Nobody Marks You

by graceling_in_a_suit

Summary

“The plan is: we’re gonna put on a play. Now, I see some doubtful faces—” Louis looked around and found zero doubtful faces. Liam looked intrigued, Zayn looked bored, and Harry looked scarly blank. “But this is what’s happening. We’re gonna do some fucking acting, we’re gonna perform our hearts out, and we’re not going to think about anything else. The past, the future; none of it. All we’re going to think about is... “ Niall trailed off, eyeing the bookshelf to his left. He closed his eyes and reached a hand out towards it, running his fingers over the covers before pulling a book out at random. “William Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing.”

AU: Five assholes stuck in a bunker put on a play.

Notes

Hello hello welcome to my bunker fic! I decided to try a few things with it while writing, and as a result it’s kind of,.. unstuck in time. In a cool Slaughterhouse Five kinda way, I hope. Please read the tags, I didn't wanna write a Bummer Story but it issss set after everyone in the world has died so its gonna be at least a little bit sad.
That being said, I hope you enjoy! And thank you to the lovely mod of the hl_dystopian_fest, it's been an absolute pleasure. xx

See the end of the work for more notes.
Wake Up, Wake Up

16 Days After.

“What if we play I Spy again?”

“Oh, for god’s sake, Niall. We’ve already spied everything in this fucking bunker.”

“I haven’t spied that spider in the corner up there yet.”

“Where? Oh! Neat.”

“I think it’s neat, too.”

“Shut up, Harry.”

52 Days Before.

“I know I said it was just going to be us two,” Liam said, already loading up the puppy dog eyes. “But I was talking to Niall about it and he wanted to invite a friend who also wanted to invite one of his friends—”

“Liam!” Louis laughed. “I don’t care how many people you invite as long as we actually study.”

“Yeah, about that,” Liam leaned in, hunching over the desk so he could pin Louis down with a look. “What’s got you so eager for learning this semester, Louis?”

“Might have something to do with the fact that I nearly failed last sem,” Louis replied bitterly. His mum definitely couldn’t afford for him to take an extra semester.

Liam pouted. “That won’t happen again, Lou. Especially if you stop going to all those parties.”

Louis organised his study materials so he could avoid making a mocking face at Liam. Stop going to parties every weekend, Louis. Binge drinking is bad for you, Louis. He knew all that already.

Just then, a knock sounded. Louis and Liam looked up in tandem to find three boys standing on the other side of the glass door to the study room.

He recognised Zayn from the entry level drawing class he’d made the mistake of using his first semester free credit on, and Niall from many a hang out with Liam. The other lad, though, was too obscured behind the first two boys for Louis to properly identify.

“Come in!” Liam greeted, waving.

Niall pretended he couldn’t hear him, motioning to the (flimsy, definitely not soundproof) glass door.

Liam frowned and opened his mouth to, very likely, yell loud enough to get them all kicked out.

Louis jumped across the table and slapped a hand over his mouth before he could.
Liam sent him a confused look that melted into a scowl when he saw Niall and Zayn losing it from the other side of the door.

Louis glared at them disapprovingly.

Finally, Niall pushed open the door.

“I’m sorry, Lima, but your face was priceless,” he chuckled, taking a seat on Liam’s left and pressing a quick peck to his cheek in apology.

Because it was Liam, it worked.

“You’re a menace,” he said, nudging Niall in the side.

Zayn took a seat on Louis’ side of the table, and the two of them shared a mute nod.

Then, Louis looked up and saw who the final person was. He was standing in the doorway, loitering like a nervous little punkboy. Of all of the things about him that were familiar to Louis, it was his curls that hurt the most. They looked lovely today, soft and pet-able.

But then he had to go and open his big mouth and ruin Louis’ life.

“Hi,” he said, a friendly grin overtaking his face. He stuck his hand out towards Louis. “I’m Harry.”

And with those three words, Louis almost flipped the table.

“Hi,” he managed to choke out somehow over the rivers of hurt flowing down his whole body. Then, because if Harry was going to play it like that then he saw no reason why he shouldn’t, too, Louis shook his hand. “I’m Louis.”

Harry nodded—the nod of someone who was going to forget your name in a minute—and sat down, pulling out his spiral notebook and three small pens.

“Don’t you have the textbook?” Louis asked, waving the fucking monstrosity in the air.

Harry shook his head, bemused. “No, I always just read over Liam’s shoulder. Saves trees.”

“Ah, yes,” Louis leaned back. “The 1.5 trees still left in the world. Have to save those.”

Harry nodded, either ignoring Louis’ sarcasm or utterly misinterpreting it.

“Anyway,” Niall butted in, something shifty in his gaze that told Louis he’d figured out something was going on that he didn’t know about. “Are we studying some French or what?”

“Our,” Zayn replied. The cover of his textbook thunked open.

Louis smiled and copied him. “I figured we’d just go over what we learned in class today to start with.”

“Sounds great, Louis,” Harry said with a smile.

Those perfect dimples, the perfect green eyes. Louis wanted to stab him with his pencil.

20 Days After.
“What’s for dinner, Zayn?”

Zayn pasted a fake smile on his face. “It’s canned spam!”

Niall groaned and collapsed against the wall. “I’ve been shot,” he moaned, letting himself fall to the ground.

Zayn picked up the tin and studied it. “This one’s got peas in it. Somewhere.”

Niall poked an eye open. “Peas?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, lad,” Louis consoled, joining him on the floor then patting him on the shoulder. “It’s still mostly spam.”

Niall thunked his head down to rest on Louis’ shoulder. “I’m sick of spam.”

Liam appeared in the doorway, Harry in tow.

“Spam?” Liam asked, pointing to the tin in Zayn’s hand.

“Well, it could have been tinned spaghetti if Harry’d just let us eat anything except spam!”

Liam looked one second away from cracking and taking back his support of Harry’s bonkers plan, but Harry parked his hands on his hips sternly.

“Hey! We all agreed. We don’t know how long we’re gonna be down here, we should save the—”

“Save the good stuff for later,” they all chorused, with varying degrees of malice.

“Exactly!” Harry smiled.

Louis contemplated grabbing the can of spam and hurling it right at his big dumb face.

25 Days After.

Zayn and Louis were going through the Science Room. Louis pulled a beaker from the cupboard he was kneeling in front of, contemplated it, then put it back.

“I can’t believe they honestly thought they’d get anyone to go to class down here,” Louis scoffed, pulling out a different, smaller beaker.

Zayn hummed from the other side of the room. He was sitting cross-legged on one of the desks, flicking through a textbook on anatomy.

“Any good dick pics in there?”

Zayn waggled his eyebrows at Louis and turned the book around. Louis squinted at the page then laughed when he recognised an artist’s rendition of the makeup of a human cell.

“I think it’s a definite possibility for the ‘could be used as porn’ pile,” Zayn added once Louis’ laughter had died down.
Louis pulled a bunsen burner from the cupboard. “That’s a tragically small pile, that one.”

“I don’t know, bro. Harry found a bunch of raunchy poems in the English Room yesterday.”

Louis rolled his eyes and grumbled.

Zayn placed the textbook down on the desk before him. “What’s your deal with him, Louis? You’re always such a prick when he’s around. Even before… all of this.”

Louis ignored the question, both because he didn’t want to answer and because he’d found something good finally. He cheered, diving into the cupboard to grab it. He emerged a moment later, box full of assorted chemicals held aloft in victory.

He grinned at Zayn, who was watching him with a dry expression. “Wanna sniff all of these until one of us gets high or passes out?”

Zayn lowered his chin to rest on his hand. He waited a few long moments before answering. “Yeah, okay.”

43 Days Before.

“Lads!” Louis roared the second his study group stepped out of the door. “We fucking smashed that.”

Liam laughed giddily and dragged everybody into an awkward group hug, a five-headed monster stumbling down the hallway. At least there weren’t many other students to get in their way—the benefits of attending a tiny university.

“Zayn, my brother, you didn’t even fuck up that phrase you’d been stuck on,” Niall congratulated. He wriggled in the hug so he could attach himself to Zayn.

Louis watched with the satisfied grin of someone riding out a post-assessment high, then froze. Harry’s hand landed on his shoulder and he pressed closer to Louis, taking up the space Niall had previously filled.

Louis tugged himself out of the hug.

All the boys turned to stare at him, three confused expressions and one… hurt. How dare Harry look at him like that, like this wasn’t all his fault for being a giant–

“Louis?”

Louis forced out a laugh. “Just realised I’ve had to pee since this morning, but I was bricking it so much that I crammed instead. I’m just gonna…” he gestured over his shoulder.

Liam nodded in understanding. Niall and Zayn gave him weird looks, but turned back to congratulating each other.

Harry was still standing there like Louis had just kicked his puppy.

Louis turned and started power walking towards the bathroom.
“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Harry!” Louis cursed, storming down the long, barren hallway that lead away from the main chamber. “You’re so annoying! I’m honestly about to lose it and jump out that hatch. Even nuclear winter has to be better than this.”


Louis wheeled on him. “I’m overreacting? You’re the one who’s forcing us to eat fucking spam all month for no good reason. Who put you in charge, anyway?”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “Nobody. I just think, given the situation—”

“Given the situation,” Harry continued, “that we should be taking measures to make sure we can survive down here long-term.”

Louis felt a stabbing pain in his chest, something he’d been pushing away the month they’d been down here. Thinking long term meant accepting what had happened. It meant coming to terms with their new reality.

This was all it was going to be for the rest of their lives.

“Fuck you,” Louis spat. “You can think long-term all you want, but some of us had people we loved up there. Some of us are trying, fucking clawing every day, fighting tooth and nail, to not go insane.”

Harry looked like he’d been slapped. “I loved people, too,” he choked out. “I miss them—”

“You obviously don’t!” Louis yelled, waving his hands. He saw Niall, Liam, and Zayn all standing a ways down the hallway. None of them made a move to step in. “For thirty four fucking days all it’s been is, ‘let’s think about the future!’ , ‘let’s play a game to lighten the mood!’ . You haven’t once been sad, or, or, angry, or fucking expressed any emotions that weren’t the neverending pep of a preschool teacher. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Harry’s jaw ticked. His eyes—normally such a beautiful forest green—were stormy and dark. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Louis,” he said. There was a hard edge to his voice, something threatening.

Louis stepped back. He’d never made it this far. As many times as he pushed and pushed, Harry had never gotten angry.

“Alright! English Room. Five minutes.”

Harry and Louis both turned to stare at Niall. He’d pushed himself to the front of Liam and Zayn and he had that rare ‘don’t fuck with me’ look on his face.

“Ohay,” Louis forced out. Really, he wanted to crawl into a hole and cry his eyes out, but. English Room Five Minutes sounded like a good backup plan.

Niall nodded at them then marched back in to the main chamber.
Harry followed with his head bowed. He didn’t look back.

Not that Louis particularly deserved it. He collapsed against the wall of the corridor and thunked his head against the metal. For five minutes, all he did was hold himself together. Then, he sighed and started walking for the English Room.

When he arrived, Harry, Liam, Niall, and Zayn were already there, lounging about on various desks. Louis took one next to Liam.

“Right. Lads.” Niall took his place at the front of the English Room. There was a chalkboard behind him—Louis hadn’t ever even seen a chalkboard before the bunker; he didn’t think they existed anymore—and a poster to the left that was espousing the virtues of proper essay structure. Aside from the bookshelves taking up most of the wallspace, that was all that passed for decoration in here. Didn’t do much for the feng shui.

It also didn’t do much to draw Louis’ eyes from the grey-blue steel of every single wall, ceiling, and floor in this godforsaken bunker. It was like they’d been swallowed by a huge metal beast. Louis did feel like he was being slowly digested, after all.

“Here’s my plan. You can argue with it if you want to be a cunt, but I’m scrappier than I look. And also, who would want to say no to these handsome features.” He gestured at his face then struck a pose.

Louis huffed a laugh—the best he could manage, just then—and Niall cracked a smile.

“The plan is: we’re gonna put on a play. Now, I see some doubtful faces—” Louis looked around and found zero doubtful faces. Liam looked intrigued, Zayn looked bored, and Harry looked scarily blank. “But this is what’s happening. We’re gonna do some fucking acting, we’re gonna perform our hearts out, and we’re not going to think about anything else. The past, the future; none of it. All we’re going to think about is... “ he trailed off, eyeing the bookshelf to his left. He closed his eyes and reached a hand out towards it, running his fingers over the covers before pulling a book out at random. “William Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing.”

Harry snorted.

Louis sent him a glare.

Niall waggled his finger at them. “That doesn’t look like you’re only thinking about Much Ado About Nothing!”

Louis groaned and tipped his head back.

To his right, Liam raised his hand.

“Yes, Liam?” Niall asked.

Liam grinned. “Can I be the donkey?”

Louis sighed. “There’s no donkey in this one, Li. You’re thinking of A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“So you’ve read it,” Liam accused.

Louis scrunched his face up. “Of course I’ve read it, Liam. I’m trying to get a performance degree.”
“Perfect! So Louis can be the director.”

Louis threw his hands up. “Oi! No, I’m not—”

Niall ignored him. “And we can take it in turns reading this, then decide by next week which characters we want to be. Any questions?”

It was Zayn who raised his hand, this time.

Niall pointed at him.

Zayn nodded, then turned to stare directly at Harry. “Can we have something other than spam for dinner tonight?”

Harry hunched down in his seat. Louis noticed he did that a lot, made himself smaller. It was one of the many, many things about him that Louis refused to find adorable.

“I guess,” he mumbled.

Louis scowled. “Oh, so when I ask, I’m an asshole, and when Zayn asks—”

“Much Ado About Nothing!” Niall screeched, waving the book in his face until Louis spluttered and pushed him away.

Liam hid a laugh behind his hand. Even Harry cracked a smirk.

30 Days Before.

“Are you seeing this shit, Louis?” Niall waved his phone in Louis’ face.

Louis caught it so he could actually read the words on the screen.

Britain Declares War On—

Louis rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know. It’s bullshit.”

Niall sent him a look. “Don’t know what you mean, mate. Personally, I enjoy the constant threat of annihilation. Really makes you stop and smell the flowers.”

Louis nodded along. “Now that you mention it, yeah. I’m going to enjoy this random French movie a lot more with the knowledge that it could be the last one I ever see before they ship me off to boot camp!”

Niall poked Louis in the stomach. “I think you’d look cute in the little helmet.”

Louis poked him back. “I think you’d look cute behind the controllers of a drone. Get with the year, Niall.”

Harry looked between them both. Louis hadn’t managed to forget he was there, but he’d been trying.

“You guys are so weird,” he said, but the smile on his face wasn’t mocking or bemused.

“Just your average Apocalypse Antics,” Louis beamed. Harry blinked a few times in a flustered way,
like having the full force of Louis’ attention (positive attention) was too much for the tiny gerbil that ran his brain to handle.

Louis made up for accidentally being friendly a second later. “Anyway, it’s not like you’ll be around much longer. The tall ones are the first to go in war.”

Harry’s doughy face melted into a frown. “I don’t know if we should be joking about this. Millions of people are going to die if the government doesn’t–”

Louis waved him off. “That’s exactly why we need to joke about it. Niall gets it.”

Niall looked up from his phone. “Liam and Zayn just said they’d meet us in the theatre. What was that, Louis?”

Louis sighed. “Nothing. Let’s go inside, I’m sweating my arse off.”

“Ah, yes, that classic 40 degree English Summer,” Niall mused, throwing an arm around Louis’ shoulders and steering him towards the doors of the movie theatre. He sent a look over his shoulder. “Coming, Harold?”

Harry nodded and trotted after them.

3 Days After.

“Let me out! LET ME OUT!”

Niall’s frenzied yelling bounced off the walls of the main chamber. It rang in Louis’ ears, cut his insides up like a knife.

Harry and Liam were holding Niall back, their combined strength enough to stop him from reaching the handle of the hatch. He scratched at their shoulders, still screaming. Louis winced when Niall drew Harry’s blood, but Harry didn’t react.

“Sshhhh, it’s okay,” he said.

“Fuck you, fuck you both. Let me out–”

“No!” Liam shouted, adjusting his grip to combat Niall’s thrashing.

Louis wanted to help, somehow, but. He knew if he tried, he’d just end up opening the door for Niall and killing them all. The little hand on the radiation metre had been so far right it was almost snapping off for the three days they’d been down here; without the lead of the bunker to protect them, well...

Niall knew what it meant; they all did.

Louis turned away from the display. He couldn’t watch anymore. And still, his friend’s anguished screams echoed around the chamber.

Niall had been quiet ever since they’d run in here, all of them too panicked to think about what they were doing. He admitted to Louis on the first night, a hushed whisper, that he wasn’t great with enclosed spaces. The bunker wasn’t exactly small, but it was a hundred feet underground. Through
that hatch was a shaft with a rickety ladder leading up to the surface.

It had been dark when they’d scrambled in here, but Louis swore he could picture that ladder with perfect clarity.

He squeezed his eyes shut when Niall’s screams turned into hysterical crying. Harry was still trying to shush hum, soothing words that Niall was way too gone to even hear.

“I can’t do it,” he sobbed. “Please, just let me out.”

Louis fled the room.

36 Days After.

“Louis? Can I have the book, please?”

Louis looked up. Harry was leaning against one of the desks in the History Room, ankles crossed and a far-too-patient look on his face. Louis was lounging atop one of the cupboards along the side of the room, making himself small in the little reading nook he’d made. There was a blanket—thready, like everything in this fucking bunker—and a sack of flour he’d repurposed as a pillow, since the other pillows seemed to have exactly three feathers each.

“I’m nearly done,” Louis repeated. He turned the page achingly slowly.

He was now past the table of contents.

Harry sighed. “I’ll just read it over your shoulder.”

Louis started to protest, but it was already too late. Harry pushed himself off the desk and crawled up on top of the cupboard next to Louis. He was wearing the only clothes they’d found here—fifty pairs of identical cream-coloured shirts and pants. The material felt softer than Louis’ own set when Harry settled in next to him, like just being in contact with Harry’s skin had made it kinder somehow.

“You’re the worst,” Louis grumbled, shifting over so they weren’t touching. Even though it had been really nice.

Harry didn’t even bother to respond. Louis sent him a glance and found him absorbed in the words on the page, eyes dancing across them with laser-like focus.

Louis shook his head and started reading.

19 Days Before.

“Did they say when they’d be coming?” Louis’ fingers tapped a nervous rhythm on the front cover of his French textbook.

Across from him, Harry shook his head. He was settled back in this chair watching Louis. He hadn’t even pretended to spread out his study materials. He’d just waltzed in here five minutes ago, dumped
his bag on the table, and announced that everyone else was going to be late.

“Is this a prank or something? Because, ha ha. get Louis alone with Harry, very funny,” Louis spat, rolling his eyes.

Harry leaned forwards in his chair. He pinned Louis down with his ridiculous frog eyes. “Why do you hate me?”

Louis froze.

Harry’s face crumbled a little. He looked young, small. Defeated. “I’ve never done anything to you, Louis.”

Louis narrowed his eyes. “Is that so?” His skin prickled with discomfort; he wanted to throw himself at Harry’s feet and beg for his forgiveness, he hated seeing people upset, and yet. If he didn’t stand by this, then what message was he sending himself? He’d told himself once he started university that he was going to try—really try—putting himself first for a change. It wasn’t just a matter of pride, it was a matter of principle. “I can’t believe you honestly think that.”

Harry frowned, confusion written all over his face. He didn’t even know what Louis was talking about, which made it so much worse.

He opened his mouth, but he was cut off by the door opening.

“Sorry we’re late, boys,” Liam smiled, bustling in with Niall and Zayn in tow. “Ready to get started?”

“Yes!” Louis jumped in, flinging his textbook open. “Definitely.”

Harry didn’t argue, but he did spend the rest of the study session with an odd look on his face.

Or, an odder look than usual.

Louis pretended not to notice.

41 Days After.

“Alright, party people!” Niall stood at the front of the English Room once again, determination set on his face. Along with a healthy serve of mischief, of course. “Which roles does everyone want?”

Louis’ hand shot in the air. Niall raised his eyebrows; surprised at the enthusiasm, no doubt. Louis had been complaining about putting on a play quite vocally for several long days.

But that was before he’d really had a chance to think about it.

And now, he was more than on board.

“Yes, sunshine?” Niall asked.

Louis lowered his hand. He grinned directly at Harry. “I want to be Beatrice.”

Niall fake-gasped.
Louis sent him a pissed-off look.

