The Dead of July

by whimsicule

Summary

Being an Avenger means continuing to be Captain America and smiling and being honorable for the public and Harry does his best. But it doesn’t give him time to figure out who he is supposed to be once he takes off his uniform and puts the shield to the side. Just being Harry had always involved Louis, and Harry fears he doesn’t know how to exist without him.

or: Harry is Captain America, and Louis’ been dead for 70 years.

Notes

so. here it is. or at least the beginning of it. the avengers au nobody but me wanted, as i called it on tumblr. this is perhaps the most self-indulgent thing i’ve ever written, but it is also a very very belated birthday present to brit, who is the best, and who listened to me ramble on about this story and its plotlines far too often. as always, thanks goes primarily out to her, for being there and for encouraging me when i got stuck and for being my rock in this rather tumultuous fandom. Also, she beta'd and americanized this for me, because she's wonderful. love you, babe.

first of all: detailed knowledge of the marvel universe is not required to understand this fic, since i’m sticking to the most known characters and staying away from major plots
happening in the various timelines of the various comics. basic knowledge, however, is assumed, so if you know nothing about the avengers and captain america and shield, just read the quick summary here you should be golden.

a good chunk of this story is already written and i'm estimating the word count to be around 80k and am aiming at 8 chapters, but i might be slightly off, so be prepared for a possible expansion. i will also be updating every two weeks from now on. if i can't meet an update, i'll let you know.

as always, feedback and questions of any kind are very welcome and appreciated and you can also hit me up on tumblr.

P.S.: i think we can all use a little pick-me-up right now. plenty of zayn and ot5 ahead. lots of love.

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

DISCLAIMER: the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.
CHAPTER I.

“Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime, and falling in at night.”

Edna St. Vincent Millay

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There’s a screeching noise ahead and it sounds like a scream echoing through the valley, but it is quickly drowned out by the thundering of the steam train as it shoots through the thick clouds rolling off the edge of the mountain. It’s freezing cold, not even snowing but spitting pinpricks of ice. Harry throws his shoulder against the metal door and feels it give in, sees the dent in it when he steps back to throw his body at it again.

“Up and at ‘em, pal.”

He doesn’t need to turn around to know the exact way Louis’ lips are curling up, how his gaze is sharp and focused, frost stuck to the collar of his coat, hair blown away from his face by the sharp wind coming in through the open windows. Harry throws himself forward again and the door gives way with a loud groan, bangs against the wall as he clambers into the next compartment, left arm coming up to hold the shield out in from of him. Louis is on his heels, rifle readied and scanning the cart, which appears to be empty at first glance, but all of a sudden there’s a blast and Harry feels it hit his shield, strength of the HYDRA-made weapon enough to make him go tumbling. The shield slides from his grip and clatters over the ground and there are two HYDRA soldiers approaching with pointed weapons. Harry is just getting back to his feet when they shoot again, but a hit from Louis’ rifle to the soldier’s shoulder diverts it. The entire compartment shakes as the blast goes through the side and takes half the wall with it. Suddenly, the wind that curls around them is almost solid with its strength and the serum doesn’t stop Harry’s eyes from watering. Before he can react to anything, the second soldier has readied his weapon.

Harry can only assume it’s instinct that makes Louis grab the shield. The weirdly blue colored blast of energy hits the shiny surface and it was enough to knock Harry off his feet, but it catapults Louis a few feet back and with the blink of an eye, he’s gone.

A sound Harry doesn’t recognize as his own forces itself past his lips and he’s on his feet the shred of a second later. He hurls the dislodged door at the two soldiers who go down like wet sacks of potatoes and leaps towards the hole in the wall of the compartment, holding on to the edges.

“Louis!”
He screams at the top of his lungs, the steam train ploughing on instantly swallowing his voice, but Harry barely registers anything happening. His entire focus is zeroed in on Louis clinging onto the side of the train and God knows how he managed to grab onto something considering the blow he took. He’s always been a crafty bugger. His gloves are sliding along the metal bar and Harry’s eyes are burning, his throat is tight.

“I’m fine!” Louis yells back, feet dangling in the air and it’s obviously not fine, but even this close to plummeting down into a valley they can’t even see the bottom of at this stage, he’s trying to assure Harry. “Keep going, Haz, all right? I’ll be fine!”

“No!” He’s trying to figure out how to do this. Harry’s gotten used to having superhuman strength, but he can’t stretch his limbs and Louis is out of his reach and there’s nothing he could hold onto. “Hold on, please!”

He knows Louis is slipping, knows the winds are pulling at his body and he shouldn’t be reckless, should think of the greater cause and responsibility and the war, but at the moment his entire world is hanging on to life by just a metal bar that’s slowly but steadily starting to peel away from the wall. Without thinking about it for another second, Harry grips the edge of the hole with his right hand and kicks his left foot into the metal. He stretches his entire body, reaches out with his left arm, but Louis is still too far away.

“Stop!” Louis tells him, looking desperate not for himself but for Harry and his entire chest seems to be on fire. “Just fuck off! Leave, God dammit, Haz!”

“I’m not leaving!” he shouts, throat feeling raw. “Hold on, just – I’m almost there! Don’t you dare to let go, I’m almost there!” Louis’ right hand slips off the bar. “Take my hand!” Harry yells and leans closer, hopefully close enough for Louis to swing his arm forward for Harry to grab. “Lou! Please! Please, take my hand!”

“Harry!”

Louis looks scared, and he looks so young and it seems like time freezes for a moment as Harry looks into his eyes. He swears he can feel Louis’ fingertips brush his own, is almost convinced he’s about to close his hand around Louis’ wrist.

The next second, Louis is gone.

Harry startles awake with a silent scream that still hurts all the way up his throat. His chest is heaving, sheets dropped into his lap, heart pounding painfully and the roaring of the train still echoing in his ears. He lifts his hand and isn’t surprised to find that his cheeks are wet with tears. Dragging fingers through his curls, tugging enough for a soft burst of pain to pull him back into the here and now, Harry lets out a long breath and sits in silence for another minute before pushing away the duvet and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

The ground under his feet is perfectly heated, like everywhere in this unbelievable tower. He sighs and lifts his gaze to the panorama windows that show a perfect view of Manhattan at night, lights adorning it like stars. It’s early and there’s only a sliver of pink on the horizon, but Harry knows he’s not going to go back to sleep, so he walks up to the glass and leans his forehead against it, looking down.
He should be afraid of heights, Harry guesses, and it’s probably some definition of cruelty that he’s not. Forcing his heavy eyes to stay open, because he’s terrified of what he might see once he closes them, he turns around and heads for his bathroom. All he needs is a cold shower and a run around Central Park before anyone else wakes up. It’s worked all the other days, and Harry prays it’ll work this time as well.

It’s half past seven when Harry walks into the communal kitchen after his second shower. It’s so incredibly sleek and modern and it still startles him, but the smell of freshly ground coffee and fried eggs is familiar and instantly settles his unease. Niall’s standing at the stove, back turned to him, in a grey t-shirt and baggy sweatpants, humming along to a song that’s quietly playing on the radio. Harry is still not used to seeing him in such a casual setting, out of his black uniform, no bow, no weapons, looking like any regular guy in his mid-twenties.

He realizes he doesn’t even know how old Niall actually is.

“Morning,” he says, voice throaty because he hasn’t used it in perhaps a day or so.

Niall turns around with a smile that too cheerful for this time of day and again contrasts so sharply with the persona he puts on when he becomes a deadly assassin who fights alien armies from outer space. Harry absentmindedly wonders how this has become his second life.


He resists the urge to check his reflection. Harry knows how dark the circles underneath his eyes are, can’t remember the last time he slept through the night and despite his body needing far less rest than regular people, it’s not been enough for quite some time. There’s a steaming pot of coffee standing on the kitchen island because Niall told him in confidentiality that he doesn’t trust the machines in this household, and that includes the coffee machine that resembles – well. Harry doesn’t know what it resembles, but it doesn’t look like something that can produce actual coffee. Niall and he have an understanding on that part.

Sitting down on one of the fancy bar stools that are set up around the kitchen island, Harry pours himself a cup and adds so much cream and sugar that Niall pulls a face at him. He can’t help it; he’s never had a surplus of or unlimited access to sugar and he’s taken a liking to it. Niall tells him he has a sweet tooth. Harry tends to reply that he has superhuman metabolism and needs the calories.

“Wanna talk about it?” Harry raises his brows at Niall, who is putting an impressive amount of eggs onto an already loaded plate and joins him at the island. “About what put those craters under your eyes?”

Harry’s stomach is still turning and he still refuses to close his eyes, scared what his subconscious might show him then. This isn’t something he can just talk about, and he doubts he’ll ever be ready to share it. He hasn’t quite figured out who he is yet in this twenty-first century full of new and different things. “Just – nightmares,” is what he settles on, close to the truth without revealing too much of it.

“Ah,” Niall nods, scooping a spoonful of eggs into his mouth. “We all get those. Zayn nearly killed me once during one of his. Almost broke me neck.” He continues to chew like there’s nothing abnormal about that, and Harry assumes there isn’t, at least not for him.
“Where is he?” Harry asks, sipping his sugary coffee. “I haven’t seen him in a few days.”

Niall simply cocks his head.

“Right,” Harry admits. “Stupid question. When will he be back?” He gets the same reaction. “Okay, again, stupid question. He’ll be back when he’s back, huh?”

“That’s the general pattern,” Niall replies and turns his attention to a piece of slightly charred bacon. “And before you ask another question you actually know the answer to, Payno’s down in his workshop doing God knows what with God knows what.”

“Right,” Harry says, finishing his coffee. “I’ll be on my floor then. Alert me when anything happens.”

Niall tips an imaginary hat. “You’ll be the first to know, Cap.”

After he’s woken up, Arlington is one of the first places they drag him to, publicly, surrounded by Army Generals he’s never met and SHIELD agents he doesn’t know and he sees his own name engraved in marble, lights flashing in his stricken face.

Harry is a man out of time. He feels it, too. There isn’t a manual on how to deal with waking up in the twenty-first century after being a frozen block of ice for about seventy years. There is nobody there to tell him how he is supposed to mourn all the people who are just gone or how to feel when he comes face to face with his own grave, surrounded by an ocean of white stones and almost unnaturally green fields.

There is his name, and there is Louis’ right next to it and Harry can’t even begin to mourn him, wound still open and fresh and throbbing in his chest. He knows that his coffin is as empty as Louis’ and, not for the first time since he’s woken up, Harry wishes it weren’t.

He starts working for SHIELD, because there is nothing else he can do. There are no job openings for formerly frozen supersoldiers and Harry isn’t ready to get back into the world just yet. He still feels awfully detached, suspended in air and, apart from the nightmares that wake him every night, worryingly numb. There’s a shrink he is supposed to see every other week, a nice woman in sharp suits and red glasses and auburn hair that’s greying at the temples, but Harry doesn’t know how to talk to her, or what to say.

The Avenger Initiative is a blessing in disguise, really. Harry doesn’t want to call it a blessing, because an alien invasion from space that destroys half of Manhattan is not, but with Iron Man, Black Widow and Hawkeye – or Liam, Zayn and Niall as he knows now – he’s found a small group of people who seem equally out of place. At first, Harry expected them to be at each other’s throats, but after a few months and a handful of missions, they’ve grown quite attached to each other.

(He says attached. The reality of it is hard to explain. Harry would probably trust them with his life by now, and they sort of live together in that massive tower Liam built for Payne Industries originally, but they don’t see each other all that much. Liam busies himself in his workshop with
robots and inventions and goes to meetings with shareholders, and Niall and Zayn go off to wherever SHIELD wants them to be, sometimes apart, sometimes together, but mostly for a handful of weeks every time.)

But being an Avenger means continuing to be Captain America and smiling and being honorable for the public and Harry does his best. It helps him to keep busy, attending veteran memorials, helping out various charities and going on the occasional SHIELD mission as well. But it doesn’t give him time to figure out who he is supposed to be once he takes off his uniform and puts the shield to the side.

Just being Harry had always involved Louis, and Harry fears he doesn’t know how to exist without him. He’s perfectly aware that it’s not exactly a healthy coping mechanism to flat out refuse to cope with anything, but it’s all he can do at this point. He puts on his uniform, shoves the nightmares and flashbacks and thoughts to the back of his mind and takes one day at a time.

Zayn comes back from wherever it was he disappeared to just two days after Harry’s latest recurring nightmare. He has enhanced senses, fought a war, but Zayn can creep around the tower without even the artificial intelligence keeping track of him. Suddenly, he’s just sitting next to Harry on one of the sofas in the communal living room. Harry startles and accidentally turns his fortunately empty teacup into dust in his fist.

“You’re twitchy,” Zayn comments while Harry tries to calm his heartbeat and school his expression back into something resembling composure. “You should take a nap, kind of looking like hell, Cap.”

Zayn’s still in uniform, completely dressed in black and Harry doesn’t try to locate all the weapons he has disguised on his body. He looks weary and a bit worn down, which is worrying. Harry’s never seen him look so tired apart from the battle of New York. He wonders what kind of mission has kept Zayn busy for the past few days.

“Haven’t been sleeping well,” Harry says and meets Zayn’s eyes. He doesn’t move and he doesn’t urge Harry to elaborate, but his gaze is piercing and Harry feels like he’s peeling off layer after layer to get to everything Harry’s holding back. He feels incredibly exposed around Zayn, and Harry hasn’t quite decided how comfortable he is with that. “How was the mission?”

“Unpleasant,” Zayn says and doesn’t elaborate.

“Any injuries?” Harry asks.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

It’s unnaturally quiet after that, Liam having soundproofed the entire building as far as Harry can tell. No traffic noises are coming in and sometimes it’s nice; sometimes it’s downright creepy. Zayn observes him for another moment, then he gets up. Harry notices that he favors his right leg, clenches his left fist for a second, a muscle in his jaw twitching. A twisted ankle, a torn shoulder, a couple of bruised ribs.

“I need a shower, then the Director needs me back at HQ. And he wants to meet all of us at 0700 hours tomorrow.”

“Copy that,” Harry nods and watches Zayn leave the room in quick, even strides. He stays in his
seat for another few minutes before standing as well, venturing to the kitchen to grab some food, give himself something to do other than listen to that voice in his head telling him that they haven’t been on a mission as the Avengers in a few months. That only something serious would prompt SHIELD to assemble them again.

Harry pours himself some coffee that’s left from this morning despite caffeine having no effect on him whatsoever. As always, he puts in cream and sugar, sits down on a stool and grabs the paper. Niall had filled in parts of the crossword with his chicken scratch and there’s Liam’s neater writing filling in some other parts along with a couple of oil smudges, indicating that he’s at least resurfacing from his workshop long enough to eat and name the capital of Kazakhstan. Then an idea must’ve popped into his head, because there are a few scribbles to the side, some notes, a rough blueprint of something technical Harry doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t see Zayn again, and Liam stays in his workshop all night, which is becoming a worrying habit. According to JARVIS (Harry still finds it strange to address a computer with a name, but then again, Liam keeps insisting that JARVIS is a lot more than that), Niall left the tower at exactly eight in the morning and hasn’t returned since, so Harry whips up a big portion of pasta and sits down in front of the TV.

None of the shows manage to catch his attention, so Harry just settles on the repeat of a college football game and lets the noises wash over him. He goes to bed some time past midnight and this time he doesn’t have nightmares. Instead, Harry tosses and turns and gets tangled in his sheets until the sun is a faint glow on the horizon, unable to find rest and heart beating heavily in his chest.

There’s an exhibition at the Smithsonian about World War II and Captain America and his fearless troops. SHIELD urges him to go again and again, to show his support, but it’s the one thing Harry can’t bring himself to do. To him, this is all still real and it’s part of his life and it shouldn’t belong in a museum. He doesn’t want to see black and white photographs, doesn’t want to read essays on operations he went on – at least that’s what it feels like – mere weeks ago; doesn’t want to pretend to be the image America spent over sixty years creating.

There’s a significant distinction between the person Harry is and the role he takes on as Captain America, and it seems that there is now a third variable in the equation, but he’s not ready to contort himself to fit an obscure image the public has of him, which is why he doesn’t want to publicly attend something that’s so personal he couldn’t keep a blank face.

He knows Liam went to see it, and he knows Niall did as well, because they’d both left brochures on the table in the communal kitchen and not being able to resist, Harry had flicked through them. They had an entire page dedicated to Louis, the only fallen comrade of the Howling Commandoes, and he’d crumpled the brochure into a tight ball. His hands had shaken for days.

Harry barely turns any heads when he makes his way to SHIELD headquarters early the next morning, but it’s not surprising. He doesn’t look much like the posters they’ve apparently been selling for the past decades since he’s grown out his army cut, hair curling around his ears like it had done before the war. And out of his uniform and without the shield, in blue jeans and a beanie and a flannel shirt, he probably looks more like the people Niall tends to call “filthy hipsters”.

Harry’s yet to figure out what exactly he means by that.

Zayn is leaning beside the front door when Harry gets there, dressed in black, cigarette between his lips, looking more alive than he had the day before.

“Any chance of you telling me what this is about before the meeting?”

“Nope.” He flicks the cigarette onto the sidewalk and turns around without another word, walks through the sliding doors, flashing his pass.

Harry follows on his heels, tripping slightly on the slippery floors between the lobby and the lifts. He assumes Niall is already waiting and knows Liam will be running late, forgetting about the concept of time working on the newest version of his suit. The Director is used to it and it isn’t going to earn Liam more than a raised eyebrow. Harry uses Liam’s inevitable lateness to nip to one of the machines on the sixteenth floor to get some gum before walking to the conference room at the end of the hall.

Zayn and Niall are already seated one end of the rectangular table, Director Cowell is standing at the other, so Harry pulls up the chair on the right. Liam shuffles in only ten minutes late, smelling like the inside of a new car.

There are no windows.

“Right, shall we get started then?” Director Cowell asks once they’ve all taken a seat. He takes a small remote control and presses a button and a screen appears at the wall behind him, flickering on, showing an aerial picture of an old city centre. It looks like a place in Europe, though Harry can’t say for sure. “Thanks to information gathered by Agent Malik over the last few weeks, we have reason to believe that there is a plan in place to eliminate one of our European delegates during a conference in Prague next week.”

The aerial shot of what Harry now believes to be Prague shifts to show a middle-aged man with jet black hair greying at the temples and a precisely trimmed goatee.

“Meet Mr Benjamin Winston,” the Director continues, “member of the European Parliament as well as an advisor to our European branch. He’s been very outspoken with regards to the heightening of control on arms trade, as well as an increase in transparency, and we believe he’s caught the attention of a few terrorist branches that can all be traced back to a single source.”

“HYDRA?” Harry concludes.

“Unfortunately,” Cowell confirms, stepping aside as to not block the blurry photographs that have just popped up.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Liam speaks up. There are still smudges of motor oil on his forearms. “But wouldn’t that usually be a job for the STRIKE team? Or a few of overseas agents? Doesn’t ring Avengers to me, to be honest.”

“You’d think that,” the Director concedes as the screen flickers again. Two blurry black and white photographs pop up, highly pixelated, prompting Harry to squint. “That’s what we assumed at first. But thanks to Agent Malik, we know that HYDRA aren’t sending in one of their run-of-the-mill assassins.

He zooms in on the pictures, which does absolutely nothing for their clarity. All Harry can see is a blurry figure dressed in black, cowering on what he assumes to be the roof of a building.
“Who’s that?” he asks, not sure if he’s meant to actually distinguish the person in these pictures.

“He’s a ghost,” Zayn speaks up and Harry turns his head to look at him. He’s got his arms folded in front of his chest, fingers absentmindedly kneading over his left collarbone. “Nobody knows who he is, or where he’s from, or what he’s called,” and Harry figures it’s most likely a big deal that even Zayn doesn’t know. “Most people know him as the Winter Soldier.”

“Never heard of him,” Liam throws in. He’s already getting twitchy, Harry can tell, probably left something unfinished in his workshop. He keeps twirling his cellphone in his hand.

“That’s because he doesn’t exist,” Cowell replies, and the pictures change again, more blurred shots of a figure clad in black, taken from a distance or in fast movement. “The first time SHIELD took account of him was in the late fifties. He appeared on our radar various times in the sixties and quite frequently in the seventies as well, but other than a few exceptions, the last thirty years have been without incident. Yet with the founding of the Avenger Initiative, he reappeared.”

“Wait, so you’re saying this person, if we even know whether it’s a man or a woman, has been active for almost sixty years?” Harry blinks at him, then squints at the pictures again. There’s a metallic gleam in two of them, perhaps a weapon or some sort of armor. “Can this even be the same person?”

Director Cowell hands him a file, Classified stamped on top of it. Harry flicks through the first few pages, a rundown of the conference in Prague, the attendees as well as floor plans of various buildings.

“We’ve considered that. It’s certainly one of our theories, that this is a role that’s filled by someone else this time around. It could’ve easily been the same person in the sixties and seventies and the inactivity could’ve been the subject’s decease,” Cowell explains.

“But it’s unlikely,” Zayn jumps in once again, making Harry’s eyebrows shoot up towards his hairline.

“Why’s that?”

Zayn reaches for the manila folder in Harry’s hands. He spreads out a few papers, some of the close-up shots of the person that’s supposed to be the Winter Soldier and points at the metallic shine that’s already caught Harry’s attention.

“There were only a few eyewitnesses over the past fifty years, but they all pointed out that the Soldier had his left arm encased in metal. Could’ve been a uniform, something similar to the Iron Man suit,” Liam huffs at that, “but I had an unfortunate encounter with him earlier this year. And that left arm is a prosthetic. I very much doubt that there are two people in the world who have a metal prosthetic for an arm.”

“Christ,” Harry can’t help but utter, and he also can’t help noticing that Niall’s been unusually quiet. There’s no time for him to address that though, because the Director speaks up once more.

“You will have time to acquaint yourself with the acquired information, but I’m sure you understand why we need the Avengers for this. Mr Winston is an unexpected target, but he is one of ours, and he is a valuable member.” He switches off the screen and lets a long, hard look settle on each one of them. “I will not have some cyborg assassin do any more harm.”

“You want us to eliminate him?” Liam asks, eyes on his phone, already scanning in the reports. “Because that’s not something we do.”
“No,” Director Cowell says firmly. “I want you to capture him.”

Harry sidles up next to Niall on their way out. Liam’s already rushed out and Zayn is staying behind for superspy things, so they’re on their own.

“Are you okay?” he asks, popping a stripe of gum into his mouth. “You don’t look too happy about this mission.”

“That’s because I’m not,” Niall replies, looking left and right, quickly doing an automatic scan of the area as they exit the building. “Fucking insane, if you ask me. That fucker nearly killed Zayn a couple of months ago, shot straight through his chest, almost bled to death. We don’t know what we’re up against. I don’t like not knowing who I’m facing.”

He turns right and Harry mindlessly follows, even though the tower is in the exact opposite direction. Niall seems distressed, and Harry doesn’t mind taking a detour. The weather’s pleasant enough, perhaps a bit chilly for early September, and he usually gets restless if he doesn’t get his dose of exercise.

“Well, they know as much as they were able to figure out,” Harry suggests as Niall harshly turns another corner, stalking in the direction of Central Park, digging his hands into his pockets and hunching his shoulders.

“Bullshit,” he almost spits. “They know zilch. They had fifty years to figure out who that bloke is, but they can’t. All they know is that he’s got a metal arm and was injected with something that’s a whole fucking lot like the juice the pumped you full with in the forties.”

Harry stops short. “What?”

Niall spins around, walks closer and drops his voice. His breath smells like coffee. “Why do you think he’s lived as long? Or is that fucking lethal? If it were a normal HYDRA agent, they’d have sent Zayn or me. You and Payno are being dragged along because the Winter Soldier is not bloody human.”

His jaw drops. But Harry figures it shouldn’t come as a surprise. Even during the war, they all knew that the Red Skull’s scientific research team was highly advanced and it had been a given that they’d been working on their own version of the serum after Captain America got involved in the actual fighting. But the fact that they might have been successful, that HYDRA has an active, trained assassin who’s been injected with it…

“SHIELD doesn’t give a damn about Winston,” Niall continues with a frown. Traffic is picking up and they’re only a few blocks away from Fifth Avenue, so the noise level is increasing, muffling his voice even more. “Might be even using him as bait. They want the Soldier and they want to milk him for information.”

Then he walks again and Harry takes a moment to catch up to him, not really knowing what to say to all of this. This new world and these new structures are still a bit foreign to him. He’s already understood that it’s not as easy to distinguish good from bad anymore, but he certainly doesn’t appreciate being told half-truths.

They walk around for another hour, stopping for bagels and only turning a few heads, and when they get back to the tower, the morning bustle of the city is in full flow. Thankfully, there’s a
private lift that takes them all the way up to the top levels. It’s entirely made out of bulletproof glass, so Harry takes a moment to switch off his brain as the skyline of Manhattan slides past. Once they reach the communal area, big living room and open kitchen, he and Niall are greeted by the sight of Ms Smith, Liam’s assistant and – well. Harry doesn’t like to pry. They’re all entitled to a private life. Niall says if Liam had a Facebook account, the relationship status would be set to “it’s complicated” – whatever that means.

Ms Smith – “Seriously, Captain, call me Sophia” – is perched on one of the stools set around the kitchen island, delicate and manicured fingers curled around a cup of coffee, a big stack of documents and files on the table beside her.

“Good to see you, ma’am,” Harry greets her just as Niall says, “Y’all right, Soph?”

It earns both of them a fond smile as she places the cup on the countertop. “Agent, Captain,” she says. “I heard you’re heading to Prague. Beautiful city.”

“Afraid we won’t see too much of it,” Niall says, rounding the island. He takes a bowl out of the cupboard above the sink and pours in some cereal and milk. Harry thinks it’s his third breakfast. “Will be too busy to do sightseeing.” Sitting down, he scoops in two mouthfuls of cereal. “You here on business?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Sophia says, eyeing the big pile of documents. “Liam’s been avoiding any business-related activities, but I do need his signature for all of these contracts.” She takes a sip of her coffee and lowers her gaze to her Payne tablet, apparently going through her calendar. “I’m hoping to wear him down once he comes up for a caffeine refill, since I had JARVIS disable his machine in the lab.”

Niall laughs at that, milk running down his chin. He wipes it off with his hand. “Remind me to not make an enemy out of you.”

Harry sits down as well, takes the morning paper to start on the crossword and it’s only a half hour later before Liam walks in as well, sighs audibly at Sophia’s raised brows and takes the pen she holds out to him in defeat. He takes the first contract, sighs again to make a point, but Sophia only goes back to her tablet and her second cup of coffee.

“There, there,” she says flatly. “You know, it wouldn’t be this much if you came into your office more than once every four weeks.”

“I’m busy,” Liam insists, not earning the desired reaction when Sophia doesn’t react at all.

“So am I, Payne. Suck it up.”

It’s a familiar exchange, Harry has come to know, prompted by Liam’s avoidance of official Payne Industries business and Sophia’s task of making sure he doesn’t drown in motor oil or forget the existence of a world outside his workshop. She’s the only one who really takes him down a peg or two and it sparks a memory in Harry’s head, a high-pitched yet slightly rough voice telling him, “someone needs to make sure your big feet stay on the dirty ground alongside ours”. There’s an image that goes with it, Louis looking beat up and tired, lying on a small cot, eyes startlingly blue even against the dark background of the tent.

“Cap?” Someone pulls him out of his own head. “Cap, you all right?”

Harry blinks, vision swimming, and finds that his suddenly bunched up fists have ripped the newspaper into shreds. He looks up, finds Niall, Sophia and Liam staring at him. He swallows the
lump in his throat.

“Yeah, sorry, I – I zoned out for a second,” he replies, getting to his feet unsteadily.

“Kind of noticed that from your thousand-mile stare, mate,” Niall comments. “Everything okay?”

“Sure,” Harry is quick to assure them. “I think I’m going to hit the shower, feeling a bit out of it.” He doesn’t wait for their reaction, just turns on his heels and exits the communal area; fully aware they’ll be talking about him as soon as the automatic doors shut behind him.

He does end up taking a shower, letting hot water run over his neck and down his back as he leans his forehead against the tiles, telling himself it’s washing away the images and memories when he’s very certain that’s not what’s happening at all. On the contrary, Harry suddenly feels transported back into the small medical tent near the German border, mud frozen beneath his boots and Louis looking half-dead, small and fragile and painfully young after having endured weeks of torture at the hands of his captors.

It had probably been both the best and the worst day of Harry’s life; Louis telling their commanding officer to shove the medals and honorable discharge up his ass, because he wasn’t going anywhere.

A part of him will forever blame himself for allowing Louis to stay, despite knowing that nobody would’ve been able to sway Louis from his decision once he’d made it.

The other, more selfish and secret part will forever be grateful for every additional second he got to spend with Louis because of it.

They leave for Prague two days later, the Quinjet taking them there in under eight hours, getting them to a secured apartment building by early evening. It’s opposite the Hotel General, where the conference will take place. It’s also where most delegates are staying and the apartment on the top floor gives them a good view over the hotel as well as the buildings surrounding it.

When Harry steps outside into the evening crowd, donning a hat and a sweatshirt to blend in, he takes a moment to soak up the atmosphere, the golden lights and the cobbled sidewalks and the ornate street lanterns. He’s never been to Eastern Europe before, but this city reminds him a lot of Paris, memories bittersweet, enough to make his eyes water a little.

He turns to the left to walk around the block once and scan the area while Zayn and Niall check out the hotel and its various entrances and exits. Liam’s back at the apartment, hacking into the surveillance videos but knowing him, he’s already cracked it and it fiddling with his suit. So Harry keeps moving, curls his shoulder forward and ducks his head to appear smaller, to not stand out between the small groups of people sightseeing or searching for a place to have dinner at.

He’s just turned right a third time when he notices something out of the corner of his eyes, a prickling at his neck, and he comes to a halt, turns around. At first, he doesn’t know what it is that makes him stop, then Harry raises his gaze, eyes twitching along the street and he notices a window, slightly ajar, on the third floor of the building opposite the east wing of the hotel.

It takes him only a second to decide, then he dashes across the street, dodging cars and pedestrians. In less than five seconds, he’s standing at the bottom of the stairwell and takes a deep breath before taking three steps at a time. His leg muscles don’t even strain slightly as he runs up to the third
floor and quickly scans the hallway to decide which room to burst into.

“Cap, what’s your position?” Liam’s voice sounds in his ear.

Harry isn’t armed, but that’s never stopped him before. He stops at the second door down and gives it a kick. It gets thrown out of its hinges and crashed to the ground, but it’s in vain. The room – a studio apartment stripped bare as it seems – is entirely empty, safe for a dirty, fitted kitchen on the left. But the window is still open and when Harry walks up to it, he sees a small chalk mark, probably a Cyrillic letter, on the sill.

“Your position, Harry,” Liam demands to know again and Harry puts a fingers against the tiny in-ear piece, presses down.

“Opposite the east wing, third floor,” he says, leaning closer. Russian isn’t one of his few talents, but he’s got no doubt Zayn will know what it means once he’s taken a look at it.

As it is, it only takes two minutes or so until Zayn is standing by his side. “It’s the Cyrillic letter for E,” he explains, leaning close to the mark but not touching it. “Could be marking various points from which he can hit the target. Winston’s room is across the street, fifth floor, seventh window from the right.” Zayn straightens again, gives Harry a quick look. “It’s a difficult shot.”

“Can’t take any chances, though,” Harry says, glancing out the window and onto the street. “And I kind of have the feeling he was looking at me.”

“Most likely,” Zayn admits, folding his arms in front of his chest. “Showing us that he’s got more than one way of getting to Winston.”

“So what do we do now?”

Zayn shrugs. “Continue as before. We’ve got a number of eyes on the target as well. If the Soldier shows up again, we’ll know.”

They’re on highest alert the next day. Mr Winston is constantly accompanied by agents and Liam, slouching back in their apartment opposite the hotel, is monitoring every tiny movement, keeping them informed on people exiting and entering the hotel through their ear-pieces. Harry knows that Niall is on the roof with his bow, should the Winter Soldier decide to use it as an entrance or escape route and Zayn, in an expensive suit, weapons and Widow Bites concealed, is somewhere on the edge of the large dining hall, while Harry is up on the gallery, looking down onto the ocean of black suits.

It’s only the first evening, and the conference is taking place over the next three days. The assassin might strike tonight or tomorrow morning or at the last minute, or any second in between really, there’s no way of knowing. It’s far from ideal and this isn’t exactly a military operation like Harry was trained to lead, like he’s experienced with. All he can do is rely on Zayn’s seemingly sixth sense and Liam’s voice in his ear-pierce; perhaps his own instincts as well.

But the evening remains uneventful and by the time Mr Winston returns to his suite, Harry breathes a sigh of relief that’s possibly premature. There are no cameras inside the actual rooms, but Liam’s got heat sensors installed to pick up if a second body enters it, so Niall (Harry doesn’t know how exactly) is perched outside the window, which doesn’t have a balcony, and Harry and Zayn are in corridor. His shield is leaning against the wall, blue and red and white against a weird ochre-
“I’ll check in with the Director,” Zayn announces after a beat, quickly glancing at his watch, “then I’ll scan the lower floors, instruct the other agents. Keep me posted.”

“I will,” Harry assures him and can’t help the way his heels want to click together after that. His old Colonel would be proud.

Once Zayn is out of view, Harry takes position beside the door to Mr Winston’s suite. It’s going to be a long night.

Liam says, “If the Winter Soldier as much as coughs in the vicinity of the hotel, we’ll know about it.”

But as the third day of the conference in Prague dawns and Harry tries to shake off a crick in his neck, he’s not so sure if they have been fed false information, or if HYDRA possibly delayed any plans because of the Avengers’ arrival. In any case, aside from the small chalk mark he had discovered, there’s not a single trace of a metal-armed assassin and Harry’s growing impatient.

He’s used to combat and military operations, a direct approach to everything he does. He’s not like Zayn and Niall, who can hold out in one spot for hours on end without even the slightest twitch of their muscles. Or like Liam, who can concentrate on extrapolating data and going over surveillance tapes or build a robot on the side, from scratch.

So, of course, in a fit of cosmic irony (or perhaps not, since Harry’s been hoping for something to happen), it happens on Harry’s watch, Zayn and Niall not far away but still away.

It’s been a long day and even Harry can feel it in his bones, the toll it takes when one has to be alert every second. Mr Winston is walking in front of him, a few yards away from the door to his suite, two SHIELD agents guarding it. The window at the end of the hall shows the building on the other side of the road, tinged in yellow light from the street lanterns, similar to the light coming from the ornate lamps above them. Their steps are muffled on the carpet, which is why Harry hears the sudden almost inaudible clank that makes him stop short before a loud crash echoes through the corridor.

It’s entirely down to instinct when Harry, without checking, without thinking twice of looking what’s actually caused that thundering noise, throws his body forward to shield Mr Winston off, and just in time it seems, because only the fraction of a second later, he hears a shot and a sharp gust of wind flies right over his head. He makes a grab for his shield, realizes with a curse that he’d left it in the hotel room they’re heading towards, and quickly gets to his feet, pushing Mr Winston behind his body.

And then he sees him. Clad in black from head to toe, left arm glimmering metallic, goggles and mask obscuring most of his face and brown hair falling to his ears. He’s surprisingly small, but there’s no doubt that every part of his body is honed with hidden strength, making him quick as a whip. It only takes Harry a second to take all of that in and to understand that the Winter Soldier has literally dropped from the ceiling and taken out both agents with a single strike. Their bodies are lying on the ground and the Soldier is crouching down, gun in hand, ready to pounce.

“Cap?” Liam’s tinny voice sounds in Harry’s ear. “Cap, come in,” but Harry’s got no opportunity
to reply.

The Winter Soldier aims his gun, and Harry darts forward. They collide heavily, air getting knocked out of his lungs and weapon clattering to the ground, sound muffled by the thick carpet. A couple of quick steps, Harry advancing due to momentum, but his opponent pushes back surprisingly quickly, and with even more surprising force. Harry’s never been up against anyone who can stand their ground in one-on-one combat. He manages to hit the Soldier once before he blocks Harry’s attacks, the metal of his arm cold and solid, turning the tables until Harry is forced back, lifting his arms in defence, dodging a hit and then another and groaning when he receives a knee to his side.

The Soldier is too quick. They’re a close match in strength, but the Winter Soldier is faster, more practiced and even more importantly, more ruthless where Harry still feels a shred of hesitation. It’s that shred that lets the Soldier get the upper hand in the fraction of a second. Suddenly, there’s a knife angling for his face and Harry grips the leather-clad wrists to stop it about a centimeter before the tip cuts open the skin between his eyes. His muscles scream and strain like they have last done during the Battle of New York, but his feet lose their grounding, making him tumble back against the wall. Harry manages to duck away and the knife gets stuck in the wall next to his head.

It gives him a second to breathe, not longer, but it’s enough to take a closer look at the attacker; almost a head shorter than him and much narrower in general but around the shoulders especially, and the only skin visible is a sliver of forehead, everything else hidden by black clothing and leather, mask and goggles. His hair looks - it looks weirdly soft.

Harry ducks again when the metal fist is aimed at his face. The wall brittles, dust and stones and shredded wallpaper falling to the floor and Harry twists away, manages to get a hold of the Soldier’s right arm and rolls him over his shoulder. His body collides with the ground, allowing Harry just enough time to send a look over his shoulder where Mr Winston is still cowering, looking at them with wide eyes. Harry realizes that the entire exchange of blows has probably only lasted a few seconds at most, not enough for Mr Winston to compose himself and run for his bloody life.

Just as Mr Winston seems to realize what he should have done instead of hesitating, Zayn rounds the corner and the Winter Soldier is back on his feet, previously lost gun once again in his hand, and this time, there isn’t enough time to move. The shot echoes loudly and Zayn stills. Mr Winston falls back from the impact, bullet hitting his chest. Zayn is by his side in a second and Harry turns, but the Soldier is already running for the window at the end of the corridor. Harry tries to catch up to him, but he’s still a few steps away when he breaks through the glass.

Harry leaps forward, hands grabbing the now empty frame, but when he looks out into the night and down onto the relatively busy street where people are already glancing up at him, he can see no trace of the dark figure that by laws of gravity should be lying on the concrete a few stories below.

“Howkeye, you see anything?” He knows that Niall has been securing the roof and the surrounding buildings.

It only takes a second for his voice to come in through Harry’s earpiece. “No, shit. Fucking shit, what the hell happened?” following by Liam demanding an update.

Harry curses under his breath. He’s disappeared. Somehow, that damned ghost assassin managed to slip under their radar not just once but twice in the timeframe of less than five minutes. Turning back around with a pounding heart, Harry sees that agents are hurrying down the corridor towards them. Zayn is kneeling next to Mr Winston, who’s as white as a sheet and the front of his shirt
blood-soaked, applying pressure to the wound. The agents join him a second later, whipping out emergency kits and calling for back-up and alerting every other agent in and surrounding the hotel.

His eyes fall on the knife that’s still stuck in the wall and Harry grabs it, pulls it out, notices its warm, solid weight in his palm and - without knowing why - slides it into the waistband of his suit.

Mr Winston is in critical condition, but not dead, which is a stroke of luck in the embarrassment that is this mission. They take a private plane to SHIELD’s headquarter in London alongside him, so that he can be treated with maximum security. Director Cowell is less than pleased.

“He surprised me,” Harry says in a lowered voice when they finally find themselves alone in a common room in London. His shoulder hurts, a dark bruise blooming beneath his shirt from a single punch thrown by the Soldier. It’s disconcerting. Harry hardly bruises at all these days. “Dropped from the ceiling.”

“Air shafts,” Liam says. That’s all they’ve been able to figure out so far, that somehow the Winter Soldier must’ve slipped past the security barriers Liam installed, past two dozen agents and Niall and Zayn, making his way through the hotel by hiding in the bloody ceiling. “Though I’ve got no clue how he disabled the motion sensors. It’s really not your fault, Cap.”

“He was so fast,” Harry continues, rubbing his forehead, „and he blocked me like it was nothing.”

“What did I tell ya,” Niall grumbles, perched on the armrest of the couch Zayn is stretched out on. “Not fucking human. And a crafty bastard on top of it.”

“He failed,” Zayn says after a beat although his eyes remain closed.

“Well, at least that means this mission wasn’t a complete failure,” Liam replies with a shrug. He’s typing away on his phone, fingers moving quickly, probably hacking into this SHIELD branch’s system.

Zayn turns his head and opens his eyes at that. “No. He failed,” and he pauses for effect. “The Winter Soldier doesn’t fail.”

“You think he’s going to try again.” Harry catches his eyes and Zayn nods. “Here?”

Pushing his body into an upright position, Zayn sighs. “Like I said, the Winter Soldier doesn’t fail. He had a clear shot on Winston and he hit his liver. I’m sure he can hit a nail on its head from two hundred yards away, so I think he missed intentionally.”

“Knowing that we’d take Mr Winston to London were he to be severely injured?”

Zayn’s raised brow is answer enough and Harry can feel tension settle over the room. Rain is steadily hitting the bulletproof glass, London a grey, glum presence outside the windows. Harry tugs on the sleeves of his grey SHIELD issued sweatshirt, feeling cold and uneasy because there’s nothing they can do since Mr Winston is still in intensive care and apparently, HYDRA and their super-assassin have been one step ahead of them all along. Perhaps Mr Winston isn’t a target after all, just a pawn to get HYDRA closer to something else.

Maybe it’s intel they’re after or secret data, Harry wonders as his eyes follow the small droplets of
water as they run down the glass, obscuring the outlines of dark chimney sticking out of crooked roofs in front of a sky that appears to be full of smoke.

Harry’s not been in London since 1945. Back then it had been raining too.

