely try to do the same; learn more about their biology and specific needs so that they felt completely accepted at home. I think that’s really important.”

Louis stilled his movements and looked straight ahead at pitch darkness, longing to see Harry’s expression. The mood between them had shifted and Louis felt Harry’s tone change as he approached personal territory. “I know you’ll be an amazing parent, Harry,” he said emphatically. “I could tell from the way you treated your patients at the hospital.”

Harry’s heart fluttered at the memory of Louis taking care of his patients; playing with them, reading stories and organising finger painting activities. “So will you,” he said easily. “Molly and Albert keep asking for you, by the way. They want to know when you’re coming to visit them again. I actually think they were disappointed to see that it was just me last week.”

“Surely nobody could be disappointed to see the world renowned Doctor Styles and have him take their blood samples,” he teased.

“Hey! It’s my job to be the bad guy poking them with needles and they still manage to love me. The nurses and beta carers in the Nursery get to calm them down and soothe them afterwards,” he said defensively.

“I’m only teasing, Harry. I bet you’re a great doctor in training. Do you think you’ll stay in London once you’re fully qualified?”

Harry considered his question carefully, taking a tentative bite of squid coated in burnt breadcrumbs. “I haven’t decided yet. I’d love to travel a bit, maybe join Médecins Sans Frontières for a year or two. I’m a home bird at heart, though so I’d probably end up coming back here. I love this city.”

Louis hummed in agreement. He patted his stomach contently and passed Harry the rest of his enormous meal to finish so that he wouldn’t have to suffer through another bite of his own. “I don’t really consider London home yet but I think I’m starting to,” he said slowly. “Do you ever miss Manchester?”

“No,” Harry said. He cleared his throat noisily after taking a number of successive bites of the creamy pasta dish. “London was more of a home after the first week I moved here than Manchester has ever been.”

Louis smiled sadly, reaching across the table to place his hand on top of Harry’s own. Instead a pointed object stabbed his finger and he gasped sharply, a whimper escaping his lips.

“Fuck, Louis. What’s wrong?” Harry asked, raising from his seat and clumsily rounding the table, muttering an apology to a waiter he bumped into. He knelt beside him and placed a consoling hand on his knee.

“Think I hurt my finger on a knife or something,” he gritted out, clutching his stinging finger.

Harry’s blood boiled as his inner alpha roared at him to find the source of Louis’ pain. “This place is a fucking hazard,” he muttered, tone instantly altering. “What do they think they’re doing giving us sharp cutlery to use in the fucking dark?”

“It’s fine, Harry. I should have been more careful,” Louis said, prying Harry’s firm hand from his knee.
“No. This is not your fault.” He raised his voice as he felt someone pass beside him. “I need to speak to your manager,” he demanded.

“You really don’t have to do this, Harry,” Louis pleaded. “I just need to bandage it up.”

“I’m going to do that now, darling,” Harry replied, helping him to his feet.

They followed the startled waiter into a small adjacent room which was thankfully bathed in bright light. Louis fell into the chair tucked in the corner of the room and rubbed the back of his neck in a gesture of self-soothing. Harry recognised it immediately. When omegas became particularly upset or distressed they yearned for their alpha even if they weren’t in a relationship. To fill in the sense of longing omegas caressed the place where their bond mark was located in order to placate themselves and alleviate their pain. Harry yearned to touch Louis’ bond mark and embrace him tightly against his chest.

“I’ll grab you a first aid kit, Sir,” the beta said hurriedly. “My sincerest apologies about what happened.”

Harry felt his hostility towards the man return and merely glared at him as though he had personally stabbed Louis. When the waiter returned he snatched the kit from him. “I’m a doctor, I can take care of him myself,” he growled. “Do as I asked and bring your manager to me.”

The man thrust the first aid kit at Harry’s chest and scampered away.

He knelt beside Louis again and examined his finger gently. The knife had punctured the delicate skin of pad of his finger and, though the cut was shallow, it produced a nauseating amount of blood. He quickly held the finger upright and cleaned the wound, muttering reassurances to Louis whose eyes were averted, unable to stomach the sight of the cut. He applied an antiseptic clotting cream and wrapped a tight bandage around his finger. “I’ve finished, darling. You can look now.”

Louis turned to meet Harry’s concerned gaze and smiled, admiring the carefully applied bandage. “Thank you, Harry.” He sighed heavily. “I’m sorry about this. Didn’t mean to ruin our date like this; you had planned it so perfectly.”

Harry placed a finger to his mouth to silence him. “You didn’t ruin anything. I’ll always be happy to take care of you.”

Before Louis could splutter a response the door swung open to reveal a tall, round-faced alpha with a dense moustache flanked by two waiters wearing similarly worried expressions. “I was informed that you wish to file a complaint, Sir,” the manager said rigidly.

Harry rose to his feet instinctively and squared his shoulders, demeanour changing to comply with social expectations for inter-alpha conduct. He felt an all-consuming desire to rip the man’s throat out, to tear him apart for hurting Louis.

Louis scrambled to his feet and tugged at his shirt to recapture his attention. “Harry,” he pleaded. “Please don’t. I really don’t want you to complain; it’ll just anger you further and upset me.”

Harry glowered at the manager until he felt Louis’ deft fingertips brush his hip as he tugged his shirt. He tilted his head to meet Louis’ imploring gaze and he felt a sense of clarity rush through him, enlightening and revealing. He had allowed his inner alpha to direct his aggressive behaviour and he heard it in the back of his mind, jeering him on to confront the manager. He physically shook his head to free himself of the taunts and felt guilt pang low in his stomach at the look of desperation written across Louis’ features.
“No, that’s alright, thank you,” he said stoically, raising his head to meet the manager’s questioning gaze. He clenched his fists and dug his shoes into the floor, muscles tensing as he rejected the low voice of his inner alpha viciously whispering his inadequacy. “We don’t wish to file a formal complaint but I would highly recommend you warn your guests about the cutlery before they dine here.”

“Of course, Sir,” the manager responded automatically. He noticed Harry’s rigid stance and the set of his jaw but didn’t comment on the restraint it evidently took to quash his desire to incite conflict and act on his anger. “We do apologise for what happened to your omega. Can we help you with anything else? Your meal will come free of charge, naturally.”

They were accompanied to the reception area and handed two bags of complementary raspberry cheesecake. The whole time Louis whispered small words of gratitude into his ear, highly aware of how much self-control and restraint were required of alphas to overcome their natural instincts. Harry’s mind remained preoccupied, however. Memories flashed in front of his eyes and obscured Louis’ sympathetic eyes. A cloud of panic lowered around him and he felt himself losing control, lines between his rational conscience and inner alpha blurring.

“How is my patient doing?” Louis’ eyes prickled with tears as he looked up at his vacant gaze as they waited at the bus stop.

His ears registered the omega’s pleading voice and he looked directly at him. “Sorry. Lost in my head for a minute there.” He noticed Louis still holding up his bandaged finger to keep the blood from flowing out of the wound. “How is my patient doing?”

Louis laughed lightly. “I’m much better now,” he assured. He kept a watchful gaze on Harry but he seemed to have emerged from his rumination. “We should head back now,” he said, pointing towards the darkening sky and the threatening clouds.

Harry tried to hide his disappointment and settled on nodding in acquiescence. He needed to clear his thoughts of Louis. He needed to clear his thoughts of the first person to reawaken his inner alpha in over two years.

Chapter End Notes

I’d love to hear your feedback on this chapter. What do you think of Harry’s character and his past? Do you think Louis was too forgiving? Thank you all for reading!
When he arrived home, famished and exhausted after a long evening of seminars, Louis was greeted with a dormitory room which looked like a small bomb had exploded in a clothes shop.

He stared in astonishment at the items of clothing - both his own, Zayn’s and an enormous amount said roommate had bought from various charity shops around London – which covered every available surface. Zayn had even taken to erecting a clothing line hanging from his bedpost to the top of the wardrobe to hang clothes that were prone to wrinkling. The only piece of furniture without clothes draped over in or piled on top of it was the tall bookcase in the corner of the room which was suspiciously bare.

Upon inspection, as he ventured further into the room, Louis saw that many of the clothes consisted of undergarments. They ranged from old-fashioned cotton Long Johns to prurient red panties. A precarious each pile beside the door had neatly folded items with a piece of ripped paper reading ‘Ireland’ resting on top.

“Hey, Lou. How was your lecture?”

Louis startled at the voice and glared incredulously at where Zayn had emerged from behind rack of dresses hung on the curtain pole. His hair was dishevelled, shirt covered in sequins and his scent was masked slightly by the intoxicating green paint covering his hands and forearms.

“What the hell, Zayn?” Louis said, gesturing wildly at the mess around him. “You know we’re not leaving until tomorrow morning, right? Where did you put the clothes I’m bringing to Ireland?”

Zayn looked appropriately sheepish as his scanned the room. “I hadn’t realised it was this bad, actually,” he said, itching the side of his head. “Honest, I think I got a bit carried away with the project. Our lecturer told us that it’s going to be worth sixty per cent of the overall grade for first year and that we need ten preliminary sketches of what we plan to create. Ten!”

Louis groaned sympathetically. “So you’ll have to bring your work on the trip?”

Zayn made a noise of affirmation before collecting a number of articles from Louis’ bed. “I actually considered not going, I was in such a panic. I am, don’t worry,” he assured as Louis opened his mouth to object, “but I’m just really concerned I won’t get the work done.”

Louis crossed the room, side-stepping a tall pile of enormous jeans and an old bedsheet covered in paint, and embraced Zayn briefly. “What can I do to help?”

They spent the rest of the evening organising all of the clothes, dividing them into piles depending on whether they were considered gender-typical and what they socially represented. They included a separate pile for the clothes Zayn would be bringing on the alpha/omega trip.

“So, where am I going to sleep tonight?” Louis asked as he folded a frilly yellow frock and nodded towards his own bed which had become the temporary residence of countless accessories; jewellery, handbags, belts, purses, briefcases.

Zayn peered around at him from the other side of the curtain where he was hanging up a sheer black shirt. His eyes widened at the sight of Louis’ bed. “You could always go to Harry’s,” he
“Don’t,” Louis groaned. “I’m already nervous enough about organising this trip with him and George without throwing that into the mix.”

He, Harry and the rest of the alpha society leaders had spent the previous week finalising the details for their excursion. They had spent endless hours in the library and nearby coffeeshops booking flights, day trips and accommodation as well as consuming copious amounts of caffeine.

The most challenging aspect of the planning had been finding a travel insurance company willing to give them an acceptable rate for the week-long trip. Each insurance provider had told them the same thing: It was too hazardous to insure young alphas and omegas on such a close-contact trip and the possibility of aggression or undesired sexual advances was too high. George had fruitlessly tried to argue that they had chosen mature, respectful alphas on the trip and that the point of going on such a trip was to encourage inter-gender co-operation.

They had eventually found a small family business in Northern Ireland willing to provide minimal insurance on the condition that they agreed not to leave their hotel after eleven each night. By the time they had found the company, Harry had lost his temper arguing on the phone and, despite his protests, according to the four other leaders of C.A.S, no longer had a say in the final decision.

The evening Harry had lost his temper, yelling profanities through the phone and startling every unsuspecting student in the library, was the day after his and Louis’ date. The omega had watched in horror as Harry yelled abuse at the beta on the other line, doing absolutely nothing to help his case that they were responsible, tame alphas. It was only when Maria and George pried the phone out of his hand, both spluttering apologies to the beta insurance representative, that realised his error of judgement.

“I’ve never seen Harry act like that before. He may swear like a sailor,” George had whispered to Louis afterwards, “but he’s got a heart of gold.”

Louis had smiled broadly in agreement but couldn’t help but feel concern for Harry. After relinquishing his tight grip on the phone to George he had stared open-mouthed at the offending device as if it was the source of his unexpected outrage. Louis had to wonder whether, in that moment, Harry was in complete control of his actions.

After much rational conversing (on Louis’ part) and frustrated pacing (on Harry’s part, after he was forced to listen to Louis and George talk to their insurance provider) they secured an offer with two days to spare. Harry’s behaviour had since returned to normal, fully focused on his assigned tasks, occasionally joking boisterously with George and teasing Liam while they worked.

During their group meetings throughout the previous week, Harry’s eyes had lingered on Louis but seemed to flit away whenever the omega returned his gaze. Harry’s shoulders had remained tense during the week and his smile never quite reflected in his tired eyes. His conversations with Louis were perfectly normal and revolved primarily around the trip abroad, though Harry stole every chance he could get to walk Louis back to his dormitory.

Louis couldn’t help but notice his physical tenseness and, despite his non-existent scent, Harry’s self-discipline, as though he had to physically pull himself back from acting on his immediate instincts. Louis longed to soothe that alpha, to find a door in the wall of security he had built around him and discover the source of his restraint.

“I’ll help you take the bags and jewellery off but I need to bring a couple of belts to Ireland,” Zayn joked, interrupting his reverie. “I have this idea for contrasting and blending clothing styles of alphas...
and omegas that I want to try.”

“And what better time to draw alpha clothing expectations when there are fifty of them pushing each other over to get your attention,” Louis winked.

“It’ll be interesting, that’s for sure. I’ve only had time to do some brief research on all of the ways alphas dress themselves but it’ll be good to see it in practice.”

“What have you learned so far?” Louis asked curiously, mind returning to Harry’s eccentric (and sometimes questionable) clothing choices.

“Alphas are less inclined to communicate their social roles through clothing than omegas are. Their clothes demonstrate their self-identity more subtly than ours do. By looking at an omega’s clothes it becomes obvious straight away whether or not they embrace their gender and social expectations. Like, if an unmated omega wears modest clothing that covers the neck, or a uniform of a profession traditionally linked to omegas - childcare, nursing, midwifery – then before they even open their mouth people expect them to act within social restrictions,” he explained, continuing the cathartic process of folding jeans and matching socks.

“If an unmated omega wears revealing, darkly-coloured clothes that emphasise the neck, chest and omega-typical physical characteristics then they’re perceived as anarchic and deviant of social norms.” He looked up to gauge Louis’ reaction. “Alphas are totally different like that; it’s far more difficult to tell whether an alpha acts as society dictates or not by their clothes alone. Things like demeanour, tone of voice and scent come into play then.”

Louis hummed in contemplation, considering Harry’s sense of style and self-identity. He couldn’t tell whether they synchronised or contrasted. He knew that Harry was comfortable in his appearance, frequently flipping the bird at Liam and George whenever they guffawed at his latest floral patterned shirt. He thought that it was an outlet for Harry’s creative side in an academically-charged degree course. He resolved to ask Zayn whether he considered Harry’s fashion sense gender-typical, though he highly doubted it. He picked up an enormous pair of briefs with SpongeBob pictures on them. “Why all the underwear, then?”

Zayn sent him an indecipherable smile. “That’s the second part of the project,” he said, folding an old-fashioned omega undergarment with distaste. “I’m going to be focusing my sketches on the idea of hidden clothes.”

Louis made an interested noise and raised his head.

“For omegas in particular, hidden clothes are vital to the way we view ourselves and our self-esteem. We tend to test boundaries more when we’re wearing something less prude underneath our layers, something that gives us any degree – no matter how small – of rebellion. We can apparently fulfil our omega role on the exterior while, in reality, we could be wearing something that most people would view as subversive.”

“Like what?”

“Anything,” Zayn said, shrugging. “Could be alpha boxers or socks reading ‘Fuck the patriarchy’ or some shit. It doesn’t matter as long as it’s not traditional omega attire. Obviously, wearing risqué panties isn’t going to give anyone a conniption nowadays but in the past, when omegas’ lives were so controlled, they took any opportunity they could get to get out of the prudish, meek mould they were told to fit.”

Louis sighed. “It’s fucked up that we’re reduced to resisting and going against expectations of us
through our underwear, though.”

Zayn made a noise of agreement. “Equally, though, I’m going to show how embracing our omega tendencies and reflecting that in our choice of undergarments can have a pacifying effect on our inner omega. Also, wearing typical omega clothes isn’t necessarily a bad thing in terms of the omega movement, despite what a lot of radical omegas think. We shouldn’t have to dress and behave like betas or alphas to be treated equally to them. A lot of omegas actually think we should use our inherent traits and qualities to our advantage to achieve gender equality.”

“I agree with that,” Louis said resolutely. “I mean, neither of us are particularly concerned with behaving like betas when that’s just not who we are. We shouldn’t need to change ourselves and act differently in order to be treated equally. I think social perception about omegas is changing slowly and clothing is just one of the huge number of things that need to change about how we’re viewed. It all comes down to the fact that every gender has social expectations but only omegas are obliged to fulfil them.”

Zayn sighed heavily. “I know, Lou. It’s already improving, though, right? At least at Candling things are getting better.”

Louis thought back to Harry’s outburst on the phone and his aggressiveness at the restaurant the previous week. “Yeah,” he said slowly, winding his finger around the laces of his shoes. “There’s still a long way to go, though.”

... 

The following morning was, predictably, chaotic. Their flight from London Heathrow to Dublin was set to depart at eight o’clock sharp, meaning an early rise for the hundred students going on the trip.

Despite what Louis and Zayn had predicted, all fifty omegas at Candling had ultimately decided to go on the trip, reassured by the knowledge that it was organised and mostly funded by Candling administration and that they would be secure at all times.

As the alpha society leaders had warned, they were inundated with applications from alpha students to go on the trip. Harry, Maria and Liam had spent days wading through applications and eventually deciding the eligible candidates based on a not-so-random lottery system. The successful candidates had been ecstatic. Breaking the unfortunate news to the majority of applicants had been a challenging ordeal, however, with jealousy and aggression heightening in the three main alpha residencies during the week prior to the trip.

Louis and Zayn had, shockingly, arrived early at the train station in order to count the omega students who arrived in small groups, identical grins on their faces and over-packed bags on their backs. Harry and Liam watched on as George similarly ticked the names of the present alphas on a list. Harry glanced up immediately when Louis arrived, smiling shyly and waving him over. Louis shook his head regretfully and pointed towards his list of names. He called out each of the omega names, each person replying with a dutiful ‘Here!’ until he reached the end of the list. He listed the instructions they were required to follow regarding losing the group and ensuring they stayed together.

“You sounded like a proper teacher,” Harry said in amusement when he walked over to where the alpha was leaning against the sign reading the train timetable.

“At least I have the well-behaved class,” Louis said, winking and nodding his head towards George who kept sighing in exasperation as the boisterous alphas ignored him in favour of inching closer
to the area where the omegas, engaged in quiet chatter, were gathered.

“Lads, this is for the insurance so that we have everyone covered,” George called futilely over the obnoxious laughter.

Harry shook his head at George’s behaviour. “Honestly, he’s the most passive alpha I’ve ever met apart from Liam. I suppose he’s a good representative of C.A.S because he’s so diplomatic but I just don’t know how he does it sometimes,” he said.

“Maybe you should take a leaf out of his book,” Louis teased lightly but he quickly realised his mistake when he saw Harry’s face fall. “Oh, Harry, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said desperately, determined to rectify his error of judgement. He hadn’t realised that Harry’s increasingly alpha-typical behaviour was such a sensitive subject. “I’m sorry,” he said, imploring Harry to raise his gaze from where his leather boot was pawing the ground.

Harry shook his head at Louis’ apology. “Don’t be sorry,” he instructed. “I’m working on it, believe me.” He send him a tight smile before quickly changing their topic of conversation. “Want to bet how long George will last on this trip without breaking into full alpha mode and screaming at the lot of them?”

Louis chuckled lightly but his eyes remained wary as he glanced at Harry and noticed the residual tension in his shoulders that he longed to soothe. “I reckon,” he said slowly, “he’ll last until the Ring of Kerry in four days’ time. When Liam spoke to the travel agent he said that we’ll be doing fishing and hiking and horse-riding so there’ll be plenty of time for all of those alphas to start showing off their muscle strength.”

Harry let out a honk of laughter. “That sounds about right. I’d say he’ll crack before then, though. Maybe tonight when all the rooms are assigned at the hotel.”

“You willing to bet ten pounds on it?” he asked, quirking an eyebrow at Harry.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” he replied, shaking Louis’ hand and closing his eyes briefly at the sensation of his smooth, gentle touch and the way his own hand covered his entirely.

He shifted his gaze to where George was walking up to every alpha to take their name individually and took pity on him. “Listen up!” Harry yelled, effectively catching the entire, dispersed group’s attention. “We need to take this fucking role call for the insurance company because we want them to compensate us if one of you dies on the trip. So stop acting like horny fifteen year olds just because there are omegas and answer when George calls your name.”

Louis’ open mouth snapped shut as he stared at Harry in astonishment. He had to admit that it was quite arousing to see how considerate Harry could be towards him and how, when necessary, he could put even the most brutish alphas in their place.

Harry stalked back towards Louis, flashing his canines as he caught the omega observing him. “And that’s how you control a misbehaved class,” he said.

The train arrived with a screeching sound before it halted to a stop. Harry boarded quickly, carrying Louis’ small, yellow rucksack despite his protests. They sat beside each other, Louis tucked cosily in the window seat and Harry beside him, spreading his legs and taking up most of the space.

“Looks like you’ll have to discipline your class again, Mr. Styles,” Louis said, continuing their narrative as he curled up in his seat, arm pressed comfortably against Harry’s and the exterior of their thighs touching.
A group of four alphas were pushing each other over vying for Lily’s attention, her lack of interest in them an anomaly and, as perceived by a group of entitled alphas, a challenge.

“I’m not sure shouting at them and scaring them into submission is the right way to go about teaching them to behave like proper alphas,” Louis said, tilting his head in feigned consideration. “Pretty sure my class will turn out more well-rounded,” he said, indicating towards a group of omegas further along the carriages who were braiding each other’s hair and talking amicably about a trip one of them had taken to Ireland when she was younger.

Harry shook his head, endeared at the way Louis regarded the other omegas and how protective he had become over them since setting up the omega society. "I should have known you'd be the competitive type. Good to know that you're definitely going to be our kids' favourite parent."

Louis' eyes widened and Harry slapped a hand over his mouth before covering it up with an unnaturally loud cough. "That is, I mean, if you, y'know, have kids in the future. With anyone, not that, like, you have to with me," he spluttered, though his skin crawled and his fists clenched at the thought of Louis raising another alpha's children.

Louis nodded once and with tinted cheeks, turned his head to look at the city landscape rushing past them. He turned back a moment later, a dusty pink colouring his cheeks and pulled lightly on Harry's shirt to catch his attention. "Look, Harry, we're almost there," he said excitedly, pointing towards a plane jetting off in a south-easterly direction. "I wonder where they're going. Probably somewhere exotic like the Caribbean or Mexico. Who was it that chose Ireland, again? Niall almost teared up when I told him."

Harry smiled in amusement. "Liam's, actually. He visited the Midlands a couple of years ago when he went camping with his scouts group or something. Anyway, we know that new legislation was passed a few years ago giving further rights to omegas and improving employment opportunities for them so we figured it would be an appropriate place for a trip like this," Harry explained, standing to reach for his and Louis' bags.

It transpired that Harry quite enjoyed carrying Louis' bag and he proceeded to hold it as they went through security and boarded the plane. Whenever Louis reached to pry it from the alpha's back, he would stand taller and lift it over his head and out of reach.

"I know you're trying to be a gentleman by holding my stuff," Louis had said, panting slightly as he jumped higher to touch the base of the rucksack, "but you're really defeating the purpose by teasing me."

Harry finally handed Louis the bag so that he could extract the list of names once more when they boarded the plane, prompting him to exhale heavily in satisfaction. He cleared his throat and raised his voice to call to the long row of omegas seated in pairs. When he finished calling the names he collapsed into the seat next to Zayn.

Though he longed to be beside Harry again he knew that, practically, he couldn't have sat beside him and surrounded himself with strongly-scented alphas. Although there were only omega students seated near him, the potent, lingering scent of the alpha students permeated the air and made him wish to discover Harry's own scent.

When alpha and omega couples mated, they became far more in-tune with each other's scent such that they were able to identify their mate immediately if they were in the vicinity. He knew that, if Harry had a scent, his would be the first he would recognise, no matter the size of the crowd. Though Harry was not his mate, he was quickly starting to consider Harry the only alpha who had ever come close to listening attentively whenever he spoke while simultaneously stealing his
breath away with the gentle brush of his fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

I apologise that this is shorter than usual but I've been super busy! Next chapter will definitely detail what is going to be a very eventful trip. I'd love to hear your feedback on this chapter! Thank you very much for reading.
Travel & Rest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though the journey was short, Louis was relieved to touch Irish soil an hour later. The scents on the plane had overlapped and competed, suffocating him to such a point that he had to nap in order to distract himself.

“We’ve arrived, Lou,” Zayn said an hour later, shaking his shoulder gently.

Louis opened his eyes blearily and blinked rapidly at him. He opened the shutter and was met with the sight of dreary clouds and light rain through the window. “Just like London, then,” he sighed.

They gathered their belongings and the passengers on the flight (most of whom were part of the Candling group) trundled through the airport until they arrived at the departure gate, Harry and George leading the group.

“Right, everyone,” George called to the group and the students gathered around him, chatter settling down around them. “As you’re all aware, we’re going to be taking the bus we’ve rented to the hotel to drop off our bags now. You can freshen up for about half an hour and then we’ll head to our first day trip. Any questions?”

There was a chorus of approval and the group filed towards the exit. Louis hurried to catch up with Harry and he smiled euphorically at him. It seemed that George had already begun lecturing Harry on driver safety and following the rules of the roads.

“There’s just a lot of technicalities when it comes to driving a bus, Harry,” George explained earnestly. “I really think we’d be better off employing a qualified bus driver for the week. It really won’t cost too much. I was talking to a the airport shuttle officer just a moment ago and he said that -”

“George,” he said exasperatedly, “don’t worry about it. I’ve driven big vehicles before. And besides, I don’t think I could stand watching someone else put the omeg- the rest of the students in danger.”

George glanced at Louis before responding. “Fine,” he acquiesced. “But only because I know you’ll be a pain in the ass if you don’t get to. And we’re taking it in turns, I don’t care what you say.”

It transpired that Harry was a pain in the ass even when he was allowed to drive the double-decker bus. Louis and Zayn sat side-by-side in the front seats behind the driver to call directions to him. They leaned comfortably on each other, softly giggling at Harry’s outrageous road rage.

“Fucking prick! You can’t cut me off in the middle of the motorway. Indicate, you fucking moron!” he shouted at a blue Nissan that sped past them. He exhaled heavily and glared where Liam and George where guffawing on his other side. “Back me up here, lads. He cut me off completely.”

“Whatever you say, Harry,” Liam said. “Just keep your eyes on the road.”

“Learn to fucking drive, knothead!” he yelled as a sleek Volvo swerved around the bus. Harry grumbled under his breath, training his eyes on the congested motorway. “Where do I take the next
"exit, darling?" he asked, taking the edge off his voice.

Louis scrambled to pick up the map, flustered at the term of endearment. "You need to keep going straight for another kilometre and then take Exit 12," he said, mindful to guide the alpha rather than directly instruct him. "After that, we'll continue until the first roundabout when you have to take the second exit. We should be there then."

Harry nodded once, glancing briefly at him and smiling to show his appreciation. "What would I do without you?" he muttered to himself.

Louis’ cheeks flushed and he resolutely ignored Zayn’s piqued eyebrow. He focused his attention on the map instead, one which featured the entirety of Ireland and Britain and had small tears and a few unidentified stains. The map emitted a faint scent of mulling spices and pine and Louis had to restrain himself from lifting it to his face to breathe it in. He found it unusual that an item such as a map would cling to someone’s scent, especially when that person wasn’t on the trip with them.

"Whose map is this?" he asked loudly.

"Mine," Harry said. "Why? Do you think the roads might have changed since it was published? It’s a couple of years old, after all."

Louis didn’t miss the way Harry’s back had stiffened beneath his forest green jumper. "No," he said slowly. "Just curious about the scent, is all."

"I’ve brought that map all over the place," Harry said carefully. "Bound to pick up lots of different scents along the way."

"Where did you visit?" Louis asked. "I’ve only ever visited a couple of places in the U.K. on holidays."

"Spent time in lots of different places," he said evasively. "Kind of didn’t stay anywhere long enough to appreciate it properly. I remember liking Truro in Cornwall the most, though. It’s a very pretty place; lots of art and culture and the views are amazing. I think you’d like it, Lou."

"Sounds like I would," Louis mused. "That must have been fun; getting to explore new places around England and meet new people."

Harry hummed and nodded emphatically. "It was. I learned a lot." He cleared his throat loudly, gripping the steering wheel. "We’re here, everyone," he called loudly. "Don’t shove on your way out of the bus. Your rooms have all been pre-assigned so there’s no point fighting for the best one."

Louis chuckled lightly, unclasping his seatbelt and walking to stand behind Harry. He leaned down to talk in Harry’s ear, startling him. "You really do sound like a teacher. Very bossy," he teased, giggling at Harry’s indignant squawk. "Have you ever considered changing career choice?"

"Absolutely not. I don’t think I could stand going back to school. Besides, I’m not bossy. I command authority just like any other alpha," he said, slinging his huge bag over his shoulder with ease. "I reserve that command to situations that demand it." He winked and pinched Louis’ hip beneath his loose jumper, climbing off the bus before Louis could fully register what had happened.

The connotations of Harry’s message distracted him as he forced himself to follow Zayn to their shared room, bypassing the ornate interior of the hotel and electing to take the elevator to the twelfth floor. Situations that demand his command, Louis mused, sounded an awful lot like situations that require him to embrace his inner alpha fully without inhibitions of fear of hurting
others. Images of Harry looming above him, commanding him, taking control, whispering in a low voice to direct his every move infiltrated his thoughts as he distractedly agreed with Zayn’s comments about their hotel room.

Louis flung himself onto the queen bed directly opposite the television, plush white pillows supporting his neck and giving him a view of Zayn removing various articles of clothing from his rucksack.

“Where are we going first, boss?” he asked, extracting a pair of black boots to lay them at the base of the wardrobe.

“Climbing the Sugar Loaf,” he said excitedly. “So get your some more suitable clothes on for climbing.”

“I don’t do climbing,” Zayn replied flatly.

“You’ll enjoy it, I promise. Liam can carry you up to the top of the mountain if you want,” he said, wrapping his arms around him from the back and restraining Zayn from hanging up clothes in the process.

Zayn scoffed but didn’t look opposed to the suggestion.

“We’ll get some lunch afterwards. This is the only physical activity for a while, anyway. Tonight we’ll be starting the gender integration stuff.”

He sighed heavily before conceding, turning in Louis’ arms to face him. “I’m not changing, though,” he said.

Louis noticed the way Zayn couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “What’s the matter, Z? I know this isn’t really about climbing.”

Zayn sighed defeatedly. “I just feel so pressurised at the moment with this deadline. I like taking my time with my art and I hate working with restrictions imposed on me.”

“Zayn,” he said, fixing his face into a sympathetic smile. “I don’t want you to feel obliged to go. I’m sorry if I made it seem that way.”

Zayn shook his head vehemently. “You didn’t, Lou. I think getting out will be good for me, anyway. I need some good inspiration at the moment. Trying to capture alpha stance beneath their clothing for one of my sketches. I can’t quite capture their dominant aura. They’re just so broody the way they strut around the place and command people’s attention.”

“And you don’t?”

Zayn hit him lightly with a handful of belts.

“Oi! That actually hurt, you idiot,” he complained, rubbing his arm and sighing theatrically. “And besides, I thought I was your muse for this project.”

“Modest as ever, Lou,” he said, shaking his head. “You are but I also need to be able to observe some of the alphas without it seeming creepy.”

“Don’t think Liam would mind creepy,” Louis said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

There was a loud knock on the door. “Louis, Zayn! We’re leaving now, once you’re ready.”
Louis opened the door abruptly and was met with Harry standing much closer than expected. He took a step backwards, chuckling nervously. “How did you know this was our room?”

Harry had the grace to look sheepish. “Your room number is memorable.”

Louis shot him an incredulous look. “Our room number is memorable?” he repeated slowly.

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “Okay, okay,” he conceded. “I overheard the receptionist giving Zayn the room card. Didn’t want to have to knock on all of the doors to find you when I wanted to talk to you.”

Louis’ cheeks turned a dusty pink shade.

“Well, we really should get going, though,” he said. “Want to start the climbing trail before the crowds pick up.”

Louis nodded and removed his raincoat from a hanger in the wardrobe before snatching his rucksack from the foot of the bed. “Ready,” he said, looking up to find Harry leaning against the doorframe watching him.

Harry flashed his canines at him, eyeing his bed before dragging his tongue across his lips, turning them a darker shade.

Louis gulped.

“I’m ready too,” Zayn said as he emerged from the bathroom wearing a pair of joggers and trainers.

He unknowingly interrupted their eye contact as two sets of eyes landed on him; Harry’s murderous, Louis’ relieved.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, regretfully noticing their expressions. He quickly averted Harry’s eyes and widened his eyes at Louis.

“Let’s go,” Louis said, high voice foreign to his ears.

Harry nodded stiffly, moving out of the entrance to guide the omegas downstairs. “Are you sure you’ll be warm enough wearing that, darling?” he asked, failing to mask his concern.

Louis glanced at his adidas leggings and raincoat. “I should be fine, thanks Harry,” he said through a smile, waltzing passed him and sensing eyes burning the back of him as his climbed aboard the bus.

As Harry had predicted, Louis was decidedly not fine. They had been climbing the slopes for over an hour, bitter wind whipping their exposed faces, when Louis complained that it was getting chilly. Six alphas in his immediate vicinity took off their jackets without a second thought, handing them to him with eager eyes. He knew that not all of them were even attracted to him but that it was intrinsic to their biology to care for omegas in general and ensure their physical wellbeing.

“If only they were this generous when it came to omega rights,” he muttered to Zayn after politely declining their offers.

Harry bounded towards him from behind. “I heard you say you were cold, Louis. Do you want to borrow my jacket?”
Louis hesitated and Harry took the opportunity to wrap his fleece-lined wind sheeter around him. He smiled gratefully at him. “Thank you, Harry,” he said quietly, sighing contentedly as the soft material warmed his skin. He glanced to his other side, noticing that Zayn had left his side to talk with Will and Lily.

“Of course, sweetheart.”

They trundled along, perturbed slightly by their heavy jackets and the biting wind, talking amicably. It was comfortable and familiar, conversation flying between trivial topics and serious discussions before they both cracked up in stitches at one of Harry’s atrocious puns.

After another half hour they reached the top, well behind the rest of the group as they has unknowingly slowed their pace to concentrate on each other.

“It’s magnificent,” Louis breathed, lips parted in awe as he admired the view of the endless landscape. Rolling hills, miniature cars whizzing along the road below them and sun beaming down on them.

“Gorgeous,” Harry drawled, standing beside him to appreciate the scenery surrounding them. “And the sky has cleared up nicely too.” He wrapped his arm around Louis’ back and rested his arm on the curve of his hip tentatively.

Louis turned to meet Harry’s inquisitive gaze and nodded once, a silent agreement to the touch. Beneath his layers of clothing, he could feel the gentle touch of his fingertips scorch his skin and he exhaled shakily.

“Mate, come on! We’re taking a photograph!” Liam called from across the mountain peak, voice carried by the wind.

Harry whipped around to glower at him.

“What is it with those two?” Louis said through a shy smile.

Harry breathed heavily. “Maybe if we set them up they’d distract each other enough to stop interrupting us.” He futilely brushed a strand of Louis’ hair out of his eyes, the wind blowing it across his face immediately afterwards. “Maybe we’d get some time to ourselves.”

“Enough canoodling, lads,” George shouted from where he was arranging the large group for the photograph. “We need you two at the front!”

They sighed heavily before making their way towards the group and crouching at the front of the group, identically ecstatic smiles on their faces. George clicked his camera until he deigned one of the photographs acceptable, long after their cheeks had begun hurting.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Harry called to George and the group laughed with relief. Harry stood to his feet and extended a hand to Louis to help him up. Before he had even stood fully, Harry tripped over the back of Louis’ trainer and tumbled down, dragging Louis with him.

They collapsed into a pile of intertwined limbs and they groaned simultaneously. Louis’ head fell on top of Harry’s strong chest, torso colliding with his hip and legs landing between Harry’s own. “Harry, you great oaf!” he squealed before laughing.

“Sorry,” Harry said, wincing at the pain in his right ankle. He didn’t look particularly sorry at the position they found themselves in, however. He tilted his chin to look directly at where Louis looked like he was climbing up his body in order to stand up again.
Louis’ legs surreptitiously bracketed Harry’s own until he had budged close enough to straddle his hips in an attempt to steady his legs to stand up.

Harry placed a hand on his upper thigh to halt his movements.

Louis’ eyes met his own and widened at the realisation of their position. His thighs were pressed against Harry’s hips, their crotches separated by mere fabric and his hand were placed on either side of Harry’s shoulders, steeling himself to get on his feet.

“You comfortable up there, sweetheart?” Harry asked, smirking deviously at him.

Louis tilted his head, exposing the side of his neck to Harry and glancing at where the rest of the group were gathered around George and Liam who had begun distributing packed lunches.

“Absolutely,” Louis whispered, relishing the unfamiliar dominance he had over Harry.

Harry nodded once, loose curls escaping his hairstyle to tumble between his eyes. Louis reached down to gently tuck them back in place but Harry reached up to halt his movements, long fingers easily wrapping around Louis’ dainty wrist. “Guess you’ll have to enjoy what little power you can get,” he mused, tightening his grip around Louis’ wrist almost imperceptibly, thumb moving in tight circles on his racing pulse point. “Because you sure won’t get a lot of that with me.”

“Keep it in your pants and give the boy a break, Styles,” an alpha called from where the group was settling down for lunch, prompting the majority of the group to swivel around in interest.

The catcalls and lewd remarks began before Louis could shuffle off Harry and climb to his feet, eyes trained on the ground. Harry got to his feet slowly, seemingly unbothered by their shouts before rounding on the group of offending alphas.

“If you say another thing about Louis I won’t hesitate to break your necks,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Jesus Christ, mate, calm down,” one of alphas said, raising his hands.

A low growl rumbled in his chest as he opened his mouth to retort.

“He’s right, Harry,” Louis said gently, placing a placating hand on Harry’s elbow to garner his attention. “Don’t overreact over something like this.”

Harry looked between the two, deeply conflicted and face strained as he fought against his natural instinct. He forced himself to breathe in the calming, exhilarating scent of Louis. He nodded once, eyes shut closed. “Okay,” he whispered. Harry faced the group who were sending him curious glances. “Sorry, lads. Just- don’t disrespect the omegas or we won’t hesitate to send you back to England.”

“Sure, man,” one of the alphas offered as they mumbled a reluctant, collective agreement.

Harry wrapped his arm around Louis’ waist once more and led him to George to collect two turkey and cranberry sandwiches.

Louis continued to direct concerned glances at him throughout the meal, fearful that his presence was exacerbating Harry’s situation and weakening his resistance against his alpha instincts. He smiled consolingly at him, squeezing his hand gently and resolving to let Harry speak to him about it in his own time.
“As you all know, this trip is for both alphas and omegas to benefit from inter-gender communication in order to break down boundaries and encourage co-operation,” Louis explained to the group. “Of course, we’re going to have a lot of fun activities that will make integration a lot more natural but we decided to launch a few discussion evenings to really open up to each other and promote better tolerance of each other.”

George nodded encouragingly beside him. "Exactly. We’re going to try to expel some gender rumours, talk about social issues and also just try to get to know each other a bit better. By the end of all of this, we want there to be acceptance and inclusivity in the group so that we can break down gender divisions at Candling once step at a time. So, everyone sit in the group with your number and let’s begin.”

There was an outbreak of excited chatter in the huge conference room in the hotel, alphas and omegas alike frantically searching for the table labelled with the number they had been assigned. Each round table was covered in a pretty table cloth and decorated with pots and trays of pastries and cakes for their late afternoon tea. Louis sat down between Harry and Lily, smiling at both of them and failing to suppress a smile when he felt Harry sling his arm across the back of his chair. The table eventually filled up, four alphas and four omegas exchanging nervous glances as each of them waited for another to begin the assigned task.

“Right,” a sallow-skinned alpha boasting a scent similar to fresh rain said. “I’ll get the ball rolling. I’m Jacob. Alpha, obviously. I’m twenty, in third year and studying biochemical science. A stereotype I have about omegas is that they’re helpless and needy.” He clasped his hands on the table, leaning back in his chair and daring anyone to question him.

The four omegas at the table nodded stiffly, aware that they would have the opportunity to  and the task continued until the fourth alpha – Harry – spoke, voice slow and thoughtful. “I’m Harry. I’m an alpha. Not sure why we have to say that one, really,” he said, chuckling to himself. “Eh, I’m twenty-two and in third year medicine. One stereotype about omegas that I’ve heard is that they’re there to look pretty and keep their mouths shut.”

Louis didn’t meet Harry’s eyes, feeling his jaw tighten and loosen. He knew, logically, that Harry didn’t hold that opinion but he couldn’t help but feel resentment bloom inside him at the onslaught on untrue prejudices spilling form the alphas’ mouths. He looked up and found seven pairs of eyes looking at him. “Oh! It’s my turn. I’m Louis. I’m an omega. I’m almost nineteen and - ”

“So you’re eighteen?”

Louis glanced at the alpha sitting directly beside Harry whose dark eyebrow was raised expectantly.

“Yes,” Louis replied confusedly. “As I said, I’m eighteen, in first year and I’m studying law.”

“That’s unusual, you know,” the alpha offered. “I mean, for an omega.”

“Yes,” Louis said neutrally, though he was growing impatient with his futile interruptions. “I’m the only omega on my course. Anyway, one stereotype that I have - ”

“That’s very brave of you,” the alpha remarked.

Louis took a steeling breath. “Thank you, Michael. The stereotype I have about alphas is that they’re entitled and expect everyone to drop everything to comply with their demands.” His
statement came out more harshly than he had originally intended.

The difference between the omegas reacting to hearing their most loathed stereotypes and the alphas hearing the same was unmistakable. The four alphas showed varying degrees of annoyance at his statement but each was more extreme than any of the omegas; Harry’s yanked his arm from where it rested on Louis’ chair and dug his fingers into his thighs, the alpha who had interrupted Louis rolled his shoulders and sat upright in his seat, glaring at him while the Jacob glowered menacingly at anyone who was unfortunate enough to make eye contact with him.

Lily, ever perceptive, sensed the changed in mood and smiled brightly around the table. “I’m Lily. I’m a wonderfully submissive, obedient omega so you don’t need to worry about me breaking any stereotypes,” she said, sarcasm dripping off her words.

Louis stepped on her toe beneath the table but it seemed that none of the other alphas, with the exception of Harry, detected the sarcasm in her tone.

“I’m eighteen and studying journalism with a minor in politics. One stereotype I have about alphas is that you think with your dicks, not your heads.”

They seemed to make an attempt to control their vexation this time, prepared for the insult though desperate to prove her wrong in their behaviour.

The task continued for the final two omegas – two fair-haired omegas who refused to meet anyone’s gaze. Once they had finished, they waited in anticipation until George returned to the front of the room, standing tall on the podium and calling for silence.

“Well done, everyone, that was quite a good start. Next, we’re going to go around our tables in turn and each person will explain why they know the rumour isn’t true or isn’t true in all cases.”

There was a chorus of approval and Louis saw him return to his own table, fists balled and stride more confident than usual, as though he had something to prove.

“Is it just me,” Lily muttered in his ear, “or does even George seem affected by this?”

Louis shook his head. “I used to think he was a beta pretending to be an alpha, you know,” he whispered back.

“Likely,” she said before giggling softly.

“I have an omega mother,” Jacob said loudly, catching their attention. “She raised me because my dad worked long, irregular hours and travelled a lot for his work. I actually grew to have a lot of respect for her and I know that she’s far from helpless. She was always determined to do things herself unless, of course, my dad was around. She never used her gender to her advantage to get extra help to raise me and my brother.”

The four omegas smiled encouragingly at him, relieved that their discussion had taken a positive turn.

Jacob smiled contemplatively. “Of course, all omegas are helpless and needy during a certain time of the year but I think that’s a discussion for another day.”

Two of the other alphas guffawed. The four omegas immediately dropped their gazes, Louis toying with the hem of his jeans distractedly.

Harry’s gaze softened at the sight before he shot Jacob a disapproving look. “That’s not what we’re
talking about,” he said firmly.

The other two alphas responded to their claims with composure and respect, surprising the omegas. Louis turned to fully face Harry when his turn arrived, eyes imploring but watchful. Harry sent him a reassuring, private smile before speaking to the group.

“Well, I know for a fact that omegas are worth far more than their good looks,” Harry said earnestly. “The omegas that I’ve met at Candling, at least, are strong and intelligent and aren’t afraid to stand up for what they know is fair.” He looked directly at Louis, green eyes sincere in the natural afternoon light passing through the window.