“Come on, Louis. Obviously you’re Beatrice. And Harry is Benedick.”

Louis closed his eyes so he could take a few calming breaths. *Don’t flip the table, don’t flip the table.*

“I’m Benedick?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“Well, who were you going to pick?”

Harry pouted. “Hero.”

Louis scoffed.

“No way.” Zayn leaned over his desk towards Harry. “I’m Hero.”

“And I think we can *all* agree that I’m Claudio,” Niall added.

Liam scowled. “I wanted Claudio!”

Louis slunk down in his seat. “Who knew putting on a play would involve this much *drama*,” he sassed.

Harry snorted. Louis ignored him.

“Scissors paper rock you for Claudio,” Liam said, waving his hand at Niall.

“Done,” Niall agreed.

On the count of three, they both picked scissors.

“This is better than the BBC,” Louis said boredly, curling up further in his seat. “So much tension.”

“I think Liam’s going for a sneaky rock win,” Harry remarked. The way he was leaning over his desk, almost in Louis’ space, made Louis want to shove his face away.

“Bugger off, Harry,” Louis shot back.

Harry’s mouth twisted downwards. “At least Beatrice is clever about her insults.”

Louis was saved from having to respond by Liam crying out in victory.

Louis glanced at Harry without quite meaning to and found him looking back.

*Sneaky rock win,* he mouthed.

Louis had many, many regrets in life. He didn’t like the thought of adding another to the pile, but. Alas.

“Is it too late to change my mind?” he asked, interrupting Liam’s victory dance.

“What?” Niall asked, shaking off a frown.

“I want to be Don Jon instead. You can have Beatrice.”

Niall waved him off. “You can just be Don Jon and Beatrice, everyone’s gonna need to play a few people.”
Louis huffed. He looked back at Harry—he *really* needed to stop doing that—and saw him waggling his eyebrows at Louis.

“I’m still the director,” Louis warned. “I’ll make you do every scene naked.”

Harry shrugged demurely. “If that’s what you want.”

“No, it’s not what I— ugh.” Louis pushed himself out of the chair and stormed from the room.

He had lines to go memorise, anyway.

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201 Days Before.

“Are you sure, mum?”

Jay gave him a look over her shoulder. She lifted Louis’ last bag into the back of her car then slammed the boot shut.

“A little late to ask that, Boobear. You’re already packed.”

Louis ducked his head and scraped a stone along the road in front of him. “I just wanted to check you hadn’t changed your mind. Things have been so shit lately, for everyone. What if—”

She pulled him in for a hug, squeezing tight. “Louis,” she said, pressing a kiss to his messy hair. “You’ve been the best son and the best big brother for nineteen years. I’m so proud of you for getting into this school. And anyway, I’m your mum; I’m supposed to be worried about you, not the other way around.” She laughed gently, then pulled back to study his face.

“Are you?” Louis asked. “Worried about me?”

Jay smiled. “Not at all, baby. I know you’re going to be amazing. You already are.”

Louis smiled, eyes wet with unshed tears. He turned to look back at the house where all his sisters were pressed to the front window watching.

He waved to them, even though he’d already spent all afternoon saying goodbye. He had an apartment close to the University all lined up already (four roommates to save money), his subjects picked out, all of his things packed. The only thing left was to get in that car and… go.

“I’m going to miss them so much,” he admitted, like a punch to the gut. “Even though they’re all little shits.”

Jay laughed. “Watch that, Louis. You were once a little shit, too.”

Louis pouted at her. “But you just told me I’m perfect in every way and always was.”

“Well, that’s also true,” she said.

Louis hugged her again. “Come on,” he said, nudging her towards the car. “I don’t want us to get stuck in traffic.”
“Do you ever wonder what they built this for?”

Louis turned to Niall. They were lying in one of the many bunk rooms. There were eight beds a room, and enough of them for about half of the University to stay in.

“No. Don’t you remember Orientation?”

Niall frowned. “That old guy with the weirdly sharp cane who rambled about student safety for half an hour? Yes, I remember that. Unfortunately.”

Louis leaned his head on the squishy part of his arm, body facing Niall. They were the only two in here; Niall hadn’t said much for the last few days, especially after the incident. Louis had taken to keeping him company—Liam had insisted that he needed space, but Louis knew better. Liam might have known Niall for longer, but Louis could still tell.

“He said they built this for bomb scares so they could continue classes, since it was becoming such a disruption. Can’t have the students ignoring their studies whilst they were praying for their lives!”


Louis closed his eyes. The room was already pitch black—the light ticked off at eight pm automatically, they hadn’t managed to turn that off—but doing so made him feel safer. He could pretend he was back in his apartment, or back in his childhood bedroom, tucked up in his sheets. “I know,” Louis said. “But we’re here now, so there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Niall laughed darkly. “Wouldn’t want to open that hatch, now, would we? Then we’d be as dead as everyone else.”

Louis shook his head. “It’s not about you and me, Niall. It’s about them. They don’t want that, yeah? So we can’t choose that for them.”

Niall looked at him for the first time in days. Louis couldn’t make out the expression on his face, but he felt the weight of his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Louis reached for him, pulling him closer until they were cuddling. Niall’s breaths evened out, and Louis felt his heart rate slow. “We’re going to be, you know?”

Niall nodded. He hugged back.

145 Days Before.

Louis fucking hated drawing class.

Truthfully, he fucking hated doing anything he was bad at for extended periods of time. He had no idea why he thought going to a class would help him get better; all it did was give him the opportunity to stare at all of his more talented peers as they created masterpieces.
Meanwhile, his drawing was a trainwreck.

“Hey, bro, that’s pretty good,” someone said.

Louis turned to them with disbelief. It was Latte Rockstar: the guy who came in five minutes late every class with coffee and a devil-may-care attitude.

Louis respected his opinion, which is why he didn’t curse him out.

“Are you serious?” He pointed at his drawing, which was supposed to be of a flower arrangement in the centre of the room. “That looks nothing like flowers. I’m rubbish at this.”

Latte Rockstar smiled at him gently. “Art isn’t about making things look like other things. Realism is a very limited form of expression.” He pointed at Louis’ page, the swirling colours, the shaky lines. “Look again. Stop trying to see flowers, and see it for what it is.”

Louis sighed but did as he was told. He tilted his head to the side, then stopped once he felt his beanie slipping off. “Still looks like a mess, lad. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Exactly,” Latte Rockstar said. “Mess is cool.”

Louis snorted. “Alright. Thanks.”

He nodded. “No problem. I’m Zayn, by the way.”

Louis grinned at him. “I’m Louis.”

45 Days After.

“Again!” Louis clapped.

Liam scowled at him, and Zayn did the same. Harry had stopped pretending he felt human emotions ten scenes ago.

“Yes, Boss!” Niall called. Louis pointed at him in appreciation.

“What was wrong with it that time?”

Louis pursed his lips at Liam. “Your line delivery was shaky again, Lima. You’ve got to say it with conviction.”

Liam growled, frustration leaking out of every pore. “Shakespeare is rubbish, Louis! None of these words mean anything, especially not when they’re arranged in this order.”

He waved his hand-written script in the air accusingly.

Louis smiled at him patiently. “Not when you don’t say them with conviction, they don’t. Here, let me—” he made a grab for the script, then cleared his throat.

“O, My Lord, when you went onward on this ended action, I look’d upon her with a soldier’s eye,
that liked, but had a rougher task in hand than to drive liking to the name of love." The words tumbled out of Louis’ mouth like a stream flowing over rocks; it wasn’t perfect, but it had momentum. “But now I am return’d and that war thoughts have left their places vacant. In their rooms come thronging soft and delicate desires, all prompting me how fair young Hero is,” he winked at Zayn, “Saying; I liked her ere I went to wars.”

Louis lowered the page, then smiled at a gaping Liam. “Do it like that,” he said, pressing the page into his chest before Liam scrambled to take it.

“‘Do it like that,’” Liam mocked. “Easy for you to say, Brad Pitt.”

“Yes, Liam,” Louis droned. “Famous Shakespearean actor, Brad Pitt.”

Liam flipped him off.

“That was really good, Louis,” Harry butt in. He was smiling sort of hopefully, as if he thought complimenting Louis might stop him from biting his head off.

“T-thanks, Harry,” Louis said.

Fuck. It worked.

Harry beamed at him.

Louis cleared his throat. “Again!”

46 Days After.

“Louis. Louis, I’m a genius.”

Louis groaned. He peeled his eyes open to see Niall hovering over him.

“What is it?”

Niall just grinned. “Come see.”

Louis pulled on a shirt and pants clumsily. “I’ll try,” he said, smacking his lips together. “I’m fairly sure I’m still asleep, though, darling.”

Niall laughed and led him out of the bunk room. “You’ll wake up when you see this.”

This, as it turned out, did not wake Louis up.

“Wow, Niall, a bunch of rubbish,” he yawned. “Can I go back to sleep now?”

Harry appeared over his left shoulder. “Niall and I worked on this all afternoon yesterday,” he said, oddly enthusiastic.

Niall nodded at him. “Harry’s a genius too, Louis.”

Harry preened.

Louis folded his arms over his chest, then unfolded them so he could scrub at his eyelids. “Right,
well, what is it that you’ve made, exactly?” he asked around a yawn.

Harry and Niall started pulling objects from the pile, talking over each other.

“This one could be for the wedding scene—”

“This one will work for the horses at the start, I reckon—”

“This is obviously Hero’s wig, I mean—”


Niall looked at him like he was the crazy person standing in the Art Room and waving a bunch of crap in the air. “Props, Louis. Props and costumes. Keep up.”

He threw a mop head at Louis, the same object he’d just proclaimed to be perfect for Hero’s wig.

Louis let it drop to the floor. “I’m going back to bed,” he announced. “Have fun.”

Niall’s complaints followed him all the way to the bunk room.

51 Days After.

“Alas! He gets nothing by that! In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with one— hey, do you think that’s Shakespeare for ‘he’s on his last brain cell?’”

Zayn stared at him for a moment then started snickering. “Yeah, I reckon so,” he said. He had a fleck of blue paint across his cheek. Louis probably had more of the same.

He spared a moment to grin at Zayn—always rewarding when he made him laugh—then turned back to his masterpiece.

“So that is he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse; for it is all the wealth that he hath left, to be known as a reasonable creature. Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother,” Louis recited, muttering under his breath like he’d been doing for the last few days. He’d just had to go and choose one of the most verbose fucking characters he’d ever had the misfortune of reading. He loved Beatrice, but, god help him, did she have a lot of lines. As he recited, he passed his paintbrush over the sunflower he was painting, adding a little highlight to the petals (which he only thought to do after he saw Zayn do it on his side of the wall).

They were in Bunk Room A, the one Louis had sort-of claimed. He’d woken up at five this morning—the time the lights clicked on—and taken one look at that fucking grey-green-metal wall, then he’d been marching off to find Zayn to demand his help in painting over it.

“Do you want it boring or pretty?” Zayn had asked—or, well, mumbled, still half asleep, bless him.

“Pretty, of course. What kind of question is that,” Louis had answered. So, here they were; painting whatever random crap they wanted onto Louis’ wall.
They’d even pushed the other two bunk beds out of the way so they could have a proper go of it. Louis just counted himself lucky the paint in the art room hadn’t quite dried up yet.

“I’s possible?” Zayn asked, pulling Louis from his thoughts.

Louis sent him a raised eyebrow, but Zayn just shrugged. He was playing the messenger that Beatrice was talking to in this scene; Louis just hadn’t caught him reading his lines or rehearsing at all, not like the other lads had been doing.

Apparently he’d been doing it when Louis wasn’t looking.

“Very easily possible,” Louis answered, adding a little pink bee to his sunflower. “Benedick wears his faith but as the fashion of a hat; it ever changes with the next block.” Another bee, blue this time.

Zayn paused for a moment to stare at Louis. When he delivered his next line, it was with a smirk. “I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.”

Louis huffed; it wasn’t hard to see what Zayn was implying. “No,” he shot back, eyebrows raised. “An he were, I would burn my study.”

Zayn raised his hands in surrender.

Louis added a third bee.

3650 Days Before.

Louis sat in his back garden. There wasn’t much in it—a sad old tree with a rusty swing, some patches of dirt and grass, and a few flowers. Louis was sitting in front of those, watching a fat little bee buzz between them. It would land on one, shuffle its legs a bit, shove its face in the middle of the flower, and then it was off to the next.

Louis grew bored of it after a while. He collapsed back on to the ground so he could look up at the sky.

There was a cloud that looked like his mate Stan, and another that looked like Ted. The wind pushed them across the sky, changing them into a dragon and a giraffe.

Louis giggled. The bee buzzed past his face.

Louis liked bees. His mum said there weren’t going to be any left, soon, but this one seemed happy with its short life. It landed on his shirt—red, his favourite colour—and Louis went cross-eyed trying to stare at it without lifting his head.

The bee hopped about a few times then it took off into the sky. Maybe it had important business with the dragon-shaped cloud; Louis didn’t know.

As he watched it fly away, he wondered about what kind of person he was going to be when he grew up. Would he be happy with his short life, like the bee? Or would he be busy being sad about everyone else’s misfortunes, like his mum?

The dragon cloud shifted into a cartoon pillow shape. It looked comfortable; more comfortable than
Louis stared at it and hoped he would be the happy kind.

**198 Days Before.**

Louis stretched on his bed. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around his room—most of the way unpacked, and very threadbare. He sighed and picked himself out of bed.

It wasn’t going to feel like home in just three days, he told himself. There was going to be a natural grieving process; getting used to this new environment would take time. Everything was fine.

He pulled several boxes of cereal from his shelf in the cupboard—also very threadbare; something he never considered about moving out of home was how much fucking *shopping* he’d have to do—and set about mixing them all together in one bowl.

Just as he was pouring the milk in, the door opened.

“Oi oi!” Louis called with false brightness. It didn’t matter which of his three roommates it was; they were all pretty boring blokes.

“Morning!” Liam called back, popping his curly head into the kitchen. “Watcha got there?”

Louis munched on a mouthful of his concoction. “Secret family recipe, mate.”

Liam nodded. “Of course, of course. Hey—is it cool if I invite my mate Niall over? He’s starting at our uni with us next week, you’ll love him.”

Louis scratched his forehead and tried to find a polite way of saying, *no, thank you, I have plans to sit and wallow in my room all day and I couldn’t possibly reschedule them.*

He was unsuccessful.

“Sure!” he said instead, shoveling some more cereal into his mouth. “Any plans, or…”

Liam shrugged. “I thought we could just watch some telly and hang out.”

*Sounds awful.* “Sounds lovely!”

Liam beamed, then disappeared from the doorway.

Louis only had three seconds of peace before the door opened again.

“What’s happening!”

“No!”

Louis stayed hidden in the kitchen while he listened to Liam and Niall greet each other. Whoever this Niall person was, he sounded friendly and Irish.

“Come and meet Louis, he’s great.”
Louis felt a pang of guilt, and then two boys were piling into the kitchen.

“Hiya, mate,” Louis said, offering Niall a wave.

Niall waved back happily.

“That looks sick,” he said, pointing to Louis’ bowl.

“Do—do you want some?”

Louis cursed himself for offering, but then Niall’s face lit up.

“Yes! I’d love that.”

Liam looked between them with a smile as Louis prepared Niall a bowl of his Special Mix.

Niall spat it out on the first bite, but. They had a laugh about it, and it was a nicer day than the one Louis had planned, after all.

53 Days After.

In the end, it was showering that did Louis in.

He’d been doing a fucking stand up job of avoiding Harry for so long. He was practically a Harry Avoidance Olympian—and he’d won himself gold place in the last week or so. Harry had been trying to corner him alone for twelve straight days; he was all, *Louis can we please rehearse— Louis can we go over our scenes please—Louis—* Louis would prefer not to.

Sure, it had been his idea to be the Beatrice to Harry’s Benedick. But that idea had thoroughly backfired, and now he was stuck as the leading lady to a very persistent leading man.

Of all the places he could have been cornered, though, it just had to be the shower.

Well, shower was a generous word; really, it was a basin that filled up with an allotted ration of water. There was soap, a sponge, and no heating.

So Louis was buttnaked, shivering, and pissed as hell when Harry cleared his throat next to him.

Louis jumped and cursed, dropping his sponge onto the floor.

“Jesus Christ, Harry!” he yelled, moving to cover himself. “Piss off!”

Harry crossed his (clothed, warm) arms over his chest. “No. You’re avoiding me.”

“What I’m doing is showering, you creep,” Louis hissed, trying to pick up the sponge with his toes so he didn’t have to let go of His Majesty’s Jewels.

Harry rolled his eyes and knelt down to pick it up for Louis, which was. So much worse.
He stayed on his knees, placing the sponge back in the basin and pinning Louis down with his big green eyes.

“Please, will you just rehearse with me? Niall wants us to do our opening night in two weeks, and we haven’t even spoken lines in the same room yet.”

Louis swallowed and tried to remember how to speak with the added obstacle of a pleading Harry Styles on his knees in front of him. “You realise this is play isn’t real, right? Opening night is just going to be five dickheads reciting Shakespeare to an empty room.”

Louis regretted the words as soon as he said them.

Harry’s hurt expression made him regret them twice as much.

“Louis, do you care about _anything_? You don’t have to be like this—so jaded all the time,” Harry whispered, sitting back on his haunches and looking away.

Louis sighed. He leant against the wall and let his body sink to the ground so he could finally be on Harry’s level. _I care about so many things, _he wanted to say, _that’s the whole problem here._

“I’m sorry.”

Harry shrugged, still staring at the ground.

“Hey, Harry.” Louis nudged his thigh with his ankle, and Harry reached out to grab it seemingly on instinct. Louis nearly choked at the feeling of Harry’s big, warm hand on his cold skin, but he forced a shaky smile instead. “If you promise to leave me alone while I’m trying to shower, I’ll practice with you, okay?”

Harry looked at him finally, gaze flicking between Louis’ eyes. “Yeah?”

Louis nodded.

Harry smiled—dim, small, but. Still.

“Deal.”
“Mrs. Tiffles.”

“Richard Cress. Mrs. Tiffles? There’s no way that’s a real name.”

“Tom from down the road. She was my kindergarten teacher, Niall. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Betty White. Yeah, alright.”

“Indra Wilks. That one hurts, Niall.”

Louis leaned against the doorway as he listened. The bizarre interaction had caught his attention as he was wondering the halls aimlessly—he had a very full schedule in the bunker.

“What are you lads doing?” he asked, curiosity piercing through the blankness he’d been feeling all day. As great as he was at shoveling his feelings down into a deep, dark hole, well. He was now in a deep, dark hole for the rest of his life; no escape, no future, just his fucking feelings.

And four other idiots.

Niall and Liam turned to him in tandem. They were lying on bunk beds at separate sides of the room—Bunk Room F, as the sign above the door proclaimed.

“We’re playing a game,” Liam supplied.

“‘S Bunker Magazine’s Top Pick of the Year, rave reviews all around,” Niall added. His deadpan hadn’t quite recovered yet, but it was most of the way there.

Louis sighed and stepped inside. He stole a pillow from one of the top bunks then parked himself down on the floor. He shuffled a little, getting comfortable on his back and folding his hands over his stomach. “Okay, I’m ready. What are the rules?”

“Well,” Liam said, a little sheepish. “It’s a bit dark.”

“You go back and forth saying the names of dead people. You win when you can’t think of anyone else.”

Louis blinked at the ceilings. “That’s nine billion names, boys.”

Liam cleared his throat in the ensuing silence.

“Justin Bieber,” Niall said.


“Reverend Kennedy.”

“Yuen Zhang.”

“Natalie Portman.”
“Karen Payne.”

“Michael Buble. And, ouch, Lima.”

“Johanna Deakin.”

“Peter Baker. I just wanna win, Niall. Louis gets it.”

“Prince William. You lads are weird.”

“David Beckham.”

“Oof,” Niall and Liam said in tandem.

Liam shook his head at Louis, disappointed at his lack of tact.

Louis just laughed.


20 Days Before.

“Anyone seen Harry?”

Louis looked over at Niall, who was craning his neck about the room.

“Who’s Harry?” asked the handsome (if a bit dry) lad Louis had just been attempting to flirt with.

“Haven’t you met Harry?” Louis asked, faux-excited. “He’s a giant toad, you can’t have missed him. What with all the warts, and the green skin, y’know.”

The boy looked confused, and Niall sighed next to Louis.

“Found him,” he said.