The next day, he dons a dark coat and a hat and leaves SHIELD’s facilities. It’s risky, he guesses, seeing at it’s possible that the Winter Soldier has followed them to London, that HYDRA has infiltrated this city like it seems to be infiltrating every important place in the world, but his curiosity has always been stronger than his sense of self-preservation.

Central London is nothing like he remembers, which is to be expected. It’s busy and polished and dirty at the same time, people moving about like swarms of bees, phones to their ears and eyes on the ground. The streets are clogged by cars and taxis, their tires screeching when the traffic lights abruptly change, their drivers sounding the horns. Harry walks for a while until he finds a quieter, calmer part of the city away from the bustle and he takes a couple of deep breaths, turning up the collar of his coat.

Away from all the people, London feels familiar in a way it shouldn’t and makes Harry slightly uncomfortable if he’s being honest with himself. It’s been over seventy years, but it’s also been only a year and it’s far too easy, far too easy to imagine that it’s been no time at all; that his friends and comrades are silently walking by his side, just on the way to the pub before leaving for their next mission the following morning.

Ed carrying the guitar he never parted with and Stan bickering with Johnny, James knocking their heads together before the argument could escalate while Tom led the way. And Louis next to him, always next to him, gradually quieting down the more missions they went on, but knocking their hands together nonetheless, because they never really needed words.

It unearths an ache in his chest that makes Harry feel out of breath, a vice gripping his heart and making his eyes water because he keeps burying it all, deeper and deeper every time, but all it does is hurt more whenever he allows himself to remember. That SHIELD shrink told him that he isn’t processing, yet how is he supposed to process any of it?

He takes a random turn to the left and counts every step to distract from the throbbing pain behind his ribs and enters a small and dark pub on the corner of the street. It smells like ale and tobacco, slightly muggy and not very clean, but Harry isn’t picky. Digging for some change in the pocket of his coat, he orders a pint from the middle-aged bartender who thankfully doesn’t spare him a second glance, allowing Harry to slink away to the booth that’s hidden away in a corner, a single candle sitting on the table, unlit.

Harry slides along the bench until his shoulder hits the wall and sets his pint down in front of him. To make sure he doesn’t miss anything important, he pulls his cellphone out of his pocket and places it next to the glass. He doesn’t lift the pint to have a sip. In fact, he doesn’t touch it at all, feeling nauseous and like his stomach is about to turn in on itself.

They’d gone to a place similar to this, frequented by soldiers and British girls, the night before they’d set off to Austria for what would eventually become their second to last mission. Ed had played a couple of songs on his guitar and James and Johnny had spun girls around, laughing and dancing the night away. The image of Louis and Stan leaning close together by the bar is still tattooed to the back of his eyelids, talking in lowered voices and there’s still that faint echo of
stinging jealousy that had always gripped Harry when he’d see them together, so close because of their shared time in German captivity.

And like today, Harry’d been sitting separated from the rest of them, unable to let go and relax, body inexplicably tense, watching Stan and Louis talk well into the night and simmering hotly on the inside until Louis had finally grabbed his whiskey and walked over to Harry. He’d been a sight in his uniform and neatly combed hair, dim light accentuating his cheekbones and up until this day, he’s never seen anyone more beautiful.

Harry’s so immersed in his own mind he flinches when somebody flops down on the bench next to him. He immediately breathes out a sigh of relief when he realizes that it’s just Niall, smiling crookedly at him, also dressed in a run-of-the-mill black coat.

“Did you follow me?”

Niall shrugs and takes Harry’s pint, drinking almost a quarter of its content in one go. “Zayn thinks you’re suicidal.”

“What?”

“Hey, I didn’t say you were. He said it. I just do what he tells me,” Niall explains and sets the glass down again. “But regardless of what Zayn thinks, you gotta admit, it’s pretty stupid to go out on your own, even if you’re Captain America. Nobody’s invincible.”

“I just needed to clear my head,” Harry explains, looking down at where his hands are pale against the dark surface of the table. “And some fresh air.”

He feels Niall’s gaze on him, heavy and assessing. “I know I’ve said it before,” Niall starts, voice lowered slightly, “but if you ever need to talk, I’ll listen, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry replies, trying to smile, but his mouth barely twitches. „I just - I don’t feel ready.” He looks up to find Niall’s eyes on him still, soft and understanding and yet somehow so penetrating that he gets the uncomfortable feeling the other already knows what Harry isn’t ready to spill.

“I understand. But, you know, I don’t think any of us ever feel ready. Still helps to let it out sometimes.”

Harry’s not so sure about that. He knows times have changed and all, but he’s still the same person, if not more cynical, and habits are hard to break. It’s not just unlearning a lifetime of having to hide part of who he is and what he feels. Being Captain America comes with an entirely new level of expectations he needs to uphold and he supposes Niall knows that. And coming to think of it, there’s hardly anything he knows about Niall either, or Zayn, and even Liam if he’s being exact. The only reason they know so much about Harry is due to him being a frozen block of ice for several decades with no right to privacy.

His stomach threatens to crawl up his throat when he thinks about what’s spread out at that damn exhibition at the Smithsonian.

“Thanks,” Harry eventually tells him on an exhale. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Niall pats him on the back and empties the pint with impressive speed and gusto, then they take their leave, heading back out on to slowly darkening streets, sun sinking towards the horizon behind a curtain of thick clouds that promise more rain. People are filling the sidewalks, going home after a long day at the office, blank faces passing them until Harry’s eyes flicker over
familiar features and he stops short, heart leaping in his chest.

“Cap?” Niall stops and turns to face him as people part around them. Harry twists around, eyes flickering over the crowd, veins throbbing. “Harry, are you okay?”

No trace of golden skin and azure eyes and sharp cheekbones. He must be going insane, lack of sleep catching up to him. “Yes, sorry, I - I thought… doesn’t matter. I think I’m starting to see ghosts.”

Niall grins crookedly. “As long as you don’t start talking to them,” and continues on his way, Harry struggling to shake himself out of his stupor. He turns around one more time, but all he sees is an ocean of dark coats.

They have a conference call with Director Cowell, who tells them to stay put, to be on highest alert, to keep patrol up in front of Mr Winston’s room. Security measures in the entire building are up and Zayn disappears for two days, probably trying to get information from secret sources only he has access to. Harry spends almost every waking hour in the gym, sometimes sparring with Niall or Liam, mostly training by himself whilst Niall does target practice and Liam tinkles with his suit.

Mr Winston is stable and in an artificial coma, lying in a windowless room in the heart of SHIELD’s facilities, so obviously bait that it makes Harry rather uncomfortable. The Director thinks that HYDRA doesn’t want him dead after all, but he’s a civilian, and Harry’s been trained to protect those, not invisible data.

Liam, apart from working on his suit and having agitated phone conversations with Ms Smith, busies himself with scanning the entire building and all safety measures, and spends hours trying to decode a handful of files he finds dodgy before SHIELD’s tech agents notice and toss him out of the system. He’s as uncomfortable as Harry with all the secrets this agency keeps in general, and with everything it keeps from them. But that’s a discussion for another time.

When Zayn returns, he and Niall disappear for a few hours. Harry’s learned not to wonder why. He has his suspicions, but he doesn’t know nearly enough about Niall and even less about Zayn, only that they used to be on opposite sides, Niall ordered to eliminate Zayn, and that he’d made a different choice. Sometimes gazes linger and sometimes Niall drops a comment that could imply an involvement of some kind, but times have changed and so have people and relationships and other definitions. Harry can’t consider himself experienced enough to draw a conclusion.

He finds Zayn a while later, not a clue what time of day it is in the sub-level of the building, artificial light the only kind of light he’s seen since his little detour at the start. They start wandering the corridors together in contemplative silence and Harry guesses had Zayn found out anything of importance, he’d have told him by now.

“Cowell isn’t telling me everything,” Zayn suddenly speaks up, just loud enough to penetrate the echo of their footsteps.

Harry’s head snaps to the side. “What?”

“Keep your voice down,” Zayn instructs calmly, quietly, “and keep your eyes ahead.” Harry swallows thickly and does as he’s told. “I called in a few favors and I think the Director is keeping some details from us. Whether it’s to do with whatever they have at this facility, weapons or intel –
“we’re not here to protect Winston. Winston’s just a decoy.”

“But he’s a SHIELD consultant. He could have been killed.”

“Cowell’s not above sacrificing one pawn if it serves a greater cause,” Zayn explains and it’s not that Harry didn’t know that, but having it said out loud is something else. “If Winston had to die for him to get his hands on the Winter Soldier, he’d agree to it in a heartbeat.”

“I thought you trust the Director,” Harry says as as take a left. They’re somewhere on the lower third floor and he’s got no clue how many more floors there are below them.

“I don’t,” Zayn replies bluntly. “I trust that he’s on the right side of the field, but that doesn’t mean I trust his decisions. And I don’t like being lied to.”

“So what do we do?” he asks as they come to a halt in front of chrome elevator doors. Harry presses his finger against the touchpad.

“Nothing, for now,” Zayn says, folding his arms and finally turning to face him. There’s a line between his brows, corners of his mouth turned downward slightly. “We’ve been played from both sides and there’s nothing to do until something happens. We’ll see what the Winter Soldier’s actual mission is and then we will also find out what the Director doesn’t want us to know.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Harry says. He presses the touchpad again, because the elevators are usually quicker than this. Nothing happens. “Huh. This is weird.”

“Press it again,” Zayn instructs, and Harry does. No symbols flash up, no whirring of a metallic box ascending or descending. The lights flicker. “Shit.”

The next second, the sound of an explosion echoes from somewhere above them, and it’s enough to shake the entire floor. They both grab the frame of the elevator doors to steady themselves before lifting their eyes to the ceiling. Another crash, lights flicking on and off. Harry and Zayn share a look, then Harry fits his fingers between the elevator doors and yanks. Once there’s a small gap, he puts his palms to either side and pushes them apart.

“He disabled the elevators,” Zayn says, glancing into the empty shaft. There’s a faint thunder of quite a lot of feet pounding through the corridors. “And communication lines,” he adds, looking down at his communicator with a frown.

“Where do we go?” Harry asks. They’re both able to climb up and down, large wires pulling the elevators more than enough to support their weight. “The explosion came from the lower first or second floor, I’d say.”

“Might’ve been a distraction.” Zayn puts the communicator back into his pocket and runs a hand through his hair. “Very likely, actually. Winston’s on the first floor.”

Harry’s grip tightens, putting dents in the doors. “That’s five floors up.”

“Niall’s up there, last time I checked,” Zayn mutters, more to himself than to Harry, forehead creasing and eyes narrowing in concentration as his eyes first flicker along the empty corridor and then back to the elevator shaft. “But there’s also a closed-off section two floors down, top-level security clearance. He might be after that.”

“Stairs?”

Zayn shakes his head. “Only start on the ground level. Where’s Liam?”
“Lab on the first floor, at least he was two hours ago,” Harry replies, feeling his pulse pick up. “Do we split up?”

“I’ll go upstairs,” Zayn says, widening his stance, eyes on the wires strung tight with the weight of the elevators.

“Good. I’ll check on everything downstairs and then come up as well.”

“If you’re not up there in fifteen minutes, I’ll send Liam,” then Zayn jumps, latching onto the wires and twisting around them. He climbs up them with almost inhuman speed and is out of Harry’s sight in the blink of an eye.

Harry takes a deep breath and rearranges the shield on his back, approaching the edge. At least this time he’s reasonably prepared, in proper uniform and he knows whom he’s up against. He lets himself drop into the elevator shaft, not bothering to hold on to anything, and lands two floors deeper in a crouch. It doesn’t go any lower, concrete cold below his feet as he pries the door apart and pulls himself up into the empty corridor.

The lights are dim and it smells strange, stale and muggy. The ceiling is hanging low, the walls are bare and Harry can already tell that this is a maze. Three corridors are branching off in front of him and he hasn’t got a clue where he is supposed to go. He tries to recall the layouts of the upper floors and does so with reasonable success, so he decides to go left with quick but measured strides, body tense with alertness. The lights down here start flickering as well and the air is thin, forcing Harry to keep his breaths shallow.

The corridor cuts an abrupt corner to the right and Harry’s just turned it when the lights flicker one last time before they go off. He instantly stops in his tracks and holds his breath, listening out, trying to keep a clear head. If the Winter Soldier has found a way to cut off electricity to the entire building, they’re in deep trouble. There should be a backup generator, and Liam is probably already on the way to restore the power, but Harry doesn’t know his way around this floor and there’s a life-threatening assassin lurking possibly closer than he’d prefer.

A few beats later, a quiet buzz starts to echo between the walls and, with a short but high-pitched beep, red emergency bulbs come on, dipping the corridor in an otherworldly light. Harry takes a deep breath and takes the shield off his back as a precaution, holding it up with his left arm as he continues on what he hopes is the right way to the high-security section or whatever it is SHIELD is hiding down here.

He walks for what feels like another few minutes, but it might be less, it might be more, feeling like a rat trapped underground and wondering if Zayn already sent Liam after him. Harry figures he’d know if Liam were on his way. Iron Man isn’t one for subtle approaches. In the maze of corridors, he thinks he’s managed to keep a fairly straight line, walking left and straight away to the right when possible and it seems like it was the right tactic when he takes a final corner and, a few yards away, there’s a large door, heavy metal and secured with at least five highly-advanced locks that seem to only open with fingerprints and retina scans.

Harry still hasn’t caught up on all the advancements in technology, so he hopes that there’s a separate power supply that isn’t affected by the blackout. Walking closer, everything seems to be untouched and fully intact, which is probably a relief. But Harry doesn’t have enough time to actually be relieved, because there’s a quiet sound behind him, a soft clonk as if someone had quietly dropped from the ceiling, and when he turns on his axis, he finds himself face to face with the all-black figure of the Winter Soldier.

The Soldier is not wearing goggles this time. Icy blue orbs pierce into Harry from eyes that are
smudged with black, obscuring his features nonetheless. He isn’t carrying any obvious weapons, but Harry has no doubt he’s heavily armed.

Harry widens his stance, tightens the grip on his shield and twists his upper body to the side. He takes a deep breath, narrows his eyes in concentration, then he throws the shield. It whirs through the air, swaying rapidly from side to side and making it hard to dodge out of the way, but the Soldier doesn’t dodge. He strikes out with his left arm, metal glistening in the red artificial light. His fist collides with the shield, a loud, hollow sound ringing between the walls, and he fends it off, pushing it to the ground, movement propelling him forward where Harry is ready to meet him halfway.

They collide, forearms knocking together and Harry grits his teeth, muscles straining, swinging his left arm forward, but the Soldier parries that blow as well. He doesn’t get anywhere while they exchange a few blows, and it unsettles Harry more than he cares to admit that they’re such an even match in strength. Finally, he gets hold of a surprisingly small wrist, tries to un-even the Soldier’s footing, but he uses it to propel his body up until he can hook a head behind Harry’s neck.

Air gets punched out of Harry’s lungs when the fall heavily to the floor, another knee pistoning into his stomach. Pain sears through his body and he only manages to keep his mind clear enough to hold on to the wrist and twist his opponent’s arm back until he grits out a groan. Harry rolls over to his other side and uses his momentum to throw the Soldier over his shoulder. His black form slides over the floor and it gives Harry enough time to get to his feet, midsection of his body aching and thin air making it harder to breathe on top of it. Already, he can feel sweat starting to form on his temples, the back of his neck, tickling his skin.

The guy is just too quick, back on his legs in less time than it takes Harry to blink, eyes cold and hard, throwing his body forward again. Instead of propelling an arm or a leg towards Harry, he stretches out something between his hands, and Harry only realizes what it is when the Soldier has already twisted it around his neck. At the last second, he squeezes two fingers between his throat and the thin wire, trying to hold it away from his windpipe. Harry ducks, propels his body into the wall, but the Winter Soldier is clinging to his back, legs around his waist and arms pulling at the wire and trying to throttle Harry.

Black spots are dancing in front of his eyes already and his lungs are starting to burn, wire beginning to actually cut through his gloves. He pushes against it, needing to get a better grip so he can yank it away from his throat, but one of his hands is trapped between his own body and a strong leg encircling his midriff. Harry’s running out of options and he’s definitely running out of time if he pays attention to the way his innards are clenching together through lack of air. With a last desperate surge of strength, he knocks his head back.

There’s a crack, the sound of breaking plastic accompanied by a dull thud that he hopes is the Soldier’s head hitting the wall. The wire loosens around his neck and he can finally take it and pull it away from him. Harry slips out of the Soldier’s grip, takes a deep, painful breath and then another and ungracefully scrambles to the other side of the corridor. His legs are shaky as he leans against the wall and watches as the Winter Soldier blinks away the pain and brings his non-metallic hand to his face. His mask is split in half, plastic apparently digging uncomfortably into his skin, and he yanks it off, unceremoniously.

And Harry… Harry can tell the exact moment his entire world starts crumbling around him, because –

“Louis?”

Because he could never forget this face. The delicate features and high cheekbones, thin but curved
lips and small nose and maybe Harry is really going insane, perhaps the lack of air supply to his brain is making him see ghosts, because there’s no way this is Louis. It can’t be Louis, because Harry watched him fall, because it’s Harry’s fault that he is dead and it’s been – God – over seventy years, it can’t –

A loud crash interrupts his thoughts, metal and concrete dust raining down on them before Harry can hear Liam’s tinny voice calling for him. But he can’t look away from this person with Louis’ face and his eyes and –

“Who the hell is Louis?”

A moment later, Harry feels hot pain spread in his belly and it takes him several beats to glance down and see the small knife edged into his body. He grabs the handle and pulls, but it must’ve hit a blood vessel, or an organ, because blood starts flowing and Harry starts to feel light-headed. He watches as Louis, or the Soldier, or whoever the hell he is, lowers his arm, attempting to get to his feet, but Liam is there in his red and gold suit, hovering above the ground, shooting something at him that looks like a dart. Louis drops down and lands in a heap on the floor and Harry can do nothing but stare at his face as consciousness starts to slip away from him and the shimmering red lights fade to black.

_to be continued._
Chapter Summary

He watches Zayn’s chest expand as he takes a deep breath. “Technically, the person SHIELD now has in custody is Sergeant Louis Tomlinson who served in the US Army from 1942 'til 1945. But,” he breaks off, seems to struggle with the words for a moment as Harry’s heart throbs heavily in his chest, a steady thump thump thump that rings louder every second. “That person down there, that – thing… is not your friend.”

Chapter Notes

first of all: oh my word. i really didn't expect the incredible response i got for the first chapter. i am really so so happy and quite excited to find out what everyone thinks of the second chapter, which was once again beta'd by the keeper of my sanity. brit, i promise, one day we'll share a gluten-free pizza in the middle of the night.

secondly: i know two weeks is a while to wait, but i've got a lot on my plate and difficult choices to make regarding my real-life career, so in order to stay on top of everything, i just want to allow myself and my beta to give this fic the attention it deserves. the last thing i wanna do is rush it, i hope that's understandable.

last but not least, feel free to come talk to me on tumblr.

ta!

p.s.: i had a friend translate a few thing into russian for me, but i might have mucked it up, so i apologise in advance to anyone who can actually speak russian for any mistakes that i might have made. the few russian bits aren't relevant to the understanding of the story.

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

**DISCLAIMER:** the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

“The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.”
“You enlisted.”

It’s not a question. Harry doesn’t really need to ask, since Louis is standing in the doorway to their shoebox-reminding, one bedroom apartment, delicate fingers curled around the wonky frame and clad from head to toe in the khaki uniform that’s become a far too familiar sight in their neighbourhood. So many people they know have already started bootcamp and will soon be ready to be shipped across the ocean to fight in a war that’s surpassed everyone’s worst expectations. So many are dead already, lying in the trenches, hopes and dreams of unrealistic heroism long left behind.

Harry’s chest clenches. He doesn’t want Louis to become one of them.

Louis lets out a heavy sigh, lower lip moving with it, brows furrowed with worry. His gaze is lowered and his clear blue eyes are staring holes into their ruddy carpet that they’d dragged out of a garbage bin around the corner from Mr Goldberg’s apothecary. Harry had spent three days cleaning and airing the damn thing. It still smells.

“I did,” he says, dropping his arm to his side, pulling at the hem of his jacket. He’s got his hat in his other hand, mildly dented because Louis’ gripping it so tight.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Harry doesn’t want to sound accusatory; he doesn’t want to sound needy. Louis isn’t exactly obligated to tell Harry anything, but he’d still hoped he would. Then again, it should hardly come as a surprise. They’re both barely old enough, but Louis doesn’t have Harry’s asthma or his bad health or weak back. Louis’ dad was an army man, as was his dad before him, and Louis always had a sense of duty and obligation.

It should hardly come as a surprise. But the reality of it is far more jarring than the plain thought.

Louis looks up then, blue eyes meeting Harry’s. He starts walking across that ugly carpet they’ve grown to love and past the wonky table and mismatched chairs and sits down next to Harry, joins him in gazing across that small place they’ve started to call home in the past year. It’s not going to be much of a home without Louis in it; Harry realizes with dread and feels pathetic with it.

“Wasn’t sure they were gonna take me,” Louis drawls and knocks their elbows together, nonchalantly like he’s talking about some random job, not joining the army. “Didn’t wanna worry you for nothing.”

Harry had worried either way when Louis didn’t come home for three days. “Right,” he replies, feeling short of breath, which isn’t unfamiliar, but he knows this doesn’t have anything to do with his asthma. “When do you leave?”

Louis pauses for too long. Harry tries desperately to keep breathing, black spots already dancing and flickering in front of his eyes. There’s the familiar weight of a hand on his thigh, fingertips brushing the top of his knees, warm even through a thick layer of cotton. His own hands are clenched at his sides.
“I’m leaving for bootcamp in a week.”

Louis’ voice is tight and the grip of his hand on Harry’s thigh grows tighter as well. A week is seven days. Seven days, one hundred and sixty-eight hours, ten thousand and eighty minutes, six hundred four thousand and eight hundred seconds. No matter how Harry breaks it down, it’s not enough.

“That’s soon,” he ends up pressing out, fighting tears, fighting the panic rising in his chest.

“I know,” Louis says apologetically. “But Haz, I’ll be back soon as well. I promise.”

It’s cocky and confident and so Louis that Harry can’t help but smile and God, he’s so in love with him. “You can’t promise that.”

“Sure I can,” Louis assures him, mouth twisted into a sassy grin. It makes his eyes twinkle in the late afternoon sun that’s shining though the window and his skin is like caramel. “Someone’s gotta make sure you don’t get into trouble.”

He pulls Harry in by the collar, wraps his arms around his shoulders and his breath brushes Harry’s ear when he speaks. “I’ll write ya. Every week. And I’ll be back before you know it.”

When Harry wakes up and blinks his eyes open, it takes him a couple of moments to realise where he is. There’s bright light reflected by clean white walls and it throbs between his temples and in his belly and when he tries to sit up, he can’t. There are restraints around his chest and arms and his brain needs a few more seconds to catch up before –

“Louis,” he croaks out, his throat so dry the words practically burn in his mouth and everything comes rushing back, the image of the Winter Soldier whipping off his mask to reveal Louis’ face burning into his mind until it hurts. His arms struggle against the restraints tying him to the bed.

“Harry.” His head twists to the side. Zayn is sitting on a chair next to the bed, one leg bent at the knee, ankle propped up on his narrow thigh. There’s a nasty gash at his right brow, already bruising. “You need to stay calm.”

“Stay calm,” Harry rasps, putting more weight forward, restraints groaning and bedframe rattling. “What the hell, Zayn? Let me go, I need to – I have to –” He doesn’t suffer from asthma anymore, but there’s a familiar tightness around his chest, making it hard to breathe, making it impossible for him to remain calm. He needs to know.

“You need to lay back and calm down and let me fucking talk, okay?”

Zayn usually is the epitome of calm. Even in worst-case scenarios, he’s the one who keeps a clear head, stays composed and focused. But there is a strain to his voice now that wasn’t there before and it gives whatever he is about to say a graveness that doesn’t help in calming Harry down. Nevertheless, he tries to relax his arms, tries to take a slow breath, in and out, yet his mind remains reeling.

“This is for your own good. It will be distressing to hear what I say and we can’t have you harm yourself or others.”

Harry doesn’t think he’s ever been considered a threat. He guesses there’s more behind what Zayn
is saying, but everything else can wait. He says, “his mask came off,” and Zayn holds his gaze steadily. There’s strain and stress and fatigue, but also grief that settles heavily in Harry’s belly. It can’t be true.

“He looked like,” Harry starts, air stuttering in his throat, “tell me, is it –”

“Yeah,” Zayn replies quietly and Harry clenches his eyes shut against the burn, against the throbbing pain behind his forehead. His fingers tangle in the sheets and he pulls on them so hard that the sound of ripping fabric cuts through the tense silence.

“How,” he choke out, unable to open his eyes. His heart is beating faster and his mind is spinning more and more and Harry feels dizzy with it, fucking nauseous and like he’s going to be sick any second.

“We’re not exactly sure yet,” Zayn says. “He isn’t responding to our interrogation.”

“I need to see him,” because that is the thought most prominent amongst all chaos. Harry spent the majority of his life looking at Louis and following his light and apparently, that hasn’t changed. The urge to see him is stronger than any worry or uncertainty he might have at this moment.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

Harry opens his eyes again and stares at Zayn, who’s solid and resolute and looking like he’s not going to budge on this one. “Why?”

He watches Zayn’s chest expand as he takes a deep breath. “Technically, the person SHIELD now has in custody is Sergeant Louis Tomlinson who served in the US Army from 1942 ‘til 1945. But,” he breaks off, seems to struggle with the words for a moment as Harry’s heart thobs heavily in his chest, a steady thump thump thump that rings louder every second. “That person down there, that – thing… is not your friend.”

Harry has a hard time following him. He thinks the words reach his brain, but there is a wall of thoughts and images of Louis Louis Louis that doesn’t allow them in. “What do you mean?”

Zayn puts both feet on the ground and prop his arms on his knees, leaning forward. “I need you to listen carefully and understand what I say, Cap, all right? I know it’s difficult, because he was your friend, but he’s not anymore. When you eventually face him, you need to keep in mind that you’re facing the Winter Soldier. He might be wearing your friend’s skin, but it’s not him.”

“What the hell are you talking about, of course it’s him, you just,” he leans into the restraints again, hears them croak, but they don’t give in. “He doesn’t know any of you, he probably thinks you’re pulling one on him, but just let me see him, let me explain, I need to talk to him.” Harry is aware that he’s rambling, that he’s getting frantic, but he thinks of Louis, prodded by SHIELD agents, desperate for a familiar face and who knows what HYDRA has done to him, but he’s found him now, they’ve found each other again. Harry just needs to see him.

“Harry,” Zayn says and it’s quiet and apologetic and heavy, and it actually makes Harry freeze. Zayn stretches out an arm and places a careful hand on his forearm. “He doesn’t know you either.”

“What’re you talking about, of course he bloody knows me. Louis –”

“He doesn’t even know himself!”

Harry was frozen in solid ice for decades and he doesn’t remember that, but he remembers freezing, remembers the cold and his senses slowly leaving his body and he’s never told anyone
about that, and he probably never will. But even that is nothing compared to the shiver that runs through his body from head to toe. Zayn squeezes his arm.

“He doesn’t know who he is. We don’t exactly know what happened to him, and how, but the result is a weapon. HYDRA took out the person and filled his body with skills and information. The Director is on his way here from New York, because we need that information, and that was the goal all along.”

“What are you gonna do to him?” Harry asks, but he knows. He knows.

“Interrogate him.”

Harry wants to pull his arm away from Zayn’s touch, but he can barely move it in its confinements. “And if he doesn’t cooperate?”

“He will,” Zayn says, lets go of Harry’s arm and gets to his feet. “The Director should be here in two hours. You should get some more rest until then.”

He doesn’t get any rest. How should he? Harry can barely feel his body, can’t even pinch himself to make himself wake up from this nightmare and he doesn’t know what to bloody think. If he’s already strapped up like this, Harry doesn’t want to begin to imagine what they’ve done to Louis.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters and leans back, directs his eyes to the white ceiling, not quite sure what to do with himself, can’t organize his thoughts for long enough to actually latch onto one. Instead it’s just image after image, memories that are new or old, all jumbled together; Louis in the dim morning light as he’d headed off to bootcamp, Louis on a small cot in a tent somewhere in Austria, crouching in the snow and propped up against his rifle somewhere on the Dutch border, leaning against the counter of a bar in London and wiggling his brows at him. Ripping a mask off his face and throwing a knife at Harry’s lungs.

He doesn’t notice Niall entering the room until he noisily plops down in the chair Zayn left empty a while ago. Harry throws a glance at him, then stares back up at the white paint.

“How’re you feeling, Cap? Were bleeding like a pig when we found you.”

“I’m fine,” Harry says distractedly. His fingers are twitching at his sides. His entire body is starting to itch with need to get out, get to Louis, and get away from here.

“Must be nice to be a super human,” Niall retorts. “Last time someone stabbed me, I couldn’t eat solid food for two weeks.” He clears his throat awkwardly, shifting on his chair by the sound of it. “But like, really, how are you? I know Zayn talked to you.”

“What do you think?” Harry bites back, and instantly feels sorry, because Niall hasn’t had a hand in this any more than he has.

“Don’t know,” Niall just shrugs. “That’s kind of why I’m asking.”

Harry doesn’t know. He doubts he is supposed to know. Waking up in the twenty first century was strange enough and trying to come to terms with what had happened to him is absolutely impossible. He can still barely stay sane on a regular day. Having Louis back from the dead as an apparent HYDRA assassin… it may very well push him over the edge, and Harry’s terrified to find
out what happens when he hits rock bottom.

“Not sure,” he presses out. “Have you seen him? What they’re doing to him?”

“Not for long,” Niall tells him. “It’s only been a few hours. They had to sedate him again. Was causing a bit of a ruckus.”

He guesses “a bit of a ruckus” is probably more than what Niall makes it sound and Harry’s witnessed first hand what strength Louis has now and he knows what desperation does to people. Trying to take a calming breath, he asks, “Why is Director Cowell flying in?”

Harry finally looks at Niall and he shrugs again. “Guess he’d like to take a look at his new cash cow. Your friend’s worth a lot of money to a lot of people.”

He shudders just thinking about that. “Zayn said he isn’t my friend anymore.”

“Zayn tends to have a different opinion on many things,” Niall says. “The Winter Soldier nearly killed him. Zayn isn’t one for revenge, usually, but he probably has a more sober view on this. But Zayn also plays his cards close to his chest, so don’t be too quick with making assumptions on what he really thinks, yeah?”

“I’m trying,” Harry sighs. The weight on his chest hasn’t lifted. He feels pressed into the mattress. “I just want to see him. I just – the last time I saw him, I watched him die and –” He breaks off. Despite everything, he’s not ready to talk about this. About not catching Louis and breaking his promise of saving him. About the days that followed that Harry barely remembers apart from the blinding pain that had gripped his entire body and – as he slowly starts to realize now – that’s never gone away entirely.

“We all get that, Cap. We really do,” Niall tells him sympathetically, and Harry knows Niall means well, but he doubts any of them truly get it. It’s not their fault. Harry can play his cards close to his chest too. “But we just want to make sure that you know what you’re getting into. Zayn was probably a bit blunt, but he’s right when he says that he’s not the same person. You can’t go in there expecting that he’s going to light up when he sees you. He tried to fucking gut you a few hours ago.”

“I’m not expecting anything,” Harry replies. He wants to get out of the damn bed and out of this room. “It’s a miracle he’s even here.”

Niall bites his lip. “Don’t think you’ll call it a miracle when you see him.”

The time spent confined to this narrow bed in a room somewhere in the building doesn’t do much to make Harry feel less anxious, less like a rubber band pulled tight. Director Cowell walks in a couple of hours after Niall’s left, flanked by two nondescript agents, as well as Zayn and Niall.

“Captain,” the Director greets him. “I’m glad to hear you’ve made nearly a full recovery already.”

“I want to see him,” Harry immediately cuts down the chase, looking him straight in the eye.

To his surprise, Cowell only nods and the two agents at his side move quick. They unlock the restraints attached to the bed and Harry’s muscles are stiff when he finally sits up, flexes his arms and stretches his legs. He’s in SHIELD sweats and it would probably be good to change into his
uniform first, but Harry doesn’t want to waste even more time. He’s aching to see Louis and it’s unbearable, almost itching under his skin.

Harry exchanges a long look with Zayn that he can’t make sense of before he’s ushered out and down a sterile corridor towards the elevators that take them down to one of the sub-levels that have heightened security. One corridor is as blank and bleak as the next and they walk for another five minutes before they reach a set of doors where the Director types in a password before they slide open. Once Harry steps through, he can hear voices, quite a handful of them, talking rapidly, urgently and after they’ve turned a corner, there’s another door, open this time but guarded by two armed agents.

Harry can see more agents through the door, some armed, some with white lab coats, hurrying around, talking agitatedly and the closer he gets, the more his pulse accelerates and his hairs start standing on end as if his body instinctively knows that Louis is right there, so close. They were both supposed to be dead, yet through some odd twist of fate, they’re both here.

When the agents see them approach, they stop with whatever they’re doing, standing up straighter.

“Status report,” Director Cowell barks as soon as they come to a halt.

“Director,” one of the agents in a lab coat responds to him. “The subject is increasingly violent and not responding. There’s no reaction to anything we’ve administered besides a very strong sedative that wears off three times as quickly as usual on a specimen his size. We’re currently working through the blood sample.”

“What about the prosthetic?” the Director asks, but whatever the agent responds to that, Harry drowns him out entirely.

He drowns out the entire room in fact, the agents scattering about and the computers whirring on the left and right, drawn like a magnet to the big wall out of bulletproof glass. Out of the corner of his eye Harry registers the narrow door, also guarded by agents and a security lock, but his gaze immediately snaps back to the small room behind the glass that’s entirely built from metal, floor, walls and ceiling shimmering in the lights that are pointed to the center of the room.

And Harry feels taken back to his unplanned and inelegant entry to the war after hearing that Louis’ unit had been taken as prisoners. In the moment, he’d been consumed by the need to rescue him no matter the consequences and he’d stormed the German base almost singlehandedly. Louis had been strapped to a table, half-dead after enduring weeks of torture and Harry had risked the entire operation, refusing to leave without him, carrying Louis away from the base until he’d regained consciousness.

Louis looks so disturbingly similar to the way he’d looked back then, strapped to a metal plate that’s tilted in a forty-five degree angle, twisting his nearly bare body into the light. They’ve left him the dignity of pants, but his feet and upper body are bare, every single sinew and muscle twitching in a struggle to break the metal bars and straps that keep him in place.

The serum had made Harry grow at least five inches in a minute, it had made his shoulders broad and stretched his limbs and his strength was visible in the bulk of muscles that adorned his upper body. Louis is still so small, skinny and wiry with protruding collarbones and his ribs clearly visible. He looks so disturbingly similar, but there’s an array of scars littering his chest and arms and there’s a metal arm, gleaming and shimmering, a perverse beauty about the artificial limb that’s replaced Louis’ own. Harry feels sick when he thinks about how Louis lost it, feels sick when he sees the darkened, thick scar tissue that surrounds the area where Louis’ skin meets metal. By the looks of it, HYDRA haven’t just replaced his arm, they took out the entire shoulder socket.
Louis’ face is a grimace as he keeps fighting, keeps struggling as SHIELD agents try to approach him, but even left without next to no mobility, they still seem terrified of him. But even like this, he’s still the single most breathtaking thing Harry’s ever seen. And he’s clearly in pain, clearly confused and most likely scared and he’d always made sure that Harry was safe, always looked after him even when Harry hadn’t needed it anymore, and Harry had let him down, didn’t save him in return, but he’s got the opportunity to make up for it.

“What are you doing to him?” He doesn’t turn away from Louis when he asks; Harry doesn’t think he even could.

“We are running a handful of tests,” the Director says as he steps up to the glass next to Harry. “There’s no doubt Sergeant Tomlinson was exposed to an imitation of the very serum that turned you into the first and only supersoldier. We’re trying to evaluate how the effects of this imitation are different from yours and in what way they are similar. Once the physical examination is completed –”

“You’ll start prodding his brain for information?” Harry cuts him off, just resists pressing his face against the glass in an attempt to get closer. Louis’ eyes are flickering from side to side, all over the room, not settling.

“I understand your sentiments, Captain,” Cowell tells him, “but I’m afraid sentiment has no place in this matter. As much as this man resembles Sergeant Tomlinson, he’s nothing more than what HYDRA programmed into him.”

Harry clenches his eyes shut and breathes deeply through his nose, in and out, and in and out again, trying to remain calm. “You don’t know that. If you’d just let me talk to him –”

“Captain,” the Director nearly barks, “this isn’t up for discussion. I allowed you here because I respect that you have history with the subject, but I can’t allow you to jeopardize this operation. You’ve apprehended Sergeant Tomlinson, but everything that follows will happen without your presence.”

“You can’t –”

“I can,” Director Cowell states calmly, meeting Harry’s incredulous gaze dead on. “And I will have you removed if I have to.”

It’s not like Harry to be cocky about his strength, but he turns his body around to fully face the Director and balls his hands into fists at his sides. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Cap,” Niall suddenly steps forward, lifting a hand, slowly reaching out to tug on Harry’s sleeve. “Come on, mate. Let’s just take a breather, all right? Let’s get some food and have a chat.”

Harry doesn’t want to take a breather and he definitely doesn’t want or need food. His eyes keep flickering back to Louis, continuously squirming on the examination table and Harry doesn’t know how he’s holding it together, because his knees feel weak and his chest is hurting with how fast his heart is beating. Once he steps out and takes a breather, he’s sure to crumble.

Niall pulls on his elbow and starts pulling him away from the bulletproof glass as Harry’s heartbeat starts thundering louder and louder in his ears, pressure building behind his ribs. His vision is blurring around the edges while Niall nearly drags him along the corridor and through sliding doors. Harry’s head spins, his balance is off, he sees Louis’ pained face and his scars and that arm,
sees a frozen abyss and hears Louis’ scream. He stumble over his own feet body heavy and uncoordinated and he has to stop and lean his forehead against a wall, rattling breaths sounding through the silence, Niall hovering at his side.

“God,” he chokes out, trying to swallow around a sob that’s making its way up his throat. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“That’s no good,” Niall says and takes hold of Harry again, steers him around a couple of corners until they get to a bathroom and Harry can drop down heavily in front of the toilet. His stomach is clenching and unclenching and he tastes bile, but he doesn’t throw up, because these days, hardly anything can leave his body. He’s probably already digested whatever he’s eaten, can only spit out saliva that’s collecting in his mouth as he dry-heaves and presses his face to the cold porcelain of the toilet.

Niall keeps rubbing between his shoulder blades to soothe him. “Feeling better?” he asks and Harry shakes his head against the toilet seat, eyes closed and concentrating on keeping his breaths even. “Right, stupid question. Take your time, Cap.”

It takes another five minutes, but it might as well be five hours, before Harry pushes against the toilet and lands on his ass, back hitting the wall of the stall they’re in. He draws his legs in and grips his knees, fingers tangling in the fabric of his sweats. There are sneakers squeaking on the tiles and a second later, Niall is crouching down next to him, holding out a small plastic cup of water. Niall’s face is blurred when Harry attempts to look at him with a grateful smile, and he takes the cup to his lips, downs the cold water in one go, but it barely takes a minute before the tremors in his chest start again and Harry kneels in front of the seat once more as he throws the water back up.

Somehow, Niall manages to drag Harry back to one of the common rooms they’d been using the past days. Harry isn’t much help, head pounding and throat afire. It’s a stroke of luck that they don’t encounter anyone on the way there. Liam is already there, typing away on a tablet. When he sees them come in, Harry heavily leaning on Niall, he sets it down immediately and watches on as Niall deposits Harry on the couch opposite his. Harry just wants to stretch out, bury his face in one of the cushions and close his eyes, but he’s pathetic enough as it is, face probably wet and blotchy, so he just leans forward, elbows on his knees, and hides his face in his hands. In and out, in and out.

“So,” Liam says after a while, drawing out the vowel. “Fucking insane, isn’t it?” Niall hums in assent, Harry just keeps his face hidden and desperately tries not to throw up again. “At least our job’s done here,” he adds and Harry doesn’t see his wry smile, but he knows it’s there. They know each other well enough by now.

“I’m not leaving without him,” he says before he can stop himself, voice sounding croaky and hollow at the same time, mouth raw from all the acid he spit out. Harry presses his fingertips to his temples in an attempt to distract from the pressure behind his eyes. Louis used to do that for him when they were teenagers and Harry’s health was at its worst; used to sit right behind him on the bed, head cradled between his strong but delicate hands. He doesn’t care what Director Cowell says. Harry’s not leaving without him.

“I don’t think that’s an option, Cap,” Niall tries carefully after a beat, sitting down next to him, sneakers still squeaking obnoxiously. “The Director wants us back in New York.”
“I’m not leaving him here,” Harry repeats. “I’m not leaving him again. I can’t.”

Liam starts, “I understand why –” but Harry doesn’t let him finish.

“You don’t. You don’t understand, and you can’t, and you won’t. But I don’t care, because he’s here because of me. All of this happened to him because I left him instead of trying to find him, trying to figure out if he could’ve survived the fall.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Liam says, scooting closer. “My grandfather talked about you a lot, you know? After you crashed the plane into the ocean he spent years looking for you. And he sent a search party out to look for Sergeant Tomlinson’s body as well, to at least bring him home, but they didn’t find him, and I doubt you would’ve either had you gone back.”

Harry shakes his head, refuses to look up. “He’d always looked after me. They tortured him for weeks and he could’ve gone back home, honorably discharged, but he decided to stay because of me and I didn’t talk him out of it. I didn’t talk him out of going on that mission. And I couldn’t reach him. He fell and all I did was watch.”