Louis smiled appreciatively at Harry. He instantly remembered that he had to defend the stereotype that had had held to be at least partially true for most of his life. “Right, well. I know lots of alphas who aren’t entitled, as such. Some of them are, eh, quite modest,” he said weakly.

The alphas did not look particularly satisfied with his response.

“What I mean to say,” he amended, “is that a lot of people consider alphas to expect everything they request to be handed to them on a silver platter. At Candling, I’ve met a lot of alphas who exude the type of confidence that’s typical of your gender but are still humble about what they have and work hard to get where they want to be without relying on others.”

Harry hummed in approval beside him, placing a hand on his mid-thigh and squeezing gently.

They continued the gender-based exercises for the next hour, discussing social attitudes to omegas and alphas as well as their portrayal in the media. They purposefully avoided physical attributes of the genders and discussion of their respective biological cycles. The two societies had decided to reserve that discussion for later in the week after the group had settled into a comfortable routine of discussing gender-related issues.

“Well I’m fucking exhausted,” Harry said through an exhale as he watched Louis yawn into his two hands endearingly.

“Agreed,” Jacob said. “I need a drink.”

Harry looked over his shoulder to catch George’s attention while his index finger drew outward spirals on Louis’ outer thigh, slowly edging inwards.

“George!” he called across the room. He made a drinking gesture and indicated towards the bar.

George sighed from where he was talking animatedly to Liam. He acquiesced and gave a thumbs-up to Harry who rose to his feet, hand immediately reaching to hold Louis’ own.

Harry lead Louis and the rest of the table – soon to be followed by the entire group of students – to the bar.

They quickly ordered their drinks and reserved a booth, joined a moment later by Zayn, Liam and Lily. Harry gulped down his scotch with the thirst of a man who had spent days in the desert.

“Slow down there, tiger,” Louis advised gently.

Harry grinned mischievously at him. “It’s been a long day of travelling,” he admitted. “Can’t stomach planes, if I’m honest.”

Louis caressed his back and smiled at him in reassurance. “You should have told me,” he said. He
paused before adding, “I like to comfort you, you know. It’s part of my biology to care for others.”

“Maybe on the flight home?” he asked hopefully. “I’d really like for you to do that. If you don’t mind, of course, Louis.”

“I don’t,” Louis assured through a warm smile, sipping on his raspberry mojito to do something with his hands.

They spent the next hour talking with the group at large, occasionally turning towards each other to engage in a private conversation. Harry’s fingers danced across the fabric of his jeans, occasionally toying with his belt hook before walking his fingers to his thigh to stroke there languidly. He remained completely focused on Louis’ movements, whispering periodically to ask him whether he was comfortable with his light touches.

Louis didn’t trust himself to open his mouth without a whimper escaping his lips and settled on nodding, eyes following his movements, placing his hand on Harry’s own from time to time.

By the time Harry had finished his fourth drink, his movements had become far less subtle, garnering the attention of the others who nudged each other but declined to comment. Harry was a drunk who spoke his mind, Louis realised, utterly uninhibited and boisterous in his treatment of them.

“Do you want another drink, Louis?” he asked, slurring his words slightly.

“Yes, please,” Louis said, intertwining his fingers with Harry’s.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed happily. “Love how polite you are, darling.”

Louis’ movements stilled and he stumbled over his words. “Th-thank you, Harry.”

Harry got to his feet and walked to the bar, stumbling slightly before leaning against the barstool with most of his weight.

“He really is quite clumsy, isn’t he?” Louis commented absentmindedly.

“You are so gone for him,” Lily muttered, sipping her cranberry vodka slowly.

Louis didn’t deny the comment but smiled shyly at her before shrugging.

Harry returned a moment later, placing Louis’ drink before him with intentional care. “I need to go to bed he,” said, yawning into his shoulder. He patted his stomach contentedly, dim light casting a shadow across his dark shirt. “Don’t want to have a headache tomorrow,” he said before laughing loudly. “Remember, Liam? The last time that happened? You told me I tossed in my sleep when I was drunk and then woke up to a pounding headache.”

“Yes, Harry,” Liam said amusedly. “I remember vividly.”

“Well, that won’t happen again,” he said, frowning slightly. “Have to be alert to drive tomorrow.” He brought his hand to gently caress Louis’ cheek, eyes dark and expression wild. “Have to take care of my precious omeg - ”

“Okay,” Liam said loudly, standing to his feet and clapping his hands. “Time for me to bring you to your bed, Mister.” He slung Harry’s arm around his shoulders. “Sorry about that, Louis,” he said carefully. “He’s not usually this bad. Think he’s a bit stressed out at the minute. Should be fine in the morning.”
Louis nodded once. “It’s not a problem, Liam. Thank you, though.”

Liam smiled at him and waved merrily to the group, eyes lingering on Zayn. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes to walk you back to your rooms,” he said.

“It’s alright you don’t have to do that,” Louis said quickly as Zayn nodded vehemently.

Liam fixed the three of them with a serious gaze. “I’ll sleep better knowing that you’re all in your rooms,” he said, glancing at where Harry was leaning on his shoulder. “I know Harry will too.”

They exchanged silent glances with each other before agreeing. They watched Liam haul an intoxicated Harry towards the exit before breaking into chatter.

Louis crawled beneath his bedsheets later that night, his thoughts revolving a certain individual he was starting to consider his alpha. He knew, however, that he would have to hammer at the cracks in Harry’s wall of self-protection before he could acquiesce to his desires.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience! I can’t wait to hear your feedback on this chapter. What do you think of Harry’s character? Do you think he is being unfair to Louis by pursuing him but not being fully honest or do you think he has a reason that justifies his behaviour?
“Fuck.” Harry muttered, voice barely audible from where his head was bowed over his suitcase. He frantically rifled through his belongings, throwing out his neatly folded clothes without consideration. “Fuck no, please.” He picked up the luggage and upturned it, clothes tumbling onto his bed. He dug his hand into the pockets of his trousers and peered inside the smaller compartments of the suitcase, hands beginning to tremble as his anxiety was accompanied by a wave of realisation. “Fuck!” he bellowed, slamming a fist on the bedside locker.

Liam jolted awake from his comfortable position curled into his pillow. “What? What happened, mate?”

Harry exhaled heavily and slid his deft fingers into his hair, tugging the loose curls aggressively. “I can’t find them,” he gritted out, collapsing onto his bed and removing his phone from his pocket.

“Can’t find what?” Liam asked, voice considerably less concerned as he realised that Harry wasn’t in immediate danger. He knew that the noise which had awoken was merely a side-effect of living with a more aggressive Harry than he was used to.

Harry glared at him, shoulders tense and hand clasped on the headboard of the bed. “My medication,” he whispered in a grave tone. He hung his head to avoid Liam’s wide eyes and futilely combed his clothes scattered across the bed and wooden floor.

Liam swiftly removed his bedsheets and crossed the room. “Call your doctor,” he said immediately. “You might be able to buy the same pills in a pharmacy here if he sends a prescription right away.”

Harry swallowed thickly, fists balled on the pile of disordered clothing. “Alright, yeah. I’ll do that now. I’m just- fuck, what if I can’t get it in time?” he mumbled, voice unusually vulnerable.

“Then you deal with the consequences, H. It definitely won’t be the first time you’ve worn your natural scent.”

“Obviously,” he scoffed bitterly. “It’s just that I can’t control myself recently; my alpha senses have been on high alert since the beginning of term and I don’t know how I’ll be able to restrain myself properly. Can barely do it as it is.”

“You don’t know it’ll be like that, Harry,” he said kindly, sitting gingerly on Harry’s bed. “It’s been years since she - ”

“I know that too,” Harry snapped. He instantly regretted it and mumbled an apology before collapsing on the bed beside him.

“It’s okay, mate. Just ring your doctor and find out. I’ll take a shower while you do that,” he said kindly. Liam made quick work of removing his t-shirt and grabbing his shower products from his rucksack before entering the bathroom.

Harry waited until he heard the sound of running water and Liam’s gentle humming before dialling his doctor’s number with reluctant fingers.
The receptionist answered the call and forwarded him to Doctor Tom Madison before he could even decide how to explain his situation.

“Hello? Yes, hi Tom. This is Harry Styles,” he said, gathering his composure.

“Harry!” he bellowed. “It’s been far too long since your last appointment, son. How’s the hospital internship going? What can I do for you today?”

“Going well, yeah,” he said in a strained voice. “I’m abroad in Dublin, Ireland at the moment, though and I, eh, have a small dilemma.”

“The medication is still working, I assume,” he asked, voice adopting a serious tone.

“It is, yes. Issue is that I left it back in England and won’t have access to it for another six days. It’s already been twenty-four hours since my last pill.”

His doctor sighed heavily and Harry hear the sound of fingers dancing across a keyboard. “Dublin, you said? Okay, I can send a prescription to a pharmacy – the only one in Leinster, mind you – that sells your medication. You’re lucky they stock any of it at all, son. It’s extremely rare, as you know and will probably cost you a mini fortune over there.”

“Not an issue,” Harry rushed out. “They do have it, though, don’t they?”

“Oh, they have it, alright. I’ve just send the prescription, so you can quit fretting like an omega in distress,” he said, chuckling lightly.

Harry clenched his jaw and gripped his phone but declined to comment on his derogatory remark.

“You need to get there as soon as possible, though, otherwise the adverse effects of stopping the medication so suddenly will cause your body to react violently. Your inner alpha could react in unpredictable ways if you don’t get it soon, you know what.”

“Yeah, I do,” he confirmed solemnly.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, son?”

Harry hesitated before replying.

“Come on, boy. Out with it.”

“My behaviour recently has become more in tune with my inner alpha,” he said cautiously. “I feel like in the last month or so I’ve been more and more ruled by what my inner alpha wants and not what I necessarily want.”

He considered Harry’s words. “And you’re still taking the prescribed amount medication daily?”

“Yes,” he responded easily.

“Okay. Describe your symptoms for me.”

Harry sighed heavily. “I feel like my anger at other alphas – even friends I’ve known for years – is always bubbling at the surface. Like, I just lash out at anyone that annoys me in the slightest. Everything that I feel, every emotion, is multiplied. Instead of feeling jealous, I need to act on my emotions. The urge to hurt anyone who hurts people I care about is so strong.”

Harry hears the scratch of pen on paper and an aggrieved sigh. “What about omegas? Candling
accepted them this term, right? Are your alpha-typical symptoms heightened around them?"

"Yeah," Harry breathed. "Yeah, I feel like they're all my responsibility, like it's my duty to make sure they're all safe and cared for. It's- it's fucking sick. I hate feeling so possessive of them, like I'm entitled to feel like that. And my inner alpha is so conflicted on this trip because they're here with a group of alphas and I feel like, when my alpha instincts are this engaged, that I'm going to snap with - "

"Okay, son, I'm going to stop you there. Tell me about your omega," he said simply.

"What?" he spluttered uncharacteristically.

"Your omega," he repeated slowly. "It's clear that all of this behavioural change is a reaction to finding your omega. As a junior doctor, I'm surprised you didn't make that connection. Quite a basic aspect of alpha biology for people on scent-altering medication, if you ask me."

Harry bit firmly into his lower lip to deter a low growl escaping from his lips at the slight. "I don't have an omega," he said lowly.

"Don't be pedantic, Harry, you know what I mean. You've obviously identified someone you can see yourself mating with and your inner alpha has settled on her."

"Him. He's a male omega."

"Right, him. Either way, your inner alpha has settled on this omega and thus, your behaviour and instincts have changed completely because you no longer emit a scent."

"Wait, what?"

He sighed frustratedly. "Your inner alpha feels like it needs to compensate for your lack of definitive scent so your behaviour is changing and your alpha instincts are strengthening because your inner alpha wants to claim him with your scent but, obviously, can't. As such, your inner alpha feels like it needs to make up for that by acting more protective of him and more jealous or aggressive with potential competitors."

Harry's mind was whirring with thoughts; images of instances when he longed to scent Louis, to disclose the truth about his lack of natural scent. He knew that Louis was curious but had always refrained from directly questioning him about the absence of his natural scent, something he was grateful for until this point. "So, what should I do to suppress these urges?"

"You can't do anything," he said bluntly. "What I'm going to do is slowly ween you off the medication so that you can begin to release your scent again."

"No," he refuted. "No, I can't so that." His body stiffened at the thought of returning to his state over two years previously.

"Harry," he sighed. "You shouldn't even have to consider this a choice. You'll be more in control of your actions while you emanate your scent than you could ever be continuing to take your medication. People don't suppress their scent after they've found their mate. There hasn't been nearly enough research to even know if it's dangerous or not. You owe it to yourself and to your omega to stop the medication."

He paused his typing and Harry heard him shift his belongings before the heavy thud of a book being placed on the desk rang through the phone. "I can hear that you're trying to fight this, I can. I just don't know how long that will last before things get out of hand. From what you've described,
I can only predict that as time progresses and you continue taking the medication, thing will deteriorate. I’ve spoken to your psychiatrist – briefly, mind you – and I know why you began the medication in the first place but that was years ago. I’m telling you that you need to leave the past to rest.”

Harry absentmindedly heard Liam singing a Frank Sinatra song in the shower, voice reverberating as his mind latched onto the distraction. He took an unsteady breath before replying. “Okay,” he sighed.

That morning, after an enormous breakfast of porridge sprinkled with brown sugar, fruit baskets and buttery toast, the group trundled aboard the bus. There was excited chatter between the students and Louis happily noted that the group was noticeably less segregated than the previous day. Alphas and omegas conversed about the prospect of visiting Dublin city centre without argument or tension. Though there was an appreciable rigidness and restraint in the way the alphas spoke and the omegas tended to gravitate towards each other to provide reassurance, the group seemed to be integrating comfortably.

Louis had wanted to discuss the development with Harry earlier that morning but found the alpha blankly ignoring him in favour of moodily shovelling porridge into his mouth and whispering angrily with Liam in a far corner of the breakfast bar. Louis had initially reasoned that Harry felt hung over from the previous night of excessive drinking but as the morning progressed he found himself doubting his theory.

“Maybe he’s still a bit sick from travelling,” Zayn suggested when they fell into their usual seats behind the bus driver’s seat.

“I think it’s something else,” Louis muttered as Harry climbed aboard and took a steeling breath when he saw Louis sitting behind his seat. “Morning Harry,” he said, smiling warmly at him.

Harry reciprocated the gesture but his smile seemed forced and unnatural. “Morning Louis,” he said, nodding his head politely before turning to George who had seated himself across the aisle from Louis. “Cover for me, would you? Not feeling well enough to drive, to be honest.”

George looked up at him, concern written clearly across his features. “Sure, man. Feel better.”

Louis shared a look with Zayn as they watched Harry amble to the back of the bus, followed by Liam who shot Zayn a furtive glance and a shy smile when he passed him.

“It’s definitely something more. He would never give up the chance to drive the bus. He likes the control too much to just hand the reigns to George because he felt a bit motion sick after yesterday’s flight.”

Zayn hummed in reluctant agreement. “Try to ignore it for the moment, Lou. He’ll come to you whenever he gets over whatever that was.”

They engaged in conversation with George who, perceptive of Harry’s behaviour, avoided any topic involving the alpha, electing to discuss the mingling alphas and omegas instead.

“It’s great to see how natural it all is,” he enthused. “I think going on these days will really benefit everyone far more than forcing them to do exercises to get to know each other will.”

“Definitely,” Louis agreed. “I think it’s much better for relationships to be forged naturally through this trip. We just need to facilitate inter-gender interactions rather than impose them.” He willingly
spoke with George during the half hour journey but he missed Harry’s input, his quirky remarks and insightful commentary whenever they discussed gender related issues.

They disembarked from the bus onto a bustling street where floods of people were rushing to their respective destinations, shouts and laughter ringing and scents permeating the air. Louis sensed Liam’s presence behind him while he was counting the number of omegas and temporarily paused to hear him arguing quietly with Harry.

“I told you, he’s going to ween me off them slowly so I still need to pick up a supply for about two weeks until I stop completely,” he heard Harry snap. “I don’t need to tell anyone shit. It’s my business.”

“Don’t be a prat, Harry,” Liam sighed. “Everyone’s going to notice before the trip’s over. You owe it to him to at least warn him about - ”

“Drop it, Liam,” he spat out.

Louis resumed his counting, sneaking a glance at Harry hanging his head. “Sorry,” he heard him mutter after a moment of silence. “Sorry for lashing out I just know I’m going to have to tell him and I’m so worried about how he’s going to react.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Harry. From what I’ve seen at least he’s completely - ”

“I counted fifty, Louis! What about you?” George called from the opposite side of the bus.

“Oh! Yeah, me too!” he called weakly, relying on George’s numeracy skills as he most definitely had not counted the group but didn’t want to delay them further.

“Let’s head to the heart of Dublin then lads,” George called to the cheers and shouts of the group. “Everyone can do what they please but meet back at the National Gallery at one o’clock.”

Louis saw him approach Harry and Liam with concern etched across his face only to be brushed off and pushed towards through the winding streets of Temple Bar. Louis grabbed Zayn by the hand and pulled him towards the main shopping district along with a group of female alphas.

“Do you think they’re following us or they actually want to go shopping here too?” Zayn asked under his breath as they browsed a sports shop in search of wetsuits to wear when they went swimming in Kerry.

“Pretty sure that one with the checked dress is called Tina and she’s definitely a fashion major,” Louis said as he held up a wetsuit for Zayn to examine. Zayn wrinkled his nose and Louis sighed, replacing it on the hanger. “Equally, though, I wouldn’t put it past Harry to instruct them to make sure we’re okay.”

Zayn laughed in amusement until he saw the look on Louis’ face. “Are you serious?”

Louis shrugged, averting his disbelieving gape. “He’s the same Harry I knew weeks and weeks ago but I think that recently he’s become a bit,” he hesitated, trailing off.


“Not that exactly, I’ve just noticed that he’s more tense recently. And more ruled by his instincts whenever he overthinks things. When it’s just the two of us everything is great. Well, better than great, really. But when we’re in a bit group or he forgets that it’s not just me and him then he changes.”
Zayn hummed, frowning in contemplation. “Have you brought it up with him?”

“What? No, of course not. We’re not dating or anything. It’s not my business to ask him about it. Besides what would I even say? ‘Hey Harry! Seems like your being a bit of a grumpy caveman alpha sometimes when we’re with other alphas. Mind toning it down a bit, man?’”

Zayn guffawed into the sleeve of his jumper. “Yeah, maybe not. Just, keep an eye open for any other changes you see. He probably wants to talk to someone about it. And knowing Harry he’s doing everything in his power to fight those instincts so go easy on him.”

“I always do.”

They spent the next two hours exploring the sights; appreciating the enchanting architecture, the historical buildings and quirky shops off the main streets of Dublin. They were the last to arrive at the National Art Gallery, panting and gripping onto their heavy shopping bags. The entire group turned to look at them, some with bemused expressions, others with unimpressed glares. Liam looked hopelessly endeared at Zayn’s slightly ruffled hair and pink cheeks as he set his shopping at their feet to catch his breath.

Louis stood on his toes and craned his neck over the group to glanced around the foyer of the gallery in search of Harry. He saw him instantly as he parted the crowd and Louis raised his hand in greeting before he could register his expression.

Harry stalked straight towards them, eyes narrowed angrily and jaw set. “Where the fuck were you both?” he demanded, stomping his foot on the marble floors.

If his deep, baritone voice wasn’t so intimidating, Louis would consider the action similar to that of a petulant child. “Sorry, we completely lost track of - ”

“I called you like twelve times, Louis and you didn’t answer,” he cut off frustratedly, holding up his hand to silence Louis. “I was worried sick, darling. Thought someone had- ” he cut himself off, exhaling heavily. “Fuck, I don’t even want to think about what could have happened to you.” He stepped closer to them and Louis could see a manic glint in his eyes. “Do you know what that would have fucking done to me? I was ready to call the fucking police, you know that?” His tone was furious, voice adopting an authoritative alpha timbre. “I can’t believe you would fucking ignore me like that, disrespect me, even. How dare you not consider your alpha’s - ”

“Harry calm the fuck down, mate,” George interrupted, approaching him hurriedly and flanked by a couple of other alphas from the group staring at him cautiously, like they couldn’t recognise him beneath the uneven breathing and murderous glare.

Harry’s face contorted into a menacing snarl and he growled lowly at him.

Louis, Zayn and a small group of inquisitive omegas in their immediate vicinity who had been watching the interaction instinctively and without their control dropped their heads to stare at the floor at the sound.

“Jesus, mate, look what you’ve done now,” Jacob growled from where he had watched Harry pace the foyer and tear his hair out in worry. “Control your inner alpha you fucking knothead.”

Harry’s lips parted at the sight of the omegas’ submission, mouth opening and shutting in shock. He stared at Louis’ small, hunched frame and hands clenched together behind his back. He noticed a tremor of fear in his shoulders.

“No,” Harry whispered, voice cracking and eyes widening and blinking rapidly in disbelief.
Though his heart ached to reach out to hold Louis, to softly murmur apologies in his ear and beg him for forgiveness, he knew that he couldn’t trust himself. He stepped back impulsively, almost tripping in his haste, eyes trained on Louis. He gripped onto the wall desperately, ignoring the calls of concern from Liam and George as he comprehended what he had forced Louis to do: submit against his will and before he could even explain himself. Harry’s hand flailed wildly behind him as his gaze remained on the line of Louis’ back and his hand gripped the glass of the door. He hauled the door open, pushing the other patrons blocking the exit and fled.

Louis, along with the other omegas, raised his head upon sensing Harry’s frantic departure. He found George and Liam standing nearby, heads together and speaking rapidly to each other, lines of concern on their faces. Liam kept glancing at Zayn from across the foyer. Their scene had attracted the attention of most of the tourists in the gallery as well as the staff. Louis saw a group of omegas approach him, smiling at him and placing comforting hands to soothe the tenseness of his back. He could only nod and smile tersely at their words of, eyes focused instead on George apologising profusely to the manager on duty.

He knew that, rationally, the source of Harry’s behaviour was distress about his whereabouts and wellbeing but that he had expressed his worry through anger. The rational part of Louis’ brain didn’t rule his emotions in that moment, however, because he was furious at Harry. He smiled weakly at an omega called Mary-Rose who stroked his shoulder and surrounded him in her flowery, feminine scent. He glanced at Zayn who was surrounded by Will and a small group of other students who were instructing him to raise his head slowly and take long, deep breaths.

“I’m just going to get a glass of water,” he said in a strained voice.

“Oh, I’ll get it for you,” Mary-Rose replied easily, bustling through the foyer to the small café to buy him a bottle of water.

Louis stole his opportunity and surreptitiously inched towards the door and rushed into the main street before anyone in the Candling group could notice his absence. He ran through the streets, waded in the crowds as a huge group of students passed him, heads whipping around and whispers about the male omega following him. He tried to follow the most straightforward route that Harry could have taken, resolutely ignoring the whispers as he focused his thoughts on where he thought Harry could have fled to.

After ten minutes of frantically roaming the streets of Dublin, having given up on calling Harry’s name after a group of leering alphas shouted him, he accepted defeat. He knew that the alphas back in the National Gallery would be highly concerned that he had followed Harry when the alpha was in such a hostile, erratic state. He trudged back in the direction, anger boiling inside of him as he recounted Harry’s sharp, unforgiving tone and his audacity to shout at him for mere tardiness.

Louis had sworn to himself since he was a young boy that he would never fall for a controlling, entitled alpha. Harry’s treatment of him that afternoon epitomised everything he detested about alphas yet he knew, beneath the harsh exterior, shrouded in worry and poorly expressed concern, Harry truly cared. During that week, more and more he turned to Harry, thought about and longed for him whenever he wasn’t near. He knew that his anger at Harry could, at least in part, be contributed to the alpha’s avoidance of him that day and the fact that being apart from each other affected Louis far more than it seemed to affect Harry.

He passed a laneway congested with a group of smoking betas outside a restaurant and saw a sight that, despite his intention to remain upset with the alpha, left Louis with a sad sense of longing and emptiness. Harry sat on uneven cobblestones, legs pulled to his chest and fingers gripping his skull. Fresh teardrops clung to his eyelashes and, beneath them, his eyes frantically darted around the
street, wide and unfocused.

“Harry?”

His movements didn’t stop, if anything, becoming more irregular in Louis’ presence. “Get away,” he whispered, voice croaky. “I’m serious, Louis, you can’t be around me.” His thoughts and fears tumbled out of his mouth, disordered and frantic.

Louis heard a scuffle behind him. He stepped closer to Harry, worry about his wellbeing outweighing his own apprehension. He knew that Harry would never intentionally hurt him, could tell from his voice that every fibre in his body regretted his outburst. Louis felt his previous anger dissipate as quickly as it came, replaced by an acute awareness that Harry needed him.

“Harry, I’m not going to leave you like this,” he said carefully, inching closer to him until he knew that Harry could detect his all-consuming scent, waves of comfort rolling off him. Louis crouched down and looked resolutely at Harry’s frenzied eyes, imploring him to meet his own. “Harry, you need to trust me. I don’t know what that was back there but you obviously weren’t in control of your actions, I know that now.”

Harry returned his gaze with urgent eyes. “You need to get out of here, Louis. I- I can’t be around you right now.”

Louis fought his strong instincts compelling him to remedy Harry’s distress and comfort him. He stood up and nodded once in acquiescence. “Who can I get for you, then? I can’t just leave you alone.”

Harry’s hands jerked suddenly and his face contorted like he had to restrain himself from acting on his impulses. “Just- get Liam. Liam,” he gritted out from between clenched teeth.

Louis’ eyes welled with unreleased tears and he stepped back until he was out of Harry’s range to notice the omega’s scent. Louis saw his shoulders visibly drop and his nostrils flare rapidly, desperately searching for his scent. “I’ll find him now,” he confirmed, turning on his heel in the direction of the National Gallery. He passed the beta patrons outside the bar and returned to the chaos on the main street.

“Louis! Louis, come here!” he heard George call urgently.

He turned and scurried in the direction of the voice to find George, Liam and four other alphas rushing towards him. “Where were you?”

“Harry,” he breathed out, ignoring George’s question though he had to go against his instinct to truthfully respond to him. “He’s in the side-street over there,” he said, pointing towards the group of betas. “He needs you, Liam.”

Liam exchanged a grave look with the other alphas. “He won’t want me to tell you this but it’s important. He’s experiencing withdrawal from medication he left back in England. Needs to be weened off them rather than suddenly stopping them so his behaviour is changing the longer he goes without taking them,” he explained, eyes trained on George.

“What medication? Why doesn’t he have it with him?” George questioned, verbalising the questions rushing through him as his stream of consciousness caught up with Liam’s words.

Liam shook his head. “I can’t talk to you about that. This is Harry’s situation and not something I can comment on,” he said firmly. “I just need you to come with me.” His voice dropped to a wary whisper. “I don’t know what he’s capable of doing if his inner alpha takes over his conscious mind
and I need someone else there in case - ”

“It’s okay,” George assured. “You don’t need to explain on his behalf. We should go.” He rounded on Louis and instructed him to return to the National Gallery. “Jacob will bring you. Stay there this time. We can’t let you get hurt.”

Louis watched with anxious eyes and parted lips as Liam and George turned their backs on him. He could barely find the strength to resist when he felt hands tugging at his shoulder to lead him away from the very person he needed to find. The only thought revolving around his head was that, whatever it took he would uncover the truth to heal his alpha.

Chapter End Notes

I would really appreciate hearing your thoughts on this chapter? What do you think will happen to their relationship when Harry gets his medication?
Forgiven

Louis received a call fifteen minutes later from George, his ringtone sounding around the expansive windowless rooms of the gallery. He avoided the glares of a couple of patrons and answered the call, scurrying into the hall.

George greeted him with a harried sigh. “Is everything okay?” he asked anxiously.

“Everything’s alright, yeah,” he replied unconvincingly. Louis could hear how he imposed the optimism in his voice.

“And Harry? How is he?”

"He’s- He'll be fine," George assured, conscious of his close relationship with Harry. "Maria is already on her way to the pharmacy that sells his medication. Liam and I are staying with him for the moment."

Louis could hear a scuffle and a low growl on the other end of the phone. "Could I speak to him?" he asked, unbothered by the obvious concern etching his voice.

"I think it would be best to wait until he's a little," - the line was cut off momentarily, followed by a sharp sound - "a little better. Hearing your voice might cause him to become aggravated again if he can hear you but knows he can't get to you."

Louis wanted to contest George’s advice but ultimately agreed, aware that he would be able to speak to Harry once the medication took immediate effect.

“We’ll probably bring him straight back to the hotel and see you back there after you’ve finished seeing the sights,” George said. “Realistically we won’t make it back to finish the city tour but I’m sure you and Jacob and the rest can keep an eye on everyone.”

Louis agreed easily. “I just wish I could be there with him,” he confessed, glancing towards one of the gallery rooms where a small group of the Candling students (the rest of whom had since dispersed to admire the sculptures and paintings adorning the walls) were gathered.

George made a noise of sympathy. “You will. Try to focus on getting the group through the rest couple of hours and you’ll be back at the hotel before you know it.”

Louis saw Zayn approaching him cautiously, eyebrow raised in question. He shook his question and mouthed George’s name to him. “Thank you. I’ll try, at least, to make sure everything goes according to plan. Everyone seems to be enjoying the artwork so far. There’s a lot of displays on omega innocence which they’re all blushing at.”

George laughed loudly before swearing. A crashing noise and a desperate shout of “Control it, Harry!” sounded.

“What happened? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, of course it is,” he gritted out, voice noticeably strained. “I’ll see you later, Louis.” With that, George immediately hung up the phone and Louis was left to stare blankly at the screen.

“What was that about?” Zayn asked, sidling near him.
“George said we should go ahead without them,” he said, tucking the phone into his pocket. “Says we’ll see them back at the hotel.”

Zayn didn’t reply, instead electing to turn his gaze to a huge portrait in front of them of an omega with white blossoms growing in place of her eyes. “I still don’t think you should forgive him for that. At least not straight away. Even if he wasn’t in control of his actions, he needs to apologise.”

Louis observed the small shoots of luscious grass which replaced the omega’s eyelashes. “I’ll wait for him to apologise, Zayn, but I already know that he feels terrible for what happened.” Images of Harry crouched on the cobblestones, eyes darting frantically and shoulders shaking flashed in his mind, bringing forward that same kind of vulnerability that he saw in the painting. “He had to beg me to leave because I knew that he had lost full control to resist his instincts.”

“I’m sorry,” Zayn said softly, placing a hand on his arm and gently closing his hand around Louis’ wrist. “I didn’t mean to sound insensitive; I know how much you care for him. I’m just looking out for you, Lou.”

…

“Fucking nightmare, that’s what he is. He almost bit my head off when I told him that the doctor had the medicine.”

“I know, Maria,” Liam sighed. He glanced briefly at where Harry lay sprawled on his bed, head lolling to the edge of his pillow, mouth agape. “He looks so harmless when he’s asleep,” he said, chuckling lightly.

She shrugged. “I suppose we all guessed his non-scent was artificially or medically imposed but we didn’t know why he would do that.”

Liam poked his head around the door and noticed the large group of tired students dragging their feet into the main hallway where most of their rooms were located. A distant murmur of excited chatter accompanied them.

“How was the rest of the trip?” Liam asked eagerly as stepped out of the room and made eye contact with Louis and Zayn leading the group. He noticed the enormity of Zayn’s backpack and instinctively reached out to relieve him of the weight before snapping his arm to his side.

Zayn raised an inquisitive eyebrow but remained silent.

“Amazing,” Louis breathed, craning his neck surreptitiously to see beyond the entrance to the alpha’s shared room with Harry. “The weather held off and we were able to take an open tour of all the major historic sights of the city. Even managed to see the Book of Kells despite the queue.” He glanced at where Zayn was determinedly avoiding Liam’s eye contact though his entire body indicated his desire the speak with him; hands clasped behind his back attentively in a typical omega stance and shy smile adorning his face. “I’m pretty sure Zayn’s favourite part was the art gallery, though. Right, Z?”

Zayn couldn’t send him the glare he wanted to but Louis tilted his mouth into an innocent smile and winked at him.

“Is that so? I regret not spending longer there, then. What was your favourite part?” Liam asked curiously.

Louis took his leave and unobtrusively left them in the hallway. He walked directly to Harry’s door to peer inside expecting to find a raging alpha pacing the room or perhaps a weeping Harry holding
his head in his hands. Instead he was met with the sight of Harry asleep beneath the thick duvet, limbs sprawled across the bed and dark lips parted.

He took a moment to simply observe Harry in deep slumber; unruly curls encircling his head, pale skin emitting slightly clammy in the soft light and dark lips parted, his two front teeth visible behind them. Louis approached him cautiously, placing his fingertips on his shoulder to brush at the stray curls resting there.

"He's completely unconscious. Probably won't remember any of this when he wakes up in a couple of hours."

George's voice at the entrance to the room started him and he snatched the hand to his chest. "Unconscious?"

George nodded sadly. "His medicine was prescribed by injection because they didn't have orally taken pill equivalent. Harry wouldn't stay still so they had to give him a weak anaesthetic," he explained. He glanced at Louis' cautious stance at the edge of the bed, hand tentatively reaching to touch Harry's cheek and was struck with the sincerity of the moment. "I'll leave you two alone. Just wanted to check everything was okay. The medication should work immediately, at least according to the doctor so he'll be back to normal when he wakes up."

"Thank you, George. I really appreciate you helping him this," Louis said earnestly, locking eyes with him.

George smiled warmly at him. "Of course. I'm not sure what you define your relationship with him as but I know he's lucky to have you, Louis. Don't give up on him just because of today. I'm not going to pretend to be as close to Harry as Liam but I know he's had a tough past. And I also know that he deserves a chance to have the life he wants with the person he want." He didn't wait for Louis' response before exiting and closing the door softly.

Louis directed his sad smile at the unassuming, sleeping figure and gently stroked his the soft skin of his cheek. "That’s me, Harry," he whispered, voice cracking over his thick swallow. “I could be that person if you’d just let me in.” A quiet sob escaped his lips and he stroked his thumb in the indent of Harry’s jaw. He made quick work of removing his shoes and crawling into the bed beside Harry before he could question his own decision. He pulled the thick duvet around him and lightly pressed his chest to Harry’s shoulder, resting his head against it. His eyes fluttered closed and he felt Harry press closer to him, throwing a strong arm around him. Harry’s face lowered until he nestled into Louis’ neck and released a deep, uneven breath.

“Ome- omega,” he sighed happily, drawing Louis closer.

He fell into a comfortable sleep, reassured by Harry’s strong presence.

…

Louis was awoken by the soft sound of knocking against the mahogany door. He blinked his eyes blearily and stifled a yawn when he saw Harry still asleep. His mouth hung open, tongue lolling against the pillow and eyebrows settled in a relaxed expression. Louis reached a hand behind him to pull at the collar of his jumper and felt a patch of wet on the back of his neck. He inwardly groaned at the uncomfortable sensation of Harry’s saliva but failed to suppress the small smile that bloomed at the feeling of Harry’s claim directly below his bond mark.

The knock sounded again, slightly louder this time.
“Just a minute,” he called softly, feeling the indents of the white bedsheets until he found his phone tucked beneath his pillow. He discreetly took a photograph of Harry’s amusing expression despite the alpha’s deep slumber before rounding the bed and opening the door with a flurry.

Zayn and Liam’s eyes simultaneously took in his unkempt hair, wrinkled jeans and bleary eyes. Zayn raised a knowing eyebrow; Liam a curious one.

“Sorry,” Louis rushed out, frantically collecting his jacket and stuffing it into his rucksack. “I really didn’t mean to stay so long. Just wanted to make sure he was okay, really.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Liam assured easily. “Gave Zayn a chance to tell me about his art project.”

“Oh yeah? Were you able to give him some pointers on alpha-typical clothes?”

“No,” Liam said through a frown. He glanced hopefully at Zayn. “But maybe we could talk about it again? I’d love to help you out. That is, if you want help, I mean. I’m sure you’re more than capable of doing the project on your own I just wanted to offer but - ”

“Liam,” he sighed, though an almost indecipherable smile adorned his featured. “I’d actually really appreciate that, if you’re willing.”

Liam breathed heavily with relief. “Great,” he exclaimed.

Louis smiled in amusement at their interaction before stepping into the hallway and hooking his arm with Zayn’s. “I’ll leave you to have the room to yourself. Sorry again about that.”

“It’s not an issue, really. See you both tonight for dinner?”

They replied their agreement in unison before waving goodbye and returning to their room, jokingly pushing each other to get inside first. Louis managed to wedge himself into the crack between the door and its frame and jumped onto his bed with an enormous bounce. Zayn shut the door firmly before turning to him with a

“What was that?” Louis questioned.

“I should be asking you the same thing,” Zayn said, inching to the centre of Louis’ bed to lie next to him. “And besides, nothing happened exactly. We were just talking. You were the one sleeping with Harry fucking predator-alpha Styles.”

“I didn’t sleep with him; I slept beside him. There’s a difference,” Louis replied. “And he’s not an alpha-predator his body just reacted to his medication badly.”

“I know that. But you still managed to nestle in beside him, probably cuddling each other and whispering in your sleep,” Zayn said, tickling him lightly on his chest.

Louis squealed and responded with his own round of tickles before Zayn finally conceded with an outraged shout of “I give up, Lou! Stop!” which was negated by an outburst of soft chuckles.

“We weren’t even cuddling. He was totally out of it when I first came in. He kind of stirred when I woke up, though so he should be good for dinner tonight.”

“He’d better. Liam said that - ”

“Oh, Liam said something, did he?” Louis teased. “Well if Liam said something then it must be true.”
“Shut up,” Zayn said through a smile. “Liam said that it took you guys a lot of work to manage a reservation for a hundred people at Carravagio’s.”

“Yeah, it did,” Louis confessed. “Harry had to pull a few strings, though I really don’t know how. Even the London branch is always booked out months in advance so I can’t imagine what it’s like in Dublin. Either way, I wouldn’t want Harry to miss out on it.”

Zayn hummed in agreement before turning to him with a mischievous smile. “Then we’d better get ready and show Harry what he’s missing if he doesn’t apologise to you for how he behaved earlier.”

“He’d apologise even if I wore a, a- ” his eyes scanned their room where most of the furniture was littered with various items of clothing and undergarments from Zayn’s project. “That,” he identified, pointing towards a putrid yellow frock with red frills. “Even still,” he added more quietly, “I suppose it would be nice to dress up for dinner tonight.”

Zayn threw him a pair of tight blue jeans and low-hung top and winked. “Because you’ll sure as hell be getting Harry for dessert.”

…

They gathered in the foyer of the hotel lobby, excited chatter ringing through the area when he hurriedly joined the group just as George shouted, “We’re only missing Harry!”

“I’m here, don’t worry,” he called as every head in the vicinity angled towards him. Looks of disgust, surprise, outrage were thrown at him as he ventured further into the group, navigating scents to find the only person he truly cared to talk to.

“Louis,” he sighed in relief when he found him at the edge of the group, glasses perched on his nose as he looked down at his attendance list.

He looked up immediately and send him an look, communicating a curious balance of desperation and surprise. “You’re here,” he stated, though his voice was not upset, merely inquisitive.

“I am and I want to talk to you, if you’ll let me,” he said quietly, maintaining a respectful distance from the omega.

Louis’ eyes passed over the students craning their necks to witness their interaction before nodding once. He allowed Harry to guide him out of the lobby to stand in the carpark where their bus was. They faced each other and Harry’s regretful eyes noted his guarded stance, arms across his chest, hand gripping the opposite elbow.

“I know that I probably don’t even deserve a minute of your time because I’m selfish and I want you to know that I’m sorry. I need you to understand.”

Louis nodded in encouragement but his face remained impassive.

He inhaled deeply before opening his eyes and nodding to himself, “You probably know by this stage that I take medication to eliminate my scent – something that, in turn, regulates my hormone levels. When I left my pills back in London I thought that I would have a little while before my body would fully react in response to me stopping the pills so suddenly.” He chuckled humourlessly. “I didn’t, obviously. As the day progressed I felt every emotion amplified and when I phoned you and you didn’t respond my mind jumped to these completely infeasible conclusions and before anyone could even calm me down I snapped and I- I felt my inner alpha take me over.”
Harry’s imploring eyes searched desperately across Louis’ face for an indication of his response. “I had this constant thought of losing you ringing through my head. I felt worry for you just, like, consume me but, obviously, alphas express concern as anger and then- well, you know the rest.”

Louis remained quiet for a contemplative moment. “I forgive you, Harry but I need you to promise me that you won’t treat me or any of the other omegas like that again.”

Harry nodded adamantly. “I promise. It was never my intention to hurt you, omega,” he said solemnly.

“I know that it wasn’t your intention to shout at me and that you weren’t fully in control of your actions. I know that it was an accident and something that we just have to move on from,” he said firmly.

Harry shook his head. “It doesn’t matter that it was an accident. I still forgot my medication and stupidly went on the trip without considering all of the omegas’ safety. I still got aggressive and forced five omegas into submission without forewarning and against their will,” he said urgently, shoving his fingers through his hair as another wave of remorse crashed over him. H met Louis’ gentle gaze. “I still hurt you.”

Louis’ sad smile loosened the knot in his chest like no other remedy. “And I still forgive you. I want us to be able overcome this, Harry. I want you to apologise to Zayn and the others too, though. They were almost equally as affected.”

Harry agreed easily. “I will, of course,” he said. “I want to thank you too, Louis. You went after me to look for me even after everything I said to you. I didn’t deserve that, darling. I didn’t deserve your compassion or your sympathy.” His eyes shined with reverence as he cautiously observed Louis and took in his soft smile.

Louis ducked his chin at the compliment before nodding. “At the time I would probably have agreed that you didn’t deserve to be forgiven so easily. I was pretty pissed off with you,” he admitted, unable to meet Harry’s eyes. “When I saw you like that, though – all hunched over in the street and shaking – I knew I couldn’t hold your behaviour against you. It was clear that you weren’t in control of your actions and that you were trying to restrain himself.”

“I wasn’t,” he said. He let out an uneven exhale before lifting Louis’ chin slowly to meet his gaze. “But things are going to change,” he said firmly. “My doctor’s advising me to ween myself off the medication to placate my inner alpha.”

Louis’ entire face brightened with realisation and Harry softly stroked the juncture between his neck and jaw.

“Are you sure that’s safe, Harry?”

He nodded in confirmation, thumb drawing small circles beneath Louis’ ear as he stepped closer.

“Does that mean I’ll be able to detect your scent?” he asked, ecstatic smile prompting Harry to lightly press their foreheads together. “Yes. You’ll be able to in about a couple of days’ time,” he said but didn’t elaborate. “Speaking of scents,” he whispered, placing his fingertips on Louis’ waist, “I woke up to find the purest, most captivating scent surrounding me and seeping into my bed sheets. You don’t happen to know how that might have happened, do you?”

Louis tilted his head in feign consideration, cautiously placing his hands on Harry’s strong shoulders.
He made a noise of appreciation at the omega’s gentle touch.

“I might have a couple of ideas,” Louis whispered. “You didn’t mind, did you? Your bed was just so comfortable and I didn’t want to leave you alone in that state.”

“Didn’t mind?” Harry repeated incredulously. “Darling, I couldn’t ask for a better surprise to wake up to. The only thing that could’ve made it better would be if you were there beside me, tucked under my arm.”

They heard the group of students approaching, loud voices carried by the October wind.

“Maybe next time,” he whispered coyly, detaching their bodies and waving the group towards the place where the bus had been parked the previous night.

They boarded the bus once again and Harry looked extremely pleased with himself at the thought of driving the bus, despite his inability to drive safely.

“It’s a control thing, I heard,” Zayn whispered to Louis from their seats behind the driver. “Like, he uses everything in his means to control things around him in his environment because the one thing he truly wants to take charge over he can’t.”

Louis tilted his head in consideration of his words. “Perhaps,” he said. “I’d imagine that it’s something to do with his internal conscience, that he doesn’t always have power over his inner alpha and that his frustration is kind of channelled into other things he does.”

“Bedroom things, maybe,” Zayn whispered with an exaggerated wink.

Louis hit him lightly, though the impact was negated by his thick jacket.

“Fucking prick, you’re in the wrong lane!” Harry shouted, gesticulating wildly. Obscenities flooded out of his mouth throughout the chaotic traffic and ignored the loud beeps of the cars surrounding the bus.

Louis giggled lightly. “Harry, I think you might be in the wrong lane,” he said gently.

Harry turned around, hard expression softening at the sight of Louis curled into Zayn for warmth. He glanced back at the road and his eyebrows darted together with delayed realisation. “Oh,” he breathed. “I knew that,” he exclaimed loudly. “I was just checking to see if this bus could bend the rules a bit.”

“I don’t think so, unless you’re planning to crash into the car heading our direction.”

Harry swerved the bus, effectively avoiding the black Mercedes-Benz.

“Where are we, anyway, Harry?” a voice called from the middle of the bus aisle.


“You’re sure doing a mighty fine job of it,” Liam muttered. “Do you even know where you’re going, H?”