Louis followed his gaze, having to turn a little. He caught sight of Harry as well; he couldn’t have missed him, since he was only a metre behind Niall. The expression on his face—stony, a little pale—told Louis he heard what he’d said, and he didn’t think it was very funny.

“He doesn’t look much like a toad?” offered the idiot beside Louis. Louis rolled his eyes at him and stomped off. He didn’t much fancy being made to feel guilty for his shitty attitude, not tonight. Tonight was supposed to be a party.

But he didn’t end up doing much partying, not with the weight of Harry’s lifeless eyes on his conscience (and on his body, stalking him around the room).


53 Days After.

“Alright, so.” Louis rubbed his hands together, eyes scanning across his hand-written script. It was resting on the table beside him—one they’d dragged in here from the English room.
“So…” Harry drawled. It echoed across the main chamber—a big, empty space that in a month’s time would become their amphitheatre. Not by being transformed or anything, just with the power of imagination. Louis wasn’t optimistic.

“So, in this scene we’re at a party welcoming the Prince and his clique to Messina or whatever.”

Harry snorted, then schooled his features at Louis’ narrowed eyes.

“And I’m in disguise because it’s a masquerade,” Harry continued. He pulled something out from his pocket and bowed his head to stick it to his face.

Louis narrowed his eyes, trying to make sense of what it was through Harry’s mane of hair, and then he straightened back up and Louis broke into raucous laughter.

“What is that?” he asked breathlessly, clinging to the table for dear life.

Harry pouted from behind his mask—a paper cutout from what looked to have once been a book on human anatomy, judging by the expertly rendered penis and testes staring at Louis from between Harry’s eyes. Evidently, there were dick pics in the book Zayn had nicked from the Science Room; the wanker just chose to give them to Harry instead so they could be used for… this. The mask was stuck wonkily to Harry’s forehead with a single strip of tape, making the whole affair all the more ridiculous.

Harry’s pout slowly transformed into a smirk and Louis’ laughter lapsed into giggles.

“I made it to make you laugh,” Harry said.

It was too honest a confession, with everything between them as it was.

Louis’ giggles subsided. He cleared his throat. “Well.” He fidgeted with his still-drying hair. “It didn’t work, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Harry parrotted, the beginnings of a smile on his face.

Louis tapped his fingers on the page of his script. “Are we rehearsing or what, dickhead?”

Harry frowned automatically, then he barked out a laugh. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

Louis sent a final glance to the page, then stepped towards Harry. “Will you not tell me who told you so?”

Harry shifted slightly. It was a very subtle change, the one between Harry and Benedick. Benedick was more smug; looser in the way he held himself. Harry Styles was a comfortable, polite boy with the wit of a demon and the heart of an angel; Benedick was a child in the body of a man, trying to woo the world so everyone would be too distracted to see how vulnerable he was. But he was true, when it counted; steadfast in his convictions. He and Harry had that in common, Louis supposed.

“No, you shall pardon me,” Harry said, somehow managing to sell the character even with that thing on his face.

Louis stepped closer. “Nor will you tell me who you are?”

Harry moved towards him as well, and the two of them swapped places—a dance, an unplanned piece of blocking, and the movement of two magnets.

“That I was disdainful, and that I had my good wit out of the Hundred Merry Tales,” Louis sniffed.
“Well, this was Signor Benedick that said so.”

Harry’s eyebrows ticked subtly, and his shoulders pivoted forwards—trying to pretend like the party held his interest and not Beatrice. “What’s he?”

Louis turned as well, speaking to the room full of dancing Messinian people, eyes flitting over the drunken revelry. “I am sure you know him well enough.”

“No, I believe me,” Harry said, hand to his chest like a good little choir boy.

Louis sent him a look—scathing, but hidden well behind his eyelashes. “Did he never make you laugh?”

Harry turned back towards Louis again, leaning his head closer—the mouse chasing the cat. “I pray you, what is he?”

“Why, he is the Prince’s jester,” Louis replied, eyebrows raised. “A very dull fool; only his gift is in devising impossible slanders.” He leaned closer while Harry leaned away. “None but libertines delight in him; and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villainy—” Louis felt genuine anger stirring in his guts, propelling the words from his mouth like fire, “—for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet; I would he had boarded me.”

Louis took a deep breath, trying to stay in character. Beatrice was spiteful, but she wasn’t rageful.

Harry’s face remained impassive. His next words rang heavier than they should have in Louis’ ears. “When I know the gentleman, I’ll tell him what you say.”

15 Days Before.

“Are you sure, Niall?” Harry whined, fingers pausing over the fretboard.

Louis stayed where he was, unseen in the doorway. He'd only come to pick up Niall for an evening of bad television and worse beer, but he'd been waylaid by the sounds of soft strumming.

“Don’t call me Shirley,” Niall responded nonsensically. Then, he looked up from the notes he was taking on the blank sheet music in front of him. “Yes, H. It needs a barre chord there.”

Harry huffed then tried the melody again, a delightful mix of plucking and strumming. Louis had known he could play, but he’d never seen it. Never heard it.

He resisted the urge to ruin it—to interrupt with some comment about musical toads or whatever the fuck he said when he was pissed—because the moment was too nice to ruin, and he was getting a little sick of being the asshole when it was becoming increasingly obvious Harry was never going to feel guilty about it at all.

“You're right, that's loads better,” Harry admitted, fingers coming to a stand still again.

“Might even be A material, huh?” Niall nudged Harry's side.

Harry moved with him and laughed softly. Then, he caught sight of Louis in the doorway. His face shut down.
And that. *That* pissed Louis off.

“What are you lads working on?” he asked, stepping into the room.

Niall looked over his shoulder. “Tommo!”

Louis smiled at him, skin still prickling uncomfortably. “Alright, Nialler?”

“Not bad,” he smiled.

Harry cleared his throat. “It’s just a composition for this music class we’re taking.”

Louis slung his arm over the back of Niall chair and leaned towards him. “And what’s an aspiring physio like you doing taking music classes, hm?”

Harry blinked. For several awkward moments, he seemed too shocked to say anything.

“I—um,” he wet his lips. “I switched majors at the beginning of this semester. How did you—”

“Easier to pull with a guitar in your lap, I guess,” Louis snapped, cutting him off. It wasn’t true, he knew that. For all the fawning Harry got around campus—hard not to notice those curls and that dazzling smile—Louis had never once seen him make a move on anyone.

Still, it got Harry's cheeks burning and his brow knotted, so. Mission fucking accomplished, everybody, Louis was still the asshole.

Niall sighed. “Guess we're headed off, then?”

“Don't need to sound so disappointed, mate,” Louis teased, turning away from Harry. “I got you the slightly better stuff this time—that German crap with the red label?”

Niall perked up a little at that, but he shook his head as he steered them from the room. “Not the beer that's the problem, Lou,” he answered, as if Louis didn't know that already.

They only made it a few steps down the hallway before Louis cracked.

He peeled himself off Niall and stomped back to the open doorway. Harry was still inside, slumped over his guitar. He looked up when Louis poked his head back in the room.

“It's not a bad tune,” Louis bit out. It was begrudging, but no less truthful for it. “Think you probably made the right call, there.”

Harry tilted his head to the side and studied him like a dog trying to figure out how a squirrel got up a tree. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “Thanks.”

Louis shrugged, then marched back over to Niall.

“Wipe that grin off your face, you look like a serial killer,” Louis groused.

Niall just shook his head.

55 Days After.
Liam kicked the ball back over to him. “Think it's going well so far, actually.”

Louis jogged slightly to catch up to it, then did an unnecessary backwards kick just for shits and giggles.

Liam cursed and ducked out of the way at the ball went soaring past him.

“Sorry,” Louis grinned. He raised his voice so Liam could hear him as he trotted after the ball. “So you’re committing, then? Getting all your lines straight?”

Liam reached the ball, then picked it up in a blatantly illegal move to peg it at Louis’ torso.

His aim was a little bit shit, so it landed just in front of Louis’ feet. “Cheers.”

Liam made a face at him. “My delivery’s still a mess if that’s what you’re asking, but I think I’m getting the hang of Claudio.” He straightened his back and smoothed a hand down his stomach, taking in the hallway with an air of regal judgement as if to demonstrate how far he’d come getting into character.

“Uncanny,” Louis deadpanned. “But actually, you're holding your own?”

Liam nodded, posture melting back into something more familiar. “Me and Zayn have practiced a few of the later scenes, but we're not actually together very much considering we're supposed to be the main pair.”

Louis crossed his arms, trying and failing to not get offended. “Its Beatrice and Benedick that are the main pair Leemo, did we read the same bloody play?”

Liam made a face at him. “They're important, I guess, but the story is more about Hero and Claudio. The whole plot is based off our romance!”

“With a healthy side dose of our romance!” Louis threw his hands in the air. “Honestly.”

“Side dose, couldn't have put it better myself,” Liam taunted. The grin on his face was just begging to be wiped off.

“Oh, yeah?” Louis picked up the ball and prepared to throw it at Liam’s face while the lad cowered behind his arms and giggled uncontrollably.

“You're both idiots,” Niall said, appearing from behind Liam. He licked his fingers clean of stickiness from the box of raisins he was munching on. “The real focus of the narrative is Dogberry.”

Louis snorted.

Niall glared at him.

“No, Niall, you're right. Dogberry is very underrated,” he heard himself say. Niall had been a grain short of a salt barrel since losing that game of scissors paper rock to Liam. Louis found it funny—which he suspected was why the lad played it up so much—but that didn't mean he wasn't also sympathetic.

“Thank you,” Niall nodded, then trotted off down the hallway with his raisins.

“Better not tell Harold about those!” Louis called after him.

Niall turned to walk backwards for a moment so he could poke his tongue out at Louis and cradle the
raisins closer to his chest.

“He’s not as anal as all that, Louis,” Liam said, suddenly much closer. “He’s letting us eat spaghetti and custard and the like.”

“At the same time?” Louis asked, eyebrows perched high. “That's disgusting, Liam.”

Liam shook his head, lips turned down in that disapproving mother hen expression he’d worked so hard on.

“Sod off.” Louis pushed his shoulder back gently, and Liam swayed a little. Then, he made a grab for the ball in Louis’ hands and darted down the hallway with it.

“That little—” Louis spat, then took off after him with a grin.

532 Days Before.

“Mum?”

His mum looked up from the cup of tea in front of her. Her eyes were puffy and red around the edges, but at least this time her crying hadn't been loud enough to wake the little ones. It was a horrible thing to have thought, but as Louis curled his toes against the fading linoleum of the kitchen floor and the dim light of the open microwave cast shadows across his mum’s face, he felt more than a bit horrible.

“Hi, baby,” she tried to say, then paused halfway through to raise her cup to her lips and pretend to sip, swallowing down a sob. “You shouldn't be up this late.”

Neither should you, Louis thought. He shrugged and made his way over to the cupboard, pulling down the plastic container that had his special mix inside—ready made for late night snacks.

The harsh tinkling of the cereal hitting a ceramic bowl filled the kitchen, louder than his mother's heavy breaths. Louis kept his back turned to her as he poured the milk in then stirred it all together with a spoon.

“Louis,” she said, voice firmer than he could remember it being since Dad moved out.

Louis turned, bowl clutched towards his chest protectively. But the look in her eyes was too world-weary for a rant about how cereal was going to rot his teeth, so he set it down on the table across from her and hopped into the seat.

“Yes?” he asked around a mouthful of sugary goodness.

“You're going to get your heart broken. You're gonna get hurt a lot, love. That's how life works. But I don't want—” she paused, looked away, then looked back, eyes ablaze. “I don't want you to think you shouldn't ever try just because it might end badly. There's a chance it'll be amazing, Boobear. You deserve amazing.”

So do you, mum, he thought.

And still, he couldn't keep the scowl off his face. He dropped his spoon into his bowl, not even wincing at the loud clanking noise it made. He wanted to hiss angry words at her, words he didn't
mean (and yet very much did).

*I'm not going to be an idiot like you*, he would say if he was braver, *I'm smart and strong and no one will ever hurt me so bad that I'm left crying in a kitchen at 4am while my children try to sleep two rooms over.*

*And amazing? Amazing can kiss my arse.*

But he wasn't braver. Or maybe it wasn't cowardice that stopped the words, but kindness.

His mum didn't need anything else to cry over.

So he forced a smile, picked up his spoon, and lied.

“I'll try, mum. I promise.”

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4 Days Before.

Zayn blinked owlishly at the television. The screen was muted, but the carnage on the news was plenty loud enough to fill the silence.

Louis stretched out next to him on the ratty couch of his apartment. He stared up at the wall and tried to decide if he felt anything.

“No, Louis wanted to say. *I believe in the goodness of people.*

He so wished that was true.

“Yeah, bro, know what you mean,” he said instead. “But we have to work with what we have.”

Zayn shrugged. He picked up a sketchpad in front of him and started scratching away at it. Louis turned his head and saw a mess of dark lines.

“We’re not gonna have much pretty soon, I think,” he mumbled. The stick of charcoal he was using dug into the page harshly, but Zayn kept pushing until it broke free. He didn’t let it stop the flow of his movements.

Louis took another drag then held it for longer than he should have. “Might not be so bad as all that,” he coughed.

Zayn sent him a look, and Louis new he believed that as much as he did.

That is to say, not at all.

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58 Days After.
Louis forced himself to breathe, to think critically. He eyed the space between Zayn and Harry, ignoring their expectant stares.

“Stop slouching, Harry, you’ll bend your spine,” Louis snapped, and Harry obeyed without complaint.

Zayn cleared his throat significantly.

Louis waved his hand. “Alright, yes, take it from ‘Now, Signor—’

‘—where’s the count? Did you see him?’ Zayn continued, latching on to Louis words. His Don Pedro was remarkably similar to his Hero, but Louis wasn’t in the mood to call him out on it.

Harry replied with his line, and the scene unfolded from there. For a practice run, it wasn’t terrible. But then something changed.

“The Lady Beatrice hath a quarrel to you,” Zayn smirked, leaning against some imaginary column. He looked a little unstable, and a lot amused.

Harry’s shoulders stiffened, but he forced a charming smile. He played up Benedick’s wounded pride, but there was something dark and angry underneath it. Something Louis had been afraid of.

“O, she misused me past the endurance of a block!” Harry said. As he monologued, he wandered around the stage, throwing his hands out to the nonexistent crowd and not once turning his back on Louis. “She told me—not thinking I had been myself—that I was the prince’s jester, and that I was duller than a great thaw; huddling jest upon jest, with such impossible conveyance, upon me, that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me.” He paused and huffed. Zayn shook his head, and Harry slung his arm across Zayn’s shoulders companionably. When he spoke next, he turned his eyes to Louis’. “She speaks such poniards, and every word stabs.” Louis blinked, humbled by the sincerity in Harry’s voice, in his eyes. But not a moment later it melted away, and Benedick was back crying to the sky about his victimhood at the hands of Lady Spite. Louis barely blinked as he finished his monologue. “—so, indeed, all disquiet, horror, and perturbation follow her.”

Zayn patted his back, then leaped to attention. “Look, here she comes,” he grinned, pointing right at Louis.

Louis flipped him off.

4 Days After.

“It really happened, huh?” Liam said. There was something disconnected about his voice, like he was talking through a shitty phone speaker from halfway across the world. But he wasn’t; he was right in front of Louis, staring at the wall of screens before him.

Louis itched to make a joke out of it somehow, say something like, nah, you’ve just gotta change the channel mate, there’s Peppa Pig on in five, but the words got stuck in his mouth.

They’d been exploring the bunker—after what happened yesterday, neither of them felt like staying in the main chamber anymore—and they’d happened across a small, unmarked door. It hadn’t been locked, or even very hard to open. Perhaps that was a bad sign, in retrospect.
Louis wasn’t sure why the University would think to install a feed to the campus security cameras all the way down here—to keep an eye on things, he guessed—but it didn’t matter why they’d done it anymore. Because every camera—every last one—showed nothing but static.

“I thought maybe it hadn’t, you know. Like, maybe it was a false alarm like all the other times?” Liam continued, wiping a tear from his eye like it was a piece of dust. “I said to myself, we’ll stay down here for a few days until the radiation metre says it’s safe to go up. Fuck—”

Louis reached for him and dragged him onto a hug. He pressed Liam’s face into his neck and he wound his arms around his torso and he shushed him quietly, because if Louis Tomlinson knew how to do anything when he was falling apart it was how to take care of someone else.

“What’s—oh.”

Louis closed his eyes as he heard Harry stumble through the doorway. He didn’t fucking need this right now, of all the goddam people to get stuck in a bunker with it just had to be—

“We should turn these off,” Harry was saying in that fucking calm robot voice he’d been using for four days straight. “They’ll use up the generator.”

Louis grit his teeth, but made sure his hands were still gentle as they smoothed over Liam’s shaking back.

Louis wanted to kick and scream, do you even fucking feel anything? The world is dead and you care about the generator—but. Liam didn’t need to see that right now.

So, he let Harry stand there and switch off every last screen. Somehow, the blankness was worse than the static. He met Harry’s eyes in the reflection. They stared at each other for a moment, like they were each daring the other to say something. Then, Harry killed the last screen, and the room was filled with darkness.

36 Days Before.

I’m only doing this because if he’s listening to music than he has less time to try and talk to me, Louis thought and he stomped across the university lawn. And because otherwise he’d come knocking, and he might catch me at a vulnerable time.

Really, it didn’t matter what he told himself. Harry’s earphones were burning a hole in his pocket, and the man in question was sitting under a tree and frowning down at a journal in his lap and he looked happy enough except for the fact that he was stuck listening to ambient noise and not even Louis’ worst enemy deserved that.

“Here you go, dickhead. Try to be more careful with your shit,” Louis said once he’d reached Harry.

Harry had just turned his head to frown up at him when Louis dropped the earphones into his lap.

“Oh,” he said, picking them up and inspecting them. “I hadn’t realised I lost them.”

Louis rolled his eyes. He was about the stalk off when he caught sight of his own name on the page Harry had been writing on.
“Oi!” he said, trying to turn his head so he could read it. “Watcha writing?”

Harry jumped a little and slammed the book closed. “Nothing,” he said.

Louis squatted next to him and tried to make a grab for the book. “Nothing, eh?” he mused as Harry scrambled to hide it under his thigh.

Harry sighed but didn’t let his guard down. “It’s just a diary, okay?”

Louis tsked. “Then why am I in it?”

Harry looked horrified for a moment, then shrugged. “Because you’re in my life.”

Well.

Louis stood and stepped away. Harry watched him go, something sad and disappointed hidden away behind his eyes.

“You’d better be making me sound cool,” Louis threatened, for a lack of anything else to say.

Harry smiled, then, the kind of smile that made Louis want to forget he’d ever met him. Made him want to start over. “The coolest,” he said.

And the strange thing was, he said it like he meant it.

60 Days After.

“Louis?”

The word was spoken softly, but it might as well have been a shout.

Louis didn’t look over to the doorway, resisted the urge to take in Harry’s sleep-rumbled face and his big comfy sweater. He could see it well enough in his mind’s eye. He could see it so well, in fact, that the speckles on the ceiling started to take shape, Harry’s perfect lips and his cheekbones and that jawline that could cut glass.

Louis blinked.

The Harry Vision blinked back, and it was immediately clear that Louis wasn’t actually seeing things.

“Louis?” Harry asked again, shuffling closer and taking up more of Louis’ line of sight.

Bugger off.

Louis sighed. “If you’re here to ask me to rehearse with you, don’t bother, mate. I’m busy rotting.”

Harry frowned, little creases appearing in his brow. “Oh.” He sounded confused, disappointed, and more than a little put out. Then, his head was gone from Louis’ view and Louis heard his feet pad back towards the door, felt the vibrations of his footsteps beneath his skin.

He sighed again. “You can join me, if you like,” he mumbled.
Harry paused in the doorway. He shuffled the nervous-man shuffle, then walked back to Louis. He settled down on the floor to Louis’ left, rustling fabric and pursed lips, then laid himself down on the harsh concrete and squinted up at the ceiling.

He turned his head to meet Louis’ eyes, but Louis jerked his head back like he'd been caught doing something naughty by a schoolteacher.

“I've never rotted before,” Harry said. His voice was… too much, this close. In the silence and stillness of the room, his very being was an interruption, a cacophony. “How is it done?”

Louis cleared his throat. “Well, Harold,” he rasped, shuddering a little as trickles of the emotions he'd been shutting out for the past few hours infected his veins again. “You take that big brain of yours out of your skull and let the empty space where it once was gather dust and worms.”