“Cap,” Niall moves in again, putting his hand on his shoulder, but Harry gets to his feet so quickly his head spins, which rarely happens these days. He walks a few shaky steps, Louis slipping from his grasp on a loop in his head, playing over and over again, nausea seeming to stick to his very bones.

“I need to know what they’re doing to him. What they’re planning on doing to him.”

“I could hack into the system again,” Liam suggests and Harry turns on his heels to look at him. “I can plant JARVIS into their database, get a few copies of files, look into their surveillance cameras.”

Niall wrings his hands and glances at Liam with unease. “For someone who’s working for SHIELD, you’re really happy to go against everything the Director tells you.”

“I’m happy to go along with whatever he tells me,” Liam replies, already reaching for his tablet. “But I don’t like being kept in the dark and I think all of us have proven time and time again that we can be trusted. If SHIELD aren’t willing to enlighten us, maybe they’re the ones that can’t be trusted.”

“It’s classified information,” Niall tries again. “I’m as unhappy as you are about this. But Zayn is in there for us and if he thinks we ought to know something, he’ll tell us.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Harry mutters.

Niall sighs and rubs his face, getting to his feet with a grimace, a grip to his knees and sneakers squeaking. “Then do what you got to do. But I can’t lie to Zayn. He’d milk me for information before I’d even realize. So…” He lifts his arms in the air and walks backwards toward the door, kicking it open with his heels. “I’ll go get some food. And I will be gone for thirty minutes. No more, no less. All right?”

“Right, Nialler,” Liam says and starts typing furiously as soon as the door falls shut behind him. “You might want to sit down, Cap. This will take a few minutes.”
It takes exactly ten minutes before Liam says, “I got it.” Harry sits up straight at that, feeling like he held his breath the entire time, but Liam waves off his excitement. “There isn’t much. Some brain scans, analysis of a blood sample… There’s a scan of the arm as well, that’s something I can assess. But no surveillance cameras in the room. Which isn’t a surprise.”

“How about security codes?” Harry asks and prompts Liam to raise his brows at him.

“What do you mean?”

Harry takes a deep breath. He’s twitching in his skin, but he needs to start looking calm again. “There are security locks. Can you find out what they are?”

Liam stares at him and Harry tries not to squirm. He knows what this seems like. “You’re not breaking him out, are you?”

He’s quick to shake his head. “No. I just want to get the chance to talk to him. If he can’t remember anything right now, it might help if he sees a familiar face. He might recognize me after all.”

Liam hums quietly and for a very quick moment, he looks at Harry with unfiltered pity before he reins himself in again, face going blank. “What if he doesn’t?”

Harry doesn’t really want to think about that. “Then I’ll have to deal with it. I’ll find some other way to help him.”

“Right,” Liam says and glances back to the lit-up screen of his tablet, even more illuminated by the soft, blue glow that shines through Liam’s black t-shirt. “I’ll see what I can do. But just – don’t be hasty, yeah? Give the Director one or two days with your puppy eyes and he might give in.”

He snorts at that. Director Cowell is nothing if not unwavering in his decisions. And the thing is, Harry guesses he can understand where he’s coming from if he looks at the situation from an isolated point of view. Matter-of-factly, Harry is too emotionally involved and he’s the first person to admit that when it comes to Louis, rationality is pretty much out the window. But that doesn’t mean Harry likes it.

“I sincerely doubt that,” he says to Liam and it’s not long until Niall returns with a few bottles of soda and a few packets of crisps he noisily opens, instantly putting a handful in his mouth.

Harry walks to the window, leans his forehead against the cool glass, and watches as clouds are slowly pushed towards the East.

Like Liam suggested, Harry doesn’t immediately barrel through all doors to get to Louis. But after spending a couple of hours in the gym, beating some punching bags into formless pulps, and ensuring that Director Cowell is in fact attending some important meetings, he returns to the lower floors. The agents let him through, but Harry can tell they hesitate for a split-second.

There are less people this time, for reasons Harry doesn’t know and can’t think of. There is one agent guarding the door that leads into the closed-off section of the room where Louis is still strapped to an examination table. They must have sedated him, because he doesn’t even twitch when one of the two agents next to him puts an IV drip into his arm.

Harry steps closer to the glass.
“He can’t see you, you know?” Of course Zayn is here. In his absence, the Director has most likely given him the order to keep Harry in line should he reappear.

Harry doesn’t go into that. Instead he asks, “What’s in the IV?” He feels nauseous once again when he watches as an agent tilts Louis’ head back and shines a small flashlight into his eyes to see if he’s responsive.

“Some nutrients,” Zayn responds easily. “His metabolism is almost as fast as yours and he’s malnourished enough as it is.” He hears him sigh, knows Zayn is glancing at him out of the corner of his eyes, but Harry only has eyes for Louis, whose head is now lolling to the side, eyes still open to slits but unseeing and unfocused. It’s a testimony to Harry’s self-restraint that he doesn’t just try to break through the damn glass.

“Listen, Captain. **Harry,**” Zayn continues in a low voice, apparently not eager for other agents to eavesdrop. “Nobody here means to do him harm. But he might have information that could save many lives, in the near and distant future and SHIELD needs to take that into consideration. And considering what HYDRA has turned Sergeant Tomlinson into, it’s not likely that he will give us that information willingly. I know you don’t agree with Cowell’s decision, but he doesn’t have a choice.”

Harry takes in a deep breath through his nose. Louis has stopped moving now, allowing whatever concoction is in the IV to flow freely into his body. Zayn said it’s just nutrients, but Harry isn’t inclined to believe him.

“Let’s not talk about this,” he says. “We aren’t going to agree on this, and I’d rather not argue anymore.”

The two of them don’t always see eye to eye, but they’re generally level-headed people and Harry doesn’t like disruption in their team. There’s no chance in reaching an agreement on what to do with Louis, but for now, Harry thinks he can be content with watching him and making sure he’s not in pain.

They remain side by side in silence for a few more moments before Zayn takes a step back. “I need to go, but I’ll talk to Cowell about giving you security clearance. Maybe Tomlinson will react to you, maybe he won’t, but at least then we’d know for sure.”

“Thanks,” Harry breathes out and listens as Zayn’s footsteps fade in the distance.

He stays right where he is, even when the other agents change shifts, go in and out of Louis’ room to run another scan and collect vitals, glad that they haven’t started properly interrogating him. Harry stays until his stomach is churning with hunger and he has to leave before he passes out right where he stands, but he finds some of the protein shakes Liam lives on in the common room, gulps three down in one go and is back in front of the bulletproof glass only a few short minutes later.

This pattern continues the next day, and the day after that. Harry knows Liam is working on evaluating the data he swiped from SHIELD, but Niall and Zayn seem to have taken up shifts watching Harry as he watches Louis. Unfortunately, he also needs to catch a couple hours of sleep every day and he doesn’t want to ponder on what they do to Louis while he isn’t there.

By the third day, Harry is almost one hundred percent sure that whatever nutrients they’re giving him are also laced with sedatives. He knows of himself how quickly he burns through painkillers and the like, so he concludes that the agents are administering it nearly permanently. But Louis still struggles, still tries to put his weight into the restraints, still remains stoically silent, lips pressed tightly together, and it breaks Harry’s heart in increments.
It happens towards what Harry assumes to be evening. Most agents are trickling out, leaving only one to guard the door and two operating the computers on the far left that are probably giving them updates on Louis’ vitals. Zayn comes in and fixes him with a gaze.

“Cowell says you can go in,” he says, and Harry feels his face split into a smile. He smiles so rarely these days that it makes his cheeks hurt. “But no talking, unless he starts talking to you first. And don’t get too close.”

“Thank you,” Harry says, but Zayn’s expression remains rather glum.

“Don’t thank me yet. Let’s see what happens first.” He nods at the agent guarding the door that turns around and punches in the code. The door whooshes and then slides open and Harry’s heart is beating in his chest, throbbing heavily. He thinks he might break out in cold sweat.

The IV is gone, but it was in Louis’ arm all day, so Harry guesses it’s not necessary. He’s aware that Zayn forbade him to talk, and Harry couldn’t say a word if he tried, heart seemingly lodged in his throat, beats resonating through his entire body. Keeping his distance as promised, Harry moves to the side Louis is facing in his trance-like state and he looks even smaller up close. Bird-like bones appearing fragile, pale skin spanned tightly around them, stretched so thin that Harry can see rivers of veins shimmering blue right beneath it; his strapped up hands trembling at his sides.

Harry takes another step towards the examination table. It’s almost intoxicating to see Louis’ face close up again. His cheekbones are more pronounced, the line of his jaw sharper and his eyes surrounded by purpling skin, lips dry and chapped. The blue of his eyes is clouded over.

Swallowing thickly, Harry wipes a stray tear off his cheek. It hurts almost as much as losing him, seeing Louis like this, not himself, not even conscious really, eyes moving slowly but not settling on anything. Yet somehow, even through this haze, the movement must catch Louis’ attention. His eyelids flutter as Harry holds his breath and Louis squirms, throat working and jaw tightening and his lips twisting like he’s and pain and –

And suddenly, he’s looking right at him. Not through Harry, and not just fluttering over his face, but looking straight at him, and Harry knows in this moment, knows it in his very core, that Louis sees him. Don’t say anything, don’t get too close is sounding in his ears, but it’s getting really damn hard.

Louis parts his lips and closes them again, once, twice whilst practically writhing on the table. Then his voice reaches Harry’s ears like a soft whisper.

“Please.” It’s raspy and barely audible but it still sends a warm wave over Harry’s body. “Please, it hurts.”

Harry’s chest lurches. He takes another step closer, arms aching to reach out, eyes and throat burning. Harry isn’t allowed to do anything and he’s aware that Zayn and two agents are watching through the glass.

“Please, I – it hurts. It hurts,” he rasps again, hands clenching and unclenching, eyelids fluttering, but Louis is still looking at him and he can’t – “Harry.”

His breath catches in his throat. Louis’ hands are shaking almost as if he were trying to reach out to him. He registers that someone pounds onto the glass, but the air around him is static and his blood is rushing in his ears and before Harry knows how, he’s close enough to touch.
“Harry, please,” Louis says and it cuts right through him. His hands close around the straps tying Louis to the table and Harry yanks the first one right off, metal groaning, adrenaline rushing loudly in his ears. The second one comes just as easily, freeing Louis’ head, then his shoulders and moving onto the arms.

The door opens with a whoosh.

“Fucking stop, what the hell are you thinking?” Zayn shouts, but Harry doesn’t spare him a glance, doesn’t even care enough to spare him more than a second of thought.

“He’s hurting,” he says. “He remembers, and he’s hurting, and I –”

Harry doesn’t get any farther than that. He throws a quick look at Zayn, sees his eyes widen before Harry’s air supply is suddenly cut off. It takes him a moment to catch on, because the effect is instant and his windpipe is getting crushed. Arms, sinewy but strong, are closed around his neck like a vice and a sudden pull makes Harry lose his footing. He falls, crashes onto his side, the weight of another body pressing him down and a loud crash echoing throughout the entire room.

Harry tries to blink back into focus, tries to coordinate his limbs, but Louis has rendered him almost immobile and he’s clinging to him, still partially tied to the table that must’ve toppled over as if it were plastic.

There are more thundering footsteps and voices shouting, but all Harry can focus on, all that he can think is that Louis has him in a headlock and he can’t breathe and he can’t –

Zayn is a blurred figure in his sight, frantic and fast movements, a syringe glistening in the cold light and Harry has a split-second to realize this before it’s plunged straight into Louis’ right forearm. It’s another beat, and then another, then the arms around Harry’s neck grow limp and heavy and he curls to the side, coughs and retches as he refills his lungs. Agents are moving in, grabbing Louis’ lifeless body and Harry watches with burning eyes and a burning chest as he’s strapped back in, restraint securing every single part of his body.

Distractedly, he touches his trembling fingers to his neck that’s sure to bruise and stares, brain still trying to catch up. Zayn grabs his upper arm like a vice and pulls, fingers digging into Harry’s biceps and he stumbles to his feet, dangerously swaying from side to side, eyes still glued to Louis who’s completely out of it by the looks of it. Zayn must have hit him with a higher than usual dosage.

“Come on,” Zayn says and maneuvers him out of the room, door swishing shut behind them and then the other one as well and Harry finds himself standing in the brightly lit corridor, feeling like he’s going to be sick all over again. “What the fuck were you thinking?” Zayn barks at him.

Harry leans heavily against the wall. “He said my name,” he says, and every syllable is painful. “He looked at me, and he said my name –”

“And you thought he’d recognized you?” Zayn asks, stepping close until they’re face to face. “Fucking hell, Cap! You’re not usually such an idiot. HYDRA probably had him observe us for days, regardless of the fact that they fed him with information on us. He didn’t recognize you. He saw you, and he knew exactly how to manipulate you.” He sighs, pity flashing across his features briefly before Zayn catches himself. Then he puts some distance between them.

“Do you understand now why we didn’t think this was a good idea?” he continues and Harry feels like a child being scolded. He guesses he deserves it for not thinking on his feet, for being so blinded because of Louis, of wanting so bad for him to remember that he’d thrown all safety precautions to the wind. “We’re not doing this to be mean, but you have to admit that you’re
biased, and that’s really fucking dangerous. Another few seconds and his prosthetic would’ve broken your neck.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. You’re the one he tried to strangle. But I hope you can keep your distance from now on.” He levels Harry with a firm look that’s unsettlingly penetrating. “He is not your friend,” then he turns on his heels and leaves Harry alone with his pounding heart that’s ready to burst through his ribs.

They torture him. Harry can’t be sure, because he doesn’t go back, and he doubts he’d be allowed back, but somehow he just knows. It’s as if SHIELD wanted to wait to confirm that there isn’t an ounce of Louis left in the Winter Soldier before bringing out the big guns and taking this so-called interrogation to the next level.

So Harry avoids sleep. He can manage a handful of days without, he’s tested his limits, and he’s silently terrified of the dreams he might have, so he practically locks himself up in the gym, lifts weights until his muscles strain and pounds against punching bags until his joints scream. Agents come in and out and they look at him and Harry knows that Louis’ identity is only disclosed to a selected group of people, but he can’t help but feel transparent, can’t stop himself from stiffening and worrying, feeling sixteen all over again but this time, he doesn’t have Louis at his side.

Niall informs him that they’re leaving for New York at the end of the week and Harry knows it’s no use to protest. He doesn’t know what he’ll find worse, being this close to Louis but not seeing him, or putting an ocean between them once more. Niall lingers for a while and Harry can tell he’s silently urging him to finally open up, but his thoughts haven’t become any clearer, quite the opposite, in fact. Louis being alive throws him into turmoil and Harry is thankful that there’s no emergency or mission he has to focus on at the moment, because he doubts he could.

He’s back in the common room they’ve been using, for a quick powernap and to grab a bottle of water, when the alarm goes off. The bottle slips out of his grasp and he’s grabbing his shield and is out the door again without thinking. Harry doesn’t know where the other Avengers are, or what’s going on, but before he can move, a tinny voice orders evacuation of the building and thundering footsteps tell him that most SHIELD agents are obeying this order.

Harry stops one that’s ushering past him. “Agent, what’s going on?”

The young woman is clearly flustered. She looks alarmed and Harry guesses that this building isn’t often cleared out. “Code 376, Captain. A security breach on the lower levels. The building is to be evacuated in 240 seconds.” Then she’s hurrying along the corridor towards the flashing exit signs, but Harry doesn’t plan on following her lead.

Louis, he thinks, then he darts to the left towards the elevators. It’s just a moment later that Harry already regrets that decision. The elevator is halfway to the lower third floor when it screeches to a halt, lights flickering. Harry curses under his breath and pries open the door to reveal solid concrete, so he stretches, opens the maintenance lid at the ceiling, flings his shield onto his back and climbs out of the box. He’s just about missed the lower first floor, as it turns out a moment later, so he can haul his body up without much difficulty.

The floor is entirely abandoned, corridor eerily quiet considering the ruckus upstairs. There isn’t a
staircase on this level, due to security, for situations such as this. It makes an escape far more difficult, even though Harry doesn’t know if that’s exactly what’s happening. But he can’t think of any other reason why they would close down the building other than preventing Louis from getting out. How he’s managed to get far enough to trigger the security breach is another question altogether. He’d been strapped to the table, behind bulletproof glass and many door guarded by armed agents. He must be weakened and yet still…

Harry glances back at the dark elevator shaft. If he were in Louis’ position, injured and perhaps unarmed or only sparsely, he’d avoid confrontation. He’d find the quickest route out of this building, but before he’d make his escape, he’d arm and disguise himself.

“What are you doing, what are you doing?” he utters to himself, trying to think quicker.

Louis has to be reasonably familiar with the layout of this building, so he’d know where to find what he needs and Harry has a sudden flash of wit that makes him jump back onto the immobile elevator and start climbing upwards again. He hopes he can get to Louis before anyone else reaches him.

The gym is, as expected, entirely deserted, but as soon as Harry enters it, he sees a few still wet droplets of blood shimmering on the floor. He holds his breath, silently closes the door behind him and takes a few steps into the room. The punching bags are on the left hand side; some remnants on Niall’s latest target practice straight ahead, two rings for sparring. On the right is a door leading to a locker room and the showers.

Harry breathes in and out, takes his shield off his back and, as it turns out, just in time. Before he’s even moved a foot, a pang echoes through the room and instinctively, he ducks behind the shield. A fraction of a second later, a bullet whizzes past him and crashes into the wall, dust crumbling to the floor. Harry tries to peek around the edge, but a second bullet is fired immediately after, this time deflected off the shield, metallic clank ringing in his ears.

Louis is standing in the doorway to the lockers, gun pointed at Harry. He notices that he’s using his left arm, his prosthetic, keeping the right one cradled against his chest as if it’s severely injured. He’s changed clothes, generic SHIELD sweatshirt too big and black trousers rolled up, small feet in a pair of sneakers and he looks so normal like this that it’s hard to connect him to the masked assassin Harry first encountered in Prague.

“Louis,” he says and he hopes he really sees and doesn’t just imagine it, that flicker of recognition that makes Louis’ eyes widen slightly, that makes him pause even for just a second before his expression is wiped clear and he shoots again.

One, two, three bullets collide with the shield, but Harry’s never had a self-preservative streak, so he keeps edging closer until they’re only a few feet between them.

“One, I don’t want to fight with you,” and he knows Louis doesn’t have much ammunition left, that he needs to keep some in case anyone else shows up and he probably realizes that Harry isn’t armed, save for his shield. Harry lets go of it. It falls to the ground with a loud clash. Only a moment later, Louis crashes into him.

They topple to the ground and all air gets pushed out of Harry’s body when Louis kneels him in the stomach. He grunts and the back of his head hits the floor and before he can get his bearings, a
metal fist hits him square in the jaw. Harry immediately tastes blood. He can stop the second blow, blinking up at Louis staring down at him, expressionless, eyes sharp but empty. There’s a bruise blooming on his cheek, his lip is split and Harry doesn’t want to imagine what his body looks like underneath his clothing.

“I don’t want to fight with you.” Harry says again, gritting his teeth as Louis’ artificial arm whirrs and clicks and he pushes down even harder. “It’s Harry. You know me, Louis. You know me.”

“молчи!” Louis shouts, strikes out and this time, Harry lowers his arms, lets Louis have at it and the blows come, one after the other. When Louis pauses for breath, Harry looks him in the eyes again, a glimmer of emotion, and that’s all he wants really. He doesn’t care if Louis hates him, but he wants him to at least feel. This empty shell strapped to an examination table is far more painful than the punches Louis throws at him.

“You know me,” he repeats and he feels inappropriate heat curling up his spine at Louis’ proximity, his strong thighs pinning him down. “Louis, please. I’m not gonna stop you. And I’m not gonna fight you.” The different fragments of his arms are clicking into place again, ready to strike, but Harry doesn’t care if the next blow breaks his skull. “I love you.”

Louis flinches back like Harry’s just hit him across the face, eyes wide. He gets to his feet and tumbles back a few steps, staring at Harry with something akin to shock. Harry pushes up to his elbows, never breaking eye contact and his heart is thundering away almost painfully hard and fast.

“Louis.” He’s not gone; Harry refuses to believe it. He wouldn’t react this way if nothing were left of him. “I love you.”

For a second, Harry thinks he’s finally gotten through to him. But then Louis blinks, shakes his head, reaches for his gun and blindly shoots ahead. Harry ducks out of the way, presses flat to the floor as the bullets whirr over his head. One scrapes his arm, burning a gash into his skin and the sounds are thrown across the entire room, drenching it in deafening noise.

And then all of a sudden, it’s quiet. Harry only hears his own rapid breaths and blinks, pushes up into a sitting position with a groan and – and Louis is gone. He barely has time to be surprised by that, because a click reaches his ears and he turns around.

Zayn is standing in the doorway, gun lifted and pointed at Harry. He’s bleeding, half of his black shirt already soaked with it, but he’s entirely still. Harry realizes that the click was Zayn releasing the safety catch.

Harry wipes blood off his own face, surprised that nothing’s broken, but he’s mainly surprised that Zayn is still pointing a gun at him. He gets to his feet, swaying slightly, and looks at him questioningly. He wonders how much Zayn saw – and heard.

“What are you doing?” he asks bluntly, but Zayn doesn’t respond.

Instead, he presses a finger against his earpiece. “The subject has escaped. All agents return to the building.” He keeps the gun trained on Harry, eyes boring into him.

“Zayn, come on.”

“Send back-up to the gym on the first floor and alert Director Cowell. I’m afraid Captain America has been compromised.”
to be continued.
III.

Chapter Summary

“I’m taking the Quinjet to Kiev to call in a few favors,” he says just as the doors open again with a ping and they walk out onto the roof where the Quinjet is already waiting. Zayn turns around and fixes him with his eyes. Harry freezes. “Do not make me regret keeping this from the Director. I get that you don’t fully trust me, but we’re on the same side, we’re on the same team, and this wasn’t my secret to share. But don’t make me fucking regret it, understood?”

Chapter Notes

i’m heading off to work in a jiffy, so this'll be a short one.

once again, i am very awed at the responses i’ve received for this fic so far. you guys are incredible. this chapter finally answers some questions instead of posing more, and i really hope it will meet everyone’s expectations. shoutout to brit, as always, for keeping me sane and cheering me on on various levels. don’t know how i would’ve gotten through the weekend without you.

see you in two weeks!

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

**DISCLAIMER:** the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

“Memories are worse than bullets.”

Carlos Ruiz Zafón, The Shadow of the Wind

***

Harry feels like he’s thirteen again and sat in the principal’s office because he and Louis got into a fight with Jack Connolly and his friends. Only now, instead of the principal he’s faced with a rather displeased Director Cowell and instead of Louis, Zayn, Niall and Liam are in the rather small and stuffy room with him. The atmosphere is so tense it practically turns the air static. Harry keeps his
eyes firmly on the table he’s sitting at.

“Allow me to go through this again,” the Director speaks up, voice loud and harsh, “because I cannot for the life of me understand how someone with such a flawless record and such dedication to our cause let one of the most wanted criminals in the world just walk out of here, without even trying to apprehend him. Were you out of your damn mind?”

“No, Sir,” Harry replies and leaves it at that.

Director Cowell curses under his breath. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“To be frank, Sir,” Harry says, “I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s the problem, Captain,” Cowell barks. “You found him, God knows how, and instead of utilizing the abilities we all know you possess, you let him toss you around, and then you let him get away. Isn’t that correct?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And why the hell did you do absolutely nothing?”

Harry bites his lip and stays silent. He knows they have surveillance cameras everywhere, but there’s no audio. And he sure isn’t going to be the one to tell Cowell that he’d told the Winter Soldier that he loved him.


Zayn steps up to the table. His left arm is all wrapped up, bandages poking out of the collar of his shirt. Apparently, Louis put a scalpel straight through his shoulder muscle. “I heard shots when I reached the first floor and I quickly realized they were coming from the gym. The door was closed, and when I opened it, I saw that Captain America was pinned to the floor, with the Winter Soldier attacking him.”

“Was the Captain trying to restrain the subject?” Cowell asks despite knowing the answer already.

“No. He didn’t try to stop him, and he didn’t attempt to fight back.”

“What gave you that impression?” the Director asks.

Zayn is quiet for a beat. “If I heard correctly, he told the Winter Soldier that he wasn’t going to fight him; that he wasn’t going to stop him.”

“Anything else?”

Harry lifts his head and glances to the right and finds Zayn already looking at him. They both know what else happened. And in spite of not wanting it to be, Harry is aware that his feelings are very much a factor in the failure of this entire operation. Technically, Zayn is obligated to tell Director Cowell everything but he holds Harry’s gaze for another moment before turning his attention back towards their boss.

“No, Sir. The subject fired three more shots before disappearing.”

Cowell sighs heavily and rubs his brow. “We finally had him,” he mutters more to himself than to them. “Right. Agent Malik, take the Captain from here. I’ve got to go and clean up the mess he’s dragged us into.”
Then he leaves the room, coat swaying behind him. Harry breathes a sigh of relief, but the relief doesn’t last long.

“Cap, walk with me,” Zayn says and Harry scrambles up to hurry after him. He thinks the serum should’ve given him better coordination, and it did, but in moments like these, when he’s nervous and flustered and tense, when he feels like he did before he became Captain America, he’s still his own worst enemy.

Zayn walks quickly and despite his height and speed, it takes a moment for Harry to catch up with him.

“Thank –” he starts, but Zayn cuts him off, keeping his gaze ahead.

“Don’t thank me. You’re under house arrest until further notice. Niall and Payne are taking you back to New York in Payne’s private jet, and you are to remain in the tower until Cowell says otherwise.”

“What about you?” Harry asks as they round the corner and file into an elevator.

“I’m taking the Quinjet to Kiev to call in a few favors,” he says just as the doors open again with a ping and they walk out onto the roof where the Quinjet is already waiting. Zayn turns around and fixes him with his eyes. Harry freezes. “Do not make me regret keeping this from the Director. I get that you don’t fully trust me, but we’re on the same side, we’re on the same team, and this wasn’t my secret to share. But don’t make me fucking regret it, understood?”

“Understood,” Harry says, feeling short of breath.

“Good,” Zayn nods. “Keep hanging in there, Harry. And stay out of trouble.”

“I’ll try.”

Zayn gives him a lopsided smile, then he turns around and gets into the jet. Only a few seconds later, it lifts off, and Harry is alone.

Harry’s been on Liam’s private jet quite a few times, but it’s still staggeringly luxurious and so unlike anything he’s used to. He’d grown up quite poor, never starving but often going to bed with a growling stomach, so the surplus of wealth Liam was born into is still a bit strange, especially since Liam is so nonchalant about it. Harry takes a seat by the window, Niall and Liam settling in across from him, a shiny table between them. He assumes that Liam writes some emails as they prepare for take-off, and Niall starts flicking through some sports magazine, so Harry leans back and looks out onto the tarmac.

He can’t but let his mind wonder to what Louis is doing; whether he’s still in London and recovering, if he’s managed to slip from HYDRA’s grasp or if he’s been forced to go back to them, if they’ve already sent him on the next mission or perhaps worse for failing the last one. They haven’t had any relevant contact, but Harry already misses him, aches for him like a lost limb, and dissects his brain in an effort to figure out whether he’s done the right thing by letting him go.

They take off smoothly, quickly ascending to optimal altitude and Harry soon finds himself looking out onto an ocean of clouds. He thinks he should feel uneasy flying just like he should be afraid of heights, but being in the air calms him down, reminds him of the peace he’d made with
everything before he’d crashed the Red Skull’s plane into the ice.

Liam gets up and pulls Harry out of his thoughts and he comes back with three glasses and a bottle of liquor, pours quite large portions for them and slides the glasses across the table.

“I can’t get drunk,” Harry says, feeling like he should just mention it again in case that’s the intent.

“Indulge us,” Liam replies, taking a large sip, leaning back into his seat and fixing Harry with a sharp gaze that makes Harry want to squirm. He takes the glass, sniffs at what he assumes to be whiskey, and puts it down, pulling a face. He’s not had an appetite in the past few days, unsurprisingly, and only the smell of alcohol makes his stomach churn unpleasantly.

“So,” Niall pipes up after a moment of silence, changed out of his uniform into civilian clothing that makes him look like a frat boy, or at least like what Harry thinks a frat boy looks like. “Are we going to talk about it?”

Harry feels his jaw go tight. “Talk about what?”

Niall gestures about, raises his brows and says, “about the giant elephant in the room? It’s starting to get a bit uncomfortable, Cap.”

“Right.” Harry drops his gaze to his hands in his lap, knuckles white with tension. He knows it’s time to come clean, about a lot of things he’s kept very close to his chest, at least to this small group of people who are practically everything he has now. They don’t agree on everything and he doesn’t understand them most of the time, but he knows that if push comes to shove, they have his back and ultimately, just like Zayn’s proven now; their loyalties lie with each other. There’s no reason for him to keep this from them any longer, especially after this mission, after everything that has surfaced.

“Did you ever tell him?” Niall asks and Harry looks up at him, meets his eyes, clear and understanding, surprised at the question.

“Tell him what?”

Niall’s voice is quiet, but blunt when he eventually says it after a beat. “That you love him?”

Harry can only openly stare at him for a second, before a chuckle forces its way up his throat, tumbling past his lips, startling himself and Niall and Liam as well, bringing up a hand to cover his mouth, to muffle the noises as he shakes his head to himself. Liam and Niall probably think he’s lost his mind at this point, but to Harry, it’s just so surreal, because he’s never been good at hiding how he feels, these past months with the Avengers being the only exception and how he was supposed to hide it from Louis –

“We were sixteen,” he says once he’s calmed down and taken a few careful breaths.

“You were sixteen – what?” Liam asks, angling his body towards Harry, brows knitted in concentration.

“We were sixteen when we got together,” Harry explains and it feels like a giant breath leaves his body in one whoosh. He looks down at the shimmering table top, perhaps mahogany, maybe something like cherry; he’s heard people make furniture out of cherry trees. Niall curses under his breath, but Harry continues, like a dam has finally broken, and that’s most likely true.
“We grew up together and it was always me and him, him and me. Loving each other was a natural progression. Never really had any say in that. Not saying it was easy,” he shrugs, “it was a different time back then. But we made it work. We always did.”

“Until he was drafted?” Niall asks, still quiet, still careful, giving Harry room and time and Harry can’t appreciate it just yet. It’s numbing to talk about it and yet setting his body on fire at the same time, mind burning with memories, each painful like a stab to his gut, and yet bittersweet nonetheless.

“I only joined the army for him,” Harry confesses, throat going tight. “When Dr Erskine suggested me for the program, I agreed to it because I thought I’d see him again that way. And when I finally got to the front, and he was gone, dead or taken prisoner, I –” He takes in a rattled breath, hands fisting the soft denim of his jeans, joints grinding together. “I went to the German base on my own, because they’d all been declared dead and nobody would help. I mean,” he looks up at Liam, “your grandfather did. And everyone thought I was being heroic, brave, when I was just being so damn selfish. I risked the lives of so many because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing him.”

“But you saved them all,” Liam says softly and their eyes meet briefly before Harry feels overwhelmed by events that are so recent in his memory but happened so long ago. “A hundred men, at least. And so many more before the end of the war. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself just because saving him was your priority.”

Harry shrugs again. “But I didn’t save him, did I? They picked him out of everyone and they tortured him for weeks before I got him out and – and I should’ve realized something was off.”

“How could you’ve realized though?” Niall throws in. “If Zayn doesn’t tell me he broke a fucking rib, I wouldn’t know.”

“He was so different,” Harry explains, mind going back to those moments Louis’ mind had wandered off and Harry had found him staring into the distance with such a detached expression he’d hardly recognized him. “The Germans had beaten him within an inch of his life and a day later, he’d been back on his feet like it was nothing. He barely slept, didn’t get exhausted and I knew him better than myself. I should have known.”

Niall and Liam don’t protest this time. Harry is sure they don’t agree, but it’s no use arguing about it, they’re all aware of that. “I should’ve told him to go home,” he continues and his voice is starting to convey the pain he still feels, deeper and raspier, wound gaping open once more. “I should’ve convinced him to go back to New York, but I was selfish, and I wanted him to stay with me. And then he died, and I – I couldn’t even mourn him.”

It’s still something that squeezes Harry’s heart until he can barely breathe, can barely see ahead, eyes watery and blurring everything. It haunts him still, and clings to him, that unbearable juxtaposition between numbness and blinding agony that had gripped a hold of him once the adrenaline had worn off and it had sunk in that Louis was gone, that he’d never see him again, never touch him or see him smile or kiss him or simply be with him. There hadn’t been the time to actually feel his grief and process it before the Red Skull had set off to drop a bomb on New York City and Harry had taken all that unresolved pain and anger and grief aboard with him.

Silence settles over them like a heavy quilt. Harry takes hold of his glass with trembling fingers, just to give himself something to do. He drinks some of it, relishes the way it burns in his tightened throat, imagines the whiskey opens it up a little. Out of the corner of his eyes, he can see that Liam is shifting in his seat, gnawing on his lower lip, glass already empty in front of him. Niall is the one who breaks the silence after at least five minutes pass, but he only speaks up after he’s reached for the bottle of whiskey and has poured himself some more.
“When they found your plane in the ice,” he says, “it was in pretty good shape actually. Fully stocked with emergency parachutes. With the auto-pilot still intact.”

Harry drops his head in shame, feeling choked up and desperate and he rubs furiously at his eyes. God, he was supposed to be an example to follow, a beacon of hope, the culmination of bravery, but he’s never been that and he can’t be, because he’s only ever been selfish and a coward.

“You could’ve switched on auto-pilot,” Liam says and Harry can’t look at him, wants to curl up and disappear and not fucking cry like he hasn’t done since James had pulled him aside in that damned pub in London that had always been filled with Louis’ voice. “You could’ve used one of the parachutes after typing in coordinates far away from civilization.”

“My job was done,” Harry finally comes clean. “The Red Skull was dead, his weapon destroyed and I… I just couldn’t go on without Louis,” and his voice drops to a whisper. “I didn’t want to.”

Niall audibly blows out air. “Fucking hell.”

Harry wipes at his wet cheeks. “Waking up seventy years later felt like some kind of punishment. Kind of feels like I’m still being punished for that.”

“Sounds like some sick fucking cosmic joke, that’s for sure,” Niall comments and leans forward, elbows on the table. “But you didn’t have to shoulder that alone, mate. Why didn’t you tell us?”

He laughs wetly. “I’m sure Captain America can be a lot of things, but I doubt gay and suicidal are two of them.” It’s the first time he’s said it out loud. It might be the first time he’s even consciously thought it. Harry feels stupid waiting for lightning to strike him. Of course nothing happens. The jet stays up in the sky, and the world keeps turning.

“But you’re not just Captain America,” Liam says, emptying his second glass of whiskey with gusto and Harry wishes he could still feel the effects of alcohol. He figures he could use the buzz. “You’re a person without that suit and that shield. We’re all still people when you peel away enough layers.”

“And to be honest, mate,” Niall adds with a slight smirk, “you wear headscarves and floral shirts. A lot has changed while you were a capsicle. I don’t think people would be too surprised to find out Captain America likes cock.”

Harry barks out a laugh before he can stop himself, and Liam just looks mildly scandalized at Niall’s bluntness. “Jesus, Niall,” Harry wheezes, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Just saying it as it is,” Niall shrugs. “Things will fall into place, I’m sure, once you start mending that broken heart, huh? Also, maybe Payno will agree that it might be time to dash to Washington, DC. Pay a visit to the Smithsonian.”

He and Liam share a glance and eventually, Liam nods and gets up, presumably to let the pilot know they’re taking a detour. Niall looks at Harry, smiling softly and Harry, despite his wet and blotchy cheeks and raw throat and throbbing chest – he feels miles better than before.

“Ready to take a trip down memory lane?”

Harry’s not, not really. But he nods anyway.
Because Liam is who he is, he’s pulled some last minute strings and the Smithsonian opens its doors for them just a few minutes before midnight. Harry can feel the tiredness and stress deep in his bones as they walk through the lobby, their steps echoing between the walls. Straight ahead, hanging from the ceiling, is an about fifteen feet long banner of him in mask and full uniform, holding the shield, in front of the Star-Spangled Banner. It makes Harry uncomfortable to look at it and he’s still freaked out by fame and people wanting to take pictures of him. He ducks his head and keeps walking, follows as Niall and Liam lead the way into the main exhibit. His stomach is churning with dread.

There’a quick rundown of the Captain America Program and the people involved, Dr Erskine and Liam’s grandfather, the founder of Payne Industries; a picture of him before the serum had been administered, with glasses and narrow shoulders and awful posture and the contrasting after-shot that still makes him do a double-take.

Niall and Liam give him some space then, hanging back as he walks around the first room that probably serves as some sort of introduction or prequel. They’ve seen it already, Harry knows that, and they know what’s coming. Harry doesn’t when he enters the next room, so the first photograph, black and white and on the blurred side, that’s blown up to the size of a car windscreen, feels like a knock to his jaw.

There’s James and Stan on the right, looking solidly at the camera with a wide stance; Tom and Johnny on the left, seemingly more relaxed and gazed also pointed forward. Ed is sitting on the ground to their feet, guitar in his lap and fiddling with the strings. Harry recognizes himself standing next to James angled towards the center of the picture that Louis is smack-dab in the middle of, the undeniable focus. He remembers when the picture had been taken and not being able to tear his eyes away from Louis, not even for a single second, resulting in Louis’ evidently bashful smile and downcast eyes and the open, staggering admiration and adoration on his own face.

And there’s more. Photograph after photograph, slightly grainy but sharp in Harry’s memory; Tom sitting on a tree stump rolling a cigarette, James and Louis standing over a map with furrowed brows, Stan and Louis cleaning their rifles, Johnny and Louis sitting on the hood of a truck and playing cards. Louis buttoning his jacket. Louis sipping a cup of tea by a campfire. Louis against the backdrop of a snowed-in meadow. Louis sitting on a cot in a barely illuminated tent.

Louis looking straight at the camera – smiling.

It takes a few moments for Harry to realize why these are so familiar. Air is trapped in his throat and he feels… he doesn’t know how he feels but bare, and exposed, and strangely violated although he knows that he was practically dead, gone for decades, and nobody could’ve expected him to return to life. But these were private. They were his. And now they’re spread out in front of everyone to see.

“How did they get these?” he asks, knowing that Niall and Liam are still close-by and watching him closely. “I – I took them. These were on my camera. How did they get them?”

“The army, private collectors,” Liam replies, stepping up next to him. “In the early days after the end of the war, things were a mess. You had no family, so after your presumed death, that stuff became public property or stayed with the army. It changed a lot of hands in the past years.”

“Do they have more?” Harry continues. “Because there were more.”

Liam shrugs. “Possibly. Likely. There’s a public narrative they want to follow, of course, and the Smithsonian is government-funded. So I guess they carefully picked and edited.”
“Is there a way to get them back? I want them back,” and Harry spins on his heels, presses the heels of his hands to his eyes and breathes in and out, just deeply in and out.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Liam assures him and instead of turning back around – because Harry doesn’t need to see this after all, was alive to witness it and it’s practically unbearable when it’s just in his head and not laid out in front of his eyes – he makes the mistake of walking over to the next section, and the next, and the one after that. There are more photographs, less intimate and presumably taken by an official army photographer and some artifacts and weapons, mission reports on wilted paper and a few paragraphs blown up and put in white font on black background.

It doesn’t take Harry long to get to the last room of the exhibit and he doesn’t know if it’s good that he’s saved it for the end, because there is his uniform, and the others’ and Louis’ and Harry is, for the fraction of a second, tempted to walk up to it, see if it’s still warm, if it still smells like him, before he soberly realizes that this must be a replica, because Louis was wearing it when he fell.

And because he did, and because he was the only one of their unit to lose his life, there’s an entire wall dedicated to him. There are pictures, even more pictures and paragraph after paragraph spelling Louis’ life out for everyone, calling him Harry’s best friend since childhood, his companion, his right-hand man and Harry thinks it’s pretty ironic, because when he looks at the photographs, he doesn’t understand how anyone could miss how he looked at Louis. But he said it himself; Captain America can’t be gay, and therefore he can’t be in love with his best friend.

But it’s impossible for Harry to imagine that people don’t have doubts when his eyes fall onto the video clip that’s embedded between texts. It’s running on loop, maybe ten seconds or a little more, grainy and shivering and Harry has to watch over and over again how he’s standing next to Louis, but never close enough, and he is watching himself shift closer, nudge Louis’ shoulder and lean closer to say something into Louis’ ear. And he has to watch how Louis’ face nearly splits because he has to laugh so hard, bowing his head a little and then shaking it to himself.

Harry can’t quite remember what he said, but it probably was one of his jokes judging by Louis’ reaction. And he can remember exactly how Louis’ jacket had felt beneath his fingertips when he’d gripped his shoulder, remembers the slightly earthy smell that seemed to have stuck to his skin from spending so many hours and days pressed to the ground in forests around France, Germany, Austria.

Remembers how the rare burst of sunlight breaking through the clouds had caught on Louis’ eyelashes, shadows fanning across his cheekbones.

He feels short of breath.

“Can we go?” he asks no one in particular, but Harry’s sure Niall and Liam are only a few feet away. They make for a quick exit through the back entrance to a waiting car that drives them onto the stretch of tarmac where Liam’s jet is waiting for them and Harry’s stomach churns so badly that he throws up as soon as he’s out of the car. Niall puts a hand to his shoulder, his back and Harry doesn’t register what happens between this moment and finding himself standing in the middle of his bedroom in the tower as the sun rises over Manhattan.