“Of course I do,” he dismissed shortly.

“Louis,” Liam said quietly, leaning across the narrow aisle on the bus, “why don’t you sit up beside him and take out the map or the sat-nav or something. You’re probably the only one he’ll listen to.”
Louis nodded in agreement and slowly approached the diver’s seat. “Harry,” he began, prompting him to turn himself to entirely face him. “Wait, keep your eyes on the road,” he cautioned. “Liam suggested that you might want a bit of help finding the restaurant.”

Harry looked conflicted, fighting his instinct to reject help for fear of appearing weak and reliant. “Okay,” he said finally, eyes trained on the road and missing the smile crossing Louis’ features. “Maybe you could read me directions from the map.” He reached into a compartment containing the faded map which clung to a certain scent that left Louis longing for more. “Why don’t you sit here, darling?” he said, moving slightly closer to the window to leave space for Louis on the wide seat.

Louis’ eyes widened. He reminded himself that he had slept closer to Harry that very afternoon as he inched closer to the seat and sat primly beside him. He denied every instinct in his body to lean closer to him, rest his head on Harry’s shoulder and gaze up at him while he drove.

Harry sensed his tenseness and placed a large hand on his mid-back, massaging the muscles. “Are you okay? I’m the one who asked you to sit beside me, Louis. Don’t be afraid to sit closer to me,” he said gently, steering the bus with one hand to park the bus in a small carpark to give him a chance to find their location.

Louis glanced up to meet his sincere eyes and pressed himself closer to him, whispering a small “Thank you, Harry.” He closed his eyes at the feeling of his long fingers roaming his back, pressing into the crevices and along his spinal cord. Louis spent a couple of minutes attempting to find their location and decipher a route to their destination.

“Why have we stopped, Harry? I’m bloody starving back here,” an irritated voice called that both of them could instantly identify as that of an alpha.

Louis felt Harry’s chest rumble with the effort it took to suppress the growl originating there. “We will get there when we get there, Daniel. Right now you need to be patient and let us find where we’re going,” he said spitefully. He turned his attention back to Louis and whispered a quiet apology. “Effects haven’t fully worn off yet,” he explained. “Take your time finding the restaurant, sweetheart.”

“I think I know the route we should take. It won’t be longer than fifteen minutes until we arrive.”

“Wonderful,” he said, beaming at Louis and trailing his fingers in spirals across the expanse of his back. Though it was clothed by a top, Louis felt his skin sear wherever Harry’s fingers touched.

“I think the fastest way would be to take a right here and then bypass the city centre to go along the motorway,” he said.

Harry hummed his appraisal and danced his fingers across Louis’ lower back, sending a ripple of shivers through the omega.

“Th – then you should take the third exit and continue along main street until we reach the restaurant,” he said, exhaling shakily.

Harry continued driving according to Louis’ instructions, absentmindedly tapping his fingers on Louis’ waist to the beat of the AC/DC. “What do you think of this song, Louis?”

Louis’ interest piqued at the question and he directed his attention to the guitar riff sounding in ‘Highway to Hell’, “I like it,” he said, privately preening at Harry’s smile of encouragement. “Proper Rock n’ Roll, you know? Sound like the kind of stuff my dad would play when I was
younger.”

“Mine too,” Harry said before coughing extremely loudly and pointing to the sign on the road indicating their next exit. “We should, eh, I should turn here, right?”

Louis glanced curiously at him but declined to comment on his change in topic. “Yeah,” he affirmed as Harry turned the steering wheel sharply. “That’s the restaurant just there.”

After Harry (rather atrociously) parked the bus, they clamoured out of the bus. One of the omegas claimed motion sickness to which Harry looked appropriately apologetic. “Are you feeling okay, sweetheart?” he asked Louis as they walked the short distance to the reception desk of the restaurant and George spoke to the head waiter.

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you,” he assured easily. His mouth twisted into. “Your terrible driving doesn’t bother me too much.”

Harry squawked with indignation. “My driving is not terrible.”

The entirety of the group in their vicinity raised disbelieving eyebrows at him. He glared at the alphas until they had the sense to look away.

They were led into the lavish restaurant, oak tables and expansive windows revealing the bustling street outside. Each table was adorned with lily flowers floating in delicate vases and candles were dotted around the restaurant. Harry led Louis towards one of the two-person tables by the window overlooking a fountain reminiscent of those found on the grounds of Candling. They sat opposite each other, smiling shyly before Louis’ gaze flew to the view just as Harry’s stayed on Louis, silently observing him and appreciating his features.

“You look particularly beautiful tonight, omega,” he said. “That colour brings out the little gold specks in your eyes.”

Louis raised his line of vision and looked up at him from beneath his eyelashes. “Thank you,” he said, smiling at him with such sincerity that the corners of his eyes crinkled. “I, eh, I really like it when you compliment me. You look as handsome as always too, Harry. I think long hair suits you.”

Harry shot him a dimpled smile. “Most people would disagree but I appreciate hearing that from you, darling.”

Louis frowned. “They do?”

“It’s considered unprofessional when it goes past my ears,” he explained, shrugging. “Used to be much longer, actually, but I decided to cut it when my part-time job at the hospital was confirmed.”

“I’m sure the little kids love playing with it,” he said with a small smile.

“They do. A little too much, actually. Tends to hurt when they tug it too much.”

They were interrupted by a chirpy beta waitress who took their order promptly and smiled at the image of their legs intertwined beneath the table.

“I’m sure you’re missing your patients. How’s Albert getting along?”

“Really well,” Harry said, smiling at the thought of the young boy. “His condition is improving
every day and just last week he started his physiotherapy to get used to using a wheelchair.”

“That’s amazing. I’m so happy for him. He’s such a great little lad.”

“He is. Him and Molly keep asking for you, by the way. They’re desperate to have you read to
them again. Say that it’s just not the same when the carers read to them,” Harry said, thanking the
waitress as she placed a bread basket between them.

“I’d be happy to,” Louis said, drizzling olive oil on his rye bread. “Although we’re both going to
have pretty busy schedules once we get back what with the International Gender Research
Foundation study.”

Harry made a noise of agreement around his wholemeal scone. “It’ll be worth the extra work,
though. I spent most of the last couple months – since I was elected as Student President, really –
working to get them involved with Candling. I don’t know any more than you do about the
research itself but judging from all the equipment and access to the labs they requested, I’m
guessing there will be a lot of experiment work.”

“That’s what I’m a little worried about. Obviously I’ll be looking at the gender issues from a legal
perspective but we still have to all be subjects for the experiments, right?”

“You do,” Harry said slowly, “but I highly doubt you’ll be forced to do anything against your will.
The only reason we’re fully involved in the experiment side of things is to see our research be
applied practically. I’m sure the other omega - ”

“Catherine.”

“Right, Catherine. She’ll be able to act as the subject for the experiments you’re not comfortable
being a part of.” He leaned closer and met Louis’ gaze with unwavering intensity. “I’ll make sure
you won’t have to do anything that you haven’t given your prior consent to.”

His piercing eyes paired with the hinted promise of protection sent a thrill of nerves down Louis’
spine. “I would really appreciate that, Harry,” he said quietly, voice breaking as he voiced the
alpha’s name.

Their main meals – mint lamb, dauphinoise potatoes and fresh garden vegetables – arrived shortly
afterwards and they tucked in eagerly. When the waitress asked about their meals, he engaged in
conversation with her about the meal, referencing a number of cooking techniques Louis had never
heard of.

“I know we had the, uh, incident last time we went on a date,” Louis began, noticing his slip in
word choice at the sight of Harry’s eyes lighting up at the word ‘date’. “But I really did mean to
compliment you properly on the meal you cooked.”

“Thank you, omega,” he said happily. “I think it’s important for an alpha to be able to provide for
his mate and children, you know? Not enough alphas these days take responsibility for that.”

Louis smiled in agreement. “Although my parents were both betas they still shared household
duties like cooking and cleaning. Didn’t really get around to teaching me how to cook though as
you’re well aware,” he said, laughing self-deprecatingly at his attempt to cook a basic pasta dish
two weeks previously.

“Hey, it wasn’t that bad,” he assured, though he was suppressing a smile at the memory of his half-
raw and half-burnt seafood.
“I’m pretty confident that I’m a worse chef than you are a driver. And after that driving I just witnessed, it’s a pretty high bar you’ve raised, Styles,” he said jokingly.

A honk of laughter escaped Harry’s lips and his eyes widened comically at the sound, making Louis burst out in uncontrollable giggles. A number of patrons glanced around at their antics, frowns immediately turning to amused smiles at the endearing couple.

They finished their meals, conversation flying between topics covering their respective courses and interests and what they hoped to achieve in the future. Louis knew that Harry was deliberately avoiding the topic of his medication but he let the topic slip from his mind, focusing instead on Harry’s engaging questions, showing the extent to which he was interested in learning more about him. He yearned to do the same, uncover the reason why Harry ever decided to conceal his scent to begin with. The right moment to do so never arrived and he vowed to wait until he knew that Harry would be comfortable talking about such a sensitive, personal issue. Louis knew that, as a private person, he was in a special position to have Harry directly approach him to reveal the source of his behaviour. He also knew that Harry would, in time, feel equipped to open up further and talk about his past and that he would simply have to wait for that day to arrive.

An enormous and elaborately decorated dessert was placed between them to share. Harry split the dessert in half, proclaiming that both sides were equal though Louis’ was undeniably larger.

When Louis raised a disbelieving eyebrow Harry merely shrugged. “Alright yours is a little bigger but only because I want you to have it.”

Louis smiled in appreciation and watched Harry stick out his tongue obscenely to lick cream off his fork. “Harry,” he whispered scandalously.

“What?”

Louis indicated wildly to his outstretched tongue circling his fork.

Harry glanced down and smirked. “Forgot I sometimes do that. I only notice when people point it out,” he shrugged, proceeding to suck a cherry into his mouth and wink at him.

Louis felt a rush of bold courage surge through him. “Two can play at this game,” he muttered, picking up his fork.

“What was that, darling?”

“Nothing,” Louis said guiltily, raising his fork to meet his parted lips. He moaned around his fork of velvety chocolate mousse, closing his eyes and tilting his head backwards to subtly expose his neck. He heard a fork clatter on a plate and Harry’s sharp intake of breath. When Louis opened his eyes he found him staring unabashedly at his mouth, bulging eyes following the long line of his neck. His tongue lapped over his lips messily, turning them a darker shade.

“Fuck, I’m just, going to- to the bathroom,” he stuttered out, standing up and scrambling out of his chair. Louis watched him run a frustrated hand through his hair and amble towards the bathroom, his usual languid, confident stride unrecognisable.

Louis ignored the curious stares directed at him as he waited for Harry to return. He felt a swell of nerves at Harry’s reaction, unsure how to react upon his return. He was saved from his thoughts when Harry collapsed back into his seat a couple of moments later, cheeks coloured a rosy pink.

“Where were we?” he asked with an indecipherable smile.
The remainder of the group finished their meals half an hour later and after paying the bill, the students trudged back to the bus, sated and sleepy.

Louis parted with Harry and watched him clamber aboard to set the destination of their hotel into the sat-nav, having assured Louis that he should rest on board rather than focus on directing himself through the late-night traffic. He saw Zayn approach him outside the reception area and raised a hand in greeting, question about how he enjoyed his meal on his tongue before Zayn held up a hand and interrupted him.

“Do you happen to know why Harry Styles was furiously wanking in the restaurant bathroom, Lou?”
Louis spent the four hour journey to Kerry curled into Harry’s side, socked feet tucked beneath him and head resting against his chest. He occasionally fell asleep, drifting in and out of consciousness as he observed the countryside landscape and winding rivers with sleepy eyes. He felt Harry rest his cheek on his hair to breathe in his calming scent. When they arrived in mid-afternoon Louis was gently shaken awake by Harry.

He thanked him gathered his belongings, manoeuvring his way around the bags scattered across the aisle to find Zayn seated beside Liam.

“I swear Lou, I think you have some kind of calming power over Harry. He didn’t swear even once at any of the other drivers,” Zayn said, smiling at Liam and accompanying both him and Louis down the aisle. They clambered off the bus together and made their way into the car park of their hotel.

The sight they were met with, however, was vastly different from the cosy farmhouse-turned-hotel they had expected and spent weeks poring over on the website. They saw a beautifully decorated cottage complete with a red door, thatched roof and baskets of colourful flowers hanging along the fence. Hens ran across the front garden and a huge stable of curious horses stood adjacent to the small cottage, surrounded by majestic, rolling hills in the distance.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful,” he heard Zayn say cautiously, “but where are we meant to sleep?”

Louis glanced at where Harry stood leaning against the bus with the map opened fully in his outstretched arms. He inched closer to him only to hear him mutter a quiet, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s definitely the place,” Louis said, confirming his suspicions. “I saw a sign reading ‘Valentina Island Lodge’.”

Harry exhaled deeply and peered around the side of the cottage in the hope to find some kind of residence to house one hundred students for the night. “Maybe we could just ask whoever owns the house if there are any other hotels in the area.”

George and Liam quickly approached them, both alphas wearing matching expressions of confusion. “They must have mistaken us when we said one hundred people. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to ask them,” he mused.

“If this is the place we’re demanding a refund, though. They can’t advertise this place as somewhere that can house a huge group like ours,” George said.

Liam and Harry agreed immediately and approached the cottage, Louis trailing behind them and trying to catch up with their long, determined strides. Louis glanced at where a group of students were gathered around the horses and others were dotted in small groups around the accompanying field making daisy chains and sharing snacks, wrapped snugly in heavy jackets but enjoying the late Autumn sunshine.

Harry knocked firmly on the door and brought himself to full height, adopting a typical alpha stance in preparation to confront the owner of the cottage. Louis had to suppress a laugh at the
sight of three tall, domineering alphas – the heads of all of whom brushed the bottom of the thatched roof – standing outside the tranquil country house, ready to give the owner a piece of their minds about the advertisement of the property.

“Maybe,” Louis said tentatively, “maybe I should do the talking. At least if the owner is an omega.”

The three alphas turned to face him directly before exchanging glances at each other. Liam send Harry a look of disapproval as he opened his mouth to object.

George had the wherewithal to chuckle, sheepishly bringing his hand to rest on the nape of his neck as he drained in the sight of his two friends. “That’d probably be for the best. We’ll step in though to help.”

Harry was visibly frustrated but reluctantly agreed, watching Louis step in front of the three alphas as they formed a semi-circle around him.

Louis rapped his knuckles across the painted wood and waited. A moment later the door was thrust open and an unusually short, plump alpha with a thick beard opened the door. His scent was that of lemongrass but Louis detected an unappealing sharpness to it. He frowned at Louis, unabashedly breathing in his potent scent before directing his line of vision toward the three alphas.

The very second that Harry saw that the man was an alpha he stepped closely behind Louis, pressing his chest to Louis’ upper back and wrapping his arm around his waist to silently communicate his presence to Louis.

“Hello, we’re here from the Candling group,” Louis said brightly, extending his hand to the alpha. He frowned at the gesture and then rebuffed it, scoffing at Louis’ formality. “I know who you are. You’re our biggest group this season,” he said shortly.

Louis smiled in a way he hoped was friendly. “Well, as you already know, then, we have quite a large group with us and we were wondering if there was some kind of mistake with regards to our booking,” Louis said politely.

“I’m fully aware of the size of your party. Don’t need someone like you lecturing me on the business I run.”

“I wasn’t - ”

“I’ll speak to your alpha instead, boy,” he said dismissively, turning his attention instead to Harry. “He’s a male omega, why do you let him believe he’s anything more?” He shook his head regretfully and sent Harry a look of distaste. “Honestly, you young alphas are all charity cases catering to these abnormalities,” he said, indicating towards Louis.

Louis felt an onset of tears approach as his eyes prickled and he blinked to deter the floodgates from opening in the presence of such an abhorrent alpha. Louis hear Liam and George make noises of disgust at his words. He could sense Harry’s outrage in the way that he breathed heavily and clutched Louis’ hip more tightly.

“My Louis and all male omegas are the farthest thing from abnormal,” Harry spat. He stepped closer to lean over the man, gently angling Louis to his right side to avoid the direct confrontation. “He was trying to engage in polite conversation because he knew we couldn’t after we saw the size of your cottage and rationally knew that we couldn’t stay here. He wasn’t fucking lecturing you on your business you prick. He’s more composed than any of us and, unlike you, actually considers
others before he opens his mouth. So if you actually want our service here I would advise you to shut your fucking trap before I do it for you.”

The alpha looked prepared to challenge him, rolling up the sleeves of his faded shirt until a beta – the replica of his father except twenty years younger and not boasting a thick beard - stepped into the hallway of the cottage. “What’s the matter, Dad?”

“Just dealing with the Candling guests, Connor. Why don’t you start distributing the tents?” he said, regaining his composure.

“Tents?” they chorused disbelievingly.

The alpha and his son, Connor, turned to face the four of them, the latter frowning slightly. “Of course. You don’t honestly think you can fit all one hundred of you in here, do you?”

Harry dragged his long fingers through his hair and rolled his shoulders. “Christ, why didn’t we hear about this before? Louis, can I speak to you for a moment?” he said with an aggravated sigh.

“Yes, sure,” he replied carefully, following Harry the short distance to the wooden fence surrounding the property.

Harry’s footsteps stilled suddenly and he turned towards him. “Do you have the folder still? The one with all of the references and phone numbers of the tourist attractions in the places we’re visiting.”

“Yes, it’s in my backpack. I know what you’re thinking though, Harry and I really think that our best bet is to just accept that some people are just too ignorant to be educated about things like social justice. I know it’s frustrating but I’ve learned that some battles just aren’t worth fighting.”

“Be that as it may, I still don’t want us to stay here,” he said definitively.

“Maybe we should get George and Liam to give their opinions on moving.”

“No,” he said firmly. “This is your decision, not theirs. You’re here representing the omega students so that mean it’s your call to make.”

Louis smiled at him regretfully. “I appreciate that, Harry, I really do. It’s just that I don’t think we have a choice. What hotel is going to take one hundred students on such short notice?” He cast his eye over the wandering paths and grazing cattle, the sun hidden behind a large Hawthorn tree in Louis’ direct line of vision. “I know it’s not ideal but, besides the owner this place is perfect. And if we camp then we probably won’t have to interact with him that often. We can even get breakfast in the local village.”

Harry exhaled heavily. “If you’re truly comfortable staying here then we can. But I’m not going to put up with his bullshit.”

Louis watched Harry stalk back to the front entrance to see Conner loading an endless number of tents onto a red tractor, the hens in the garden clucking beside him as he carried out his work.

“We’re staying,” he confirmed to the alpha, though his tone hinted at his disinclination to do so.

“Bet you agreed to your omega’s wishes, didn’t you?” he taunted, sauntering into the kitchen and indicating for a fuming Harry to follow him. George, Liam and Louis did the same, exchanging wary looks with each other.
They carried out the paperwork and reluctantly payed a hefty deposit to the man.

“Connor will bring you all to Thatcher’s Field where you’ll be staying and he’ll explain how you set up the tents,” he said.

They nodded and Harry steered Louis out of the cottage urgently.

“What was that?” Louis said, half-laughing when they reached the gate out of the garden in a matter of seconds, Harry’s hands still clutching his shoulder desperately.

“Don’t like you being in his presence,” Harry gritted out. He looked down at Louis’ curious gaze. “I’m sorry if that seems like I’m overstepping my mark but I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

Louis smiled beatifically and pressed a light finger into the line of Harry’s forehead, smoothing the crease there. “Hey,” he said softly. “I don’t mind at all. I know you’re only looking out for me.” He shifted his eyes nervously to a patch of bright daisies blooming in the afternoon sun. “If I’m honest,” he said shyly, “it makes my inner omega really happy and like, settled when you act protective like that.”

Harry’s entire demeanour transformed at the confession, eyes brightening before holding Louis in a tight embrace, pressing small kisses into his hair. “You have no idea,” he said, lowering his head to nuzzle lightly into his neck, “how happy that makes me, Louis.”

“Alright, lovebirds, that’s quite enough affection for the moment,” Liam interrupted, though he wore a proud smile. “We have to follow Conner down to Thatcher’s Field and gather the rest of the group too.”

They eventually rounded up the group and made their way towards the enormous field, a mere half kilometre from the cottage.

The strongest alphas in the group helped Conner unload the tent packages, flexing their muscles in a futile attempt to attract the omegas, many of whom were petting the horses and foals in the nearby paddock.

“Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five,” George counted as the tent materials were distributed around the field. “So four people to every tent, right?”

Connor nodded in confirmation. “Yes, four per tent and males and females must be separated.”

“What?” George laughed incredulously, thankful of Harry and Liam’s approaching footsteps.

“What’s going on?”

“Apparently males and females need to be separate,” George said.

Harry scoffed before noticing the sheepish look on Connor’s face. “You can’t actually be serious?”

Connor shrugged. “It’s part of Dad’s policy. And believe me when I say he’ll have no problem kicking you out if you go against the rules,” he said sagely. “It’s only for one night,” he tried to reason. “I know his views are kind of backward when it comes to male omegas and female alphas and such but it’s just the way it is. Not all of us are like that.”

“That fucking prick needs his knot shoved up his - ”

“Harry, calm down,” Louis said gently, though his blood boiled at hearing his suspicions about the
man confirmed by his own son.

“I’d better get back to the house. You remember what I said about setting up the tents?” he said to George.

“Yeah. Thanks for the help,” he said through pursed lips.

They watched Connor drive through the field in the direction of the quaint cottage before gathering the group together. They sat in a misshapen circle, George and Louis leaning on the fence as they explained the rule imposed, much to the dissatisfaction of the students.

“It’s a discriminatory rule and we’re going to make a formal complaint,” George assures them. “Right now, though, we have to grin and bear it because there isn’t anywhere that’ll accommodate us for the night. Trust us, we’ve looked at all the options.”

“Now, unfortunately we have two situations where female alphas are going to have to share with female omegas and vice versa for the males,” Louis explained, gauging the starkly contrasting reactions of the students.

“There can only be four in each tent unless you want to physically sleep on top of each other, I suggest you all co-operate and understand and treat this situation maturely,” George said solemnly, sending a dark look at a select number of students with whom he was familiar. “We have eighteen female alphas which means two of you will have to share a tent with two female omega. We also have nine male omegas which means that one of you will have a tent with three male alphas. We know that this isn’t ideal for anyone but there’s nothing we can do, unfortunately.”

“We have a great day planned for tomorrow and wouldn’t want you to miss out just so that we spend the night travelling to a new location where there mightn’t even be a possibility of finding somewhere to stay,” Liam added.

There was a mummer of general approval among the group. Maria, the only female alpha who was the society secretary offered herself and another friend to share a tent with two female omegas.

“We’re both straight and I’d sleep more comfortably knowing that the two omegas won’t be in any danger or vulnerable situation or anything,” she said, articulating the thought in everyone’s mind about the safety of the omega students.

They agreed immediately and Louis gathered the female omegas together to discuss the situation. They were generally accepting of the situation and quite a number of them offered to be assigned one of the inter-gender tents. After hearing endless reassurances that he would make sure they felt safe and comfortable at all times, Louis eventually decided that Lily and one of her friends, Lane, would be chosen.

He returned to the group to find Harry and George with their heads together, arguing heatedly but surreptitiously.

“Is everything okay? Lily and Lane have agreed to share a tent with Maria,” he said, peering over at Harry to find a scowl on his face.

“Everything is fine,” George assured. “Are you positive they’re willing to share. I know Maria well and I promise they won’t come to any harm with her.”

Louis smiled appreciatively at his consolation and nodded. “They’re happy to do so.” He glanced nervously at the ground. “I don’t mind sharing either,” he said cautiously, looking directly at Harry. “If you’ll have me, that is.”
“We kind of expected you to say that, Louis,” Liam interjected before Harry could reply. “But after everything that’s happened the last couple of days it might be better to just let one of the others take one for the team.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” George added and Louis’ heart plummeted at the sight of Harry’s apologetic expression and the way his eyes fell to the ground. “We don’t expect you to have to put up with sharing when your inner omega might be uncomfortable with it.”

“What do you think, Harry?” he asked, imploring him to meet his gaze.

George and Liam turned their heads to send him warning glances. Though Louis knew that they had his best interests in mind, he felt a strong urge to wrap his arms tightly around the alpha. Harry had hurt him but had apologised profusely and Louis didn’t want to remain entrenched in his past mistakes.

Harry smiled sadly, looking directly at him. “I think that I don’t really have a say here and I want you to whatever makes you feel most comfortable.” He looked resigned, glancing towards him before his eyes flickered across the landscape and a short sigh escaped his lips.

Louis paused for a moment, fully aware of the three pairs of expectant eyes trained on him. He could see Zayn and Will sitting together on the grass, holding up various poles and rods in an attempt to construct the foundation of the tent. He knew that both of them would be prepared to take his place and that they too wanted to ensure his safety and the wellbeing of his inner omega.

“Okay, let’s get started then, Harry,” he said brightly, clapping his hands and picking up the groundsheet of the nearest tent set and laying it on the ground.

Harry gawked at him, jaw dropping and started eyes widening comically. “Wait, what?”

“You can’t expect me to make this by myself,” he teased. “Come on, if we’re sharing a tent then you need to put in some work too.”

Harry almost tripped over his long legs in his haste to stand beside Louis.

He saw George and Liam exchange a look of amusement, the former pointing in the direction of the rest of the group. “We’ll be over there helping the others if you need us.”

Harry stilled his movements by placing his hands on Louis’ shoulders. “Are you sure, Louis? I’d completely understand if you or your inner omega isn’t ready to forgive me.”

Louis placed his hands on top of Harry’s and closed his eyes to privately revel in the feeling. “I trust you, Harry. I don’t know how long you’ve been struggling with controlling your inner alpha but I think it’s time that you trust yourself too.”

Harry’s face broke into a beam and he pressed his cheek into Louis’ hair. “Thank you, Louis. You don’t know how much that means to me,” he whispered, rubbing his thumb gently across the smooth skin of Louis’ wrist. Harry unwound his hands from beneath Louis’ and captured his wrists, pressing a soft kiss to his lower palm.

Louis’ entire body jolted and his hands pulled away as though burned.


“Sorry, sorry,” he amended hurriedly. He resolutely avoided Harry’s concerned gaze, sensing a blush rise up to his cheeks as he whispered, “You can hold my hands, it’s fine. I- it’s just, eh, my
wrists are very, eh, sensitive.”

“Sensitive?” Harry repeated, tilting his head with confusion.

Louis’ entire face heated and he toyed with the hem of his jumper. “Sorry, it’s kind of embarrassing,” he said through a humourless laugh.

“You can tell me, omega,” he said kindly, stepping closer to hold Louis’ hands once again. His eyes searched for Louis’ and, finally, they met.

Louis knew that his cheeks had turned a rosy blossom colour in the way that Harry’s eyes roamed his searing skin.

“I promise to listen, Louis. I want to make sure you’re comfortable with me touching you but I need to know you’re boundaries. If you don’t want me to touch your wrists - ”

“No! It’s not that at all,” he said hurriedly.

“Well then what is it?” Harry asked, patient tone reflected in the way his thumbs slowly trailed across the skin of Louis’ hand.

Louis exhaled shortly. “It’s, eh, sort of just a thing I have,” he said awkwardly.

Harry smiled encouragingly at him, nodding his head for him to proceed.

“I think my inner omega likes the feeling of having my wrists held,” he rushed out, squeezing his eyes shut to avoid watching Harry’s reaction.

He heard the sound of laughter and sensed Harry chest rumble deeply. Louis opened his eyes and peered up at him, quirking his eyebrow in question.

“Is that all?” Harry asked, shaking his head at Louis’ antics, highly amused.

“What do you mean?”

“Me holding your wrists is a kink? Darling, I thought it was something serious like you don’t like the feeling of having them trapped or something,” Harry said, brushing a stay strand of hair out of Louis’ eyes. “You should’ve just told me.”

“Oh,” he breathed. “I guess I just realised that it’s something I like when you’ve touched my wrists in the past. You’ve never held them like that before so that’s probably why my body reacted like that. I never realised it was a, a kink, until you did it, Harry.”

Harry’s eyes darkened at the confession. His hands travelled excruciatingly slowly until they captured Louis’ wrists. “Yeah?” he said thickly. “You like it when I do that?”

Louis’ eyes fell closed and his head tilted backwards, sighing contentedly. “Yeah,” he breathed lightly. “You make me feel so good, Harry.” For a moment he savoured the feeling of feeling secure in Harry’s hold, sensing the evening sun pass across the back of his neck and hearing the distant sound of chatter from the other students across the field. He released a breathy sigh when Harry’s fingers tightened to grip his wrists.

Harry placed Louis’ hands on his chest and he instinctively leaned closer until their bodies were wrapped around each other. He felt Harry’s light breath travel across the nape of his neck, tickling the skin of his bond mark region. Louis felt a sense of tranquillity settle around him, leaving him
with a sense of wholeness, as though Harry and him formed something unified and pure.

“Omega,” Harry whispered softly. “Louis, darling, I’m going to let go now because I don’t want you to disappear on me just yet.”

A whine passed Louis’ lips and before he could fully register what had happened he felt Harry’s soothing touch leave his wrists.

“How are you feeling? I’m sorry I didn’t keep going I just didn’t want to put you under without your permission,” Harry said, slow drawl bringing Louis into full consciousness.

“I feel perfect, Harry,” he said sincerely. “Thank you for not, well, taking advantage of me. I knew I could trust you but even still, a lot of alphas wouldn’t have hesitated to let me go under completely.”

“I never would,” he said emphatically before frowning slightly. “I never will.” He brought his hand to the base of his hairline and looked across to the other side of the field where music – Rihanna’s *Rude Boy* - had begun to play. Many of the tents had already been erected, thanks in no small part to the eight years Liam had spent as a boy scout.

“We’d better get started with this,” Louis said, nodding towards the array of tent materials sprawled across the short grass.

“Yeah, definitely,” he agreed easily. “Liam will probably be sleeping in the tent with us but I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of making our tent too.”

Louis rolled his eyes in amusement and crouched down to help Harry sort through the materials. He basked in Harry’s undivided attention and the inherent desires of his inner omega (which had formed a reliant connection with Harry) were fulfilled. After a half hour of cursing (on Harry’s part) and gentle reassurance (on Louis’ part) they had formed a respectable tent.

“It’s not nearly as big as I expected,” Louis frowned after crawling inside and sitting cross-legged beside the grounding pole at the centre.

Harry had more difficulty getting inside, his broad shoulders blocking his entry. After a couple of minutes of struggling he resorted to entering side-ways, wriggling inside until he sat beside Louis with a sigh of relief.

“What?” he said, feigning indignance at Louis’ soft giggles.

“Come on, you big alpha let’s start arranging the blankets. I’m going to need the most, you know,” he said, snatching the largest blue sleeping bag with a fleece lining on the inside. He expected Harry to object but he nodded earnestly.

“Oh, absolutely. I need you to be nice and warm so that you don’t catch a cold. I tend to run hot but you’re probably much more prone to feeling the cold,” he said, placing an enormous pile on blankets at the foot of Louis’ sleeping bag. His eyebrows knitted together and he proceeded to stand before banging his head on the roof of the tent. “I’m going to get you some more blankets, omega. It’s going to be cold tonight and I’m worried you’ll catch a chill otherwise.”

Louis smiled at Harry’s instinctual need to care for him and prioritise his well-being. As he closed his eyes and held Harry’s sleeping bag tight against his chest he sensed the scent of dulcet mulling spices and fresh pine needles emanating from it. As he drifted to sleep the heady scent wafted towards his nostrils and wrapped him in a thick, calming embrace.
Happy larryversary! I hope you all had a wonderful day and, if not, I hope that this chapter made it just a little better. Kudos and comments are hugely appreciated. Thank you! Also: what are your thoughts on mpreg?
He was awoken by the sound of shuffling feet and voices reverberating through the tent. He waited before opening his eyes, breathing deeply and recognising the familiar, mingling scents of Zayn and Lily. They were weak, however, and completely overpowered by one potent scent permeating the small space and rendering his limbs defunct. He revelled in the way the scent intertwined with his own and wafted throughout the small space inside the tent, as though it was theirs to share.

“Do you think he’s noticed yet?”

“How can he not have? Harry’s only just started emitting a distinctive scent and it’s already the only thing I can smell in here.”

“I just doubt that he would’ve fallen asleep before he noticed. He would’ve spoken to Harry first, I think.”

Louis opened his eyes blearily to find Lily hovering over him with a tilted head, her long auburn hair falling onto her shoulder and Zayn quietly observing him from where he sat on Liam’s sleeping bag.

“Alright, Lou?” Zayn asked cautiously.

He nodded feebly, closing his eyes once more to fully appreciate the splendour and richness of Harry’s scent. “I’m good, yeah,” he said on an exhale.

Lily smiled knowingly. “You sure about that? If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were a little overwhelmed,” she teased.

Louis stuck out his tongue at her. “Absolutely not,” he huffed.

“Whatever you say,” she sing-songed. “We just came to warn- I mean inform you that Harry’s on his way. That same Harry who has suddenly started releasing his scent.”

“Obviously you know that already,” Zayn said, indecipherable smile etched across his face as he nodded towards where Louis was unsubtly inhaling and sighing contentedly. “But we know that Harry’s not the best at, ah, communicating so you should probably get ready to coax the reason for this out of him.”

Louis sat up, smiling gratefully before shaking his head. “I really appreciate that but there’s no need. Harry said a few days ago that he expected this to happen.”

Lily and Zayn share an impish look, eyebrows piqued and fantastically failing to hide their matching smirks.

“I certainly didn’t expect that,” Zayn said quietly. “From what you tell me, at least, I always got the impression that he wasn’t very good at the whole communication thing.”

“Yeah, like he preferred less talk and more action,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

He half-heartedly through a blanket at her which she dodged easily. “Harry’s not like that,” he said
with a frown. “He’s not the best at communicating his issues but I really think that he’s trying hard to get better. Ever since the incident at the Museum he’s tried more and more to open up to me. I just hope that he trusts me enough to - ”

“Louis? Darling?”

The tent flap opened to reveal Harry crouched at the entrance outside, holding a flask and sandwiches in one hand and a pile of soft blankets in the other. His thick, consuming scent almost immediately overpowered the other scents in the tent, seeping into every corner and crevice and unknowingly staking his claim on the tent. He wore a puzzled expression at the sight of the three omegas curled up in the blankets of the tent.

Lily and Zayn scrambled out of the tent, muttering apologies before Harry raised a hand to silence them.

“It’s not a problem,” he assured. “We’re still allowed to go into each other’s tents, I think. The asshole- sorry, the owner of this place just said that people of different genders couldn’t sleep in the same tent. He didn’t mention any rule about not visiting each other’s tents.”

Zayn nodded and gave Louis a furtive smile.

“See you all later, then,” Lily smiled, waving at the two before hauling Zayn away from the tent. Louis could see them immediately put their heads together and he shook his head in exasperation.

Harry entered the tent once more, clumsily falling inside - the best strategy, according to him – and handing Louis the flask of hot, sweet tea and the egg and cress sandwich. “Lunch, omega,” he said simply, sitting down to eat his own meal.

Louis thanked him and devoured the food, careful not to let breadcrumbs fall onto the blankets. “You, eh, you didn’t happen to hear what we were talking about there, did you?”

Harry, who seemed to have momentarily lost focus if his clenched fists and flaring nostrils were any indication, met Louis’ gaze. “No,” he said slowly. He smirked. “Why, were you talking about me, or something?”

“No, no,” Louis rushed out unconvincingly. He caught Harry’s unimpressed expression. “Well I, eh, I might’ve mentioned your name when we were talking about all of this,” he said, waving his hands in the air to indicate the new scent permeating the air.

Harry sat up proudly, shifting closer to Louis. “What do you mean ‘all of this’?” he asked, flashing his canines at Louis.

They both knew that Harry was fully aware he was talking about his scent and that he just wanted to hear Louis say it. Louis indulged him anyway.

“Your scent,” Louis said shyly. “It’s the only thing my senses are registering at the moment.” He laughed humourlessly at his obvious infatuation with Harry. It was widely known that potential mates and bonded mates were particularly in tune with each other’s scents.

Harry, however, took his laugh to mean something different and the smile fell of his face. “Is that a bad thing?” he said self-consciously. “I’m sorry, omega, I really can’t control the strength of my scent. It’s always been this persistent.” He cast his regretful gaze to where his fingers toyed with the edge of Louis’ sleeping bag.

Louis shot up from where his legs were crossed, flinging a huge pile of crumbs on his sleeping bag
in the process. He had never seen Harry – the most charismatic, confident people he knew – behave in such a self-conscious manner. His sadness tugged at his heartstrings and he suddenly needed to being back Harry’s characteristic confidence. He crawled towards him and placed a gentle hand on his chin, raising his head to look directly at him. The sight of Harry’s sad eyes filled him with unwarranted regret. “Harry,” he sighed. “I promise you that it’s not a problem. Not at all.”

Harry smiled sadly. “You don’t have to say that, Louis. It’s a genetic trait to have a strong scent like mine. It’s something that only passes through the male alphas in the family. I don’t expect you to have to put up with something I can’t control.”

Louis’ eyes shone with unshed tears. “Harry, I don’t have to put up with anything,” he said sincerely. “Please, listen to me. I’m completely overwhelmed by your scent in the best way possible.” He paused and glanced down shyly, eyes finding Harry’s fingers trailing along the edge of the blanket. “I don’t think I could even to begin to describe how good it is.”

Harry’s frown relaxed slightly and his eyes gleamed with optimism. “Really?”

Louis boldly moved closer, kneeling between Harry’s outstretched legs and leaning forward to brush his hair out of his eyes. “It’s like, like I’m completely at the mercy of your scent.” Louis watched the way Harry’s face transformed at his words and he boldly added on, voice low and sultry, “I feel so affected by the way your scent lingers wherever you go. It’s like you stake your claim and mark your territory. Like you show who the real aloha is without giving a fuck about anyone else.” Louis knew he was massaging Harry’s ego but he couldn’t bear the vulnerable self-consciousness Harry had exhibited mere moments earlier.

Harry’s eyes darkened and his tongue darted out to lick across his lips. “Fuck, yeah,” he grunted. “I’ve got to mark what’s mine, sweetheart.”

His gaze never left Louis’ widened eyes. He fell backwards to lie on the warm blanket and pulled Louis on top of him, their chests touching and Louis’ elbows bracketing Harry’s head to prop himself up. “Fucking love you covered in my scent, too. It was the only thing I could think about when I came in here, you know.”

Louis clenched his jaw to prevent a whine leaving his lips. “I like that feeling – being covered in your scent - more than I can express,” he said softly. He hovered above Harry and smiled mischievously. “Want me to show you?”

Harry swallowed thickly. “There’s nothing I’d rather more,” he whispered hungrily into his ear. He gripped Louis’ hips gently and nodded for him to proceed.

Louis closed his eyes and parted his lips prettily. He let the surge of confidence Harry’s scent (which was becoming progressively stronger) gave him consume him and let a breathy moan escape his lips.

“Fuck,” Harry grit out, shuddering beneath him. “Louis, fuck. Darling, you make me want to do things to you that I really shouldn’t.”

Louis pulled his bottom lip into his mouth and tilted his head innocently. “Why not, Harry?”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Harry said firmly, rolling Louis across his chest to swap their positions and loom over him. He smiled deviously down at Louis, nudging his nose into the juncture of his neck and jaw. “I know you like being in charge sometimes, baby, and I have to admit that it’s very hot. But I also need to have some control over you,” he whispered, pinching Louis’ hip softly.
Louis tried to hide his smile by diverting from Harry’s comment. “Baby? That’s a new one,” he said instead.

Harry licked across Louis’ jawline languidly, causing him to shudder. “Do you mind it?”

Louis shook his head before releasing a quiet moan as Harry stilled his head with his hands, his tongue travelling upwards to lick across his lips. “I don’t, so long as you don’t call me pumpkin pie or treacle tart or something just as embarrassing like my dad does.”

Harry groaned and pulled himself off Louis’ neck. “You completely ruined the mood,” he said, feigned annoyance causing Louis to giggle softly. “Now all I can think about is your dad while I’m trying to enjoy kissing you,” he teased. “Bet he’s a huge alpha, too.”

“Why would you think that?” Louis asked curiously. “Both my parents are betas.”

Harry gaped down at him. “Seriously? I thought that male omegas were generally born out of strictly alpha and omega mates.”

“Not in my case,” Louis said. “Why, are your parents an alpha/omega pair?”

Harry hesitated before replying. “Yes, my father is an alpha and my mother an omega.” His gaze hardened. “But I don’t want to think about them right now. Just want you, Louis.”

He preened at Harry’s words and took little satisfaction from the fact that Harry had revealed something personal about him.

“Can I kiss you, Louis?” Harry said desperately.

Louis almost laughed the suddenness of his request, another aspect of Harry that he adored – he always kept him on his toes. “Please,” he whispered on a breath.

Harry lowered himself, elbows on either side of Louis’ shoulders and large hands holding his head, fingers occasionally threading through his hair. He pressed harshly against Louis’ lips, prying them open to his liking before slipping his tongue inside to swipe across the tip of Louis’ tongue, teasing him to respond. Louis surged up, moaning into Harry’s mouth and sending tremors inside it to which Harry responded eagerly. Harry varied the pace, slowing his movements at times to appreciate Louis’ subtle reactions and minute responses before speeding up without warning, pulling Louis’ lower lip harshly between his teeth before releasing his lip and pressing down.

When Harry thrust his tongue into Louis’ mouth he caught it between his lips and sucked hungrily, head falling back against the blanket and, in the process, pulling Harry impossibly closer. Harry growled into his mouth, eyes widening at Louis’ bold move before moving his entire body to press against Louis’. “Louis,” he said with a guttural moan. “We- fuck, we need to stop before I get carried away.”

Louis pressed his nose below Harry’s ear and left soft, lingering kisses on his searing skin. “Okay,” he sighed. He allowed Harry to roll onto his back to lie beside him, panting lightly.

They turned their heads to face each other, sharing the same air and losing themselves in their self-contained world.

“That was perfect,” Harry said quietly, afraid to break the stillness inside the tent. “Can’t believe I got you, after everything.”

Louis kissed the tip of his nose, causing Harry to scrunch it before tickling him lightly. “We’re
going to have to get going soon,” Louis said, occasionally giggling at Harry’s ministrations while fruitlessly attempting to bat him away.

Harry pouted. “I know,” he sighed. “This adventure journey that Liam’s been raving about should be fun, though.”

“We had better go, then. Nature and the wilderness await, Harold.”

Harry fixed him with an unamused look. “If you call me that again, I’m calling you treacle tart for the rest of today.”

They gathered their belongings, pulled on their hiking boots and filled their bags with treats for the long journey. Louis felt particularly self-conscious as they emerged from the tent to join the rest of the group, keenly aware that he Harry’s scent covered his clothes and rendered their relationship impossible to deny.

“Looks like Styles got some. I’m surprised he kept it in his pants this long to be honest.”

“Fucking finally. He’s been drooling over him for weeks.”

Louis ignored the whispers that accompanied them as they sidled in beside Liam and Zayn, both of whom piqued their eyebrows at the noticeably mingling scents emanating from the two.

“Right, so this adventure trip will involve some mountaineering, canoeing and archery and we’ll finish at tea time and get some food at a local restaurant in Kerry city. Everyone clear?” George barked, evidently impatient with the alphas who had been jeering and shouting.

There was a resounding chorus of agreement and everyone climbed aboard the bus hastily, excited to embark on the trip.

They arrived a mere half hour later, a sense of palpable excitement in the air. The adventure guide firstly brought them to the archery station located in a thick, evergreen forest. The short upwards climb to the station was riddled with fallen branches, wet leaves and wild animals. At one point Louis tripped over the end of a thick log and Harry and Zayn simultaneously reached out to break his fall. While Zayn removed his hand from Louis’ chest once he had his feet firmly planted on the ground, Harry refused to let go of his hand, instead holding is securely until they completed their journey and needed to separate to complete the archery task.

To everyone’s surprise (and to some of the more competitive alphas’ chagrin) Lily had the best aim and succeeded in hitting the bull’s eye consecutively once she had found a technique. Louis was hopeless at the task and Zayn was abysmal but both omegas enjoyed watching their friend succeed in a physical sport – one of the many spheres in which alphas claimed their superiority.

The second feature involved climbing one of the mountains covered on woodland though, thankfully, the path was better-defined and more accessible. There was relative silence on the journey, merely the sounds of short breathing and the rhythmic song of birds claiming the air. Liam, with the help of their guide, pointed out various plants and animals specific to the area while Harry noted the medicinal qualities of many of the plants, citing facts even Liam had never heard of.

“And the dried bark peels of these pine trees along there have a huge amount of Vitamin C,” he explained, panting lightly at the subtle incline of the path.