“Oh,” Harry said, folding his hands across his (comfortable, warm, great place to nap maybe) stomach. He was silent for a few minutes, and Louis was able to catch his breath.

Then, Harry shuffled closer. Louis could feel the heat of his arm through both their jumpers. He shivered as Harry spoke. “Am I doing it right?”

“Well, I don't know,” Louis said, aiming for a conversational tone. “Does it feel like you're incapable of feeling love ever again?”

Harry hummed. “Is it supposed to?”

Louis rolled his eyes. “We’re not here to have a picnic, Styles. If you're not gonna rot with me then get off the boat.”

Harry looked around the room—Bunk Room K, dusty and empty and sad. “I didn't realise we were on a boat. Sorry.”

Louis’ lips twitched as Harry followed up his statement by making some boat-related sounds effects (waves, mostly, then some badly-remembered sailing terms).

“You're really bad at this, love,” Louis said, but he couldn't stop his smile from spreading.

Harry twisted onto his side and rested his head on his elbow. Didn't look very comfortable, but he was too busy staring at Louis to notice, it seemed. “Actually, I think I'm great at it.”

Louis let his smile fade. It was nice of Harry to try, but some days he woke up with a cloud over his head and there was nothing much to be done about it. “Why won't you rot with me, Harry?” he asked, and really he was asking a great many questions all at once.

Harry’s eyes darkened and his lips pursed. It wasn't his thinking purse or his disappointed purse; Louis know those well. “I don't think—”

Louis shook his head. He used all the movement he'd been storing up all day to roll on top of Harry, pin him down by the shoulders and look down at his face. “It’s been sixty days since everyone you ever fucking knew died, Harry, and you ‘don't think’?”

Harry looked dazed, blinking up at Louis like he'd been given an unexpected gift, but then his face soured when he processed Louis’ words. “What do you want me to do, Louis? Hold them a funeral?”

“Yes!” Louis hissed, leaning closer. “Something— anything —to stop running from it.”
“Fine,” Harry growled. He pushed at Louis’ shoulders until he let up, and then he was standing on shaking legs and disappearing down the hallway.

Louis sat there blinking after him. His head sounded like crickets.

Harry peaked his head back into the room, blowing a stray curl out of his face in frustration. “Coming?”

Louis couldn’t remember how to say no to Harry (if he was honest, he’d forgotten a few days ago), so he nodded and followed.

49 Days After.

“You know this means you’re going to have to kiss him, right?” Niall asked, eyebrows waggling.

“’s a right shame he's so hideous, then,” Louis shot back, not even looking up from his script.

Niall’s silence was a tangible thing.

Louis glanced up at him. He’d paused his work on the tunic… thing he was stapling together for Leonato. He’d claimed it was his most distinguished work yet, and Louis had smiled and nodded and quite magnanimously not said a word to the contrary.

“You're gonna tell me one day, right?”

Louis’ fingers froze halfway through turning a page. He was trapped under Niall’s gaze just as surely as he was trapped in this bunker; helpless, and a hundred feet underground.

“You already know, lad,” Louis eventually said. It was more than he'd wanted to reveal—sleeping dogs, and all that—but a sharp little tack like Niall picked it up quick.

His eyes widened, then hardened. “No fucking way,” he said, and he sounded so much like Harry even through the accent that Louis contemplated thunking him in the head with his script. “He’s that Harry?”

“Yes,” Louis said instead, putting on an air of patience. “So do you understand why I need you to let it go?”

Niall frowned into the middle distance. “But, that doesn't make any sense, why would he–”

“I don’t know!” Louis hissed. He’d asked himself every question Niall was about to, and he didn't much feel like going through it all again, thank you kindly. “Just… drop it, yeah?”

Niall picked up his costume again and set to work, and Louis turned back to his script, but. He swore he could hear the cogs in Niall’s head turning. He wasn’t sure he’d like what the lad came up with once they stopped.

60 Days After.
Louis knocked on the door to the Music Room.

Niall looked up from where he and Zayn were tinkering with the busted piano in the corner. Neither of them knew a single fucking thing about piano repair, but they’d been at it on and off for a week anyway.

Liam was also there, chilling in the corner and—from the sounds of it—teaching himself how to play *Hotline Bling* on an ocarina.

“Lads, you’re invited to a funeral,” Louis said, trying to project as much gravitas as he could.

Niall didn’t bother to look up from where he was halfway buried in the open back of the grand, but Zayn sent him a dirty look.

“You couldn’t have made it two months before you murdered him?”

Louis scowled at him. “No, and his blood’s cooling as we speak, so.” He stepped back from the doorway and waved exaggeratedly.

Liam finally put his ocarina down and made to stand, but Louis interrupted before he could.

“Actually, bring that. You can use it to play a dirge or something.”

Liam frowned at the ocarina then at Louis, but Niall shoved his shoulder on his way past and he snapped out of it.

Louis led the three of them back towards the main chamber. When he’d left Harry, he’d been out of sight somewhere in the massive stockroom (very boring, lots of tins). He’d called out to Louis to ask him to bring everyone, but he hadn’t really been in a sharing sort of mood about the ceremony he was about to conduct.

So, when Louis stepped into the room and saw a dozen candles lighting the path between the door and a little table decorated with a hastily-scrawled drawing of the Earth and a biscuit tin with the word ‘COFFIN’ written in shaky block letters, he was just as surprised as the rest of the lads were.

Harry cleared his throat. Louis’ eyes snapped to where he was standing behind the table, hands clasped behind his back and a net of some sort arranged over his head like a sad, shitty veil.

“I’d like to say a few words about the planet, if you don’t mind,” he said, sombre as ever.

No wonder Louis could never get a beat on what Harry was feeling, if this was what his sarcasm looked like.

“Um—” Niall started from behind Louis.

Louis shushed him angrily. “It’s a funeral, Niall. Don’t be fucking rude.”

Niall snapped his jaw shut.

Harry’s lips twisted.

“No wonder Louis could never get a beat on what Harry was feeling, if this was what his sarcasm looked like.

“Um—“ Niall started from behind Louis.

Louis shushed him angrily. “It’s a funeral, Niall. Don’t be fucking rude.”

Niall snapped his jaw shut.

Harry’s lips twisted.

“Please, take a seat,” he said, pointing to the ground in front of the table.

Louis was the first to sit down, but the others soon followed.

“She was a mother, a lover, and a friend,” Harry started. “She would walk into a room and light the whole place up. Yes, Liam?”
Liam lowered his hand. “Earth, right? Earth would walk into a room?”

Harry nodded exactly seven times. It was about four nods too many.

“She was a provider; everything we had, we owed to her. And we’ll miss her very much now that she’s gone. No more questions, please.”

Niall and Zayn both lowered their hands.

Louis raised his.

“Yes, Louis?” Harry asked.

Louis ignored the grumbling from behind him and cleared his throat. “Would it be alright if I said a few words?”

Harry nodded and reached up to untangle the veil from his head. He passed it to Louis once he’d gotten himself into position next to the table.

“Cheers,” Louis mumbled, accepting the veil. He didn’t bother organising it all pretty-like the way Harry had done; he just dumped it on his head and started talking. “Mother Earth was a wicked girl to have at parties. She once slammed fifty cruisers then whooped my mate Stan’s ass at pool.”

Harry coughed—a poor attempt at covering up a laugh, but Louis couldn’t fault him for it.

“She was strong, and loyal, and a bit unpredictable. We all loved her a lot, since, y’know, we lived on her. And we still do, so, in some ways, she continues on through all of us.” Louis patted the drawing softly, and the paper crinkled under his touch. “I’m just sorry that her nine billion other children aren’t here to see her go.”

Harry raised his hand, but he didn’t wait for Louis’ permission to speak (quite rude, that). “Um, that’s actually the next part,” he said, gesturing to the drawing.

Louis frowned and picked it up. He tried not to snort when he saw what was scribbled on the back—a stick figure with a top hat, an ‘x’, and the number ‘9 Billion’—because that would be insensitive and distasteful. “Right,” Louis announced, placing the drawing back with the human side facing outwards this time. “Would anyone like to say something about the human race?”

Liam jumped up and snatched the veil off Louis’ head.

Louis grumbled a little and fussed with his hair as he sat back down. He didn’t mean to sit next to Harry, but that’s exactly what he did.

“The human race had its faults,” Liam said. Already, his tone was much more sincere than either Louis or Harry had managed. “But it was a beautiful thing. My family, all of your families, they didn’t deserve an ending like this. I like to think they’re happy somewhere, maybe sinking cruisers with mother earth in heaven or something. Everyone except the fuckers that did this to us, the ones that pushed those buttons. Those assholes can rot in hell for eternity while satan eats their testicles. Amen.”

Liam took the veil off his head, a little pink in the cheeks.

He hesitated for a moment about where to put it, but then Zayn hopped up and took it from him gently.
“Thanks, Liam. That was…lovely,” he said, patting him on the shoulder.

Liam slumped back to his seat.

Zayn didn’t put the veil on—he was much too cool for that, Louis understood—but he did hold it and stare at it contemplatively. “When I woke up on the day that it ended,” he said, a faraway look in his eyes. “I think I knew something was going to happen. I called my sisters just to say hi, and they made fun of me for being so homesick. Home is one of the concepts we’re laying to rest today, right? We’re saying goodbye to home, to televisions, to all the food in the world except the shite that’s down here. To shopping malls and skyscrapers and farms with rowdy goats and angry chickens. Hell, maybe all the chickens didn’t make it, not just the angry runs. Chicken Run, the movie, certainly didn’t. So,” Zayn paused, swallowed the lump in his throat, and continued, “on behalf of the human race that did this to you, Earth; I’m sorry. We’ll miss you as you were. And, on behalf of the Earth that made us; fuck the human race, we deserve everything we got because we did it all to ourselves.”

There was a moment of silence in the chamber. Zayn was shaking a little, Louis was staring down at his lap, Harry was staring at Louis, Liam was frowning at the stick figure in the drawing, and Niall was sitting back, head tipped up to the ceiling.

“Do you think there’s five other daft dickheads in a bunker half a mile West holding a funeral for Earth right now?”

Louis startled and looked over to him. “No,” he said, a sharp grin overtaking his features. “Because no one’s as daft as us, lad.”

Niall looked down from the roof. He smiled back at Louis.

“So, is there cake at this wake?” Liam asked, rubbing his hands on his thighs. “I could slam a cake.”

Harry snorted. “There’s dried apricots and cocoa powder,” he replied.

Liam winced. “It’ll do.”

He and Harry wondered off to find it, Niall in tow a moment later. Louis stood and stretched his legs, then walked over to Zayn.

“Chicken Run was a good movie, huh?” he said, taking the net from his hands and tossing it over the table. “Let’s go find some chemicals to sniff before Liam remembers I made him bring that ocarina and tries to play My Heart Will Go On or some shite.”

Zayn blinked at him, eyes coming in to focus. “Yeah, okay.”

0 Days After, 0 Days Before.

“C’mon, guys, just one more practice run,” Liam whined. He shook his flash cards in the air like that might diffuse the situation.

Louis didn’t stop glaring at Harry, and Harry didn’t stop doing that creepy-laser-focus-stare right back, and Niall and Zayn’s eyelids didn’t stop drooping.
“At this point I think we’ve stayed later than the security guards,” Niall mumbled into his fist.

“The security guards are here all night, Niall,” Liam replied.

“Exactly!” Niall waved his hand vaguely. “That shows you how late we’ve bloody stayed.”

Liam opened his mouth to retort when his phone buzzed. Before he could even glance at it, Louis’ joined in, too, then Niall’s and Zayn’s and Harry’s. It was a chorus of angry vibrations, and everyone scrambled to check their notifications.

No calls, just a stream of frightened text messages and one very calm one that chilled them all to the bones.

*Nuclear strike alert, it said, civilian evacuation ordered. Retreat to your nearest bunker.*

Louis cursed and jumped up. “How do we get to the university bunker?” he asked, snatching up his keys and his pencil case.

“Leave it,” Harry hissed, batting the things from Louis’ hands. “We have to go. Now.”

Liam led the charge out of the study room, bricking it for the front entrance. He reached the lawn in record speed, the rest of the boys hot on his heels. There was no one else out, not a person in sight. The sky—which had just ten minutes ago been pitch black—was lit up with purples, blues, and reds. It would have been beautiful, if it wasn’t for the white dot in the middle of it all getting larger and larger each second.

“Its from space,” Niall whispered. “That means we’re *all* fucked, a bunker’s not gonna do shit.”

But Liam wasn’t listening.

“The uni said it’s protected even from satellite strikes,” he argued. The wind was whipping his hair up into a frenzy.

In a wild moment of clarity, Louis looked around at his friends and he knew that the world was about to end.

It was Zayn who snapped them into motion.

“Come on,” he yelled, ripping open the centre of the statue on the main lawn to reveal a ladder. He started scrambling down, and Louis rushed to follow. He remembered this from orientation, but he’d forgotten how deep it went.

“Faster, go faster,” Liam urged, pulling up the rear.

“Fuck you,” Zayn hissed back, almost losing his grip. Louis tried not to look down; it was too dark to see how far it went.

And then, it was too dark to see how *anything* went, because Liam slammed the metal cover back into place, shutting them all inside.

Louis didn’t know how long it took to climb down that ladder. All he knew was the beating of his own heart, the sound of scrambling boots and sweaty skin on rusty metal, and Niall’s harsh breaths.

They’d gotten to the bottom and heaved the thick hatch closed by the time the bomb struck. It shook the whole world, the bunker around them shuddering like a toy in the fist of a toddler. Louis curled up with his head in his hands until it stopped.
But once it stopped, he learned that silence was worse.

“That wasn’t enough time,” he whispered.

“What?” Liam asked, still out of breath.

Niall was clinging to the ground, and there was something wild in his eyes that Louis didn’t like the look of.

Zayn was still gripping the wheel on the hatch, like he was considering just opening it back up and flooding the bunker with the radiation that ten feet of lead were soaking up.

Harry was kneeling on the ground, his back to everyone else. He was shaking, perhaps even crying quietly. Louis wanted to reach out to comfort him, but. There hadn’t been enough time.

“Enough time for what, Louis,” Zayn begged.

Louis met his eyes and saw that he already knew the answer, he just didn’t want to be the one to say it.

“Enough time for anyone else to get to a bunker,” Louis said. “We barely made it in, and we were fifty metres from one. Most people are half an hour from the nearest, if that. Unless they’re rich enough to afford their own.” The words had only just begun to sink in when Louis twisted the knife deeper. “There was enough time for those government fuckheads pull their own trigger, though.” He grinned, sniggered. “Mutually assured destruction. Never thought I’d see the day.”

Niall’s breaths sped up, but Harry’s back stopped shaking.

“Louis,” he growled, twisting around so Louis could see the darkness in his eyes and the tear tracks on his cheeks. “Shut the fuck up, will you?”

Louis did.

61 Days After.

This time, it was Louis who sought Harry out.

He didn’t want to think about why—because he knew why, and it had everything to do with Niall’s judging glances for the past week and a half. He’d even made Louis write down his feelings so he could properly process—it was driving him nuts.

Harry was an easy person to find. As large as the bunker was—you know, for a bunker—it wasn’t exactly the streets of London. There were only so many places one could hide.

And hiding, Harry wasn’t; he was sitting behind an easel in the art room, hair up in a messy bun, covering a sheet of paper in paint.

He looked up for a moment when Louis walked in—just long enough for something to soften around his eyes—and then he was back to staring at his creation.

Louis circled around carefully, then eyed the painting. It was an abstract work, full of colours and swirls and lines. It didn’t look messy, per se, but it also didn’t look organised. Louis wasn’t sure what
“It’s my sister,” Harry mumbled, swiping some pink onto his brush and dotting it onto the paper.

Louis hummed. “She’s got a lovely smile,” he said, pointing to a squiggly circle in the top left corner.

Harry huffed a surprised laugh and lowered his brush finally. He washed it out in a tiny jar of water, then turned on his stool to look at Louis. “Did you want something?”

Louis crossed his arms over his chest like that would help him feel less exposed. It didn’t work, of course, because he’d always be an open wound around Harry.

“Just to see if you wanted to rehearse some more,” Louis said.

Harry studied him for a moment, surprise colouring his features.

“Are you feeling alright?”

Louis jutted his chin out. “Fine. Why?”

Harry shrugged. “You’ve never willingly asked me to spend time with you before. Think it might have something to do with how much you hate me.”

Louis felt like he’d been stabbed. “I don’t hate you,” he forced out.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “My apologies. I only got that impression from the dozens of times you’ve told me you hate me.”

Obviously I didn’t mean it, dickhead, Louis stopped himself from saying. It wouldn’t exactly help his case to lie to Harry; after all, he had meant it. For the most part.

“Yeah, well,” Louis spat, rocking back on his heels. “You’re a big boy. Change my mind.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Oh, so it’s my problem, now?” he asked, and Louis might have backtracked if it wasn’t for the mischievous twinkle to his eyes.

“Yes,” Louis sniffed. “Isn’t that right, Gemma?” He directed the question to the painting over Harry’s shoulder, then nodded firmly. “She agrees. You’re outnumbered.”

Harry glanced at the painting then back at Louis, something that looked suspiciously like wonder taking over his features. “I don’t remember telling you her name,” he said, tilting his head to the side.

Louis froze.

Harry didn’t remember.

It had occurred to him before that some kind of selective amnesia could explain Harry’s behaviour, but he’d always dismissed the theory as ridiculous; they hadn’t been that drunk. But now, suddenly, it made far too much sense.


He didn’t remember.

It was all too much. Louis turned and made for the door, anything to escape the thoughts swirling around in his head. He wasn’t sure if this changed anything, or if. If maybe it changed everything,
and that was scarier somehow.

“Louis, wait! I thought you wanted to rehearse?” Harry called after him.

Louis waved over his shoulder, pasting a slightly manic grin on his face. “Lots to do first, Harold, I’m a busy man.”

With that, he fled.

105 Days Before.

“Tommo!” Niall roared. His cheeks were flushed and his hair was a sweaty mess, but god if he wasn’t a sight for sore eyes.

“Hiya, Niall,” Louis mumbled, wrapping him in a hug.

He’d barely dragged himself out of bed for this party—made a token effort to do his hair then ended up shoving it under a beanie instead—and he realised as he pressed his face into Niall’s shoulder that he’d forgotten to take his glasses off.

He didn’t really need them, but they reminded him of his mum, fretting around him at the optometrist’s and telling him how handsome he looked. He wore them when he was too tired to squint at things, or when he needed a bit of comfort. Today was a ‘both’ situation.

“What’s wrong, Lou?” Niall asked, pulling back. They weren’t best mates, exactly (he was still more Liam’s friend than Louis’), but even in his drunken state he managed to make it seem like he genuinely cared.

“I kinda failed my recital yesterday,” Louis said, nose twitching. He’d been wallowing about it all day and it still hadn’t been enough to lessen the sting. “I was so nervous, I fucking slaughtered it.”

Niall made a sad noise, then he was jostled by a partygoer behind him. “Well, fuck that!” he burped, snatching a cup from a nearby table and dragging Louis into the kitchen. He started pouring a whole bunch of random bullshit into it—complete with theatrical swishes and a rather loud, “abracadabra!”—and then he pushed his creation into Louis’ hands.

“If that doesn’t cheer you up, nothing will.” He grinned toothily.

Louis eyed the concoction warily. He raised it to his face to take a delicate sniff when his attention was caught by someone halfway across the room.

It was a boy. He looked about Louis’ age, as everyone at this party did, but there was something almost timeless about the waves of curly hair framing his cherubic face. He looked like some sort of greek god slash model, dressed rather oddly in a large, garish jumper and floral patterned jeans. The boy seemed to feel his gaze on him. He looked up, eyes searching then landing on Louis. He was a little fuzzy around the edges, like a drawing that had been half-erased, but his eyes were a clear, sharp green.

Louis took a swig out of his cup. He barely winced as the gross mixture went down, burning his oesophagus on the way. He was too busy willing his cheeks to not colour as the boy smiled at him.
“Yeah, there ya go!” Niall cheered.

Louis waved at the boy—a shy wiggling of fingers.

The boy blinked, then waved back.

13 Days Before.

Louis had come back for his pen. It was a nice pen, and it was hard to come by nice pens when you weren’t really in the habit of going looking for them (or, when you didn’t have the funds to do so). So, Louis had come back for it.

Perfectly innocent.

Except for the part when he’d had to crouch under the table to pick it up, and of course that was the same time the door to the study room had decided to open.