“You little shit,” is the first thing Louis says to him when he wakes up. Harry lets the flap of the small tent fall shut behind him and it doesn’t do much to muffle the noises from outside where the camp is suddenly overflowing with rescued soldiers. But it still feels like a small island of quiet, an
isolated space for just the two of them where Harry doesn’t need to guard his expressions. Not that there’s much to salvage, Harry guesses, with how he spent two days carrying Louis through wintery forests, almost two hundred men trailing them.

But Louis is safe now, and he’s finally awake after drifting in and out of consciousness for far too long. There’s a woollen blanket wrapped around his narrow shoulders and his entire upper body is wrapped in bandages, but he’s alive, and Harry has him back, and that’s all that really matters at the moment. He remains standing, arms stiff by his side because he’s shaking so much he’s afraid his knees will buckle once he steps closer to Louis.

“You’re taller than me, aren’t you?” Louis asks and he says it like it’s the only thing that’s wrong with the world, quirks his eyebrows and tilts his face to the side and Harry can’t suppress that wet chuckle that stumbles past his lips. “You know,” Louis continues airily, “I leave you for a few months and you get a scientist to turn you into – this.” He gestures at Harry and Harry feels himself blush. He’s not really thought about the difference in his physical appearance and what Louis would say to him giving himself over to the project like this, how he’d react to him looking different.

“I mean,” Louis says before Harry can reply anything, mouth twitching into a grin, “I knew how much you’d miss me, Curly. But becoming some sort of supersoldier and crossing the Atlantic and storming a German base just to see me? Bit dramatic, even for you.”

And Harry can’t help but laugh at that, but he thinks he’s also crying because he’d have done a whole lot more. “God, Louis,” he manages to choke out and Louis finally opens his arms wide.

He asks, “Why’re you still all the way over there?” and Harry’s across the tent and dropping down in front of Louis’ cot a second later. He wraps his arms around Louis’ waist and Louis’ arms go around his neck and Harry knows Louis is hurt, so hurt, and he knows that he needs to be careful with his strength, but he still has to press Louis as close as possible, until there isn’t an ounce of air left between them.

“Harold, are you crying?” Louis teases him like he’d always tease Harry for being so overly emotional despite being the actual sap of the two, and he’d always threatened the other boys with a beating whenever they’d call Harry a girl.

“Shut up, I’m not,” Harry mumbles, but Louis grabs a hold of his shoulders, pushes him away to look at his wet face with a knowing smile, but his own eyes are shimmering wetly as well and Harry knows, he knows, that Louis is just as glad to see him.

“It’s fine,” Louis rasps, suddenly looking overcome as he cradles Harry’s face with his small hands, delicately trailing fingers over Harry’s jaw, his cheeks, his lips. Harry swallows thickly. “I missed you, too. You have no idea how much.”

Their lips are dry and chapped, but it’s so easy when they fall together, so familiar and everything Harry’s ever wanted, running a palm up to Louis’ neck to urge him closer. It’s never been chaste with them, and this is no different. Harry feels heat zinging down his spine and the sudden advantage in height and strength is heady when he crowds against Louis, tilts his head back to dip in even more. For a moment, Harry can push it to the back of his mind that they aren’t back at their apartment in Brooklyn. For a moment, he can shut out the fact that they’re surrounded by wounded soldiers somewhere close to the German border, fighting in a war that’s even more
gruesome than anyone could have ever imagined.

A call from outside makes them break apart, hearts beating quickly, but Louis holds him close and his breath is hot on Harry’s damp lips. “That’s just Stan,” Louis explains, brushing his thumb back and forth on the line of Harry’s jaw. “I asked him to keep watch. Just in case.”

“Lou,” it sounds again, this time a bit louder. “The Colonel is on his way.”

Harry sighs. “Never enough time,” he says, because they have months to catch up on and Harry wants him so much he barely knows how to cope.

“We’ll make time,” Louis assures him with a soft smile, a quick peck to his mouth. “I promise.”

The morning is eerily similar to the ones before they’d left for Prague. When Harry returns to the communal kitchen after a long workout to rid himself of the repercussions of memories intertwining with his dreams, Niall is standing at the stove in skinny jeans and a grey t-shirt, frying bacon, singing along to the radio. The sun is streaming through the panorama windows and Harry can see dust particles flittering through the air. There’s a large jug filled with coffee on the kitchen island, one that looks like a piece of art rather than crockery.

Niall turns around and gives him a bright smile. “Morning, Cap. Bacon?”

Harry’s stomach turns just at the thought. “Not really hungry.”

“Can’t quite believe that, since all you’ve had to eat in the last days is on some airstrip near DC,” Niall says bluntly and leans back against the stove, folding his arms. “At least have some eggs and toast.”

He knows it’s sensible. His metabolism runs nearly three times as fast and Harry does feel hungry; he just doesn’t have much of an appetite. “I’ll try,” Harry says because he’s not that much of an idiot and he rounds the island to get to the fridge. Someone stocked it while they were away and besides Liam’s strangely colored energy drinks, there’s some fresh fruit, yogurt, butter and cheese. Harry grabs a carton of orange juice and starts rummaging through the cupboards in search for jam. Once he’s found some, he sits down at the island, accepts Niall’s rather generous handout of eggs and only almost-burnt toast and pours the two of them some juice.

“Where’s Liam?” he asks after he’s taken two bites of toast with blackberry jam.

“He’s taken the suit to Malibu, I think,” Niall answers, chewed egg falling out of his mouth as he speaks. “Something about prototypes he needs to look at, some business people he has to shake hands with.”

“Sounds like fun,” Harry remarks, staring down at his plate for a moment to force himself to have a go at the eggs.

Niall huffs out a laugh, smirk evident in his voice. “I think after the weeks we’ve had, he’s going to enjoy some boring business crap. Also, you should see his fucking mansion in Malibu, ‘s basically a holiday for him.” He pierces a piece of bacon with his fork and points it at Harry. “We all need some downtime, Cap, especially you. I know you can’t exactly book a holiday to Mexico right now, but you should try to relax a little.”
“What about you?” Harry shoots back. “Or Zayn?”

“I relax when I’m here. I’m marathoning the Star Wars Trilogy today; you should join me. And Zayn – well. He’ll be back in a week or so, act a little cranky and then sleep for three days and he’ll be as fresh as a daisy.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.”

Niall shrugs. “Worst he can do is to relegate me to the couch and man, you’ve seen those couches, they’re heavenly, so I don’t really mind.”

They eat in silence for a few more minutes, Niall engrossed in his food and the crossword in the morning paper, and Harry slowly drifting into deep thoughts he actually wants to avoid. There’s a single-mindedness to his dreams and thoughts Harry can’t deal with because he doesn’t know where Louis is, or what happened to him, what HYDRA has done to him over the last decades. Harry just wants to know and he wants Louis back and knowing that’s not really an option might possibly hurt more than losing him in the first place. That blank stare, no recognition evident, an entire lifetime completely erased – it’s impossible to come to terms with that.

“How do you think he’s back with HYDRA?”

Niall doesn’t need to ask whom Harry is talking about. “Probably.”

“What if he’s not?” Harry presses on. “When I confronted him, it felt like I’d gotten through to him. He looked at me and I think he realized that he knew me.”

“Mate,” Niall starts with an apologetic expression and Harry knows Niall means well, but he’s getting really tired of people directing this look at him, “even if he did, there’s decades of programming he’d have to break through. I doubt he can just walk away from HYDRA and I’m pretty certain they’ve made sure that he returns to them no matter what happens.”

“Programming,” Harry echoes, stabbing at his eggs rather than eating them. It makes a horrible noise against the porcelain plates. “You make it sound like he’s a machine.”

“I don’t mean it that way,” Niall says and Harry knows he didn’t, but it still irritates him that nobody besides him cares to refer to Louis as a human being. “But that’s what he is to HYDRA and that’s how they treat him. They don’t care for humanity, and to them he’s a weapon and for a weapon to work without a glitch, the programming needs to be faultless.”

It makes Harry feel sick and he has to fight hard not to dart over to the sink and spit his breakfast back up. “But there needs to be something I can do.”

“Right now, all you can do is sit tight and wait for things to unfold. You know Zayn, he’s gonna come back with new information and we’ll take it from there.”

He wants to argue, but at the same time, Harry knows when there’s no point. Louis could be anywhere in the world and Harry doesn’t want to put his team or anyone else in danger – again – because he’s being reckless. So he lowers his head and shovels eggs and toast into his mouth, hoping that it will stay down, and empties almost the entire carton of orange juice before he and Niall migrate to the living room.

It’s how he spends the next handful of days, sleeping restlessly and trying to blow off steam in the gym because he’s not allowed to leave the tower. Niall makes him watch Star Wars and The Godfather and quite a few more Martin Scorsese films in his mission to acclimate him to the twenty first century, and most definitely in order to distract him from other things, but Louis stays
at the forefront of his mind, no matter how many mafia movies flicker over Liam’s massive TV screen.

Liam returns on a rainy and unusually cold day, strong winds slapping golf ball-sized drops against the windows. Harry and Niall have moved on to Casablanca and Liam joins them with a tub of ice cream. He does look relaxed and slightly more tanned and the lines on his forehead are smoothed out. The mood is lighter than it’s been in weeks, despite the foul weather.

Which is why it feels like some cosmic joke that Zayn comes back to the tower nearly three weeks after they’d touched down from London when the sun is painting the entire city golden, warm light flooding the communal living room. His expression is stormy as the weather’s been leading up to his return and he looks exhausted down to his very bones, cheeks sunk in and practical craters under his eyes and Harry can see that Niall is already hovering with unease. He eventually gives in and fetches Zayn a bottle of water and something that looks like a protein bar as Zayn sits down on the couch.

Zayn takes neither. Niall remains standing next to where he’s sitting, the bottle and the protein bar in hand, and chews on his lips. Liam is trying to seem relaxed and casual, throwing a few glances at the TV where some movie about a time machine is playing. Harry is thrumming in his skin. But he doesn’t want to seem rude. Zayn undoubtedly hasn’t rested since leaving London for Kiev, and he doesn’t need Harry to bother him and bug him the second he sets foot in the tower.

“How was Kiev?” Liam bites the bullet after a couple of minutes, muting the TV and fully turning towards Zayn.

“Weather was horrible,” Zayn says with a crooked smirk, lifting an arm and massaging his left shoulder. “And people wanted to make a point by being difficult.”

Harry is certain that those people have come to regret that and he wrings his hands in his lap, eyes flickering to his feet and then back up to Zayn’s face and he finds Zayn already looking at him with slightly narrowed eyes. He knows he’s being assessed and measured.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he asks after filling his lungs with air, hoping that it’s not too direct a question.

“Yes and no,” Zayn replies cryptically after a beat. “Yes, I found some useful information and, before you ask: no, I didn’t find him. But apparently, neither did HYDRA.”

Niall nearly drops the water. He’s got quick reflexes, so he catches it before it hits the ground. Harry’s heart seems to be clawing its way up his windpipe.

“What?”

“I managed to follow his trail for a bit,” Zayn is nice enough to elaborate without any dramatic pauses. “I know the protocol these missions abide by – eliminate target and return to the base – and for a while, it seemed like he was adhering to it. But then the trail grew erratic and without leaving a trace, he dropped off the face of the earth.”

“Couldn’t that be just HYDRA snatching him up again?” Liam asks, shifting to the edge of his seat.
Zayn and Niall shake their heads simultaneously. “I doubt it,” Zayn replies, taking the water Niall hands him without a single glance to the side. He unscrews the top and takes a sip, and then another, throat working, then he sets it down onto the table. “The Winter Soldier followed his programming to a certain point and suddenly, something triggered him, whatever that may have been, and he went rogue. From what I could gather, HYDRA had agents on him, but he shook them off, repeatedly, until he managed to disappear somewhere around the Hungarian-Ukrainian border.”

“So what,” Harry starts and has to clear his throat, “what happened to him?”

Zayn breathes out audibly. “Are you asking about what I know – or what I think?”

Harry doesn’t know what to answer to that. He doesn’t want to just shrug, because this is far too important, but at the same time, he doesn’t like speculation. Then again, “I trust you,” he says. “And you tend to be spot on most of the time.”

Zayn holds his gaze for a handful of beats. Outside the tower, the sun is slowly beginning to set, reflecting off of buildings, orange and pink flooding the floor and dragging shadows along the carpet. He unzips the jacket Harry only now notices he’s still wearing and pulls out a plain-looking manila folder and lays it on the table next to the bottle of water. Harry looks at it and his pulse speeds up, blood thrumming faster through his veins. He almost feels dizzy.

“Is that his file?”

“No,” Zayn shakes his head. “But like I told you, I called in a favor. It’s all in Cyrillic, so it’s not going to enlighten you much, but I can tell you what’s in it. But before I do, and only if you want me to, you need to understand that this is bad. Whatever you imagined they did to him – this is worse.”

Harry had seen Louis after weeks of torture at the hand of HYDRA researchers under German command. He’d seen the bruises and cuts and the far-away look Louis would sometimes get in his eyes. And he’s imagined what HYDRA had to do to eventually break Louis, to make him succumb to their every whim and he realizes that Zayn has seen a lot as well; horrible things, possibly or even definitely more than Harry and if he says that…

“I need to know,” he says nonetheless and Zayn nods in response.

“HYDRA developed a method,” he begins and Harry’s fingers start digging into his own thighs, “in which they send electric shockwaves into the brain. Through a specific target mechanism, they can locate areas in the brain and attack them. In this case, the frontal lobe and the hippocampus, which roughly translates into: they can turn people into puppets.”

“Is that what they did to Louis when they found him?”

Zayn glances downwards, which isn’t a good sign and Harry’s breath hitches. “At first. But you know how thanks to Dr Erskine’s serum, you heal a lot faster than he average human?” Harry nods at that. “Well, so does he, according to those reports. And the brain is also able to regenerate damaged tissue, so in the beginning, when they wiped him, it never lasted very long before he regained his memories. Sleep also helps accelerate that process.”

“Let me guess,” Liam pipes up, looking nearly as pained as Harry feels. Unjustly, he tends to forget that Liam had been imprisoned and tortured for months as well. This is bound to bring back unpleasant memories. “They used sleep-deprivation?”
“Not exactly,” Zayn replies. “They didn’t allow him to sleep. Instead, whenever he wasn’t needed, they put him in cryogenic suspension, meaning they froze him and when they had use for him, they unfroze him, fried his brain, filled it with protocols and missions and sent him on his way. And whenever he came back, they put him in cryo again.”

Harry gets to his feet. He nearly falls over the coffee table in an attempt to get away. His heart is beating so heavily he thinks the repercussions in his belly might make him throw up again. He walks a few hasty steps towards the windows and leans his forehead against the warmed-up glass, refraining from banging his head against it repeatedly in order to make the images and sensations stop that suddenly flood his mind. He knows what it’s like to freeze. He remembers the cold and his senses going one by one, first his eyesight and lastly his hearing and he still can’t sleep when it’s entirely dark, afraid that he’s back in that block of ice.

He can’t imagine what it would be like to feel like this over and over again.

“Do you think his brain started to heal itself when SHIELD had him?” Liam carries on the conversation. “He was sedated almost the entire time.”

“It’s possible,” Zayn’s voice reaches Harry’s ears, “but because HYDRA damaged his brain repeatedly for so many years, the damage could be irreparable.”

“But he remembered me,” Harry finds himself saying numbly, breath clouding the glass in front of his face. “He looked at me and for a moment, I swear he knew who I was.”

“Like I said,” Zayn retorts, “it’s possible. We don’t know the extent of the damage to his brain and we don’t know how much he can recover from that, but by the looks of it, I think it’s likely that his programming started to wear off.”

“So, where is he now? Somewhere in Eastern Europe?” Harry asks and turns from the window again, leans back against it for support, knees feeling week and hands fistng his shirt to keep occupied.

“I don’t know.” Zayn peels out of his jacket, lays it out on the couch. He’s wearing a fitted black vest underneath that reveals a smattering of bruises on his right shoulder, a bandage tightly wrapped around his left biceps and a long but shallow gash just below his right elbow. Apparently all information he’d gathered hadn’t come easy. “Like I said, he just disappeared, left no obvious trace, and the climate in the region didn’t allow me to linger and wait for signs.”

“But –”

“Harry,” Zayn cuts him off immediately, “he’s gone. And I have no idea where he might be, or when and where he could possibly resurface. If I did, I wouldn’t keep it to myself.”

It’s quiet after that. Niall is raking his hand through his hair, making it look like he put his fingers in a socket, and Liam is chewing on his lips, gaze lowered. Harry – well. Harry generally feels a bit shit. He’s being impatient and petulant and ungrateful, because Zayn went through a lot to gather information. Sure, SHIELD will be happy with the Intel as well, but Zayn wasn’t obligated to share it with Harry. Even more, he’s pretty positive that Director Cowell won’t be happy if he finds out what Zayn just told him.

“Sorry, I just –“ Harry struggles to get the words out; struggles to give voice to the turmoil in his chest and his head and to even stay on his feet at this point. He’s spent far too much time keeling over as of late, especially considering he’s supposed to be superhuman. “I don’t want anything to happen to him.”
“From what I can tell,” Liam eventually pipes up after a couple of moments, “he seems to be a tough cookie. I’m sure he can take care of himself.”

Harry refrains from arguing with that, mainly because the thought of Louis, confused and broken and hurt, alone in a country on the brink of a civil war, chased by agents of two secret organizations, is too much to stomach. He remembers how he’d felt when he’d woken up, knows it must be a thousand times worse for Louis, because everyone after him wants to hurt him one way or another. An irrational part of him that’s steadily gaining momentum wants to hijack the Quinjet and fly to bloody Ukraine and just find Louis, because Harry’s found him before, and that had been a suicide mission as well. But even if he’d decide to, Harry can’t leave. Liam has undoubtedly programmed JARVIS to prohibit Harry from exiting the building, at SHIELD’s instructions.

All that Harry can do is cling on to the belief that Louis – as he’s done over and over and over again – will manage to defy the odds and somehow be okay.

He doesn’t exactly remember what he dreams every night, but it has Harry waking up drenched in sweat and his heart beating so solidly that his ribs are aching from it. After a week of tossing and turning until sunrise, he can’t take it anymore and trudges into the kitchen early Thursday morning, digital clock on their oven indicating that it’s just past four. Harry’s not done this in a very long time, and he doubts he’s still good at it, but he needs a distraction, needs to do something other than mindlessly pounding against punching bags.

Thankfully, he’s familiar with the kitchen layout by now, doesn’t need long to collect bowls, a whisk and a rolling pin, flour, eggs, milk and some of the fresh fruit. Weirdly enough, he remembers a simple recipe and starts weighing the ingredients, whisking egg whites and chopping fruit and it feels like just the blink of an eye later, the sun’s rising and there’s a second tray of oatmeal biscuits in the oven. The marble surface of the kitchen island resembles a battlefield, and there’s an impressive amount of muffins and chocolate chip cookies on a few trays.

A low whistling sound startles Harry out of his baking trance and he nearly drops the bowl of dough he’s currently kneading. It’s a recipe for scones he picked up in London. They have plenty of jam that would be good with scones, and Harry can whip up some whipped cream as well. The oatmeal biscuits are a bit dry without cream.

“Please tell me you’re not making apple pie,” Zayn rasps from the doorway. He walks closer, feet dragging on the floor in a very unusual fashion, sweats hanging low. There’s a clover print on his white t-shirt and Harry is pretty sure it belongs to Niall. Like Niall predicted, Zayn has spent the last couple of days in a semi-comatose state, sleeping off injuries and stress. “I can’t stomach so much wholesomeness in the morning.”

Harry holds the bowl tighter to his chest, nudging his feet together and looking over the array of baked goods he’s produced in a frenzy, feeling slightly embarrassed. “No, um… there’re some blueberry and white chocolate chip muffins. Also rhubarb and vanilla, and some chocolate and oatmeal cookies. And um, I’m also making scones, if you want some.”

Zayn just stares at him with sleepy, heavy lidded eyes as he hoists himself up on a stool. “I might need some coffee to wash it all down, but sure, bring it on.”
Harry doesn’t count them, but he makes roughly two dozen scones on top of everything before they run out of flour. Niall stumbles into the kitchen just when they’re cooling down on a baking tray, yawning wide and eyes like saucers when he flops down next to Zayn, scanning the muffins and cookies and scones that are probably enough to feed ten times as many people.

“Any reason you’re going all Martha Stewart on us?” he asks, filling up a plate and smothering everything in a thick layer of cream and arming himself with a fork.

Harry just shrugs and stirs some honey into his green tea. He’s feeling a little nauseous if he’s being honest, all that sweetly smelling dough clouding his head. “Couldn’t sleep,” he answers, takes a sip of tea and starts loading up the dishwasher. “Thought I’d do something useful.”

He turns back around to find Niall and Zayn looking at him with the same pitying expression and it settles bitterly in his stomach, quenches any appetite he might have had.

“Maybe you should talk to someone?” Niall suggests, then takes a bite of muffin and cream, dampening the seriousness of his tone slightly when he outright moans. “Damn, this is good.”

“I talked to you, didn’t I?” Harry retorts, cradling the cup of tea in his palms, spinning it slightly on the shiny surface.

“That you did,” Niall says, eyes flickering to Zayn and then back. He chews and swallows and points his empty fork at Harry. “But maybe you should talk to a professional.”

“I’m fine,” he insists, but Zayn and Niall look pointedly at the mountain of muffins and scones and raise their brows simultaneously. It’s only slightly creepy. “Right, maybe not entirely fine. But what am I supposed to say to a shrink? My formerly presumed dead boyfriend is now a brainwashed super assassin who tried to gut me?”

Niall shrugs, reaches for a cookie. “Maybe you could paraphrase?” he suggests and then cackles softly, earning him a soft smack on the back of his head. “Oi,” he complains to Zayn without any real bite, then turns back to his breakfast, leaving Zayn to pick up where he left off.

“There are plenty of psychiatrists on SHIELD’s payroll,” he continues, dark eyes boring into Harry like they always do. “And like any other doctors, they’re sworn to patient confidentiality. So you can say whatever you like.”

“I don’t really feel like saying anything,” Harry mutters more to himself than to them and pokes the scone he’s optimistically put on his plate. “I wouldn’t know how to start.”

“How about you start with why you tried to kill yourself.”

Zayn’s words hit him like a physical punch and Harry flinches back, then sinks into himself, lowering his head, eyes and cheeks burning with shame.

“Whatever made you do it then,” Zayn goes on, not giving Harry the chance to recover or reply, “does it still prevail now? Do we need to make JARVIS lock up all windows and balconies?”

“Jesus, Zayn,” Harry breathes and buries his face in his hands. The marble countertop is cold against the skin of his elbows and he breathes in and out, steadily in and out, unable to stop his mind from going back to that moment, sun shining brightly above his head and through the windows of the plane, clouds below and through a few gaps here and there, the shimmering surface of the ocean, and then a sheer endless mass of glistening ice. Harry isn’t sure if he believes in God.
now, but he had back then, and he’d been so sure that Louis would be waiting on the other side. For the first time in weeks, he’d felt at peace.

He’d give quite a lot to feel peaceful now.

“I’m sure Paul would come back to New York as well,” Niall suggests when Harry doesn’t reply. “Last I heard he was back in India, but he’s a doctor as well, and I’m sure he’d make an exception for you.”

Harry shakes his head, trying to regain his figurative footing. “Paul made his choice and we shouldn’t drag him back into this mess,” and not for the first time, Harry wonders how things would have turned out had he made a different choice at any point along the road.

“Then at least talk to us if you feel like crap, okay Cap?” Niall says, loading a fresh plate with something of everything. “If you do this every time you can’t sleep, we’ll be rolling to our next mission,” and he gets to his feet, empties his juice and coffee. “I’ll bring these down to Payno, then I’m hitting the shower. See you there,” he says to Zayn with a wink, sends Harry another big smile, and disappears down the hallway.

Zayn turns his gaze onto Harry.

“What?” he asks.

Zayn’s eyes bore into him for another beat, says “nothing”. Then he goes back to his coffee.

Liam flies back and forth between California and New York for a few weeks while Payne Industries finalizes the prototype for a more commercialized version of the arc reactor to get a new, green energy source on the market. Niall and Zayn take turns in heading to the SHIELD facilities and Harry knows they have to have one of them keep an eye on him at all times, not taking JARVIS into account. Harry tries to keep busy and distract himself so he bakes, he reads, watches the stack of movies Niall organizes for him and works out as much as he can in the tower’s gym.

It’s monotonous and weirdly numbing and yet he still can’t sleep, forces himself to keep his eyes open until he literally can’t anymore, because it’s better than waking up screaming, or waking up and realizing he’s not in Brooklyn or a cot in Europe and Louis doesn’t have his arms wrapped around his waist.

The weather, just as Harry’s mind, grows steadily more erratic; sun bright and blinding, followed by dark clouds swallowing it all up again and drowning Manhattan in rain, trying to wash away all previous traces of a summer that just hadn’t come.

Harry wakes to golf ball-sized raindrops drumming against the large windows of his bedroom and the sound of thunder grumbling in the distance. At first he thinks that’s what woke him up, because it hadn’t been a dream, but then he feels something cold and sharp pressing down against his throat, scraping his skin when he swallows and his Adam’s apple bobs up and down. The next second, lightning flashes across the black sky, illuminating the room for the fracture of a second, but it’s enough for Harry to make out the person leaning over him, practically straddling his chest, pressing the blade of a long kitchen knife against his aorta. Thunder roars in the distance, but it’s coming closer, the splatter of the rain accelerating, and then there’s another flash, stretching shadows and contorting shapes.
But Louis is as sharp as ever in Harry’s eyes. His long hair is sticking to his forehead and neck from the rain that’s been pouring down all afternoon and evening and night and the t-shirt he’s wearing is clinging to his haggard body, dirty and stained and caked with what looks like blood; fresh or dried, Harry can’t tell.

“Louis,” he breathes in, but he’s not given the chance to get even another word out.

Louis leans forward, digs his knee into Harry’s stomach, exactly where it hurts, his metal prosthetic applying relentless and painful pressure to Harry’s chest while his other hand is holding the knife to Harry’s throat. “Нет двигайся!” he barks, eyes cold and hard and eyebrows lowered dangerously. Harry only has a moment to look at his pale and dirty skin, his sunken in cheeks, before Louis slams his metal hand down once, pushing all air out of Harry’s lungs, making him gasp. “Don’t move!”

Harry has half a mind to wonder if this is a dream as well, but Louis’ knee digging in hurts like hell and not even his dreams are quite as realistic. His mind is scrambling for logical thoughts, a plan of action, something, when Louis’ voice cuts through the silence again.

“Who are you?” Louis stresses the words by putting more pressure on the knife and it’s unsettlingly close to breaking skin. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m Harry,” he manages to press out, short of breath. “You know me. It’s Harry.” Louis shakes his head, squeezes his eyes shut and bares his teeth like he’s in pain. He shifts quickly until he’s got Harry’s arms pinned down entirely with his legs, prosthetic cold against Harry’s bare skin.


“Заткнись!” It sounds like Russian, and Harry doesn’t understand, but the meaning is very much implied. Louis’ eyes are piercing but nevertheless clouded, confusion painfully visible and God; Harry can’t imagine what he must be feeling. “That’s not my name! I don’t have a name,” and he reaches back with his prosthetic, pulls something out of his pocket and holds it in front of Harry’s face. His breath catches. It’s a leaflet from the Smithsonian, open to the page that summarizes Louis’ story. “Why does he have my face?” It breaks Harry’s heart, is what it does.

“You do,” he insists, trying to ignore the burning of his lungs as the lack of oxygen starts to become problematic. “And that’s you.” Liam has motion detectors installed in the entire building and JARVIS picks up on every movement that’s not theirs or registered with him. He’s sure the others have been alerted, already on their way to help him, but right now Harry isn’t sure he wants them to interrupt. “Your name is Louis William Tomlinson, and you were born in Brooklyn, not far from here.”

“Why do you know me?” His tone is still biting and harsh, but his gaze is beginning to shift, starting to reveal an underlying desperation and omnipresent confusion. “How?”

“You’re my best friend,” Harry says, trying to press his head further into the pillows to lessen the pressure on his throat. “We grew up together. We’ve known each other our entire lives.”

“You’re lying!”

“I’m not, please, I swear,” Harry squirms, a sharp burn emitting from the spot where the tip of the blade has broken skin. “We’re best friends,” and so much more, but this is neither the place nor the time. “Please, just – put down the knife and we can talk, I can explain –”

The door flies open, slamming against the wall with a crash that rivals the thunder roaring outside. Harry would flinch if he could move at all, but Louis grows tense, pressure on Harry’s chest and
throat increasing. Liam, Zayn and Niall are standing in the doorway with raised weapons, Niall with his bow, Liam with a glimmering gauntlet and Zayn aiming the barrel of a gun at Louis’ head. Their eyes are wide with tension and shock.

“Holy shit,” Niall comments aptly.

Harry wants to tell them to step back, but he’s out of air and afraid that only a little bit of movement will make Louis slice his throat wide open. Liam is covered in motor oil, Niall is just in his pants, but Zayn manages to look composed and threatening even in soft joggers and a tank. He takes a step forward. Harry feels a drop of blood trickle down the side of his neck.

“Drop the gun or I’ll slit his throat,” Louis orders with an even voice, yet his entire body is starting to tremble. The sheets trapping Harry’s legs are soaked and Harry assumes that it stems from Louis being wet like a dog, but now light shines into his bedroom from the doorway and when he angles his gaze, he’s shocked to see the red puddle that’s steadily spreading.

“We’ll drop our weapons,” Zayn says, “if you drop the knife. Nobody here wants to hurt you.” He takes another step, lowering the gun to his side, lifting his other hand. “You’re losing a lot of blood.”

As if he hadn’t even realized until this point, Louis sits back on his haunches and stares down at his body where his t-shirt is torn in places. There’s a large, deep gash that looks like it’s just opened up again and it’s dipped Louis’ entire right side into crimson. He’s shaking, breath hitching and mouth twisting in pain he only seems to register now. Harry uses his moment of distraction to take hold of his human wrist, gently pushing the knife away from his throat. It’s probably a miracle that Louis lets him.

He sits up as much as he can, considering Louis is still weighing down his legs. Harry lets his fingers close around Louis’ wrist, feels the quick and uneven pulse, squeezes once to assure Louis that he’s here. Louis’ eyes flicker to him and he holds Harry’s gaze for a few beats before blinking rapidly, shrinking back and nearly tumbling off the bed in the process. He clenches his eyes shut, presses both palms against his temples, biting down onto a groan as he staggers to his feet and back, back until his shoulder hits the adjacent wall.

Harry yanks the sheets aside, metallic scent biting in his nose. “Louis,” he tries again, reaching out, “let me help. You’re safe here. I promise.”

Louis looks at him for perhaps a second or two, face turned into a grimace from the pain; then he just keels over.

Harry lurches forward and manages to catch him against his chest before he hits the ground. Then it’s suddenly quiet, only the pitter-patter of the rain hitting the windows audible in the darkened room. Harry’s heart is still beating at twice its usual speed, but Louis is in his arms, a cold and nearly dead presence, but he’s there, and Harry needs to swallow down a sob that threatens to work its way up his aching throat.

Harry glances to the left. Zayn and Niall have lowered their weapons and Liam’s gauntlet isn’t glowing anymore. Liam lets out a long whistle.

“I’ll get the first aid kit.”
to be continued.
Harry swallows thickly, but he holds Zayn’s gaze. “I don’t know anything right now,” he confesses, desperate to keep his voice steady but unable to stop it from wobbling just slightly. “All I know is that he’s the most important thing in my life. And I’m not handing him over to be tortured. And neither are you. Over my dead body.”

well would you look at that! one day earlier than expected, because it's my day off and the fandom had a bit of a shitty day yesterday and i'm feeling generous.

as always, thanks to brit for being speedy with the editing and for putting up with my never-ending britishisms, i promise i'll learn.

please feel free to come say hi on tumblr.

see you in two weeks!

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

**DISCLAIMER:** the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

“Love removes the world for you, and just as surely when it's going well as when it's going badly.”

*Alice Munro, The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*
Louis is passed out cold. Harry places him on his bed and from then on works robotically, stripping the bloody sheets and replacing them with fresh ones that smell like fabric softener, smooth and silky. He cuts Louis out of his ragged t-shirt, bites down hard on his lips when he sees the scars and the wounds, some old, some horribly fresh and he seals everything with surgical glue for now, washes away the worst of the dirt with a wet flannel, applies bandages where he can. He grabs a pair of joggers out of the closet that are slightly short on him, a t-shirt and one of his sweatshirts, places them next to the bed and allows himself a moment to just look at Louis before he pulls up the fresh sheets.

He looks even worse than he had in London. Every rib, every bone clearly visible and skin tinged blue. But his chest is expanding with every breath and his eyes are closed and he’s here now, and he’s safe, and Harry is ready to do whatever it takes to keep it that way, feeling emotions curling heavily in his chest, boiling close to the surface.

Harry’s hands are shaking when he pulls the covers over Louis’ small frame and he manages to keep it together when he leaves the room, walks along the corridor and takes the lift up to the communal floor. It’s still the middle of the night, and outside it looks like the Apocalypse is coming, but the others are sitting around the kitchen island with mugs of steaming tea and Harry can’t take another step.

He presses the heel of his hand to his mouth to muffle the first sob that breaks out of him, his vision swimming as his knees threaten to give out. Niall is out of his seat in a heartbeat, steadying him first, then wrapping solid arms around his shoulders. Harry buries his face in the sweater Niall’s put on in the meantime and cries for God knows how long, sobs whacking his entire body until he’s exhausted, so tired and so bloody relieved it overwhelms him.

“Let it out, big guy,” Niall tells him, rubbing his back and probably not even pulling a face as Harry gets snot all over him. “Let it all out.”

Slowly, he starts moving them back to the island and deposits Harry onto a stool, stepping aside but still keeping his arm draped around his shoulders. Harry gratefully accepts a tissue Liam holds out and wipes his face, trying to regulate his breathing.

“He’s out cold,” he manages to say after a couple of minutes pass.

“I’m not surprised,” Zayn comments, brushing an array strand of hair off of his forehead. “I doubt he’s gotten any rest since London. HYDRA must have chased him like a rabid dog.”

“Do you think that’s why he,” and Harry can’t go on, doesn’t need to either, thinks of the bloody sheets in his hamper that he should probably just throw away.

“HYDRA agents aren’t easy to shake off,” Niall says to that and of course they all know. They’ve had plenty of run-ins with HYDRA to know why Louis looks like they’ve put him through a meat grinder. “So what now?”

Silence ensues. Harry drinks some of his tea, hoping it’ll loosen the knot that’s tied around his heart. “I’m not handing him over to SHIELD,” is all he can say at this point and he reaches into the pocket of his sweatshirt, pulls out the leaflet Louis had with him, paper worn as if he’d spent hours running his fingers over the surface. “He had this,” Harry tells them and puts it on the counter. One corner is darkened from blood. “He went to the Smithsonian. That means he remembers, right? Or that he’s at least trying to.”

“And he came here,” Liam concedes. “Though I’ve got no fucking clue how he managed to get into the building.”
Harry’s mouth twitches. “He’s crafty. Could pick locks before he could write his own name.” He smiles wistfully into his cup at the memory and glances up to find Liam looking at him mildly, but Zayn’s expression, although sympathetic, is still rather sober.

“He held a knife to your throat,” he says.

“If he wanted to kill me, he could’ve done it,” Harry retorts immediately. “He didn’t come here for that. He came for answers, and I want to try and give them to him. I want him to get better, and to be safe.”

Zayn sighs wearily. “What about your own safety? Or the team’s?”

“He’s not going to—”

“You can’t know that!”

Harry swallows thickly, but he holds Zayn’s gaze. “I don’t know anything right now,” he confesses, desperate to keep his voice steady but unable to stop it from wobbling just slightly. “All I know is that he’s the most important thing in my life. And I’m not handing him over to be tortured. And neither are you. Over my dead body.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, he notices that Niall steps away from him and moves back around the island and to the seat he previously occupied. Harry can’t see, but he’s sure he places a soothing hand on Zayn’s thigh.

“He’s been through so much. He doesn’t deserve whatever SHIELD or HYDRA would do to him were they to get their hands on him again. And I know I’m putting you all in a difficult position, but I just—I can’t let him go again,” Harry confesses quietly. “And if nothing else, he at least deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

He allows that to sink in and gets up, takes his empty cup to the dishwasher and leans heavily against the counter. Harry lifts a hand and runs it absentmindedly along the shallow cut on his throat, scratching off some dried blood.

“I’m with Harry on this,” Liam throws in suddenly and Harry sends him a grateful look over his shoulder. “I spent a couple of weeks in a cave and that was the worst thing that ever happened to me. That guy’s been a prisoner of war for seventy years. And SHIELD would make him a prisoner again. I think he deserves to become his own person again.”

“Thanks, Liam,” Harry tells him and gets a soft smile in return.

“You’re not thinking of the consequences,” Zayn still disagrees. “I know what he’s been through and I probably understand it a whole lot better than you, because the people who trained him also trained me. I’ll spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, because there are plenty of people who spent time and money on me. Just imagine how much more he’s worth to them. We don’t know what we’re dealing with,” he exclaims, spreading his arms wide to emphasize. “We’re not equipped to deal with this. Any of it. From the trauma he’s been through to the information he might possess and what he’s actually capable of.”

Harry furrows his brows and turns to face him. “What do you mean, what he’s capable of?”

Zayn gives a meaningful pause, tense and uneasy and chilling to the bone. “I’m worried he might be a sleeper.”

“What’s a sleeper?”
“A sleeper is generally a normal person,” Niall explains slowly, treading carefully. “But they’ve been programmed and filled with a mission and there’s a phrase or a code word that activates them. A sleeper doesn’t even know that that’s happened to them. It’s what makes them so dangerous and lethal. You don’t find out until it happens, basically.”

“Why would Louis be a sleeper though?” Harry can’t but ask.

“Because,” Zayn replies, “HYDRA pumped a lot of money into him. He’s their most prized possession. I’m certain they’ve gone to great lengths to ensure they won’t just lose him.”

“I’ve put self-destruct buttons into my suits,” Liam adds thoughtfully. “Do you think they could have done something similar?”

Zayn shrugs. “Perhaps. Again, we won’t know until it’s too late.”

“If there’s a chip,” Liam suggests, “I could do a scan. I wanted to scan his prosthetic anyway, it’s a really fascinating piece of engineering.”

“He’s not a lab rat,” Harry throws in, growing more and more displeased. “And if you don’t want him here, I’m happy to find some place else for us.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Liam gets up and walks to the fridge, takes out one of his nearly black protein drinks. The digital clock signals twenty-seven minutes past four. “It’s my tower. You’re welcome to stay for as long as you like. But maybe we should put it up for a vote. It’s two votes for Tomlinson staying, so what about you guys?”

Zayn drops forward on his elbows and interlaces his long fingers, shaking his head. “Sorry, Captain. But I think it would be the best option for everyone to get SHIELD involved. Niall?”

Promptly, Niall lets out a long, frustrated groan and throws his arms in the air in overtly dramatic fashion. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me! Why does it have to come down to me?” he exclaims, looking back at Zayn and meeting his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that,” he says, turning towards Harry and rolling his eyes a moment later. “And you, don’t give me that beaten puppy look either. Christ, that’s not fair.”

Niall huffs out a breath and rubs his hands across his face until it’s red. Then he gets up and walks a couple a steps through the kitchen, chewing on his lips, before spinning around to face them again.

“I’m sorry,” he addresses Zayn with a sigh. “But I had orders to shoot you on sight. And when I didn’t, everyone told me you couldn’t be trusted, but I went with my gut feeling and look where it got us.” He glances towards Harry. “And right now, my gut tells me to trust Cap on this. So I will.”

Harry breathes a sigh of relief; mouths a thank you to Niall, who shrugs, and waves his hand as if to say don’t mention it. Zayn levels him with a narrow gaze, then he gets to his feet and stretches.

“Have it your way,” he concedes. “But I warned you. And you shouldn’t forget it.” With that, he swiftly exits the kitchen.

Niall lets out another groan. “Now I’m definitely sleeping on the coach.”
Louis sleeps until sunrise, which isn’t nearly enough considering he must’ve forced himself to stay awake for weeks with only short moments of rest. Harry’s there when he wakes up, sitting on an armchair in a corner by the windows, a book in his lap that he was staring at instead of reading. He flinches when Louis, without prior warning, suddenly shoots up in the bed, sheet pooling in his lap, arms raised defensively and eyes wide, breath fast. Harry thinks he can see how rapidly his heart is beating in his chest.

It must take a moment for Louis’ confusion to subside, then he lowers his arms again and blinks, eyes flickering around the room until they settle on Harry and stay there. A warm shiver runs down Harry’s spine.

“Hi,” he says, feeling breathless. Louis fists the sheets and considering that out of all the armor he’d worn he looks almost delicate, the muscles in his right arm twitch impressively, reminding Harry not to underestimate him. When he was very little, his mother told him that he shouldn’t back the stray dogs out on the streets into a corner or up against a wall, because cornered animals were always the most vicious. He wonders if Louis is going to lash out if Harry gets too close.

“I’m not armed,” Harry continues and shows his empty hands, thinking that this might be a good start. “And if you want, you’re free to leave. None of us are going to stop you. But if you want answers, I’m happy to give them to you. You’re safe here, and you can stay as long as you’d like.”

He watches on as Louis lowers his eyes to the hands clenching in his lap, one out of flesh and one out of metal and his gaze keeps moving, never meeting Harry’s, but at least he’s not getting up and running away; at least he seems to be considering Harry’s offer. It’s quiet then, for a long time during which Harry doesn’t dare to move or speak, afraid any movement or sound might spook Louis. So he sits and waits patiently for Louis to collect his thoughts or make up his mind, tension only given away by the tightness of the hold he has on his book, making the pages quiver.