“That’s actually very interesting,” he said earnestly. “You sound like the proper Bear Grylls. Were you a scout like Liam or did you just pick that stuff up studying medicine?”
“Nah, I don’t have the patience for learning fifty different ways to tie a knot. I learned a lot of it as a kid at school when we did Nature, Woodwork and its Practical Applications, this alpha-only subject available at one of my- I mean at my school. And then other facts I picked up in college with the ridiculous amount of reading we have to do for medicine.”

Louis nodded. “I wish I had the chance to learn that kind of stuff. We were taught worthwhile omega skills instead; sewing, mending and cleaning were all considered more useful.”

Harry’s face expressed sympathy. “I’m sorry that was the way for you, Louis. It’s so fucked up that you’re excluded from so much solely on the basis of your gender. I wish that wasn’t the case. You deserve every opportunity to excel, darling.”

Louis stopped in his tracks, prompting the two omegas trailing after them to bump into him. The girls side-stepped him and one of them whispered in the other’s ear upon noticing their private conversation. The two omegas didn’t have Louis’ attention, however. The sincerity of Harry’s voice, the way he spoke with conviction and expressed such vexation on behalf of Louis was what had his attention. “Harry,” he said quietly, voice breaking on the word. “I- I really don’t think I’ve ever met an alpha who’s actively resented gender inequality against omegas like you do.”

Harry merely shook his head. “Trust me, Louis. Things need to change and they will. It’ll take time of course and there will always be alphas who oppose change but I can already see attitudes about omegas shifting.”

“I can too - at Candling, at least. I just hope that wider society changes for the better too.”

They continued their uphill journey until a thick fog settled around them and they were forced to abandon their journey at the halfway mark, opting instead to spend more time at the canoeing station.

They were each given a small station to change into the wetsuits which were still uncomfortably wet from the previous group that had used them. Upon stretching the material over their bodies and grimacing at the feeling, they trotted along the pathway towards the adjacent lake settled in the valley. The fog on the mountain was still visible but by the lakeside, the air was blissfully bright and rays of sunlight danced on the water, deceiving them of its true temperature.

After they gathered in the group to listen to the instructor drone on about the safety procedures, Louis spotted Harry and sidled towards him.

“Partners?” he asked, catching Harry’s attention. He had to steady his breathing as he was still becoming accustomed to Harry’s encompassing scent which rendered him almost breathless.

Harry turned to look at him and his eyes widened at the vision that was Louis with windswept hair and wearing a tight wetsuit. He fumbled for words before regaining his composure and nodding eagerly. “Yes, yes, definitely,” he said. He cast his gaze to a shed directly beside the lake containing the canoes. “I’m going to grab the best one. You stay here.”

Louis rolled his eyes but nodded, focusing his attention on Liam and Zayn’s not-so-subtle conversation on the opposite side of the group until Harry returned with a sleek blue canoe. He propped it against his chest – the picture of masculinity with his bicep muscles protruding beneath the fabric – and waited until the instructor allowed them to begin. While the other pairs scrambled to get their canoes, Harry gently led Louis to the shore, both wincing slightly as the sharp stones dug into their feet.

Harry gracelessly threw the canoe into the water and climbed inside, letting out a shout at as the
freezing water crepted up his legs and seeped into the fabric. Louis smirked from his position perched on a large rock, cold water merely tickling his toes. “Too cold for you, Harry?”

“No, absolutely not,” Harry said unconvincingly. He shook his head adamantly, lips tight and face strained. “It’s positively balmy. I can handle it just fine.”

“Sure you can,” Louis chuckled. He dipped his foot into the water and let an inhumane noise leave his lips.

“It’s freezing, Harry!” he yelled, retracting his foot immediately.

Harry looked regretful but couldn’t prevent a small laugh at the sound Louis had made. “Okay, so it’s a little cold. Here, I’ll lift you inside.” He used his hand to row the canoe closer to where Louis was watching him before standing up wobblily, arms outstretched when he was four feet away from him.

Louis looked wary. “Are you sure? I can probably just jump into the canoe without touching the water.”

Harry shook his head firmly. “Then the canoe will topple over from being rocked too much.”

“Okay,” Louis agreed, though his voice suggested a differently. “I’ll just stand at the edge of the rock here and you try to lift, is that right?”

“Perfect.”

Harry extended his body across the canoe to place them beneath Louis’ arms. “On three. Ready? One, two, three!”

Louis jumped in the direction of the canoe and Harry held him mid-air. At the last second he lost his footing on the slippery edge of the canoe and fell forwards – Louis held in his arms – into the water with an almighty splash.

They both resurfaced in the shallow water instantly, entirely drenched in piercing cold water, numbing their skin instantly. Harry spurted out lake water and looked sheepishly at him.

“Harry!” he exclaimed, attempt to feign indignation entirely negated by his light giggle upon noticing how ridiculous they both looked.

“I’m sorry,” Harry rushed out. “I must’ve slipped or something. I had you in my arms, I promise I didn’t let go!”

“That was the entire problem,” Louis chuckled.

Harry cracked a smile then, clambering to his feet to help Louis up and into the canoe properly.

They had attracted attention from the rest of the group and, upon glancing in their direction, Louis saw that their method – getting into the canoe before pushing it into the water - was far more effective.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Harry moaned.

“Doesn’t matter, Harry,” he assured kindly. “That was actually kind of fun anyway. And besides, we don’t have to be afraid of falling in now.”
Harry smiled and lifted one of the oars to begin paddling. “Well even if our way of getting in was more, uh, unique, we can still beat the other pairs in the races,” he winked.

Long after most of the pairs had given up from the icy water and the light drizzle of rain, opting instead to take a scalding shower and wrap up in thick clothes, Harry and Louis were still gliding across the water, laughing and talking, completely oblivious to their surroundings. They had placed a surprising first place and were still savouring their victory by the time the instructor called to them to come back to shore.

Louis’ teeth chattered and he wrapped a large towel around him gratefully.

“Let’s get some dinner,” Harry said, pulling Louis into a tight embrace to guide him back to the changing area.

After a delectable meal of shepherd’s pie, chips and salad they returned to the campsite, tired and sated.

The reality of sharing a tent with Harry (as well as Liam and another alpha Jacob who was a friend of Liam’s) settled in as they trundled back to the large field. Harry’s scent had become progressively more potent as the day continued to a point where Louis had to force himself not to lean close to his neck to breathe in deeply.

After bidding goodnight to Zayn and receiving a number of good luck wishes from the omega tents he passed by, he approached the tent. Before he had even entered he heard Harry’s firm, reverberating voice.

“...and if you do or say anything to make him uncomfortable I will not hesitate to break your necks. And he’s a lawyer so he’ll probably sue you too, for good measure.”

“And you’re a junior doctor, Harry so you probably should be mending people’s broken necks,” he sighed, crawling into the tent to find the three alphas changing into their pyjamas (or lack thereof in Harry’s case). “Sorry!” he squealed, instantly backing out of the tent.

“No, it’s alright, darling. You can come back,” Harry said on a short laugh. When Louis re-entered he smiled at him. “Sorry, didn’t mean for you to hear that.”


He glanced at Liam and Jacob, both of whom were resolutely avoiding eye-contact. He absentmindedly wondered what else Harry had told them until he realised they were waiting for him to get dresses himself. He quickly pulled on a thick pyjama t-shirt beneath a jumper for added warmth as well as a pair of dark leggings, trying to ignore the feeling of Harry’s scent surrounding his bare skin.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” he replied with a nod.

Harry sent a serene smile at him, eyes following the fabric of his leggings looking like Christmas had come two months early. Jacob and Liam turned around, as though suddenly given permission to look at him. They soon settled down into their sleeping bags, exchanging anecdotes from the eventful day and munching on some chocolates Harry had brought. Louis couldn’t quite participate fully in the conversation, especially as darkness settled around them and the talking subdued to the point where he couldn’t distract himself. He continued to toss and fidget beneath his sleeping bag, pulling it closer around his body and even resorting to pulling a pair of socks over his hands.
“Are you alright, Louis?” Harry asked much later that night, after Jacob had fallen asleep and Liam’s heavy snoring had begun to fill the tent.

“Sorry! I didn’t wake you did I?” he whispered, turning to face Harry in the dim light of the tent, facial expression barely decipherable.

“Not at all,” Harry said. “Was already wake. What’s wrong?”

Louis sighed heavily. “I just can’t get to sleep in the cold. Miss my bed in mine and Zayn’s dorm,” he admitted quietly.

“Omega,” Harry whispered sadly. “Is there anything I can do to help? Maybe we could get Zayn to give you a piece of his clothes so that you have a familiar scent to breathe.”

Louis didn’t tell him that it was Harry’s scent he most wanted to feel around him. He shook his head regretfully. “That’s okay,” he said. “I’ll eventually get tired enough to fall asleep, anyway,” he whispered.

The outline of Harry’s sleeping bag moved to press closer to Louis’ own. “Do you think you might prefer- I mean do you think it would help if you slept in my sleeping bag?” he asked cautiously. “It’ll be warmer, at least.”

“Yes, thank you Harry. Once you don’t mind, that is,” Louis said. He shot up to crawl over towards him, slowly lowering himself into the fleece-lined sleeping bag.

Harry chuckled softly and placed a strong arm beneath his head, revelling in the soft sigh of contentment that escaped Louis’ lips. “Better, darling?”

“Much better, Harry,” he breathed, turning his head to press into the skin of Harry’s chest and closing his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the lovely comments on the last chapter. I hope to receive the same feedback for this chapter. *laughs nervously*. I meant to say before that I'm on tumblr at Toomanylarrytears. It's a new account and I would love you all to come and say hi to me there!
Harry awoke to a fresh morning breeze seeping into the tent through the small holes in the fabric and the feeling of Louis’ index finger tracing the outline of his birdcage tattoo. He sighed contentedly at the gentle touch and thought that he wouldn’t mind laying with Louis curled into his body for the rest of his life.

“Are you awake?” Louis whispered, voice slightly raspy from lack of use.

“Yeah,” he sighed, belatedly adding, “Just want to stay here though.”

“It’s a travelling day,” Louis reminised. “Just one night in the hotel in Cork and then tomorrow morning we take a flight back to London.”

Harry hummed. “I’ve enjoyed this but I suppose it’ll be good to get back to normal college life again.”

Louis agreed softly, ministrations on across Harry’s skin never stilling, as though he was desperate to capture every feature of him – strong muscle on his upper chest and soft love handles covered by smooth skin littered with tattoos.

Louis’ alarm clock sounded, the sound blaring in the confined space and breaking the stillness. He sighed heavily.

Jacob groaned loudly from the other side of the tent but they noticed that Liam’s sleeping bag was empty and his pyjamas were folded neatly beside his backpack.

“That’ll be the ten o’clock alarm,” Louis explained. “Gives us just enough time to grab some breakfast before heading to Cork. Are you sure you’re okay to drive again?”

“Definitely,” he assured, slowly hauling himself to his feet and pulling a thick jumper over his unruly curls. “I’ve always enjoyed the freedom driving has given me.”

They dressed promptly and gathered their belongings (including Liam’s) before joining the early risers for croissants, fruit and marmalade toast in a quaint family-run café where the young omega waitresses were delighted at the prospect of feeding a group of their size.

Louis went to pay for the meal while the rest of the group climbed aboard the bus. The waitresses – sisters with auburn hair and rosy cheeks – thanked him profusely and, after the all but one had left to resume their cleaning duties, the youngest of the group nervously approached him. She asked him how it was attending college as an omega, fidgeting with the waistband of her apron the entire time.
“It’s amazing,” Louis said, beaming at her. “I honestly never thought I’d be given an opportunity like this. I just hope the barrier preventing our admittance in the rest of the U.K. and Ireland is lifted soon.”

“Oh, I hope so,” the omega said. “Don’t want to be stuck in this tiny town waitressing until I find an alpha and have to quit work.” She hung her head sadly before sending him a hopeful smile, lowering her hands from her waist to clench them into tight fists. “Prove them all wrong, won’t you? Prove to them that we’re just as capable as them and that we deserve the chance to go to college just as much as they do.”

Louis’ eyes welled with tears at her earnestness and he nodded vigorously. “I will, I promise.” He payed the final sum and left waving as he left.

“Everything okay, Lou?” Zayn asked carefully as he boarded the bus.

“Yeah, yeah just- just appreciating how lucky we really are. I mean, lucky considering our gender and everything,” he said quietly.

Zayn smiled softly at him and pulled him into a short embrace – something that proved difficult in the confined space of the bus aisle. “Now go sit with your man, Lou. I know for a fact that he can cheer you up better than anyone else.”

Though the journey to Cork was only one hundred and seventy kilometres it lasted almost five hours what with Harry getting lost, the various poorly-maintained roads they travelled along and their rest stop at a local shopping centre where everyone scattered after lunch to do a spot of shopping. They were relieved to finally arrive at the hotel – an elegant lodging with dark wood surfaces and flower arrangements covering every available surface.

“What an upgrade from the tents, though,” Louis said on a breath, twirling around to take in the chandeliered ceilings and expansive reception area.

Harry nodded glumly and dragged his feet to join the queue at the reception desk.

Louis frowned slightly and followed, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. “Are you feeling okay, Harry? You don’t really want to go back to tents, do you?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s nothing,” he dismissed.

“Then why are you pouting?”

“I’m not *pouting*,” he exclaimed. He sighed, carefully avoiding Louis’ gaze. “It’s really nothing, just that we were able to, you know, share a sleeping bag together when we were camping. I’d choose that over a lavish bed any night.”

Louis’ heart warmed and he couldn’t the suppress the eye-crinkling smile that defined his features. “Who knows?” he said coyly. “Maybe we’ll be able to do it again sometime soon.”

Harry gaped at him before quickly regaining his composure and sending a wink at him. “Certainly hope so, darling. Why don’t you find the venue hall for the gender debate tonight to make sure everything’s set up and I’ll get us all checked in?”

Louis nodded obediently and sent him a small wave leaving the main reception area.

Harry didn’t like Louis being left alone in an unfamiliar place but his inner alpha was satisfied that his scent still lingered on Louis’ skin and that, their group being so large, there would always be
someone reliable nearby to ensure he didn’t come into any difficulty.

“Wait!” he called impulsively as Louis was about to turn a corner.

Louis wheeled around and jogged back towards him.

“Can I get a kiss goodbye?” he requested cheekily.

“You’ll see me in a few minutes,” he said, shaking his head. A smile danced across his face, however, and he stood on his tip-toes to leave a light kiss on Harry’s cheek and another on the sharp angle of his jaw. He turned on his heel and in the direction he had just come.

By the time Harry had finished confirming their one-night stay he made his way to Louis and Zayn’s shared room a half-hour later, the rest of the group had gone to their rooms to freshen up before dinner. Harry walked into a blissfully warm room only to find and empty room and Liam’s bag on the bigger bed in the room (one which Harry planned to claim for himself later). Harry fixed his hair and splashed water on his face after the long, tiresome journey.

Harry made his way along the fifth floor corridor to Louis and Zayn’s shared room, rapping his knuckles on the door.

It swung open a moment later to reveal a flustered Liam whose thick eyebrows furrowed.

“Harry? What are you doing here?”

Harry smirked. “I should ask you the same thing,” he commented, moving past Liam to enter into the room which had a view of the surrounding landscape rather than the bandstand and lake view Harry’s room boasted of. He turned to find Zayn sitting cross legged on his bed, sketchpad in his hand and an enormous pile of clothes surrounding him like a miniature fort.

“Hey Zayn.”

Zayn glanced up briefly and nodded once. “Harry,” he said, nodding curtly before returning to his sketching.

“You haven’t by any chance seen - ”

“Louis?” he interrupted with a smile. “No, he hasn’t been to see the room yet. I suspect he’s getting tonight’s gender discussion sorted out.”

Harry nodded in agreement, racking his mind for something else to say to converse with the quiet omega. He suspected that Zayn was the observant type who could tell a lot just by watching someone but never reveal his true thoughts.

Liam made his way across the room and sat on the other bed, smile plastered on his face like there was no greater joy to him than watching Zayn draw pictures of second-hand clothes.

A low growl rose in Harry’s chest before he could fully register how his inner alpha was reacting.

Zayn immediately stilled and Liam sprang from the bed as though burned.

“Sorry, sorry man,” he rushed out. “Forgot that was supposed to be Louis’ bed. Sorry.”

It took a moment of deep breathing for his inner alpha to calm down but, after it had, Harry shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I shouldn’t have reacted like that.”
Liam pulled him into a firm embrace and clapped him on the back. “Not something you can control, man. Besides, I’m sure your alpha’s still getting used to having your scent again. And having it on Louis, too,” he said quietly.

“It’s not like I’m going to roll around in his bed claiming it as mine,” Harry said indignantly. “Just a moment of weakness, is all.”

“Whatever you say, Harry,” Liam sighed before turning his attention to Zayn. “Are you alright, love?”

Zayn nodded happily, apparently entertained by their interaction. “Fine, thanks. Didn’t last long enough for my body to react or anything.”

Harry nodded, reassured but he still felt apologetic for his behaviour. “What are you drawing? Can I see or is it a secret? If it’s a sketch of nude Liam then I don’t want to see but- wow!”

His eyes scanned across the page where a girl with distinctive omega features wore an oversized suit, thick tie covering most of her chest and jacket falling past her knees. There were small darkly shaded spots on the shirt, scattered like tear stains and a caption that read ‘The suit never fits omegas.’

“Zayn, that’s- fuck, that’s fucking incredible. I never knew you were such a good artist. Obviously Louis had mentioned it but I- I never thought you would be this good.”

Zayn smiled modestly and ducked his head. “Louis always exaggerates,” he said simply. “But thank you.”

“Can I see more?” he asked eagerly.

Zayn laughed lightly. “A lot of my stuff is back in our dorm room but all of this stuff,” he said, indicating towards the pile of clothes around him, “is what I have drawn so far on the trip.”

“You must’ve worked like a machine the past week,” he said, looking at the tall piles of primarily suit items – shirts, dress pants, thick belts and enormous jackets – as well as a small pile of undergarments.

“I did a lot of it on the bus,” he explained, resuming his sketching with gentle strokes across the page. “You can take a look if you want. Most of the drawings are in this sketchpad, though so you’ll need to wait to see how I incorporated each item into the sketches until I finish this one.”

Harry nodded and approached the small pile, rifling through the pile of alpha-specific undergarments – boxers, briefs and more traditional pairs with a particular space to cater for knots, should an alpha need to slip on underwear before his knot had shrunk.

“Where did you get all of these?” he asked

“Lots of different places. A lot of it I got from some charity shops in London or I used old clothes I don’t wear anymore.”

Harry fingered through the dark blue and grey shades of the undergarment stack and saw a pretty white lace fabric peeking out from beneath them. He carefully removed it from the pile. His eyes widened at the sight of a pair of panties in front of his eyes. He absorbed every detail of the fabric from the delicate frills around the waistband to the perfect bow at the back of the panties.

“Who- who owns these?” he demanded, expecting Zayn to say that he bought them from a charity
shop. He twirled his finger idly with the lace fabric. He vaguely registered that the scent was familiar.

Zayn glanced up briefly to identify the item before resuming his artwork. “Louis,” he said simply.

Harry’s mouth fell open. “Louis?” he exclaimed, alarmed eyes widening comically and stuffing the panties back into the pile before he did anything with them that he knew he would regret. “I- eh, I got to go,” he said, scrambling to the door much to the amusement of Liam and Zayn. He manically carded his long fingers through his hair and ran to the door. “I’ll, eh, see you both for dinner,” he called before slamming the door and striding in long footsteps back to his room, willing himself to make it there without a hard on.

…

Dinner that evening was a lively affair, most of the group having mingled extensively throughout the week and everyone excited to return to England after their trip. There was a sense of anxiousness surrounding their particular circular table, however, as George and Louis put their heads together to discuss the particular topic they intended to discuss at the gender debates that evening: biological cycles.

Heats and ruts were disconcertingly stigmatised in England, especially with consideration to their prevalence – forty-five per cent of people were either alphas or omegas, the only genders to experience such gender-specific cycles. They hoped that, with the evening’s debates they could challenge the stigma associated with open discourse about the sexual aspects of a natural reaction. Ruts took place, on average, every two months for alphas; omegas experienced heats thrice yearly. Every student in the venue hall had had the pleasure (or, in some cases if someone did not have a partner, discomfort) of a biological cycle and their representatives on the two gender societies hoped to bridge a divide between them and treat the issue maturely.

“I’m telling you, this is a bad idea. It will completely defeat the whole purpose of trying to integrate alphas and omegas at Candling,” Liam warned from across the table as they ate their delectable desert of piping hot raspberry crumble with vanilla ice cream.

George shook his head firmly, ever optimistic. “I really think it’ll work, I really do. This week has been so successful so far and I think this would be a great end to it.”

Louis voiced his agreement. “Even if it’s only a portion of Candling students who spend a couple of hours talking openly about the issue I think it’ll precipitate a change in attitudes of sort.”

Liam cast his gaze to Harry for support in his opinion but Harry merely looked conflicted.

Harry’s jaw tightened and he met Louis’ eyes. “I completely agree with the concept. I just have … reservations about its execution. I think some of the alphas won’t be able to see past the sexual parts and they might get a little rowdy.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Liam interrupted earnestly. “I know exactly what we’re trying to achieve here but I think it’s too risky. I know, Louis, that you said - ”

“But,” Harry said loudly, “I think that, on the whole, the importance of our aim exceeds the relatively improbable risks associated. I think we should do it.”

Louis nodded, ducking his head at Harry’s piercing stare.

Liam sighed in defeat and scanned across the table. “Guess I’m outnumbered.”

The table chorused their agreement, Maria adding that the group had already been informed about the subject of the debates to prepare in advance and that they probably wouldn’t be able to rescind the debate topic anyway.

The group were guided towards the venue hall, a lavish hall with gold and white embroidered walls, heavy chandeliers and various portraits adorning the walls. The evening light streamed through the tall windowpanes and onto the small clusters of tables around the hall.

George approached the podium positioned at the front of the room once the group had taken their seats. They had organised the timetable for the various sub-topics especially to deal with alpha issues first before progressing to those pertaining to omegas. Louis had decided not to speak for the first portion of the debate until the group had settled and they established that the group were capable of debating respectfully about their cycles.

“Wellcome everyone for our final night of the alpha/omega trip. As you all know, tonight’s debate concerns the issue of mating cycles,” he said with a bright smile.

The venue hall was strikingly silent for such a large group of students; alphas and omegas alike sat at the edge of their seats, simultaneously attentive and cautious.

“I needn’t remind you all to remain cognisant of the fact that this is a very personal issue for all of us and that anyone who fails to show others with dignity will be told to leave. The purpose of this debate is to break down barriers of communication between alphas and omegas, not talk about our bedroom fantasies,” he said, rare dominant timbre seeping into the strength of his conviction.

After an acceptable murmur of agreement, George proceeded with the first topic of the night: the effect that ruts have on an alpha’s mental state. He called a number of alphas from the group at large to share their understanding of the topic and to clarify questions omegas had. He chose Harry first to set a precedent for the group.

Harry strode towards the podium at his characteristically languid pace before stopping abruptly and waving his hand in greeting to the group.

“If only he drove as fast as he walks,” Zayn muttered under his breath.

“Evening,” he drawled with a smile. “As George said, I’m going to be starting off our discussion on the alpha mindset during ruts. Some of what I say is going to be factual but, as there hasn’t been nearly enough reputable research carried out in this area, a lot is going to be from my own experience.”

Harry’s nervous cough alerted Louis to the fact that he had never seen him so rigid whilst speaking to a crowd; he had always relished being the centre of the attention, piquing and conducting their interest with apparent ease. Now, however, Harry seemed unusually vulnerable, as though his confidant façade was gradually diminishing as he revealed more about his previous ruts.

“I think most of my fellow alphas here will agree with me when I say that the twelve hours before a rut begins are probably the most difficult. Mentally, you’re usually conscious of the fact that your rut is going to start. You’re hyperconscious of the fact that you could be a threat to omegas in your vicinity but you still have to carry out your normal job or go to class because usually alpha scents don’t begin to properly strengthen until almost immediately before you’re instincts fully take over. For an alpha’s mental state, that irrational guilt and fear that you might take advantage is always there.”
Harry scanned his eyes across the room to gauge the reaction of the group; most of the alphas were nodding in agreement but the omega reactions varied from unabashed interest to shooting him furtive glances in fear of meeting eye-contact. He found Louis smiling at him proudly.

“During the rut itself you come in and out of complete consciousness but there is always a small element of awareness that you need to make decisions and act upon your instincts. For me, at least, I always know what I want to do and what I want my, eh, partner to do,” he articulated slowly, ignoring the wolf-whistles sounding around the room and Louis’ indiscernible expression, “but I can never fully register whether it is what I want or what my inner alpha wants.”

A loud murmur of agreement sounded amongst the other alphas, indicating that they too encountered this issue during their respective ruts.

“I think a fundamental aspect to remember is that an alpha’s mental state is not totally incapacitated during his or her rut but that the ability of us to resist our urges is completely dependant on the individual alpha,” he explained.

His voice adopted a softer tone and the microphone carried the sound of his thick swallow. “Some of us are aware of what they’re doing almost all of our ruts. But no matter how much an alpha might fight they just can’t act against their instincts. They could regret everything, everything, but if they’re biologically preconditioned not to have enough power over their inner alpha then they can’t stop.”

Harry passed his eyes across the room and found sympathetic stares surveying him, others wearing blank looks as though they couldn’t understand his point of view.

“And I don’t mean in the sense of stopping fucking your partner if they ask you to do so. And for the record, if an alpha is explicitly told to stop during his or her rut and doesn’t then they’re a rapist because it is biologically certain that when an omega doesn’t want something or is in distress then even our inner alphas consider them our first priority.” His voice had adopted a deep, resonating tone that warned of his resolve and passion.

“No, when I say finding it hard to stop I mean forcing yourself to come back from the animalistic mindset that takes over you during your rut. It’s difficult because you- you feel like everything is right when you let your inner alpha completely take over your thoughts,” he said, sighing wistfully. “You feel like you’ve found the secret to fulfilment, like you’re doing the job you were made to carry out. And, in general, that’s the kind of mindset that alpha’s in rut have and crave after their rut, hence why they may behave particularly possessively for the few days after their rut finishes.”

“Thank you all for listening,” he said, taking his leave, “and I look forward to hearing your own thoughts on the issue.”

A round of enthusiastic applause echoed throughout the high-ceilinged venue hall. Harry took note of the engaged, receptive looks dancing across the faces of most of the omega students and the general agreement among the alphas, many of whom actively congratulated him as he made his way back to his seat.

Louis sent him an encouraging smile but a fleeting glimmer of caution flashed through his eyes, as though he was seeing Harry in a different light for the first time.

“A great start, Harry. We’re going to have Lance up here next to speak about the physical aspects of ruts and he’s promised to cite only medical information, not relive his own sexual escapades.”

“What sexual escapades? The ones with his hand?” a voice shouted across the room as several
Lance, a tall alpha with a strong nose and cutting jawline, stood on his chair and called across the room. “Oi! Shut it you wanker! Better than that fucking siren you had over for your rut last time!”

There was a sharp intake of breath from most of the omegas and George immediately chastised him over the microphone.

“Lance, mate, if you use that kind of term again you won’t be allowed to speak.”

Lance had the grace to accept his mistake but, as a typical alpha, found issue with George explicitly instructing him how to behave. He took his place at the podium, instinctual desire to prove his masculinity to prospective omegas after having been triggered.

“Right, I’ll be talking about physical properties of alphas during ruts which will apparently ‘limit the stigma surrounding our knots’ but realistically just give us all boners,” he said obnoxiously.

The alphas in the room seemed particularly entertained by Lance – though Harry’s laugh was forced, contrived almost and contrasted sharply with the grimace on his face. Louis (and from what he could tell from their demeanour, most of the other omegas) felt a sense of panic settle on his shoulders at the alpha’s words. The sensation rendered him fixed to his chair, fingers gripping the edge of his seat. He knew that if Lance’s analysis was explicitly sexual then there would be a higher risk of one of the omegas releasing a stronger scent that would render them vulnerable in an alpha-dominated environment.

“Harry,” he whispered softly, as Lance explained the link between the inherent, natural desire to pro-create and produce children with the frequency of alpha ruts. “Harry?”

“What is it?” he asked roughly, his attention fixed on Lance.

Louis felt slightly perturbed but continued nonetheless. “I think that there might be a risk for some of the omegas here. I never thought one of the speakers would go so, eh, in-depth on this subject. I think that it would be better to cut it short before something happened.”

Harry nodded once but his vacant eyes told of the story of a resurfaced memory. “Of course, yeah,” he said absently but didn’t move from his position.

Louis knew that, rationally, he couldn’t march up to the stage to demand that Lance end his speech early and so succumbed to listening to him speak about the changes in an alpha’s body as the alpha completed his or her rut cycle.

Louis crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, slightly irritated by Harry’s unusual lack of attentiveness, attempting to ignore his inner omega’s sadness as he remembered the heart-plummeting feeling of Harry admitting that he had spent his rut with other omegas. He hadn’t expected otherwise but he couldn’t deny the wrenching feeling of having those words spill out of Harry’s mouth.

Thankfully, none of the omegas were greatly affected by Lance’s speech nor by a subsequent alpha’s explanation of the myths and expectations surrounding ruts but there was a distinguishable difference in the energy permeating the room. When Louis turned to Harry to comment on an interesting point the alpha had made about the variability of earnings depending on the length of an alpha’s rut, Harry ignored him completely, opting instead to scan his eyes across the room before
typing on his phone. Louis felt decidedly frustrated by the time George announced that it would be his turn to begin the omega section of the debate.

“We’re going to move onto the second part of our biological cycle debate this evening: omega heats,” George said with a slight blush Louis had never seen him wear.

Louis strode towards the podium with determination, a renewed determination to get Harry’s attention after his inner omega – having already suffered upon hearing Harry’s earlier admission – experienced rejection by the very person he craved.

“Good evening,” he said with a coy smile. “Today I’ll be speaking about the physical aspects of an omega’s heat and, in the process, I hope to illuminate some of the popular beliefs about them that are simply untrue.”

He cast his eyes to Harry and found him looking outside the window, head perched on the palm of his hand. He felt a surge of determination run through him, primarily propelled by his instincts.

“Many omegas would contest that heats – especially those without a partner – are unbearable. The body physically demands to feel filled by an alpha and, though a lot of substitute objects available claim to be, nothing is the same as the real thing. Though an omega may not always be conscious of their physical requirements, going into heat is essentially as bodily reaction to needing to be filled and, in some cases, impregnated. To some omegas, being in heat is a physical demand to have his or her alpha’s full, undivided attention to form their union and bond.”

Louis glanced to Harry’s seat and found him leaning back in his chair, legs spread invitingly and eyes trained on the screen of his phone. His gaze followed the hungry gazes of the alphas in his immediate surroundings. Their unashamed lust was slightly intimidating, some trailing their tongues across their lips while others began to emit potent scents which mingled and distracted from his aim to recapture Harry’s attention. He wanted Harry to stare at him with desire; Harry to wink cheekily at him and pat his thighs as an indication for Louis to sit on them.

Louis sighed frustratedly. He felt his inner omega recognise the potent scents surrounding him, compelling him to continue his speech to drawing a further reaction out of them.

“Omega heats feel like a dream,” he said breathily. “You’re completely at the mercy of your strong alpha; letting him control you and use you in any way he sees fit.”

He heard a nearby alpha curse under his breath and saw a dark-eyed alpha sitting directly opposite him palm himself unabashedly beneath the tablecloth, determinedly meeting Louis’ gaze with a hungry stare. Louis cast his gaze across the room to see Harry’s back facing him, his chair flush with the table and hands gripping the arms of his chair with such force that he expected the wood to break from the pressure. He saw Zayn sitting opposite from Harry, scandalised look defining his features as he made an indication for Louis to stop. He was in too deep, however, the satisfaction his inner omega derived from having the complete attention of every alpha in the room directed at him outweighing his rational thoughts.

“You know the person that you want,” he breathed into the microphone, gaze never leaving the tense line of Harry’s back. “You want him more than he could ever know. You want him to complete your bond, to give you what you need and fill you up so that you can’t walk properly for days.”

The alphas stared at him with tight jaws and clenched fists, nails dug into their thighs like they wanted to ravish him, wreck him.
“Alpha,” he whispered, eyes welling with tears, “if you know that you’re the person I’m talking about now, I need you.”

Harry’s musky, intoxicatingly thick scent finally reached him from the opposite side of the venue hall. The manic movement of Harry’s chair from across the room and the wild look in the alpha’s eye as he wheeled around was the last thing Louis registered before it all became pitch dark.

Chapter End Notes

Angst to ensue. What are your thoughts on this chapter? Why did Harry ignore Louis? Comments and kudos are hugely appreciated.
Blinding lights blurred his vision as he opened his eyes. He blinked rapidly to adjust to the brightness. He felt a sharp, pounding pain in his right forearm. He groaned softly at the unyielding throbs, the only thing he could focus on in the quiet of the room.

A nearby, relentless beeping sounded and he heard muffled voices, orders shouted from a distance. The room had a strikingly sterile smell, save for the familiar, heady scent of mulled spices and pine he detected at his side. He tried to turn his head to confirm his suspicions that Harry was indeed beside him but the slightest movement sent a jolt of pain down his side. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply, thoughts racing as he struggled to recall the events leading to that point.

“Patient 407 Tomlinson, omega, male is awake Doctor Murray,” he heard a voice call, alerting him to another person in the hallways adjoined to the room.

He opened his eyes and felt the body beside him stir. The door to his private hospital room opened and a dark-skinned beta with a kind smile entered, her gleaming white nurse’s uniform reflecting the pristine white surfaces in his room.

“Good to see that you’re awake Mr. Tomlinson. My name is Nurse Audrey and I’ve been taking care of you the last two days. With the help of your alpha too, of course,” she said with a smile in Harry’s direction.

Louis looked at her blankly, mouth opening and closing as he tried to form a coherent response that could simultaneously ask all of the questions he yearned to know the answers to. “Wha- how? What - what happened to me?” he said, voice raspy from disuse.

She smiled sympathetically and sat at the end of the bed. “You were seriously injured two nights ago when assaulted by an alpha by the name of James Middleborough, someone I’ve been informed is part of your university group. He has since been detained by police services in Ireland and was sent back here after paying a hefty fine for public disorder as a first offender.”

He gaped at her, racking his brain for any memory, even an inkling of the event.

She patted his ankle sympathetically. “You sustained the majority of your injuries from the fall off the podium you were standing. You pierced your right arm and the left side of your waist. You were severely concussed to the point where we had to put you in induced coma for the flight back to England – your medical insurance didn’t cover you in Ireland – and for your two night stay here,” she explained patiently.

“I- I was assaulted?” he said, lips trembling.

She nodded sadly. “If you could even consider it a benefit given your condition, you didn’t consciously suffer according to the medical examination. Upon impact with your head, you were concussed immediately. It could have been very serious had your alpha not known the correct steps to take to prevent the bleeding in your arm and waist.”

Louis slowly turned his head towards Harry, wincing at the pain. His sleeping form revealed dark, heavy bags beneath his eyes and a violently purple-coloured cheekbone. His arms were wrapped around his waist, as though embracing himself and his wrist was covered in a dressing. Louis’
mind leaping to grave scenarios in which Harry could have been injured and his eyes flooded with tears. “What happened? How did I allow that to happen?” he asked desperately.

She sent him a cautious look. “I think- I think it would be best for him to explain to you. I’m sure he would prefer that. This is the first time the poor thing has slept since you arrived. He’s been driving us up the walls with his demand for a doctor to be permanently present in your room. Even wanted to be there during in the surgery ward while we operated on your arm.”

Louis nodded tersely and watched her pull a clipboard from behind her and note his blood pressure and morphine administration levels.

She carefully removed and replaced the dressing on his waist but his forearm proved a greater struggle. He winced as she slowly removed the cast and examined the deep wound for any indication of infection or blood poisoning. Her expression was grave, however and she immediately called on her pager for immediate assistance.

Three nurses, a doctor and a specialist entered the room within minutes, eyes narrowed and focused.

“I’m going to need blood tests conducted in these brackets and a septicaemia examination before we take further precautionary steps,” the doctor instructed to one of her nurses.

“We’ll need sufficient examination of tissue organs and a test of his inflammatory immune response,” the specialist said, pulling gloves on his hands to carefully examine the skin surrounding the wound.

The pitch and tone of their voices woke Harry, whose body jerked and stood up instantly. He stood unsteadily to his feet, eyes darting around the room before they landed on Louis’ form, releasing a heavy sigh of undisguised relief at the sight. Upon seeing his face contort into a wince, however, their gaze broke and he cast his eyes across the medical practitioners surrounding his arm.

“What’s happening? What are you doing to him?” he demanded, raising himself to full height to stand over the head doctor crouched over Louis’ arm.

One of the nurses tentatively approached him. “Sir, we’re going to carry out a number of tests to examine Mr. Tomlinson’s wound for sepsis,” she said. “If you wouldn’t mind taking a seat here we’ll update you as soon as the results are back. In the meantime, it would be best for you to remain calm while we survey the situation.”

“Stay calm?” he yelled. “You’re fucking with me. He needs medical treatment now if there’s any chance of sepsis.”

“I don’t doubt that they’re trained well enough but my omega needs treatment now before the risk of blood poisoning increases.” He bellowed to the doctors hunched over Louis’ wound. “You need to fucking give him antibiotics and intravenous fluids now and have someone monitor his blood pressure.” His voice became hysterical, louder as his eyes passed over Louis’ pale, clammy skin. “He needs a high oxygen flow tank too.”

She scurried away and whispered into one of her colleagues’ ear. The doctors, who had been speaking rapidly to each other and sending orders across their pagers stood up. The taller of the two, a male alpha with a scent reminiscent of cranberry and lemongrass spoke. “Sir, I assure you that we’ve taken note of all of that. I understand that you’re regarding this situation as that of your
omega and not of a normal patient but I must advise you to calm down. You can take a look at the
wound itself. The likelihood of Mr. Tomlinson having blood poisoning is minimal and he doesn’t
yet have the majority of typical symptoms. This is merely a precautionary measure rather than a
delayed intervention.”

Harry gripped the bar of the hospital bed and leaned down to scrutinise Louis’ wound, heavy
breathing slowing to a more natural pace as he comprehended that Louis’ wound was not as severe
as he initially presumed. “Fine,” he spat. “But there needs to be regular updates on his condition.
Not like the concussion tests you operated yesterday.”

The alpha swallowed a retort and nodded reluctantly. “We’ll do what we can.”

“You’ll do more than what you can; you’ll do what my omega needs.”

The doctor sighed heavily, muttering under his breath about overprotective alphas. The consultant
and two of the nurses followed, leaving just Louis, Harry and Audrey in the room. She monitored
his fluid rates and applied a new monitor to him before taking note of his post-unconsciousness
dexterity examination.

Louis looked up at Harry pacing the small space beside his bed where a small chair (where he
presumed Harry had slept) held most of his belongings. His eyebrows drew together as he tried to
piece together everything that had happened. The last thing he remembered from that night was
needing Harry more than he could ever express. His desire had blurred and obscured his rational
thoughts, rendering him at the control of his inner omega. Images of Harry’s cold gaze and his
reluctance to answer him flashed before his mind and he felt a justified vexation at the alpha
overwhelm him. “I’m not your omega, Harry,” he said quietly.

From the way Harry’s back muscles tightened and he stopped in his tracks, Louis knew he had
heard. Audrey evidently heard too as she immediately excused herself from the room, softly telling
him she needed to get a new monitor.

Harry turned slowly to face him, eyes wide and shielded. Harry made to step closer to the bed but
stopped himself at the last moment, deigning instead to stand beside the window where morning
light cast a curious shadow across his face. “Louis, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Louis gave him a look of disbelief. “Then what did you mean it like? Because it seems to me that
you simply love claiming me as yours to everyone else except me.”

“That’s not it,” Harry huffed. “I- it was easier to call you my omega to the doctors because then
they took my demands more seriously.”

“Oh, so now it’s out of convenience that you call me your omega?”

“No, that came out - ”

“I don’t care. You can’t just devalue the significance of calling someone your omega, Harry.”

“I wasn’t doing that, Louis. Fuck, I was trying to get them to let me into the hospital room in the
first place. Do you know how fucking worried I’ve been?”

“No I don’t, Harry. I never asked for this to happen. Didn’t expect you to even be here, anyway.”

“Fuck, Louis!” he yelled frustratedly. “Of course I’m here. You want me to prove to everyone that
I want you to be my omega and here I am.”
“I couldn’t care less about them,” he said spitefully. “I want you to tell me; show me that you mean it and actually fucking talk to me about whatever shit is going on with you for once, Harry.”

“With me? Are you fucking with me? Have you looked into the mirror recently, sweetheart?”

Louis gaped at him. “What are you talking about?”

Harry laughed ruefully. “You seriously don’t know? Does that little speech Sunday night ring any bells? You telling the entire fucking alpha group how wet you were and how you wanted to be tied down for Christ’s sake. I don’t know where that came out of, Louis. If you were trying to- I don’t know, get me back for mentioning other omegas then that - ”

“I don’t care about any other omegas you’ve fucked, Harry,” he spat. It was a lie but, in that moment he had greater concerns than telling the complete truth.

“Well what was it then, Louis? Because while you were apparently supposed to be giving medical facts about omega heats every alpha in that room wanted to fuck you into the floor and I felt like a fucking jealous monster. I don’t share what’s mine.”

“Then why didn’t you do anything, Harry?” he demanded.

“Don’t raise your voice at me, omega,” he warned.

Louis instinctively closed his mouth and averted Harry’s gaze, aware that he had angered him enough to be reprimanded. “You can’t do that, Harry,” he whispered. He looked up to meet Harry’s narrowed eyes. “You have no right to tell me how to behave. You can’t even fucking communicate with me.”

“And you can?” Harry said incredulously. “You thought you had to fucking resort to whining into a microphone in a room full of horny alphas just to get my attention.”

Louis inhaled deeply. “I’m not going to pretend I know how my inner omega got so much control over me but that doesn’t excuse the fact that you completely ignored me before that. I was trying to explain that I didn’t have any control over my actions, I think I’ve made that quite clear. My omega was so desperate for something, anything that would give me some kind of reassurance but you couldn’t even look at me. Do you know how that made me feel?”

Harry looked justly regretful. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I really am. I shouldn’t have ignored you like that.” He cast his eyes to the immaculate surfaces where his long fingers danced. “And I know you don’t want to hear this right now but I- I can’t talk about why I did. Not yet.”

Louis’ eyes welled with unshed tears and his face contorted. “Harry, I understand that you have things that you feel you can’t tell me but I need you to know that you can. If we want this to work I want to be the person you come to. I’d never think badly of you. I know you, Harry and nothing about your past could change the person you are now. I’m just- I’m tired of waiting for you.”

Harry stepped forward and crouched in front of the bed. He gently brushed a fallen eyelash from Louis’ cheekbone, eyes following the movement. He leaned close to Louis until they were breathing the same air, eyes darting across Louis’ face before pressing his lips to Louis’. He swiped his tongue along Louis’ lower lip to moisten it. He pressed small, fleeting kisses along his upper lip before fully capturing Louis’ mouth in his own. It was emotional, full of unsaid words and, after two sleepless nights and perpetual worrying, to Harry it was everything.

“I’m sorry, Louis. I’m sorry,” he whispered, nosing along Louis’ jaw to press a lingering kiss below his ear. He breathed in Louis’ scent – cranberry, elderflower and sweet vanilla – evoking a
deep sense of desire and arousing his alpha instincts which longed to calm him after their argument.

“Harry,” he whispered, surging up to respond just as passionately, pressing against Harry’s mouth to try to express his undisclosed emotions. “Harry, can you scent me? Please?”

Harry nodded vigorously. “Of course, Louis,” he whispered desperately. “That’s all I want, darling, is to make you happy with me.” He let his scent wash over Louis, pass across his skin in heavy waves, whispering softly in his ear in an attempt to calm him. “Make you trust me enough to take care of you, protect you. I’m sorry I can’t be everything you need right now but I will, I promise.”

Harry stopped releasing his scent abruptly, opening his eyes in realisation.

“Don’t stop, please Harry,” he said softly.

“I didn’t, though,” he said to himself. “I didn’t do it, Louis. I didn’t take care of you, didn’t protect you. Fuck, I’m couldn’t even carry out my most basic alpha duties right. No wonder my father - ”

“No,” he said firmly. “That was not your fault, Louis. I’m going to kill James when I find him.” The manic look in his eye told Louis that he had no reason to doubt that Harry would. “No matter how you act, that never gives someone a justifiable excuse to assault you. I should never have let things get so far.”

“Harry, you’re here now taking care of me. You stayed with me this entire time. That’s what I appreciate, not whether you reacted to my inner omega calling out for you.”

“But that’s the issue, darling,” Harry sighed.

…

“Mr. Styles,” Audrey said hours later, opening the door to his hospital room to find both of them laying on the narrow bed, feet tangled together.