“I just don’t know why, Zayn,” Harry said, a forlorn edge to his voice. “It feels like no matter how hard I try, no matter how close I get to him maybe liking me, he just. Shuts me down, and it’s… exhausting. Am I doing something wrong?”

Louis frowned, tuning out the sound of his heartbeat thundering in his ears. Who could be upsetting Harry so? Louis wasn’t sure if he wanted to stab them or congratulate them, since both urges were equally loud.

He heard Zayn sigh. “I don’t think it’s about you, mate,” he said, then paused to yawn. “You might just have to accept that he’s always gonna be a prick to you and move on.”

Harry’s feet shuffled on the carpet. They were the only part of him Louis could see at that moment; soft brown leather Chelsea boots, almost worn to rags.

“But he’s not always a prick, Z, that’s the problem. Sometimes he, like. Forgets, or something, and he’s so wonderful to be around. You have to think so; he’s your friend.”

Louis was starting to get an idea of who they were talking about, and he’d like off this ride, now, please.

“Louis is a great guy,” Zayn said slowly. “But he’s also a stubborn ass. You’d be better off leaving it to rest, alright?”

With that, his paint-stained chucks made for the door. Harry sighed, the Chelsea boots pigeon-toeing for a moment. Then, they started walking after Zayn.

Louis counted to thirty in his head, squeezing the stupid pen in his hand as a gentle revenge for the mess it had gotten him into.

Well, if it isn’t the consequences of my actions, he thought drily, finally pushing himself to his feet. What a surprise.

That night, he drowned his sorrows in cheap beer and crap tv.
Louis knew, he knew, that picking Beatrice was going to come back round to bite him in the ass. It had been a sort of sacrifice play; he’d been counting on it all being worth it for the glory of making Harry just as uncomfortable as he was.

And. Yet. Standing there watching Niall (as Ursula) and Zayn (as Hero) practice Act III Scene I, knowing that if he looked to his left he’d see a very frown-y Harold did absolutely fuckall to soothe the ribbons of discomfort their words were causing.

Louis had taken a look at a scab on his side and decided to let children poke at it with sticks for a month just to make someone else slightly nauseous. What a joke.

“But I persuaded them, if they lov’d Benedick, to wish him to wrestle with affection, and never to let Beatrice know of it,” Zayn said, not even stumbling over a single word, the bastard.

“Why did you do so?” Niall asked, face the very picture of concern.

Zayn placed a hand over his heart. “Nature never fram’d a woman’s heart of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice,” — it’s not pride, its principle, Louis was a good person— “disdain and scorn rise sparkling in her eyes,” — his friends were supposed to support him, weren’t they? But, then, he hadn’t exactly told anyone but Niall about it, so what were they supposed to think? The whole thing was a bloody mess— “and her wit values itself so highly, that to her all matter else seems weak,” — and there was Harry, head hung low as he listened, fingers tapping against the arm folded across his chest— “she cannot love, nor take no shape nor project of affection,” — and if Louis was braver he’d do it right now, he’d confront him, he’d make his anger someone else’s fucking problem for once, anything to just let go of it, but he’d built this bed with his own two hands and now, “she is so self-endear’d,” he had to lie in it.

And he knew that Hero’s words were meant for Beatrice, meant to manipulate her into falling in love with Benedick (or, at least, seeing the error of her ways). He knew that, and Harry knew that, and this was all just a ridiculous farce of a production that five idiots were putting on to convince themselves that the rest of their lives could mean something, that it didn’t always have to be like how it was.

So, why. Why did it feel like every word was carving out a chunk of Louis’ skin?

“…Therefore Benedick,” Zayn was saying, “like cover’d fire, consume away in sighs, waste inwardly; it were a better death than die with mocks. Which—”

Harry stormed from the room. Zayn cut himself off to watch him go, something a shade or two darker than regret in his eyes.

Louis clenched his jaw, then clicked a few times to get Niall and Zayn’s attention.

“Keep going,” he said, making himself smile. “That was really good.”
“Lou?”

Louis hunched for a moment, closing his eyes and counting to ten. Then, he made himself stand tall and set his shoulders and open his eyes to face the world (or, well, the dusty shelves of the stock room), because his mother hadn’t raised a coward. No; she’d raised someone sweet and kind, someone who he hadn’t seen in the mirror in a while.

Not that there were mirrors down here. Or mothers, for that matter.

What they had instead was tinned beetroots and tuna paste.

“Louis?”

Louis resisted the urge to slam his head against the shelf. “Yeah, what?” he called back.

He heard Harry pause, saw his blurry form still through a gap in the shelves. Harry turned, then met his eyes.

Louis had to squint a little to see the expression on his face; concern.

“Are you alright? I know it’s not any of my business,” he started, ducking around the aisles and approaching Louis with his hands out, “but I thought I’d ask, in case you wanted to talk.”

What Louis wanted to do was hug his sisters again. What Louis wanted to do was burn every copy of Much Ado About Nothing that had ever existed, then sock Shakespeare in the jaw for daring to suggest he had anything to say about spite or love. What Louis wanted, was to go back in time to that night and do it all over again, relive the world as it was meant to be. Living people—more than five of them—and fresh air and trees and comfy beds and his family just a phone call away.

Harry seemed to catch at least some of that on his face, because he smiled softly.

“Do you want me to go first?”

Louis swallowed the lump in his throat and pulled up a sneer, because that was easier than being honest. “By all means, Harry. Tell me all about how well-adjusted you are and how much better you’re handling this than me. I’d love to hear it.”

Harry shook his head, eyes shiny. “Grief isn’t a competition, Louis. I haven’t won and you haven’t lost. It’s just a feeling, like anything else, and all we can do is try.”

“Try to—what, to cope? To move on?”

Harry winced, but he powered ahead. “No, Louis. Try to live.”

“I’m doing that,” Louis hissed, bunching the sleeves of his sweater to wipe angrily at the tears that he couldn’t stop from spilling down his cheeks. “But you being here doesn’t exactly make that easy for me, Harry.”

A sharp inhale of breath, a small step backwards; Louis didn’t look up to see the hurt on Harry’s face. Not again. He’d had enough.

He relaxed back against the shelf and laughed up at the ceiling. “And you don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you. I’ve been… I’ve been so fucking awful to you all this time, for what? For nothing. What’s the fucking point of it all, H?”

Harry was quiet for a long while. Louis comforted himself with the sound of his breathing—deep,
even, sure.

When Harry spoke, finally, it was with words that weren’t his own.

“Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?”

Louis huffed another short laugh. He let his head drop so he could meet Harry’s gaze. He found nothing in it but comfort.

“Yes,” Louis rasped, then licked his lips. “And I will weep a while longer.”

Harry’s lips downturned, examining Louis’ face as if so injuries. “I will not desire that.”

Why the fuck not, love? After everything—

But that wasn’t how the scene went.

“You have no reason,” Louis said, smiling as reassuringly as he could manage at this beautiful, kind man. “I do it freely.”

Harry watched his lips as he spoke, then raised a hand to cup Louis’ cheek, smearing another tear into his skin. Louis stopped breathing, then a moment later, his heart stopped beating as well. “I do love nothing in the world so well as you,” Harry breathed, eyes flickering between Louis’ like a starved man. Louis’ heart had only just begun to beat again when Harry smiled crookedly. “Is not that strange?”

He doesn’t mean it, Louis thought, getting out his mental butterfly net so he could put a stop to his squirming stomach. But the butterflies broke through the net, and he couldn’t stop their message of hope from taking over. Maybe he means it a little?

Harry leaned closer, so close Louis could smell the porridge he’d had for breakfast on his breath. It shouldn’t have been so comforting, that.

“Tell me you don’t hate me, and I promise I’ll believe you this time,” Harry pleaded.

Louis shook his head. “I don’t. That’s the god’s honest truth.”

It’s just not all of it.

“Okay, then,” Harry whispered, licking his lips. “Am I still expected to change your mind?”

Louis frowned, then remembered his words in the Art Room not an hour before. The fucking butterflies made their way into his brain, infecting his thoughts with their ridiculous fantasies.

“Yes,” they said, using Louis’ lips. “Do your worst, Signor.”

Harry smirked devilishly, a stark contrast to the sweetness from a moment ago.

“Darling,” he drawled, almost mockingly. It sent a shiver down Louis’ spine. “I don’t think you’re ready for my worst.”

Louis tilted his chin up high, ignoring the pitter-pattering of his heart. “Bring it on, punk,” he sneered, using the exaggerated 50’s greaser accent he’d failed to perfect in time for his leading role in Grease.

But, it startled a laugh from Harry, a soft, “alright,” and it broke the tension. Louis was able to walk
out with his head on straight and his heart intact (for now).

That didn’t mean it hadn’t been monumentally stupid, to let himself think there might be a chance for him and Harry. The last time he thought that, he’d had his heart broken.

105 Days Before.

Louis had never met anyone as perfect for him as Harry. They’d danced and drunk and stole flirty glances over plastic cups and now they were sitting on Niall’s tiny, shitty balcony, huddled under a blanket and passing a blunt back and forth. It was the most intimate night he’d ever spent with someone, let alone a perfect stranger.

And that’s exactly what Harry was; perfect.

He told shitty jokes and he grinned so wide, but he was also so thoughtful and oddly inscrutable. His hands were so big but so gentle, and Louis couldn’t decide if he’d rather wrap him up in hugs and kisses and never let him leave, or let Harry do the same to him.

Both, he decided, watching Harry take a drag then blow the smoke out at the moon. Both was good.

“My sister told me when I was a kid that weed makes you grow warts on your… you know,” he mumbled, then passed the joint back to Louis. “She’s since denied it, of course, but. I thought it was true until I was literally sixteen years old.”

Louis snorted around the joint, leading to a mini coughing fit. Harry laughed and patted him on the back, then conveniently forgot to take his hand back.

Louis leaned further against him, enjoying the happy little sound Harry made as he rearranged the blanket around their shoulders. “She sounds like a right diva,” Louis said, hiding his face in Harry’s neck. At some point in the evening he’d lost his beanie, but the glasses had stayed on his face.

“What’s her name?”

“Gemma,” Harry said through a smile. “And yeah, she is. You’ll love her.”

Louis pulled his head back to stare at Harry. He didn’t look like someone who’d just told a person he’d met that same night that they’d get along with his family; he just looked like himself, doughy and sweet and everything Louis hadn’t known he’d been missing.

“Sorry, that was really forward,” Harry said, like he’d only just come to that realisation.

Louis snorted, then huddled closer to press a kiss to Harry’s cheek. Then, because he couldn’t see any reason not to, he pressed another to Harry’s nose, then to his other cheek. He hovered for a moment over Harry’s lips, daring himself to just fucking go for it, when Harry pulled away.

“I know I’ve had about four different kinds of illicit substances tonight,” Harry said, pupils blown wide but steady all the same. “But I hope you don’t think that’s why I’m saying this.”

“Saying what?” Louis asked, holding his breath.

Harry grinned, wide and brighter than the moon above. “I can tell I’m gonna marry you one day. I can just…feel it.”
Louis wriggled his legs until he was straddling Harry, and Harry’s smile grew impossibly wider as he wrapped his arms and the blanket around Louis’ shoulders. “That’s a bit bloody presumptuous, Harold,” Louis teased, poking Harry in the dimple. “Who says I’m a marrying sort?”

Harry hummed. “The fact that you haven’t run screaming does,” he replied, arching his eyebrows. “Clearly, we’re both insane.”

“Well, then we’re in good company,” Louis said, taking a final drag of their half-forgotten joint before it burnt itself out. He tilted his head questioningly, and Harry tilted his head right back. Not a need for a single word.

Louis leant forwards to blow the smoke into Harry’s waiting mouth, then he chased it up with a kiss. You’re gonna marry me one day? Louis thought, nipping at Harry’s lip until he moaned prettily. Not if I marry you first.

97 Days Before.

“Are you sure you don’t know who he was?”

Niall sighed again and took a swig of his larger. Liquid courage, he’d said, though Louis couldn’t fathom Niall needing it. The pub they were in was packed with students from their uni, sweaty and loud and an all around good fucking time.

Not that Louis could enjoy it, in his current state. All he’d been doing for the last eight days was whining and feeling sorry for himself.

“Look, Louis,” Niall said, staring him down. Louis could tell he’d worn his patience thin. “He was probably one of Zayn’s friends or something, I’ve never heard of him. And, you know,” he gulped, softened his gaze. “He was gone in the morning, babe. You might just have to accept that he doesn’t want you to find him.”

Louis shook his head vigorously. “You weren’t there, lad. I know he was into me, you can’t fake it that much.”

Then why did he leave? asked Niall’s eyes. But he was too nice to say the words himself.

Louis cleared his throat and twisted his lips into a shaky smile. “But hey, enough about me, yeah? This is your big night!” He jostled Niall’s shoulder, causing the lad to spill some of his drink.

Niall brightened at the mention of his upcoming performance. “I’m shitting myself,” he giggled “Didn’t think there’d be so many people here.”

Louis pulled him in for a hug. “I know that there’s five other blokes performing, but they’re all definitely here for you.”

Niall laughed and hugged him back. “Thanks, Louis. Shit, I think I’ve gotta go.” He jumped off the stool and raced off. Louis turned to see his soft brown hair disappear in the crowd, headed for a backstage door that a staff member was waving frantically out of.

By the time Niall took to the stage, Louis had downed the rest of his larger. No use letting it go to
waste.

“Good evening, everybody,” Niall murmured, eyes flitting over the crowd.

Louis whooped obnoxiously, and Niall grinned.

“I’ll be playing a couple songs for you tonight. Hope you like Michael Bublé.” He perched himself on the wooden stool and started plucking out the happy little intro to Haven’t Met You Yet. Louis pulled out his phone and started recording, because Liam couldn’t make it and he’d made Louis promise to send him videos.

As he recorded, he looked around the pub. He expected to see some smiles, some interested looks, and a lot of foot tapping. What he didn’t expect to see was Harry Styles cuddled up in a booth with some random greasy bloke who was making heart eyes at him.

Louis fumbled a little, almost dropping the phone. When did his hands get so sweaty? And when did Harry get a boyfriend?

It’s only been eight fucking days, Louis thought, swallowing a hysterical laugh. Lad works fast.

And, for that matter: fuck that guy.

Louis had woken up in a blissful state of happiness after their night together. They’d barely even had sex, and it still felt like he’d connected with someone on a deeper level than he ever had before. All of his anxieties about love, about relationships; none of them even crossed his mind, when Harry was smiling at him. He was ready to turn around and tell him that he’d like to be his boyfriend, crazy as that sounded, when he realised that the bed was empty.

He remembered Harry getting up to take a piss at some point in the early morning, and apparently he just…hadn’t come back. At the time, Louis had shrugged it off; maybe he had an early class? Small campus like this one, he’d find Harry soon enough.

So he asked around, but no one seemed to know who he was. And the days just kept passing. Louis had still held out hope, though; he knew that he and Harry had something special. They’d find each other and laugh about how silly they were not to exchange numbers, and then that would be it.

But now Louis was in a crowded pub listening to his friend sing Michael Bublé and Harry was right there, for the first time in more than a week, and he had someone else.

Louis blinked away tears. They weren’t even tears of sadness; they were tears of anger. Absolute fucking fury.

How cruel must you be to lie to someone about seeing a future with them, then immediately turn around and find a new toy to play with? Louis thought he’d gotten to know Harry, that night. Apparently he’d only met an empty shell of a person.

“Oh, I might have to wait, I’ll never give up,” Niall sang. His voice was wonderful as always, hints of his accent peaking through the words. “I guess it’s half timing and the other half’s luck.” Harry was mouthing along to the words. The man he was cuddled against kissed his cheek, and he turned his head to smile at him. Louis wanted to throw up. “Wherever you are, whenever it’s right, you’ll come out of nowhere and into my life.”

Louis wrenched his eyes away from the scene and focused on Niall on stage, shining like the star he was always meant to be. You happy, mum? Louis thought savagely. I opened my heart to love like you told me. And it went about as well as could be expected.
Niall found Louis in the crowd and smiled at him blearily through the stage lights. “And I know that we can be so amazing, and baby your love is gonna change me,” he sang. Louis smiled back as widely as he could make his aching cheeks go, and sent him a thumbs up. He decided very firmly to not look back at Harry for the rest of the night. “And now I can see every possibility, mmm….”
Time Brings All Things Together

244 Days Before.

“I don’t even need them, mum,” Louis said, soft and reasonable.

“Hush, now. You’re going off to university in a month, Boobear. Can’t have you squinting at the board.”

Louis reached up to still her hand, trapping it in his own before it could pull a pair off the wall. The optometrist was loitering behind them, and it made Louis nervous.

“I can just sit at the front if we can’t afford them, mum,” he whispered.

Jay tugged her hands back gently, then reached up to frame his face. “We can afford whatever you need to succeed, darling,” she said, wiggling his cheeks until he laughed and ducked away.

“Fine, alright. But only if we can find the most ruggedly handsome pair,” he joked. To punctuate his request, he tried on a pair of bedazzled pink cat-eye frames.

Jay hid her laugh behind a hand, body shaking with it. “It’s definitely that one, Louis.”

Louis looked in the mirror tried to pull off Blue Steel with the frames still on. “I think so, too,” he said.

Jay shook her head fondly, then a more serious-looking pair down. “How about these, love?”

Louis swapped them onto his face. They made him look softer, like an alternate dimension Louis who’d done well in school and stuttered when he talked to cute boys. (Come to think of it, stuttering was probably a better strategy than ‘be so insanely loud that they can’t not notice you’, because that one hadn’t yielded much success so far).

“I don’t hate them,” he allowed.

Jay wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Her scarf tickled his cheek, but he leant into the embrace. “I think they make you look handsome.”

Louis gasped. “They’re magic glasses from a wizard–“

Jay laughed and waved him off. “We’ll get these ones, thanks,” she said to the eager optometrist.

Louis had to take the glasses off so that they could put in the right lenses for him, and he tried not to wince at the price as his mum paid.

He didn’t try to talk her out of it again. He knew she wouldn’t listen.

And besides, they did make him look handsome.

62 Days After.
Louis had been hoping to lie low for a few days, sulking and eating all the chocolate-flavoured protein bars, but Niall had other plans.

“C’mon, Louis. We’re five days from opening night and we’ve still got a few costumes to organise. Please?”

Louis sighed and removed the pillow from his face. “Will you carry me to the Art Room?” he asked, putting on his most pathetic pout. He hadn’t bothered cutting his hair since he’d been down here, so he was sure some very impressing bedhead enhanced the display.

Niall sighed and crossed his arms. “If I ask you what happened, are you going to tell me?”

Louis let the pout melt away. “Harry doesn’t remember me.”

Niall frowned, eyes bugging out of his head a little with the force of his alarm. “Did he hit his head or something–”

Louis flapped a hand in the air dismissively. “No, from before. He doesn’t remember when we first met.”

Niall wiped a hand down his face. “Jesus, Louis. Gave me a heart attack. Wait–” he peeked through the gap in his fingers. “He doesn’t remember Zayn’s party? That explains a lot, actually.”

“Yeah,” Louis said, letting his eyes fall closed. “It also means I’ve been the world’s biggest cunt to him for no fucking reason.”

He felt the mattress dip as Niall settled down next to him. He patted Louis’ face softly in that, there, there, diddums way you do when you’re making fun of someone in your head but don’t want to be rude.

“I wouldn’t say the world’s biggest cunt,” Niall reasoned, now massaging his fingers into Louis’ skin. He giggled to himself, and Louis batted his hand away. “Anyway, you know now, so you can finally start being nice to him, yeah?”

“I suppose,” Louis mumbled.

“Do you wanna maybe start by…” Niall said, leaning closer. “Helping with the costumes?”

Louis squinted up at Niall. “Do you wanna maybe carry me?”

Niall made a face at him. “If my knees give out, I’m blaming you.”

Louis laughed and wrapped his arms around Niall’s neck.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” he snapped, hefting his Louis’ torso over his shoulder then waddling out of the room.

Louis’ stomach dug into Niall’s shoulder blade and his legs dangled uncomfortably until Niall fixed up his hold, but he was to busy giggling to care.

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it,” he wheezed, clinging on for dear life.

Niall wobbled a bit, nearly crashing them into a wall.
“You’re heavier than you look, Tommo,” he panted.

Louis’ head nearly wacked into the doorframe as Niall stumbled into the Art Room. He was deposited atop a desk rather briskly, and he had to scramble to hang on as Niall grasped his knees and tried to catch his breath.