“It said I was dead,” Louis says out of the blue, so quiet Harry could’ve easily missed it had he not been waiting for it for almost an hour. He turns his icy blue eyes onto Harry. “At the exhibit. It said I died in battle.” He pauses, apparently mulling the words over in his head. “But they’re wrong.”

“Yeah,” Harry breathes, aching to walk over to him and at least sit on the edge of the bed. “They’re wrong. But everyone thought so. We had no idea you’d survived.”

“It said we were best friends,” Louis continues unperturbed, still holding Harry’s gaze. “Are they wrong about that, too?”

“No.” He’s almost too quick to deny that, scooting forward to the edge of the chair. “No, please. You were my best friend. My only friend really. Most important person in my life.” Harry breathes in and out. Louis expression is blank, unwavering and it shouldn’t hurt as much as it does. Harry should have expected it to be hard. “You still are.”

Louis glances back down at his hands. He pulls his lower lip into his mouth, bites down on it until the already pale skin around it whitens even further. “I don’t remember that,” he says. “I don’t remember a lot of things.”

Harry needs to remind himself to keep calm and composed, because this isn’t about him, and Louis needs him to not be a quivering mess now. Zayn is right when he says they’re not qualified or experienced to deal with this, but they’re all one of a kind, winging it as they go along, and all Harry can really do is try.

“What do you remember?” he asks and waits anxiously for Louis’ answer.
Louis doesn’t reply straight away. The fragments of his left arm whirr softly, clicking and reassembling, but Louis seems used to it by now. “A chair,” he says eventually. “A chair, and the cold. It was always cold.”

Harry presses his eyes shut, takes air in through his nostrils and exhales slowly.

“And falling,” Louis suddenly goes on, chilling Harry down to his very bones, “I remember falling.” He looks up again. “Did I fall? Is that how I died?”

Harry nods, can’t get words out at first, needs to swallow down the lump stuck in his throat. “You did,” he replies. “We were high up in the mountains. On a train. Half the compartment was ripped apart and you – you fell.”

Louis holds his gaze, seemingly unaffected. Harry can’t but look at the scars adorning his skin and tries not to imagine who and what put them there.

“How do I know what’s real?” Louis speaks up again after a few beats of silence pass between them and Harry’s heart clenches.

“You can ask me,” he replies earnestly. “Whatever it is, I’ll answer. And I promise I won’t ever lie to you,” because Harry’s got nothing else but this.

He’s got nothing to offer Louis but honesty and safety and the promise that he’s not going to abandon him again. The fact that not even a hint of obvious emotion flickers over Louis’ face is heartbreaking, but again, having Louis here and being able to talk to him and helping him understand who he is is more than Harry could have expected, and he needs to stop being selfish. Louis is going to get better, and it will take time, and it will be hard, but, as they say, the only way is up.

“Are you hungry?” he asks then, because being confronted with Louis’ bare chest, skinny and sinewy, really drives it home. Louis looks at him blankly, doesn’t answer, doesn’t even give Harry the slightest hint that he understood the question for a few moments, so Harry rephrases. “Do you want something to eat?”

Louis just stares at him for another minute before he lifts one shoulder in what can only be considered a shrug. Then it sinks in. It’s the first testimony of what HYDRA have really done to him, apart from the horrors Harry already knows about. He might as well just keel over and be sick all over the floor, because Harry feels sick and suddenly rotten right down to his core. Louis has to be starving, especially considering the stress he’s been under and their faster-than-normal metabolism that requires at least three times as many nutrients as the average human.

Harry rises onto shaky legs, lets the book drop down onto the armchair and wipes his palms on his jeans. The alarm clock on his bedside table indicates that it’s just after seven. “How about a shower?” He’s aware that he’s reaching now, but he’s desperate for Louis to feel better, to regain anything, even if it’s just a full stomach or a basic sense of cleanliness. “I have a tub as well, if you’d rather have a bath.”

He moves to the door that leads to his ensuite and opens the door, steps aside to give Louis the choice to walk into the spacious bathroom and observe it and for a moment, Harry thinks this attempt of reaching out has failed as well, when Louis suddenly brushes the sheets to the side and swings his legs off the side of the bed. He gets to surprisingly steady feet and moves soundlessly across the floor, pauses only for a millisecond when he passes Harry before stepping into the bathroom. Harry doesn’t even get the time to worry about giving Louis some privacy, because he peels his pants off with practiced movement, without hesitation, and drops them on the floor,
standing there entirely bare, arms tense at his sides.

The gash that had started bleeding a couple of hours ago still looks bad, stretching from Louis’ front around his hip, purpling at the edges and surgical glue only doing so much of keeping it all together. Harry wants to avert his eyes, he really does, but Louis doesn’t move, he just stays standing there like he’s waiting for something to happen and –

He bites down on his knuckles and turns around for a minute to collect himself and fight back the burn behind his eyelids. When Harry has regained his composure – at least outwardly – Louis still hasn’t moved. Harry steps into the room, rug soft and plush beneath his feet and he leaves the door slightly ajar in case Louis doesn’t feel comfortable in closed spaces.

Louis is eyeing the shower warily. His fists are trembling.

The tub is in the far right corner, a luxurious thing with jets and touchscreen control and incredibly spacious. Harry thinks that might be the better option and walks up to it, grabs the sprinkler and turns to Louis in time to see him visibly jerk back, eyes wide and nostrils flared. Harry remains angled over the tub, looks at the sprinkler in his hand and back at Louis before the penny drops.

“Lou,” he starts, voice rough with boiling emotion. “I’m just – I’ll fill the tub for you, okay? I’m not gonna –” and he breaks off, putting the sprinkler back into its mount, then runs the tab, holding his hand into the spray and adjusting the temperature. “Take a bath, no water pressure, and here’s some soap, and towels and I’ll – I’ll leave you alone if you want.”

He seems to relax, but not by much. Nevertheless, Louis walks up to the tub and after a moment’s hesitation, he climbs into it, sits down in about five inches of water and draws his legs close to his body, wrapping his arms around them, curling into himself – trying to appear as small as possible.

Harry doesn’t know what to do. He’s completely out of his depth, flying blind and he doubts Louis is aware of what he’s doing or what’s wrong with that. It’s only been a few hours and Harry’s already close to a complete breakdown in the middle of his bathroom, because Louis has clearly been denied even the smallest sense of comfort or human decency, stripping down in front of someone he probably still considers a stranger like it’s been drilled into him. He doesn’t reach for the soap as the tub slowly fills up, probably hasn’t even been allowed to use soap or wash himself in the past decades. By the looks of it, they hadn’t bothered with cutting his hair in between cryogenic suspension either.

Louis hadn’t exactly been vain, but he’d been aware of his good looks, used them to his advantage and he’d spent such a long time in front of mirrors that Harry had always teased him about it. He’d never left their apartment without his hair meticulously styled, clean-shaven and impeccably dressed and it’s such a stark contrast to now, looking neglected and barely-there, that Harry feels nauseous with it.

He isn’t sure if he’s overstepping one of many boundaries that should probably be put in place when he switches off the tap and grabs a bottle of shampoo. Louis has turned his face away from him, but when Harry asks, “can you dip your head back?” he complies only after a beat.

Throat tight and chest in knots, Harry sits down on the edge of the tub and, keeping his breath shallow because he already tastes bile, takes a moment to think about the implications of Louis just doing what he asks when a few hours ago, he’d been ready to kill him, blindly following what could be classified as an order. But Harry pushes it aside for now, forces his hands to remain calm as he fills his palms with water and starts wetting Louis’ knotted hair. Like when he was dressing his wounds, Harry focuses on the task at hand, using his fingers to untangle the strands, applying shampoo and washing it out again.
Louis leans forward again, curving his spine, allowing Harry to count protruding vertebra after vertebra. He wets a washcloth, sees the way Louis trembles when he brushes it across his back and over to his shoulder and sides where blood has stained his skin and Harry works until his eyes are burning and the washcloth is red and the water is starting to get lukewarm and Louis just lets it happen.

When he’s done, Harry drops the washcloth, which is beyond saving, in the trash and goes back to the bedroom, grabs the pile of clean clothes and some big, fluffy towels, places them on the counter next to the sink. Louis still has his arms wrapped tightly around his legs, staring at the rippling surface of the water.

Harry clears his throat. He feels faint. “These clothes might be a little big, but they should do until I can organize you something that fits,” he tells him. “I’ll um – leave you alone now. But you should try and get some more rest.”

Then he leaves the bathroom and his bedroom and almost leaps out into the hallway before he starts to cry.

“I think they hosed him down,” Harry says a while later. He’s down in Liam’s lab, sitting at one of the many desks covered in parts of machinery while Liam works on a bright red gauntlet, twirling a screwdriver in his hand. His throat still feels raw. “He just stood there and he flinched when I grabbed the sprinkler. I think he expected me to just point it at him.”

“Not really surprising, is it?” Liam comments without looking up. He looks a bit frazzled and Harry sees the empty bottle that previously held a protein shake on the desk next to him. No doubt Liam came down here straight after their talk in the kitchen. “They needed to get him clean from time to time, and I guess that was efficient. Not like HYDRA treated him like a person in any other way.”

“I know, it’s just – harder to see than I thought. And,” he adds, mulling the words over in his head, “he’s just suddenly so – docile. Don’t know if that’s the right word, but – yeah. He went from attacking to obeying me in a few hours.”

Liam puts the gauntlet down and twists his chair around. “He’s spent seventy years following orders,” he says. “I doubt it’s easy to let go of that, to be his own person again, especially since he hardly remembers what being a person means. And right now the only person that links him to his past, and his humanity, is you.”

“So he’s swapped HYDRA for me?” Harry concludes. “But – that’s not what I want for him.”

“It’s a start, though,” Liam shrugs. “Better docile than cutting your throat at night I’d say.”

“Probably,” Harry has to concede, but it doesn’t sit well with him. Then again, it is a start and Harry guesses that if he gives Louis space and time, he’ll remember enough of himself to finally make his own choices again. “It’s just so strange. Because – it’s him, right? But at the same time it’s not, and I’m terrified of doing something wrong.”

“To be honest,” Liam says, “I think that’s gonna be a bit of hit and miss situation for a while. And I know Zayn said that we’re not the right people for this job and maybe we’re not, maybe we’ll fuck it up. But we’ve all been through a lot, and we’ve all come out the other end, yeah?” Then he
turns back to his gauntlet.

“Thanks,” Harry mutters and decides to let Liam work in peace, because it’s not even been a day and he needs to be more patient than that.

He returns to his floor and finds the bedroom door slightly ajar. Peeking in, he sees that Louis is back in bed, covers pulled up to his shoulders and hood of the sweatshirt pulled over his head, facing away from the door. Harry isn’t sure if Louis is sleeping, but he decides that he probably doesn’t want to be disturbed, so he turns around and heads into the living room, grabs one of his books and starts to read.

Louis doesn’t come out of the bedroom for three days and Harry doesn’t go in. He keeps thinking back to his mother telling him about the stray dogs, about not cornering them, and he thinks it will be worth more if Louis decides to come out on his own. In the meanwhile, Harry reads up on amnesia and PTSD, picks out a couple of films he and Louis had watched together before Louis had been shipped off and he downloads recipes for things he remembers Louis liked to eat. It gives him something to do, because Niall lets him know that Director Cowell is still fuming and, until urgent matters arise, wants Harry to be suspended from active service, which actually suits him just fine.

It’s all he sees from the others. Liam is as always busy in his workshop and he guesses Zayn and Niall still have a few things to iron out between themselves and with SHIELD, and Harry decides to stay on his floor, just in case Louis leaves the bedroom, which he does on the third day, exactly when the sun is starting to set over Manhattan.

When Harry looks up to see Louis standing in the doorway, he nearly drops his glass. The water sloshes over the edges and wets the floor and his socked feet. He’s in the same jumper and sweatpants, legs and sleeves too long and he has the hood pulled up as well, trying to hide as much of himself as possible. Harry wants to close the distance and hug him to his chest, aches for it like he aches for so many other things that just aren’t on the table at this stage.

He sets his glass down and grabs a dishtowel, dries his hands and then the few drops on the tiles. “I was just about to cook some dinner,” Harry says once he’s put the towel away and he thinks about what he’s read about easing someone back into everyday life. Not asking too many questions but presenting a routine, nutritious food but low in seasoning and spices and easy to digest.

Rummaging through the cabinets in the kitchen he barely uses, because he tends to stay on the communal floor, Harry finds some rice, beans, and canned tomatoes and sets it all down onto the counter. Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees that Louis moves closer, long sweatpants dragging on the floor. He sits down at the table, gaze aimed ahead where the sky is orange and magenta and brightly alive, unlike them. As Harry fills a large pot with water, he notices that Louis has pulled the left sleeve of the sweatshirt to completely cover his prosthetic, not even the shiny fingertips visible where his hands are almost carefully placed on the tabletop.

Swallowing the lump that seems to have taken up permanent residence in his throat, Harry busies himself with measuring the rice, chopping a few vegetables and opening the cans while Louis doesn’t even move a muscle, but at least he’s not running away. Harry thinks that has to count for something. Thankfully, he’s efficient and it’s only half an hour later that he can scoop rice and vegetables with sauce into two bowls. He grabs two spoons and some napkins, sets one portion down in front of Louis and sits down across from him.
Louis’ eyes flicker from the bowl to the spoon and up to Harry, then back, just as lost as he’d been in the bathroom and Harry’s appetite is instantly diminished. Trying not to keep staring at Louis, he grabs his spoon and starts eating. It’s a bit bland, but he didn’t want to overdo it on the seasoning to go easy on Louis stomach. He doesn’t expect him to eat much, in spite of being probably literally starving, and he only starts when Harry’s more than halfway through his portion.

Harry only looks up when he puts his spoon down. Half of Louis’ face is hidden by shadows falling over it from the hood pulled deep into his forehead. His left arm is below the table, hidden from view, which as Harry is beginning to suspect is kind of the point. Louis pokes at his food more than actually eating it, but he gets through half the plate before he pushes it away. Harry waits for him to look up.

“I don’t remember Brooklyn,” Louis says eventually, a fine line between his brows. He still looks dead on his feet, but he hasn’t aged a day, and he is still so stunning that Harry’s breath hitches when their eyes meet. “I just remember a cat.”

Harry can’t help the smile that spread on his face, wide enough for his dimples to cut into his cheeks. “Dusty,” he replies. “He wasn’t ours. He was Mrs McDougall’s cat, but he’d sneak into our apartment if we forgot to shut the windows.”

“Right.” He starts chewing on his lip and that’s – it’s so familiar, is what it is and Harry is so glad, so bloody glad that there are still these small seemingly irrelevant things that HYDRA couldn’t beat and fry out of Louis. “Why do I remember a stupid cat? I don’t remember you.”

It stings. It hurts more than Louis driving a knife into his stomach or his metal fist hitting his jaw and Harry tries not to let it show, but he’s pretty sure his face crumbles. Quickly, Harry attempts to compose his expression. He doesn’t think he’s particularly successful.

“It will take time,” he tells Louis. “Zayn said they damaged brain tissue. But that can heal. You just need rest and it’ll all come back.” At least that’s what he hopes.

“Zayn,” Louis says, rolling the name over his tongue. “Who’s Zayn?”

“Black Widow,” Harry replies and tries not to feel hurt when recognition flashes across Louis’ features.

“I remember him,” he confirms, blinking and tilting his head slightly and he opens his mouth to add something when a shiver curls through his body and Louis jumps to his feet. Harry sits there slightly dumbstruck and can only watch as Louis hurtes to the sink and throws up his dinner. A moment later, Harry hurries to his side, grabs for Louis’ hair and the hood and has to listen and watch how he retches, his entire body shaking with it for at least two minutes.

Louis remains leant over the sink, breathing harshly and gagging and Harry curses silently, almost relishing the bittersweet contact, letting his fingers trail along Louis’ hairline in an attempt to soothe him. Eventually, Louis pushes back and Harry lets his arms fall to his side, watches as Louis stumbles back against the drawers and slides down until he sits on the tiles. Then Harry sits down opposite him and they bask in silence for a while, Louis’ breath slowing down again and Harry trying to let go of the tension gripping his shoulders.

“Are you okay?” he asks eventually.

Louis doesn’t answer. Instead, he pulls his legs in and appears to be making himself smaller and that’s so wrong, it’s so wrong and it pains Harry to see, because Louis had never been tall, but he’d
always been the biggest and brightest presence. He’d never hid himself, never tried to shrink away and he hadn’t – he hadn’t been ashamed of who he was. And that’s how Louis seems to feel now, if Harry can read him even the tiniest amount, and he hasn’t thought about it until this point, about Louis’ pride and his sense of honor and how numbing and crippling it must be to remember what happened. Until this point, he thought it would be a good thing.

“I don’t remember you,” Louis repeats and his voice is like sandpaper. Harry jerks back from it, so much that he hits his head against the cabinets. “I don’t remember you, but – I know you. No idea how that’s possible and it doesn’t make sense, but nothing makes sense right now.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense.” Harry assures him quickly, heart beating fast. “And you do know me. Nobody knows me as well as you do.”

Louis brings his right hand up, pinching the bridge of his nose with thumb and index finger. He squeezes his eyes shut, then blinks rapidly, and Harry wonders if that has something to do with an onslaught of images, or memories.

“They never said a lot to me,” he speaks up after a while. It’s getting dark in the kitchen, the sun now hidden behind skyscrapers and only a sliver of orange left on the horizon. It’s been a warm day, but Harry feels an inexplicable chill in his bones. “But I think they used to say, “he’s dead”. And I don’t remember if I knew who they were talking about, but I must’ve, because I just – I stopped fighting, I think. They said “he’s dead”, and it wasn’t worth it anymore.”

“Louis,” Harry chokes and he has to scoot closer until his folded legs are almost brushing Louis’, reaching a hand out. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“But you’re not dead. They lied.”

Harry takes a trembling breath when Louis lets his right hand drop to the floor, just inches away from his. “They did. They lied about a lot of things.”

“You’re not dead,” Louis repeats and when his fingertips brush Harry’s, he trembles. “And I’m not dead either.”

“No, Lou,” Harry retorts, watches Louis staring down at their hands. “You’re not.”

It’s silent after that. The light disappears on the horizon, leaving the kitchen in the dark, grey surfaces and long shadows dragging over the tiles. Louis doesn’t take his hand but he doesn’t pull his away either and it’s only been a few days, yet Harry knows they can make it. When Louis’ voice sounds again, it’s so quiet Harry’s not sure he was supposed to hear it.

“Maybe I should be.”

Harry interlaces their fingers, shaking his head. They can make it, and they will.

It takes a few more days for Louis to get accustomed to solid food again. He still doesn’t leave Harry’s bedroom much, only appears in the kitchen around sunset each day, probably trying to find some sort of pattern in his life now that HYDRAs control has been taken out of the equation, and he doesn’t talk as he silently and disturbingly obediently eats whatever it is Harry sets out for him. But Harry sits with him and he holds his hair back when he throws everything back up until finally, he doesn’t.
Harry takes to showering in the gym, and sleeping in his living room, not daring to venture farther away from Louis than that, absolutely paranoid that he could suddenly be gone, just leave and Harry wouldn’t have the chance to see him again. So he hovers, and he makes hot oatmeal with honey for breakfast, setting out two bowls in the hope that Louis might realize he needs to eat more than one meal a day. He’s nearly certain that Liam’s forgotten about time, and that Niall is giving them space, and he’s also pretty sure Zayn is trying to stay away from this situation for now, but it’s like it’s been since the beginning; him and Louis, and the rest of the world doesn’t matter, and Harry wouldn’t want it any other way.

But it’s hard. Harry is slowly going insane with the need to be closer to Louis, to touch him in at least some way; to hold him close and listen to his heart beat. They’re tactile people, Louis and him, and Harry is starved, but there’ve been too many people putting their grubby hands on him, poking and prodding and hurting, and Harry won’t become one of them. The first step in gaining Louis’ trust is being a constant and assuring presence, not forcing human contact on him when he clearly isn’t ready.

He’s just come back from the gym when JARVIS lets him know that Sophia is waiting in the communal living room for him and Harry’s confused as to what it is she wants from him, but he makes his way up immediately regardless. Niall informed him this morning in the gym that he had a short mission to go on, and God knows where Zayn is these days, and Liam being Liam the floor is entirely deserted save for Sophia in a perfectly cut ensemble in aubergine and heels she could probably stab someone with if push came to shove. She greets him with a friendly smile. There are two bags on the dining table.

“Good day, Captain,” she says, pocketing her phone. “How have you been?”

“Well enough, I guess,” Harry replies hesitantly, not knowing what Liam told her. She looks too much at ease considering that a super assassin has taken up residence in the tower. “And you?”

“Good, as always, and I’ll be even better once I get Liam to go through a couple of contracts.” She rolls her eyes at that and then pulls the bags over. “He also informed me you have a guest in need of some basics, so I had JARVIS send me his measurements and took the liberty to pick a few things up.” With that, she pulls a stack of shirts out of the back, followed by jeans, socks, pants and a few nice sweatshirts and sweaters. Sophia turns back to face him, but Harry can only fishmouth at her. “I hope everything fits. I’ve made sure it’s all good quality, but if you want me to exchange something or need more, feel free to let me know.”

“Thanks,” Harry says numbly, looking at the piles of clothing laid out on the table. Absentmindedly, he touches a finger to the soft cotton of a grey t-shirt. “I don’t – thank you so much. That was very thoughtful. If you let me know how much it cost, I’ll –”

Sophia waves him off. “Don’t be ridiculous, Captain. I put it on Liam’s credit card. It’s not like he checks his own bank statement. Consider it part of the service,” she adds with a wink. “Liam also asked me to find a specialist in handling trauma patients suffering from PTSD, in case it would be needed, and I contacted one of Payne Industries’ affiliates in the US military. He recommended me some psychiatrists who specifically work with veterans and I’ve checked them all thoroughly.” Pulling out an envelope, she lays it on top of the clothes. “Dr Watson’s contact details and references are in here, but if you’d like to get in contact, JARVIS has everything stored in his database as well.”

Harry feels floored. He tries to think of an appropriate response, but Sophia doesn’t give him time. Before he’s even opened his mouth, she has shouldered her bag – which of course complements her outfit perfectly – and pulled out her phone.
“Our lawyers have been in touch with the Smithsonian as well as the Captain America trust, and any private possessions of yours still remaining in various archives will be arranged to be sent to you as soon as possible. Only a matter of days, I was assured.” She checks the time, mouth pulling at the corners, clearly displeased. “Now, if you excuse me, I need to shove some contracts down Liam’s throat and my plane to Los Angeles leaves in two hours. Have a lovely day, Captain.”

Harry just manages to utter, “you too”, before she’s whirled past him leaving only a cloud of sweet smelling perfume and probably a couple of hundred dollars worth of clothing. Feeling slightly frazzled, Harry puts the clothes back into the bags and grabs them along with the envelope containing the psychiatrist’s information. It’s not really a surprise how Sophia handles this situation since she’s been managing and dealing with Liam for years. She’s nothing if not sharp, efficient and – when Harry really thinks about it – eerily intuitive.

Taking everything back down into his own living room, Harry busies himself with pulling the tags out of everything and making sure that there are now tags that could scratch or irritate Louis and he can’t help but find himself blushing at the choices Sophia made and what she must be thinking about Harry and his supposed guest. There’s the skinny jeans in various shades ranging from black to light blue, basic t-shirts in white, grey and black and a good mix of shirts; denim, flannel, cotton. A jacket for colder days. Socks and fitted underwear that makes blood rise to his cheeks and drop to his groin simultaneously, and Harry has to bite down on his thumb until it subsides. There are two boxes of sneakers in one of the bags as well, and an extra set of toiletries. He has to remember to tell JARVIS to send Sophia a very sincere thank you note.

Harry entertains the thought of handing everything over to Louis right this second, but he restrains himself after he takes a couple of deep, calming breaths. Heading into the kitchen to make some tea, maybe grab a snack, he is suddenly reminded that Sophia had mentioned the Smithsonian and his private possessions and he feels a pleasant wave of relief wash over him as the water boils. It’s just a small thing, but Harry is quite eager to have his belongings back, nearly squirming with the thought of the amount of people who have snooped around in them.

Louis had worked extra shifts and saved up for so long to buy Harry a used camera for his eighteenth birthday, and he had spent the following years photographing barely anything but Louis. He doesn’t know how much of it survived, and although never explicit, he knows these pictures allow an intimate insight into his soul. It will be good to have them back. Maybe they can even kick-start Louis’ recovery.

Trying to direct his thoughts elsewhere, Harry makes some fennel tea and a simple ham and cheese toast. It’s hard to swallow down, almost cotton-y in his mouth, despite him knowing that the sandwich is perfectly fine. His stomach seems unhappy with being filled, still churning and restless and the tea does little to settle it. Harry just feels exhausted and drained, and the only person that could make him feel better is the one he can’t even be close to at this stage.

He shouldn’t be wallowing in self-pity. He should be stronger than that. But Harry fears that he’s not, nor will he ever be, not as Captain America and not as himself. He remembers a conversation he’d had with James, right at the beginning, during their first mission after the Howling Commandoes had been formed. Louis had come up with the strategy, Louis had managed to sneak into a German base under the radar and the mission had only turned into a success because of him. Harry hadn’t been a bystander, far from it, but without Louis, he wouldn’t have known what to do. His whole life, he’d had Louis to rely on and depended on him and followed him and he’d said to James that it should have been Louis. If he hadn’t been drafted so early, if Dr Erskine had met him instead of Harry, Harry had no doubt Louis would have ended up as America’s beacon of hope in his stead.
And he allows himself to dwell on how things would have turned out had their roles been reversed. He thinks he would have stayed in Brooklyn, continuing to work at Mrs Burden’s Bakery, hoping to hear from Louis, hoping for him to return safely. And perhaps Louis would have returned and they would have stayed in Brooklyn or moved somewhere else, out to the suburbs, next door to each other with a shared garden. Maybe Louis would have married a pretty girl eventually and Harry would have been content to just be his best friend and uncle to his children and they wouldn’t have grown old together like they’d sometimes imagine – but at least they’d have been together.

Right now, it feels like everything he’s wanted is the closest and farthest away it’s even been. He’s lucky enough to be alive in a time where he could get married and could have children and do things he never thought possible, yet the only person he wants to share this with doesn’t even remember him. Louis isn’t to blame, Harry is, and he feels awful for all that he has simply not being enough.

The sandwich sits heavy in his stomach and the tea has gone cold when he finally shakes out of his thoughts, knuckles white where he’s still gripping the kitchen counter tightly. A shortness of breath prevails these days, Harry feeling close to choking constantly and he stares at the clothes and shoes and wants to make room for them in his closet, wants Louis to want to make a room for himself in there and in Harry’s life. Zayn said Louis might not heal completely, that it’s entirely possible for his brain to be damaged permanently, and Harry tries not to entertain that thought; yet at the same time, he wants to be realistic, even if it’s painful.

He tells himself he’d be okay just being Louis friend, Harry swears he would be.

Pouring the cold tea down the drain and putting the empty plate into the dishwasher, Harry rubs his hands over his face to regain at least some sense of composure. He takes a few calming breaths before spinning on his heels and heading into the living room.

After staring pointlessly at his flickering TV screen for hours, Harry makes some stew for dinner and sets out two bowls and two sets of spoons and two glasses of water, and he watches the sun set over Manhattan. But Louis doesn’t come. The door to his bedroom remains firmly shut. Harry sits on his chair and fights back the burning in his eyes, contours blurring, but he can still see how his hands shake on top of the table’s surface.

The train is speeding, it’s thundering on and it’s white and it’s cold, and Louis’ scream is still echoing in his ears. Harry feels like he’s freezing and the wind is making his eyes water, tearing at him, and he still sees Louis’ face and he still feels his skin and Harry – Harry feels like he’s dying.

He comes to it with a start and a scream that’s thrown back and forth between the walls. Shooting upright, Harry gulps in air. His heart is rabbiting away, producing an almost nauseating ache in his chest, his insides clenching and head spinning. Harry curls forward and wraps his arms around his middle, desperate to hold himself together that way, somehow. His cheeks are wet and he sniffs once, a single drop sliding down his face and tickling along his jaw. It drops onto the collar of his shirt that’s soaked in cold sweat.
With a grimace, Harry wipes his face and pulls the damp shirt away from his body. He drops it onto the floor, where his blanket and pillow are already lying, probably shaken off in his sleep. Sighing, Harry waits for his eyes to adjust to the dark. It’s most likely nowhere near morning yet, because the sky is pitch black outside the window, the only source of light coming from the skyscrapers lit around the Avengers tower.

It takes him a moment to register the dark silhouette of the person sitting on the opposite couch and then another second for his brain to catch on. Harry startles and jumps back, pressing his back into the cushions, heart ricocheting in his chest.

“Christ,” he wheezes and exhales a shaky breath when he realizes that it’s Louis and Harry can’t but be thankful that this time, there isn’t a weapon in sight. Once his pulse has slowed down again, he says, “you didn’t come to dinner,” and surprisingly, his voice doesn’t betray how shaken up he is inside.

Louis doesn’t respond. He doesn’t react at all, in fact, which isn’t a rarity, but slightly disconcerting nonetheless, especially since this is the first time apart from their dinners together that Louis has ventured outside Harry’s bedroom. He’s still in Harry’s sweatshirt and jogging bottoms, feet bare and legs pulled up to his chest. As always, he’s used his right hand to pull the left sleeve of the sweatshirt to cover the entirety of his prosthetic. The hood is pulled up, casting his face in shadows, yet for some reason, his blue eyes still shine paradoxically bright in their sockets.

“Are you hungry?” Harry tries again and gets onto shaky legs. “I can warm up some stew, make some tea or, like, toast if you’d rather –”

“You were screaming.”

Harry freezes. He comes to a halt by the edge of the couch and looks at Louis, who hasn’t moved, but whose eyes are sharp and focused on Harry. “What?”

“You were screaming,” Louis repeats monotonously. “In your sleep. I heard you.”

He doesn’t know what to say for a moment. “I’m sorry,” Harry settles on, feeling uneasy. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t,” Louis just says, not moving, not even blinking, not showing a single trace of emotion and Harry has to remind himself to keep breathing. “I don’t sleep much.”

Harry swallows thickly. Louis should be sleeping more, if not to rest then simply because it means his brain can finally start healing properly and Harry thought with all the time Louis spent in his bedroom, he’d been doing that. He notices that Louis’ eyes, for a split second, flicker to his bare chest and Harry hopes the darkness hides his blush. Most likely, Louis is simply assessing him instinctively, his half-dressed state showing weakness and vulnerability. Perhaps he is comparing Harry’s unblemished skin to his own, littered with scars and traces of the abuse he suffered.

“It’s your bedroom,” Louis goes on after a beat. “You should sleep in it.”

“I don’t mind staying on the couch,” Harry replies. “I want you to be comfortable.”

“Comfortable,” Louis echoes. His brows tremble a little, like he actually has to think about what that word means.

“Yeah. I got some new clothes for you as well,” Harry remembers, quickly glancing over where the bags are still laid out. “Something that should, you know, actually fit you.”
Again, Louis doesn’t respond. Harry wonders if he should just head into the kitchen and rely on Louis to follow him, or if he should stay right here to assure Louis of his presence and to show him that he wants to listen. He decides to stay, but he moves cautiously closer when Louis drops his gaze to the ground.

Louis chews on his lips for a handful of minutes before he speaks up again. “You were calling my name.” Harry opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. Louis still isn’t looking at him. “You were calling for me and I thought – I don’t know what I thought,” he ends with a slight frown. “But then when I walked in, you were asleep. Was it a dream?”

“It was,” Harry answers and has to clear his throat before he continues. “It’s one of the only things I dream about these days. Watching you fall.”

“Falling,” Louis says and then looks up at him, tilting his head at a slight angle. “That’s how I died.”

“Yeah,” Harry barely manages to choke out. “Have you been dreaming about falling?”

He shakes his head softly, refusing to break eye contact. “I see faces. But that’s not dreaming, is it? I wish it was, but I know it’s not.”

“Lou –”

“They’re staring at me,” Louis says, and Harry’s blood runs cold. “I can’t tell whether they’re dead or alive. But I think they’re dead. I think I killed them.” He pulls his legs closer and makes himself impossibly smaller like he’s trying so hard to disappear. “I did horrible things.”

Harry exhales shakily and drops down on the couch next to Louis, close but not touching and he raises a hand to reach out, lets it hover just inches away from Louis’ arms, but Louis twitches almost imperceptibly and Harry decides heavy-heartedly that it’s too soon. He bites down on his lips until they sting. His eyes are still wet.

“That wasn’t you,” he says firmly. “They forced you to do this, they didn’t give you a choice and you’re not to blame for anything, you hear me? Louis, you’re not – none of this is your fault. You didn’t do it.”

Harry almost flinches when Louis’ gaze suddenly bores into his, blank expression gone and replaced with confusion and sheer agony, like he’s feeling so much pain he doesn’t know how to catalyze it.

“You can’t know that,” he tells Harry. “You don’t know if I wanted to do it, if it was my own choice and, fucking hell, maybe I even enjoyed it.”

“I do know,” Harry insists desperately, watching how Louis’ breathing grows uneven and how his hand closes around the upper part of his prosthetic as if he were trying to rip it off, and Harry doesn’t think he’s very far from the truth. “I do know, because I know you. And I understand you can’t remember, but I do, and that wasn’t you. It wasn’t, trust me. I know what they did to you, and for how long, and anyone else couldn’t have resisted them and fought them and – Christ – you kept fighting and you managed to break free of them. I don’t think anyone but you could have endured all that’s happened, but you did,” and Harry reaches out then, lays his hand on top of Louis’ white-knuckled one and Louis still jerks, but he doesn’t jerk away from the touch. He’s trembling from head to toe, but Harry holds on.

“You’re the best person I know.”
But Louis shakes his head, starts pulling away. “They should’ve just killed me,” he says, voice quiet and thick. “You should have killed me when you had the chance.”

Harry doesn’t know what to do. It’s physically painful to hear Louis say that and mean it. “Please don’t say that,” he nearly begs. “You deserve to live, and you deserve a chance to heal and be yourself.”

“I don’t even know who I am!” It suddenly breaks out of Louis, voice echoing through the room and Harry’s eyes go wide at the sudden shift in Louis’ behavior and the glistening in his eyes. “I don’t know who I am, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to remember, or think or fuck – anything. I saw a picture of my face and I read about my life, but it’s not mine, because I can’t even tell if any of it’s true. And I know I should remember who you are and I believe you when you say that you knew me, but… but I can’t –”

He breaks off, suddenly frozen still and staring ahead. Harry can see the shimmering fingertips of his metal arm. “Louis?” he asks tentatively.

Louis is silent for another moment. When he opens his mouth, his voice is raspy and monotonous. “They promised me.”

Harry leans forward slightly, tilting his head to get a better look at Louis’ expression. There’s a fine line between his brows, a confused curl to his lips. “What did they promise you?”

“They promised that if I behaved… they wouldn’t tie me to the chair again. They said if I did everything they asked, they would take away the chair. But they lied.”

“Because they knew you’d start to remember,” Harry tells him, because he’s starting to understand what significance the chair has to Louis, and what probably happened to him once he was forced into it and tied up until he couldn’t move. “Because they knew you’d never give in otherwise.”

Louis deflates visibly and he sinks back onto the couch, wrapping his arms around his trembling torso. “I can’t remember,” he says, more to himself than to Harry. “I just can’t remember.”

“It will take time,” Harry says because that’s what he has to tell himself as well to keep going, insides feeling like he swallowed a gallon of pins. “But I’ll be right by your side, I promise. I’ll be right here.”

And they sit together in silence, waiting for the sun to rise.

to be continued.
“Louis, ” he pants and he wants to kiss him again, but Louis juts his chin out, lips parted and shiny and red, corners of his mouth twitching up as he starts moving his hand. He glances down and then back up at Harry, pupils blown. Shockwaves are curling through Harry’s body and this is still a new body and still somewhat unknown to him, and somehow, all sensations are suddenly amplified. But it might just be Louis, more intoxicating than he remembers. Harry’s mind never did manage to do him justice.

Chapter Notes

hello everyone, once again a little bit early. this is the longest chapter so far, almost exactly 13k, and it seems like this fic is generally going to get a bit longer than expected. i’ve extended it to nine chapters for now and i hope i can stick to that, but i guess we’ll see.

as always, shoutout to brit for being my number one cheerleader and for unsuccessfully trying to americanise my writing and also for making me the most incredible playlist that gets me right in the zone.

chapter six will be posted on the fourth or fifth of June, because i’m really keen to keep ahead of schedule.

please feel free to come and say hi on tumblr, i’m always happy to ramble on about this 'verse. feedback is of course very much appreciated.

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

WARNING for this chapter: blood and self-harm. approach with caution.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

DISCLAIMER: the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.
“I’ve realized now that hope almost never goes together with reason. It’s something quite irrational and instinctive.”

Vasily Grossman, Life and Fate

***

“What the –”

Harry has barely entered the room when hands are already pressing him against the door and subsequently pushing it closed. The doorknob digs into his lower back uncomfortably and his head smacks against the solid wood, producing a dull ache, before his eyes zero in on Louis. Their gazes lock for just a second and Harry feels all air leave his body that’s suddenly strung tight as Louis aligns their bodies, rolling his hips up.

“Jesus, Lou, what –” and he can’t finish that either, because Louis glances up at him and that’s still such a strange thing, to be taller and bigger and having Louis look up at him through his lashes. Louis looks and he reaches for Harry’s belt, has it open within the blink of an eye with only one hand whilst the other one keeps a constant pressure on Harry’s crotch. “Everyone’s right downstairs.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Louis says and sounds out of breath already. His left hand rubs Harry through his khakis and he lifts the other to start unbuttoning Harry’s shirt. “It’s been months and I nearly died and you nearly died and we all might very well die tomorrow. So forgive me if I’m quite keen to find out if the serum has affected every part of you.”

He gives Harry a filthy wink as he yanks the last button open, pulling the shirt out of Harry’s waistband, making Harry gasp. Louis smirks and his eyes crinkle and they seem to sparkle even in the dim, muggy light that barely manages to illuminate the small room they’ve stolen to in this house some twenty miles away from Liège. And Louis’ right, it’s been so long, it’s been far too long since it was just the two of them, because trudging hundreds of miles through German forests and occupied French territory doesn’t exactly allow for much privacy.

They’ve made it through so much already, and they’ve made it so far, and suddenly Harry feels the urgency that’s gripped Louis as well and he ignores Louis’ hands still working on his fly, pulling Louis even closer and trapping them between their bodies. Harry crashes their mouths together, making their teeth clank and it’s almost brutal pressure for a handful of beats, frantic pulling and biting until heads are angled and lips start to slide instead of scrape. He thinks he hears Louis mutter out “finally” before he wrangles his hands out from where they’re squished between them, down Harry’s sides and back to his fly, working on the button, then the zip.

A groan rumbles in Harry’s chest, but he’s too choked up from having Louis again that it doesn’t make it up his throat. He hasn’t had many opportunities to ogle Louis and observe him like he’s always done, and uniform layers and deep winter have made it hard as well, but he’s pleased to find that despite dropping weight in captivity, Louis’ ass is still as firm and round as he remembers when his hands drop down to cup it. Louis bites down on his bottom lip in retaliation and they separate, breathing the same air still, and without wasting another moment, puts his hand down Harry’s pants, gripping him firmly.

“Louis,” he pants and he wants to kiss him again, but Louis juts his chin out, lips parted and shiny
and red, corners of his mouth twitching up as he starts moving his hand. He glances down and then back up at Harry, pupils blown. Shockwaves are curling through Harry’s body and this is still a new body and still somewhat unknown to him, and somehow, all sensations are suddenly amplified. But it might just be Louis, more intoxicating than he remembers. Harry’s mind never did manage to do him justice.

“What do you think, Curly?” Louis asks him with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “An inch or two? Not that you were small to begin with.”

“I –” Harry groans out and he thinks he’s about to swallow his tongue, “I don’t –”

“Haven’t had a proper look yet?” Louis asks him. “Did you keep it in your pants all this time, not even once rubbing one off, so I’d be the one to touch it first?”

Harry yanks Louis forward again, crushing a bruising kiss to his lips as they slowly start to tumble away from the door, stepping on each other’s boots and Louis lets his hand slip out of Harry’s pants to start unbuttoning his own shirt. Harry shrugs his off, lets the heavy fabric drop to the dusty floor, wooden planks groaning beneath their weight, dog tags cool and tickling the sensitive skin between his pecs. Louis stops in his tracks, licks his lips and stares at Harry’s exposed chest, making him blush and heat up even more, tingling from his toes up to the tips of his ears. Gently, almost reverently, he places his hands on Harry’s chest, fingers brushing over his nipples and making Harry suck in a breath and he slides them up and down slowly, because, Harry realizes, this is new to Louis as well.

If he’s being honest, Harry is still a bit apprehensive about this, because they know each other inside out and they’ve loved each other for so long already, every part and suddenly, he’s different, and Harry’s unsure if things might change. Louis has always loved to protect him and cuddle him close and cage Harry in and he’s always told Harry how much he loved his love handles and knobby knees. Now, Harry is tall and broad and solid as rock, sculpted in a way that seems entirely unreal, even to him when he looks at himself in a mirror.

But Louis is looking up at him again and his smirk has softened into a delicate smile as his thumb runs over the markings of Harry’s tags, pressing the metal to his skin.