Harry looked up and carefully removed himself from Louis’ sleeping form, cherishing his delicate features and steady, shallow breathes before turning to the nurse. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course. Doctor Lyons requested to speak to you privately if you don’t mind,” she said, guiding him out of the room.

Harry reluctantly accompanied her past the other hospital wards and onto the fourth floor where the consultants’ offices were located. She knocked firmly on one of the office doors and introduced him to a middle-aged alpha with a thick beard and thick-rimmed glasses at his desk.

Harry recognised him immediately.

“Thank you, Audrey,” he acknowledged as she let herself out of the room. He stood and shook Harry’s hand firmly, scrutinising eyes following the dark bags beneath his eyes and his creased shirt. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Styles. My name is Peter Lyons, the head consultant in gender-specific physical injury and psychological illness. I know your father very well, actually.”

Harry raised an inquisitive eyebrow as he sat opposite him, a long desk separating them. “I know that,” he said shortly. “What does your department have to do with Louis, though? His injuries
aren’t gender-specific.”

Doctor Lyons examined Harry carefully, gaze probing and indecipherable. “They aren’t exactly. But I think you and I both know that the position he put himself in was certainly prompted by his omega inclinations.”

He scanned a thin file on the desk before continuing. “During Mr. Middleborough’s questioning he blamed Mr. Tomlinson’s disposition, the potency of his scent and his apparent plead for an alpha. This was then cross-examined and accepted to be accurate. My question for you is why did this take place? Judging from the reactions of the witnesses that were questioned – including you - his behaviour was completely unprecedented and contrary to his character. You were at the scene and you didn’t react. He’s not your omega but you claim he is. So why, then, did that take place? And why did you allow it to escalate?”

Harry’s steely eyes met the doctor’s scrutinising gaze. “I think you already know why, Doctor Lyons,” he articulated slowly, tone shaded by reluctance and contempt for the doctor.

He smiled and leaned back in his chair to observe Harry. “You’re right. I do know why it happened but I want you to tell me yourself.”

“That’s completely unprofessional,” he spat.

“Your behaviour was completely unethical,” he refuted calmly. “You don’t have any leverage here Mr. Styles so I suggest you talk or I won’t hesitate to tell Mr. Tomlinson exactly why he wasn’t able to resist his omega tendencies.”

…

The following morning Louis was visited by Zayn who pulled him in a tight embrace, whispering gentle words into his hair. He was to be released from the hospital that day and Harry had left to bring him fresh clothes from his dormitory to change into in order for him to attend his evening classes. Louis was excited to return to his lectures but anticipated the reactions of the other students to the incident.

“Everyone knows that it wasn’t your intention to say those things, Lou,” Zayn assured. “The rumour going around is that you went into early heat and were started to lose control from being surrounded by so many other alphas. I didn’t say that the rumour wasn’t true because I figured that it’s probably easier than trying to explain to everyone that your omega instincts took control of you for no apparent reason.”

Louis smiled appreciatively. “It definitely is easier. Thank you, Z.”

Zayn nodded, fingers absentmindedly toying with the fraying fabric of Louis’ bedsheets before broaching the question that had been at the forefront of his mind. “Lou,” he said carefully, “do you- do you know why that happened? Like why your inner omega determined your actions. It looked like you didn’t even realise what you were saying you were so far under.”

Louis shook his head regretfully even before Zayn had finished. “I wish I knew why,” he sighed. “I’ve been trying to remember ever since I woke up. I’ve been replaying everything that happened leading up to that point and nothing seems to indicate how I could have allowed my instincts to control me like that.”

They fell into comfortable conversation after that. Zayn recounted delivering his art project to his art professor and explaining the premise of his work; Louis described in-depth the surprisingly
delectable hospital meals and the omega nurses he had befriended during his stay who doted on him and teased him about his relationship with Harry.

“What was he like while I was talking?” Louis asked suddenly as the two were packing his belongings into his backpack.

“What was who like?”

“Harry. I remember him facing away from him the entire time but he was at our table, right? And you were too.”

Zayn’s movements stilled. “Yeah. Yeah, I was,” he confirmed. “He- he looked- fuck, Louis, he looked like he wanted to murder someone. His scent was unbelievably strong and his eyes- his eyes were the darkest I’ve ever seen. They had a faraway look in them. He looked fucking possessed, like he was ready to kill.”

Louis shook his head. “I don’t understand,” he said under his breath. “Why didn’t he react?”

“He wanted to. I know he did. He was gripping he table and his body kept jerking in the direction you were standing, like he had to restrain himself from acting.”

Zayn resumed collecting Louis’ belongings and placing them inside his backpack, movements slow and meticulous. Louis merely sat cross-legged on the bed, cold hands clutching his socked feet. His mind whirred with thoughts and the mental painted image of Harry he had formed cracked and peeled with every word Zayn uttered. All of the assumptions he had made about Harry were challenged, rebutted by his restraint and decision not to help Louis when he was most in need of him.

Louis showered in the small bathroom adjacent to his hospital room with his injured side and forearm carefully covered by waterproof dressing. He revelled in the feeling of scalding hot water cascading down his body. He watched the water swirl into the drain and the steam rise around him. He washed his hair with the shampoo provided – lavender and thyme – and towel dried his hair until it fell into a fringe over his forehead. He wrapped a towel around his waist and walked back into the room to find Zayn perched on the edge of his head, hand outstretched with clean clothes. He peered out the door to find Harry talking with Audrey before pulling on the forest green jumper and dark jeans Harry had selected for him.

Harry returned to the room a moment later to find Louis and Zayn in deep conversation. “Ready?” he asked.

Louis nodded stiffly and gripped the straps of his backpack while Zayn remained tellingly silent.

“Is everything alright? You don’t have to fill out any paperwork, darling,” he said as Louis made to turn in the direction of the administration desk. “It’s already been covered so we can go straight back to Candler.”

“Okay, I just want to say goodbye to the nurses,” he said, slowly walking towards a group of familiar nurses taking their break at the desk. He winced at the pain that shot down his side and tried to put most of his weight on the opposite side.

Harry noticed Louis’ slight limp and immediately rushed to his side, pulling him under his arm. “Lean on me,” he said. “You can put your weight on me, darling. Don’t want to injure yourself further.”

Louis smiled and allowed himself to fall into Harry’s clutch with every step. He felt Harry press a
gentle kiss to his hair before he stiffened.

“Louis?” he said, stopping in his tracks.

“What is it?”

“Your scent,” he muttered, frowning as he furrowed his nose into Louis’ hair. “It’s different.”

“I used a different shampoo. They didn’t have any other,” he said simply, attempting to continue along the corridor.

Harry extended a hand to halt his movement.

“What is it?” he sighed.

Harry’s jaw set and his eyes narrowed at Louis’ tone. “I was going to say that I miss your natural scent. That shampoo masks it.”

“Well there’s nothing I can do about it now Harry,” he snapped.

Harry crowded him into the wall, movements swift and large hand moving around to his lower back to support him.

Louis’ breath hitched and he glanced up. The tender touch of Harry’s hand across his back contrasted starkly with his affronted expression. “What’s wrong with you?” he said exasperatedly.

“Nothing,” he said, wriggling free of Harry’s hold. “Let me thank the nurses and then we can leave.”

“Sweetheart,” he sighed. “You’re clearly upset about something I did.”

“Yes, I am,” he said. He resisted every fibre of his being instructing him to apologise to Harry for his behaviour, to trust him. “And I think I have the right to be upset. I need some time to figure this out without you smothering me, Harry.” His breath hitched and he turned his gaze to his hands fumbling with the cuff of his jumper, vaguely registering the fact that Harry’s scent lingered there. “I need space away from you.”

Harry felt a tip of a knife break the skin stretched across his chest; felt it sink deeper into him and twist slowly, excruciatingly at the rejection. His entire being screamed at him to reach out for Louis as he turned to walk in the opposite direction, leaving Harry to stare at him, paralysed. His arm fell limply to his side and he felt the ache in his chest seep throughout his entire body like a disease.

The drive to Candling lasted a mere half-hour but it felt like an endless journey through congested traffic and past the bustling shoppers in central London. Zayn tried to make conversation with him in the back seat but Louis merely made half-hearted noises of agreement.

Harry’s intense scent permeated the car, making Louis feel trapped in the something he needed to remove himself from despite his instincts. He opened the car door as soon as Harry reversed in the student car park and breathed in the fresh breeze relievedly. Harry moved quickly to help him out of the car but Louis shook his head, stepping down unsteadily onto the pavement.

“I can get out myself. Thank you for driving me, though. And for staying with me the last couple of days. I know that you probably missed out a lot of class and everything,” he said.
“Doesn’t matter,” Harry dismissed easily. “We have the project starting in a couple of days’ time so we’ll be exempted from a lot of class.” Harry’s eyes searched Louis’ face desperately. “But even if that wasn’t the case, I would never care about something like that. Not when I know that you need help.”

Louis pulled his lower lip into his mouth and nodded tersely. “Thank you, Harry,” he whispered earnestly. “I’ll- I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah,” Harry said on a breath, following Louis’ gaze to where Zayn stood awkwardly on the opposite side of the car, Louis’ backpack slung over his shoulder and eyes trained on his phone. “Louis, I know you have a right to feel like this. I shouldn’t have let things get that far. I know that. But I need you to know that I’m sorry.” His voice cracked vulnerably and his fingers trembled as he ran them through his hair shakily.

“I know that, Harry,” he said with a sad smile. “I just don’t think I can trust you properly just yet. I was told something and it just brought back memories of everything that happened that I couldn’t even register when I was so far under. I- I can’t continue like this. Not when I can’t even trust myself and my own instincts.”

Harry’s heart plummeted at his admission. He yearned to reassure Louis; explain that he could trust himself. Harry wanted to scream that he was to blame, that he was the reason for Louis’ loss of control, that he was the source of his self-distrust. He closed his mouth and acquiesced to Louis’ request for space. “I- when you’re ready for us to talk again,” he whispered, “please talk to me. I need you. I need us to be right again.”

Louis’ lips quivered and he shut his eyes before nodding repeatedly. “I will,” he said softly. He tucked his chin into his chest, an act that he did to reassure himself before glancing up to meet Harry’s pleading eyes. “Goodbye Harry.”

Harry couldn’t watch him leave, turning instead to hang his head in defeat. He tried to suppress the self-loathing, the feeling that had consumed him over the two days he watched Louis’ beatific form laying in his hospital bed. He felt an uncontrollable rage surge through him; his muscles tensed, hands balled into fists and his jaw clenched.

“You fucking idiot,” he shouted into the empty car park, reverberating voice carried by the howling wind. He shoved his hand into his hair, tugging harshly and ignoring the physical pain. He paced the car park, eyes darting across the bare tarmacadam for any sign of Louis’ return, a sign, even, that he wasn’t alone. The wind and his screaming conscience remained his sole unwelcome companions.

He stormed towards his car, letting a growl of frustration rip across his chest and slip past his mouth. Louis’ desperate voice pleading with him to be left alone replayed in his mind, harsh and stark. He kicked the tyre of his car, forcing himself to focus on the throb of his foot instead of the repetitive whispers admitting that he couldn’t even trust himself.

“You did that,” he whispered, panting heavily. “You fucking did that to him.”

He kicked the car tyre, hair falling loose and whipping with the wind, face contorted with concentration until his knees buckled and he fell to the ground. He let the heavy sobs escape him, chest heaving with emotion; his longing for Louis, his self-hatred and his regret pounding through him at an unrelenting pace.

Harry didn’t know how long he spent with the elements, body frail and face blotched when he finally hoisted himself to his feel with a definitive sigh. He allowed his legs to drag him back to his
dormitory room, ignoring the whispers and the words of concern and questioning directed at him until he slammed the door behind him.

Gemma was sat on his bed, front teeth resting on her bottom lip and face revealing her concern.

“Harry,” she sighed. “I know what happened. And Dad does too. He- he thinks that it’s what you wanted.” She swallowed thickly and averted his furious gaze, the fire behind them burning with determination. “Thinks that since you stopped your medication that it was your intention to - ”

“To what, Gemma?” he shouted. “To fucking let myself control him? To act like the same abusive fucking alpha he is?” He gritted his teeth, heavy breathing returning as the floodgates to the surge of memories opened. He strode towards her, threatening stance conveying his rage. “I never intended for this to happen. It was exactly this reason that I took those suppressants in the first place but I fucking had to stop them to control my instincts and now look where it’s got me. In the same fucking place I was before only this time Louis thinks that he’s to blame for losing control.”

An eerie silence, broken only by Harry’s erratic breathing, settled around them.

“You need to tell him,” Gemma whispered eventually.

“You don’t think I haven’t thought of that?” Harry demanded. “He’d never accept it, Gemma.” He laughed humourlessly. “What sane omega would?”

“Harry,” she said exasperatedly. “You need to tell him if you want to have any kind of relationship with him. He deserves to know.”

Harry shook his head vehemently. “Gemma, you don’t understand. He’s it for me. He’s the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. I can’t risk that for anything.”

Chapter End Notes

I was planning on posting this next Sunday but I had free time today to write so I thought I would treat you all and post this chapter earlier than anticipated. What do you think is going to happen to their relationship? What do you think the Doctor and Gemma were referencing to when they spoke of Harry having control over Louis? Thank you for reading. Looking forward to reading your comments!
A ringing sound from his phone broke the startling silence. Louis blindly reached across the bedside locker to mute his alarm and held the bright screen to find an unread e-mail sent the previous afternoon while he was still at the hospital.

Dear Mr. L. Tomlinson,

We are delighted to welcome you to our team of researchers at the International Gender Research Foundation. Your schedule for the next month is attached below. As you have been informed from previous correspondence this project will impede on your studies but Candling University have been wonderfully receptive and have allowed for your exemption from all of your classes with the sole exception of your core module.

Your introductory meeting and outline for the objective of the research will begin today at 9am sharp. We greatly look forward to getting to know you better over the course of the four weeks and conducting productive research together.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Matilda May.

Louis yawned loudly into his hand and glanced at the accusatory ‘8:35’ before shooting up from his bed with alarming speed.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Shit, shit, I’m going to be so late.” He stripped himself of his pyjamas before scurrying to the adjoining bathroom.

“Zayn, mate,” he called as he turned on the shower, cursing the plumbing in the omega dormitories as icy cold water spurted out. “I need you to do me a favour.”

He heard an unwilling grunt.

“Will you dump all of the papers on my desk into the blue bag beside my bed and try and put them into a relatively neat pile so it doesn’t like I’m as disorganised as this,” he called. “I just don’t want to make a bad impression.”

He washed himself of any lingering scents from the hospital and wrapped a towel around his shivering body. Zayn, bleary-eyed and sporting bed hair, handed him his neatly organised bag and a rain jacket, muttering a “It’s supposed to rain today,” before promptly collapsing on his bed with a sigh.

Louis smiled and thanked him softly before pulling on a pair of blue jeans, a lilac jumper and a beanie to cover his wet hair. He slung his bag over his shoulder and crept out of the room, mindful of Zayn’s heavy snores.

He arrived at the Research Hall with mere seconds to spare, finding the group of eleven students in various states of tiredness seated in one of the smaller rooms, weak morning sunlight illuminating the hardwood surfaces in the room. Harry stared at him as he stepped further into the room and the other students – as well as Matilda herself – noticed his scent.
“Sorry I’m late,” he rushed out, scrambling to take a seat beside Catherine, the only other omega who smiled warmly at him. He panted softly and peeled his jumper off his sweaty back.

“Not to worry,” Matilda assured good-naturedly. “I was informed about your situation. We weren’t even expecting you, Louis so it’s a relief that you’re with us.” She cast her eyed across the group with a smile. “We can formally begin now.”

Louis’ eyes travelled across the group, following their subtle movements and side-glances. He finished on Harry whose arms were crossed across his chest despite his attentive expression. Louis noticed that, after a mere day of not speaking with him, his scent was exponentially thicker. The potency of his father’s scent came to mind and how he had an air of importance – superiority, even - surrounding him which demanded respect from alphas and omegas alike.

Matilda walked purposefully towards the front of the room and extracted twelve booklets from her briefcase before distributing them. “These booklets include everything you need to know about the areas of specialisation we will focus on in the area of gender research. For the first two weeks we will be collectively carrying out monitored experiments and for the latter two weeks our biology students will analyse the results, our law students will apply these results to propose improved legislation and our medicine students will examine areas where medication can contribute to bridge the divide between the genders. So, let’s begin.”

She led the group through the deserted hallway towards the research laboratories. There, they were introduced to a team of twenty researchers with various areas of expertise. Louis noticed that their scents were artificially and temporarily muted for the duration of their lab work to prevent interference.

“This here is a subsection of the part of the alpha brain that controls gender-defined functions,” one of the beta researchers, a freckled man with watery-blue eyes, said. “Its function is to dictate behavioural features and responses, allow for and regulate scent production and codify for an alpha’s knot to be formed during sexual arousal.”

“It all sounds very unsexy when he says it in scientific terms,” Catherine whispered.

They were given a general overview of the objectives of the research and an orientation of their workspace.

“As you’re all aware, we need to maintain the ambiguity regarding the experiments themselves,” Matilda explained as she led them through a set of double doors into a pristine laboratory with white surfaces and neat filing cabinets lining the walls. The laboratory was windowless and he blinked rapidly to adjust to the artificial light. There was an expansive glass pane covering one of the walls which observed another smaller room with a therapist’s chair settled in the corner.

“This will be the area that we conduct experiments that could be deemed mildly unsafe,” she explained, pointing towards the room through the glass.

“What exactly will we be doing that’s unsafe?” Adam, one of biology students asked loudly.

“We can’t tell you that until immediately beforehand,” she said. “It’s not necessarily that we don’t trust you not to tell anyone outside of the research project about our work but more as a precautionary measure. Even Candling don’t know the extent of our research otherwise we would never get insurance. And Candling would be obliged to inform the government which would render all of our work void.” She took a deep breath and cast her gaze across the group. “Our research can only be disclosed if and when it’s proven that it can actually bring about proper changes in society.”
They hung on her every word as she guided them through the timetable for their first two weeks.

“These experiments will be the core basis of our work and, hopefully, will confirm the research we’ve conducted up to this point. Our central hypothesis is that alphas and omegas are conditioned by society and not solely by their biology to react to their instincts. If we prove this to be true a lot of actions carried out by either gender – but alphas specifically – will not be deigned acceptable and they will be held accountable for their actions. Primarily, we want stricter laws and better rights in the area of undesired scenting, reaction to heats and ruts and cases of rape.”

Though Louis knew it was unlikely for a project such as this to have such extensive legal and societal impact, he couldn’t help but hope that their research would reach such conclusions.

They parted for lunch an hour later, most of the group trailing across campus to go to the quaint coffeeshop with the best baked goods. Louis went to the toilet, leaving the rest of them to go ahead. When he re-emerged, thoughts of steaming hot tea and toasted cheese sandwiches on his mind, he found that he wasn’t the only one left.

“I’m not a fucking experiment, Matilda. I don’t want people gapeing at me like I’m some alpha freak,” he heard Harry say around the corner. From his position he could see her stern expression while Harry’s body was hidden behind a long cabinet.

“Harry I needn’t remind you that you’re the one who signed up for this before I even knew you’d inherited your father’s genes.”

“He wouldn’t approve of this and you know it. I can tell my father exactly what you’re doing. He’s under the impression that you’re looking at relatively tame gender dynamics not fucking changing the way society thinks.”

“Harry don’t send my false threats. I know perfectly well that you won’t be telling your father anything.”

Harry growled lowly, squaring his shoulders and looming over her.

She didn’t cower but Louis saw her flinch beneath her thick layer of makeup.

“I won’t tell him, you’re right. But you and I both know that there are a lot of other people I could.”

“You don’t want that, Harry. You know as well as I do that there needs to be some kind of change in the way omegas are treated and inter-gender relations work. This research will make a difference, I’m sure of it.”

“Well then stop treating me like a fucking freak show just because of my condition.”

She sighed heavily. “Harry neither me nor any of the researchers see you as that. First and foremost you’re just you, same as all of the other students. But what you have is of huge importance. If we can prove that you of all people can resist your basic instincts then there is literally no argument against introducing legislation to protect omegas and give them better rights.”

Louis heard him sigh heavily before muttering his agreement.

She smiled and turned in Louis’ direction, prompting him to squeal internally and scurry around the corner and out of sight. He only slowed his pace when he had reached the coffeeshop, wiping the light layer of sweat from his brow and hoping that none of the alphas would be inordinately affected by the potency of his scent after the short run.
He absentmindedly ordered his lunch, thoughts encircling Harry’s conversation with Matilda. He knew that Harry was already connected to the organisation through his father’s planning for their research project but he had not anticipated him being on such personal terms with Matilda. He also now knew that Harry was particularly self-conscious about his inner alpha but Louis was inclined to think that it wasn’t just his particularly powerful scent that he was sensitive of. He made his way to the group who were sat in comfortable armchairs, three tables pushed together to accommodate them all and engaged in deep conversation, their hushed voices alerting him.

“I think we need to stay aware,” Adam said earnestly, leaning forward and darting his eyes around the group. “We can’t be sure what kind of experiments they’ll do,” he said conspiratorially.

“Oh, lighten up,” Fernanda, another biology student said through a mouthful of blueberry muffin. She swallowed thickly. “We’re going to be the ones carrying out a lot of the experiments and, when the primary researchers are doing most of the work then we’ll be observing. Their process is completely transparent it’s just that they don’t want to disclose everything in case we can somehow prepare in advance in a way that’ll manipulate the results.”

There was a murmur of agreement in the group as Harry stalked into the coffee shop. His scowl only disappeared when he saw Louis tucked into a corner seat, sipping his milky tea and munching on sandwiches. There were two free spaces – one empty armchair beside him and a space beside Catherine on an overstuffed beige couch. Harry sat beside her with a weak smile. He missed Louis’ eyebrows drawing together as he watched from the opposite side of the misshaped circle of chairs.

Sabrina, one of the other two law students, a third year beta with corkscrew curls started talking to him but he was distracted by Harry’s low chuckle and spun around to find him hunched over with laughter as Catherine giggled lightly. He hated the jealousy that crept into his thoughts, rendering Catherine – a kind-hearted omega who was fiercely intelligent – the enemy in this scenario.

Sabrina continued talking, as though she hadn’t noticed his disinterest and he nodded along with her though his eyes sprang to Harry and Catherine periodically. He knew that he had no right to feel jealous. He had told Harry that he needed time to re-evaluate his priorities and their relationship. Harry had given him the space he asked for and was perfectly entitled to talk with any other student. Not when that student is an omega, a small voice in his head argued. That should be you sitting there, holding Harry’s hand, perhaps, and cuddling into him too. He exhaled abruptly and Sabrina turned to him with a curious expression.

“Is everything okay? Sorry, I’m probably boring you with this story,” she said.

“Not at all,” Louis said, feeling guilty for his lack of attentiveness. “Sorry, was just distracted is all. Please, continue.”

She shot him a knowing look and tilted her head to subtly point towards Harry. “Distracted by someone in particular?”

Louis’ cheeks turned a light rosy shade and he knew denying it would be futile. “I suppose,” he said quietly.

“He likes you too, you know,” she said conversationally. “It’s pretty obvious to anyone with a set of eyes that he’s into you. Why don’t you go for it?”

Louis laughed humourlessly. “It’s not that simple,” he admitted. “I’m just sorting through some stuff at the moment, I suppose.”

She nodded with a tight-lipped smile. “As long as it’s not omega stuff your dealing with,” she said...
gravely. “Your inner omega should be fully engaged and under your control if we want to get anywhere with these experiments. The aim is to resist gender instincts, right?”

He confirmed her question but found that he didn’t have anything left to say that didn’t involve his conflicted conscience and his lingering jealousy as Harry told Catherine a story he had told him before, gesticulating wildly with his hands as he often did.

Louis finished eating by himself. He stole another glance from Harry and found him staring back, indecipherable expression – somewhere between reservation and self-restraint – on his face. Louis immediately looked away, afraid of being caught by his natural pull to be near Harry, to breathe in his scent and to connect with him.

“We should head back now, guys,” Adam called.

The group silently and packed their belongings away before venturing outside to confront the turbulent October wind roaming the college grounds. Catherine found her way towards him as soon as they were out of the coffeeshop, looping her arm through his.

“I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings there,” she said sincerely, holding up her hand to silence him as he tried to object. “I know how it is, trust me. I become the green-eyed monster whenever another omega so much as glances at my boyfriend.”

“You have an alpha?”

She shook her head, pulling him closer to whisper in his ear. “I trust you not to tell anyone but he’s a beta. That’s why you can’t detect his scent on me.”

“I was wondering,” he said softly. “You smell like pure honey.”

She giggled lightly. “That’s what everyone says.”

“Don’t worry, though, Catherine. I promise not to tell. I hadn’t realised views about that were so conservative. Back where I live things are much better. I dated a beta during my last year studying because there were no alphas in my school.”

She sighed in awe. “I wish it was like that,” he said jokingly. “Those alphas are menaces. Always messing with my instincts.” She glanced over to compel him to return her gaze. “I didn’t intend for Harry to sit next to me, though. I’m sorry that happened. I don’t know why it would – he’s head over heels for you.”

“It’s not your fault,” he assured. “I- I asked Harry to give me a little space so he was really just respecting my boundaries.”

She made a noise of interest. “Surprised he didn’t mention that.”

“Why would he?”

“We were talking about you most of the time, of course. Must be one of those alpha pride things where he doesn’t like letting people know he’s been rejected.”

Louis decided to ignore her first comment as the thought of him filled his heart with such warmth that if he spoke about it he thought he might squeal. “I didn’t reject him.”

She sent him a disbelieving look. “Sure doesn’t look like that,” she sing-songed.
Louis was saved from replying by their arrival at the front entrance to the Research Hall. They were ushered inside from the biting wind and Louis couldn’t suppress the shiver that ran through his body and chattered his teeth. He saw Harry dramatically remove his coat before making a peculiar lunging movement in his direction and stopping himself mid-stride only to turn away from Louis and force a conversation on one of the other students, all the while gripping his coat in a tight fist.

Catherine watched the episode with amusement twinkling in her eye. “Alphas,” she muttered with feigned exasperation.

They were led into the research lab to begin the experiments, a nervous silence settling around them.

“We will begin with a basic scent assessment of all of the alphas and omegas to test your susceptibility to certain scents. This will give us a basic standard or a kind of objective control for the research. My research team and the five beta students will set you up with the monitors. Instructions to do so are here and I would like all of the alphas to firstly step into the adjoining experiment room,” Matilda said.

Louis, Catherine took seats directly in front of the pane of glass – which Louis now knew was a one-way mirror – with clipboards to take note of the reactions they observed from each of the alphas.

Typically, Louis was instructed to observe Harry’s reactions. He sighed heavily and was silently relieved that Harry wouldn’t know he was watching his every move, admiring the strong line of his shoulders, the way his strong chest muscles protruded beneath his shirt and the cautious smile adorning his features, a dimple teasing him.

Louis could hear the alphas being told to line up. They were instructed to erase their thoughts to focus solely on the scents permeating the room. The room had been divided into five box-shaped structures that completely separated each alpha from the next and from which the scents would be released.

Louis watched the biology students attach monitors to their chest and neck before stepping out of the compartments and sealing the door carefully.

“Right, I want three of my biology students to take seats next to Louis and Catherine to examine their physical reactions and the other two to monitor readings of the alphas along with my research team,” Matilda called.

There was a lull in the discussion as everyone settled into their assigned roles.

“We’ll begin now.” She pressed a button and spoke into a small microphone which carried her voice into the adjoining room where the alphas stood in anticipation. “We’re going to start injecting scents into your separate compartments. The aim is for you to react as you would while letting your inner alpha take over. It should be completely authentic. The compartments are extremely durable so you won’t break anything either. Do not try to resist your urges.”

Louis watched Harry’s Adam’s apple swell as he gulped and nodded tersely.

“Should you wish to exit from the experiment you can pull the small lever behind you to stop the scent production. Your compartment will then flood with fresh, unaltered air. That same air will be passed through between each scent we expose you to as well. I must warn you in advance, however, that you will have to repeat the experiment at another stage if you choose to opt out
today,” she said firmly.

When each of the five alphas had consented – some, albeit, rather unwillingly - everyone took their positions, clipboards at the ready.

“We will begin with their own scents,” she informed the group. “The technology in the compartments is taking the scents they’re currently emitting and compounding them substantially. As none of them are bonded, it is purely their own scents their senses are registering.”

Louis absentmindedly thought it unfair that Harry, who already undoubtably had the most prominent scent, was subjected to twice the amount of exposure as the rest of the group.

He watched Harry’s eyebrows momentarily furrow as he detected his own scent of heady mulling spices and fresh pine. Louis glanced at the questions on his clipboard.

1. Does the subject appear to be constrained or in pain?
2. Does the subject’s bodily features move in a way that suggests an inclination to move – whether that is to flee or lunge is irrelevant.
3. Does the subject touch his/her bond mark spot? If so, how soon after detecting the scent?

The questions continued in the same manner for each of the scents the alphas would be exposed to. He carefully observed Harry, divided only by a pane of glass, as his scent thickened and enveloped him in a thick fog. His nose twitched and his shoulders tensed. Louis watched as Harry made himself seem bigger, more assertive; he lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes menacingly, widened his stance and squared his shoulders in a way that Louis could not appreciate for long for fear of being affected by the aura he exerted.

“That’s enough,” Matilda called suddenly and one of the researchers immediately press a button on the panel. The timer for the test went off mere seconds later, the sound accompanying the scratching of pens as the researchers took note of everything they had witnessed.

Louis watched Harry’s demeanour change drastically in a matter of seconds. His shoulders slouched and posture deflated, his expression was puzzled, as though he couldn’t quite comprehend what had happened. Louis leaned over Catherine to watch the alpha she was assigned to, a medicine student called Christian, and found him seated on the floor with his head in his hands. Catherine looked extremely anxious, unnerved by his demeanour. He hadn’t touched the lever.

Matilda seemed extremely satisfied by their responses. “Excellent,” she exclaimed. “Next, we’re going to pass through some typical omega scents. They won’t be linked with any particular person but they will bring typical omega traits such as purity and compassion to mind. There will be far more differences between their reactions as we can’t tell whether they will connect the scent to a particular person such as a parent or partner, or whether they will perceive the scents simply as generic omega ones.”

She nodded towards one of the researchers who clicked a second button into place, allowing the thick scents to fill the compartments.

Louis watched Harry’s entire body stiffen. His eyes widened with something close to recognition and he pulled his lower lip between his teeth. Harry’s fingers shook profusely, his wrists jerking sporadically.

Matilda nodded towards her research partner and the scent was intensified.

Harry let out a harsh whimper of pain and turned his entire body towards the wall of the
compartment, pounding his hand once against it. From the angle, Louis could see the slight bulge beneath his jeans.

Matilda spoke into the microphone clearly. “Don’t resist it,” she instructed. “Otherwise you’ll have to repeat it. We’re trying to make these controls as accurate as possible.”

Louis watched Harry’s hips jolt, as though he needed friction. His head lowered and he gritted his teeth, inhaling through his nose and savouring the scent.

“Turn off the sound setting,” she urged suddenly.

All of the grunts and shuffling passing from the adjacent room into the laboratory were muted instantly. Louis watched the alphas drag their feet across the ground and part their lips. He followed Matilda’s gaze which was directed solely at Harry. His head was tilted backwards, eyes shut in concentration and his chest thrust forward.

The timer sounded and the scents were instantly retracted from the room, Harry’s entire body falling to lean on the wall with such force that Louis thought he might knock it down.

Matilda called one of her research team members and the two spoke in hushed voices. Matilda kept pointing towards Catherine and Louis, gesticulating wildly.

“I want to try something,” she announced to the group. She motioned for the two omegas to join her. “With your consent, of course, I want to implement an experiment that we had debated making a part of this but had ultimately decided against.”

Louis and Catherine exchanged a wary look but allowed her to proceed.

“We want to try and use your scents for the experiment. Obviously you only met some of these alphas for the second or third time today so you haven’t formed a complete connection with all of them. But if we use your scents, scents that have a specific person linked to them, then we think this could prove even more accurate. It will trigger a part of the alpha brain that associates attraction or arousal with familiarity. This will make the alphas more relaxed and willing to free their inhibitions, thus rendering the whole thing more accurate.” She looked between them. “What do you think?”

Louis glanced towards Catherine whose full lower lip was pulled by her front teeth. “How are you going to use our scents specifically? We won’t be in the compartments with them, will we?”

“Oh, absolutely not,” she assured. “We have a particular machine that will detect your scent and artificially replicate it so that it can be channelled into the compartments. You’ll be free you resume your observation andanalyse their reactions too.”

Catherine nodded once. “I’ll do it, I suppose,” she said, turning to gauge Louis’ reaction.

He agreed tentatively, reassured by the fact that Catherine seemed comfortable doing so. “Will the same thing be done to us when we’re in the compartments? Like will we have to react to the alphas’ scents?”

She nodded firmly. “Of course. This research is all about balance and comparing how biology dictates natural responses. We’ll do the same to the alphas for comparative purposes.”

They agreed once again and were led to a chamber with numerous monitors and what looked like four storage tanks.
“These will be to produce a replica of your scents,” one of the researchers said. “I’ll hook you up to one each and then you’ll be free to get back to monitoring the alphas’ reactions.”

He connected a heavy white material to the back of their necks, wires attached to two individual machines. “This will only take a minute,” he said calmly.

The machines made loud whirring noises and Louis felt a light tickle across his neck.

“Great,” he said, fiddling with the monitor and paying them no heed, completely focused on the task of replicating the scents.

“That was pretty harmless,” Louis said happily as they trundled back to the laboratory.

They took their seats and waited for the replication to complete. Louis saw three of the betas and a handful of the researchers whisper urgently.

“Everything okay?” he asked Fernanda.

“Definitely. I’m just interested to see how this will all play out. It’s at stages like this when individual alpha properties really come through. These results will impact the experiment a lot, especially if one of them isn’t able to control his alpha instincts at all.”

Louis hummed thoughtfully and turned back to his station facing Harry. There was one researcher in each of the separate compartments asking the alphas which omega they had felt more of a connection with. Louis felt oddly objectified but reasoned with himself that the same would be asked of him.

“Right,” Matilda called when the researchers emerged and sealed the door to the adjacent room. They handed her a form of each of the alphas’ preference. She spoke into the microphone and to the group at large in the laboratory. “We’ve decided to add Catherine’s scent to compartments two and five – that’s Christian and Luke. We’re going to add Louis’ scent to compartments one, three and four – that’s Harry, Elena and Benjamin.”

Louis blushed at the mention that they chose his scent, especially having only spoken with Benjamin once. He heard a firm shout from Harry’s compartment and everyone turned to face him through the glass.

Matilda raised her eyebrow in interest. “What is it, Harry?”

“No,” he said petulantly. Harry couldn’t see her through the one-sided glass but his stare was unyielding.

She sighed heavily and rounded the corner to enter his compartment. Louis inconspicuously watched him whisper angrily to her, pretending to be interested in his clipboard. Her expression remained impassive while he gesticulated wildly to the other compartments, frustration written across his features. She shook her head firmly and spoke more clearly that Louis could make out her words.

“I don’t care about your feelings for him. That is completely irrelevant to the experiment, Harry. You can’t dictate whether or not the other alphas will get to be exposed his scent.”

Harry huffed angrily but nodded eventually.

“I should have known that would happen,” Matilda muttered as she exited the compartment, ensuring it was fully locked.
The researchers initiated the final experiment and the laboratory fell into silence as everyone focused their attention on the alphas. Louis watched Harry’s entire body startle at the scent. His arms extended horizontally until his palms were flat against the walls on either side of him, elbows locked in place. His head fell back and he let out a shaky breath, eyes open.

Matilda motioned for the strength of the scents to be increased.

Harry’s hands darted to his bond mark and his eyes fell shut. “Omega,” he whispered.

Louis’ entire body heated and he tugged at his jumper, itching to remove it.

Harry’s chest widened and lengthened in a way Louis had never seen before. He seemed to make himself appear exponentially bigger, more powerful. His chest shook and Louis heard a low grumble escape his lips. A low, guttural growl fell from his mouth and his nostrils flared, head turning aggravatedly, as though searching for something or someone. Suddenly, the beginning of a menacing roar sounded, rendering Louis and Catherine paralysed to the spot. Both of them fell to their knees in submission, heads dropping and clipboards clattering on the tiled floor.

“Shut off the sound!” Matilda shouted.

The roar instantly muted though Harry’s open mouth stretched, head thrust back and broad chest heaving with the strength of it.

Louis watched Matilda’s feet cross the floor hurriedly retrieve to Harry’s monitor readings, eyes darting across the graphs.

The timer blared.

The scents permeating the compartments were halted and, unlike the other alphas who slumped against the walls, he ran to the door of his compartment, tugging the handle aggressively.

“Spray the omegas with the scent-neutraliser,” one of the researchers called.

“Don’t let the alphas out just yet,” she instructed. “It’s too dangerous.”

Louis felt a cool spray wash over him, rendering his senses unaffected by the instincts urging him to lower his head. He got to his feet unsteadily, helped by one of the researchers while the betas watched in apprehension. Catherine swallowed thickly and smiled at him tentatively.

Matilda raised her head suddenly, as though remembering that the rest of the students were still there, quietly exchanging glances. “We’ll resume with Catherine and Louis tomorrow,” she said with a harsh exhale. “Until then everyone ... everyone take the evening off.”

Louis watched her stride back to the laboratory with unrivalled determination, graph held in her hand as though it held the answer to all her questions.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for how late this chapter is. This past week has been insanely busy. I would really appreciate any comments you have to motivate me to find time for the next chapter. Thank you!

Come and say hi on tumblr
The following morning Louis dragged his feet across the majestic grounds of Candling and couldn’t bring himself to take the long, scenic route to the Research Laboratory in the dreary, drizzling rain. He opted instead to weave through the side-entrances and back passageways until he arrived with mere moments to spare. He spotted the rest of the group trudging towards the main laboratory and followed them briskly, catching Catherine at the back of the group.

“Hey,” he said with a shy smile as she enveloped him in a tight embrace.

“Is everything good with you? You kind of disappeared straight after the whole incident yesterday. I was a little worried.”

He smiled gratefully. “I’m great, don’t fret about me,” he said before frowning. “I should have stuck around for you though, I’m sorry. I didn’t even stop to think about how that affected you just as much as it did me.”

Catherine exchanged a look with some of the other students who were eyeing them curiously. “I don’t think I was. I was only put under for a few seconds. You were under for at least five minutes,” she said hesitantly.

Louis gaped at her, oblivious to the fact that Harry’s roar – which had been muted the second after Matilda realised what had happened – had such an effect on his inner omega. Before he could respond, however, the door to the laboratory opened abruptly and Harry rushed inside, rain droplets dripping from his hair and light jacket.

In typical alpha manner, he didn’t apologise for his lateness, merely nodding his head toward Matilda at the front of the room and falling into the only spare seat beside Louis. His scent was thicker than the previous day, progressively becoming more potent as the day since he stopped taking his scent neutralisers lengthened.

“Did you happen to go for swim in the fountain on your way here?” Louis teased as heavy droplets from Harry’s clothes fell on him.

Harry turned to look at him, an expression of confusion and delight hidden behind his wet fringe. He seemed overjoyed that Louis could even speak with him, unaware that after the previous day Louis’ inner omega still felt a strong connection to him. He carded his fingers through his hair self-consciously to push the unruly curls off his forehead. “No, I just stopped for a little detour,” he said pointing towards the label around his wrist reading ‘Junior Doctor Harry Styles – Paediatrics’.

“You still visit?” Louis asked with delight, aware that both of them had been exempted from most of their coursework due to the research project.

“Of course,” Harry said emphatically. “Wouldn’t miss seeing my patients for the world.” He toyed with the collar of his shirt, wringing the water from it much to the displeasure of Fernanda who sat on his other side. Harry’ eyes searched for Louis’ and he swallowed thickly when they met openly for the first time in almost two weeks.

“Alright everyone,” Matilda called, eyes lingering on Harry and Louis. “My team of researchers spent yesterday evening examining the alphas’ responses and we think that they will work very
well as experimental controls. We definitely think we’ve captured the essence of what we’re hoping to achieve with this research.”

A murmur of chatter broke out as the alphas collectively sighed with relief as they wouldn’t have to experience the scent tests a second time.

“We’re going to proceed with the omegas next,” she said decidedly. “Louis, Catherine, would you follow me please?”

They group collected their belongings and accompanied her to the main area of the laboratory where the glass pane was.

“We’re going to replicate the alpha test as we did yesterday as well as adding another one which is omega-specific,” she explained. “If at any stage you want the proceedings to stop you must pull the lever behind you and you will immediately be released.” She turned her attention to the group lingering at the glass pane while Louis and Catherine were brought into the adjacent testing room. “The rest of you collect a clipboard and divide into two group, one for Louis and another for Catherine.”

Louis heard a small scuffle outside and Harry’s firm “not my problem. I’m not swapping,” as he was accompanied into a box-like room, rolling his eyes at Harry’s petulance. One of the beta researchers attached wires to his chest and around his neck to monitor his heartbeat, hormone levels and the degree to which his physical and mental capacities were affected. He was stood facing a faded mirror, though he knew that on the other side were at least five students and many more researchers observing his every move.

The beta left and sealed the door tightly with a resounding click. Louis exhaled shakily as he was plunged in silence.

Without warning, Matilda’s high voice rang through the speakers in the compartment. “We’re going to begin with your own scents,” she said clearly.

Not more than five seconds later Louis’ nose twitched as he detected his own scent permeating the air. He breathed in and sighed contentedly. Omegas and sirens especially, revelled in their own scents and those of other omegas, finding comfort and familiarity in their sweet undertones. By contrast, alphas were extremely affected by their personal scents as they were reminded of frequent ruts spent alone, without a mate. They similarly despised the scents of most other alphas with the sole exceptions of immediate family and close friends as they regarded them as potential competition.

Louis felt his thin lips being pulled into a smile as he closed his eyes gently and wrapped his arms around himself, purring quietly. After the timer blared, the scent left the compartment and was instantly replaced by scent-neutral air.

Her voice interrupted the quiet once more. “Same as you saw yesterday we’re going to test your reactions on some scents that are typically linked with alphas though none belong to any one particular alpha. This will ensure - ”

“Matilda, I don’t - ”

“Oh, pull yourself together, Harry,” she said exasperatedly. “As I was saying, this will ensure that we see how you respond to alpha scents in general before we expose you to familiar alpha scents.”

The microphone switched off and seconds afterwards heavy, heady scents were injected into the
air; musky cologne, sandalwood, patchouli, and rosewood; natural scents of earth and adventure crept into each corner of the compartment, filling the space with such speed that Louis was almost swept from his feet. His hands shot behind his back and clasped together, head falling down, chin tucked into his chest in an act of submission. He swallowed thickly as his senses were captured by the unfamiliar alpha scents, rendering his inner omega vulnerable and pliant, willing to succumb until the scents passed.

Moments later Matilda’s pleased voice rang through the small speaker in the compartment and Louis let out a sigh of relief when the scents finally disappeared.

“Alright I’m going to send one of my researchers in to get the name of the alpha you think your omega will be most affected by. I understand that in this case it is different than the alphas yesterday but don’t feel that you need to choose one alpha in particular. Especially if you think that your inner omega is likely to be more affected by another.”

Louis absentmindedly thought that the advice was directed at him but was saved from dwelling on it when a tall beta researcher opened the compartment door.

“Would you please tell me which of the alpha you believe will have the greatest impact on the following three factors of you inner omega: cognitive ability, physical demeanour and self-control,” she said, glancing up expectantly at him.

He hesitated, tugging at the collar of his jumper.

“If you are unsure we can let you out of the compartment to familiarise yourself with them again,” she offered.

“No,” he said. “Thank you but, no.” He chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Don’t think I could handle the embarrassment of being paraded in front of all the alphas to choose my favourite’s scent.”

She smiled amusedly. “Well do you have any one gender in mind at least?”

Louis sighed. “I only have one person in mind,” he admitted. His mind measured playing with Harry by choosing his scent after he had requested a break from him and upsetting Harry by not choosing his scent. From the moment Matilda had reminded him of this stage of the test he knew he would choose the former but he still felt apologetic, consoling himself by reminding himself that after the scent test he would clarify things with Harry, explain that he needed more time until he could fully understand how their relationship could fluctuate so extensively.

“Harry,” he said quietly. “I want Harry.”

She nodded once, taking note of his name before sealing the door.