Someone started clapping, and Louis looked over to see Harry sitting a few desks away, eyebrows raised as he applauded.

Louis tamped down his immediate instinct to throw an insult at him, instead choosing to bow theatrically. “Have you tried the Niall Express yet, Harold? ‘S bloody fun.”

“For you, maybe,” Niall moaned. He gave up and collapsed onto the floor, starfishing out. “And don’t even think about it, H. I could barely carry the little one.”

“Oi!” Harry and Louis said in tandem.

“Who you calling little, stickboy?” Louis joked, poking Niall’s ankle with his toe.

“I’m not that big,” Harry mumbled.

“Course not, Harry,” Louis said, wiggling his toe against the sole of Niall’s foot until he grumbled and snatching his leg back. “Niall’s just jealous because you’re a meal and he’s a snack.”

Niall lifted himself onto his elbows to glower at him, and Louis poked his tongue out in response. The, he made the mistake of glancing over at Harry. Harry was smiling at him dazedly, pink-cheeked and all kinds of beautiful.

“Right, um,” Louis stuttered, looking back at Niall. “We’re making costumes?”

63 Days After.

“Zayn?”

Zayn blinked up at him blearily. He was sitting in his room, back pressed against the metal frame of one of the bunkbeds. Louis hadn’t seen him in two days, and judging by the piles of food wrappers Zayn had been in here that whole time.

“Louis,” Zayn answered, a measured response. “Hi.”

Louis picked his way through the detritus and crouched down next to him. He opened his arm up for Zayn to crawl under, but the man shook his head.

“D’you wanna talk about it, love?”

Zayn sighed. “It’s just...I don’t know where Mecca is anymore.”

Louis frowned. “Like…metaphorically, or?”

Zayn sent him a sidelong look, then nudged his chin against Louis’ arm until he lifted it up again for Zayn to snuggle under. “Not a metaphor, Lou. I was just thinking after that funeral we did, about my family and stuff. My dad never put pressure on us to be devout or anything, but I was raised Muslim.
I haven’t prayed in four fucking months, before we even… Before the fucking apocalypse or whatever–”

Louis winced.

“–and now I don’t even know which direction Mecca is. It should be so simple, and I don’t even know anymore, it’s–”

“Alright. It’s alright,” Louis shushed, tugging Zayn closer. “Christ, you’re a bony one, aren’t you,” he mumbled. Zayn shifted his shoulder so it wasn’t digging in to Louis’ side with a mumbled, sorry.

Louis patted his back as he thought about what to do. It took about three seconds before he’d decided, which was always a bad sign.

“So, Mecca,” Louis said, clearing his throat. “Where did you last see it?”

Zayn froze then pulled back, brow wrinkled in confusion. “What?”

Louis powered on. “You’ve lost it, right? Well, when you lose things, you’re supposed to sit down and have a think about where you last had it. So…?”

Zayn’s face started to clear. He scratched at his beard—two days of growth had filled it out quite a lot. “That’s not bad, actually.”

Louis grinned.

Zayn shifted suddenly, pulling himself up to stand on two shaky legs. He offered Louis a hand, but Louis waved him off. Zayn shrugged then started down the hallway, Louis hot on his heels.

“Where are we going?” Louis asked.

“I need to retrace my steps,” Zayn answered, turning left then right then left again until they burst into the main chamber.

“Ah, of course,” Louis nodded. “So, up there,” Louis pointed to the hatch, “is the weird modern art statue on the library lawn, which makes that,” he pointed slightly to the left of the hatch, “the library.”

Zayn nodded. “Last time I prayed was in my dorm room, if I can just—”

Louis clicked frantically. “Wait here!”

Zayn frowned after him as he took off into the stock room. Louis paused as he entered, overcome with memories of the last time he’d been in here, but he pushed them away. It only took a minute to find what he was looking for, then he was back out in the main chamber handing a pencil and a poster espousing the nutritional benefits of the Bunker Mealplan—almost four veg and one fruit a day!—to Zayn.

“What,” he said, taking the objects.

Louis waved at the poster. “Just turn it around, the back’s blank. You can make a map, yeah?”

Zayn smiled softly as he placed the poster on the ground and knelt in front of it. “Okay,” he started, drawing a small dot towards the bottom of the page. “That’s us.”

They got to work making the map, arguing about lefts and right and if the shortcut round the back of
the science building actually did lead to the McDonalds or not, until Zayn had filled out the page with the entire campus.

“So, that means that my room is here,” he said, drawing a square in four firm strokes.

“Which way were you facing last time you prayed?” Louis asked, leaning closer.

Zayn closed his eyes for a moment. “This way,” he breathed, drawing an arrow through the square.

Louis followed the path of the arrow back down to the library. “That means…” he stood, walking around the map to reorient himself, and Zayn followed, a spark lighting up his eyes.

“Mecca is that way.” Zayn pointed to the far wall.

Louis followed his point. “Yeah,” he said, a smile taking over his face. “Guess it is.”

Louis found himself with an armful of Zayn a moment later.

“Thank you,” he said, wrapping his arms around Louis’ middle. Louis smiled and hugged him back.

“You’re welcome, Z,” he murmured, rocking them slightly. “You’re so welcome.”

382 Days Before.

Louis tucked his feet under him and looked up at the stage. All the lights in the theatre were on but no one else was really here yet, because Louis had decided to show up an hour early to dress rehearsals so he could do exactly this.

Sit.

Sit in the silence of the room, take in the acoustics, and think. Three more days and he’d be up there on opening night, lights bright in his eyes and terrible American accent coming out through dusty speakers for all to hear. He thought he’d be more nervous by now—shaky voice, shaky lines, shaky hands—but instead he just felt calm.

He’d been lucky; this was his school’s last ever production. The governmental funding the theatre department relied upon had been cut last year, and they’d only had enough left over to do Grease because of a few generous parents.

Louis’ mum had been so excited when he got the part; she’d grinned and hugged him close. Maybe that’s why he felt so calm—because he knew, no matter what, that she’d be proud of him.

“Oh, hey, Louis.”

Louis turned with a smile. Stan stood in the aisle, dressed in all black. Louis had all but begged him to audition for a part, but Stan had said he’d be more comfortable as a stagehand. Louis hadn’t pushed after that.

“Hey, bro. Wanna sit?”

Stan nodded and plopped down on the chair next to Louis’. 
“You really love this, huh?” He smiled at Louis, then gestured around the theatre. “All this acting shit.”

“Don’t forget the costumes and the show tunes,” Louis smirked, wagging a finger at him. Then, he sobered. “Yeah, I do. Sometimes I think it’s the only thing I care about, y’know? The only thing that’s mine.”

Stan crossed his arms defensively. “Oh, your mates are chopped liver, then, eh?”

Louis’ eyes widened and he rushed to apologise, but Stan waved him off. “I’m only messing, Louis. You know they’ll all be here front row opening night to support you.”

Louis huffed out a laugh. “You had me going for a second, mate.”

Stan shook his head with a smile. “But, for real—you’re gonna go to uni for drama, right?” At Louis’ dubious look, he continued. “Don’t give me that. You’re good at this, Louis.”

“I’m not that good,” he mumbled, shifting lower in his seat. “But that isn’t the problem. Arts degrees aren’t covered, mum’d have to pay in full.”

Stan frowned. “Even if you enlisted?”

“I’ve looked into it, and nah. Armed forces don’t care if you can sing and dance, Stan. They won’t pay for it.”

Stan frowned. “Mate, I hate to say it, but you’re in a pickle.”

Louis laughed. “Yeah, no shit. Don’t worry about it, though. I’ll figure something out.”

Together, they looked back at the stage.

“Maybe I just wasn’t meant to be up there,” he said, aiming for levity.

Stan wasn’t buying it. “Louis, don’t be thick. You know you were. You are.”

Louis let the words sink deep into his soul, then he stood and stretched. “Enough of this, let’s go exploring.”

Stan grinned and jumped up after him. “I think there’s a basement level,” he said. “Wanna find it?”

“Sounds sick.”

63 Days After.

Louis settled his fingers on the keys and closed his eyes. It had been about a year since he’d played, and even then he wasn’t much good.

But he’d been walking past the Music Room, and he’d noticed it was empty. The piano lid was up, white and black keys glistening in the electric light, and. Empty music rooms were always a tragedy, and who was Louis to not remedy that.

He flexed his fingers a little, trying to remember his chords. When he started playing, it was a simple
melody—something he’d learned as a child and never forgotten. It had had words, once; something about bluebirds and sunshine, perhaps. Louis smiled as he played, enjoying the dance of his fingers. His fringe fell into his eyes, but he ignored it.

“I didn’t know you could play,” came a voice from the doorway.

Louis’ fingers stilled. He glanced up at Harry, keeping his face soft and eyes level. “I can’t, not really,” he said. “I just remember a couple things.”

Harry smiled at him and leaned against the wall. His hair was loose today, falling about his face in waves. He was wearing the same thing all of them wore—cream shirt with long sleeves, cream trousers—and he’d paired it with a frankly impressive pair of fuzzy pink socks.

Louis leant forwards, resting his chin on his folded arms on the top of the piano. “Wicked socks,” he said, pumping his eyebrows. “Where’d you find them?”

Harry wiggled his toes and laughed. “I was actually wearing them when we came down.”

Louis’ face twisted.

“I’ve washed them since then,” Harry added. “Of course.”

“Of course,” Louis repeated. “Well, can I do anything for you, Harold?” He tapped his fingers against the wood of the piano, and Harry watched for a long moment before shaking himself off.

“Yeah, actually,” he said, pushing himself off the wall. “You could follow me?”

Louis stood automatically, closing the lid. “Do I get to know where we’re going, or is it a surprise?” he asked, rounding the piano.

Harry grinned toothily. “Definitely a surprise.”

Louis raised his eyebrows, coming to a stop near Harry. He closed his eyes and held out his hand. At Harry’s questioning silence, Louis sighed impatiently. “If its a surprise, then you’ll need to guide me,” he said, wiggling his fingers. “Honestly, it’s like you’ve never surprised anyone.”

Louis shivered as a warn, gentle hand took his own, fingers slotting against his. Then, as sudden as a crack of thunder on a warm Summer’s night, he felt Harry’s soft lips press against his own.

It was just for a second—he didn’t even have time to process that he was being kissed, let alone respond—and then it was gone again.

“Surprise,” Harry whispered into his ear.

Louis opened his eyes to judge his expression, but Harry clamped his free hand over them before he could.

“No peaking!” he accused.

Louis cleared his throat, lest his voice come out as the squeaky nervous wreck it sounded in his head. “Was that not it?”

“Was what not it?” he asked, voice coming from beside Louis now as he turned and started leading Louis down the hall. His steps were slow and steady, but his voice sounded sharp.

*When you kissed me!* Louis wanted to accuse, but if Harry was going to play dumb, then there was
no point in pushing it. He’d learned by now not to try and out-stubborn him.

“Nothing,” he sighed, disappointment shining through despite his best efforts. “Nothing at all.”

What am I doing, he thought.

Harry seemed to notice when Louis started to slow, because he squeezed Louis’ hand. “We’re nearly there,” he said.

Louis was pulled to a stop a moment later, then Harry tugged him carefully through a doorway.

“Okay,” he said, letting go of Louis’ hand. “Open your eyes.”

And Louis did.

138 Days Before.

This time when Latte Rockstar—now known as Zayn Malik—walked into class, 15 minutes late as always, he had two coffees. He waved at the teacher and took a seat on Louis’ left, then wordlessly passed one over.

Louis took it gratefully and smiled at him. “Thanks,” he murmured, trying to stay quiet so as he didn’t interrupt the sounds of pencils scratching on paper.

Today they were doing a collaging exercise that Louis couldn’t quite wrap his head around. He made room for the coffee on his desk, shuffling some of the pictures he’d brought out of the way.

“You really like bees, huh?” Zayn asked, pointing to his stack of photos.

Louis shrugged shyly. “I guess. They’re easy to draw.”

Zayn raised his eyebrows but didn’t comment. He started filling his page with lines and textures—he’d apparently bought a newspaper on his way in to use as his collaging inspiration.

Louis picked up where he’d left off, adding a few more bees to the page.

“Is it, like. A metaphor, or something?” Zayn asked after a few minutes of silent drawing.

Louis felt himself getting defensive. “It’s just bees,” he said.

“Is it?” Zayn asked, looking at him searchingly. “It’s alright if its not, you know.”

Louis stared at the drawing he had so far. He didn’t think about the last time he’d seen a bee—when he was a boy in his back yard, sitting and staring at the clouds—and he didn’t think about growing up in a full house, growing up with noise all around as his sisters buzzed about—and he didn’t think about how everything was so completely fucked and the planet was dying and all anyone could do was make bigger guns to point at each other—and he shook his head.

“It’s just bees.”
“Tada!” Harry whispered, a cute little sound from a very cute boy.

Louis tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

The room with the security camera feeds—the one that Louis had kept closed since Harry had turned everything off—had been transformed. There was a blanket on the ground, grey and sad as all the blankets down here were. On top was a few open tins (spaghetti and stew and peas) and a gas burner to heat them up. There was a protein bar (chocolate flavoured) and some mixed nuts and dried fruits (not chocolate flavoured) and a whole chapel’s worth of candles scattered across the room.

Harry closed the door behind them, and in the darkness the candles seemed to shine brighter, illuminating the ceiling.

Louis tipped his head up with a grin as he took it in—hundreds of white specks painted onto pitch black.

“A sky full of stars,” Louis breathed, turning around. “Harry, what is this?”

It was hard to see Harry’s expression in the low light. He licked his lips and smiled shakily, almost...nervously. “This is me. Changing your mind.”

Louis closed his eyes. “You don’t have to. It’s—”

Harry’s hand came up to rest on Louis’ waist, pulling them closer together. “I know,” he whispered. “I wanted to.”

Louis stared up at him, eyes flickering between both of Harry’s. “Well, alright, then,” he said, aiming for confidence and missing the mark. “What’s for dinner?”

Harry laughed and let him go, moving to sit on one side of the blanket. He gestured to his spread proudly. “It’s a four course meal. Very gourmet, I hope you have a refined palate.”

Louis kept his face straight as he settled down across from Harry, crossing his legs and leaning over to have a sniff of the stew. It smelt like feet, which meant it was the nicer of the two types of tinned stew the stockroom had to offer.

“This is definitely six michelin stars right here,” he proclaimed, throwing a walnut in the air and catching it in his mouth.

Harry picked up a peanut and tried to do the same, only to lose his balance and very nearly fall face-first into the spaghetti. “There’s only three stars, I think,” he said once he’d righted himself and Louis had stopped laughing.

Louis hummed, choosing a dried apricot with careful fingers. “That’s how good your cooking is, Harold,” he boasted. “You broke the scale.”

Harry opened his mouth to respond, then almost choked when Louis threw the apricot straight in. He narrowed his eyes as he chewed, and what followed was an impressive display of nut-and-fruit-throwing-and-catching-in-mouths that, quite honestly, could have made them Olympic contenders, if there was such a thing as Bunker Olympics.
“We should do Bunker Olympics,” Louis announced, mid-bite of the now-warmed stew.

Harry nodded pensively, munching on the spaghetti. “Lots of sport to be had down here.”

“And competition can only bring us closer,” Louis deadpanned.

Harry pointed his fork at him. “It could literally bring us closer, if we did three legged sprinting. Maybe the eggs on spoons thing.” He tilted his head. “Sack racing?”

“We haven’t got eggs but we do have sacks, so that’s a strong possibility,” Louis agreed. “Don’t know anyone with three legs, though, mate. Are you sure about that one?”

Harry poked his tongue out at him, and Louis’ poker face broke into uncontrollable giggles.

Harry laughed as well, but he seemed more preoccupied watching Louis.

Louis’ giggles subsided, and he shifted a little under the weight of Harry’s gaze.

“What?” he mumbled, looking down at his shirt in case he’d spilled something on it.

“Nothing, just–” Harry shook his head, putting down his now-empty tin. “This is really nice.”

Louis flinched. The unspoken, why couldn’t we have had this all along?, was a painful reminder.

“It is, yeah,” he agreed, fiddling with his hair. “Look, Harry–”

“Louis–”

“Oh–um–you go first–”

“I just wanted to say–”

“Yeah, go ahead–”

“–I think you’re–”

“–sorry–”

Harry huffed. “Will you let me talk?”

Louis bit his lip, trying to look innocent.

Harry’s frustration melted into a grin. “If I say something important, are you going to interrupt again?”

Louis put his best listening face on, rested his chin on his hand, and shook his head.

Harry pursed his lips for a moment, then his voice was filling the room. Louis was paying attention to the words—of course he was—but he was also paying attention to the way Harry’s deep voice echoed in the small space, wrapping around him like a warm embrace.

“I wanted to say that I think you’re incredible,” Harry said, leaning forwards. “Even when you were being a shit to me, you were the first person I looked for when I walked into a room, and the last thing I thought about before I fell asleep every night.” He took a second to shift the scraps from their feast out of the way, then placed his hands on Louis’ knees. Louis sat up straight, eyes wide as he listened. “I have liked you for one hundred and fifteen days, and loved you for seven.”
Louis’ breath caught in his throat. Distantly, as if his brain was yelling at him from behind a television screen, he thought, *I’ve loved you for one hundred and sixty eight days. I win.*

Harry’s hands travelled up to his thighs, and his face was so close to Louis’ that Louis could smell the dried apricots on his breath.

“I’m not saying this because you’re the Beatrice to my Benedick, and I’m not saying it because we happened to get stuck down here together, and I’m *not* saying it to pressure you into anything. I’m saying it because…” he frowned, like he wasn’t even sure the reason himself.

“Because you wanted to?” Louis asked, barely louder than a whisper.

“Yeah,” Harry breathed, a shy grin on his face. “That.”

Louis closed his eyes and hung his head. He knew what he wanted to do, he just didn’t know if he could let himself. If Harry Fucking Styles got to break his heart twice…

“Hey, it’s okay,” Harry comforted. He retrieved his hands and sat back, and every inch of space he put between them stung a little more than the last. “You don’t have to—”

“I do.” Louis looked up fiercely. “I do have to.”

Harry frowned in confusion.

“Just—” Louis sighed in frustration, running a hand through his hair. “Give me time, yeah? Give me time to believe you.”

“Louis, I’m not lying to you. I wouldn’t do that. *I love you.*”

Louis stood. He couldn’t stay here in this room a minute longer, not with Harry’s wide, sincere eyes and the blank screens behind him and the fucking painted-on stars above.

Harry watched him go. He looked sad, but not surprised. It was that that made Louis pause in the doorway.

“Come and tell me that again tomorrow,” he said. Then, he fled.

56 Days After.

At least Harry hadn’t cornered him in the shower this time, Louis thought bitterly.

He wiped the tears from his eyes quickly, but not quick enough.

Harry had clearly just been passing through when he’d seen Louis standing in front of the date wall. He’d come over to say—well. To say something that had died on his lips the second he caught sight of Louis’ tears.

“Its—” Louis coughed, sniffled, wiped his eyes some more, then continued. “Its my mums birthday today.”

Harry’s eyebrows pinched. He looked between Louis and the wall, studied the last few numbers that had been scrawled on it—23.3.32, 24.3.32, 25.3.32, each one shakier than the last—then looked at
the piece of chalk clutched in Louis’ hands.

Louis dropped it to the floor—he’d forgotten he was holding it—and the chalk shattered into four pieces.

“Oh,” Louis said, staring down at it. Another dead thing for the list. Add *chalk* to that game—that name game Niall and Liam had been playing. The thought struck Louis as funny in the kind of abstract way that things did when you were too overwhelmed to remember what humour was.

Harry didn’t say anything for a long time. Slowly, so slowly, he peeled himself off the wall and took a step forwards. For a dizzying moment, Louis thought he was leaving and he had to face the realisation that such a thought made his heart squeeze. But then, warm breath ghosted over the back of his neck and two arms reached around him. Harry folded Louis into himself, or he folded himself around Louis, or perhaps both. He tucked his chin over Louis’ shoulder like it was meant to be there, pressed his hands over Louis’ stomach like he was holding Louis’ guts in, and simply breathed.

Louis was tense for the first minute, but then Harry squeezed him a little and Louis relaxed back into him. He let himself be held, let Harry stand there with him in front of a wall with fifty six dates on it, and he let Harry see him cry.

64 Days After.

“Dress rehearsal, motherfuckers!”

Louis winced and shoved a pillow over his face.