“Thank God you still got the extra set,” he tells Harry and for just a second, Harry doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Then his eyes follow the flicker of Louis’ gaze and he can’t but let out a laugh when he realizes that Louis is referring to his third and fourth nipple. And yes, they’re both still there and Harry just has to loop his arm around Louis’ neck and pull him in again. He walks them over to the cot in the corner of the room, his belt buckle clanking in the scintillating silence.

Louis spins them around when his legs hit the wonky frame and it takes them a while to arrange themselves on the small bed, but eventually, Harry manages to stretch out his body and Louis settles in his lap with a smug expression, circling his hips until Harry’s certain that if he gets any harder, he might as well explode. He whines like a petulant child and pulls at the vest that Louis is wearing underneath his shirt until Louis pointedly rolls his eyes, shrugs off his uniform and – with a moment’s hesitation – starts to pull the vest over his head and –

And he’s different as well, Harry guesses. He is rather certain that’s why Louis hesitated at all, because there are a sickening number of still red, harsh scars suddenly adorning his previously unblemished chest, left shoulder still bandaged and something that looks like a bullet wound just below his ribs that are standing out far more than they used to. For Louis to feel self-conscious just for a second makes Harry’s heart break and yet at the same time, he doubts he’s ever loved him more than in this very moment; bent but not broken, resilient and courageous and strong, much stronger than even Harry anticipated.
"I love you," he says, heart feeling heavy all of a sudden and Louis crinkles his brows in response, angles his head with a little smile in place.

"Where’s that coming from, Haz?" he asks, but he still places a palm over Harry’s heart to feel it beating. "You know you don’t need to say that to get into my pants."

Harry refrains from shaking his head to himself. "I know, just – ’s true, you know? I love you."

Louis leans down and kisses the tip of Harry’s nose, making him go cross-eyed for a second. "I love you, too," he whispers against Harry’s lips and pulls back before Harry has a chance to kiss him some more. Apparently, Louis is a man on a mission, because he makes quick work of Harry’s trousers and pants, pulling both down to his knees in one go. Harry hisses at the cold air hitting his heated skin.

Louis quirks a brow at him. Bites his lip. "Maybe I can tell if it’s grown once I’m sitting on it," and Harry throws his head back with a groan, nearly splits his skull open because he smacks his head against the wooden headboard, Louis’ cackles ringing in his ears until Harry can’t but join in.

If he closes his eyes and shuts out everything else, Harry can almost pretend they’re back at home in Brooklyn.

"Glad to see you’re still a klutz," Louis deadpans and nearly flops back when Harry forces down his laughter and uses his newly gained core strength to fluidly push himself into a sitting position.

He meets Louis’ parted lips and swallows any further comments and decides to be bold, grabbing his ass and pushing their groins together, friction on his bare skin going to his head and making it spin. The kiss grows erratic as soon as Louis starts to move his hips again and after a few minutes, they’re practically panting into each other’s mouths and Harry wants to, he needs –

"Off," he chokes out, grabbing Louis’ belt so hard that the buckle breaks in his grip and the leather makes a whipping sound when he’s too quick in pulling it out of its loops. Harry isn’t quite sure anymore about what’s up and what’s down and which body part belongs to him, and Louis’ fingers digging into his shoulders do little to ground him. Louis kneels up awkwardly, because Harry isn’t happy in letting go of him completely, but his trousers and pants eventually make their way to the floor along with his boots.

Harry feels feverish. He has no idea how he manages to kick off his own shoes and trousers, but after he does, there’s just skin, slick and sweaty despite the low temperatures outside and the meagre heating inside, yet Harry couldn’t care less. He needs to touch Louis everywhere, every inch, so much, and he doesn’t even know how to put it in thoughts, but at the same time, he’s desperately afraid of accidentally hurting him in the process because he can’t control himself and his own strength.

"Come on," Louis breathes hot air over the spot on Harry’s collarbone that’s wet with his spit. "Open me up."

Another wave of heat curls down Harry’s spine as his fingers automatically slide downwards. “Do you have any oil? Or lard?”

Louis stills. It’s not exactly a cold shower, because he’s still grinding down onto Harry’s crotch, but when Louis puts a few inches between them, mouth dropped open, it’s at least a little bit sobering. “No,” he says. “Fuck, I don’t. Why don’t you have any?”

“Because you just – and I –” he splutters, blinking at Louis, “you practically ambushed me and –”
“Oh, come on!” Louis cuts him off, rolling his eyes. “Not like I forced myself on you.”

Harry leans his head back, glances up at the ceiling and wills his blood to stop boiling. Everything south of his bellybutton is practically throbbing. “I’m not saying that, but you – you planned this, how could you forget we need –”

“Oh, fuck’s sake!” Louis doesn’t allow him to finish that sentence either. He pinches Harry’s nipple, making him twitch and finally stills his hips. “It’s your bloody job to think ahead, Captain,” he emphasizes, gives Harry’s biceps a slap before folding his arms in front of his chest. “God damnit.”

“Stop cursing,” Harry tells him, lowering his eyes again and taking in their heated and flushed appearances.

“I’ll swear as much as I want,” Louis retorts without much bite and then looks at him pointedly. “I don’t know if you can tell, but we’re in a bit of a situation here. And I was quite eager to get off.”

Harry shrugs. “I could blow you.”

“If I wanted you to blow me, I would’ve pulled you behind a tree as soon as we stepped off German territory,” Louis says petulantly. “Why do you think I have Stan making sure nobody comes up here? I pulled you up here because I wanted to f–”

This time, Harry is the one who stops him from finishing. With more agility than both him and Louis would usually credit him with, Harry flips them over and most likely pushes all air out of Louis lungs, if his huff is anything to go by. Their new position also puts a new kind of pressure on their hips and Harry watches with fascination how Louis’ lips part in a silent gasp, lashes fluttering prettily and eyes rolling back in his head.

Harry cages him in like Louis used to do, lower arms pressed into the thin mattress on either side of his head. He can’t help but touch a thumb to Louis’ brow, delicately following its curve, before leaning down to bite at the juncture of Louis’ neck and shoulder.

“Harry…”

“Let me,” he says, noses at Louis’ ear before sucking the lobe into his mouth, listening to the quickening of Louis’ breath and relishing the way he scrabbles at Harry’s sides and his back, digging his nails in, burning where he manages to break skin.

Louis doesn’t go limp, but the tension seeps from his shoulders when Harry lowers his body down and starts rolling his hips. He winds his arms around Harry’s neck and buries his face against his collarbone, strong legs coming up to circle Harry’s waist. It doesn’t take long from there, both of them far too worked up and deprived for them to even want to draw it out any further. Harry attaches his lips to Louis’ neck, desperate to leave a mark as they slide towards their climax, sensations amplifying and mingling and blurring together until there’s nothing but heat and hot, white light.

Harry wakes up with a start, like so many times before. But unlike those previous times, his heart isn’t pounding because he had to relive Louis’ death. The living room is dark, but it looks like it’s
only a while away from sunrise, sky a dark shade of bluish grey, the first couple of lights coming on in the skyscrapers surrounding the tower. Louis is curled up on the opposite couch, practically hiding in Harry’s sweatshirt, but it looks like he’s fast asleep. And Harry is rock hard in his pants.

He swings his legs over the edge and puts his bare feet on the ground, leans forward and buries his face in his hands, harshly breathing in and out through his nose because the movement is enough to make heat fizzle up his spine. Harry honestly can’t quite remember the last time he felt this aroused. He can’t remember the last time he was hard. And it’s at the most inappropriate time, because Louis can’t remember yet he’s right here and his presence affects Harry like it’s always done and he can’t – he just can’t help it.

Taking another breath, Harry gets to shaky legs and presses the heel of his right hand against his straining erection, trying to will it to subside, trying to think about anything else but Louis, sharp and soft and ragged edges and beautiful. Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t work and he picks up the shirt he’d tossed to the ground a few hours prior, holds it in front of his crotch in case Louis wakes up before Harry has managed to leave the room.

He walks gingerly down the hallway and to his room that he hasn’t actually been in since Louis’ arrival, but it looks the same as always so he makes his way to his bathroom, switches on the lights and drops the shirt, looking at himself in the mirror. His skin is flushed and sweaty, his eyes glassy and his rapidly growing curls are sticking to his neck. Harry brings his hands up and runs them through his slightly damp hair, tugging on it absentmindedly and he tries to switch off the memories that keep rushing back to him, tries to ignore the images that are omnipresent in his mind. But he can’t and the memory of Louis is so strong that Harry can practically feel his delicate and still roughened hands on his body, the ghost of his lips on Harry’s shivering skin.

Harry steps out of his pants, unable to hold back a moan when the soft fabric brushes his aching dick. He flushes in embarrassment and Harry’s not a prude, very far from being inexperienced and a virgin like so many seem to think, but he feels awful when he steps into the shower and turns on the water. Leaning his forehead against the calmingly cool tile instantly, he lets the warm water wash over his shoulders.

For a couple of minutes, Harry allows himself to just stand there and breathe, imagines that the water washes some of his worries away and the steam rising cocoons him in a little. Then he decides to bite the bullet. The first touch is nearly electrifying, makes him gasp and groan and put his lips between his teeth. Harry feels a bit rusty, needs to get a decent feel for it again, grips and squeezes for a moment before slowly starting to move up and down, spreading the wetness from the tip all the way down to the base. His abs twitch and he has to bend forward, brace his left arm against the shower wall and Harry can’t hold the images back anymore and they come flooding back in.

They’d only ever had the luxury of sharing an actual shower in London, their usual quarters before and during the war lacking the quality of a decent bathroom, but back then, in the cramped space where hot water only lasted a few minutes, they’d been very efficient in getting each other off with hands and mouths, not enough time for more, but Louis’ presence is nearly tangible and Harry allows himself this one little slip of remembering the heat of his mouth and the picture he’d made on his knees.

Harry comes shamefully fast, groaning Louis’ name and stroking himself through an almost painful orgasm that tugs on his heartstrings and deep in his belly. And he stands there, watches as everything gets washed down the drain and ignores the burning ache in his chest.
Louis, surprisingly, is still asleep when Harry gets back to the living room dressed in black jeans and a grey Henley. There’s only a curved wall separating it from the kitchen, so he decides to do something useful and cook breakfast. With practiced movements, Harry throws together some scrambled eggs, oatmeal and toast, cuts up some fruit and makes tea, because Louis skipped dinner and Harry is desperate to get him back on track with a normal routine.

He sets the table, has a cup of coffee and stirs the porridge, frowning at the way the sky is clouding over already. It looks gloomy and it looks a lot like it could very well rain all day and just a few moments later, drops are hitting the windows with increasing pace. Harry is just rolling up his sleeves to wash oil off a pan when he hears the distant ping of the elevator. He doesn’t have time to wonder who might be dropping in to see him before Niall’s voice echoes over to him.

“Oi, Cap!” he calls out and Harry can already hear him make his way through the living room, probably smelling breakfast. “Wanna spar?”

Harry is just about to tell him to be quiet, because Louis is still asleep and he needs it, but he doesn’t get around to it. A surprised yelp and then a horrendous crash cut through the silence, and it clatters like something got smashed to pieces and is now scattered and Harry only needs two or three steps before he’s left the kitchen and freezes.

Niall is on the floor, lying in a sea of shards that stem from the broken living room table that’s set down in front of the couches. Louis is crouching over him, eyes narrowed and sharp, hair falling into his face and the metal arm pressed to Niall’s throat. Harry can only guess that Niall must have startled him, that Niall isn’t familiar to him, is categorized as a threat and instinctively, Louis probably lunged at him in the fraction of a second. It was bound to happen at one point, and Harry is surprised it took quite so long.

But Louis doesn’t let up, and Niall is slowly starting to turn blue in the face and it’s only when he uselessly smacks Louis in the arm that Harry snaps out of it. He dashes forward and tackles Louis, hitting his side and sending them both a few meters across the floor. Louis blindly lashes out, striking Harry across the face with his prosthetic and busting his lip so that Harry tastes blood.

“Louis, stop!” Harry calls out to him as he shields off the next blow, reaching for Louis’ shoulders in an attempt to pin him to the floor. Behind him, the scraping of glass over the floor tells him Niall is getting to his feet, but without being armed, Harry’s afraid he isn’t much help to him. He manages to snatch up Louis’ right wrist, struggles to keep it fairly immobile. “Louis, it’s me, you’re safe,” he says again, but Louis’ eyes move around frantically and he’s not paying attention, he’s panicked and desperate and the muscles in Harry’s arms are straining. “Louis!”

The prosthetic is a weapon in itself and it hurts like hell when Louis lands a blow to Harry’s right shoulder, but he’s not thinking and he’s not collected like he was before and after a few beats, Harry manages to turn that to his advantage, weighing Louis down with his own body and restricting his movements. He keeps saying Louis name and eventually, his eyes regain focus and his body goes lax and Harry can let go of him. Fortunately, the entire scene ends as quickly as it started and when Harry sits up, Louis scrambles back, pressing his back into the side of the couch, going rigid again and heart beating so rapidly that Harry can see it in the pulsing vein on his neck.

He breathes out a sigh of relief. Niall croaks and coughs, still sitting amidst the broken remains of the table, and his neck is already bruising. He rubs at it with a pinched expression.

“Are you okay?” Harry asks.
Niall is obviously not, but he manages to twist his face into a more cheerful expression and makes a dismissive gesture with the one hand that’s not rubbing at his throat. “All fine, Cap. Peachy.” He coughs once more, then he turns to Louis. “Got a mean swing, I gotta tell ya, mate.”

Louis startles and blinks at him. He looks terrified and utterly shaken and Harry can’t imagine from which sort of nightmare Niall pulled him by calling halfway through the flat. He looks terrified of himself as well, which is a thousand times worse, and he cradles his prosthetic to his trembling chest, pulls the sleeve to cover it completely, like he’s terrified of that most of all.

They’re all still sitting on the floor, calming down, when the elevator slides open again.

“Ah, shit,” Niall comments fittingly as he sees Zayn and Liam walk into the living room, stances wide and Zayn with a palm placed on his side, undoubtedly resting on a concealed weapon. They take in the scene, Niall and Harry and Louis sitting amongst the shatters that were an undeniably expensive piece of furniture just minutes ago. Liam looks like he’s just rolled out of bed.

“What happened?” Zayn’s voice is smooth but sharp.

“You know me,” Niall says easily with a shrug. “Can’t keep me mouth shut. I just startled Louis here, and he lunged at me. Harry pulled him off,” which is a very vague summary of the event, but out of all of them, Niall knows best how to handle Zayn, especially when he looks a second away from drawing a gun and aiming it at Louis.

Liam sighs. “Always my furniture,” he grumbles without any bite. “I wonder why I don’t just leave all your floors empty.”

Zayn doesn’t seem to pay attention to him. Harry knows he’s looking at the shattered table and he knows that Zayn zeroes in on Niall’s throat and comes to the conclusion that this wasn’t just some harmless scuffle. Harry himself isn’t sure what would’ve happened hadn’t he been able to intervene. Louis might have crushed Niall’s neck. Zayn seems to think the same thing, because he takes a couple of steps towards Louis, looking menacing, and Louis scrambles to his feet, swaying slightly, looking a second away from keeling over.

Harry looks at him, how he gets back to his feet despite being starving and exhausted and broken, stubborn and resilient until the last second, and his heart hurts so much he wants to scream. He gets to his feet and with two long strides, puts himself between Louis and Zayn. Zayn’s eyes bore into his, heavy with a not-so-hidden challenge and Harry stares back, making it very clear that his stance hasn’t changed, that Zayn has to go through him to get to Louis and they know each other; Zayn knows what Harry’s capable of in battle, but Zayn also knows that he’s got no idea what Harry’s ready to do to protect the one thing he loves most.

Tension seeps from Zayn’s shoulders slowly, but even more when Niall is finally standing up, glass crunching beneath his weirdly fuzzy slippers. “I’m fine, Zayn,” he says nonchalantly, but his blue eyes are steely. “Nothing happened.”

Harry almost breathes a sigh of relief when Zayn breaks their eye contact to look at Niall, definitely doing a quick visual scan that he is indeed fine, or as fine as he can be, before dropping his right hand to the side, making it clear that he doesn’t intend to hold a gun to Louis’ head at the next chance. Throwing a glance over his shoulder, Harry finds that Louis isn’t looking at him but at Zayn, posture unsettled but gaze clear and focused, unwavering. Zayn notices, because there’s nothing he doesn’t notice, and Harry can’t but hold his breath when their eyes meet.

It’s silent and tense for a few beats before Louis, to Harry’s surprise, raises his voice.
“I shot you,” he tells Zayn, still cradling his left arm to his chest, the other solid at his side but undoubtedly ready to strike out if needed.


Neither of them blinks. They keep staring at each other and it’s making Harry slightly uneasy for more than one reason, but it’s not his place to interfere, and Niall and Liam are staying out of it as well.

“You weren’t my mission,” Louis says after a while, voice unsettlingly distant and detached, like he himself isn’t exactly sure what he’s saying and what it implies, but Zayn somehow seems to, because inexplicably, his gaze softens just slightly and he gives a small nod that Harry could’ve easily missed hadn’t he stared at Zayn with his entire focus.

Nobody says anything after that. Nobody moves a muscle either; at least not until Niall’s nose twitches.

“Do I smell breakfast?” he asks, and just like that, they’re back to normal.

Well, almost.

It’s crowded around Harry’s dining table and he worries that it might spook Louis or make him uncomfortable. He’s clearly not comfortable, at least it doesn’t look like he is to Harry, but he stays in the kitchen, watches passively how Niall, Zayn and Liam grab cups of tea and coffee and cartons of juice and take a seat and he doesn’t move until Harry point to his usual chair at the head of the table. Louis sits down tentatively, eyes flickering to Harry who sits down to his right, acting as a precautionary barrier between him and Zayn.

He fills a plate with everything for Louis, as well as a bowl of gooey oatmeal with honey and blueberries in the hopes that some of that will make it into his stomach and stay there and Harry also pours him a cup of tea, only milk no sugar, like Louis picked up during their time in London. Harry tries not to stare at Louis throughout the meal, but he keeps glancing at him out of the corner of his eyes as Niall and Liam rehash the same old argument about Star Wars versus Star Trek. He listens with one ear and sees that Louis seems to relax after a while, picking at his food but eating more than he has in the past couple of days.

Maybe it’s a good thing to spend more time with the others, get Louis acclimated to other people instead of hiding him from the world. Even Zayn appears to be coming around; if the few looks he throws towards Louis is anything to go by.

And when he asks, “do you want more tea?” and Louis responds with a short nod, Harry counts this morning as a step in the right direction.

It takes Harry another three days to realize that Louis is sleeping on his bedroom floor because the mattress is too soft and Harry swallows down a wave of nausea before he pulls a second duvet out of the closet, spreads it out on the ground in front of the windows and settles down there as well. It’s not like sharing a bed, but Harry takes it as a sign of trust that Louis allows him in his presence.
when he sleeps, that he’s even able to fall asleep with Harry only a few feet away.

Niall has breakfast with them almost every day now and Harry silently thanks him by making his favorite muffins and learning how to bake Irish soda bread that Niall nearly cries over. Louis seems to be a bit startled by that, and Harry is so glad to see flickers of emotion crawling back onto Louis’ features that he nearly cries as well. Niall also doesn’t seem to feel the smallest shred of unease in Louis’ presence and chatters away to him, content with getting no reply or just a simple nod or shake of the head, and it appears to be so effortless for him, takes some of the weight off of Harry’s shoulders. It’s not really surprising that Niall managed to win Zayn over years ago.

Louis starts wearing the clothes Sophia bought for him, but he keeps stealing Harry’s jumpers, always tugging the left sleeve down and it makes something unfold in Harry’s chest, makes his skin tingle and his breath hitch whenever he sees Louis. They’re just small choices, but they’re choices nonetheless and it’s small steps, baby steps, but at least they’re not immobile.

Louis reads what Harry leaves out for him and he eats what Harry puts on the table and he sleeps when Harry lays down on their duvet on the floor and maybe that’s not ideal yet but – baby steps.

Louis is taking a bath when Liam walks into the living room with a cardboard box. He’s still wary of the shower, but cleaning himself is still so mechanical that Harry has to leave him alone to do it because it makes his skin crawl to see Louis like that. Harry also wants to silently urge Louis to take his time, to enjoy it, to relax, although that hasn’t quite worked yet.

“What’s that?” he asks Liam as he sets the box down on the dining table, since the one in the living room was pulverized.

“From the Smithsonian,” Liam replies with a smile. “They’re keeping the stuff that’s in the exhibition for now, but those are things that were archived anyway. I haven’t looked at it yet, because it’s yours, and I can leave you to it if you want.”

“No, it’s,” and he clears his throat, “it’s fine, I think. I’ve been keeping too many things private for a long time. Feels good to come clean about some things.”

The inside of the box isn’t dusty. There aren’t any cobwebs holding together the remnants of Harry’s first life together. But it smells – not old, more like his head actually feels like these days, all fogged up and badly lit and in desperate need of fresh air. Harry reaches inside, trying to keep his hands steady, and the back of his neck is prickling from the way Liam has his eyes focused on him. There are a few smaller boxes in there, and some manila folders, everything meticulously labelled like no normal person would ever bother to do and it’s making him feel uneasy already.

Harry only categorizes his life into two parts: with Louis, and without him. He realizes that most would probably say pre- and post-freeze, but that’s practically the same thing for him. After losing Louis, everything became bleak and muffled anyway. It feels like he’s just now starting to see color again. So it’s strange to see that other people have done it for him, written things like Post-Serum, 1943, Border of France onto folders.

There are years and places and names of deceased comrades and some number codes that probably have something to do with the Smithsonian’s archiving system. Harry grabs a box that states Pre-Serum, Brooklyn, 1938-1940 and puts it on the table between Liam and him. He removes the lid and places it on the side and instantly has to choke back on a sob. He’s never been under any
illusion that much of their home had been preserved, what with the war and their presumed deaths and the housing situation, so even the littlest parts that are now lying in front of him are enough to knock all air out of his lungs.

There’s the stack of letters his mother had written for him before she’d passed away which he’d kept in a drawer of his nightstand. An old pocket-watch that must have belonged to Louis’ father or grandfather, Harry isn’t sure anymore. The old second-hand camera Louis had spent months saving for to give to Harry for his eighteenth birthday. A paperback copy of some book Louis had been reading before enlisting. Unopened letters. A set of dog tags.

“He must’ve sent them to you from the front,” Liam pulls him out of his thoughts, pointing at the letters and the tags Harry had been stroking absentmindedly. “You get issued new tags every once in a while,” he continues like he’s unaware that Harry knows these things. “It’s customary to send them home to family members or spouses.”

“Spouses,” Harry can’t help but mutter, running his thumb over the slightly roughened ridges. He doesn’t have his tags anymore. Louis had been wearing them when he fell.

Clearing his throat, he reaches for the letters and tears the first one open, ignores the burn in his throat when his eyes skim over the familiar handwriting, surprisingly neat considering Louis’ impatient nature. There’s nothing scandalous written, which isn’t surprising in spite of Harry being painfully familiar with Louis’ foul mouth, because Louis is neither reckless nor stupid and every letter sent towards home had been opened and checked multiple times. It’s not intimate either, but Louis’ words are laced with affection and worry not for himself but for Harry, reminding him to mind his asthma, to check in with Dr Gough regularly and to keep warm, to buy an extra blanket if money allowed it.

He opens the next letter, and the one after that, and the one after that, each shorter than the one before and Louis’ sentences growing shorter, the tone wearier and Harry can practically see his pinched expression, the soft tremble in his hands as he’d put ink onto paper, convinced it would reach Harry when Harry had already been injected with the serum at the time Louis had sent his last letter to him. In retrospect, it hurts that none of them reached Harry at all, held up no doubt at various army bases on the way to Brooklyn and that this is the closest he might get for a while to having his Louis back.

The photographs that he’s sure hadn’t been developed yet when he’d left the apartment are neatly stacked. Harry’s fingers can’t stop trembling. A view of Brooklyn from one of their windows; it’s in black and white, but Harry can almost feel the sizzling heat that had lasted the entire summer, making the air wet and heavy. Dusty, curled up on a kitchen chair, multi-colored fur patchy, crooked tail twitching about. Mrs Burden holding out a tray of perfectly shaped bagels, round face shiny from the steam coming out of the ovens early in the morning, flour speckling her striped apron.

Louis, the very book that’s now sitting on the table in front of Harry in his lap, seated on the window sill, evening light washing softly over his small figure, highlighting his perfect profile, his sharp cheekbones, the sheen of sweat on his bare arms.

There’s two dozen more, a window into a previous life Harry had no choice but leave behind so that others could have a future. For a moment, Harry so desperately wants to go back; back to these four walls that had been theirs, to his low-paid but rewarding job at the bakery, to Dusty brushing around his ankles and to a Louis who knows him and loves him. To this simple life that had been a life nonetheless, the only life Harry ever really needed and wanted to live, before war and pain and unbearable loss.
Liam pulls him out of his reverie. The pictures are spread out on the table and Liam is pointing at one,angling his head to look at it proper. “I’ve never seen you smile like that,” he says, and Harry feels faint.

It’s like seeing an old friend, being confronted with how he’d looked like before Dr Erskine had turned him into Captain America. His shoulders are narrow and his posture is awful, eyes appearing disproportioned behind thick-rimmed glasses that were more broken than intact. The nosepiece is taped up, because some boys from their neighborhood had beaten Harry up and broken his glasses in half. Louis had fixed them, because a new pair had been unaffordable, but not before he’d given those boys a round of bloody noses. And Harry had been rather attached to them even years later.

His curls are a mess and his skin is blemished, but he’s smiling wide and happy, because Louis had been the one holding the camera.

“Didn’t really have a reason,” Harry replies and is startled by a noise coming from the edge of the kitchen.

Louis is up and standing in the doorway, feet bare on the tiles and too-long jeans rolled up to his ankles, swimming in one of Harry’s hoodies and hands buried in the pockets. He’s eyeing Liam warily, like he’s still unsure how to behave in the company of others.

“Hey,” Harry breathes softly and sitting up straight. “How’re you feeling?”

“Fine,” Louis says with a half-shrug. He starts moving around the table, going along the far side and apparently making sure that he doesn’t turn his back on Liam, which may or may not be done subconsciously.

Harry watches Louis pick the chair farthest away from both him and Liam, drawing his knees to his chest and curling into himself, hunching his back to make himself appear even smaller. His right arm goes to his left shoulder, fingers pressing down perhaps absentmindedly, perhaps very consciously, on the metal shoulder of his prosthetic. It’s not taken Harry very long to understand that Louis is dead uncomfortable with it, hides it and covers it and refrains from using it, keeping the metal arm pressed tightly to his body like he’s afraid of what he’ll do with it if he loosens control.

Meanwhile, Liam has opened another box, filled with pictures taken by Harry of their time on the front, the Howling Commandoes and various army bases. Harry is still debating whether it’s a good idea for Louis to look at these, to be confronted with photographs that might be too much at this stage, when Louis stretches out a hesitant arm and drags a picture towards himself with the tips of his fingers. He tilts his head, squints; his mouth is set in a hard line.

Harry can’t see what he’s looking at and it’s making him slightly anxious. To Louis, they’re best friends, childhood friends, comrades and brothers in arms, but some of these photographs clearly allude to a bigger picture and Harry hasn’t decided what to tell Louis and what to keep from him for now. He’s got no clue how Louis would react, but he doubts it would be positive and he’s almost ready to get up and snatch the picture away from him when Louis speaks up.

“He was shot.”

“Who?” Harry exchanges a quick look with Liam before slowly getting up and moving closer to Louis to get a better look at what he’s talking about. It’s a photograph of Louis and Stan standing side by side, Louis with his rifle shouldered and Stan with a helmet askew on his head, both looking off-camera in concentration. “That’s Stan.”
“Stan,” Louis repeats, fingers skimming along the edge of the photograph, brows furrowing. “He was shot during the ambush. He needed medical attention, but – but they wouldn’t help.” His lips are curling, his eyes narrowing as he digs through his head. Harry doesn’t know how frequently Louis remembers these kinds of things, because he doesn’t share much. He tries not to be hurt that none of the returning memories involve him. “I kicked up a fuss, and they beat me, and when I still wouldn’t shut up they took me and –”

He breaks off, squeezing his eyes shut and in a moment of inadvertence Louis brings his left arm up and presses shimmering fingers to his temple, applying pressure on his head and gritting his teeth.

“Stan told me about that once,” Harry says, hoping to relieve some of the pain Louis is in from his brain trying to piece itself back together. “A lot of soldiers were hurt, and the guards were picking out people who didn’t come back. You riled them up, got them to pick you instead. They all thought you’d died because you didn’t come back either.”

Louis drops his hands, still too distracted to cover up the prosthetic like he normally does instantly. Harry wants to tear his eyes away from the shiny metal, but he feels his eyes drawn to it, is really tempted to reach out and touch it and see if it’s as cold as it looks.

“‘My grandfather kept very detailed journals of that time,” Liam tells them after a few silent beats pass. “I went through them years ago and he suspected that HYDRA were experimenting with their own version of Dr Erskine’s serum. They probably perfected it and tested its limits on you.”

Fingers gripping the edge of the table, Louis blinks rapidly. “What’s HYDRA? What serum?”

Harry swallows and tries to keep his breathing even. Louis looks lost and confused and in actual, physical pain. He’d give everything he has and more to make it stop, to erase everything bad that’s happened to him and beneath it all, he’s beginning to feel boiling hatred for everyone who’s ever put a finger on Louis. He’s been so overtake with his own feelings and having Louis here that he hasn’t even thought about acknowledging his anger yet. But Harry is perfectly aware of it now and his hand tightens on the back of Louis’ chair, enough to make the wood groan.

“HYDRA back then was the scientific branch of Nazi Germany’s army,” Liam explains because Harry finds himself unable to respond, “led by someone called the Red Skull. He wanted to establish a new world order. Unfortunately, they still exist today and that’s still their goal.” He pauses heavily, gives Louis time to ask questions that don’t come. “The serum is what made you survive their torture. It’s what has made you inhumanly strong like Harry over here. There are some other perks, like an accelerated metabolism and a decreased aging process.”

Louis eyes flicker to Harry and Harry tries to give him a reassuring smile, but his face is stuck in place, expression frozen because if he parts his lips he might scream. But fortunately for him, and the situation in general, Liam is a lot more perceptive than people give him credit for, and he finds a photograph, pushes it towards Louis with a smile Harry can’t manage.

“That’s my grandfather,” he says and points at the black and white figure in the picture, standing in front of the plane that had dropped Harry off above the German base where he found Louis. Sometimes it escapes Harry how much he actually owes Liam’s family. “The guy with the weird hat and the mustache.”

It works in taking Louis’ rather piercing attention away from Harry who’s trying really hard to not fray at the seams. “He looks,” Louis starts and squints at the picture, “he looks familiar.”

Liam’s smile broadens noticeably and Harry has a hard time not being bothered by all of it; by
Louis remembering the flipping cat and Stan and Payne Sr. None of them were that important in his life. None of them had meant what he and Louis had meant to each other and he just doesn’t understand.

“He spent a lot of time with the allied troops,” Liam says. “And he co-founded SHIELD, went up against HYDRA for decades.”

Harry knows Liam idolized his grandfather and was close to him like he never could be with his father, had taken completely after the patron of the family until he’d passed away, went off the rails a little bit after that with Sophia left to pick up the pieces and make sure nothing serious was happening to Liam. He knows Liam had been glad to talk with Harry about his grandfather and he must be delighted to have yet another contemporary in front of him but –

He isn’t sure what his problem is exactly. Harry is aware that he needs to stop thinking about himself in this situation, because it’s not important what he wants and what he needs. It’s about Louis and about him getting help and getting better and recovering at his pace, and Harry tries so hard not to be frustrated, he really does. He tries and he tries.

He just fails.

Zayn finds him in the gym a few days later. Harry’s exhausted himself nearly all night, finding it suddenly unbearable to sleep in close proximity to Louis and not being able to hold him close. He’s run a marathon on the treadmill and he destroyed three punching bags and he’s just tying the drawstrings of his sweatpants after a hot shower when someone clears his throat. Harry looks up to see Zayn standing in the doorway to the shower and changing room, leaning against the doorframe, tattooed arms crossed in front of his chest. He is in black jeans and boots and his worn leather jacket, and even this early in the morning, he looks like a statue carved from solid marble.

“Morning,” Harry greets him, voice raspy and throat slightly aching.

“Good morning,” Zayn replies quietly and doesn’t move, doesn’t move his eyes away from Harry’s form as he grabs his t-shirt and pulls it over his head, hair still damp and sticking to his skin. “How are you holding up?”

Harry decides to just shrug, because every word he’d manage to utter might be a lie and he’s really done lying. “What’s up? I haven’t seen you in a while,” he says instead, taking in the twitch of Zayn’s eyebrow.

“I was busy,” Zayn replies monotonously and continues to block the doorway, so Harry sits down on one of the benches and looks at him with an unasked question in his eyes. “The Director thinks there’s a mole.”

“What?”

“JARVIS?” Zayn’s eyes flicker towards the ceiling. “Please disable audio recording until 0800 hours.”

“Certainly, Sir,” sounds JARVIS’s accented voice from every corner of the room. “Would you like me to disable the video feed as well?”

“Audio is fine,” Zayn says and turns his attention back to Harry, slightly more relaxed in his
posture. “As I was saying,” he picks up again, “Cowell thinks we have a mole in the organization.”

“How come?” Harry asks and puts his towel on the side. His feet are still bare and the tiles feel cold beneath them. “How is that even possible?”

“HYDRA and affiliated organizations have managed to get hold of information that shouldn’t have been accessible to them. Cowell confided in me and I’ve been following some hints from various contacts I still have in Europe, and apparently, it all comes from one source.”

“In Europe,” Harry states, hands stilling after he’s pulled on a pair of socks. “Is that why –”

“Yes,” Zayn beats him to the conclusion, “that’s what London was all about. At least partially. Winston was a target, but we were all put on his case because the Director thought it might lure the mole out of his tunnel.”

“And?”

Zayn shrugs. “Do you know how Louis managed to escape?”

“You mean apart from me not doing anything to stop him?” Harry quips with a wry smile, wiping his tired eyes distractedly and blinking a few times until Zayn becomes clear again. London feels light-years ago already. “No.”

“Someone disabled the security doors,” Zayn tells him, eyes narrowing slightly and lowering his voice in spite of having ordered JARVIS to cut off audio. “Whoever it is, they’re highly skilled and managed to infiltrate SHIELDs entire system. The doors were unlocked, and Louis is smart, you know that better than anyone, and he adjusted to the sedatives, fooled everyone, took out a dozen agents without anyone picking up on it. I sounded the alarm just outside the high security sector, after he put a scalpel into my shoulder.”

Harry releases a breath through his clenched teeth. He hadn’t really wanted to think about Louis hurting anyone on his way out, but then again, those people had tortured him for days and he’s having a hard time deciding whose side he’s on. Harry guesses that there’s a lot of grey zones in this case.

“You think the mole who works for HYDRA let him out?” he poses the question ringing in his ears and watches as Zayn nods gravelly.

“I’m not sure they work for HYDRA. Might be an independent agent. The KGB is still active. There are a lot of people out there who are against SHIELD and there are a lot of people who don’t believe in anything but would do anything for the right amount of money.”

“No doubt,” Harry concedes. “Why are you only telling me now?” he asks and when Zayn doesn’t immediately answer, Harry’s eyes widen in surprise. “What, did you think I was the mole?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Zayn scoffs and shakes his head. “Not to offend you, but you don’t have the technical expertise to pull this off. And you don’t have a bad bone in your body, Cap. But this is highly confidential,” he continues with a serious tone. “Niall knows, of course, because he and I have been scanning movements for the past couple of weeks. And Liam knows as well. I’m perfectly aware you two swiped some encoded information from SHIELD, so now he’s been cast to sieve through SHIELDs entire system to find irregularities and encryptions.”

Harry doesn’t feel guilty enough to pretend to be distraught about getting caught. He doubts Zayn is going to make a big deal out of it. “So what now? Any new developments?”
The leather of Zayn’s jacket squeaks slightly when he tightens his arms folded in front of his chest and shifts his weight. “No. But – and feel free to be smug about that – I think I was wrong about getting SHIELD involved when it comes to Louis.”

“Really?” Harry’s eyes widen at that and he can’t stop his jaw from dropping.

“Like I said,” Zayn goes on unhindered, “We don’t know who is passing information on, but we can’t risk anything going out to HYDRA about Louis’ whereabouts. Because they want him back, believe me. They won’t outright attack the tower until they’ve got solid evidence, but Louis is of unimaginable value to them, and they’re looking for him. It might not be safe here for much longer.”

Unease settles deep in Harry’s belly and he knows it’s not possible for them to hide forever, but he thought the might have more time; that Louis might get the chance to remember everything before they’d have to be on the move, together.

“He said to you,” Harry remembers suddenly, “that you weren’t his mission. And – you calmed down after that. Why? Why does it matter that you weren’t his mission?”

It takes Zayn more than a minute to reply. The steam from the showers starts to dissipate and the air becomes lighter, but inside, Harry feels as heavy as before. “He’s remembering,” Zayn says eventually, lowering his gaze for a moment before meeting Harry’s eyes again. “But he can’t erase his programming just like that. He might not be a sleeper, but he still categorizes people as targets and non-targets that need to be eliminated or spared. And I’m not saying this to hurt you, but despite everything, or perhaps because of that, you still need to be careful.”

He pauses. Harry swallows audibly and his heart beats solidly in his chest, thudding along and reverberating in his body.

“He’s not been programmed to kill any of us, for whatever reason,” Zayn elaborates and his gaze is firm and unwavering, reminding Harry that this is very serious. “So as long as we pose no threat, I don’t think he’d harm any of us. But he’s cornered, and he’s confused and we’ve got no clue what might trigger him, so you’ve got to be careful.”

“I am being careful,” Harry insists, but Zayn shakes his head to himself with a soft smile that still chills Harry to his bones.

“You’re really not,” Zayn disagrees, moving towards the door and waiting for it to slide open again. “That’s kind of the problem.”

And he leaves without another word, without another glance over his shoulder and Harry remains seated in the same spot for another thirty minutes before he manages to get up.

In the end, it’s Liam’s idea. Harry doesn’t want to blame him, not really, but he figures he should have been more hesitant and more skeptical since everything’s gone far too smooth so far. Most likely, it’s a combination of things, of Liam suggesting it in the first place and of Harry agreeing and thinking it might be good and Niall and Zayn having headed off to Pennsylvania for a few days to check out a suspected HYDRA base.

Liam tells Harry one morning over breakfast (that Louis has finally started eating) that he’s finished a new update on his suit and wants to test it out in hand-to-hand combat. Normally, Harry
wouldn’t be opposed to denting Liam’s tin shell a little and he wouldn’t hesitate to say yes, but then Liam’s turning to Louis.

“You should join us in the gym,” he says with a bright smile and a bit of jam stuck to his facial hair. “Might do you some good to run a few miles on the treadmill, blow off some steam. I always sleep like a stone when I’m physically exhausted.”

Louis doesn’t reply to Liam, but he looks at him attentively before directing his eyes towards Harry in a silent question. Harry’s aware that Louis tends to rely on him for direction, and he hopes it is more out of trust than anything else, but he’s starting to be at a loss because he doesn’t know how to get Louis to make his own decisions. He doesn’t know the next step.

“Do you want to?” Harry asks.

Louis only shrugs, but he follows them into the lift with a skeptical tilt to his brow half an hour later, sweatpants dragging on the floor and hood pulled over his head as always. Liam is already in his black and blue scuba-diving resembling outfit and when they get to the gym, the newest version of his suit is already waiting in a small case that unfolds quickly when Liam gives JARVIS the command. The parts attach to his body and connect with clicks and hisses and Harry’s watched the process so many times by now, but it’s still slightly awe-inspiring. He feels Louis stiffen momentarily beside him, but he relaxes when Liam slides the faceplate up and starts rolling his arms like he’s stretching.

“Still needs a paint job,” Liam says, flexing his metal-encased hands before placing them on his hips. “Thought I might go for red and blue this time, amp up the patriotism. Or maybe I should leave it silver.”

“And have it be less flashy than before?” Harry quips, already following Liam to the center of the room. “You’d have arrows pointing to it if you could.”

Liam just shrugs and slides the faceplate down, widens his stance. Harry copies him but not without throwing a quick look over his shoulder to where Louis is still hovering uncertainly, back to the wall and scanning the gym for threats like it’s now second nature to him. He wants to point Louis to the treadmills, or tell him to go back upstairs if he’d rather not be here, but at the same time he wants to see what Louis will do if left to his own devices.

The blow that connects to his jaw doesn’t hurt, but it still whips his head back and pulls his attention back to Liam, who can’t visibly raise his brows wearing the mask, but Harry knows it’s implied when he tilts his head to the side. He brings a hand up to rub at his jaw, then he rolls his shoulders, flexes his arms and pounces.

Generally, Liam in his suit is a pretty even opponent and what he lacks in speed, he usually easily makes up with blowing Harry halfway across the room or just flying away. But Liam wants to test the suit’s resilience, so Harry concentrates on putting more strength behind his punches than speed, prompting Liam to block them, arc reactor glimmering brightly smack dab in the middle of his chest. Harry tries not to aim there, because he knows that thing can be a hassle to deal with. Liam tends to get rather prickly when the casing gets cracked.

They exchange blows for a couple of minutes while Louis rounds the gym, watching them as Harry can tell out of the corner of his eyes.

“Do you think it’s a good idea for him to be here?” Harry asks after he’s blocked Liam again. “Won’t SHIELD pick up on it?”
“They won’t,” Liam says, stepping back a little, suit pieces whirring quietly as they adjust. “This is my tower after all, and SHIELD doesn’t get access unless I grant it to them. They overrode my systems once, and it’s not happening again. I’m not an amateur.”