Matilda’s voice rang through the small space a moment later. “Excellent. We’re going to pass the scent that you both happened to choose into your compartments now. Remember not to resist and try to - ”

Louis didn’t catch what she said after that, distracted by the fact that Catherine had chosen Harry’s scent. Catherine, who he considered a friend, became - in his inner omega’s green-tinted eyes, at least - his rival for Harry’s affections. Rationally, he knew that Catherine was uninterested in all of the alphas from the group – she had a beta boyfriend – and that Harry was the only alpha she had spoke to for more than a couple of minutes as they knew each other from their medicine lectures. His inner omega, just like the night his omega instincts overpowered his rational thoughts, was not focused on either of those facts. His inner omega urged at him to cause a scene, to compete with
her and direct Harry’s attention solely on him.

Harry’s scent permeated the compartment and ensnared his senses within seconds; the heavy bark and pine needles, the mulling spices of star anise, cinnamon and cloves and something else that was unique, belonging exclusively to Harry. Instead of falling directly into submission, however, he slowly lowered himself to his knees, eyes closed and head swaying as he breathed in the scent. He lowered his head as he inhaled and turned it to his side, exposing his neck completely.

“Harry,” he whispered on a breath. His shoulders shook with the waves of scent washing over him, embracing and releasing him. He was conscious, knew exactly what was happening but found that his only goal was to free his inhibitions, show Harry how he desired him, yearned for him.

There was a sudden thud against the glass of his compartment as though a body had been hurled (or hurled itself) against it.

The scent was vacuumed out of the compartment within seconds and Matilda’s voice slowly requested that he stand up. The demand was directed at him and he took sick satisfaction from the fact that Catherine had not been as affected as he had.

“That was very interesting, thank you Louis and Catherine,” she said. “Like I said before we’re going to try something new now. This final stage may be difficult depending on how powerful your respective omega instincts are and the extent to which you can control them. We’ve carried out this experiment during other research projects in the past and we think it will definitely pertain to this study. We urge you, however, to tug the lever behind you if you need the sound system to stop.”

There was a short scuffle as people were put in particular places for the final test.

“What’s going to happen is we’re going to investigate your reactions to someone using their alpha voice on you.”

Louis’ breath hitched.

Catherine must have had a similar reaction to him in the accompanying compartment because Matilda quickly added “Of course you can opt out at any stage like I said.”

Louis pulled his lower lip into his mouth and nodded at her to proceed.

“I’ve asked Christian and Harry to read a very strict set of instructions they are going to tell you and they have been told that if they go off script in any way or abuse this part of the test then there will be very serious repercussions,” she said earnestly. “We’ll begin right away. And remember to succumb to your omega instincts to make this control test as accurate as possible.”

Before Louis could consider how he might react to Harry’s alpha voice, a deep, authoritative voice carried across the speaker. His voice was coloured by dominance, showing no hint of hesitation. Louis wondered how frequently he used his alpha voice to be so well-practiced in his commands.

“Louis,” he enunciated slowly, “Would you please bow your head and kneel before me?”

He nodded and obeyed instantly, dropping to his knees and swallowing thickly at Harry’s tone, treating him with reverence and articulating his instructions as requests.

“Well done, darling. Such a good boy for me.”

“Harry!” Matilda chastised from beside him, clearly scandalised. “Stay on script or I will exchange
Harry growled lowly in the back of his throat, careful to hold the microphone away from his chest so that it would not pick up the sound. He cast his gaze back to the set of instructions and continued.

“I want you to say exactly what comes to mind when you think of an alpha,” he said in a tone that was unusually low, even for him.

“Strength,” he whispered, voice muffled as his head was directed at his knees.

“Look up for me.”

“Strength,” he repeated, eyes boring into the mirror ahead though he knew that Harry was watching his every movement from the opposite side. His cheeks turned an appealing rosy shade at the knowledge. “Power, passion, pride.”

“Very good, omega,” he praised.

Harry’s alpha voice sent thrills down his spine and a shaky breath escaped his lips. Every sense in his body screamed with delight, fulfilment coursing through him at the knowledge that he had pleased his alpha.

“Last thing for you, darling,” he said, voice syrupy slow. “Do you promise to follow my instruction?”

Louis nodded, throat dry with desire.

“I want a verbal affirmation from you, omega,” Harry said, voice suddenly stern as he was drawn into their alpha-omega connection, prompting him to embrace his role.

Louis felt his briefs dampen, sensing his own aroused scent permeate the air. “Yes, I promise,” he said with a small, breathy whine.

“Perfect,” he cooed. “Before you get up – because I’m sure your knees are hurting you by now – I want you to try and resist every instinct in your body. I’m going to tell you to do something and from the tone of my voice you’re going to want to comply. But I want you to resist. Do you understand, darling?”

“Yes,” he said, voice high-pitched and cracking on the single word. “I understand.”

“Bare your neck for me omega.”

Louis’ entire body fell to the ground with the force of Harry’s full, unbridled alpha voice. His elbows protected him from the fall but a whine left his lips upon hearing his commanding tone. His instincts yearned to follow Harry’s instruction and expose his neck and bond spot but he gritted his teeth, locked his jaw and resisted it. His breaths came out uneven and heavy until he felt a strong hand on his back. Immediately, he felt a cold, neutralising spray attach to his skin and unlock his senses from the alpha-omega bond.

He hauled himself to his feet, planting his hand against the wall to steady himself before exhaling heavily. He felt hands lift him carefully, guide him out of the compartment and onto a chair in the laboratory. The lights seemed too bright, his senses suddenly empty, relieved of Harry’s enrapturing voice. His quashed the urges of his inner omega demanding that he find Harry. It seemed he had left or been escorted elsewhere as while Louis adjusted he could neither see nor
sense Harry’s presence.

The crowd around him dispersed minutes later after Louis had regained full, rational consciousness when Harry and Matilda re-entered the laboratory. Upon seeing Louis, Harry completely ignored everyone and everything in his path, rushing towards him determinedly and lifting Louis into a gentle embrace, arms holding him tightly against his chest.

“You did it,” Harry whispered, tone hinting at desperation. “I didn’t think you would but you did it, Louis.” Harry set him back on the ground carefully, brushing a stray strand of hair from Louis’ forehead.

“I didn’t do anything,” Louis resisted, stepping away from Harry.

“You resisted my alpha voice, Louis. No one ... you did it,” he cried. “I— I wish that never happened,” he whispered gravely. He observed Louis’ watchful eyes and moved closer. “Please, Louis, understand that I didn’t mean for it to be like this. I know you want space and I- I should never have done that.”

Louis shook his head, stepping away again, the back of his knees knocking against the chair. He saw the other people who had been crowding around him disperse around the room to give them personal space. Although he had longed for Harry’s presence throughout the entire scent test, the impact of what had happened hit him.

The lines in his relationship with Harry felt blurred, disjointed. He felt manipulated, as though Harry had taken advantage of him in his inebriated state though he knew that he had followed the instructions issued to him. To Louis, however, it felt like a personal attack on his inner omega and his dignity. He felt violated, as though Harry had used the opportunity to exert his dominance over him to such an extreme extent as to show him, in front of everyone and for a gender research project no less, for what he truly was—docile and manipulatable.

Thoughts of betrayal overwhelmed him and he tripped, clutching the chair as his eyes filled with tears. He took in Harry’s expression of despair, of desperation, and he ran.

…”

Once upon a time there lived an idyllic omega with long, golden hair and eyes which swirled deep shades of mahogany and honey. Her name was Edin. She was created in the vision of innocence and purity, all that was whole and unblemished by sin in the world. She lived in the King’s castle, a towering structure with ivy creeping up the walls.

Edin, the most celebrated omega in all of the land, was destined to be crowned Queen of Forboda, the place where humanity strived to create a place of beauty and goodness. The King and the man she would marry was a mind-mannered alpha who valued peace above all else. He detested the violence and destructive nature of the alphas beyond the walls of the kingdom of Forboda.

On the night of her coronation, while the lords and ladies were dancing and feasting in the ballroom of the caste and the commoners were celebrating in the streets, a sudden change of weather disrupted the event. The inky blue sky and bright moon were instantly concealed by a heavy mass of cloud. Thunder clapped above them and lighting struck the nearby forest while buckets of water poured over them. The commoners ran to shelter under the porches of their neighbours’ houses, searching for candles to give them light in the near pitch darkness. The lords and ladies ran to the tall window spanning the length of the ballroom to watch the drastic turn of weather.
Without warning the candles in the ballroom were extinguished and the entire palace fall into darkness. Shouts and screams filled the ballroom as loved ones huddled together for comfort and warmth. Edin and the King searched for each other, her high voice calling out to no avail.

The double doors in the ballroom swung open to reveal the silhouette of a tall figure accompanied by the strong gust of wind. A deep, commanding voice silenced the shouts with a single word. “Edin.”

Her footsteps halted and she fell to her knees in submission.

The owner of the voice stepped inside the ballroom and the doors shut in his wake, leaving the ferocious wind outside. Only the heavy breaths of anticipation of the lords and ladies filled the silence. As the figure ventured further inside, guests breathed in his scent. It was indescribable; worn leather and smoke, thick-bound books and tainted blood. It rendered Edin powerless.

He stood directly before her, boots brushing her knees. “Edin,” he sighed with relief. “I have found you at last.”

She didn’t dare to look up, afraid of the vision she would meet. “How do you know my name?” she whispered.

“I know all about my destined mate.”

Her head was reeling with the strength of his scent, seeping into her every conscious thought. “Who- who are you?”

The man lowered his head until the tip of his nose brushed her teeth. “Maximus,” he whispered into her ear. “But you, my darling, will call me Alpha. We will leave now, Edin.”

She shivered, unable to control the overwhelming desire to follow him despite every rational thought urging her not to.

“No!” the King, who had been watching the scene unfold with confusion and fear, shouted across the ballroom. “You will not take her. She is my destined wife. I am the Alpha King of Forboda.”

Maximus laughed deeply in the King’s face before stepping around Edin to face him, looming two feet taller than him. His expression changed from amusement to unrivalled anger within seconds. “You,” he said darkly, “are no alpha. You are a disgrace to the name of alphas. My omega deserves to be treasured and cherished by an alpha who can treat her as she is; fair, pliant and compassionate. She needs another to compliment those traits, one with strength of character and determination; chivalry and passion. She will be mine and I hers.”

“You are no such alpha,” the King spat. “You are nothing but an opportunistic commoner coming to take my destined queen away from me.”

“Be quiet, my King,” the high-pitched voice of the kingdom chronicler called from across the ballroom.

The King motioned for the ancient beta to come forward, making her way towards them with careful steps.

“He is far more than a commoner,” she whispered gravely, pointing towards Maximus. “He is the veridicus alpha masculum, my King. He is the superior of the alphas but he needs his mate to complete his journey to fulfil the alpha prophesy. Legend tells us that when he finds his mate he will achieve his destined path as the alpha regem and they two alone will create a line of male
alphas so strong that all other weaker alpha genes will cease to exist. His heirs will possess his strong alpha scent and his imperium unique over omegas in a way that no other alpha will ever rival.” She breathed deeply and searched for the King’s eyes in the darkness. “You must let them leave, King, or you will interfere will destiny.”

“I will not!” the King bellowed. “I will have Edin as my wife and the Queen of Forboda.” He wheeled around to face Maximus, undeterred by his strength and ferocious demeanour. “You will leave and never return,” he bellowed, alpha voice injecting his words with venom.

The entirety of the omegas in the room whimpered, falling to the ground in various states of distress. All were in shock at the unprecedented reaction of their beloved King.

Maximus merely glowered, bringing himself to full height and staring at the King with fury written across his features. “I will leave,” he conceded. “On my own will. But mark my words I will return for my mate and Edin will find no greater place to live than in my heart forever.” He turned on his heel and offered his hand to raise Edin to her feet.

Edin finally saw his face. His features were carved with a tool produced by the gods, strong and firm yet delicate and forgiving. His hair tumbled in long, dark curls across his shoulders. His eyes, however, were filled with despair.

“I will return, my dear. I promise,” he whispered. “If it takes years of torture, of slavery or anxiety, it means nothing when my prize will be you.”

He placed a soft, lingering kiss on her parted lips and stalked towards the door without a second glance.

Within minutes the thunderous clouds had lifted and a clear sky and twinkling stars replaced them. The entire kingdom rejoiced at the departure of the alpha. All, that is, except Edin and the King. She wallowed in sadness and pain, mind and body calling out for her true mate, desperate for his loving presence. The King became fraught with paranoia and worry. He ordered for locks to be placed on every door, guards to accompany Edin wherever she went and rewards to be sent out for anyone who succeeded in finding and killing Maximus Steel.

Edin and the King grew apart over six fortnights, their love severed and replaced by a distance so great that neither could find each other. The night they were to be married, she requested privacy for her to cry heavy sobs of sorrow and yearning for her true mate. The guards left her alone in her room for the first time in three months and she wept, staining her ivory wedding gown.

As she heaved another sob into her handkerchief, a face appeared at her tall window of the east tower. She saw the sharp line of his jaw, the steely look in his eye and his eyes which drew her towards the window. Her heart leaped at the sight of Maximus and she lifted the window open with determination. He climbed inside and she fell into his arms. They were overcome with urgency, a desperate need to procreate and produce their destined heir.

“My love,” he whispered lowly, “I wish we had more time but it must be this way. There are guards encircling the castle. We could never escape together.”

She nodded in acquiesce. “Once, my dear Maximus, one night to be with you is my one desire. It is my rubric for fulfilment to be with you in spiritual love if not in physical form wherever our lives may take us.”

They consummated their bond that night with reverence and care, touches and caresses that soothed their searing skin. A knock at the door interrupted them and Maximus shot up, pulling his
garments over his strong form.

“I must leave, my darling, or I will never live to see our alpha child. I will return, my love, with whatever might it may take.”

He darted to the window and climbed down the thick ivy.

As Edin collected her thoughts and prepared for dress for her marriage, she heard a loud shout from beneath the east tower. She rushed to the window and saw Maximus below, fighting the guards with skill and strength. She watched in horror as tens, later hundreds of guards came to the scene. His impressive swordsmanship, undefeated throughout his lifetime, was no match for the capacity of the kingdom’s newly-employed army. Once a place of peace and security, Forboda became one of violence. Maximus was killed on the night she was to be wed to a man she could never love.

Edin lived a life of hardship and suffering, completely at the mercy of the King. She gave birth eighteen fortnights later to a beautiful alpha and only she new that he belonged to her and Maximus. The young alpha was to become the most robust alpha in all of the kingdom, the likes of which nobody across the length of the country had never seen. Born out of wedlock, he was an alpha of virtue and strength, of power and ambition, one who made it his one, true purpose to find his destined mate. And, like his father, he would cross any land, fight any army or search any barren place to find his omega. He was the alpha that would produce the sole lineage of the veridicus alpha masculum.

…

Louis spent the evening cleaning his side of their shared dormitory. He folded and re-folded his clothes, divided his laundry into colours and whites and removed the clutter covering the surface of his bedside locker. He told himself that it would feel cathartic to rid his room of the mess but eventually, after nearly two hours of cleaning and, after two months, finally seeing the surface of his bedside locker, he collapsed onto his bed with a sigh of defeat.

Mere moments later, the sound of a key rattling and the door swinging open alerted him to Zayn’s presence. Zayn ambled in, enormous portrait held in his arms and placed it carefully on his bed before turning around. He sent Louis a cautious glance as he began to remove his soaking wet hat and peel his rain jacket off his skin.

“You alright man?”

Louis nodded slowly. “I’m pretty good, yeah.”

Zayn’s eyes followed Louis’ neat belongings, the co-ordinated shelves of clothes and law books piled into three small stacks on his desk, papers placed meticulously into separate folders.

“You sure about that? I’ve never seen this place so neat.”

Louis shrugged from his position sprawled out on his bed. “In the mood for a change, I guess.”

Zayn nodded but looked unconvinced. His eyes darted towards the portrait on the bed. “Want to see what I’ve painted?”

Louis sat up immediately and crossed the room to stand beside him, surreptitiously breathing in Zayn’s calming scent.

“I always know when you do that, you know,” Zayn said conversationally.
Louis looked justifiably sheepish. “Sorry, I thought you didn’t mind. I - ”

“I don’t mind, Lou. Not at all,” he said with a soft smile.

Louis put his head on his shoulder as Zayn began to rip off the protective cover from the portrait which had prevented it from being damaged by the heavy rain pouring outside.

“So this is the main product of my project. You know the one with all the clothes?” he said.

Louis nodded and helped him pull off the outer cover with nimble fingers.

“Basically, this is my portrait of a stereotypically superior alpha. I wanted to capture his masculinity and strength with more old-fashioned alpha garments and physical features. A bit like the alphas we always heard about in fairy tales when we were younger, you know?”

When they finally removed the cover, Louis inhaled sharply at the sight of the portrait. His eyes widened as he took in his broad chest, the skin covered his scars and dark bruises, the blood-stained clothing draped across him with reverence. Louis’ eyes scanned the green eyes, alight with determination and the thick waves of dark hair falling to his shoulders in loose ringlets.

“Maximus,” he breathed.

Zayn seemed delighted. “That’s exactly what I was going for. I kind of had his character in mind when I was creating the basic concept of the ubiquitous alpha male. To be honest though, I kind of had his son in mind when I was drawing it. Maximus never became the true alpha male – it was always the heir he had with Edin. The son was more powerful, ferocious and more in touch with his inner alpha. Some storylines even suggest he was part-wolf.”

Louis nodded adamantly, thoughts racing through his mind as a small inkling, a notion of familiarity clicked into place. No matter how absurd or unrealistic it was, he knew who he needed to find.

“Harry,” he whispered.

Zayn narrowed his eyes before casting his gaze back to the portrait. “Well, yes, I suppose,” he said with a light chuckle. “Now that I come to think about it I guess he does look a little like Harry. Minus the blood, obviously. But that’s just there to emphasise the romanticism of alpha violence and physical sacrifice in the name of love. You know I never really thought that - ”

“It’s him,” Louis said simply, tired eyes blinking rapidly. “Harry is one of his heirs. That’s why- fuck! It all makes so much sense now – his scent, the way he always looks like he’s always holding himself back, how strong his inner alpha is.” He cursed loudly at the sudden realisation.

He knew, however, that his theory couldn’t answer every question racing through his mind and overlapping, rendering him overcome with anticipation.

“Lou, what’s going on? What are you talking about?

His eyes widened and he shook his head. “I- I have to go,” he said on an exhale. His eyes darted to the pouring rain outside. Undeterred he ran to his closet to find his rain jacket only to find that he had put it somewhere else while cleaning. “Doesn’t matter,” he muttered to himself.

Zayn looked extremely worried by this point. “Lou, man, are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m absolutely fine,” he said distractedly, pulling on his grey beanie. “Don’t wait up.” With that he steeled his breath and left, exiting the omega dormitories and crossing the rose garden as the
bleak, heavy clouds poured on his small frame.

Chapter End Notes

I would love to hear your feedback if you have a moment to spare. I'm really looking forward to reading your theories about Harry.

Come and say hi on tumblr!
Thank you all for waiting patiently for this update. I received an extremely negative comment the other day and I just want to say that if you don’t like my story then there is nothing stopping you from not reading it anymore. There was no need to send me such a nasty comment. I write this in my own time, I edit it myself, I don’t get paid for it and, like all of you, my life is extremely busy at the moment. And yet I still make (non-existent) free time in my schedule to please you my readers with frequent updates because the rest of my truly wonderful readers ask politely. The majority of you are grateful for that but reading that one comment made me extremely upset. I really wish these kinds of people (though I know that they do not represent the majority of my lovely readers) would understand that fanfiction writers should be valued and appreciated. Sorry for this rant, I just needed to get that off my chest. Hope you enjoy this chapter!

Louis wound his way between the buildings dotted across the Candling campus and beneath the tall Victorian archways to avoid the rain pounding against the ground. The sounds of heavy droplets splashing into the overflowing fountains, of the wind howling as it rustled the autumn leaves still clinging to trees and the soft *thud* of his shoes hitting the gravel accompanied him. The attempt to dodge the downpour was futile, however, and he arrived at the main alpha dormitory with droplets clinging to his skin and dripping from his soaking hair. He took a steadying breath and pushed open the formidable oak doors.

There were a few alphas lingering in the entrance, others huddled around the roaring fire in the adjacent common room to heat up their fingers. The very second he entered he felt all of their heads snap towards him, eyes boring into his skin and nostrils flaring at his scent.

“You alright there, sweetheart?”

Louis glanced up to find a sallow-skinned alpha wearing tight clothes which clung to his toned skin. He nodded nervously. “Fine, thank you,” he said politely. He crossed the entrance and made his way towards the stairs. Three sets of footsteps followed him, the muscly alpha included.

“It’s Louis, right?” he asked audaciously.

Louis whipped around and eyed him cautiously. “How do you know that?” He meant to sound more demanding, indignant but his voice came out anxious, his inner omega demanding that he respect the three alphas approaching him.

They all laughed obnoxiously and turned towards each other, as though sharing an inside joke.

Louis put his hands on his hips impatiently. “I’m really in quite a hurry.”

This transpired to be a mistake, however, as one of them cooed at the action.

“Oh, he’s just adorable when he’s mad,” he said.
One of the alphas seemed to take pity on Louis and answered his question, still wiping the tears of laughter from his dark eyes. “It’s kind of hard not to know who you are. There are only ten male omegas on the whole campus. Trust me when I say that we make it our priority to know who you all are.”

Louis visibly recoiled at the sleazy wink the alpha gave him, feeling unnerved at the admission, and turned to leave towards the staircase.

“Wait! Where are you going? Don’t you want to stay down here with us, princess? We can get you a towel and dry you off.”

Louis clenched his jaw and grinded his teeth. He turned around calmly and watched their gaze collectively flit from his arse to his face. He yearned to give them a piece of his mind, lecture them about objectification and common courtesy but he knew that they were the kind of alphas that were easily insulted by outspoken omegas. With no one else in the vicinity to help him if they angered, he knew that his safety was more important. “I need to find someone,” he said instead. “And I’m in a hurry. But thanks for the offer.” With that he turned on his heel and scurried away, climbing the stairs until he stood in front of Harry and Liam’s shared dormitory.

He knocked firmly on the door before he could gather his thought. A sense of panic flared inside of him as he tried to form a coherent, rational way of asking Harry about his lineage.

The door opened a moment later to reveal a shirtless Liam, chest dripping with sweat and panting lightly. “Louis? What are you doing here? Why are you all wet?”

Louis inhaled sharply at the heavy leather scent Liam emitted and gave him a short once-over. “I could ask you the same thing.”

Liam glanced down, as though suddenly realising his absence of a shirt and the sweat droplets gathering at his collarbones. He laughed good-naturedly. “Just doing a bit of strength conditioning,” he explained, opening the door of the dormitory to reveal a mat and various weights on the floor between the beds.

Louis was instantly hit with Harry’s potent scent radiating from the room. “Good for you. Zayn’s always talking my ear off about your big muscles.” He frowned. “Well, as much as Zayn can actually talk someone’s ear off about anything.”

Liam’s eyes widened and his cheeks turned impossibly pinker. “Oh, well, great,” he said weakly. He averted his gaze. “Is there anything I can help you with? Here, come inside. I’ll get you a clean towel.”

Louis followed his request and watched Liam dart out of the room and across the hallway to the laundry room. His eyes followed Harry’s belonging scattered across his unmade bed, his cluttered bedside locker and the tall heap of dirty clothes at the foot of his bed. He absentmindedly folded some of the shirts on his bed into a neat pile as he observed the photographs and postcards, cinema tickets and certificates pinned to Harry’s noticeboard.

Most of the photographs were of Harry surrounded by friends, people he didn’t recognise, but others were more recent; Harry and Liam stood in front of a sign reading ‘Fáilte go hÉirinn’, Harry surrounded by his young patients at the hospital with two of the young toddlers in his arms tugging at his curls and, at the very centre of the college, him. Harry must have taken the photograph while he was asleep in the tent, he reasoned as his eyes scanned his entire body curled into the curves and grooves of Harry’s own, his soft hair brushing against Harry’s arm, his lips almost brushing Harry’s birdcage tattoo.
“Sorry about that,” Liam said, announcing his entrance as Louis startled, dropping the shirt he had been folding. “I wanted to heat it up in the dryer for a couple of minutes so that it would be nice and toasty.”

Louis thanked him and made a gentle, contented noise as he wrapped the towel around him.

“So,” Liam said, clasping his hands together. “Is there any reason you’re here or - ”

“Oh! Yes, of course, sorry,” Louis said. “I came here looking for Harry. Thought he’d come straight back to his dorm after our research today.”

Liam winced. “He did come home,” he said carefully. “But he was very ... he was very upset. Like he seemed mad at himself or something. Whenever he gets like that I know not to interfere. It’s the kind of thing most people need their mate for, you know? To help them calm down and alleviate the pain and everything.”

Louis felt his heat drop out of his chest and plummet to his stomach. He swallowed thickly. “I think- I think that might be partly to do with me,” he said quietly. “I ... I need to find him, Liam.” He knew that he sounded desperate but every fibre in his body wanted to reach out and envelop Harry, find him and comfort him. “Do you have any idea where he might be?”

Liam looked delighted to share information that would be of value to him. “Yeah,” he affirmed. “He always goes to the hospital whenever he gets upset like that. I think being around all the kids helps to ground him and distract him even if it’s just for a little while.”

Louis nodded and carefully added the damp towel to Harry’s pile of dirty laundry. “Thank you, Liam,” he said, making his way to the door.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

Louis frowned. “To the hospital of course. He’s in St. James’s Hospital, right?”

Liam nodded distractedly. “Yes, yes but why are you going like that?” he asked incredulously, indicating at Louis. “You need to wear something dry. Don’t want you catching a winter cold. For one thing, Harry would skin me alive if I let you leave without something warm.”

Louis rolled his eyes at his typical alpha behaviour but acquiesced when Liam began rifling through Harry’s overstuffed wardrobe. He sat on the bed and cast his gaze towards his bookshelf, sliding his finger across the medicine textbooks and thick folders.

“I’m not sure what Harry would want you to wear,” Liam said, holding out a floral-patterned shirt and wrinkling his nose with distaste. “I mean, obviously he’d want you to wear everything he owns but I don’t know what’s actually clean and he’d kill me if I gave you something dirty to wear.”

“Liam,” he sighed. “I really don’t mind and I doubt Harry with either.”

Liam laughed amusedly, sorting through the clothes at the back of Harry’s wardrobe, his entire upper body obscured inside as though he was half of his body was in Narnia.

Louis cast his gaze back to the medicine textbooks filling bookshelf and noticed, on the bottom shelf, tucked in the corner, a collection of antique fairy-tales. They were ancient, the fragile binding almost falling apart and light watercolours filling in hand-painted illustrations. Louis removed The Tale of Maximus and Edin from the shelf and held it reverently in his lap. He opened the thin, delicate pages and found that, a folded scrap of paper inside every page. A black-inked cursive scrawl covered every inch of the papers. Louis gasped quietly as his eyes scanned the
words inscribed there, anticipation building.

Alpha gene expressed by males. Maximus never fully became veridicus alpha masculum but his son did. Abilities vary between generations and some strengths more prominent than others. Abilities common to all of us; strong scent (but can be susceptible to certain brands of scent manipulators if taken daily); extreme emotions particularly jealousy and anger; inability to gain full control over inner alpha; need to find soulmate and, once found, highly in tune with soulmate’s emotions; can control omega behaviour using scent or alpha voice if emotional connection formed with said omega is formed; soulmate can resist this control – Mum is the one exception to this.

Louis’ mouth went dry and he flicked through the delicate, flimsy pages of the book and found similar notes in every page. They varied from notes about his own alpha tendencies and similarities between himself and his alpha ancestors to rumours about the rumoured abilities of Maximus’s descendants. On the final page he found a scrap of pink paper, again depicting Harry’s familiar scrawl.

I found him. I found my soulmate.

It was dated the second day of September – the day Louis first met Harry. Louis’ fingers trembled and the book fell to his feet. He carefully removed the piece of flimsy paper and held it between his fingers.

“This should be fine,” Liam said, holding a lilac jumper, a fleece-lined raincoat and a pair of thick, woollen socks. He was utterly unaware of Louis’ distress. “These look like Harry’s smallest jeans too,” he said, passing Louis a pair of faded jeans. “I’d give you a clean pair of briefs too but I think Harry would probably have a conniption if he found out.”

“Right, yes. Thank you,” he said distractedly, thoughts revolving around the word that made him weak at the knees yet made flowers blossom in his chest: soulmate. He took the clothes from Liam and held them to his face, burrowing into them to breathe in Harry’s comforting scent. He sighed gently into the scent of heady spice and pine.

Liam had the wherewithal to look away, not wanting to impose on such an intimate moment. “I’ll be back in a minute he said,” closing the door shut behind him.

Louis quickly peeled his wet clothes off him, shivering as the cold air blew a wave of goosebumps across his skin. He pulled the Harry’s clothes and re-tied his shoes before opening the door to allow Liam – who had been standing awkwardly in the hallway – back into the room.

“Thanks again, Liam,” he said with a grateful smile.

Liam shook his head. “Anytime,” he said sincerely. He hesitated before adding, “Seriously, you make Harry so happy it’s a joy to see sometimes. Like you’re his other half, you know?”

Louis smiled sagely.

“And, like, I know he can be a right pain in the ass and he’s made a lot of mistakes in your relationship but I promise that he’s trying. He’s trying so hard to be better and give you space.” Liam’s eyes were imploring as they searched for Louis’ own. “But he really misses you, Louis. I know he does even if it’s only been a couple of weeks.”

Louis nodded ardently, blinking rapidly to hold back the teardrops clinging to his eyelashes. “I know, Liam. Thanks for looking out for him. I ... I think I need to talk to him. Properly this time. No secrets.”
“Harry,” Liam said before pausing. “Harry is can be a little closed off about some things. I- what I’m saying is he might not be able to open up like you want him to - like you deserve him to, I’m sure. It’s just- just keep in mind that it’s not just you that he’s closed off to. He’s been like this ever since we first met.”

Louis opened his mouth to reply but found that his words got lodged him his throat, fearful that his unshed tears collecting would spill over. “Thank you,” he settled on, voice coming out raspy and unsteady. “I ... I’ll keep that in mind.” With that Louis tucked the piece of paper securely into his pocket and waved awkwardly at Liam as he left the room.

Rather than spending the bus journey to the hospital revising what he planned to say to Harry like he had planned, his thoughts contrived theories about Harry, about his past and his lineage. Memories of the instance he met Harry’s father emerged with surprising clarity; Harry’s father’s all-encompassing scent, the unrivalled respect the other alphas payed him, how he commanded the room and every person therein by his mere presence. His features were paralleled by Harry but expressed differently – Harry was never chauvinistic or overbearing, he used his authority to benefit others and, for a reason unbeknownst to Louis, had chosen to manipulate his scent.

The bus arrived outside St. James’s and Louis disembarked, standing outside the small reception, relentless rain cascading down his rain jacket and rendering him shivering and red-nosed. Two nurses immediately approached him, concerned for the visibly upset omega. He brushed them off with a weak assurance that he was looking for someone and they immediately guided him towards the paternity ward where they told him he would find Harry, both exchanging indecipherable glances over his head, as though having a non-verbal argument about helping him.

When they reached the ward – cream walls decorated with paintings created by the patients and thank-you letters from their parents – Louis stopped abruptly. He spotted Harry in one of the patients’ rooms speaking with her parents, his back to Louis.

“That boy takes up shifts he’s not even supposed to. He’s always so good to the patients, especially the long-term ones,” she said loudly, smiling with endearment. “You’ve got a great alpha, dear.”

Louis nodded and swallowed the lump in his throat. “I do,” he whispered, voice cracking.

She left him after her pager began to beep and he stood at the entrance to the room, fingers toying with the hem of Harry’s jumper. He periodically reached into his pocket to touch the slip of paper, his heart beating faster each time he remembered the word inscribed there: soulmate.

The door jerked open suddenly and he whipped around, alarmed to find Molly, the girl with Alopecia he had met the last time he visited the hospital.

“Lou!” she shouted with delight, running as fast as her stumpy five-year-old legs would carry her until she ended up in his arms. “Mummy, Daddy, look! It’s Lou! It’s the boy I told you about!”

Molly’s parents emerged from the room, closely followed by Harry who wore an expression of anticipation, of longing inhibited by his reservation.

“So you’re the famous Lou we’ve heard about,” Molly’s father, a bearded beta with a tired smile said, reaching out to shake his hand before noticing that both of Louis’ were occupied by Molly. He chuckled loudly.

“Doctor Harry,” Molly suddenly chastised, frowning to herself. “You promised to tell me whenever Lou was in the hospital with you. You broke your promise. Naughty, naughty.”
Louis giggled and whispered “He is very naughty, isn’t he?”

She nodded fervently, tucking her chin on his shoulder.

“I ... well I wasn’t expecting Lou to be her, Molly,” Harry explained, “so I couldn’t tell you in advance.” He stepped closer to Louis with watchful eyes, like he was approaching a wounded animal that he didn’t want to frighten away.

“Perhaps you can play with your friend later,” Molly’s mother said gently. “We need to collect your brother from pre-school now, though, so you’ll have to head on down to the nursery on Floor 3.”

Molly whined loudly, pressing closer to Louis and unsubtly breathing in his scent.

“Molly,” her mother chastised. “What have we told you about doing that? It’s very rude when you don’t know someone.” She looked apologetically at Louis. “I’m very sorry, she’s usually not like this.”

“Don’t apologise for her, it’s not a problem,” he assured, resolutely looking between her and Molly, avoiding Harry’s gaze. To him, Molly was the last surmountable barrier to speaking openly, uninhibitedly with Harry. The speed at which the inevitable moment was arriving piqued his anxiety. He hoisted Molly on hip and mirrored her smile.

“But I do know Lou,” she protested. “We’re friends. He said so last time.”

“Well you can still be friends with him while you’re downstairs in the nursery. Please, honey, we really have to go. It’s not Doctor Styles’s responsibility to look after you.”

She sighed in acquiescence and jumped down unsteadily from Louis’ arms before Harry lunged down to catch her before she fell. “Easy there,” he said, placing her on the ground and sitting on his calves to speak at her level. “Maybe I’ll come down later and we can do some finger painting again, hm?”

She considered his proposal for a moment before nodding enthusiastically. “Yes but only if we get to draw our favourite people like we did the last time, right Doctor Harry?” Her eyes widened and she pointed at Louis. “That means that - ”

Harry put his finger to his lips to silence her. “That’s our secret, remember?”

Her mouth opened to continue before her gaze fell to the ground. “Fine,” she grumbled. “But when Lou does finger painting with us that means that he has to paint you too. It’s only fair, Doctor Harry.”

“Only fair,” he affirmed. “Now off you go. I’ll see you later.”

“And Lou too,” she called, racing down the hallway to catch up with her parents.

Harry stood up from his hunched position, lengthening his back muscles with a low groan.

“Have you tried going to physiotherapy about that?” Louis asked, the words spilling out of his mouth before he had time to process them.

Harry’s eyes fell on Louis and softened, his lips quirking into a smile. “I’m a doctor. I know all that physiotherapy stuff already.”
Louis raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

“Okay, okay,” he conceded. “I tried ballet for one lesson.”

“One lesson? I’m not sure that’ll mend your back, old man,” Louis teased.

Harry’s eyes brightened, the green and gold hues illuminated by the bright lights in the hallway. “Well chasing after you certainly doesn’t help my back problems.”

Louis’ gaze fell to the floor at Harry’s admission. Harry realised his mistake and stepped closer with purposeful footsteps.

“Why are you here, Louis?” he asked, voice unusually unguarded.

“Harry,” he breathed. “I really don’t think we should do this here.” Tears prickled his eyes and he rubbed his numb hands in his jeans in search of warmth.

Harry glanced down, eyes tracing Louis’ attire. His enlarged pupils followed the way his jumper hung from Louis’ smaller frame, exposing his delicate collarbones, and his jeans dragged across the floor though they had been rolled and bunched at Louis’ ankles. His eyes darted back to Louis’ hands clasped together and stiff after spending time in the downpour. He reached down and held Louis’ hands in his own larger ones. Harry’s rings dug into his skin but the sensation of his numb finger, skin cracked from the biting wind, enlaced with Harry’s searing hot skin left him breathless.

“We can go to my office area if you like? Or the café downstairs?”

“Your office,” he said. “Please. I just want us to be alone; somewhere private.”

Harry wheeled around and trotted down the corridor and out of sight. Louis released the breath he hadn’t realised he had been holding. His fragmented fingernails dug into his palms, yearning for Harry’s soothing touch.

Harry returned a moment later and carefully set two cups of tea and a plate of cranberry and white chocolate biscuits on his desk before sealing the door shut. His eyes darted around the room, alarmed and suddenly conscious that he had to sit on his chair opposite Louis instead of beside him. He watched Louis blow softly on the tea, cup held between his trembling fingers and, with a moment of clarity, he no longer cared about sitting a respectable distance from him. Instead, he hauled his chair beside Louis’ armchair, mere centimetres between them. The rising steam obscured his view of Louis and he pulled his chair closer still.

“I- what happened today was a mistake,” he began. “I know it wasn’t fair that you had to do that in the experiment but I need you to know that it wasn’t just you they affected. Before ... before I was told to use my alpha voice on you they exposed me to your scent. But it was kind of differed, like it had been manipulated by an undertone of another alpha’s scent, trying to spur my inner alpha to react. It was subtle, barely there, and most people wouldn’t have noticed but- but - I did.” Harry sighed heavily, glazed eyes following how Louis’ tea formed tendrils of steam. “And I know it doesn’t make up for what happened but I need you to know that I ... I wasn’t in control of my inner alpha then. And afterwards, after you resisted my true alpha voice, I was so shocked that I...
couldn’t help but run to you, Louis. I know I shouldn’t have and I know you said you wanted space but- I couldn’t stop myself.”

Louis rubbed the nape of his neck in a self-soothing gesture, fingertips dancing across his bond spot. He swallowed thickly before glancing up to meet Harry’s unyielding gaze. “I- that’s alright, Harry. I- I accept your apology. We were both involved in something completely separate to our relationship and it wasn’t your fault,” he said slowly. “I ... I came here to tell you that I want all of this to stop.”

Harry’s entire demeanour deflated, his head hung and his legs – which had been spread apart and firmly planted on the ground – snapped up like he wanted to leave. “I- yeah I understand,” he whispered. He laughed humourlessly. “Of course I understand. I don’t know why I thought- never mind. I ... yeah, I’ll escort you out if you want.”

“What do you mean?” Louis asked. His lower lip quivered and he pulled it between his teeth. “Do you- do you want me to leave?”

Harry’s head snapped up. “No, of course not,” he said instantly. “But I understand if you do, is what I’m saying.”

“But I- I don’t, Harry. I want to stay here and talk this through with you. Like I said I just want this break or whatever has been going on to end. It’s doing neither of us any good.”

“Aren’t you ... aren’t you angry with me? I should’ve- fuck, you deserve so much better than me, Louis. I’ve done so many stupid things. I don’t- I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want this.

"Harry, I -"

"I know I fucked up our relationship and I know you probably think it’s beyond repair. You deserve the world and I- " he said, cutting himself off as he cast his gaze to the thunderous downpour outside. "I can’t give you that. All I can give you are broken promises.”

Harry’s eyes shone with sincerity and Louis felt exposed to a part of Harry he had never discovered.

Louis whispered his name and rose to his feet, gravitating towards Harry like being pulled by a weak magnet. “I know something, Harry. I know something but I need you to confirm it to me and tell the truth.” He tugged a strand of hair behind his ear and stared resolutely at Harry’s paling face. “I- if we’re going to make this work, Harry, I need to learn about you – all of you. I want you, Harry. I want you more than you let yourself even consider I do. But I need you to be honest. I- I think that I deserve your honesty.”

Harry nodded resolutely but his eyes seemed distracted, darting back and forth as though watching memories, instances where Louis could have uncovered something about him, flash before his eyes.

Louis placed a tender hand on Harry’s stubbled cheek and directed his gaze towards him. “I grew up reading fairy-tales, Harry. But I never expected to be caught up in one.”

Harry stared at him, shining eyes expressing the affirmation he couldn’t articulate. “It’s not a fairy-tale,” he said urgently. “It’s- this is my life, Louis.” He collapsed into the chair and leaned forward,
sharp elbows pressing into his thighs and long fingers catching in the strand of his hair.

“And I want to be a part of it,” Louis whispered. “But ... but Harry I- we can’t live our lives separated by secrets.”

Harry’s tears spilled over and he gulped the air loudly, body heaving as unperturbed sobs escaped him. Louis hastened towards him and Harry pulled him into his lap before Louis could decide how he should comfort him. Louis pressed himself against Harry, eliminating the space between them and wrapping his arms around him. His fingers gently stroked Harry’s back, entangling in his hair while he whispered soft assurances in Harry’s ear. Harry sighed deeply as Louis’ scent consumed him, rendering him enraptured by the omega’s nature to nurture.

“Louis,” he said, voice breaking on the word. “Louis, if I tell you you’re never going to want to speak with me again.”

“Harry I will always - ”

“No,” he interrupted firmly. “No. You deserve to know the truth and I know I should’ve told you so much sooner but I was selfish. I was so fucking selfish that I wanted to savour every moment we had together without involving you in any of my mess.”

“Harry,” he sighed. “I don’t know the first thing about what you’ve put up with because of this but I promise that I will listen to you. I promise, Harry.”

He hung his head and pulled away from Louis, suddenly conscious of their close proximity. “It’s not what I’ve put up with,” he whispered, chest heaving. “It’s what I’ve put others through.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I would love to hear your feedback.
Disclosed (Part II)

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind comments in the last chapter. I promise to find time to reply to them all later this week.

"From when I was very young, my father always told me the Tale of Maximus and Edin. Even when I was a teenager and the stitches holding my family together began breaking at the seams, he would always boast about our lineage, the abilities we were endowed with. He thought it was something to boast about and to be proud of. He cultivated a pride in me to embrace everything that came with it; and I believed him."

Louis watched Harry settle his steaming mug on the desk with a sigh, the liquid spilling over the rim. He touched his temples and rubbed small, soothing circles there.

“When I left home for university the first time I left with that belief ingrained in my head; a kind of superiority complex that my father always had. Still has,” he added bitterly. “When I was younger I never idolised him but I always respected him. I viewed him as everything he transpired not to be – brave, principled, hard-working. And I arrived at college with that same mentality; that no matter how different I was from my father, everything he had was what I aspired to achieve.”

Louis smiled sadly and placed a hand on Harry’s knee, patting it reassuringly. “You couldn’t have known any better, Harry.”

“No,” he said firmly. “No, I should have known. There were always indications, things he said that used to get under my skin but I would always ignore it time and time again.”

His eyes watered for the second time that evening and he hung his head between his legs. Louis crept off his armchair to kneel beside him.

“It’s okay, Harry,” he whispered softly, tentatively stroking the tendrils of Harry’s hair. “I’m with you, it’s okay.” Louis sensed Harry head turn towards him, nose seeking Louis’ neck and inhaling deeply.

“Thank you,” he sighed. He brought his index finger to his eye and touched the tear droplets off his eyelashes. “Thank you, Louis.”

Louis sat unwillingly in his own seat and watched Harry take a steadying breath before ploughing ahead, his voice deeper, harsher, as though rekindling those memories had brought out a different side of him.

“Gemma had already left for college, of course, so it was just my parents living together once I went too. They were soulmates. My father never struck me as a romantic but I used to find comfort in the fact that he always valued the idea of finding his soulmate. I used to think that it was out of love that he valued the idea of soulmates, even if it was a selfish kind of love. It wasn’t even that. He wanted to find his soulmate to ensure that he could produce an alpha son, another heir of Maximus. He didn’t care about love but he took sick pleasure from his heritage and that’s what drove him to find her.”
“I never doubted that they were in love because, by virtue of them being soulmates - their souls intertwined in something so rare and precious – I thought that she was happy.” He laughed humourlessly. “I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

His voice was hushed, frantic and coloured with despair. “She was ... she was under his control.”

Louis pulled his bottom lip between his lips and strained to hear Harry’s hushed voice, breathy, like he was still in awe of the fact that he had never realised.

“My mother is a siren,” he whispered. He didn’t pretend to ignore Louis’ gasp, meeting his eyes, shining with vulnerability and unusual sincerity. “It’s why, when we were back in Ireland, I had to ignore you. Someone had made a comment about sirens just before you go to speak and- fuck, it was like the walls I had built up, these fragile walls enclosing you and me in this delusional reality where we could be different from my parents, came crashing down. I was reminded of everything my father did to her; how he manipulated her and forced his alpha voice upon her; how he used his scent to surround her and make her helpless to his ability. He ... he’s the only one of Maximus’s descendants whose soulmate can’t resist them. And in that moment, back in Ireland, all these possibilities that I could be like that flooded my brain.”

Harry’s expression struck him with unbridled honesty. “I couldn’t bear the idea of forcing you to do anything against your will like that, Louis. But my inner alpha was so conflicted. I was ignoring you to try and resist you but your inner omega somehow detected that; it knew that there was still a part of me that wanted you and it clung to that. Our instincts are ruled by negative, impulsive emotions and so your omega clung to any rational thing that would make sense to explain why I was neglecting you – I had found another omega. That’s why you reacted like that; your omega wanted to gain my attention, felt like you had to compete for my affection, show how much you wanted me back so you- well, you know what happened.” He cast his gaze to the fray of his jeans regretfully.