The door to his room was shoved open, and Niall repeated his battle cry. Behind him there was a sharp clanging noise, and Louis peeked out from beneath the pillow to see Harry standing over Niall’s shoulder banging two pots together.

“Dress rehearsal!” Niall shouted again.

Louis sat up and scowled at them both. Niall sniggered at him, and Louis flipped him off.

“Good morning, Louis,” Harry purred, perching his head on Niall’s shoulder. “Did you hear the news?”

Louis yawned. “Something about a dress rehearsal, I think?”

Harry grinned and took a step back, getting ready to bang the fucking pots together again. Louis threw himself out of bed.

“Harry, if you bang those pots together I *swear to god* I’ll shove them up your–”

“So, Louis’ awake!” Niall cheered, dragging a giggling Harry with him down the hallway. “Two more to go!”

Once the menaces were gone, Louis collapsed back onto his bed.

He’d somehow managed to forget that opening night was in three days, in between all the excitement and the fucking *declarations of love, fuck me.*
Louis buried his face in his hands and allowed himself three seconds of silent screaming, then he stood and got himself ready for the day. A pop to the shower-sink would do him a world of good.

The first thing Louis heard when he stepped into the main chamber was a mournful, “You shaved?” from Harry.

Zayn, Liam, and Niall were busy picking through the various props and costumes they’d dragged in from the Art Room, so there was no one to notice when Harry walked over and ran his fingers over Louis’ smooth jaw with a pout.

“Didn’t do it for you, did I?” Louis mumbled, crossing his arms defensively. “The scruff doesn’t really go with Beatrice’s character.”

Harry shook his head. “I thought it suited her, actually,” he replied, a devious twinkle in his eyes.

Louis stood on his tiptoes so they were eye-to-eye, gearing up for what was sure to be a truly scathing reply, when Harry snuck an arm around his waist and pressed his face into Louis’ hair

“Still in love with you,” he whispered, sending tingles down Louis’ back. “In case you were wondering.”

Louis pressed his hands to Harry’s chest and allowed himself the luxury of being held. Harry’s heartbeat was thundering under his hands, worryingly fast. “Wasn’t,” he lied.

Harry hummed, then pulled him closer. His heartbeat began to slow until Louis almost couldn’t feel it anymore, then someone cleared their throat behind them.

Louis leapt back, but Harry stayed where he was, smiling blissfully.

“Lads,” Zayn greeted, face impassive.

“Zayn,” Louis replied, matching his tone. “Lovely weather we’re having.”

Harry snorted.

Zayn and Louis kept staring at each other.

“I’ll just...get changed, then,” Harry said, peeling himself away from the awkward micro-expression-conversation Louis and Zayn appeared to be having.

So, you hate Harry, huh? Zayn’s right eyebrow asked.

None of your business, punk, Louis’ nose said.

You’re cute together, Zayn teased, blinking slowly.

Fuck off, Louis’ eyes replied. Then, for good measure, he used words. “Fuck off.”

Zayn laughed and slung an arm around his shoulder to pull him towards the costumes.

Right, Louis thought. Dress rehearsal.

7 Days Before.
Louis had had a long fucking day. He rubbed his eyes behind his glasses—he was wearing them in front of other people, that’s how long his day had been—and yawned angrily. Before coming to university, Louis’ hadn’t known it was possible to yawn angrily.

“Well, I guess I’ll go get the fucker, then,” Louis mumbled. His chair made a loud screech as he pushed up from the table, and the other lads winced.

“He’ll be back in a minute, Louis,” Niall said, not even bothering to look up from whatever brain-rotting game he was playing on his phone.

Liam grunted in agreement, face buried in his arms on the table. Zayn was nodding off in his chair, shaking himself every few minutes when he remembered that he couldn’t fall asleep just yet.

“I don’t want to wait another minute, Niall,” Louis explained patiently. “We were so close to being done for the night, and he just had to answer a very important phone call, hm? I’ve had it.”

No one stopped him as he marched from the study room.

He looked around the library, but he didn’t see a single person. He huffed and made the rounds, peering down the shelves and scaring a few late-night studiers in the medical section.

It took a few minutes to find Harry, since he was curled up in a bean-bag chair in the far corner of the library. Louis caught a glimpse of his garish jumper then started walking towards him.

He wasn’t even still on the phone; he was just staring through a window at the sky, brow wrinkled in thought.

“I’m sure you’re incredibly busy,” Louis seethed, “but do you think you could drag your sorry arse back to the study room so we can wrap up and go home?”

Harry blinked dazedly and turned to look at him. He smiled automatically—a vacant, polite smile—and said, “sorry?”

Louis frowned. “What’s wrong with you?”

Harry looked down at his lap.

Well, that was… different. Louis tilted his head to the side. He’d never seen Harry like this, and as much as he hated to be concerned about someone who’d so wronged him… he couldn’t help it.

He sighed and squatted beside Harry. He kept his voice gentle, touching a calming hand to Harry’s shoulder. “Come back to the study room, yeah? We’re nearly done, then you can go home.”

Harry still didn’t look at him. His hands moved in his lap, and Louis glanced down to see he was fiddling with his phone, turning it round and round.

“Who called you, Harry?” Louis asked, leaning closer. “Are you alright?”

Harry shook his head. “Um, it was my mum. She’s on holiday in Spain at the moment with my stepdad, she—” Harry stopped, licking his lips and looking back out the window.

Louis sat back as it hit him. “She can’t come home.”

Harry nodded. “They were meant to fly back in today, but they closed the borders last night, so…”
Louis sighed, staring at the carpet beneath his knees. The news had been full of stories like Harry’s all day—he’d been counting his lucky stars that Fizzy’s class trip to France had been next week instead of earlier.

“I’m sorry, love,” Louis said, patting Harry’s shoulder. “I’m sure they’ll sort this out, they can’t leave them there.”

Harry looked at him finally. He looked scared, young; it hurt Louis’ heart to see him like that. For a moment, he seemed lost in thought, eyes fixed on the glasses on Louis’ face. Louis fought the urge to take them off; now wasn’t really the time to be self-conscious. Then, Harry’s eyes cleared.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

Louis sat back, wrenching his hand off Harry’s shoulder as if he’d been burned. Angry words swelled up in his throat—defensive, hurt, *unhelpful* words—but he swallowed them down.

“I’m not allowed to have layers?” he tried. When his joke fell flat, he sighed. “I’m not much for kicking a bloke when he’s down, Harold.”

Harry shook his head. “No, I–I knew that. I didn’t mean to–”

But Louis was already standing. “It’s okay. We’ll wait for you in the study room, yeah? Take as much time as you need.”

He turned and made it two steps before Harry found the words to reply, and when he did, it was a softly whispered, “thank you.”

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*64 Days After.*

“I’m not putting the bloody mop on my head.”

Niall pouted.

Louis parked his hands on his hips. “No, for f**ks sake. I’ve got some dignity, thank you very much.”

Niall looked him up and down with a sardonic twist to his brow. Louis refused to blush; just because he was wearing a skirt Harry had made from a spare blanket (decorated with a bright floral pattern he’d created using some half-dried paints) and a necklace made out of dried lentils and beans *didn’t* mean he wasn’t capable of drawing the line at ‘mop’.

“Come on, Louis, it’s the best we could do. See, Zayn likes it!”

Zayn looked up and shrugged. The painted mop-head he was wearing wiggled a little from the movement but stayed fast.

“No. Beatrice is a free spirit! Maybe she just has short hair,” Louis reasoned.

Niall considered that.

“Yeah, alright. I accept that.”
“Thank you,” Louis sniffed. Then, he clapped his hands together. “Are we ready to go, lads? Enough relaxing, we’ve got a show to put on,” he yelled, as if it hadn’t been him that had held up the dress rehearsal.

Everyone snapped into gear, throwing on the last pieces of their costumes.

Harry brushed past Louis on his way to stage left. “You look lovely,” he purred, sending a grin over his shoulder.

Louis bit his lip. Harry looked lovely as well; not because of his ill-fitting tunic and cardboard-and-fabric boots, but in spite of them. He’d somehow managed to paint his nails black for the occasion, though; Louis stared a little too long at his fingers after he noticed that.

The lads looked at him expectantly, awaiting his mark. Louis grinned sharply—even though it was the world’s saddest, smallest play, he would always love the thrill of the performance.

“Alright, go!”

Niall stepped onto the stage—or, into the rectangle of floor they’d marked out with tape—and inspected a piece of paper in his hand. “I learn in this letter that Don Peter of Arragon comes this night to Messina.”

65 Days After.

“This time, I want less fuck ups,” Louis said, taking his time to make eye contact with the four other boys in the group huddle.

They all nodded—there had been a fair few fuck ups at yesterday’s dress rehearsal, it was a fair criticism—and patted each other on the back.

Harry sent Louis a secret smile as everyone took their places. Louis smiled back and wondered when those fucking butterflies would leave him alone.

The dress rehearsal—somehow, lord knows how—went worse this time. Cues were missed, costume changes took twice as long, and no one could seem to remember how to use their lips to form words.

“Truly, I would not hang a dog by my will, much more a man who hath any— fuck!” Niall cursed.

Louis broke character to whack him in the shoulder. “This is a family show, Niall!”

Niall’s eyes rolled into the back of his head as he let out a truly impressive groan. “I’m fucking sick of this,” he said, scratching at his arm through the material of his oddly-shaped Dogberry costume. “Who’s dumb idea was it anyway?”

“Yours, actually,” Harry pointed out from next to Louis. He was wearing Basic Bunker Fashion (trademark pending) that Zayn had dyed black using some rusty nails he’d found and some vinegar from the stockroom. It smelled something awful, but Louis didn’t flinch away when Harry rested his arm on his shoulder.

Niall flipped him off.
Louis sighed.

“Alright, I’m calling it. Time of death; sometime before light’s out. Let’s try again tomorrow, yeah?”

Liam mumbled something rude under his breath and pulled off his Claudio tunic and boots. He was left wearing only his underwear and a scowl.

Zayn was munching on a protein bar. He’d already gotten changed out of his Hero outfit sometime in the last scene. Louis found himself oddly impressed by that, then Zayn ruined it by suggesting, “Let’s have a movie night.”

Louis raised his eyebrows then looked at Harry. He was closer, now; Louis hadn’t even noticed himself slinging a hand around his waist.

“Yes, Zayn, let’s have a movie night,” Niall said, voice dripping with brutal sarcasm. “What a wonderful idea, I’ll just pop to the shops for some fucking popcorn.”

Louis pointed at him. “Niall, shut your mouth until you can say something nice.”

Niall made a face at him then took a seat straight on the floor.

Harry rubbed his hand on Louis’ shoulder soothingly, and—when had that gotten there?

“What did you mean, Zayn?” Liam asked patiently. He was still starkers.

“Put some clothes on, will you lad?” Louis said.

Zayn waited for Liam to wrap a spare blanket around himself before answering. “I meant, we could like. I dunno, recreate stuff? Like an acting exercise?”

“I actually love that,” Harry said.

“Cheers, Haz,” Zayn nodded. “I’m not going first, though.”

Louis tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Not bad, not bad. Okay, let’s do it. Niall, you’re coming too.” With that, he turned and started walking out of the main chamber, dragging a giggling Harry along by the waist.

“Where are we going?”

“Movie night needs a pillow fortress, obviously!”

“Right, yeah. Of course.”

One pillow fortress and several pillow fights later, and the lights clicked off above them.

Liam had just taken to the stage to play the first ‘movie’, and the last thing Louis saw before absolute darkness stole his vision was him opening his mouth to speak.

“Fuck.”

Louis snickered into Harry’s shoulder. He’d given up trying to detach himself from him; no amount of pillow whacking could convince him to sit further away. Truthfully, though, Louis hadn’t been trying very hard.

He heard Niall sigh from the corner. Louis expected him to say something else spiteful, but instead
he just said, “I’ll go find some candles.”

Louis felt Harry reach his spare arm—the one that wasn’t wrapped around Louis’ waist and sending tingles all over his body—towards Niall, stilling him. “I’ve got some just under that bunk there.”

There was a long rustling noise and some muffled cursing, then Niall cried out in victory.

“Pass ‘em here, lad,” Louis said, crawling onto Harry’s lap so he could reach for the candles. He pulled his lighter from out of his pocket—might not be anything to smoke down here, but Louis couldn’t quite shake the habit of having it on him—and tried to ignore the smugness he felt when Harry reacted to their change in position by wrapping his arms around his torso. Louis bit down his smile as he fiddled with the candle. “Aha!”

“Let there be light, bitches,” Harry said.

Louis snorted.

“Who you callin’ a bitch?” Zayn asked, grinning in the soft candlelight.

Harry shrugged.

Zayn accepted that as an answer for a reason Louis couldn’t fathom.

“Liam, go ahead.” Louis grinned up at him.

Liam cleared his throat. “Alright, so I’m on an aeroplane. And there’s this really weird guy next to me, and I tell him I don’t like flying. Also, everyone’s smoking because it’s the 80s.”


Louis pinched his arm (gently, of course). “Spoilers,” he hissed.

Liam ignored them both, then proceeded to describe the entire plot of Die Hard using a mixed bag of words, facial expressions, and badly-timed hand gestures.

After that, Harry shoved Louis off his lap so he could recreate Notting Hill, then Zayn hopped up to do Alladin. Louis and Niall were content to stay seated and throw invisible popcorn all night.

The candle burned low, but they barely noticed.

73 Days Before.

Louis spread some more jam on his scone. He was home for the weekend, and he’d managed to wrangle all his sisters to the park for a picnic—the only thing left was to eat through all the garbage they’d bought from the shops.

Daisy and Phoebe were running around playing some kind of game that involved lots of shouting and giggling. Lottie was painting her nails, and Fizzy was munching on some baby carrots.

“So, Louis,” Lottie said, and Louis could already tell he wasn’t going to like her question by the wry twist to her lips. “Have you caught yourself a fit uni boy yet?”
Louis’ first thought was more of a flash of memories—loud music, cheap beer, and a certain lovely curly-haired angel underneath him—and his face soured. It had been an entire month, and he still couldn’t let it go.

“Oh, that’s not a good look,” Fizzy said, leaning back. “What happened, Lou?”

Louis shoved the scone in his mouth and shrugged. “I’m way too busy for romance, me. I’ve got classes to pass.”

“Mhm.” Fizzy picked up another baby carrot.

Lottie, thankfully, let it drop. “D’you want me to paint your nails?”

Louis sighed wistfully. “Guess so. What colours you got?”

66 Days After.

“What do you mean, ‘not today?’”

Louis crossed his arms. “I mean, not today. Dress rehearsal is cancelled. You’re all gonna spend today getting your heads screwed on right, memorising your bloody lines, and relaxing. Tomorrow, we do opening night.” He held a finger up. “Uh! No arguments. Director’s orders.”

Niall and Liam slunk off, muttering amongst themselves. Zayn hung back for a moment to clap him on the shoulder, then he was gone as well.

“Can I ask why?”

Louis sighed. Harry was standing a few feet away, leaning against the wall in a position that unintentionally drew Louis’ attention to his crotch.

Louis cleared his throat walked over to lean next to him. At least now he wouldn’t have to look.

“Everything always goes to shit in final rehearsals. It’s a theatre thing. Just you wait; opening night’s gonna be smoother than a baby’s bottom.”

Harry nodded. “Those are very smooth, yeah.”

Louis sent him a sidelong glance. “Been around many babies?”

Harry smiled sadly. “Not nearly enough.”

Well, you’re never gonna see one ever again, Louis thought. But, it was a much too depressing thing to ever say out loud, so. He kept it to himself.

“Oh, I wanted to tell you something,” Harry said, pushing himself off the wall so he could crowd into Louis’ space.

Louis tried to remember how to breathe. He meant to ask, what is it?, but what actually came out of his mouth is, “Your eyes are very green today.” He didn’t know why he noticed. Maybe it was the lighting, maybe it was the feeling in his stomach, maybe it was the messy way Harry had styled his hair today; all Louis knew was that he was looking at the same boy he’d seen across Zayn’s
apartment that night long ago, the one that had stolen his heart.

Harry tilted his head to the side. “Yeah?”

Louis nodded, then shook his head to clear it. “Um. What did you want to tell me?”

Harry’s bemused smile turned wicked in an instant. He leaned closer to he could press his nose behind Louis’ ear. This time, Louis was ready for the words. That didn’t mean they hurt any less. “I love you.”

Louis closed his eyes. He felt something snap inside him. “Did you love me last year?”

Harry pulled back a little, a frown softening his features. He opened his mouth, but Louis interrupted before he could.

“October 15th, the night we first met. Did you love me then?” He stepped closer to Harry, but Harry stepped away in alarm. “Because I would’ve sworn you did, until you were gone the next morning.”

Harry froze. The concern on his face was replaced by horror, by recognition. It was everything Louis hadn’t wanted, and yet he felt a dark satisfaction at seeing it.

“That was you?”

Louis grit his teeth. “Surprise.”

Harry shook his head a little in disbelief. “Fuck. Louis, I–you have to let me explain–”

Louis scoffed. “I have to do jack fucking shit, Harold.” He didn’t wait for a response; he strode for the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harry didn’t try to stop him. Louis wasn’t sure why that disappointed him.

105 Days Before.

“So, Harold–”

“It’s Harry, actually.”

“So, Harold, what are you studying?” Louis grinned up at the boy, watching as he ducked his head to hide a smile.

“Um. Physiotherapy, at the moment.” He looked back up at Louis, and Louis marvelled at his ability to make it seem like they were the only two people in the room even though they were shouting to be heard over the loud music and drunk people were bashing into them at every angle.

“Hmm, good with your hands, then?” Louis asked. He made a grab for Harry’s free hand—the one not holding his untouched beer—and held it up to his face with a critical eye.

Harry wiggled his fingers and laughed. “I guess. Do they look very healing?”

Louis pursed his lips in thought, turning Harry’s hand to trace the lines of his palm. “Not really. You’ll have to work on that.”
Harry snorted. “Must be why I’m failing.”

Louis tsked. “No, smart lad like you?”

Harry made a face at him.

Louis made a face right back, then set his cup down on a nearby table. “Come on, let’s dance,” he yelled, boisterous and not at all charming.

Harry laughed and let himself be dragged. He pawned off his beer to a random girl he bumped into with a cherubic smile and a “cheers!”.

The song was, in Louis humble opinion, unlistenable rubbish. Nevertheless, he jumped along to the beat and pulled Harry against him. If he was going to take his mind of his trainwreck of a recital, then he might as well do it in style. And, honestly, Harry was the cutest boy he’d ever seen and it was a miracle he’d made it this far without scaring him off.

Scared seemed to be the farthest thing from Harry’s mind as he laughed and danced along with Louis, letting himself be spun around underneath Louis’ arm with nothing more than a grin and a flash of dimples.

With a combination of dawning horror and hope, Louis had a moment of clarity in the middle of the chaos of the dance floor in this crowded apartment in this fucked up world:

*I might just have to keep this one.*

12 Days After.

Louis found Liam in the History Room. He was sitting on the floor, desks all pushed to the sides, and he was staring at an open book in front of him. As Louis neared, he recognised the contents of the page; it was a timeline of human history, with a beginning and a middle and an end.

Louis sighed and took a seat on the floor beside Liam and poked him in the side softly.

Liam didn’t look up from the book. Recognising when drastic action was needed, Louis settled on the ground and parked his head in his lap.

Liam startled and looked down at him.

“Oh, hi,” he said, patting Louis’ chest distractedly.

Louis frowned. He wanted to ask what was wrong, but. He didn’t like to ask stupid questions. All he could do was offer silent comfort.

After a few minutes, Liam started talking.

“Do you ever think it was maybe a good thing?”

Louis closed his eyes. Twelve days ago, he would have twisted his face up and asked, what are you talking about, lad?

He would have poked and prodded and joked until Liam fessed up what was really bothering him.
He would have known what to do.

Today, though. Louis was just a human-shaped collection of skin that was barely holding itself together.

And he knew exactly what Liam meant.

“Just… I know it sounds horrible, but. We were horrible. We ruined everything, didn’t we? Did you know that I had to enlist to get the money for uni? Harry and Niall and Zayn did as well, we were gonna be shipped off to die the second the fighting started, us and so many others. But now, after… After a few thousand years or however long it takes for the radiation levels to go down, the Earth’s gonna be better off without us.”

If it was anyone else, Louis would have sat up and caught their face in his hands and told them fiercely to not talk like that, because that was his family that they were talking about, they didn’t deserve to fucking die for the sins of their race.

But.