“I’m not saying you are,” Harry replies and twists to aim a kick at Liam’s side. “Anything new on the decryption front?”

Liam lifts off and jumps back a few feet but Harry is quick to follow, forcing him into defense. “Not really. Jesus, you’re not even breaking a sweat, are you?” He sounds strained and slightly out of breath. “Maybe I should just stick to blowing things up,” he pants before his gauntlets start glowing and Harry suddenly finds himself getting flung across the entire room.

Fortunately, his fall is cushioned by a pile of mats that are stacked in the corner for when Niall and Zayn do some sparring on their own that tends to make Harry turn a deep crimson red. He jumps back onto his feet just as Liam removes his helmet, face red and mildly sweaty.

“Fucking freaks of nature, the lot of you,” he says, shaking his head. “Always thought I was in good shape until you showed up. Hell, I need air-con in this bloody suit.”

“Sir, need I remind you how that turned out the last time?” JARVIS comments on that, making Liam roll his eyes. “You don’t,” he replies to his AI, “because I’m not going to forget about frostbite on my bits. Please don’t mention it again.” He turns to Harry again. “You didn’t hear a word.”

“My lips are sealed,” Harry retorts and makes a zip motion with his hand and he turns his attention to Louis whose eyes are flickering between him and Liam, who angles his body toward Louis as well.

In this moment, for whatever reason, Harry has the urge to grab Louis by the sleeve and drag him out of the gym. Something settles in his belly, a mix of a sense of foreboding and Zayn’s voice in his head, telling him to be careful.

“Do you want to have a go?” Liam asks Louis before Harry can continue his thoughts and Louis appears slightly confused, looking at the helmet and then Liam’s face, practically drowning in Harry’s clothes, shrug barely visibly beneath the layers. Liam smiles, takes an unnecessary breath and puts his helmet back on, eyes glowing blue. “Then let’s have it.”

He lifts his arms and takes a wider stance and Harry keeps his eyes on Louis as he pulls his t-shirt back in place and adjusts the headband restraining his curls, who doesn’t react in any way, just keeps blinking at Liam and his shiny suit and subconsciously, Harry starts holding his breath.

“Ready?” Liam asks. Then he darts forward.

Harry takes a step towards them, to intervene, but in the fraction of a second that it takes him to move, Louis suddenly drops into a crouch and takes Liam’s legs out from underneath him. Liam manages to catch himself and get upright again, but not in time to duck away from the blow Louis sends his way. He brings both arms up and a loud clank echoes through the room when Louis’ fist collides with them. From then on, Louis has the upper hand, pushing Liam back who doesn’t get a punch in, can only block one blow after the other.

It’s eerily fascinating to watch. Harry hasn’t been able to watch Louis, had been very much involved in the fighting, but seeing him move has a twisted sense of beauty to it. Harry spent the majority of his life at war with his body, clumsy and uncoordinated and although he’s progressed
past that, there’s nothing aesthetic about the way he moves. Louis’ always been an athlete, aware
and in control of every inch of his body and it almost looks like dancing, quick and fluid. It looks a
lot like Zayn fights as well, even quicker and more lethal; lacking the hesitancy Harry still clings
to.

It becomes clear very quickly that friendly sparring isn’t part of Louis’ repertoire. Whereas Harry
gave Liam opportunity to try out movement and other nicks of his suit, Louis batters him like he’s
fighting for his life and Harry suddenly finds his worries confirmed when he catches a glimpse of
Louis’ face, expression blank and eyes cold, mouth set in a hard line, possessed by a steely focus to
attack. He forces Liam farther and farther back, quick steps across the room, so fast that Liam
simply cannot block everything and he gets jostled about like the suit doesn’t exist at all.

Harry doesn’t know why he isn’t doing anything.

Eventually, after the suit is already slightly dented in a few places from the sheer force of Louis’
hits, Louis topples Liam over, grabs a hold of his leg and with a quick spin propels him into the
ground hard enough to make the floor tremble. He’s on him in a heartbeat, peels the faceplate off
like it’s plastic and Harry sees Liam’s wide eyes, watches as Louis swings his left arm back, metal
fist glistening in artificial light and he could break Liam’s skull with it, Harry knows that and
judging by Liam’s horrified expression, he does as well.

Louis’ fist flies through the air and in a last attempt to get away, Liam ignites the jets on his feet
which sends him flying into the cabinet where Niall keeps an array of bows and arrows. The crash
sounds through the gym and the cabinet falls to pieces, collapsing on top of Liam in his suit but at
the same time, Louis’ metal fist hits the ground. There’s a cloud of dust and the crunch of gravel
and when the chaos has subsided slightly, Harry sees that Louis is almost elbow deep in the
ground. More noise reaches his ears as Liam moves underneath the pile of battered iron sheets, but
he can’t look away from Louis who draws his metal arm back, remaining in a crouch.

“Louis!” he calls out, finally managing to move his legs but freezing to the spot when Louis spins
around all of a sudden and something whizzes past his head, getting embedded in the wall behind
him with a dull thunk. Harry throws a look over his shoulder and sees one of his kitchen knives
stuck in the wall. “Fuck,” he breathes out and turns his attention back to Louis who is now staring
at him wide-eyed and shock still. “Louis.”

He hurries across the room, throwing a “are you all right, Liam?” in his direction, and feeling
guilty for focusing his entire attention on Louis who is now falling to his knees, shaking from head
to toe.

“’m fine,” Liam replies – thankfully – as he shuffles out from underneath the remnants of the
cabinet and Niall’s arrows and starts disassembling the suit uttering a slew of curses.

Harry drops down in front of Louis and, without second thought, wants to reach out for him
comfort him and reassure him that it’s all fine, but Louis lashes out, striking Harry across the face
in the process, stumbling back with an ashen face.

“Get away from me,” he rasps and curls into himself, dry heaving and choking on air, breathing
having grown erratic. “Get the fuck away from me.”

“Louis,” Harry pleads, “it’s fine, Liam’s fine, nothing happened, just let me –” He doesn’t know
what he even wants to do, but Louis looks so stricken and Harry just wants him to know that it’s
okay. Harry sincerely doubts Liam will hold a grudge and he realizes that this was bound to
happen, but Louis seems terrified of himself and what he did and he keeps shrinking away from
Harry.
“Don’t touch me,” Louis says and gets to shaky, unsteady feet, swaying and shaking like a leaf, left arm once again pressed to his chest, completed covered by the sleeve of Harry’s sweatshirt and Harry doesn’t understand what’s going through Louis’ head and he can’t begin to understand him because Louis shuts him out. “Just don’t touch me,” Louis says again, taking more steps back, gritting his teeth and blinking again, closing his eyes tightly as he reaches blindly for the elevator.

“Louis.”

“Don’t fucking touch me,” and then he’s gone.

Harry breathes out and deflates, buries his face in his hands because it was going so well, better than expected, and now he doesn’t know what to do. A groan makes him look up at Liam who’s sitting on the ground and rubbing his exposed shoulder now that the suit is folded up in its case by his feet.

“Shit,” Liam comments fittingly. “So that went wrong.”

Harry laughs humorlessly. “I think that might be an understatement.”

“I’m so sorry,” Liam goes on, getting to his feet with another groan, face twisting in pain. He’s taken quite the battering and even the suit can’t shield him from everything. Louis’ kicks and punches are bound to have left some bruises. “This was a shit idea and I shouldn’t have towed him into this.”

Harry shakes his head, getting up as well; brushes dust off his sweatpants. “It’s not your fault.”

“I should’ve known something like that would trigger him, so yeah, it’s my fault, and I’m happy to take the blame.”

“There’s no point blaming anyone,” Harry insists, giving Liam a once-over before taking in the state of the gym; a hole in the floor, smashed cabinets and arrows and bowstring everywhere. He rubs his hands over his face again, feeling an incoming headache pulsing behind his eyes. “What am I supposed to do now, though?”

“I don’t know,” Liam sidles up to him with a shrug, putting a hand on his shoulder in a comforting fashion. It’s such a simple gesture and it’s excruciating to think that even that is off-limits with Louis. “Give him space, a while to calm down?”

“I don’t want him to think that I’m scared of him,” Harry says after a beat. “I don’t want him to think that I don’t want him here.”

“I don’t think that’s the problem here.”

Harry blinks at him. “What?”

“I think,” Liam explains, “that he’s scared of himself. There’s two parts to who he is and it’s not simple to reconcile that, I think. He probably remembers being Louis, and he remembers being the Soldier, and those two parts are beginning to overlap. I doubt that’s easy to deal with.”

Huffing out a dry laugh, Harry says, “All of you seem to be able to deal with this much better than I am. And you seem to understand what’s going on much better as well.” It’s frustrating, again, and Harry knows it’s stupid to feel jealous of how Niall, Zayn and Liam are capable of handling this situation.

“That’s not true,” Liam disagrees with him with a gentle smile. “We didn’t know him before. And
he doesn’t mean to us what he means to you. That doesn’t mean we don’t care, or don’t want him to get better, because I’m sure you know we all do. It just means that we’ve got a different perspective. This is very emotional for you and we got the room to be a bit more rational.” He pauses with a heavy look, gives Harry’s shoulder a squeeze. “But I think we need both angles, yeah? So chin up, Cap. It’ll be fine.”

It’s not fine.

Harry has a strange memory that comes to him when he’s on the way back to his floor, once he’s made sure that Liam is okay and not gravelly injured, of the first time he’d been to London, shortly after forming the Howling Commandoes officially, mere weeks after rescuing Louis from captivity. They’d unofficially shared a room, Louis bunking with the other members of their unit and Harry having the luxury of getting a private room and bathroom and he’d returned to it in search of Louis after meeting with Payne and the Colonel.

The room had been deserted, but there’d been Louis uniform jacket and rifle lying on the bed and the bathroom door had been closed. Harry had opened it, not thinking much about it, because they’d never had much sense for personal space. Louis had been standing in front of the sink, fumbling with bloody gauze bandages, and he’d pulled on his shirt hastily when he’d seen Harry’s reflection in the mirror.

Back then, Harry had thought Louis hadn’t wanted him to worry about his injuries, shrugging off Harry’s request to take him to a doctor and only now does Harry understand that it might have been due to Louis wanting to hide that he hadn’t been injured at all, already healed, all traces of wounds that would have killed others entirely gone. Harry’s angry with himself for being too short-sighted to realize it all and maybe he could’ve changed things had he known back then, but there’s no use pondering on it now as he finds himself in his bedroom, once again faced with the closed bathroom door.

When he opens the door, he wishes he’d be presented with a replica of that memory, because for the first few seconds that he stands in the doorway to his bathroom, all he can see is red. A wave of strong, metallic scent washes over Harry and he nearly gags, vision swimming and heart feeling like it just froze in his chest when the contours slowly start to sharpen and the scene in front of his eyes is put into focus again.

There’s blood everywhere. It’s in puddles on the floor and running down the side of the tub and sink and burning in Harry’s eyes. And Louis is sitting on the floor in Harry’s ratty sweatpants, upper body entirely bare and jumper lying crumpled on the side, faded fabric soaked. His skin is more red than anything and he’s still shaking, clumped strands of hair hanging like a curtain around his face and for a minute, Harry doesn’t understand what’s happening right in front of him. It takes him another beat to realize that Louis is moving, if just minimally, his right hand closed tightly around his left shoulder and fingers digging deep – far too deep – into the skin bordering his prosthetic.

A noise reaches his ears and Harry only notices that it slipped past his lips when Louis’ head whips to the side to stare at him, face twisted in what can only be described as raw pain and agony.
“Lou,” Harry manages to croak out and he can’t breathe, he can’t – he can’t do this, he can’t bear this and –

Louis head whacks against the cupboard beneath the sink, again and again and at first his grip on his shoulder loosens, but then he lets his hand close around his bicep instead and the muscles in his right arm strain as he pulls like – like he’s trying to tear his prosthetic out with his bare hand.

“Liam!” he calls out, lurching forward and nearly slipping on the tiles because they’re wet with blood, with Louis’ fucking blood, and he drops to his knees in front of Louis, tries to pry his hand off his arm without hurting him further, but Louis struggles against him, kicking his legs out and Harry doesn’t want to hurt him, he doesn’t, but if he doesn’t do anything, Louis will hurt himself even more.

“Liam!” he shouts again without knowing why he’s actually calling him other than being in over his fucking head and he’s panicking, Harry knows, who wouldn’t though, and he puts his own weight on Louis’ legs to still him. “Louis, look at me, please. Look at me.”

Louis doesn’t. His eyes remain unfocused and his hand remains firmly closed around his arm, but he stops thrashing and he stops banging his head against the cabinet. Harry lets his gaze roam over Louis’ body, trying to locate the most severe injuries. There are scratches on his chest and deep gashes where the prosthetic meets skin, like Louis had tried to claw it away and maybe he’s hit a vein because – because there’s just so much blood. Harry feels sick.

“Stop, Louis. God. Please stop,” Harry starts muttering and he grabs Louis’ wrists, applies pressure and moves his other hand to loosen Louis’ fingers.

“Get away from me.” Louis’ eyes are glassy and still not looking at him. “Leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that,” Harry tells him, chest clenching so painfully it’s hard to breathe. “I’m not leaving you. I’m never leaving you again,” and he forces Louis’ right arm down and to the side, has to pin it against the cabinet with his own weight because it keeps twitching towards the metal arm.

He curls his body around Louis’ still shaking form and pulls him in, feels Louis grab a hold of the back of his t-shirt, tearing at the material, clenching and unclenching his fist. But he doesn’t push Harry away, even if it’s just because he’s in shock and exhausted and confused, but what matters is that he doesn’t push Harry away and for Harry, despite everything, it’s almost heady to have physical contact again. Louis’ hand is warm against his back and he’s still so achingly familiar that all Harry can do at this moment is hug him close, one hand at the back of Louis’ neck and one arm around his waist, effectively trapping his prosthetic.

Harry turns his face until his lips brush Louis’ hot and sweaty forehead and he feels his racing pulse beneath his fingertips. “I’m not leaving you,” he says and he doesn’t know when he started crying. The smell of blood is still overwhelming and Harry knows they should move, that Louis’ wounds need to be tended to, but he can’t bear the thought of letting go, so they stay on the ground of the bathroom, soaked in crimson, and wait for the pain to subside.

It doesn’t.

_to be continued._
Chapter Summary

Liam shrugs and wheels his stool over to a disposal bin. “But I’m not really helping either. Or like, I can’t help. I mean,” he goes on, grabbing a screwdriver for no reason and fumbling with it, “he’s not a machine. And I can’t replace faulty parts and fix him and – and none of us are exactly faulty, right? I mean, we’re damaged goods, aren’t we? But we’re on the mend. All of us, we’re not broken, we’re just – bent.”

Chapter Notes

a lot of things have happened since the last update, and i hope i can keep up the schedule of two weeks, because it's all getting a bit longer and i am swamped with work and other important things i gotta take care of. if i can't meet an update, i'll say so on my tumblr.

this chapter is almost as long as the last, about 12k, and has only been proofread by me, so any remaining mistakes are my own, because my beta needs some personal time away that i don't want to disrupt. i'm not able to say more, but please give brit some love.

about this chapter: i don't have a degree in psychology and i've only been to a handful of therapy sessions myself, so i'm talking out of my arse a little, but i hope it's still plausible and realistic. feel free to point out any massive errors. happy to be consulted on the matter.

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

**WARNING for this chapter:** tw for talk about self-harm and blood.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

**DISCLAIMER:** the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

**CHAPTER VI.**

“But when the strong were too weak to hurt the weak, the weak had to be strong enough to leave.”
Liam finds them like this and he’s quiet. It’s not like Harry expected him to scream, but Liam remains impressively calm in the face of blood splattered all over his posh bathroom and Harry on the floor, holding on to Louis like a lifeline, who is a terrible composition of red and white. He crouches down in front of them and puts a hand on Harry’s calf, face schooled into a collected expression. Harry still feels short of breath and unhinged, body tingling like he’s been dropped in acid. Louis is hot and cold beneath the tips of his fingers.

“We need to get down to the lab,” Liam says and Harry is grateful that he doesn’t ask what happened. “I have a fully stocked first aid kit down there; antiseptic and gauze bandages. I can do a scan.”

“Louis?” Harry turns to him but Louis’ eyes are focused on some undefined spot on the wall. “Louis, is that okay? That Liam takes a look?” He doesn’t want to force anything on him.

“I just want to check there isn’t any serious damage,” Liam elaborates. “That looks pretty painful from where I’m standing.”

Harry doesn’t even want to think about that considering the the way Louis is still trembling, shaking from head to toe and face white and pasty, shining with cold sweat. He hopes that at least the bleeding has stopped, but he doesn’t really want to look too closely. And going to the lab might prove to be a challenge; Harry doesn’t actually want to let go of Louis long enough to get them there. He shares a look with Liam, tightens his arm around Louis’ waist and feels his erratic pulse with his fingers pressed to the base of Louis’ neck.

“Louis,” he tries again, angling his head to get a better look at Louis’ face that remains frighteningly expressionless. “We’ve got to get you looked at.”

But Louis doesn’t react. He seems far away, gone to a horrific place where Harry can’t follow, can’t even reach him and despite physically holding onto him, Louis has slipped entirely from Harry’s grasp. Harry shares another desperate glance with Liam and whatever it is Harry is actually able to say silently with his eyes, Liam gets it and takes a step back, stance widening as Harry presses his lips together and tightens his arms around Louis’ body.

He’s heavier than he looks, considering his height and the fact that he still isn’t putting on any weight. It’s down to his body practically being nothing but bone, sinew and muscle, and Harry figures the prosthetic adds quite a bit to that as well. Distractedly, he wonders how long Louis needed to adapt to it and how different and difficult it was to balance his body when he first got it. Regardless, lifting him is no problem for Harry and Louis remains motionless, apparently not even registering they’re moving at all.

Liam is waiting by the lift and it’s a few quick seconds until they step onto the floor that makes up Liam’s workshop and lab.

“Hey,” Liam calls out as soon as they step outside the lift and are faced with Liam’s robots busying themselves with things they’re not supposed to be busying themselves with. “Drop that,” he tells DUM-E firmly and the robot lets the gauntlet drop to the floor with a beep that sounds actually sad.
“Go on,” Liam continues, “shoo, off you go,” and DUM-E and Butterfingers hang their – well, Harry doesn’t want to call it heads. They oblige Liam’s request a moment later.

Harry walks farther into the workshop, one-way glass allowing a view of a grey Manhattan topped with even grayer clouds and transparent walls revealing a series of Iron Man suits and what looks like car engines in various stages of assembly. There are independently running screens and projections of a variety of mechanics Harry has no ambition to understand and every time he comes here, which isn’t very often since it’s very hard to communicate with Liam when he’s working on something, there are new things that look otherworldly.

“You can put him here,” Liam says, pointing to an empty workbench as he wheels a few monitors closer and pulls out his phone to start typing.

Harry does so reluctantly and Louis’ eyes go to the ceiling immediately, body shock still and shivering, speckled with blood. He starts to move away when a cold hand circles his wrist, fingers pressing down on his pulse point and Harry feels a warm wave of relief wash over him. He stays by Louis’ side.

“JARVIS, I want a three hundred and sixty degree scan of the prosthetic. Pull the 3D model up for us to see when you’re done and send all extrapolated data to my personal hard drive.” Liam pulls up a stool and wheels around, emergency kit in his hands. He throws some disinfectant and wipes at Harry before moving to the other side of the bench. “Do a quick scan for any serious damage as well, can’t have him bleed out all over my tech.”

His stomach does a twist at Liam’s words but Harry swallows his unease down and starts wiping the blood off of Louis’ right arm and torso, not getting too close to where Liam is carefully inspecting the wounds around Louis’ left shoulder. They’ve had to patch each other up quite often, but they’re not professionals and any serious injuries always had to be treated by SHIELD medics, but that’s not really an option now, so Harry prays that Louis is okay, that disinfectant and bandages will be enough.

“There’s no internal damage as far as I can detect, Sir,” JARVIS lets them know a minute into it, “and it appears his body has started a very efficient healing process.”

“Already,” Liam mutters to himself, applying pressure as he wraps Louis’ neck and shoulder in gauze bandages. “Fucking freaks of nature, seriously.”

“I’m just pulling up the scan now, Sir, and I have taken the liberty to highlight the tissue that is incorporated in the artificial limb.”

Harry’s head shoots up from where he’s monitoring Louis’ face closely. “Tissue?” he and Liam ask simultaneously as a perfectly proportioned 3D hologram of Louis’ left arm appears between them.

“Holy shit,” Liam says as he squints at the red lines threading through the otherwise blue coded parts of the arm. Harry is neither an expert in anatomy nor in mechanics, but he’s pretty sure those lines are veins or actual nerve cords that run through the arm like it’s perfectly normal. Harry is also sure that it’s not. “That is…” and Liam doesn’t even finish the sentence, seemingly at a loss for words.

Liam reaches into the hologram and blows up the details, still squinting and muttering to himself so quietly that Harry can’t understand him. Louis’ fingers tighten around his wrist and Harry brings up his right hand and interlaces their fingers.
“That’s just – incredible,” Liam says, louder this time and apparently very fascinated. “How did they manage to do this? What’s the exact composition of the metal, JARVIS?”

“It appears to be one hundred percent vibranium, Sir.”

Harry locks eyes with Liam. “Isn’t that what–”

“Your shield is made of, yeah,” Liam finishes, eyes going back to the hologram and reaching out to examine it from different angles. “I have no idea how they managed to get their hands on vibranium. And how HYDRA managed to sculpt it into – this.”

He wheels to his array of computer screens again and picks up a tablet, turns back around and starts typing and swiping and Harry is momentarily distracted, doesn’t realize that Louis has said something until he’s quiet again.

“What?” he turns his attention back to Louis who has started to blink at the ceiling, worrying his lips. “Louis, what did you say?”

“Take it off,” Louis croaks and squeezes his eyes shut like he’s in pain. “Please take it off.” Harry sees that Liam lowers the tablet, zeroing in on Louis as well, worry creasing his forehead. “Take it off,” Louis repeats. “Please.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy,” Liam replies after a few moments of silence. “It’s not just an artificial limb that can be removed. There’s tissue and nerves, and that’s most likely the reason you can operate it so easily.” He pauses, hesitates like he wants to get a hand on the prosthetic but thinks better of it. “Does it hurt?”

Louis shakes his head, refusing to open his eyes. “Not anymore,” he says.

Harry closes his other hand around their intertwined fingers and holds on. “Are you in pain right now?” he asks, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat as he tries to swallow the lump that appears to be stuck in there.

“What?”

He tightens his grip. “Are you hurt? Does it hurt? I mean, not the arm, but – anywhere else?”

Louis opens his eyes. He turns his head minimally to the side and lets his blank eyes rest on Harry for a beat. Then he pulls his hand away. Harry tries not to reach for him again, hands twitching when they drop to his sides and he watches on as Louis struggles to get into a sitting position, legs dangling off the bench, looking achingly similar to the way he’d looked when Harry had found him at the German HYDRA-led base, bandaged up and shaken and hardly himself.

Liam manages to produce a bottle of energy drink from somewhere and hands it to Louis without a word and it’s probably an incredible show of trust on Louis’ part that he takes it only after a moment’s hesitation and gulps its contents down in a few seconds. He keeps the bottle between his hands, squeezing it so hard the plastic starts to crack, sinews in his right arm protruding. Harry looks on as Louis’ lips press together tightly, as a crease appears between his brows, as he moves the bottle into his left hand and, with one single twitch of his glistening fingers, makes it combust.

The sharp sound echoes through the room and Harry can’t but flinch when Louis drops the remnants to the floor and gets up, usual fluid movements stagnant and stiff. He disappears into the elevator without a single glance back.

Liam lets out a long and heavy sigh, picks up a spare piece of bandage and starts wiping blood off
the bench. “Why do I feel like this is all my fault?”

“It’s not,” Harry says automatically, and it’s true. It’s not Liam’s fault at all. If anyone is to blame for all of this it’s Harry. Liam raises a brow at him. “Hey, Liam, no. Come on, you know it’s not.”

Liam shrugs and wheels his stool over to a disposal bin to get rid of the bloody cloths. “But I’m not really helping either. Or like, I can’t help. I mean,” he goes on, grabbing a screwdriver for no reason and fumbling with it, “he’s not a machine. And I can’t replace faulty parts and fix him and – and none of us are exactly faulty, right? I mean, we’re damaged goods, aren’t we? But we’re on the mend. All of us, we’re not broken, we’re just – bent.”

He smiles at Harry, crookedly but honestly, and Harry wants to return the sentiment but, like so many times before, he can’t force the corners of his mouth to turn upwards. And if he’s being honest, Harry isn’t so sure if Louis isn’t broken; if all of them aren’t broken in one way or another. It’s hard to imagine that people walk away from what they’ve all gone through and one day just be back to normal. There’s nothing that Harry wants more, to hang up the shield one day and return to a small place in Brooklyn with Louis and make a home for the two of them. It’s a bittersweet feeling that settles in his belly when he thinks of that, hot with hope and shame.

“That’s a nice way of putting it,” he tells Liam nonetheless, because it is, and Harry wants to believe the same. That it’s just a matter of time, and that time does manage to heal all wounds no matter how deep.

Harry doesn’t tell Zayn and Niall what happened when they return just three days after the incident (three days in which Louis locks himself into the bedroom, refusing to come out even for dinner and Harry sleeps with his back against the door). He doesn’t know what Liam has told them, but it’s pretty evident that things aren’t exactly peachy. It’s not possible to ignore the hole in the gym floor and Niall hugs Harry when he greets him, not letting go for minutes, so Harry’s pretty sure they know anyway.

It’s the night that follows that gives way to the first snow of the season, thick flakes peacefully and hypnotically falling from the night blue sky that’s embroidered with heavy clouds. Slowly, it starts sticking to surfaces, making the entire city appear to be covered with icing sugar. There’s frost clinging to the windows.

Harry has given up on sleep. It won’t come, no matter how many times he tells himself to relax and even a gallon of herbal tea won’t calm the erratic thoughts in his head. He’s scared to sleep, even, because he’s scared of what he might see when he closes his eyes; he’s scared of what might be gone once he opens them again. He leans his head against the cold glass to shake his senses awake, letting his eyes roam over the surrounding buildings and a Manhattan that seems to have slipped into hibernation. It’s eerily quiet. Harry’s sigh mists up the glass and echoes through the living room.

It’s nights like these that make Harry wish he could still get drunk, just take a bottle and drown in it.
He’d tried to, a long time ago. It had been similarly cold, frost and the smell of snow clinging to his skin even hours after returning to London and getting pushed into a shower by James and Tom. They’d had to prop him up and rinse him down with icy water, hoping to get him out of the rigor that had gripped him once he’d realized that Louis was gone for good. Needless to say, it hadn’t really worked. Harry had peeled himself out of his uniform and he’d gone out in civil clothing, Louis’ scarf that had still smelled like him wrapped around his neck, wandering the dark and deserted streets until James had found him and dragged him back to the pub they’d frequented as a group.

And Harry had downed one glass after the other, not counting and not feeling the desired effect, and with a surge of aggression he’d thrown the entire bottle against the partly collapsed wall. Harry can still see it in front of him; the amber liquid running down the blackened walls of the bombed out pub, shards flying wide and scattering all over the dirty floor. He’d fallen to his knees then, and he’d screamed and cried as James had wrapped him in a hug, not knowing how he was going to be able to go on with that equally numbing and blinding pain that was tearing his entire being to pieces.

Harry doesn’t think that pain ever stopped. He guesses he’s learned to live with it. Going from mission to mission and not allowing his body to register the agony his mind is still feeling.

He wipes a hand over his eyes with another tired sigh and turns away from the window, walks to the center of the room and tries to ignore the fatigue that’s making his body heavy and his mind nostalgic. There’s not a lot he can occupy himself with at the moment and being still restricted to the tower, he can’t go for a run around the city to test his body’s limits, to tire himself out until he literally can’t take another step, and the gym is becoming monotonous. Harry is pretty certain Liam is still awake and tinkering away in the lab, but he’s burdened him enough already, and he doesn’t want to disturb Niall and Zayn’s downtime either. They’ve just spent days chasing dead leads on HYDRA operated facilities and they don’t need Harry’s problems on top of their own.

His feet take him out into the hallway on their own volition before Harry even registers that he’s moving. The door to his bedroom is still shut, no light shimmering through the crack and Harry stands in front of it like always, body shaking with suppressed tension. It’s hard to breathe and yet his lungs are still burning.

Harry hesitates to knock and when he does, the sound – although expected – makes him twitch. There’s no answer, of course there isn’t, so Harry knocks again and waits, feels that sharp pain in the back of his throat that tells him he’s once again close to welling up. He feels absolutely pathetic, but also very desperate.

“Louis,” he calls out hesitantly and rests his hand on the door handle, not pushing down but closing his fingers around it. “Are you awake?” He feels stupid asking, because he’s pretty certain Louis is not asleep and he’s not going to respond, but Harry doesn’t want to barge in, wants to allow Louis as much privacy as he can. “Can I come in?”

There’s nothing but resounding silence from inside his bedroom, but Harry has always been selfish and he’s selfish now and he just needs to see Louis’ face, needs to see that he’s okay and taking care of himself and perhaps talk to him, convince him to come out of his shell and out of the bedroom. Louis needs to sleep and he needs to drink and eat and Harry just wants to take of him too, because he’d abandoned him and even his lifetime is not enough to ever make up for that.

The bedroom is dark, but even the smallest hint of light is getting reflected by the thin layer of snow outside, so everything is dipped in various hues of grey. His bed is made and untouched and there’s still a used paperback on his bedside table from weeks ago, before it all started, before
Harry’s world as he knew it ended. His slippers are on the floor and there’s a pile of dirty laundry in the hamper that Harry still hasn’t gotten round to wash. He’s not really been paying attention to the details as of late.

He’s barely holding it together.

Louis is sitting in the corner, leaning against the floor-to-ceiling windows, legs drawn in and arms wrapped around his shins. His hair is pushed away from his face and mostly hidden by the hood he’s pulled up again. The sleeves of the sweatshirt are pulled down over his hands. His feet are bare. The duvets Harry had laid down look barely touched, sheets still crisp and hardly crinkled. He doesn’t turn around as Harry walks into the room and closes in on him, but his posture stiffens slightly. Harry clears his throat and lowers himself into a sitting position with a few feet between them. The window feels icy when he leans his bare shoulder against it.

He doesn’t know what to say.

“I don’t know what to say.” It’s all he has, being honest with Louis. His throat feels raw and his hands ache with the desire to touch. “I don’t know what to do, either. I’m flying blind, but I’m trying, we all are, and things like that, they just – they happen. And I don’t blame you and neither does Liam and we’re not scared of you, okay?” Harry takes a hasty breath. “I’m not scared of you. I just want you to get better and I just wish you’d talk to me. I don’t care about what, but just – I don’t know. Tell me how you’re feeling or what’s going through your mind.”

There’s no reaction. The snow keeps falling, faster and heavier, but Louis eyes are blank, so Harry can’t be sure he’s even seeing it. He’s not an empty shell anymore, but he’s retreated so far into himself that Harry is scared he might never reach him again.

The silence is unbearable. “You never told me when you were hurt,” Harry continues. “You never wanted anyone to worry about you and you were so stubborn too, God. One time, I think we were twelve or thirteen, you caught pneumonia, and you passed out in school, and your mom dragged you home by your ears because you hadn’t told anyone how unwell you were feeling.”

Louis’ mom had made him stay in bed for two weeks; the longest Louis had ever been out of commission. Harry had sat with him nearly the entire time, playing card games and reading comic books and bringing him school work and it had made him feel so accomplished, because he was the one taking care of Louis for a change.

“You never told me when you were hurt,” Harry continues. “You never wanted anyone to worry about you and you were so stubborn too, God. One time, I think we were twelve or thirteen, you caught pneumonia, and you passed out in school, and your mom dragged you home by your ears because you hadn’t told anyone how unwell you were feeling.”

“Louis, please.” Harry is ready to beg. “Just talk to me. About anything. And I’ll do anything, I swear, to make things better and to be better, absolutely anything. I promise.”

At that, Louis finally turns his head, just slowly, and his gaze eventually meets Harry with steely precision. The shadows dragging over his form are putting emphasis on his sharp bone structure, the line of his jaw, his sunken in cheeks and the bags under his eyes. He’s still beautiful; he’s the most beautiful thing Harry’s ever seen and will ever see and even now, he takes his breath away. Harry wants to reach out and soften his edges, brush away dark smudges and traces and he wants to kiss him so much it hurts. He wants to breathe new life into both of them.

“What if I told you to put a bullet in my head,” Louis’ voice cuts roughly through the silence, “would you do that, too?”

Harry feels his eyes widen at that. His heart leaps, soundlessly screaming in his chest. “Jesus, Louis – no! How can you –”

“Then don’t say anything,” Louis cuts him off, grip on his shins tightening, and turns to face back
It’s grey and cold and snowing, and it looks like the end of the world. When Harry glances out the window, he can’t be sure if the grey smoke rising towards the sky stems from chimneys or from remnants of the recent bombings. Soldiers and agents are rushing past him, but he feels frozen in place for a moment, feels the weight of the world on his shoulders; the world that might very well come to an end if they don’t succeed in saving it. Harry tries not to think about his particular role in everything, but from time to time, it’ll creep up on and overwhelm him slightly.

Payne has cracked a few codes that suggest HYDRA’s head scientist Zola will be attempting to escape south via a train route through the Swiss Alps. The Howling Commandoes and other agents are preparing for takeoff, because they need to be quick to seize this opportunity to get their hands on one of the most wanted men in the world. It’s not the Red Skull, but it’s his right hand man, and as Harry’s learned in the past few years, desperate men are always willing to negotiate.

Harry lets agents rush past him before he makes his way up the staircase again, floorboards creaking beneath his heavy boots. He hasn’t had a chance to see Louis all day, stuck in meetings and doing some general hand-shaking he hasn’t been in the mood for and although usually Louis is included in all strategic talks (not just because Harry wants him there), he’d opted out this morning and according to Stan and Ed, he’s been gone all day. It makes Harry worry quite a bit, because he’d have to be a fool not to notice how Louis has started to pull away from him, and from all of them. Harry wants to sit him down and make him talk and listen to him and make whatever it is that’s bothering him go away, but there’s simply no time, no opportunity and the few hours they manage to steal every other day is spent desperately tearing at each other’s clothes.

He’s relieved to find Louis standing by the window of the room they unofficially share, back turned to him, already dressed in his navy coat, rifle leaning against the crooked bedside table, apparently lost in thought. There’s a stiff line to his shoulders, a rigidity to his posture that isn’t new, but Harry still needs a moment to adjust to it. They’ve all changed a lot, Harry as well, perhaps more physically than psychologically still, and Louis maybe most of all. There’s a side to him now that seems removed and set apart, and Harry is frankly terrified that one day, he won’t be able to get through to him.

Harry doesn’t bother announcing his presence, because Louis knows it’s him just by the way he’s slowly approaching him, still slightly dragging his feet, leaving only a foot between them when he comes to a stop.

“I was looking for you before,” he says, putting his weight on his toes and then rolling back on his heels. “Stan said you were gone all day.”

Louis doesn’t react for a beat and Harry can only see the faintest reflection in the window, blurred outlines and smudged colors reflected by the milky and fogged up glass. “Needed to clear my head a bit,” he replies then and doesn’t turn around, but Harry can tell his eyes flicker up at Harry’s reflection. “Went for a walk, did some target practice.”

Harry curls a hand around Louis’ shoulder; thumb brushing where collar meets skin. “If you’re not well, I’d rather you stay here.”

“I’m fine,” Louis retorts, a bit of sharpness sneaking into his tone, muscles tensing beneath Harry’s fingers. “It’s nothing, and you don’t need to mother me,” and just as Harry is about to
protest, he adds, “we need everyone we’ve got, you know that.”

Harry’s gaze flickers to the ground for a moment and he bites down on his bottom lip. Louis isn’t everyone, and Harry doesn’t even flush with shame when he thinks that he’d sacrifice a lot of people to keep Louis safe. He guesses that his mind has its dark corners as well.

“Plus,” Louis continues with a shrug, “it’s a wild goose chase across a frozen mountain range, so what could possibly go wrong?”

In a split-second, Harry has wrapped his arms around him and pulls him back against his chest. He buries his face in Louis’ hair that, illogically, still smells like home, laced with frost and gunpowder and he allows himself a second to just breathe him in. Slowly, Harry lets his right hand drag its way to splay out on top of Louis’ heart. He counts the beats, presses a kiss to the side of his head, and lets his lips brush against Louis’ ear when he speaks.

“Don’t joke about this. I don’t have a good feeling about this mission.”

Louis lays his hand on top of Harry’s and applies soft pressure. “If it’s any consolation,” he says, “I’ve had a bad feeling about every mission we’ve gone on, and all of us are still breathing.”

They both refrain from mentioning that there were many close calls.

“Yeah, but luck is gonna run out at some point, right?” Harry tries to joke, but it falls flat, and Louis twists around in his arms.

He doesn’t look him in the eyes. His gaze is firmly fixed on the star that sits smack dab in the middle of Harry’s chest, thanks to his still rather flashy uniform. “Not for you,” Louis says, more to himself than to Harry before he glances up at him with a crooked smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. They’re more grey than blue today, and frighteningly dim. “Captain America.”

It sounds almost resentful, coming from Louis. Everybody Harry’s encountered since becoming the world’s first supersoldier had been in awe, almost star-struck and starry-eyed, and Harry knows what kind of feelings he is supposed to evoke, what he represents for so many civilians and soldiers. But he also knows that Louis looks at him and wishes that he’d never met Dr Erskine, that he’d be safe back in Brooklyn looking after their small apartment and he knows that Louis is angry with a lot of people for pushing Harry to the front of the line, although he’s very much aware that Harry made that choice all on his own.

It’s becoming quite difficult to navigate these days.

But Louis is close and he’s intoxicating and Harry wants to lean in and kiss him, yet Louis ducks out of his embrace and Harry’s left standing there, quite dumb-struck and arms suddenly empty. Louis keeps his gaze lowered, reaches for his rifle and shoulders it with practiced ease.

“Come on,” Louis says, throwing only a quick glance over his shoulder as he heads for the door. “You’ve got a villain to catch.”

Harry watches him go, and tells himself that it’s perfectly normal, that they can talk once they get back, that it’s just some uneven terrain, that Louis is tired and that he is as well, that they’re exhausted and worn out and still so desperately in love that they don’t know how to deal with it from time to time, but they’ll be absolutely fine.

Only a few hours later, Harry watches him fall.
Dr Caroline Watson is a small but sturdy woman with a bright smile and a warm voice. She comes into the communal area of the tower with a flurry of movement, large patterned scarf hanging down and trailing damply behind her when she walks out of the elevator. Snow is clinging to her coat and woolen hat and heavy boots. Huffing, she tugs at her scarf and shakes it out, causing a gust of slowly melting flakes to rain down onto the shiny floor.

Harry is in the open kitchen with Liam, who was kind enough to call her in, because Harry – he still feels uneasy about this altogether.

“Dreadful out there,” Dr Watson says as she approaches confidently, folding the scarf skillfully before draping it over the back of a chair that she pulls out a moment later to drop her satchel onto the seat. “Considering the state of traffic, one would assume this is the first time these people ever saw snow.”

She peels herself out of her coat and the hat off her head, revealing a light grey jumper and a neatly braided bun. Harry isn’t that great at placing accents, especially with people who, like Dr Watson according to her credentials, have moved about so much. He guesses she’s from Massachusetts, perhaps the Boston area, but he can’t be sure, and he doubts it actually matters. He’s just trying to keep his mind from sliding into panic.

“Nice to see you again, Caroline,” Liam says and reaches out to shake her hand. “How’s the family?”

Dr Watson rubs her hands together, presumably to warm them up. “They’re good, they’re good. Brooklyn just started kindergarten, so I’ve been traveling less, which is a relief. No more weekly trips to the VA hospitals in Philadelphia and Washington because we’re horribly understaffed, as always.” She shakes her head to herself. “Unbelievable how this country treats its veterans,” Dr Watson says and turns her attention from Liam to Harry, who scrambles out of his chair, mildly appalled at his own bad manners. “Not that I have to lecture you about this, Captain. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Harry, please,” Harry tells her after shaking her cold and slightly clammy hand. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“My pleasure,” Dr Watson replies as Liam sets down a steaming cup of tea in front of her. It smells like nettle and ginger, something Sophia stores in their kitchen because it’s supposed to help her detox after a long flight. Harry quite likes it. Dr Watson thanks Liam and turns back to Harry. “Now, is there anywhere we could talk in private?”

“Oh, I’m leaving,” Liam jumps in, clasping his hands together. “I’ve got things to do in the workshop, and Niall and Zayn are upstairs, so you’ve got the place to yourself. Thanks again, Caroline, we really appreciate it.”

With that, Liam takes off and Harry watches after him for a moment until the elevator doors slide shut and he finds himself alone with Dr Watson, who pulls back a chair and sits down, opening her satchel and producing a small moleskin notebook and a pen. Harry stays standing, chewing on his lips, because he doesn’t really know where to go from here.

“Is everything all right, Harry?” Dr Watson asks in a calm voice, looking at him questioningly and when Harry glances at his hands, he sees that he’s got his fists clenched tightly, trembling softly.

“Yeah, I mean, I just –” He clears his throat awkwardly and keeps his eyes on the table’s shiny
surface. “Louis isn’t really reacting to anything right now, and he doesn’t want to come up here, and –”

“It’s fine.” Dr Watson cuts him off gently. “I think it’s better if it’s just the two of us for now, anyway.”