Louis’ thoughts raced faster than he could process. He thought back to Harry’s determination not to meet his gaze, the potent scent he emitted yet his stubborn refusal to pay Louis any heed. “You thought that you’d be able to control me like your father does to your mother?”

Harry nodded sadly. “After watching you resist my alpha voice this morning I knew for definite that it wasn’t the case. Louis, you don’t know how relieved that makes me.”

Louis remained silent for a moment, considering Harry’s words. He wanted to reach out, to comfort and reassure Harry but he needed to uncover the truth first. “Why is it that your father is the only one that can do that?” he asked carefully.

“It’s because my mother is a siren. Her body and, at the beginning of their relationship, she herself consciously acted in a way that would attract him, please him. That meant, in practice, that she obeyed anything he instructed. It goes against the very nature of soulmates; they’re meant to treasure each other, fulfil their defects and complement each other. All of Maximus’s descendants can, to a certain degree control other omegas but none of them – except my father – can control their soulmates.”

“So you, you can use your scent or your alpha voice to control other omegas?” Louis whispered, bottom lip quivering.

Harry swallowed against his dry throat. He nodded. “Yes,” he whispered. “But not you.”

An uncomfortable silence settled around them as Louis processed Harry’s words. He glanced up to find Harry’s fingers erratically clasping together before banging on the desk, itching to reveal more
to him despite his best intentions to keep his former life private while at Candling.

“I found out that my mother was under his control through the letters she sent me in college – my first college, that is. She never revealed anything through text because he could read them. He got worse, she said, after I left. He thought she had served her purpose to produce and raise a male alpha son for him and treated her less humanely every day. I couldn’t bear reading her letters; at first I was in denial that my father could ever do that. But after I considered everything – their unequal dynamic, the way she always felt confined to whatever role my father assigned her – it just hit me with this sudden clarity.”

Harry’s hands balled into fists and his leg muscles and the sharp line of his jaw tensed. “I was so mad, so fucking furious that I had ever let that happen in front of my eyes.”

“Harry,” Louis said gently, “Harry, that wasn’t your fault. You can’t blame yourself for something that you had no power over.”

“I had power over everything else, though,” he gritted out. Harry’s eyes darted across the surfaces in the room, bypassing Louis’ anxious expression to return to his twitching fingers clutching his mug of tea. His voice has become gravelly and thick with emotion, every sentence punctuated by his nails digging into his palm or his long fingers shoving into his unruly curls. “I- hearing about my mother and knowing that there was nothing I could do, that they were destined to be together, broke me on the inside. It brought out a side in me that I never knew existed. It filled be with anger and this sickening need to prove myself somehow; show that I didn’t need a soulmate. I thought the whole thing was a fucked up mess after seeing what my parents were. I used so many people, Louis. I controlled them in ways that made me no better than him. I sunk to his level, to something disgusting, when I was trying to escape everything to do with him.”

Harry sobbed heavily into his elbow but, despite his instinct to comfort Harry, Louis knew that he needed to hear the entire story.

“What did you do, Harry?” he whispered.

“Anything,” he choked out. “I did anything to escape the feeling like I didn’t have control because hearing about my mother’s situation made me feel powerless. I became the kind of alpha I swore I would never be. I used every chance I could to assert my dominance and control over other people. I fucked anyone that fell susceptible to my scent just because I could. I still believed in soulmates but I knew that I could never allow myself to find mine if there was any possibility I could be like my father.” Harry’s eyes refused to meet Louis’, instead watching the heavy rainfall and the streetlamps illuminating the street below.

Louis watched as Harry’s bloodshot eyes, the sharp line of his clenched jaw and his beautiful defects created a picture of vulnerability. He thought of the stereotypes of alphas who held themselves to be superior to all others, who felt entitled to avail of their voice and scent to exert their authority over omegas. The image that his thoughts created of Harry, the alpha who was more invested in gender equality than any other, who unyieldingly supported him and his career and never made assumptions about his gender, evolving from such a person baffled him.

“What changed, Harry?”

Harry met his imploring gaze and it was like the rain clouds separated to reveal the silvery moon hanging in the sky.

“I met you.”
Louis’ face broke into a smile against his will. He felt a picture of Harry’s life forming in front of his eyes but he still had reservations, yearning for Harry to reveal everything before he could fully commit to him. Though inconstant, whenever Harry’s line of sight fell on him he felt the moons align and the earth around him still, a sense of fulfilment blooming inside of him.

“When I saw you I knew instantly that you were my soulmate. You wouldn’t have felt it fully then but sensing your scent and presence made me so overwhelmed, Louis. Inside of me, simply by virtue of my lineage, is an irreconcilable desire to find my soulmate. I tried to resist it at the very beginning of meeting you but I knew, deep down, that it was futile. Before I even properly knew you, you had already found a place in my heart to lay rest.”

“I ... I felt it too, Harry,” he admitted quietly. “Not overwhelming like you described but I felt drawn to you, like there was an invisible magnet bringing me towards you. Along with the fact that you were so different to any other alpha I had ever met, you occupied my thoughts before we properly met.”

Harry pulled his lower lip between his teeth to suppress his smile. “You don’t have to say that if you don’t feel it’s true, Louis.”

He shook his head firmly. “It is. It just felt more subtle, like I couldn’t quite wrap my head around why I was so drawn to you.”

Louis tucked his chin shyly into the jumper – Harry’s jumper – and drank his tea.

“Why did you manipulate your scent? Liam said that he’s only ever known you without your scent.”

Harry exhaled and paused to gather his thoughts before replying. “I began taking scent neutralisers about a month before I started Candling. I needed a new beginning where I wouldn’t ever be tempted to behave like I did before. My mother had been contacting Gemma through her letters the same way she was with me. Gemma was always smarter than me, though. I was too caught up in my own fucking life, though I spent it perpetually worried about her I still didn’t think there was anything I could do. Gemma knew that there was. She called some type of social protection agency to help my mother. They ... they took her away from my father and to me, at least, that was a kind of wake-up call. I stopped behaving like a fucking selfish bastard and tried to look after her better.”

“We were so lucky. They knew she was a siren but they took her away from my father anyway after Gemma explained their situation, minus our heritage of course. They hadn’t anticipated the kind of bond she had with my father, though. Gemma convinced them that it was an unusual bond they shared and they miraculously believed it. She- she’s there now semi-permanently. She returns to my father though every three months for his rut and whenever he requests her presence to keep up his public image and she complies. Her inner omega still yearns for him despite everything. She’s ... she’s so strong.”

Harry sighed defeatedly. “My father knows that he can’t get away with things like before. He was furious when he found out at first but I think he knew, beneath everything, that he was wrong. His pride would get in the way of him admitting it, of course but after seeing how the social service had to intervene, I think he knew that if he wanted any kind of relationship with her then he’d have to acquiesce. He had already lost part of her and knew that Gemma was behind it. Something happened between them soon after my mother left. She never told me what but after a few months they had formed something that resembled a relationship. We needed to rely on him; financially, for future employment reasons, for Gemma keeping her place at Candling.”

Harry slurped the remainder of his lukewarm tea and swallowed a cranberry and white chocolate
biscuit whole before grimacing and reaching for a chocolate one instead. “My relationship with him was strained – still is, obviously – but Gemma convinced him to let me move to Candling to start over. I think he wanted to keep an eye on me. I wasn’t the chauvinistic, confident alpha son he had always wanted and he was perfectly aware that I would always side with my mother. So he kept his distance but kept a watchful eye on me since I started college here. The cherry on the cake came when I decided to manipulate my scent. It was something he despised with every alpha fibre in his body. He thought I was dishonouring my roots, deviating from the whole idea of a veridicus alpha masculum. But he couldn’t stop me.”

Louis’ feet led him across the small space between them and he crouched in front of Harry, though they were almost the same height when Harry was sitting. Harry watched him cautiously, gulping visibly and his Adam’s apple protruding. His hands twitched in his lap, yearning to reach out and stroke Louis’ cheek or intertwine his fingers in his hair. Harry knew, however, that he needed to resist his instincts, show Louis that he would be patient, wait for Louis to respond before acting on his impulses. With such minimal distance between them Louis’ scent was heavier, fully-encompassing him in a air of security and nurturing.

“Louis please say something.”

“I don’t need to,” he whispered, pressing a soft kiss to the back of Harry’s hand, his twitching fingers instantly stopping their ministrations.

Harry stood up from the chair, extending an arm to help Louis up before enveloping Louis in both of his.

“I don’t need to say anything because I know you, Harry,” he said. “I know the person in front of me more clearly than I’ve known anyone else in such a short space of time. You’ve made mistakes, Harry, but you’ve learned from them. It doesn’t matter to me whether this all happened in the past or not, the person you are today isn’t a reflection of your father’s beliefs or your alpha instincts, it’s your decision not to let those things consume you that matters. You wanted to help your mother and you chose to defy your father, you wanted to become the person you are today, not the person your father wants you to be. You’re the alpha that I love because of that, Harry, because you care enough, because you’re compassionate enough to decide not to be the person you were instructed to be.”

Harry tilted his head and leaned it on Louis’ shoulder, nose brushing his neck as he breathed in deeply. “I don’t deserve you,” he whispered. “You’re... you’re everything, Louis.”

“Harry I want you to understand that I want to be with you. I needed space because I felt you couldn’t trust me enough when I felt like I could spill everything to you and I needed us to find a balance. Because it’s not just you or me – it’s us. I wanted to be there to hold your hand, to be someone to listen to you, help you when I saw you struggling but you wouldn’t let me in. But you deserve me, Harry, you deserve everything you desire and strive for. You need to let yourself believe that, Harry. I want to be yours.”

“Omega,” he whispered, reverence distinguishing his tone as he pulled back to find Louis’ gaze. “I want this too, more than I could possibly express but darling I need you to be sure because everything is going to be different with me. We’re going to have different alpha-omega relationship than anyone else. It’s going to be more intense and confusing and I’m still learning to control my alpha instincts and - ”

“Harry,” he whispered, voice breaking on the word. He placed a gentle hand on Harry’s chest and his eyes found Harry’s guilelessly wide ones. “I am sure.”
“Doctor Harry why are you crying?” Molly exclaimed as they walked inside the nursery, hands intertwined. “Lou did you make Doctor Harry cry?”

Louis approached her position in the corner of the nursery where she was kicking a football into the small goalpost. He crouched beside her and took her hand. “Don’t worry about Doctor Harry, he will be just fine. Those are happy tears.”

“Happy tears? I know what those are,” she said proudly. “Mummy and Daddy always cry happy tears when my scans are good.”

“Exactly,” Louis said, smiling gently. His heart fell at the reminder that such a spirited girl had suffered so immensely. “Just like that.”

The football rolled back to them and he picked it up. “Ready to play? I’m sure Doctor Harry would love to join us.”

Harry shook his head vehemently. “No, no, I think it’s safer for everyone involved if I just watch.”

“Don’t be silly, Harry, of course you should play,” he said, lifting an unwilling Harry to his feet as Molly squealed excitedly. “I’ll go easy on you, I promise.”

As it transpired, Harry was, indeed, hopeless at football. Though they were in an enclosed space in the nursery and playing with a sponge football, Harry managed to trip over his own legs twice within the first few minutes.

“This is so unfair,” Harry groaned, hauling himself to his feet. “How come you and Molly get to be on the same team?”

“Because we always win,” Molly laughed, kicking the ball with as much power as her short legs could muster. It bounced off the opposite wall and collided with Harry’s head, sending Molly into a fit of giggles.

They played for another ten minutes until Harry declared defeat and promised Molly a lollipop if she allowed him to forfeit. After discussing Harry’s proposal with Louis – a ‘secret meeting’, as she deemed it – Molly agreed after requesting a strawberry lollipop and she skipped in the direction of the finger-painting table.

Harry ambled towards Louis, who was clearing up the football station. Louis immediately looked up, beaming at Harry.

“You really have a way with kids. It must have been easy to choose psychiatry as your specialisation.”

Harry nodded. “I find it difficult at times, especially for a lot of my long-term permanent patients but it’s always rewarding to see them back on their feet.” He glanced at Molly from across the room. “She’s getting on so well, especially in the last couple of weeks. It’s a joy to see her playing with you.”

Louis shrugged. “It’s in my nature to care for children. It’s like the rubric to omega fulfilment to
Harry smiled to himself, imagining a future with Louis, thoughts that, after a tumultuous couple of months of dating, he really shouldn't allow himself to imagine. “Well you two definitely can team up to kick my ass in football. You’re amazing at it. It’s like you just dance across the pitch with such control over the ball.”

Louis tucked his chin into his shoulder modestly. “You could come to one of my matches sometime, if you want. It’s only fair that I get to show you one of my hobbies since you brought me here.”

Harry’s face broke into a smile. “Yes, I really would. I'll be shouting your name from the sidelines.”

…

Later that evening, after the nursery had closed for the evening and Molly was safely tucked into her bed, Harry led Louis back outside into the bustling London street.

“It’s funny, I always forget I’m in the heart of the city whenever I’m here.”

“I know what you mean,” Louis whispered, wrapping his coat tightly around him with one hand, the other interlaced with Harry’s. “It’s almost like a separate world in there.”

They ambled along the street and back to the Candling campus, pitch black sky contrasting with the startlingly pearly moon which shed light on the frosty grass. Louis spoke of his beloved parents when Harry had eagerly asked, his experience growing up and his mini football obsession. Harry spoke of his work, his dreams and ambitions and his professed love for fairy-tales when Louis had questioned him about the collection he found on Harry’s bookshelf.

“I don’t know,” he said sheepishly. “I guess I find them kind of soothing for my inner alpha. I know they’re idealistic but the thought that, perhaps, life could be like those depicted in the tales, revolving around my omega and everything I hold dearest to me, makes me feel whole, complete, I guess.”

Louis stopped in his tracks and placed his second hand inside Harry’s. The biting wind chilled him to the bone and his lips chattered around his soft smile but, in that moment, he needed Harry to see his eyes, to see him, and to know that he cared.
In Harry’s embrace, Louis felt protected. A sense of relief seemed to seep into his tense muscles and heavy head, rendering him reliant on Harry as they supported each other. From their position with their legs entangled on Harry’s bed, Louis idly playing with Harry’s hair while reading a tedious book on criminal law as Harry recounted a strange dream he had the night before, they felt safe and surrounded by one another.

Two weeks had passed in a flurry since the night that Harry confessed to him about his parents and personal history and since then Louis had never felt closer to another person. Once Louis had unlocked the chains Harry had wrapped around himself, he felt united with Harry in a way that made them one and the same.

Though they had spent those weeks working together as part of the experiment, they yearned for each other’s company outside of those hours too. After a tiring morning of legal analysis on Louis’ part and medicinal application on Harry’s part, they waltzed out of the Research Building together for lunch, bundled up in scarves, fleeces and winter coats. They unwillingly returned for their evening sessions for further work until the clock struck five and they raced out of the building, laughing and teasing each other.

“What do you think about the research we’re doing, Louis?”

Louis glanced up, surprised at his unexpected question. “It’s interesting, I suppose,” he said slowly. “We haven’t gathered all the research yet, though, so I can’t get onto the legal application bit until that’s done. Although, there’s that issue about alpha cognitive ability during their ruts that I was researching yesterday and it turns out there’s a law in South Africa about - ”

“No,” Harry interrupted. He shifted his position on the bed to watch Louis’ response. “I mean what do you really think about this research? Like, the conduct of it.”

Louis sighed. “I don’t know, if I’m completely honest. Like, at the beginning, it all seemed like we could actually make a difference. At least, that’s how it was framed, you know? But now,” he said, trailing off, “now I’m not so sure. It sometimes feels like we’re doing things for Matilda’s benefit, to fulfil her interests in gender differences rather than actually applying it to changing equality in the rest of society.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad you said that that.”

Louis piqued an eyebrow. “Why?”

“I’m worried that the research isn’t everything it’s portrayed as. Matilda and my family have a- a history,” he said, articulating each word frustratingly slowly. “I’m positive that my father was the one to encourage the Candling board to agree to facilitate the project in the first place. I wasn’t wary at the beginning, though; it seemed like a great initiative and I figured that Matilda would be able to separate her work from her relationship with my father.” His fingers plunged into the blankets, twisting them and tucking them around the two of them. “Obviously not,” he added bitterly.

Harry’s playlist filled the heavy silence that settled between them.
“What do you suggest we do? You can hardly report this lest she reveals the research we’ve done so far – the strength of your scent and the extent of your alpha - ”

“Abilities?” Harry supplied.

“I was going to say powers.”

“Louis, I’m not a superhero,” he laughed, pinching Louis’ hip beneath the blankets. “But I get your point. To be honest, I don’t really know what we can do.”

They spent the rest of the evening watching a period drama that Harry was enamoured with. Louis spent the show imitating the characters’ posh accents, much to Harry’s amusement. He revelled in hearing Harry’s loud, unbridled cackles in his small dormitory.

As the credits of the season finale rolled and the theme music sounded, Louis lay his head on Harry’s strong chest.

“What are you thinking about?” Louis asked, though his voice was muffled underneath the piles of soft blankets he was swaddled in.

Harry, whose fingers had been trailing across his ankle and calf, stopped his ministrations and smiled. “I’m thinking about how soft your skin is.”

“You are not,” Louis laughed. He rolled his eyes fondly and pinched the strip of exposed skin at his hip.

Harry swatted his hand away and dived forward to tickle him along his ribs. Louis squealed and tried to bat him away futilely. He writhed and wriggled in Harry’s grip, legs kicking out beneath him. Harry’s amused, collected chuckles accompanied Louis’ squeals and weak shouts of protest. They rolled over the bed and onto the floor, laughing breathily and legs intertwined when Harry finally relented.

“Get off me, you big alpha,” Louis said, though there was no spite behind his words.

Harry laughed and crawled off him. They both collapsed back onto the bed with a collective sigh.

“I could stay here forever,” Louis admitted, curling against Harry’s side.

Harry reached out to put a strong arm around him, brushing up and down his back with slow movements. He turned towards him and lifted Louis’ head until their eyes met. “Then stay.”

Louis smiled. “It’s not at easy as that. For one, this is an alpha only dormitory and I don’t think Liam would appreciate me rooming with you two.”

Harry waved a hand in dismissal. “Liam wouldn’t mind. He can move in with Zayn instead.” He pressed his face into Louis’ neck and pressed gentle, lingering kisses there. “And besides, what I say goes. I don’t want to miss a second without you when you could be wrapped in my arms.”

Harry proceeded to smother him in a tight embrace and Louis curled around the grooves and crevices of his body. Harry brought his lips to Louis’ temple to leave a fleeting kiss there.

“I have a present for you,” he announced.

“Oh! What is it?” He clapped his hands together and sat up eagerly.

Harry removed himself from his clutches with a coy smile and crouched beneath the bed to extract
a small black box. He smiled nervously, fingers winding around the blue ribbon tied around the box in a neat bow.

“I’ve wanted to get you something since that night but I just couldn’t find the right thing. Took me ages and a shopping trip with Gemma that I immediately regretted bringing her on but in the end I found something that I hope you like. If you don’t you can return it of course.”

He hastily shoved the box into Louis’ lap and watched in anticipation.

“Harry,” he sighed, “you didn’t have to buy me anything at all.”

“But I did, baby,” he protested. “You helped me so much that night and I’ve never properly told anyone everything but you were so supportive and forgiving. I didn’t know how I could properly express my gratitude so I just thought that this was the best thing.”

“The second best thing,” he corrected. “You’re the best thing, Harry. The reason I was there for you in the first place is because I want to be with you. I don’t need you to give me anything extra, Harry. Nothing could really compare to just spending time with you.”

“So you want me to take this back, then?” Harry asked with an amused smile when Louis lunged forward to take it.

“Well, I didn’t say that.”

Harry chuckled loudly and moved behind him on the bed. Louis sat between Harry’s outstretched legs, back pressed against his chest as Harry’s chin tucked into the crook of his shoulder. Harry licked across his collarbone.

“Come on, sweetheart. Open it.”

Louis tentatively untied the ribbon which Harry then wrapped around his wrist, muttering that the shade of blue reminded him of a certain pair of eyes. Louis opened the box and found, tucked into the velvet cushion, a delicate silver necklace. A small, ornate anchor hung from the chain and, in tiny letters the word ‘Harry’ was inscribed across the shank.

“It’s ... oh, it’s beautiful, Harry,” he whispered, pulling his lips into his mouth as his eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

The sterling silver caught the evening light and Harry’s name, written in neat cursive, glimmered back. He could feel Harry exhale with relief before embracing him around his stomach and pressing their cheeks together to admire the necklace.

“Let me put it on you,” Harry insisted.

Despite their endless touches, gentle caresses and lingering kisses, Harry clasping the necklace around his neck, the anchor falling into the juncture between his collarbones, felt unusually intimate. Harry’s fingers felt different, purposeful and nervous, reflecting the charged energy between them. Louis shivered at the feeling of Harry’s fingers pressing into his neck, directly below his bond mark.

“Can I touch it?” Harry asked, vulnerability colouring his tone.

Louis turned his head and presses a closed-lipped kiss on Harry’s knuckle. “Yes.”

Harry sighed unsteadily and placed his thumbs on Louis’ mark, fingers threading his hair. He
pressed lightly, thumbs trailing across the soft pink skin before they were replaced by his index finger, tracing the circular spot reverently. Louis feels the branding lines of heat travel across the small expanse of skin and he lets a small whimper escape his lips.

“Feels perfect, Harry,” he whispered. “It feels right.”

“I know, baby. I can’t wait for us to bond, for me to mark your spot and leave a deep, beautiful bite here.” His fingers danced across the searing skin. “It’s going to make our connection so strong, Louis; remind each other of who we belong with.”

Louis turned around in his arms and crawled into the space between Harry’s legs, placing his hands on his shoulders. His eyes met Harry’s and, for a second, they understood.


Louis smiled tightly but acquiesced.

They spent the rest of the evening breathing in each other’s scents. As Louis was about to leave and possibly due to his touching of Louis’ bond spot, he felt unusually possessive.

“Can I ... can I scent you, Louis?”

Louis whipped around with surprise before nodding frantically. “Yes, yes, please.”

Harry strode towards him with long steps, halting directly beside him. Louis felt his breath hitch. Harry’s eyelashes fluttered closed and his chest heaved as he released his scent. The headiness rendered Louis paralysed to the spot as the strong waves washed over him. He detected him own scent combining with the spice and pine of Harry’s. The two scents didn’t compete, however, but simply seeped into one another, forming something that seemed natural.

Harry inhaled hungrily, shamelessly. “Love you like this,” he whispered into his ear. “Just drenched in my scent, aren’t you, sweetheart?”

Louis nodded, head falling against Harry’s chest as he pressed a gentle kiss there. “Love being surrounded by you like this, Harry. You ... you make me complete, alpha.

Harry’s knees buckled and his grip on Louis tightened, his breathing becoming heavy and uneven. “Fuck,” he whispered. “Fuck, Louis, don’t call me alpha unless you want me to throw you onto the bed and pound into you.”

Louis’ cheeks flushed and he stumbled over his words. “Harry- I really want to but- ”

“No, no, not yet,” Harry said with a ragged breath. “You should head home. I want us to discuss things before we do anything.”

Louis nodded, his eyes trailing to the bulge of Harry’s tight jeans. He pulled on his hat and coat, watching as Harry sat on the edge of his bed unsteadily, eyes dark and lips shining. Louis stepped carefully, leaning down to whisper in Harry’s ear.

“I’m going to go now, alpha.”

“Louis,” he warned.

He smiled innocently, eyelashes blinking slowly as he titled his head to breathe lightly into Harry’s ear. “Remember to think of me when you take care of that tonight.” His fingertips ghosted over
Harry’s bulge before he spun around and left the dormitory, shutting the door in time to hear a frustrated groan.

…

“Good morning, Harry.”

Harry glanced up from the bottomless pit of research he was wading through to find Louis walking into the Research Laboratory like a breath of fresh air.

“Morning,” he said with a tired smile.

"Sleep well?" he asked from the opposite side of the laboratory.

Harry smirked, combing his long fingers through his hair. “Yeah, managed to have a lovely wank before bed thanks to you.”

A loud groan sounded from across the room. “Harry, mate, we don’t need to know that shit.”

“And don’t let Matilda hear you say that, either,” another voice said. “She’ll go off the rails if she finds out that you’re properly together.”

Harry waved a hand in dismissal as couple of the students exchanged wary glances.

“I’m serious, Harry. She thinks it’ll interfere with the results or something. Just don’t make it obvious while she’s here.”

“Though she’d have to be blind not to notice.”

Louis made a mental note to ask Harry to tone down his affections as he unwrapped his scarf and hung his coat and satchel in the cloakroom. He carefully arranged the anchor necklace so that it could be seen against his navy jumper, fingers tracing the name engraved there. He stepped inside the main laboratory and joined the group, sending soft smiles to the other students he was slowly becoming better acquainted with. What he received in return, however, were expressions of shock; open mouths and widened eyes paired with flared nostrils. The two alphas nearest to him stood up, their chairs tipping dramatically onto the floor.

Louis felt Harry rush towards him and pull him firmly into the adjacent room. Startled and equally curious eyes followed them until Harry shut the door with a sigh.

“What’s going on?”

“Louis, it’s your scent,” he said, eyes falling shut as he stepped closer, crowding Louis’ space. His voice came out uneven, highly affected by the scent permeating the small space.

“What about it?” Louis asked, alarmed. His hand instinctively shot to his scent glands.

“I- when I scented you last night, I think my scent combined with yours somehow to make it especially strong. I can still detect yours distinctly but-fuck, it’s like ours have mingled together, joined into something even stronger. Like we’re connected by our scents.”

“I’m surprised Zayn didn’t notice it,” Harry said after a moment of silence and glances at Louis’
fidgeting fingers.

“No, he went home to Bradford to be with his family for Milad un Nabi.”

Harry nodded distractedly. He exhaled again as a heavy wave of Louis’ scent enveloped him.

Louis’ eyebrows darted together as his eyes followed Harry’s balled fists, up his strong arms and across his stiff shoulders. “Do you like it?” he asked eventually.

“Fuck yes,” Harry breathed. He stepped closer until their chests touched and his hands roamed Louis’ waist. “Baby, I’m finding it ridiculously difficult not to tear your clothes off you right now.”

Louis sunk his teeth into his lower lip and tilted his head coquettishly. “Just think what our scents will be like once we’ve bonded.”

They had raised the question of bonding the previous week. Louis had thought they had made an unspoken agreement, them being soulmates and their close, unfathomable connection rendering the decision unnecessary to formally discuss. Harry had shyly approached him about it, however, when they were discussing their ambitions for the future, asking him whether he would consider bonding with him in the future. Louis entire demeanour had softened at Harry’s earnestness and fell into his embrace, whispering that he had made that decision long before he ever asked.

Harry released a ragged breath, leaning down and tilting Louis’ head to the side until his flushed neck was exposed. The cold tip of his nose traced the vein of Louis’ neck as his grip on Louis’ waist tightened. Harry attached his lips to his neck and sucked slowly, moaning as the scent surrounded him. Louis whimpered as Harry gnawed lightly at the sharp line of his jaw, nipping the skin before licking over it. His fingers dipped beneath Louis’ jumper, rubbing soothing circles on his hip as he reverently kissed the dark claim on Louis’ neck.

“We really should go back,” Louis whispered. “They’ll draw their own conclusions about what we’ve been doing unless we both go back.”

“Think it’s a bit late for that,” Harry said, pulling him close to his side as they straightened their clothes.

“But what will happen with Matilda?” Louis asked. “She’ll know right away, Harry.”

Harry’s playful expression turned grave. “You’re right. I- it’s not fair that my scent affected you like that.” He cast his gaze to Louis’ neck where he had discreetly covered the noticeable mark with the collar of his jumper.

“Hey,” Louis sighed, turning Harry’s head to face him. He smiled gently. “It’s not your fault. You can’t blame yourself for this, Harry. In fact I don’t think this is even an issue of blaming something. The fact that my scent reacted to yours like that because we’re so connected – it’s beautiful. And if she can’t accept that we’re together then maybe we shouldn’t be doing this in the first place.”

Harry sighed heavily, relief washing over his features.

“We’re in this together, Harry.”

He linked his fingers with Louis’ and pressed a kiss to Louis’ wrist. “Together,” he said quietly.

They left to find the active chatter extinguish the second they entered the main research laboratory. Matilda and her colleagues glanced up from where they were huddled around one of the desk, each
wearing an unamused expression. Matilda whispered in one of their ears before striding towards them.

“Well?” she said, thrusting her arms out. Her gaze remained on Harry. “What do you expect me to do now? You’ve gone and done it then, Harry.”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded, wrapping his arm around Louis’ back and subtly pushing him behind.

Louis immediately recognised this as an act of protection and stepped behind to appease Harry’s inner alpha, though he carefully watched their exchange.

“About the fact that you didn’t want to do this project from the second you found out what it entailed and now you’ve finally found a way to get yourself thrown out.”

“This wasn’t on purpose, Matilda, and you know it,” he said coldly.

She glared at him, flicking her hair out of her eyes. “Well unless you agree to terminate this thing,” she said, waving her hand dismissively in their direction, “then you’ll have to acquiesce your places on this research programme.”

Harry glanced behind him and found Louis nodding in agreement. He felt a small hand squeeze his own in silent reassurance.

“Consider it done,” Harry said.

“Fine,” she gritted out. She eyed him imploringly, voice deceptively gentle. “Harry, I know you think this is directed at you because of your father’s interest in this area but I promise you that our endeavour is more than that. If you’d just - ”

“No,” he scolded. “Louis and I are in agreement.”

Her eyes darted between them and her lips contorted into an unappealingly smug smile. “Using your scent to control him, though, Harry? Really?” she said incredulously, raising a manicured eyebrow. “I thought you were better than that. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, then, obviously.”

Louis’ hand shot to his mouth to cover his audible gasp. He stepped closer to Harry, placing a hand on his love handle only to find Harry gently remove it as he moved closer to Matilda.

Harry’s shoulders shook with rage, his eyes narrowing to slits as he stepped closer to her. Despite her tall stature, he towered over her. “Now you listen here and you listen good,” he said murderously. “I am not him, nor will I ever be. I don’t know what he’s told you about me but he doesn’t know shit. He may have you wrapped around his little finger but I promise you that if you ever try to break loose he won’t hesitate to wreck everything you’ve worked for.”

One of the research assistants who had been watching the situation unfold from across the room approached Harry. “You’re crossing a line here, mate. This is a professional environment.”

“Leave, Jordan,” Matilda said slowly, eyes remaining fixed on Harry. “I can handle myself just fine.”

The research assistant – Jordan – looked reluctantly between them before shuffling away.

“Professional my bollocks,” Harry muttered once he was out of earshot. “You fucking oversaw
Louis and Catherine being subjected to my scent when you had no idea what effect it would have on them.”

“Well, I couldn’t have expected him to be your soulmate, now could I?”

Louis could only watch as Harry grinded his teeth and bared them menacingly. He sensed a low grumble stirring in his chest and pressed close to Harry’s side to prevent him from growling. He instantly felt Harry relax with his soothing touch. He placed a protective arm around his shoulders, thumb accidentally brushing the bond mark and sending a jolt of energy between them.

“Leave my omega out of this,” Harry spat. “I know that Candling’s commissioning this research under my father’s supervision but that doesn’t give you a right to put his demands above basic fucking ethics.”

“Well then what’re you going to do, Harry? Get your little omega lawyer to sue me?” she said, grimacing at Louis’ indignant gasp.

He shook his head when Harry tried to protest to her ridiculing. Despite his inner omega demanding that he remain quiet and resolve the situation, Louis mustered the courage to reply. He despised compromising his values or sense of self-worth just to satisfy his inner omega.

“I try not to make assumptions about people that I don’t know and I’d appreciate it if you did the same,” he said. He glanced up at Harry and caught the hard lines on his face soften as their gazes met. “Harry’s right. This project wasn’t conducted properly at all. And you can’t threaten Harry just because you know about his alpha powers. Anyone, lawyer or not, would appreciate that you haven’t applied proper ethics at all and that you can’t disclose private information like that.”

She huffed loudly, disregarding Louis and returning her attention to Harry. “Well you know exactly who to go to if you want to report me,” she said derisively, tone indicating that she knew he would never carry through with such a threat. “Send him my regards.”

With that, she whisked around and pushed open both double doors to enter the adjacent hallway, heels clicking rhythmically against the hardwood floors.

They breathed a sigh of relief together and quickly gathered their belongings from the cloakroom in silence, deigning not to say goodbye to the rest of the students dotted around the laboratories.

Louis didn’t dare to break the thick silence until they stepped outside, their cheeks whipped by the bitter wind.

“What happens now?” he asked tentatively, turning towards Harry.

Louis watched as he swallowed thickly, his Adam’s apple protruding.

“We talk to my father.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! What are your thoughts on this chapter? How do you think Harry and Louis' meeting turn out? Looking forward to your responses. Come and say hi on tumblr!
“My heat is next week.”

The late evening sun peaking through the curtains cast a light on the column of Harry’s neck. He swallowed thickly. His frantic writing halted and he glanced up absently. “Oh yeah?”

His attempt at nonchalance fell short of his mark if Louis’ piqued eyebrow was anything to rely on.

“I know that your rut starts about then too,” Louis said, biting his lip tentatively. He nodded towards the calendar above Harry’s desk where three days in mid-November were circled with a red marker.

“Yeah, most alphas who don’t have mates stay here in the dormitory and wait it out but I- I usually move out for a couple of days to save Liam from the whole ... the whole ordeal of listening to everything.” Harry shut his laptop and closed his notebook, placing his materials in a neat pile before turning around to face Louis. He smiled cautiously.

Louis tugged at his jumper for something to distract himself from Harry’s piercing gaze. He desperately wanted Harry to propose spending their respective mating cycles together but his apparent reservation worried him.

Harry stood and crossed the room briskly. He climbed onto the bed and collapsed beside him, tucking Louis against his side before pressing their foreheads together.

“Harry?”

“Yes, omega?” he asked, licking Louis’ collarbone to soothe him, the waves of tension rolling off him.

“Would you like to spent your rut with me?”

The words slipped out of his mouth before he could fully process what he was proposing. If Harry was surprised, it didn’t show in his expression. He sighed shortly before pressing a chaste kiss to Louis’ forehead.

“I really want to, sweetheart,” he sighed.

Louis felt his heart plummet in his chest, the regret of Harry’s tone seeping inside of him. He shut his eyes at his inner omega’s vicious whispers of inadequacy.

“Hey,” he said, lifting Louis’ chin until their eyes locked. “Louis, of course I want to, please don’t think otherwise. My hesitation has nothing to do with you at all. You’ve done absolutely nothing wrong, darling.” Harry’s chest heaved as he inhaled. When he spoke again, his words spilled out with practiced ease, as though he had anticipated Louis proposing such a thing.

“I’m just worried. The last time I spent my rut with an omega was years ago. I hated the person I was then. I hated how detached I was from everyone and everything. I would just fuck anyone that let me without regard for them at all. I couldn’t even bring myself kiss another person because I felt so isolated, so removed from myself. I just acted on my alpha instincts and let them control me.
I knew it was dangerous and unsafe and fucked up but I did it anyway.” His heavy breathing slowed before he smiled sadly. “I don’t want that to happen to you, darling.”

“Harry,” he whispered. He wriggled his hand between their intertwined limbs until he caught Harry’s and squeezed it. “This will be different. I promise it will be. I already know that I can resist your alpha voice. And I know how much you care about me. Your inner alpha would never do anything that I didn’t want. They’re connected in a way none of us realise.”

“And that’s the problem,” he sighed. “Neither of us can fully realise anything. Everything when I’m around you is so extreme, Louis. It’s why these few months have been so fucked up. My inner alpha is only now starting to adjust to being around you all the time. I don’t know how I’ll react when I see you in heat.”

His last sentence came out with a strangled voice and a sharp jerk of his leg. Louis suppressed a giggle.

“Harry, I trust you,” he said. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s closed eyelid. “I need you to trust yourself.”

Harry looked like he wanted to argue. “And what about you, then?” he finally asked. “Neither of us know how you might react either. I won’t know how lucid you’ll be and you mightn’t be able to consent and if you’re not able to that then I won’t - ”

Louis pressed his palm to Harry’s chest. “I’m cognisant of everything apart from immediately after I’ve come and been knotted.” Louis felt Harry’s chest harden, his breathing quicken. “I know that for a fact. I will be able to consent, as will you.”

Harry nodded firmly. “Okay, but I’m just worried that something will go wrong.”

“Harry, please don’t worry. We may not be the most conventional couple and I understand what you mean about everything being a little more intense but I trust you. I’ve seen you resist your instincts for my sake before, Harry. And besides, I’ve always been able to give explicit consent in the past. I’ve spent my heat with alphas before and every time - ”

Harry’s heart pounded in his chest and his grip around Louis’ back tightened. He clenched his teeth. “Louis,” he grunted, “what the fuck makes you think I want to hear about other alphas that have fucked you?”

Louis’ cheeks turned a faint rosy shade. He made the mistake of inhaling deeply and detected a dark hint to Harry’s scent reflecting the hard line on his face and his pained expression. “Well, you mentioned omegas you’ve been with,” he said, crossing his arms indignantly.

Harry pressed a kiss to his pouting lower lip, sucking gently. “That’s because I knew, deep down, that they’d never mean anything to me. I knew that I had a soulmate and I felt tied to you even before I knew you. I could never let myself date seriously when I knew that I would eventually find my beautiful omega.” He threaded his fingers through Louis’ hair, fingertips dancing over his bond spot. “You, on the other hand, didn’t know a thing about soulmates. You were free to date whoever you wanted.”

Louis pressed his cheek against Harry’s own and nuzzled his neck, pressing gentle kisses along the sensitive skin below his ear. “Well I promise not to tell you about them.”

“Good.”

They spent the next couple of minutes sharing comforting touches, pressing lingering kisses across
the expanse of bare skin on each other’s necks.

“I’m fantasising about snapping their necks right now,” Harry said conversationally as he pressed his lips to Louis’ temple.

“What?” Louis squawked.

“The alphas that fucked you,” he said, licking calmly along the column of Louis’ neck. He shifted his weight until most of his body concealed Louis’ own, Harry’s back facing the door. Louis immediately recognised this as a feature of alpha possessiveness, a sense of threat many alphas felt when they had a close connection to an omega they were not mated to. Harry licked the outline of Louis’ lips with the tip of his tongue before pressing down harshly, prying them open. “You’re mine and I don’t want to hear about them again. Understood?”

“Yes, alpha.”

Harry’s moan was muffled from where his mouth had latched onto the searing skin of Louis’ neck. He pulled back suddenly. “If you want to, Louis, we can spent our cycles together.”

Louis nodded furiously and surged up to pull Harry’s lower lip into his mouth, eyes fluttering closed as he sucked on it. “I do,” he whispered, voice strained. “I do, Harry.”

...

The morning of the sixth of November dawned early, the clear sky deceiving Londoners from the fierce winds and biting frost. Harry leaned against an overarching oak tree outside the omega dormitories, looking entirely inconspicuous though his heart raced at the thought of the day’s events. The flyer attached to the tree – the same one he had seen dotted across every noticeboard and bare surface across campus – fluttered in his face as the wind swept by him. He read over the familiar words that, as Student President, he had to approve before they would be mass produced and distributed.

Winter Masquerade Ball

All students are invited to attend the fifty-second annual Candling Winter Ball on the thirtieth of November. Dress code is black tie with a twist – every student must wear a mask which reflects their status. Alphas must wear red; betas must wear blue; and omegas must wear white. Tickets on sale from the Student Union. Each student not accompanied by a date will be given a complementary sprig of mistletoe in the hope that you find Mr. Right or Mrs. Right. Contact details listed below.

Harry’s long finger shot through his tousled hair the moment he saw Louis rushing down the front steps, bundled in a thick coat and a long scarf looped around his neck. His worries about the meeting vanished when he laid eyes on the pink tip of Louis’ nose and the way he slipped his gloved hand into Harry’s own.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“I think I’m past the point of listening to your excuses for being late,” Harry laughed, giving his hand a squeeze. “You know I just tell you a time that’s twenty minutes before we actually have to leave before we go anywhere, right?”
Louis brought a hand to his chest in feigned indignation. “This wasn’t my fault this time, though. I had to spend ten minutes convincing Zayn not to accept this alpha’s offer to the Winter Ball. He only wants to get in his pants. Zayn’s convinced that Liam’s never going to ask him though.”

“Those two are hopeless,” Harry said. “I must’ve told Liam a thousand times to go for it but he thinks that Zayn’s out of his league.”

“Which he is. But, then again, everyone is out of Zayn’s league. He would have to date himself if he wanted someone within his league.”

Harry chuckled and pulled Louis flush against him, making walking along the cobble-stoned pathways a little difficult. “That reminds me, actually,” Harry said as they crossed through the maze of manicured hedges and fountains spurring clear water which gleamed in the morning light. “I haven’t properly asked you to come with me yet.”

Louis rolled his eyes fondly and followed Harry to where he sat perched on the edge of one of the rather ugly fountains. He held Harry's outstretched hands, their lines of sight almost singular as Harry sat opposite him.

“Louis,” he said, pulling him close against his chest until Harry felt the tickle of Louis’ scarf against his chin, “will you come to the dance with me?”

“I would be honoured,” he said with a toothy grin. He leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to Harry’s forehead before pulling him to his feet unsteadily. “Now let’s go before we’re actually late.”

They made their way through the Candling grounds until they reached the formidable Lesley Hall, a greying stone building with flying buttresses and turrets lining the perimeter. The board meetings took place here on the first Friday of every month and, on a daily basis, the professors had offices located in the building. They climbed the tall steps until they reached the enormous entrance hall with dark-wood flooring and a dome shaped ceiling creating an airy atmosphere.

They had spent the previous day revising everything they felt was most significant to disclose to Harry’s father. Though telling the board as a whole would be ideal, they couldn’t risk their discovering of the family lineage. Harry had similarly objected to Louis’ presence in the first place but, after much convincing, Louis had reasoned that it would not make any sense how he knew her practices were unethical if Louis was excluded from the story. After all, he was the person subjected to Harry’s scent and alpha voice under Matilda’s command.

“Everything is going to be just fine, Harry. We won’t have to stay long at all. Just explain that she’s exceeding the scope of what the research project’s true objective is and that, due to that, it could bring bad publicity to the school. He can’t but agree to that.”

Harry smiled at him, pulling his lip between his thumb and forefinger until it turned a startling red shade. “Thank you, omega. I know that my inner alpha would prefer you not to have to go through this but, honestly, I feel so much better knowing that you’ll be here.”

“Good morning, Mr. Styles. You’re here for the board meeting I presume.”

They startled and turned around to find a secretary approaching them. She led them briskly through a winding corridor lined with musty wallpaper and antique portraits of past professors of Candling. They arrived outside a dark door where the jovial laughter and chatter could be heard from inside.

The secretary knocked and announced their arrival. The chatter subsided instantly. Above her,
Louis could make out a long, mahogany desk where the alphas – sporting trimmed moustaches and
clad in wait-coats that protruded at the belly – sat. He spotted one of them lurch his upper body
weight onto the table to conceal the generous tray of brandy and rum bottles.

Louis was hit with Harry’s father’s scent before the man clambered out of the room. Mint and pine
needles – the scent that dominated the room and, sickeningly, reminded him of Harry – pervaded
the corridor as he shut the door. The secretary scurried away.

It was jarring for Harry to see his father after months of blissful reprieve. Louis desperately looked
for differences between the cruel man before him and his son. The mossy green eyes lacked
warmth and affection, his demeanour was self-important to the point of superiority and his dark
hair was embellished with greying patches. Otherwise, their physical similarities were striking.

“Son,” he rasped, clapping Harry on the back. He hadn’t noticed Louis’ presence yet and he was
thankful for it. He eyed Harry acutely, eyes trailing over his impassive expression and frame. His
nostrils flared.

“I’ve stopped the medication,” Harry said before his father could comment. “My reasons for doing
so are none of your business.”

The man tilted his nose in the air again before wheeling around to face Louis directly. His
eyebrows shot together and his eyes narrowed, glaring at Louis. “Well?” he said. “I presume you’re
back here to complain again, then, are you?”

Louis shook his head, paralysed to the spot beneath his gaze. He struggled for breath. Not only was
he unperturbed by Louis’ discomfort, he seemed to take genuine satisfaction from that fact.

Harry rounded on his father before his eyes fluttered back to Louis. They shone with confusion. He
gestured vaguely at his father. “Do you- have you seen him before?”