It was Liam. Liam, who always believed in people. Always saw the best in others, even to a fault. He was too loyal and too trusting and he was saying that the end of the entire world wasn’t such a bad thing after all, and.

Louis turned his face into his abdomen so he was less tempted to look up at his expression. He felt Liam’s hand land in his hair, unsure.

Still, he didn’t say anything.

And for a while, neither did Liam.

67 Days After.

“Fuck, we’re not ready,” Niall panted. He picked up a tin opener from the props table and waved it in Louis’ face. “Does this look like a weapon to you? How is Claudio supposed to feel threatened by this?” He threw the utensil back down and ran a hand through his hair. “We have to start over.”

Louis placed his hands on Niall’s shoulders. He saw Harry glance over from the other side of the room where he, Liam, and Zayn were setting up a sea of tins from the stock room onto the chairs they’d spent all morning dragging in from every classroom.

“Niall. Take a deep breath.”

Niall scowled at him but followed his instruction.

Louis softened his grip. “Good. Now, look at the audience.”

Niall did.

Louis dragged him closer as he followed his gaze (careful, oh so careful to not accidentally look at Harry).

“Don’t you think that a tin opener is a scary weapon to them?”
Niall wheezed. Louis suspected it was supposed to be a laugh.

“We’re gonna be fine. Say it.” Louis shook Niall’s shoulders until he laughed—a proper laugh, this time.

“We’re gonna be fine.”

“What? Niall, you’re mental, everything’s a mess!” Louis cried.

Niall pushed him away with a giggle. “Go get changed, Louis.”

Louis went willingly, skirting around the edge of the stage. Opening night butterflies combined with Harry butterflies—the angry kind, after his outburst yesterday—meant he hadn’t had the nicest morning. At least the man in question hadn’t tried to talk to him again.

Louis’ current plan was to try and survive the next two hours, then come up with a new plan. He hadn’t been much for running away from his problems before, but maybe it was time to start.

While locked in a bunker.

Fuck.

Louis pulled on his costume robotically. He’d just finished tying the skirt around his waist when he heard a throat clear behind him.

“Louis? Can we talk?”

Louis froze. He turned slowly, taking in Harry’s frowny-angel face, his hands tucked behind the back of his badly-stitched tunic, feet pigeon-toed in shittily constructed boots. His hair was half-up, a cute little bun that made him look softer. Louis gulped.

He wanted to say no, he wanted to push past him and announce that the play was starting in three seconds. But then…he’d have to go up there, and pretend to throw jabs and insults at this beautiful boy who’d hurt him, and he suddenly knew he couldn’t do it.

Harry grew tired of waiting for an answer. He stepped forwards—a liberty taken, a distance overcome—and placed a hand on Louis’ cheek.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Louis jerked backwards. Just because he’d known it already didn’t make it easier to hear.

But Harry chased after him, crowding him against the costume table. Zayn wolf-whistled from stage left, and Harry spared a moment to send a piercing glare his way.

“Don’t know how you managed that, Harry,” Louis forced out, shakier than the ground after a bombstrike, shakier than he’d ever felt. “I’m unforgettable, me.”

Harry nodded frantically. “You are. I know you are. I didn’t mean to.”

Louis laughed disbelievingly.
“No, really. I woke up to pee and I felt like shit from the stuff I’d taken so I decided to take some ibuprofen but it was, like. Dark. So I took some tablet my doctor had prescribed me for a chest infection a few months before and I woke up on the bathroom floor like six hours later.”

Louis raised his eyebrows.

Harry held his hands up in surrender. Louis’ cheek felt colder, now, but he ignored it.

“That’s the god’s honest truth.”

Louis scoffed. “I’m sorry if I find it hard to accept ‘pill-induced amnesia’, Harry. You can just tell me it didn’t matter to you, I’m a big boy.”

Harry shook his head forcefully, almost dislodging the bun on his head. “That’s not it. I searched for you, I promise I did. I remembered everything I felt when we were together, but I couldn’t remember your name. I thought I found you, but. He wasn’t you. And then too much time had passed, and. Everything else happened.”

Louis bit the inside of his cheek. He felt hope stirring in his chest. He also felt the last bastion of his pride, and it was pissed off as hell.

“That’s a nice story, Harry. Now, if you’ll excuse me, we have a play to put on.”

Harry ducked his head. Louis walked off and didn’t look back.

66 Days After.

The boys were stumbling down the hallway in the direction of their bunk rooms, Movie Night officially over.

Louis felt an hand close over his arm as he turned to walk away, and looked back to see a Harry-shaped shadow clinging to him.

“Good night, Louis,” he said, thunder and ice in Louis’ ears. “And by the way, I’m still in love with you.”

Louis let himself smile in the darkness, and he let himself step closer, and he let himself press a kiss to Harry’s cheek, and he let himself breathe him in. Harry’s hand came up to curl in Louis’ hair and card through it gently.

67 Days After.

“Well, I will call Beatrice to you, who I think hath legs.” Liam smirked, somehow managing to sell Margaret’s sassiness even with a mop on his head.

Harry nodded allowingly. “And therefore will come,” he sassed back.

Louis watched Liam walk from the stage towards him. Opening night was going well so far—too
well, suspiciously well—and Louis just knew that he was going to break soon. He was the most experienced performer out of all of them, and yet he felt like he’d been barely holding it together all night.

On the stage, Harry sat on the lip of a fountain—or, a table with a blanket thrown over it and water bottle set on top—and sighed wistfully.

Then, he started singing. “The god of love, that sits above, and knows me, and knows me, how pitiful I deserve—” He cut himself off with a shake of his head, but Louis could still hear his beautiful tenor echoing in his brain. “I mean in singing; but in loving…” He continued on, every word more wistful than the last. “No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms.”

He fell silent, staring out at the audience with a far-away look in his eyes. Louis took a deep breath then stepped on stage.

Harry leapt up the instant he approached. “Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I called thee?”

Louis looked up at him from beneath his eyelashes. When he spoke his soft reply, he meant it from the bottom of his heart. “Yes, Signior, and depart when you bid me.”

Harry smiled sadly. “O, stay but till then.”

Louis raised his eyebrows and parked his hand on his hip cockily. “Then’ is spoke; fare you well now,” he said, then turned as if to leave. Harry made a noise behind him—a cut-off protest—and Louis glanced at him over his shoulder. “Ere I go,” he said, then shifted to face him fully, “let me go with that I came; which is, with knowing what hath passed between you and Claudio.”

A shadow passed over Harry’s face, but it was cleared after a moment. “Only foul words, and thereupon I will kiss thee.”

Louis walked towards him and placed his hands on Harry’s shoulders, raising himself so they were eye-level. Harry wasn’t breathing beneath his hands, eyes wide with surprise at Louis’ unscripted closeness.

“Foul words is but foul wind, Signor,” Louis said. “And foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath,” he poked Harry in the sternum, stepping back finally, “is noisome; therefore, I will depart un kissed.”

Louis walked backwards a few steps, enjoying the dazed look on Harry’s face. Harry shook himself off, and laughed. “Thou hast frighted the word out of his right sense, so forcible is thy wit.” He projected to the audience, and Louis realised he’d almost forgotten they were there.

A hundred tins, judging his every move.

But what did they matter, they’d all be eaten eventually.

Louis took another step backwards, head dipped in acknowledgement of Harry’s compliment.

Harry strode towards him, arms outstretched. Always begging for more, always throwing himself at Louis’ mercy. No, at Beatrice’s mercy. “I pray thee now, tell me for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?” He asked, a sardonic twist to his lips.

He deserved an honest answer, but Louis had a part to play. “For them all together; which maintained so politic a state of evil that they will not admit any good part to intermingle with them.”
Harry held a hand to his chest and pretended to stagger away from the blow, but there was a fond smile on his face.

Louis turned to face the audience and inspected his nails. “For which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?”

He glanced up and saw Niall, Liam, and Zayn standing in the audience watching them perform. Zayn whispered something in Liam’s ear, and Niall nudged them both to pay attention. Even if every tin in that audience had been a person, their gazes would have held this much weight.

“Suffer love! A good epithet,” Harry mused. Louis glanced at him and saw the change between Benedick and Harry. “But I don’t suffer love at all,” he said, lowering his voice. “Nor do I love thee against my will.”

That’s not how the line goes, Harold. Louis tried to look away, but he found himself trapped in Harry’s eyes. He had to clear his throat a few times, and he stumbled over his next line.

But then, Harry melted away and Benedick was back, bantering with Beatrice like his life depended on it.

The show went on, as shows were want to do. Hero was revealed to be alive (what a twist! There were a few gasps from the tins in the audience), and it was revealed to Benedick that he’d been deceived into thinking Beatrice cared for him.

Before long, the scene Louis had been dreading came to pass.

“Which is Beatrice?” Harry asked, looking around at where the group of masked ladies would have been if there was more than five actors in this play.

Louis stepped forwards and pulled the mask—a gas mask, hideous and uncomfortable—from his face. Zayn and Liam were off to the side, reunited in their love. Niall was next to them, face hidden by his fake beard. They all stared at Louis and Harry—very unprofessional, but Louis couldn’t break character for long enough to tell them off. “I answer to that name,” Louis said, letting Beatrice’s cheek shine through. “What is your will?”

Harry licked his lips. Visibly, he smoothed his features down and settled his shoulders, pretending like the answer to the question he was about to ask wouldn’t affect him at all. “Do you not love me?”

Louis winced, then copied Harry. He stepped up beside him and stared out at the tins and lied. “Why, no; no more than reason.”

He was on autopilot for the next few lines and Beatrice and Benedick discussed how they’d been deceived by their friends.

Then, Niall slung an arm around Louis’ shoulders. He’d pulled off the beard and shoved a crumpled hat on his head—Leonato was apparently a hat man. “Come, cousin, I am sure you love the gentleman,” he said, with much more gusto than the line required. Louis flinched away, then Liam clapped Harry over the shoulder.

“And I’ll be sworn upon’t that he loves her; for here’s a paper written in his hand, a halting sonnet of his own pure brain, fashion’d to Beatrice.” Liam waved a piece of paper in the air, and Louis watched as the put-upon horror on Harry’s face turned to genuine anguish as he looked at it.

Louis snatched it from the air before Harry could, and only read as far as, I wish I knew how to make him like me before he realised what it was he was reading. It was a page from Harry’s diary.
Louis pressed the page to his chest before he could read another word, then turned to Zayn in horror as he pulled his own page from his cloak.

“And here’s another, writ in my cousin’s hand, stolen from her bunk room,” he winked, the fucker winked at Louis, “containing her affection unto Benedick.”

Louis watched as if in slow-motion as Harry made a grab for the paper. He didn’t allow Louis the same privacy as Louis had allowed him; his eyes scanned over the page hungrily, and Louis closed his eyes and hunched in on himself.

He had no way of knowing what it said, but who was he kidding. It was all equally damning. The only things he’d written down were about Harry; some of it was poetry, but most of it was what Niall had insisted he write (an account of their night together, a cathartic exhalation of all the angry and bitter and confused and loving thoughts Louis had had since then). Louis opened his eyes to glare at Niall, and the knowing smile on his face told Louis that he’d always meant for this to happen.

He considered simply walking off, but Harry looked up, then.

He cleared his throat, seemingly affected by what he’d read. Louis wished for a hole to open up and swallow him.

“A miracle,” Harry said, and the words sounded new. “Here’s our own hands against our hearts.”

Louis made himself straighten his shoulders; if Harry wanted to finish this play, then who was he to deny him. “Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity.” Harry smiled hopefully, and Louis smiled back.

“I would not deny you,” he said, “but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion.” He raised his eyebrows tauntingly, then added, “And partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.”

Liam laughed—Louis couldn’t tell if it was in character or not—and Harry growled with mock-anger.

“Peace! I will stop your mouth,” he declared, swooping in and gathering Louis into his arms. They’d rehearsed his scene, of course, but part of Louis was still expecting to actually be kissed.

He was glad when Harry only stage-kissed him, nuzzling against the side of his face.

Niall, Liam, and Zayn all started clapping and whooping.

The last scene passed in a blur—wrapping up the last few loose ends, and all the characters dancing the night away, blissfully happy as only a fictional character could be.

Too soon, the show was over. They took their final bows in the silence of the room.

“Oh, wow, a standing ovation!” Niall yelled, hand over his heart. “That one over there is crying, even! Wow, so much applause.”

Liam laughed. “You’ve been a great audience!” he yelled, waving and smiling.

The tins still sat in their chairs.

Louis hadn’t expected their opening night to go well, but now that it had (mostly), and it was over… he was filled with a crushing sadness.
And then, he remembered the page still in his hand.

He walked off stage with the rest of them, and the moment they all stepped over the taped line he turned to whack Zayn, Niall, and Liam in the head.

“What are you doing sneaking into my room and stealing my private shit?” he demanded.

Niall frowned in confusion. “What—everything went well, though?”

Louis exhaled sharply. “It’s a play, Niall. If you want me to spell it out, then I will: I’m pissed at you.”

Liam stepped in. “He was just trying to help, Louis.”

Harry sighed from behind them, then Louis felt gentle hands take the page from his hand and replace it with another. Louis closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them he saw three cautious pairs of eyes. But they weren’t looking at him. A glance over his shoulder, and Louis staggered back.

The thunderous expression on his face would be enough to scare any man.

Louis didn’t particularly feel like bathing in anyone else's anger, let alone Harry’s.

So, he fled. But before the door had quite closed, he heard a snippet of conversation.

“That was really shitty, guys. No—shut up, I don’t care. I have a hard enough time convincing him what’s real, and now—”

The words faded as the handle clicked shut. Louis closed his eyes, leant against the wall, and held himself together.

2 Days Before.

He hadn’t known the protest was happening today. He’d known it was happening, sure, but. Today was important; he had an essay on absurdist theatre to hand in. He’d worked on it all weekend, and he was damned if he lost any marks for late submission.

But the way to class was blocked by a parade of students. They were all shouting different things, and all their signs had different words, but it all pretty much boiled down to, War is bad. Everyone will die. Stop it.

Louis agreed with the general sentiment—of course he did—but. Essay.

He tried to pick his way through, and he’d made it about halfway before he saw him; Harry fucking Styles, standing on a table, directing the crowd. He was calm and present, but there was a righteous fury about him that screamed louder than loud.

Louis was captivated for longer than he could afford with the ticking clock over his head. He watched a beautiful boy as he passed out water and called his directions and he thought, how is it possible that I’m still in love with him.
531 Days Before.

“Good morning, love.”

Louis smiled at his mother. She had dark circles under her eyes, but she looked much better than she had last night when she was crying her eyes out.

“Morning, mum,” Louis said, as warmly as he could manage. “D’you want a cuppa tea?”

She sighed and sat down next to him. They were out on the back porch; Louis liked to sit out here on the weekends, and the chairs were more comfortable than the ground now that all the grass had died.

“No, thank you,” Jay said. She tipped her head back for a moment to look at the sky, then she turned to face him.

Louis took a gulp of his tea. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry you had to see that last night, darling,” she said, running a hand from the top of his head to his neck. She patted his shoulder, wetting her lips before continuing. “But I hope you know I meant what I said. I’ve heard a lot of stories about...how divorce can affect children, and. I just want you to be the happiest you can be, Boobear.”

_I don’t need anyone else for that_, Louis thought. But he doubted such sentiment would comfort her right now.

“I’m gonna be alright, mum,” he said.

“I know. I know.” She sat back and sighed again. “Can I actually have some of that tea, love?”

Louis laughed. “Of course. Have the rest.”

“So generous!” She swooned, and then she raised the mug to her lips and realised there wasn’t much more than a sip.

Louis laughed at the disappointment on her face, and then a moment later she was laughing too.

67 Days After.

There was a knock at the door.

Louis looked up in surprise—he wasn’t expecting anyone to come looking for him here, he’d just chosen this room to be alone (and maybe also to wallow a little bit).

“Louis?” came a voice from the other side of the door.

Louis closed his eyes and groaned.

“Yeah, come in,” he said, because hiding hadn’t worked and running wasn’t an option. He didn’t move from his sitting position, though. _Take that, Harry._
Harry opened the door slowly, then stepped inside. The lights had clicked off a few minutes ago, so it was just Louis sitting in front of a candle with some painted stars on the ceiling and a collection of dead screens.

“I’ve been looking for you for a while,” Harry said, taking a seat on the other side of the candle.

“Well, I’ve been here,” Louis said, grinning tiredly.

“That’s nice.” Harry rubbed his hands on his trousers—standard bunker issue, nothing special about them except that they were lucky enough to be pressed against Harry’s skin—and pursed his lips.

“I read that page—the one from your diary?”

Louis laughed at the ceiling. “Oh, yeah? And what exactly did it say?”

Harry shrugged. “Nothing very exciting, but there was a lot about how much of a prick I am.”

Louis stared at him. He wasn’t going to apologize; what did Harry want from him?

Harry leaned forward, his hair dangling dangerously close to the open flame of the candle until Louis tsked and moved it out of the way for him.

“It said something else, too,” he said. “It said–”

“That I love you?”


“Guess not,” Louis whispered.

Harry shook his head slowly.

“Well, I do. So.” Louis crossed his arms over his chest and jutted out his chin. “I’ve been in love with you this whole time and I treated you like shit because I thought that you fucked off after our night together then pretended you didn’t know me. It was petty and vindictive, but I’m not sorry. Any questions?”

Harry cocked his eyebrows. “Only one.”

Louis uncrossed his arms so he could motion for Harry to go on ahead, but Harry caught his hand before his could and held it to his cheek. He grinned—the kind of grin that grew in a time lapse from a seedling to a tree, wide and bright and beautiful—and he said, “Will you be my bunker boyfriend?”

It startled a laugh out of Louis. “What?”

Harry shrugged demurely, still grinning. “It’s a boyfriend in a bunker. We’ll be the first; proper historical event.”

Louis pressed Harry’s dimple with the thumb of his free hand. “Yeah, alright. Put that away before you poke someone’s eye out, though, will you?”

Louis hadn’t thought it was possible, but Harry’s grin widened. “Make me,” he said, leaning over the candle again, uncaring as Louis cursed and tucked all of his hair out of the way. “I know you love me now, you can’t take it back.”

Louis felt his face soften. “Darling,” he said, as sweet as he’d always wanted to be—and Harry’s
eyes closed at the word, looking like he’d never heard anything so lovely—“I loved you before the world ended, and I’ll love you while it dies. Until the food runs out or the water dries up, until the air gets thin and there’s nowhere else to store our shit—”

Harry’s besotted expression melted into laughter. “You’re such a romantic, Louis,” he said, pretending to swoon.

“Not over the candle, Harry, *jesus,*” Louis hissed, pulling his hand from Harry’s so he could better protect his hair from catching on fire.

Harry sent him a dark look. “Fuck the candle,” he said, and he shoved it to the side. The room fell dark the moment the flame went out, but Louis could still hear Harry’s breaths. And then a second later he could feel his lips against his, a warm hand carding through his hair.

A heartbeat, beating in time with his own.

Louis kissed back.

105 Days Before.

“Thanks for the drink, Niall, but I think I’m just gonna—go over there?” He pointed vaguely to the other side of the room, but he was staring at one very lovely silhouette.

Niall shrugged and wandered off. Louis heard him yell out a greeting to someone or other, and then he was lost in the crowd. Louis spotted him talking to Liam and some other bloke as he passed, and then he was within talking distance of The Boy.

The Boy looked up from his phone. His eyes were much greener up close, and his jaw much sharper.

But Louis was a brave one, so he stuck his hand out and smiled really wide. “Hi,” he said, refusing to feel self-conscious even as The Boy’s eyes travelled over his beanie and his glasses and settled on his hand—fingers still painted blue from Lottie’s last visit. “I’m Louis. Louis Tomlinson.”

The Boy smiled back at him. His hand closed over Louis’, and even though it was much bigger it still seemed to fit somehow. Louis let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding as calm settled over his body.

“Hi,” replied The Boy. He leaned closer to be heard over the loud music, and Louis did the same, both gravitating towards the other. Louis sensed a quiet magnitude about him; something hard to explain and even harder to ignore. He felt it in the pit of his stomach when he said his name, a name he knew he’d never forget.

“I’m Harry Styles.”
Thank you so much for reading! Comments and kudos are appreciated as always. In particular, I'd like to know if anyone would be interested in me posting this in chronological order? It would be a very different story, but... Idk.

Tumblr post is [here](https://example.com) if you wanna go chuck that a reblog.

Much love,

L.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!