Louis wanted to scream at his former self for not warning Harry earlier. He has reasoned with
himself that the man would have forgotten him, dismissed him, even, as an idealistic omega who
interrupted his board meeting to demand better omega protection many months ago and that he
would be saved from telling the story to Harry. He felt enclosed by two equally undesirable
options: tell Harry the truth or let his father tell it.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “After, after Zayn’s unexpected, eh, incident, I spoke to the board to request
better omega protection procedures and classes to educate Candling students on how best to
respond to an omega in the same situation.” He avoided using the word heat, cautious that he
would offend Harry’s father.

Harry’s rigid demeanour instantly relaxed and he stepped beside him, surreptitiously linking his
hand with Louis’ behind their backs. “I wish you’d told me, darling,” he murmured.

He heard a loud snort.

“This boy had the audacity to demand such things in September. Thought he was entitled to those
privileges just because of his status.” He glowered at Louis as he inspected him over the rim of his
glasses, obscuring the mossy green eyes Louis was so familiar with. Louis instinctively recoiled
under his gaze. “We agreed to those provisions to shut you up, boy, not to give you a free pass
back here whenever you need something.”

“Don’t speak to my omega like that,” Harry warned. “He has come here with me to talk about the
gender research initiative that you endorsed.”
Harry’s father wrenched his hand from the adjacent wall and stalked towards Louis. His eyes shined with astonishment, his movements only halting until he stood directly before Louis. The veneration in his eyes, however, disappeared as quickly as it had come as he remembered exactly who his son’s destined omega was. His eyes darted towards Harry, sneering up at him with disdain. “I should have known a weak-willed alpha like you would end up with an omega who doesn’t know his place. You had better teach him, boy, or he’ll never learn.”

Harry lunged forward until his face was mere centimetres from his father’s. He glared at him, eyes harsh and gaze unyielding. He breathed heavily through his nostrils. “You have no right to tell me how to treat an omega, father. Especially not my omega. We’re here to inform you about the research project, not seek you approval of our relationship.”

“You’re behaving repugnant to every value I’ve instilled in you,” he spat.

“Good,” he said. “At least then I’ll never do what you did to - ”

“Enough!” he roared, his alpha voice seeping into his tone.

The abhorrent voice forced Louis to succumb. His stance weakened but he resisted falling to his knees. He felt Harry’s soothing touch on his neck in an instant, whispers of reassurance in his ear and his distinctive scent calming him. Louis leaned into his touch, thankful that Harry had prioritised taking care of him rather than chastising his father for using his alpha voice.

“My darling omega,” he said softly, “Louis, I need you to look up for me. Nobody is going to hurt you, I promise.”

Louis felt the thin fingers on his neck coax him to lift his head. He was met with Harry’s father’s sceptic gaze eyeing their interaction until Harry rounded on him.

“Thank you. You did so well for me, omega,” he whispered, careful not to let his father intrude on their shared moment.

Louis smiled but didn’t trust his voice not to crack. He felt Harry’s hand return to his lower back.

“Can we speak about this matter somewhere more private?”

Harry’s father led them to a room with darkened curtains and old, rickety tables surrounded by patterned armchairs. He led Louis to one of them and discreetly muttered into his father’s ear.

“If you so much as glance at Louis one more time I will report you to the authorities and make sure that you don’t see my mother for another year.”

“Your empty threats don’t frighten me, boy,” he retorted. “I must say that it’s good to see your little omega can act like one when he has to, though.”

Harry wanted to roar at the despicable man before him. His thoughts flooded with memories of precisely why he detested his father. Conscious of Louis perched on an armchair, expectant on the other side of the room, deterred the growl that threatened to leave his lips. “I came here for one purpose and as soon as that’s addressed we’re leaving.”

Louis watched as Harry crossed the room to stand behind Louis’ armchair. He crossed his arms, chest protruding as he raised his chin in a challenge even before he spoke.

“Matilda lied to you.”
Harry’s father raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you believe that?” he asked, tone dripping with incredulity.

“She’s going to bring down the reputation of Candling.”

“I don’t do mediocrity, son. Candling is the highest ranking university in the country and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I guarantee that she’ll do no such thing.”

“She is and she will continue to do so unless you intervene.” Harry’s eyes pierced his father’s own, the words escaping his lips slow and deliberate. He needed to provoke a response in his father. “I know that you put her up to this; to examine the extent our my abilities in this project. But the whole thing is unethical. Any research she presents to Parliament or any kind of body that will implement the scientific research will be rejected instantly and will reflect on Candling.”

Harry’s father narrowed his eyes and stared at his son, eyes raking over him to detect any hint of dishonesty. “What kind of unethical practices?”

“No proper method to withdraw from parts of the project,” Louis said. “And there weren’t any proper protection measures in place. Procedures were only stopped when they’d already gone too far.”

“And she’s using you. She may have convinced you otherwise but she’s using this project to progress her own research agenda, not discover more about our abilities. None of the research about our abilities will help you. It shows that we possess control over our instincts, father, not that they’re uncontrollable. With knowledge like that, they’ll never let you see mother again.”

His conflicted eyes contrasted starkly with his balled fist, physically grappling for any kind of counter-argument. “How am I expected to believe this from you?”

“You know it’s true, father. Don’t deny it.”

“Even still, I’ve known Matilda for longer than I’d care to admit.” He cast his gaze to the door behind him, as though expecting someone to be standing there, eavesdropping.

“You know how deception works, father,” Harry said quietly, voice ringing in the high-ceilinged room. “Don’t let your expectations blind you from the truth.”

…”

Louis tangled his fingers in Harry’s hair, making small braids with the wispy tendrils. He periodically glanced at Notting Hill playing on Harry’s laptop, softly singing the soundtrack against Harry’s sinewy chest. He was enraptured by the ink spreading across his chest and arms, pressing fleeting kisses along the edges of the butterfly and the tips of the sparrows’ wings.

Harry tightened his hold on him, his scent thickening until it pervaded every corner of the room. As soon as they arrived at his dormitory after Harry’s father had agreed to discuss the possibility of terminating the research project with the board, Louis had whispered in Harry’s ear to request that he scent him. After experiencing an alpha voice, he felt an innate need to be embraced by Harry and drowned by his scent.

“I love listening to you sing. You’ve such a light, silvery voice,” Harry said. He pressed his lips
firmly against his forehead. “In fact, I love hearing your voice full stop. Even when you’re annoyed, you’re always softly-spoken. It’s so reassuring.”

“Your dulcet tones are far from pure, though only of their persistence may I be sure,” Louis whispered, blushing beneath Harry’s curious gaze.

“What’s that?”

“A piece of poetry,” Louis muttered. “It was written by an omega during the War when her alpha had gone to fight. Despite their distance, she could always hear his voice in her ear. She loved him so desperately that they were connected, even hundreds of miles away.”

Harry spun him around quickly before catching sight of Louis’ startled expression. He gently pressed their foreheads together. “That’s beautiful, my darling.”

Louis swallowed the lump in his throat, constricting his airflow. His thoughts returned to his feeling of completeness, of unity with Harry and his desire to never let go. “She yearned for him and felt every pain that he did. I don’t know if he lived or if they ever re-united but, for her at least, that link that they had was enough. When we bond,” he whispered, blinking slowly in the heavy, shared space between them, “we’ll be just like that. Connected in our emotions and sorrows. And above all else, we’ll be connected in our love.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I’m very much looking forward to writing the last chapter. What are your thoughts on their relationship?
The morning that he expected his heat to arrive brought torrential rains and blustery winds that roamed the expansive grounds of Candling. After devouring a breakfast of porridge with brown sugar, Louis nestled into the bedsheets on Harry’s bed. He watched across the room as Harry meticulously arranged their food supplies for the next few days; fruits, nuts and water bottles were readily available on the kitchen table while meals that Harry had prepared and others that Louis had bought ready-made filled the small fridge in the adjoined kitchen unit.

Liam had agreed to find a place to stay for the following three days with surprising enthusiasm. Harry had triple-checked the scent diffusers on the doors, pestering the maintenance workers to ensure that they were in order and that no one in the alpha dormitory outside of the bedroom itself would be able to detect their presence.

In the two weeks since they had agreed to bond, they had divided their time between lectures, the hospital and Harry’s dormitory. Although messy by nature, Louis was a compulsive cleaner whenever he felt worked-up or anxious and the prospect of bonding with Harry consumed his thought. He felt fulfilled beyond comprehension at the idea but was still extremely nervous about it. As such, Harry’s dormitory was impeccably clean, so much so that Liam had enquired whether Harry had employed cleaning staff. Whenever the memory of Harry promising that they would bond during their cycles entered his daydreaming, he felt drawn to any item of Harry’s which emanated his scent. He had spent the previous afternoon folding and re-folding Harry’s shirts until Harry needed to physically pry them from his hands and force him to talk about his anxiety.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

Louis smiled at his earnestness. “I’m fine for the moment, Harry. Thank you, though.”

Harry nodded to himself before crawling onto the bed, eyes locked with his. Louis, swallowed beneath the blankets Harry had insisted on covering him with in the cold room, made space for him. They were content in each other’s quiet company until Harry shifted closer to him and he heard the rustle of paper beneath the bedsheets.

“What’s that?” Louis asked.

Harry’s smiled sheepishly and pulled his hand from beneath the blankets. He handed a crinkled piece paper to him, rushing to explain its contents. “I kind of wrote down stuff that I’m comfortable doing over the next few days.” He reached across the bed to extract his small copy of The Tale of Maximus and Edin and let the book fall open on one of the delicate pages. “There’s also some information and stories in here that have been passed down for years in my family in here that explain what happens when the alphas in my lineage bond with their soulmates.”

Louis knew that he would never tire from hearing Harry describe him as his soulmate. Louis took in the unusual vulnerability colouring Harry’s expressive features and pressed his lips to his
flaming cheek. “Which should I look at first?”

Harry pointed to the piece of paper. “I want you to tell me what you’re comfortable with on that and be able to tell me what you’d like to do too.”

Louis’ eyes scanned the rather long list as Harry pretended to be busy inspecting the soft leather binding of the book.

Finally, he tugged at one of Harry’s curls to gain his attention. “The first three things I’d like to do. For the first time we do this, at least,” he said shyly, pointing towards the neat scrawl. “And for mating, I just want us to be facing each other. I know that makes things a little difficult but I’ll try and tilt my head to the side to give you better access.” His gaze fell to where his nimble fingers were compulsively folding and unfolding the piece of paper. “I just want to be able to see you when it’s happening.”

“Louis,” he sighed, reaching to lift his chin. “Of course we’ll do that. We can make the angle work just fine. Is there anything else you want specifically, my love? Don’t feel embarrassed.”

Louis blushed, a soft pink shade trailing up his neck. “I just want it to be gentle for when we bond. I ... I’m happy for you to be a little rough at any other time but, when we bond, I just want to focus on you; on us being together and uniting like that.”

Harry pressed his nose against Louis’ cheek and whispered into his ear, “You want me to make love with you, baby?”

Louis batted him away. “Not yet, Harry,” he laughed. “And don’t call it ‘making love’. That sounds so sleazy.”

Harry looked dejected for a moment before Louis pointed towards the book that lay open in his lap.

“Besides, I want to hear about the rituals in your book.”

Harry conceded and pulled Louis flush against him, their curves and grooves moulding together like the last two parts of a jigsaw.

“The first account here is from my great-grandfather. I never met him but from what’s written in here he was quite the ladies’ man. Certainly had no shame discussing his sexual escapades,” he chuckled. Harry extracted a collection of small scraps paper embellished angular capital letters and read what was inscribed with the practiced ease of someone who had read them many times before.

“Clarice – that was his omega – and I bonded since a fortnight and three sleepless nights. I remain unconscious to everything but her celestial beauty and dainty touch. Fate, certainly, has been kind to us. We were engaged in the most fanciful of evening meals that she had prepared when she expressed a desire for us to bond. Before I could question her of this unexpected request her enrapturing scent sucked me down into her whirlpool. And I welcomed it as a shipwrecked man at sea would; hopeless and yet consumed by hope. I knew the time had come and felt my inner voice – that’s what he calls his alpha instincts – disciplining me and instructing me how to react. I quickly bolted the doors and sent for the farm hands to take care of the property for the foreseeable future. We bathed together and I took care to draw out the unfavourable cold that seeped into her bones. An urge swallowed me like never before to prepare the bedchamber. I quickly laid flowers along the bedside and wrapped blankets around my Clarice’s shivering form. My mind was awake but my movements were guided by her. We fell into a symphony of steps and movements, like a grand
“This next one is from my grandfather. I liked him a lot, though he was very traditional. My grandmother, Agnes, is still alive but very frail. She lives at a nursing home in Surrey and Gemma and I visit her every Christmas. Their bond was the only truly proper bond I could appreciate. It was so beautiful. They treated each other like frail objects that could crack at any moment. So concerned and aware of each other’s needs. It’s like, even though they knew everything there was to know about each other, they always searched for more. Like they took genuine delight from every tiny, irrelevant thing the other did. When he died, a little part of her died with him.”

Louis watched as he turned the flimsy page to reveal three tightly-bound pages covered in small scribbles. He placed his hand on top of Harry’s so that they both could follow the words scrawled across the pages.

“I refused to leave her side, so afraid was I that something would change while I was gone. I did not want to miss a thing. She lay on her side and I, against her back. I traced my finger over her tender spot, savouring every second she let me press my tongue to the hot skin. At part of me had joined irreversibly with her. Neither of us regretted it but it felt so sudden, so complete and yet too immediate. I longed to repeat our experience, content with the knowledge that I would never bore of her gentle touch and delicious noises. My teeth were sharp, she informed me. I chastised her for such an unrefined comment but took secret delight from the fact that she described the feeling in such elated terms. We disclosed our secret joys with shared complicity, aware that, beyond the hollow walls, nobody could hear us.”

“There are many more from older relatives that are written in Old English,” Harry explained, filing the papers away in the book. “They’re a little complex but you can read them whenever you want. My father’s one is there too but I never read it. I wouldn’t want to.”

Louis shook his head firmly. “Absolutely not,” he agreed. He traced his finger over one of the water-colour illustrations of Maximus, admiring the expressive detail and contrasting stains of inks. “Thank you for sharing those, Harry.”

He shrugged but attacked his lips to the juncture between Louis’ neck and shoulder. “I thought it would good for you to know what kind of things to expect when we- later today.”

Louis nodded against Harry’s chest and sighed contentedly. Their breathing fell into synchronisation, the thrashing trees outside and the rain pounding against the window filling in the silence.

As Louis closed his eyes he felt Harry leap from the bed suddenly. He crossed the room in quick strides, stopping only in response to Louis’ shout of protest when he made to put on his boots.

“Harry? Where on earth are you going? Your rut could hit any minute now.”

He whipped around and Louis’ sharp intake of breath sounded throughout the room. Harry’s eyes were dark and hooded, his muscles rigid and he very much looked like he wanted to devour Louis.

“I’m going to warn the other residents not to even dream of coming near this dormitory. Might scare them away while I’m at it. Stay here, omega.”

Before Louis could object Harry turned on his heel and stalked out of the dormitory, leaving a thick scent in his wake.

When he returned moments later, Louis had not moved and Harry wore a smug expression.

“Nobody will be bothering us now,” he said to himself, toeing off his boots and hauling himself
onto the bed.

“Harry, what did you tell them?”

He made his way over to the bed and pressed a finger to Louis’ lips in silence. Before he removed it, Louis’ tongue darted out and he licked a long stripe up his finger. Louis caught Harry’s disbelieving stare. Harry shivered, crawling closer to him. He pressed his finger inside Louis’ mouth and he sucked eagerly, eyelashes fluttering closed. Harry inserted a second finger and he swirled his tongue around them.

“Darling,” he whispered, pressing his fingers in and out of Louis’ mouth.

His jaw slackened and he pressed his tongue between the two fingers, placing his hands on Harry’s thighs to keep him steady.

Harry switched their positions in one swift movement, sitting against the headboard of the bed and pulling Louis onto his lap. His eyes followed the low dip of Louis’ shirt and he dragged his hands up and down the sides of the fabric. Louis sat down in his lap and felt Harry’s bulge beneath him.

“Fuck, Louis,” he groaned. Harry quickly pulled Louis’ shirt off just as a wave of Louis’ heat crashed between them and he felt slick against his thigh.

Harry attached his lips to Louis’ collarbone, discarding Louis’ shirt with a small, “you’ll be wearing my clothes from now on,” and sucking gently.

Louis threw his head back, panting as he lifted himself up before grinding down against Harry with a broken whimper.

“Louis,” he breathed. His voice had a darker, huskier hint, indicating his self-restraint. “Want you to stroke me, baby.”

Louis nodded, fingers flying over the buttons of Harry’s shirt. He felt Harry panting beneath him and carefully removed Harry’s shirt with deliberately slow motions.

“Louis, if you fold my fucking shirt I swear to God I - ”

He laughed before throwing Harry’s shirt behind him, silencing Harry with one small press against him. Louis unzipped his jeans, sensing the throbbing subside as he pulled down the jeans completely, throwing them on the floor. He felt Harry’s scent wrap around him with such immediacy that he was almost swept from his position on his lap.

“Alpha,” he sighed.

Harry’s threw his head back, groaning loudly. He thrust upwards, briefs rubbing against Louis’ bum.

“Darling, let’s get these off.” He pressed his finger beneath the waistband of Louis’ sweats and brought it around his lower stomach teasingly.

“Harry, please,” he whimpered.

He complied easily, ripping the sweats from him. The vision he saw, of Louis wearing white panties decorated with lace trimmings and a little bow at the back, made his mouth water. His voice fell an octave and he growled lowly in the back of his throat.
“Fuck, Louis, you don’t know what you do to me.”

Louis smiled shyly. “I do know. I can feel it.” He emphasised his point by grinding down torturously slow. “Want me to take care of it?”

Harry nodded wordlessly, removing his briefs. “I want nothing more right now.”

Harry’s dick, which had been straining obscenely through his grey briefs, curved against his stomach, pink and throbbing. His dick was heavy and full between his legs. Louis gulped, eyes widened.

“You’re,” he breathed. “You’re big, alpha.”

Precome leaked out of the slit and landed on Louis’ finger. He sucked Harry’s taste into his mouth, moaning prettily.

Harry watched with dark eyes, bringing a hand down to jerk himself off.

“God, Louis,” he muttered, voice desperate. “You make me want to do things I really shouldn’t fucking do.”

Louis’ tongue slid across his lower lip. He crawled between Harry’s legs and dragged his fingers along his inner thighs, lowering his head. He pressed a close-mouthed kiss to the head before licking along the slit.

Harry let out a strangled moan. “Baby, don’t tease me.”

Louis slid his flat tongue from the base to the top of the heat, feeling the throbbing pulsing beneath him. He made eye-contact with Harry, blinking slowly before dragging his tongue over his lips and sliding them along his shaft. Harry moaned approvingly. Louis moved up and down, moaning as he sped up and Harry made small, thrusting motions to meet him. He gently sucked on the head, gliding his hands up and down Harry’s thighs. He lifted his gaze to find Harry staring open-mouthed, nostrils flared and eyes dark.

Louis lowered his head again before taking Harry fully into his mouth in one swift movement. Harry thrust up erratically at the feeling and he pulled off.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have thrust into your mouth. I couldn’t - ”

Louis shook his head, placing a gentle hand on Harry’s jaw. “No,” he croaked. “Do it, again.”

Harry pulled his lower lip into his mouth reluctantly.

“Please, alpha. Want you to fuck my throat.”

Harry’s groaned, rutting up instinctively. “Fuck, Louis, yes. Pinch my leg if you want me to stop.”

Louis nodded before shifting backwards. He opened his mouth just enough to take the swollen tip in before moving up and down with long wet, drags. Louis moved faster as Harry’s breaths became harsher, pushing him close to the edge. Harry grunted and began to thrust shallowly at first before Louis swirled his tongue, and indication that he wanted Harry to rut up into his mouth.

“Look at me, Louis. Want to see your eyes.”

Harry watched Louis as he thrust up slowly, his tip brushing the back of Louis’ throat. He tangled his fingers in Louis’ hair, rough fingers tugging at the strands. Louis hollowed his cheeks and took
in more of Harry, tongue dragging across the vein underneath.

“That’s enough,” he gritted out. “Want to hold on until I’m inside you. Been thinking about it fucking constantly.”

Louis leaned into Harry, tilting his head and brushing his lips against Harry’s ear. “Then get to it,” he whispered.

Harry flipped them around until he loomed above Louis, panting against his searing chest.

“Fuck, I love you lying underneath me like this.”

He leaned down and pressed their lips together, harsh and persisting. Harry let his tongue slip into his mouth before pulling back, fingers inching down Louis’ smooth chest.

“I’m going to hold your wrists now, my darling, just like I promised. You want that?”

“Please, Harry,” he sighed, lifting his wrists and holding them out to Harry.

Harry’s long fingers encased his delicate wrists, pressing small kisses on the inside. He pinned them above Louis’ head as he shivered beneath him. He pressed them into the pillow, arms stretching, chest arching up and seeking Harry’s touch.

“I could do anything with you right now,” Harry whispered into his ear, smirking down at him. “Wreck you until you can’t walk; tease you until you’re shaking and spurting all over himself. Could even tie you up until you’re a whimpering mess, completely at my mercy.”

Louis let a desperate whimper escape his lips. “Alpha, I need you. Need your touch,”

Harry surged down and sucked his sensitive nipples until they were hard and swollen. He nipped gently before licking over them, revelling in Louis’ soft moans.

Harry hummed approvingly. “You like that, don’t you, sweetheart?”

Louis whined softly, hips canting upwards and pressing against Harry’s leg. He was throbbing through the lace panties, the soft fabric brushing against Harry’s upper thigh.

“Tell me how good I make you feel,” he said, nuzzling into Louis’ neck.

“So good, Harry,” he said on a broken cry as Harry grinded down. “Make me feel so good. Like nobody else.”

“That’s right,” Harry grunted. “Because it’s only me. Understand? You’re mine and nobody else’s.”

Louis sighed, “only yours, alpha.”

“Can’t believe how lucky I am,” he said, fingers brushing down his chest, dipping beneath the waistband of the panties. Both his hands circled underneath him, palms filling with Louis’ round cheeks, kneading the soft skin. “Can I touch you? Want to eat you out.”

Louis sighed with relief, “yes. Want you to touch me there, alpha. Want you to taste how much I need you.”

“I’ve been going insane wanting to get my hands on you,” he muttered. “Wanted to wait until the right time. And the wait was so fucking worth it.”
He flipped Louis onto his hands and knees, presenting his bum high in front of Harry. He quickly discarded the panties with a small, “you’re such a naughty boy, you know. Getting all dressed up for me without any warning,” before touching his rim lightly, teasingly.

“Need you,” Louis whined. “Please, Harry, need you so bad.”

“I’m going to open you up with my tongue,” he said, voice deep and throaty. “Taste your slick. Feel you squirm beneath me.”

Harry palmed himself furiously at the sight of Louis’ pink hole fluttering, soft moans telling his desperation. Harry cupped his cheeks and spread them open, pressing his fingers into the skin. He bit into one of the round cheeks, hearing Louis break apart under his touch. Harry rubbed a finger over his leaking rim.

“So wet, darling. You're little panties are soaked,” he sighed. “Is this all for me?”

“Harry,” he breathed, voice raspy and desperate. “All for you. I’m so close, alpha.”

“I think you can wait a little longer,” he hummed. “Don’t you?”

“Yeah,” he said shakily. “Yeah, for you, alpha.”

Harry’s slick, wet tongue traced his pink hole, teasing his entrance. Louis whimpered as he sucked hard against his rim. His back arched into Harry’s touch and a shiver wracked his body.

“You taste so good, Louis,” he sighed, pulling back to drag his nails down Louis’ lower back to his bum, leaving long, red lines.

“Harry, I need you to fuck me,” he whined high in his throat.

“You need this, baby?” he said, brushing the tip of his dick along Louis’ entrance. “You need me?”

Louis pressed back, searching. “Please, alpha. Again.”

Harry’s scent surrounded him, leaving him whimpering and yearning for his touch. Harry turned him onto his back, noting the high flush of his cheeks and his gentle pants. He nodded once. Harry took a heavy breath before lining himself up and pressing in. They moaned in unison, Harry low and guttural, Louis high and breathy.

“Fucking hell,” he said through gritted teeth, leaning down to nip Louis’ neck. He pressed himself in fully, watching as he stretched Louis’ pretty pink hole. “You’re so tight.”

He began to thrust and rotate his hips as Louis moaned obscenely, whispering, “more, more, please.”

Harry began to push in and out harshly, puling out completely before slamming back in, trying out different angles until he found Louis’ prostate.

“Alpha,” he cried, fingers digging into his firm shoulders.

“That’s it, darling,” he muttered, slowing his thrusts as he hit the spot each time. “That’s your spot.”

He pressed in, dragging his teeth down Louis’ neck. He pressed fleeting along his jaw as little moans escaped Louis’ parted lips. “You’re perfect.”
Louis caught Harry’s eyes, communicating his desire, his desperation and something more. “Harry,” he said on a breath, “I’m ready. When you want, I – I’m ready.”

Harry gulped thickly, skin prickling in anticipation. Louis tilted his head to the side, lifting it up from the pillow and exposing his neck. Harry pulled out before pressing in tantalisingly slow and hitting Louis’ prostate. He cried out Harry’s name, pulling their chests flush together just as Harry bared his canines and bit into his neck. Harry came, shooting into Louis’ hole with heavy thrusts as his knot enlarged.

“Alpha!” he cried, eyes falling closed as he arched against Harry’s touch, baring his neck to allow Harry better access.

Harry detached his lips, dragging his tongue over them. His trembling fingers brushed Louis’ bleeding bond mark. His tongue lapped over the spot, cleaning and soothing the searing skin. He admired his work, eyes brimming with tears as he felt his connection with Louis form.

“It’s beautiful, omega,” he whispered, tone illustrating his reverence.

They locked eyes, conveying their emotions through gentle touches and intertwined fingers.
Happily Ever After

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The tide whisks you away from me, cursing and roaring

I wait for you, biding my unsavoury time with senseless stories and unimaginable fairy-tales

Until finally

You

Arrive home to relieve me of my troubles

And replace them with the delicate blossom of intimacy

That characterises us so completely

Louis was awaken by a gentle hand brushing his hair from his forehead. His eyes fluttered open and he curled into Harry’s touch, purring contently. Harry’s thick scent wrapped around him tighter than the blankets he was bundled in and he detected a hint of baked goods in the air too.

“Omega,” he whispered. “Louis, I’m sorry to wake you like this – you look so adorable sleeping – but if you don’t get up now you’ll be late for your Tort Law lecture and then I’ll have to hear you harping on for the next week about how I let you miss your Tort Law lecture and I really don’t want to spend the morning after bonded hearing you recite medical negligence cases.”

Louis pressed his lips to Harry’s knuckle before sighing. In one swift movement he hauled himself up into sitting position to find a tray laden with pancakes, steaming hot tea and tropical fruits cut into small cubes.

“Is this all for me?” he exclaimed.

Harry nodded, a wide grin forming. “I’ve had all morning to myself so I thought I’d do something productive.”

“Thank you, Harry.” He pressed his lips to Harry’s cheek, feeling him blush beneath his touch.

He tucked into his breakfast, shifting his weight until he found a comfortable spot. Harry noticed him wincing.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. He wrapped an arm around Louis’ shoulders gingerly.

“A little sore. I can feel your hand-prints burning my bum,” he admitted. “Hey! Wipe that smug smile off your face.”

Harry barked with laughter, snatching a piece of mango from Louis’ tray before dodging the poorly-aimed pillow Louis threw in his direction.

They spent every last second together until Louis knew that he needed to leave for his lecture. Harry had insisted that he wear his clothes – a thick lilac jumper and dark jeans cuffed at the ankles
which engulfed his slender frame. The rain hadn’t relented during their cycles and so he pulled on a red raincoat that fell to his knees.

“I’ll see you later on,” Louis assured, standing on tip-toe to press a kiss to Harry’s cheek.

Though he felt reluctant to leave (and he knew that Harry desperately wanted him to stay) after sharing such an intimate time together, he knew that he would feel his connection with Harry regardless of where he went. He felt the slight twinge of pain in his neck whenever he turned it to the side, something that reminded him of the mark engraved there. Harry had proudly taken a photograph to show him – a red mark the size of a plum with teeth indents. The bleeding had subsided and Harry had informed him that the wound had already begun to scab. In time, it would appear like a pink indent in his neck, though his bond with Harry would have become stronger, more resilient by that stage.

“Stay safe, my darling. And don’t take any shit from anyone about your mark. If anything happens at all call me immediately. It doesn’t matter when or where, I need you to call. I’ll be there.”

Louis nodded obediently, softly saying “thank you, Harry,” before sending a small wave over his shoulder.

…

“God, Harry didn’t leave any prisoners, did he? That looks fucking deep.”

“It looks so painful, Lou. I can see his teeth indents clearly. I would have gathered my stuff and run away from him faster than you can say ‘pups’ if it was me.”

“How does it feel? Do you know what Harry’s thinking all the time now?”

Returning to the omega dormitories after his final lectures on that Friday afternoon, Louis concluded, was a grave mistake. The moment he stepped inside, cheeks flushed from the biting wind and hair soaking from the rain, he was bombarded with questions from every omega at Candling. He had humoured them for over an hour before Zayn stepped in and dragged him to their dormitory.

Before the door had shut properly, Zayn wrapped him in a tight embrace. They swayed in each other’s arms, communicating emotions that they couldn’t quite express in words.

“I’m so proud of you, Lou,” he mumbled against him.

“I didn’t do anything, really, Z.”

Zayn pulled him back, hands clasping his shoulders. “Yes you did. This is a really important step in your life and, as your best friend, I get to say that I’m proud of you.”

Louis smiled and looped his hand around Zayn’s waist until the two collapsed onto his bed.

“Your scent is definitely different,” Zayn noted, not unkindly.

“Do you prefer it like this?”

Zayn considered his question before shaking his head. “It’ll take some getting used to, I guess. It
seems very natural, though. Like your scents were meant to blend together or something equally as poetic.”

Louis laughed but averted his eyes, tugging at the hem of Harry’s jumper.

“Come on then. Let’s have a look.”

Louis obliged. He turned around and pulled down his jumper to reveal his bond mark, tensing as he heard Zayn’s intake of breath.

“Just don’t touch it yet. It feels quite tender still.”

“Oh, Lou,” he sighed. “It looks beautiful. Just the right shade of red and the scabs are healing nicely. Must’ve hurt though.” His fingertips pushed the hair aside, taking care not to touch the mark. He let out a loud laugh before shaking his head. “I swear it looks like Harry fucking sharpened his teeth or something because those teeth indents are deep.”

Louis giggled, swatting him away. “It twinges a little but overall it makes me feel at peace. Probably sounds weird but I feel this deep sense of calmness whenever I consciously think about it. I get these little spikes of emotion every so often - must ask Harry if he gets them as well – where I know that he’s feeling a certain way. It’s hard to explain. Like, I don’t know the precise emotion he feels but I feel what my response to whatever he’s feeling is. Does that make sense?”

Zayn nodded in encouragement. “Like if you suddenly feel sympathetic, you know he’s upset about something. Or if you feel particularly nurturing, like you want to resolve a situation, then you know he’s angry or had a bad day.”

“Exactly,” he sighed. He bit his lip, suppressing a smile. “Like, about ten minutes ago, I really proud for some reason. Like I just wanted to run into the rain and find him and tell him how much I love him.”

Zayn dived forward and engulfed him in another hug. “I’m so happy for you, mate. You deserve this and so much more.”

Louis laughed and fell into Zayn’s embrace.

They spent the next couple of hours idly packing a small suitcase for him to bring on his post-bonding weekend stay at a quaint apartment just outside London city. Just like all newly-bonded couples, they needed to spend time together, adjusting to each other’s company and to their intrinsic link. Although Harry admitted that he would have preferred that they stay at his dorm – which had become a second home to Louis over the past two months - it would have been unfair to Liam to deprive him of his own bed for longer than necessary.

“Quite frankly, I think he was happy to be rid of me for a few days,” Harry’s said from the driver’s seat of the car a couple of hours later.

“More likely that he was happy to have an excuse to spent more time gawking at Zayn,” Louis said. He was burrowed in Harry’s coat, legs tucked beneath him and munching on his left-over McDonald’s meal. He offered a chip to Harry from across the console which he happily munched on. He continued feeding Harry chips, each time being rewarded with a soft kiss on his finger.

“I’d give you some burger but that would probably be a bit messy.”

Harry shook his head. “Throw it at me. I’ll catch it with my mouth.”
Louis looked sceptical. “Harry,” he sighed. “Concentrating on catching flying meat in your mouth paired with your atrocious driving is a recipe for disaster.”

“I’d like to see you do better. London drivers are absolute lunatics,” he said, pointing redundantly at the cars whizzing past them.

Louis shook his head and suppressed his smile by taking a particularly large bite of his burger.

He turned up the heating and nestled into his seat, revelling in the blast of warm air which, along with Harry’s comforting, ever-present scent, permeated the car. They arrived at the small apartment a mere half-hour later, collapsing into a pile of limbs onto their tall bed adorned with embroidered pillows and a thick duvet.

For dinner they devoured the Yorkshire Pudding with buttery peas and mashed potatoes that Harry had made especially for him. He had lit scent-free candles in the small apartment, adding an ethereal, flickering glow. He watched the curves and contours of Harry’s expressive features over the candlelight.

“I told my parents about us bonding,” he said when Harry had asked about his day. “My mum nearly broke my eardrum with how loudly she screamed.” He smiled privately at the memory before casting his gaze to Harry’s hopeful expression. “She’s dying to meet you. I’ve sent pictures, of course but she wants to talk to you in person too.”

“I’d love that, Louis. Your mum seems lovely.”

“She is,” he confirmed. “And I know she’ll adore you. Just don’t act too formal around her. She doesn’t want to be called Mrs. Tomlinson or anything. She doesn’t like dwelling on formalities. You’re family now.”

Harry’s smile defined his entire face, pearly teeth sparkling in the dim lighting. A shadow of uneasiness past across his face. “Wish my parents were like that,” he said, laughing humourlessly.

Louis placed a hand on Harry’s own across the table, dragging his thumb across his knuckles. “Hey,” he sighed. “It’s you and me now. Just like you said.”

Harry’s lips quirked into a smile. “You’re right,” he whispered. “Of course you’re right, my darling. It’s just us.”

They ate in relative silence for the remainder of the meal, the distant sounds of police sirens and car horns blaring in the distance. After dinner they cleaned the dishes, Louis washing them in the warm, soapy water before handing them to Harry who dried them with a tea-towel.

“Have you told your parents?” he asked suddenly.

Harry frowned, setting the cutlery he was drying on the counter-top. “No,” he said slowly. “Why would I?”

Louis shook his head. “I don’t mean your dad. I mean, he’s obviously aware that we’re together. I just thought that you might tell your mum. Thought she might want to know.”

Harry sighed heavily, scrubbing his face with his hand as though trying to remove a layer of grime. “No,” he said shortly. “She’s with him at the moment. It’s – it’s the time that they’re spending together.”

The plate Louis was washing clattered into the sink. Water overflowed onto the ground and
dampened his shirt. Louis payed no heed to the commotion, however, instead staring resolutely at Harry. “What?” he whispered. His voice cracked on the word. “They still – you mean she still goes to him for his rut? The social services detaining him from getting to her still let him?”

Harry pulled the cuff of his jumper. “Yes,” he said evenly. “I told you this already. They’re connected. The services know that they have a special bond so they allow it.”

Louis ran his drenching wet fingers through his hair, the bubbles gathering at the nape of his neck and stinging his bond mark. “That’s happening against her will, though,” Louis said, frustrated that Harry couldn’t picture the problem that was so frank to him. “They don’t know about your lineage. Or how badly he controlled her.” He stared into the deep sink. “Still is controlling her, clearly,” he added. “I thought you or Gemma or someone would have stopped that.”

Harry remained silent. “Why are you bringing this up, Louis?” he asked eventually. His patience was wearing but Louis felt his resolve strengthening. “I just want to move on from it. It’s the two of us in this together, right? Just like you said.”

He shook his head, eyes watering. He stepped away from Harry, the corner of the marble counter-top protruding and digging sharply into his lower back. “This isn’t moving on, Harry. This is burying a problem in the hope that it stays underground. And distracting yourself by focusing on me.” He caught Harry’s narrowed eyes. “I’m not a distraction, Harry.”

“Louis,” he sighed. “I don’t consider you like that. Don’t say shit like that when you know it’s not true.” He tried to step closer to Louis, lifting his chin despite Louis’ uneasiness. “I love my mother more than I could ever begin to express but at the end of the day she’s a siren. She’s completely dependent on him because that’s in her nature. It would hurt her to be separated from him during his ruts because she considers it her duty to be there for him.”

“Being a siren doesn’t make her any less of a human being, Harry. Just because her natural inclination is to serve him doesn’t mean that she wants to fulfil that. Same way you try and suppress your urges, you should give her the opportunity to do so too.”

“That’s not my job,” he countered.

“Yes it is!” he exclaimed, raising his voice. “You’re her son. She can’t go to the authorities or tell the social services about your lineage. She’s your responsibility.”

“Louis,” he sighed before pausing. He laughed self-deprecatingly. “Listen, I know what you’re saying and I know it seems bad when you put it like that but you need to understand that my parents’ – my parents’ fucked-up situation was the only thing I could think about for fucking years of my life. You don’t think I feel guilty? You don’t think I’m fucking outraged at that monster?” His eyes gleamed in the darkness. “Of course I fucking care about her but I’m entitles to have a bit of happiness in my life too. And I know it’s selfish but I’ve waited so long to find you and now that I have and she’s finally in a better place it seems like for fucking once in my life that I can find some form of happiness.”

Louis watched as Harry slammed his hand into the cupboard. The wood creaked at the impact before he punched it again, channelling his frustration - as alphas did - physically. He punched a small hole in the cupboard, the wood sticking out at sharp angles. Harry’s exhaled through gritted teeth, shaking his hand aggressively. He paced for a moment before muttering “I’ll fix it in the morning.”

Louis watched as he collapsed into one of the chairs, his breathing slowing down after his outburst.
“I know you don’t want to hear this, Harry,” he sighed. “But we – we can’t be like that. I can’t let you put your own interests or your priorities above her basic wellbeing. It’s not a question of your parents intruding on your life. It’s – it’s that you need to realise that you can’t have your happily-ever-after unless you know, deep down, that you’ve done everything you can for her.”

Harry’s eyes darkened and his fists clenched beneath the table. He opened his mouth to reply before shaking his head. He stared at Louis, eyes watchful yet calculating.

“And I know that you haven’t. But I want to help you, Harry, in any way you’ll let me and I think that, together, we - ”

“No,” he whispered, watching the light from the traffic outside cross Louis’ face, the orange glow illuminating his eyes. “I’ll see you at the Winter Ball.”

Louis watched in astonishment as Harry stood up from his chair in one swift motion. He crossed the room and pulled on his jacket, stuffing his keys into his pocket. He swallowed thickly.

“Harry, where are you ... what are you doing? What do you mean?”

“I need time,” he whispered, empty eyes trained on his keys, finger slowly tracing the ridge.

"Time to do what?" Louis said. "Harry talk to me, please."

"They're together at the moment," he whispered. He glanced up, his eyes shining in the dim light. "I need time to convince them."

Louis gaped at him. "Harry, I don't understand - "

“You don't need to. Not yet.” Harry took Louis hand in his and dragged his thumb over the soft skin.

Harry left the room and the main door of the apartment closed softly before Louis could register what had happened. He crossed the hallway and rushed outside, clad in a light jumper and called Harry’s name to no avail. His mocking echo answered.

Louis rushed down the stairs, coming to a halt in the apartment car park and ignoring the jeers of a group of alphas smoking in the foyer.

“Harry!” he shouted. The wind howled, sending a wave over goosebumps across his skin. He saw the headlights of a car across the car park and watched in vain as the black BMW swerved around the road and joined with the heavy London traffic. He stood there, wind chilling him to his very core, long after he could no longer follow Harry’s route in the distance.

…

“I feel like such a hypocrite,” he cried into Zayn’s arms. “I told him to find him mum, I told him he needed to help her and then he did. He listened to me and he wanted to fix things but all I feel is empty without him.”

“It’s okay,” Zayn’s sighed into his hair. “Let it all out, Lou. Its part of your bond reaction to not being in his presence. It’s perfectly normal.” He swept Louis’ rain-damp hair out of his eyes.
“Harry shouldn’t have left you like that and I promise that he’s feeling the exact same way if not even worse than you.”

He had tearfully stuffed his clothes into his overnight bag and shouldered through the taxi ranks in the city. He had eventually got a taxi back to campus, dragging his bad and feelings like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. By the time he arrived back to his dorm, sniffing and tear-stained skin shining in the lamp light, Zayn was asleep. He had noticed Louis' thick, uneven scent and awoken soon afterwards.

Louis lay in Zayn’s embrace, heaving heavy sobs and dampening his shirt for hours until he was shaking in his arms. Zayn carefully lay him in his bed, tucking the blankets around his slender frame. “You’ll see him at the Ball, won’t you? Everything will be fine by then. I promise.”

Louis gulped in air before another round of tears escaped his blood-shot eyes. In that moment, the only person he needed was miles away and hurting just as devastatingly.

...  

The Winter Masquerade Ball took place in an enormous, elaborately decorated ballroom on the far and generally unused side of campus. Heavy chandeliers hung from the ceiling, tapestries and paintings lined the walls and dark curtains were separated to reveal the blanket of undisturbed snow outside. The live band were playing traditional waltz music, though many people were merely skirting the centre of the ballroom, complementing each other’s outfits and laughing nervously. By the time the drinks were distributed, most students had loosened up sufficiently to being swaying to the faster tunes.

There was a heavenly glow in the hall, emitted from the candles adorning every surface, which bathed the room in golden light. Louis stood in the corner with Zayn and Liam, pretending to be engaged in their quiet conversation.

Louis hadn’t seen Harry in over two days, during which time he had dragged his feet to his lectures every morning before falling into bed and heaving silent, unrelenting sobs into his (now drenched) pillow. His bond with Harry, ironically, felt stronger than ever without his presence. He felt permanently conscious of Harry’s intense rages, consumed as he was by a need to relieve his alpha’s anger.

Though he himself tried to feel angry with Harry for leaving him so recklessly, he found only sorrow lingering beneath his anger. A flicker of hope accompanied his thoughts; an inkling that Harry was doing the right thing, doing this not only for his mother's benefit but also because Louis had asked him to.

He had pulled on his suit and attached his gleaming white mask only after Zayn’s insistence and vow that Harry would fulfil his promise to attend.

So far, however, he hadn’t seen Harry. His gaze was fixed at the entrance for the first hour of the Ball. He ignored the sympathetic smiles Zayn and Liam aimed at him and fidgeted with the stiff collar of his shirt. After another half-hour, Zayn left with Liam to the centre of the dancehall after he repeatedly reassured him that he would be perfectly fine watching (rather bitterly) by himself. He couldn’t feel that way for long, however, as he marvelled at how Liam tentatively guided Zayn around the ballroom, footsteps moving swiftly and gracefully together.
When he was finally starting to lose hope he felt a strong, in-nominate pull propelling him outside. He felt his feet whisk across the dancefloor, indiscriminately bumping into dancing couples without his consent. A flicker of anticipation, of sanguine delight rose in his chest. The source of such a feeling, it seemed, was his bond mark burning his neck.

“Louis!” he hear Zayn call. “Where on earth are you going?”

He dodged a twirling omega and shuffled past the long table teeming with delicious desserts and fruity punch until he arrived at the double-door entrance.

There, standing tall in stature in a black tuxedo with snow falling slowly onto the dark fabric, an elaborate mask clutched in his hand and dark, tousled hair blowing in the wind, stood Harry. His eyes filled with tears at the sight of Louis, light emanating from the ballroom behind him portraying his divinity.

Louis surged forward, jumping into his arms. Harry’s finger locked with his and he pressed ceaseless kissed across Louis face, murmuring senseless words of adoration and apologies into his neck. He breathed in Harry’s thick scent, the pine needle and mulling spices – cloves, cinnamon and star anise –relieving his racing heartbeat.

Harry pulled back, bright eyes shining with admiration. “You were right, omega,” he said, dark lips breaking into a beatific smile. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet. She’s going to be staying with me for a little while, far away from him. And she wants to thank you, for showing me what was right and true.”

That was the day that Louis met his future mother-in-law and fell in love with Harry with a newfound sense of pride and unbridled joy.

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed this please come and say hi on tumblr and reblog my post (I would be ever so grateful if you did)!

If you enjoyed this, please consider buying me a coffee!
What a journey! Since the beginning of August I have poured my heart into this and I want to thank each and every one of you for your endless support and love and patience. I truly appreciate it and I will treasure your comments in my heart for a very long time to come. Thank you all! (Fun fact: I came up with the name Candling when I was writing the first chapter in my dining room where there were vanilla scented candles.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!