“Right.” Harry drops heavily into his chair, his gaze lowered. His own cup of tea has gone cold already, but he pulls it towards himself and wraps his hands around it to have something to hold on to.

It’s still snowing.

“Before we start,” Dr Watson says, folding her delicate hands on the table in front of her, “I’d like to assure you that this conversation falls under doctor-patient confidentiality. Liam has assured me that during my presence here, all audio and video surveillance will be switched off. So whatever you tell me, it stays between you and I. Is that all right?”

Harry releases a breath he wasn’t aware of holding in. “Yeah, I – thanks. I’m just… not sure what to say to be honest.”

Dr Watson smiles softly. “That’s okay. That’s also perfectly normal, I assure you, and to be expected. I’ve done two tours in Afghanistan myself, and I’ve worked with many men and women who’ve come back, and it’s hard to do, it’s practically impossible; to seamlessly slip back into a normal life. It’s hard even when there are plenty of people who support you and are familiar, so I can imagine how hard it must be for you.” She pauses and Harry feels her eyes on him, but he doesn’t look up. “So how about we start with the basics?” she continues. “Even if it sounds like a cliché, but how are you feeling at the moment?”

Harry shrugs. It’s hard to put into words and it’s hard to convey things he doesn’t have a proper grasp on. “I don’t know,” he answers truthfully, moving his cup between his palms. “I thought I was doing okay until recently and… I guess I’m starting to realize that I wasn’t okay at all, and I haven’t been okay for a long time. And I can’t really… run away from things anymore. That’s not an option now. Because I’ve got to take care of Louis.”

If Dr Watson recognizes the name in context with who Harry is, then she doesn’t show it. In fact, she doesn’t make a big deal out of Harry being who he is either, which is very comforting.

“What happened?”

“I’m sure you know,” Harry can’t help but tell her bitterly, “it’s all spread out in a museum at the moment.”

“Yes,” Dr Watson says, “but I’d like to hear it from you.”

Harry looks up at her at that. He can feel every beat of his heart like a punch to his chest, hard and heavy and reverberating in his belly. “We were in Switzerland,” he says and he can barely hear himself, blood rushing in his ears, “and Louis and I hijacked a train, but we were outnumbered and he – they fired at us, and the compartment got blown to pieces, and I tried to reach him, but I wasn’t – I couldn’t.”

He thought it might become easier with time to say it, but instead, it seems to be even harder now. Harry wipes at his eyes that are starting to sting.

“I couldn’t stop,” Harry continues, voice thick with the tears he is desperate to hold back. “Catching Dr Zola was important, because he had information we needed, so I did. I wanted to go
back and find him, at least bring him home, but there was no time.”

Dr Watson is watching him, sympathy clear in her expression, elbows resting on the table and Harry tilts his head back, looks at the exposed beams on the ceiling and blinks a few times to get rid of the wetness of his eyes.

“Was he your partner?” It’s clear that she doesn’t mean the platonic interpretation of the term and Harry hesitates for a second before he curls his back and nods, staring into his tea. “Did you allow yourself time to mourn him? Time to grieve?”

“No,” Harry answers, “I went on a suicide mission and crashed a plane into the ocean.”

It’s dead silent after that. Harry gets to shaky feet, legs of his chair creaking noisily against the floor and he turns to the sink to send his tea down the drain. Breathing in and out, he grips the counter tightly and squeezes his eyes shut against the slew of images that flash in front of his inner eye, always the same, like one of Niall’s old DVDs full of scratches, stuck on one scene, jumping back and forth.

“Harry,” Dr Watson tries carefully, “we can take a break at any time. And you’re not required to talk about anything you’re uncomfortable with. If you want to switch topics, we can.”

“It’s fine,” Harry forces out, knowing full well that he doesn’t sound even close to being fine. “It’s just – I’ve only now started telling people about this. Apart from you, there’s three people who know and… I’ve got to stop bottling it all up, I think.”

He turns around in time to see Dr Watson nod understandingly. “Do you think that’s why you haven’t been doing okay?”

“Probably,” Harry concedes.

Dr Watson lifts her cup to her lips and takes a few sips. After she puts it down, she grabs her pen and quickly takes a few notes. Harry is tempted to peek at what she’s writing, but he thinks he doesn’t actually want to know what she’s thinking of him at this point.

“Now,” she continues, drawing her brows together, “the Louis you mentioned earlier, is he by any chance the one lost in battle in 1945?”

“Yeah,” Harry breathes out. “It’s all a bit crazy, I know.”

Dr Watson waves him off. “Please, New York was invaded by aliens last year and I’m currently talking to a man who was born in 1920, but doesn’t look a day older than twenty-five. There’s not a lot that can shock me.”

Harry is immensely grateful for that, he really is, but it’s still hard to comprehend sometimes, everything that’s happened and is happening and keeps happening. He wouldn’t blame Dr Watson for packing up and bolting to save her sanity.

“Still, that must have been quite a shock for you.”

“You could say that,” Harry says and leans back against the counter. He contemplates sitting down again, but he quite likes the option of pacing, or perhaps bolting to save the last scrap of his sanity. “Don’t think I’ve ever cried as much as in the past weeks.”

“I’m not going to ask for details, because I’m sure a lot of it is confidential. I don’t want to put you in a precarious situation.” She pauses heavily and Harry fumbles with the hem of his shirt. “But I’d
like to know how you two are doing.”

Harry thinks of the bloodstained towels and bathmats in the trash. He thinks of the broken coffee table and the crater in the gym floor and the duvets on his bedroom floor; of Louis, not talking to him, not looking at him, bandages wrapped around his upper body.

“We’re barely holding it together, I think.” He sighs and lets go of his shirt, digs his hands into his front pockets because he might very well start tearing out his hair. “He’s not – himself. He doesn’t remember much from before. And he’s been through so much, and he’s hurt so badly, and I just wish I could help him. At the moment I feel like I’m making things even worse. That’s why I thought a professional might be helpful. That maybe you’d know what to do.”

A tear escapes the corner of his eye and slides down his cheek, curls around his jaw and disappears into his collar, but Harry doesn’t wipe it away. It’ll dry anyway.

“I’m afraid I can’t talk to him unless he is willing to talk to me,” Dr Watson tells him. “If that’s what you were hoping. But I’m happy to give you some advice once we’ve worked through a couple of things.”

“What do you mean?”

Dr Watson tilts her head slightly to the side, assessing him. It reminds him a little bit of Zayn, the way her eyes seem to narrow a fraction and her lips twitch at the corners. “Harry,” she starts, and he gets the feelings that he won’t like what’s coming, “you’re a trauma patient as well. You’ve been through a lot and you’ve barely started on the road to recovery. I realize it might not seem that way to you, or to the people you’re surrounding yourself with, but sometimes, it’s not the best strategy to just keep going.”

She picks up her cup again. There’s a thin but pretty wedding ring on her hand, a single tear-shaped diamond catching the faintest hint of light peeking through the thick clouds.

“You lost your partner and afterwards didn’t hesitate to sacrifice yourself, and that not killing you doesn’t erase the fact that it happened, or that you were ready to make that choice. And him being back now doesn’t erase the fact that you lost him for a long time.” Dr Watson twirls her cup and when she smiles, it’s with a sad edge to it.

“You’ve experienced tremendous loss and ignoring it won’t make it go away. I’m not saying that you should drop everything you’re doing. But I think it’s time to work through everything and actually process that, install healthy coping mechanisms and reflect on what you’re feeling. Until you’ve allowed yourself to heal, you can’t expect to heal anyone else.”

It’s a lot to take in. Harry feels short of breath and kind of overwhelmed. It’s one thing realizing he’s probably not coping well and entirely another to have someone like Dr Watson spell it out for him. He knows he’s a wreck. But he also thought that having Louis back would mend him instead of breaking him all over again. He thought that he and Louis would heal each other.

“What Louis needs from you the most right now is to be okay,” Dr Watson says and really drives the message home. “And I don’t think you are.”

Harry’s breath hitches. His throat and eyes sting. Everything hurts. “No. No, I’m really not.”
Dr Watson leaves just before noon to pick up her daughter from the daycare center, promising to be back same time next week, and Harry feels so emotionally drained that he stays in the communal kitchen for another hour, just leaning against the counter and staring out the windows as the snow starts to decrease and the sky gets a bit brighter. His insides feel raw and picked at, and Harry supposes that’s kind of what happened, but it’s not pleasant. But he’s been naïve in thinking that a quick chat with a psychiatrist might solve all their problems.

He steals one of Liam’s energy shakes out of the fridge and downs it quickly, follows it up with a few pieces of dry toast before he makes his way back to his floor. As always, the urge to see Louis is strong, but at the same time, Harry doesn’t know how well he would stomach it. When he exits the elevator, he glances down the corridor, but he can’t tell whether the door is still closed. He hovers there for a minute before shaking his head at himself and heading into the living room.

Niall is sitting on the couch, plate in his lap with a few slices of soda bread and a big chunk of cheese. Some action movie is flickering over the screen, a guy in khakis and hat driving a truck through the desert. Harry approaches slowly and Niall turns to smile at him, waves with a slice of bread that’s lathered with butter.

“Y’all right, Cap? How was it with the shrink?”

Harry shouldn’t be surprised that Niall knows about Dr Watson. “Okay, I guess. I mean, it’s not easy to talk about everything with someone I don’t really know.”

“Yeah? I always find that makes it easier,” Niall replies. “Or maybe not easier, but – getting a different perspective is always helpful.”

“I guess,” Harry shrugs and rounds the couch opposite Niall, sits down and draws one leg up, hugs it to his chest. “What are you watching?”

“Oh, you’re gonna love this,” Niall grins almost manically. “Harrison Ford in Indiana Jones: The last Crusade. It’s fucking brilliant.”

“That’s what you said about Transformers,” Harry can’t but comment on that. “The battle of New York would’ve look mighty different if the Chitauri had been car robots.”

Niall cackles at that, takes a big bite of bread and, with his mouth still full, says, “In my defense, I didn’t know you were playing for the other team. Usually, Megan Fox in barely-there clothes seals the deal. It’s not like anybody watches it for the plot.”

Harry raises a brow at him. “I thought you’re playing for the other team as well.”

“I’ll play for whatever team will have me, mate. I can appreciate a nice pair of boobs.”

Harry can’t, but that’s beside the point. He finds it startling still, the way it’s just not a big deal. He still has trouble saying it in his head, can barely manage to say it out loud because for years and years and years, he’d had to hide, had to be terrified to get beaten into a bloody pulp had anyone found out about him and Louis. It’s not ideal now, Harry knows that, he knows there’s still work to be done, but it’s becoming less of a deal how people label themselves or if they label themselves at all. He wishes he had Niall’s ease. He wishes he could say it all out loud.

“What are you doing here, by the way?” Harry suddenly realizes. “Not that you can’t be here, just… why aren’t you upstairs?”

“You have the soda bread,” Niall answers, eyes glued to the TV screen. “Plus, Zayn wanted to talk to your boyfriend.”
Harry’s about to correct Niall and tell him that technically, Louis isn’t his boyfriend at the moment, before what he said actually sinks it. “What?”

Niall takes another moment to understand that what he’s just mentioned isn’t a normal occurrence. “Oh,” he blinks at Harry’s shocked expression, “yeah, like, an hour ago? They’re on the balcony. I’m just here, you know… just in case.”


“Don’t look at me like that, I’m not doing anything,” Niall says. “And I don’t know what happened, I can’t speak Russian. Still. I know I should, but I can’t. Languages aren’t my thing.”

“But…” Harry trails off and he cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of his barely used balcony where they’re supposedly still sitting. It curves along the side of the tower, equipped with reflective glass to give more privacy, and Harry had thought about adding some plants to it. But Zayn and Louis have to be somewhere on its far right, not visible from the living room. “But why? What are they even talking about? Are they talking?”

“Assassin stuff?” Niall shrugs. “Don’t know man, think they’re having a smoke as well, so,” and he shrugs again.

Harry wants to relax and slouch back into the couch, watch the movie with Niall and maybe head to the gym for a while, but his entire body feels tense and he can’t but ask himself why Zayn would approach Louis at all and why Louis would allow Zayn in his presence when he’s been avoiding Harry for days.

“Come on, Cap,” Niall tells him when he sees the rigid line of his body, “relax. It’s fine. Zayn knows what he’s doing.”

Harry is aware of that, but that’s also the problem. Zayn is a master manipulator, Harry has witnessed it first hand, and he doesn’t want to impute malicious intent to him, but he has no idea what Zayn’s agenda is in this. SHIELD has been infiltrated and Zayn is tasked with finding the mole, and perhaps he wants to get information out of Louis. Perhaps he wants to use Louis to lead him to the traitor, and Harry isn’t comfortable with letting Louis anywhere near SHIELD or any person that’s not him. Maybe he’s overreacting, maybe he’s reading too much into this, but Harry doesn’t trust anyone with keeping Louis’ best interest in mind.

“Did Zayn say anything to you?”

“About what?” Niall asks with one raised brow, brushing off some crumbs that have fallen onto his chest.

“I don’t know,” Harry replies. “Anything?”

“Well, Cowell is still pissed and conducting a secret operation within a secret organization is a bit stressful. And apart from all our leads ending up nowhere, there’s not much going on. If anything big were happening,” he adds, “you’d know about it, yeah? Because we’re a team.” Niall pauses, then he puts his plate on the floor and turns up the TVs volume. “But feel free to go outside. Zayn’s got nothing to hide from you.”

It’s probably the perfect moment for Harry to brush it off, get up and head to the gym, run a couple miles on the treadmill and take his mind off of things. But Harry’s proven plenty of times that he isn’t exactly rational when it comes to Louis. So he clears his throat and gets up, ignores the look Niall gives him and heads over to the sliding doors that lead out onto the balcony. It’s stopped
snowing now and there are speckles of blue peeking through the clouds, but the air that hits his face when he slides the door open is freezing cold and makes his eyes water.

They’re huddled in a corner to his right, beams of the tower coming up the side to shield them off from the weather, sitting in those funky chairs Liam has put on all their balconies because, according to him, they go with the overall look of his building. Zayn is in a steel grey coat with the collar flipped up, legs crossed and a cigarette dangling from his fingers. Louis, in jeans and sweatshirt and blanket wrapped around his shoulders, is sitting close to him, back curved, tobacco and cigarette papers in his lap. He’s rolled about a dozen already. One is between his lips, unlit.

He looks pale.

Zayn notices him first or at least, that’s the way it appears. Harry’s certain Louis registered his presence when he still had his hand on the doorknob. Sheepishly, Harry tucks his hands into his pockets and walks closer.

“Everything all right?” He tries to sound casual, but he’s well aware that he fails.

Zayn’s eyes narrow marginally when he looks at him and Harry used to dislike it, the way he can strip anyone bare within seconds and see through any façade. He doesn’t hate it now, but he’s not entirely comfortable with Zayn knowing his exact motives for interrupting them.

“Sure,” Zayn says easily, blowing out smoke. “Just talking.”

“Right.” Harry does feel a bit stupid now. “Um, I’m heading down to the gym in a bit, but I was… I was wondering if you and Niall are staying for dinner? I was thinking of making some chili.”

“Sounds good.” Zayn takes another drag and inhales deeply, keeping his gaze firmly focused on Harry, and Harry has to stop himself from squirming on the spot.

His eyes flicker to Louis, who’s finished rolling a cigarette and is already starting on the next, movements practiced. He’d smoked sometimes back in Brooklyn and he’d stopped when Harry’s asthma had gotten worse. During the war, he’d picked it up again, always carrying a bit of tobacco in the breast pocket of his coat.

He’s refusing to look at Harry.

“Right,” Harry says again and bites at his lower lip so hard it stings, then he shuffles backwards, blindly grapples for the door handle and stumbles back inside less than gracefully, eyes burning and chest clenching tightly.

Niall is still on the couch, looking at him with wide eyes, concern written clearly on his face, but Harry just swallows thickly, takes a few hasty breaths, and walks past him and into the elevator. Once the doors are shut, he presses the heels of his hands to his eyes and tries to keep breathing.

He runs for two hours without pause until his t-shirt is soaked with sweat and his leg muscles feel like they might actually start to cramp up. Tumbling off the treadmill, Harry blinks away the dark spots that are dancing in front of his eyes and pulls off his shirt even before he reaches the showers, wiping the soft jersey across his face and neck, rolling his shoulders. He kicks off his shoes and takes off the rest of his clothes, drops them in the hamper that’s in the corner of the small changing room that’s leading to the showers.
By the time he feels clean and more like himself again, the room resembles a sauna, and Harry drips everywhere before he finds a clean towel and is just tying it around his waist when he glances up and sees Zayn standing in the doorway.

“Jesus,” Harry wheezes, gripping the towel tightly. “You keep sneaking up on me.”

Still in his coat and laced-up boots, Zayn is actually the one who should look out of place, but in his presence, Harry usually tends to feel inadequate. He secures the towel and runs a hand through his wet hair. It’s gotten quite long now, wet tips tickling his shoulders. He’s thought about cutting it, but then again, he’s not really bothered by it.

“Where’s Louis?”

“Upstairs,” Zayn replies monotonously, leaning sideways against the frame of the door, folding his arms, “watching Indiana Jones with Niall.”

“Why aren’t you there?” Harry asks and he can’t quite erase the bitter edge to his tone.

“Because I wanted to check on you,” Zayn says unaffected. “You were gone for a while. Niall was worried you might’ve drowned yourself in the shower. And I want to talk to you.” It seems like he’s waiting for Harry to say something, but Harry doesn’t really know what to say to that. After a few beats, he tells him, “You’ve got to stop acting like I’m the enemy.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry retorts immediately, because that he does know. “I’m sorry for how I acted earlier. I know you’re not. I was just – surprised, I guess, that you’d suddenly get involved when you weren’t so keen on him being here in the first place.”

“Changed my mind about that, didn’t I? I’m not going to throw him to the wolves, Harry.”

“I know,” Harry sighs. “I’m just frustrated because he won’t be near me and he won’t talk to me and now he’s getting chummy with you and he’s talking to you and –”

“To be honest,” Zayn cuts him off, “he’s not talking much to me either.”

“Then what were you doing?”

Zayn shifts his weight from one leg to the other, lifts a hand to rub at his stubbled jaw. “I wanted to clear the air between us. I’m no friend of unresolved tension. Especially when it involves someone as unstable as him. But I wasn’t talking much either. You don’t need to get jealous just because we were sharing space.”

“I wasn’t jealous,” Harry tries to deny, but judging the way Zayn’s mouth twitches, he isn’t buying it. “At least not like that,” he adds, feeling himself flush. “Did he say anything to you, though? Because – I mean, I’m sure you know what happened. And I just... I can’t get through to him.”

“He asked me to tell him about HYDRA,” Zayn says without beating around the bush. “So I did.”

Harry stills. “Oh. Okay. What – what did he want to know?”

Zayn assesses him for a bit, eyes calculating and expression sharp. “If you want to know, you have to ask him. There’s been enough people poking around in his head without permission, so I think it’s time he kept some things to himself, don’t you agree?”

For a moment, Harry is taken aback. He hadn’t thought of that, not when it comes to himself, but he realizes now that he’s not been acting appropriately, that he’s as much a stranger to Louis as
everyone else. “You’re right. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” Zayn tells him and straightens his back, pushes away from the doorframe. “But you’ve got to stop pushing like that. He needs to do this at his pace. Not yours.”

With that, he turns around and leaves.

Dinner later that day is a quiet affair. Liam joins them as well, looking frazzled and smelling like he set himself on fire a couple of times, and he gulps down the not very spicy chili Harry made in record time before excusing himself and heading back to his workshop. Zayn isn’t one to chat endlessly anyhow, and Niall keeps looking between Harry and Louis and Zayn, apparently waiting for one of them to do something out of character.

Harry sure feels like he’s about to snap. He can barely get a spoonful down, and he wants to look at Louis, wants to spend the rest of his life doing nothing but look at him, but at the same time, he seems to be doing everything wrong. And quite wrongly, he’d been under the impression that things were looking up for some time when in fact, they were rapidly approaching rock bottom.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Harry watches Louis stir his portion of rice and chili, watches as he, as always, keeps his left arm hidden, drops the spoon to delicately brush hair away from his face, tucking it behind his ear because it’s getting long as well. Before, Harry would have asked him if he wanted to cut it. Now, he keeps his mouth shut and silently begs Louis to at least eat half a bowl for dinner.

That night, Harry doesn’t stay just outside his bedroom. He goes back to sleeping on the couch, or rather, trying to sleep on the couch, and ends up staring out the window as it starts to snow again.

The next day starts similarly grey, clouds hanging low and heavy. Harry gets up with the dim sunrise and goes to the gym, does a few miles on the treadmill and a few hundred chin-ups until his biceps burn. He returns to his floor feeling a bit more refreshed, but still a bit raw and open, like Dr Watson and Zayn have peeled away his outer layers, leaving him vulnerable and exposed, which is why he nearly flinches when he walks into the kitchen and sees Louis sitting at the dining table across from Zayn.

“Morning,” he rasps and this time Louis eyes meet his, even for just the briefest of moments.

“Morning,” Zayn replies and points at the can on the counter. “There’s some coffee left. Niall went to HQ pretty early, he’s bringing back donuts.”

“That’s nice,” Harry says and gets a cup, some sugar and cream, feeling Zayn’s eyes burn into the back of his neck when he rummages about to get plates and other things that could go with donuts from the fridge. “Haven’t had donuts in a while.”

“You’re looking a bit under the weather,” Zayn tells him after a pause.

“I’m fine,” Harry replies and, after remembering what Dr Watson told him the day before, amends it to, “or I will be. It’s – it’s okay. Didn’t catch much sleep.”
Zayn hums quietly and goes back to the tablet that’s sitting on the table in front of him, showing Cyrillic letters Harry can’t decipher. He’s also just now noticing that the daily paper is spread out in front of Louis, open to an article on the riots in Ukraine. Louis has read a few books since coming here, at least Harry thinks so, judging by them disappearing into his bedroom, but he’s never looked at a newspaper before and he wonders if Zayn prompted him to take a look and have a read.

He takes the plates and his cup and puts them down on the dining table, pulls out the chair on the side between Zayn and Louis and sits down, clears his throat. Louis’ eyes flicker up again.

“Um,” Harry starts, worrying his lips, “maybe later, we could, uh – change your bandages. Wouldn’t want anything to get infected.”

Louis nods briefly; then he drops his gaze back to the paper.

Thankfully, Niall comes in just ten minutes later, smelling like frost, snowflakes in his hair and arms full with bags that say Carpe Donut, smiling brightly and dumping everything on the table, dripping everywhere and Harry makes a mental note to mop the floor later.

“Payno’s asleep in his workshop,” Niall tells them, accepting Zayn’s cup of coffee and finishing it quickly. “Left some donuts for him after I made sure he couldn’t drown in motor oil.”

“Did you get the ones with filling?” Zayn asks, already looking through the bags because for a KGB-trained assassin covered in tattoos, he has an endearing love for fried bread and icing sugar.

“Sure did, babe,” Niall nods, sitting down. “There’s some with jam and sprinkles, and I got them custard ones as well, with chocolate frosting.”

It is such a random thing to happen this week that Harry can’t help but feel instantly lighter. He offers Louis a bag and watches with a smile how he takes a chocolate donut and tears it apart on his plate, examining its insides. Harry takes one with jam and only a short while later, they’ve eaten their way through more than half of what’s on the table. It’s probably a good thing that they’ve all got a fast metabolism.

Zayn and Niall head off to have a nap afterwards, which Harry doesn’t want to question judging by the way Niall’s waggling his brows, but the lightheartedness doesn’t last long. He hasn’t been alone with Louis since he asked him whether he’d shoot him, so Harry’s legs feel unsteady when he gets to his feet and sees that Louis is mirroring his movements.

“I’ve got the first aid kit in the bathroom,” he announces and trusts Louis to follow him, thoughts falling all over each other in his head because he hears Dr Watson’s voice, saying that Louis needs him to be okay, and Zayn telling him to stop pushing, and Harry doesn’t know how to do either.

Louis pulls his sweater over his head as unceremoniously as he’d stripped the first time they’d entered the bathroom together and Harry tries not to read too much into that. His hands shake slightly as he gets the first aid kit out from the cabinet beneath his sink and when he stands up from his crouch, Louis is sitting on the edge of the tub, looking at his feet, hands folded in his lap.

Harry clenches his jaw and swallows, undoes the old bandages as efficiently as possible and is relieved to find pink but mostly unharmed skin, only the area in direct contact with the artificial arm still in need of getting wrapped up. Applying a generous amount of antiseptic and trying not to let his gaze wander over Louis’ bare chest, Harry cuts up gauze bandages and quickly ties them around the damaged area around Louis’ shoulder.
“Usually, it was the other way around,” slips past his lips before Harry realizes he’s opened his mouth. “You putting plasters on me after getting into another fight.” His voice sounds shaky. “Your mom kept everything in the kitchen and we’d sneak in only when nobody was home, because we didn’t want to get told off.”

His vision is swimming as he packs up the first aid kit, dropping the bottle of antiseptic twice before he manages to put it away. Louis doesn’t move and he doesn’t say anything, but Harry suddenly finds it impossible to stop.

“You chipped a tooth once, trying to defend me. It was just a baby tooth, and you managed to hide it from her for two weeks, I think, and when she found out she grounded you for ages, but you snuck out the window to see me every day and she never found out about that.” He laughs quietly to himself, thinking back on it and about the gleeful expression on Louis’ face. “No idea how you managed to do that, and you never told me.”

Harry puts the kit back into the cabinet and closes it, taking a calming breath and trying to fight burn in the back of his throat.

“You always looked after me,” he goes on, turning to look at Louis, who’s suddenly gone very pale. “And now I need to look after you, don’t I, and –”

“Stop.”

He freezes. “What?”

Louis’ hands are on his knees, knuckles gone white, and shoulders shaking with suppressed tension. “Stop,” he repeats, voice tight. “Just stop. You need to stop. I can’t – I can’t –”

“Louis, I –” Harry tries, getting out of his crouch just as Louis is getting to his feet.

“No, you need to stop, just fucking stop,” he grits out and shakes his head, hair falling into his face. “I’m not him, and I can’t be him, and you need to just fucking stop because I can’t do it. I can’t do it!”

He pushes past Harry, leaving his sweater on the floor and Harry needs a moment to catch up on what’s happening. Harry follows him out into the bedroom and watches dumbstruck as Louis paces back and forth, tearing at his hair, looking so distraught that Harry finds it hard to breathe.

“Please stop, stop,” Louis keeps repeating like a mantra and Harry wants to approach him, calm him, hold him close, but Louis looks so fragile all of a sudden that Harry's scared of breaking him.

“Louis, what’s… I don’t understand.”

Louis takes a rattling breath. “I can’t do this with you telling me these things, and looking at me like that.”

Harry still doesn’t understand. “Like what?”

“Like I’m him!” Louis calls out, spinning around. His chest is heaving and his metal arm is glistening in the sun that unfittingly breaking through the clouds this very moment. “Because I’m not. I’m not him and I won’t ever be him, because time didn’t fucking freeze for me, okay? I – I killed so many people, just so fucking many and –”

He sounds like he’s about to hyperventilate and Harry can’t do anything. He can’t do anything but watch and listen and feel his heart break, because this is his fault, all of this is his fault.
“That wasn’t you,” he insists. It’s all he can do and it’s not enough, Harry knows it’s not enough. “They made you do it, and it wasn’t you. You aren’t some – some kind of monster, because they are. They did this to you.”

“Stop saying that!” Louis yells at him. His voice echoes through the room. “I’m not shaking in some corner thinking I’m a monster. I know I’m not. I’m human. That’s what makes it so horrible. I wish I was some kind of monstrosity like the Red Skull, but I’m not. And you keep saying I didn’t do these things, but I still did. And I still have to live with that. It was me who did it and it doesn’t matter how many times you try to convince me otherwise, it doesn’t change a thing and I still have to fucking live with it!”

He’s been so withdrawn and quiet up until now that seeing him like that is jarring and Harry doesn’t know what to do, but it seems like a knot has been loosened and Louis looks frantic and overwhelmed. He sinks down onto the edge of Harry’s bed, looking very small.

“It’s all coming back, but it’s not good. It’s not good and you want me to remember, but I don’t,” Louis forces out and reflexively, his right hand closes around his prosthetic, gripping it tightly, and Harry thinks he gets it now. “That’s not an option, though. I’ve got this fucking thing reminding me every day what they did, and what I did and I’m – I’m not him.”

“You are, though, please,” Harry all but begs, inching closer. He knows he’s crying, cheeks red and throat raw, but he doesn’t care, because Louis is hurting, even more than Harry thought and he didn’t even see it. He was too damn selfish to see it.

Louis keeps shaking his head and Harry wants to frame his face and look into his eyes and he wants Louis to be okay. “I can’t be who you want me to be,” Louis says. “I can’t.”

“That’s not true, Louis. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry for doing it all wrong, but I promise I’ll be better. I promise you’re gonna be okay, we’re both gonna be okay.”

“Stop saying that,” Louis tells him. “I can’t do this, and I can’t be him, and I can’t stay here…”

“God,” Harry breathes out and sinks to his knees, like a puppet with its strings let loose, “please don’t leave. Lou, I beg you, we can talk about this and we can figure this out together, but – please don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

But Louis just continues to shake his head, right hand aimlessly clawing at his metal arm like he’s still wondering if he might be able to rip it out after all. “I’m not him, I’m not him,” he keeps muttering to himself. “Nothing makes sense, and you’re lying to me. I’m not him.”

“I’m not lying. God, I swear Louis, I’m not lying. You’re… you’re everything. Don’t go. I don’t – I can’t –”

Louis pushes himself to his feet; arms twitching at his sides and Harry can barely see him. Furiously, he wipes at his eyes and struggles to stand up. He knows he looks pathetic and he’s a mess and he doesn’t deserve Louis, because he ruined everything, but Louis can’t go. Harry doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do if Louis goes. The things Sophia brought are still in neat piles by the door and Harry watches numbly as Louis pulls on a sweatshirt and jacket and only when Louis’ slipped on a pair of sneakers does life return to his body.

He darts across the room, but Louis has already spun around and Harry isn’t thinking straight, he’s too desperate and emotional and he is too frantic to see the metal arm until it’s colliding with the side of his head. Harry feels a burst of blinding pain.
Then everything goes dark.

_to be continued._
VII.

Chapter Summary

Harry doesn’t really care if Niall stays or goes. He just wants to close his eyes and shut out the world until he can figure out how to turn back time and keep his trap shut and make Louis stay. Liam is a genius, so there’s got to be a way. Harry wants to take it back; he just wants to take everything back.

Chapter Notes

hello again, this time with a tiny delay.

this chapter is the longest so far and by now i can safely say that the dead of july will definitely exceed 100k. i am still unsure if i’m excited about that, because it's kind of taking over my life. but there’s just two more chapters and probably a tiny epilogue to go.

i'd like to thank geeh for jumping in to beta this for me like a knight in shining armour and also for enduring my endless ramblings, because this - as i said - is my life now.

this entire story is for her, but i want to give a special shoutout to brit and dedicate this chapter to her because nobody else sends me little voice notes containing surprise led zeppelin songs. ramble on indeed.

please feel free to drop in and say hi.

see you all in two weeks and please enjoy.

title is taken from summer skeletons by radical face.

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

DISCLAIMER: the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

CHAPTER VII.

“It comes so soon, the moment when there is nothing left to wait for.”
When Harry comes to, it takes a few beats for him to register the soft sheets beneath his fingertips, the fluffy pillow his head is bedded on, the stabbing pain throbbing between his temples. Black spots dance in front of his eyes when he opens them to the white ceiling of what he realizes is his bedroom. Instantly, he tries to sit up, but a cool palm against his forehead pushes him back into the pillow. A moment later, an icepack is pressed onto his head exactly where the pain seems to originate.

“You should stay horizontal for a bit longer, mate.” He recognizes Niall’s voice. “Took quite the blow to your head.”

“Louis,” Harry remembers with a jolt, but Niall isn’t having it and forces him to stay put. Harry is still enough out of it to let it happen.

“Liam is doing a perimeter sweep,” Niall tells him, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “But it looks like he’s gone.”

Harry can’t breathe. It feels like someone placed an invisible weight onto his chest that’s slowly but steadily breaking his ribs, ragged edges piercing his lungs until he’s close to choking. He was so sure he wouldn’t have to experience this type of pain again, but now it’s back and it feels even more vicious the second time around and Harry is not sure how he’s supposed to push past this. There’s no plane taking off this time and the world isn’t waiting for him to save it. He can’t spend the next seventy years frozen in the Arctic, hoping to numb the pain.

Unable to swallow the seemingly solid rock in his throat, Harry moves his hand to delicately touch the bag of ice Niall is pressing to his temple. Dried blood flakes off when Harry scratches across his skin with a fingernail, Louis’ vibranium prosthetic strong enough to cause a laceration with a single blow. Someone, presumably Niall, has taped a bandage to the wound. The ice pack sends rivulets of water down his neck, tickling his erratic senses.

“What happened?” Niall asks him quietly, after he’s given Harry a couple of minutes to clear his head, which hasn’t happened.

Harry really wants to snap at him, because what the hell does it look like? But he’s – he just can’t be asked. He’s mostly just furious at himself and he doesn’t want to say out loud that he screwed up beyond all possibilities, that he just kept pushing and pushing and not listening to anyone’s advice and not paying attention to Louis and what was important and he’s ashamed, Harry is just so ashamed. It’s his fault, and now Louis is gone and he’s lost him for the second time because all he could think about was what he wanted. Louis is out there again, hurt and confused and alone, because all he needed was for Harry to put him and his needs first, and Harry couldn’t even do that.

They got a second chance, and Harry blew it.

“Cap?” Niall tries again, but Harry doesn’t want to face him -- or anyone -- so he takes the corner of his duvet and drags it with him when he rolls to the side, facing away from Niall and out the window where it’s grey and dull and miserable again. He draws the blanket up to his nose and
wraps it tightly around his body; the pain in his head almost forgotten, barely a prodding afterthought that isn’t important and that Harry can’t spare any attention for. “You want me to leave?”

Harry doesn’t really care if Niall stays or goes. He just wants to close his eyes and shut out the world until he can figure out how to turn back time and keep his trap shut and make Louis stay. Liam is a genius, so there’s got to be a way. Harry wants to take it back; he just wants to take everything back.

The mattress dips as Niall slides onto the bed next to him and a moment later, arms sneak around his shoulders -- not squeezing, but weighing Harry down a little, which is unexpectedly calming. He presses his nose into the pillow and pretends it smells like Louis.

“You want to watch a film or something? Take your mind off it until Liam and Zayn are back? Get a head start on those waterworks maybe, you know. Helps to have a good cry sometimes. We could bring out the big guns, watch The Notebook.”

“What’s The Notebook?” Harry manages to croak out, throat raw like it’s been wiped with sandpaper.

Niall pauses. “You don’t know The Notebook? If you’re a bird, I’m a bird?”

“I know you perch outside windows and on roofs, but I wouldn’t call you a bird,” Harry says, not really following, making Niall cackle quietly.

“Oh man, The Notebook goes to the top of our movie list, okay? You want to watch it now? It’ll probably make you cry,” he tells Harry.

“Not really. Can I just – not move for a bit?”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Niall replies, patting his shoulder once and yawning against Harry’s neck.

“We’ll watch it tomorrow, then.”

They don’t watch it the following day. Or the day after. Harry stays in bed for a total of three days in the end, barely moving, barely registering anything apart from day- and night-time and the fact that Niall and Liam take turns sitting with him, probably having a silent agreement not to let him out of their sights for even a single second. Harry knows what a pathetic picture he paints, and he can guess what they’re thinking and most likely expecting of him.

He gets up to use the bathroom and gulp down some water, but he doesn’t touch the food Niall and Liam put on his bedside table. They don’t pressure him into eating and they tread around him like he’s made of glass and they’re being so careful -- not mentioning Louis and what’s happening in general, allowing him to stay in his bubble.

Zayn isn’t so kind. He shows up at the foot of Harry’s bed as his third day in solitude draws to a close, looking impeccable and put together, like nothing affects him ever and Harry can’t help but feel a spark of incongruous irritation. With a sigh, Harry turns his head to face out the window again. It hasn’t snowed again, but the grey clouds are hovering low and temperatures are steadily dropping. Harry feels nauseous when he thinks about Louis being out there on his own, unaware that he needs to take care of himself.
Harry remembers the talk he had with Zayn a few days prior and Zayn asking him to stop treating him like an enemy and Harry knows that’s what he’s about to do again. But Zayn keeps feeding him nothing but half-truths and he’s never entirely honest and Harry feels lost dealing with that, especially now. Especially considering that Zayn was the last person to properly talk with Louis.

Harry isn’t good at being rational when it concerns Louis.

“You told me to stop pushing,” Harry remembers, keeping his eyes focused on the dampness crawling up his windows, “but I didn’t listen and I couldn’t stop, even when he asked me to.”

“What happened?”

He takes a deep breath. “I told him about Brooklyn, about things that happened when we were kids and he – he just snapped, I think. I pushed too far, and he snapped, and he said he couldn’t do it anymore, because he wasn’t who I wanted him to be, and he didn’t want to remember, and I,” Harry pauses, wipes his eyes with sheets that are in dire need of a wash, “I just don’t get it, because he talked to me before and then he suddenly didn’t and you… What – what did you say to him?”

Harry turns onto his back to look at Zayn, whose expression is as unreadable as always. “I already told you, I –”

“No,” Harry cuts him off and pushes himself into an upright position, sheets falling from his shoulders and pooling in his lap. His t-shirt stretches across his chest. “I’m supposed to trust you, but you don’t trust me at all, and you keep holding things back and I’m really fucking tired of being left in the dark. I want to know what you said to Louis.”

It’s not like Harry expects Zayn to have a visible reaction to his words, but the way he doesn’t even blink is actually very impressive. “You do realize a lot of my information is classified. Niall and Payne don’t know about that either.”

“Don’t give me that,” Harry throws back at him. “This isn’t SHIELD business. This is about Louis, and I want to know what the fuck you said that made him leave.”

“Oh, please,” Zayn scoffs, eyebrows lowering, “I didn’t make him leave. It was his choice to stay or go, and he decided to go, and you need to understand that. I know what it’s like to get away from something like HYDRA, and all I did was tell him that he needed to do what he felt needed to be done. So don’t pin this on me.”

“What needed to be done?” Harry blusters. “Do you know what you sound like? He’s just –”

“He’s not just anything.” Zayn cuts him off with such a sobering tone and expression that Harry forgets to protest and interrupt him in return. “That’s what you still don’t understand and it’s what I’ve told you from the beginning. He’s not the person you knew, regardless of whether he remembers his past or not.”

Harry’s mind flashes back to Louis saying, “I’m not him and I won’t ever be him,” and he hasn’t got time to think further than that, suddenly feeling deflated, because Zayn sighs heavily and rubs a hand over his face, showing a hint of how exhausted he might actually be after all.

“Imagine waking up with blood on your hands, with no idea how it got there, but surrounded by dead people. Imagine knowing you killed them, but not remembering how or why.” He pauses heavily, eyes boring into Harry’s. “Now, would you believe it if someone told you it wasn’t your fault?”

Harry swallows thickly. “He told you about that?”
Zayn nods. “He did. And you’re right in saying that, don’t get me wrong, but Louis was still the one who pulled the trigger, and that’s something he has to deal with. And it’s nothing you or I or anyone else for that matter can ever assume to understand. It’s not up to you to decide how he feels about that.”

Harry looks down at where his white-knuckled hands are gripping the duvet. The cotton crinkles and rustles softly. He really needs to wash these sheets. He has to clean this room as well. And the bathroom. There are still blood-drenched towels in his hamper.

“I used to know how to help him,” he says. “I used to be able to tell what he needed.”

“Seventy years is a long time.” Zayn’s expression is less sharp when Harry looks up again. There’s always something callous in the way his dark eyes latch onto the people around him, even when it’s Niall, but now it seems like the edges are softened slightly. “I think that’s what you’re still refusing to acknowledge. No amount of wishing for things to be different will erase the time that’s passed. You can’t pick up where you left off, even if he remembers, even if he decides to come back.”

Zayn’s eyes stay on him even when he gets up with swift, smooth movements, dressed in his usual black attire that’s heavy on leather. He hasn’t shaved, which, Harry gathers, means that he’s not going on a mission for at least the next few days, because he always needs to be ready to slip into different characters.

“Do you think he will?” Harry can’t help but ask, since Zayn looks like he’s about to leave. “Come back, I mean.”

“I think you need to let go,” Zayn tells him, clinical in his tone. “Director Cowell is considering dropping the house arrest and you have a team that needs you to be at your best when you get back out into the field. We depend on you not pulling another stunt like London.”

He moves towards the door. “Zayn,” Harry calls out before he can leave, “what if I can’t?”

Zayn lingers for a second. “I don’t think you have a choice.” Then Harry is alone again.

On the morning of the fourth day, Harry makes it out of bed. He strips the sheets and puts them in the hamper with all the other dirty laundry he collects from around his room, starts the first load, and has a cup of coffee before heading to the bathroom. There’s nothing that betrays what happened in there, but still, all Harry can see is red, so he gets down onto his knees and scrubs the floor and the sink and the tub and the tiles adorning the walls until his nose burns from inhaling his cleaning agent’s odors.

He takes a shower and stays under scalding hot water until his skin is pink and steam is covering the mirror. He stands in front of it and it’s hard to remember that seventy years have passed, because when Harry looks at himself, he just doesn’t see it. Sure, his hair is longer now; long enough that he can tie parts of it back and keep it out of his face. But there are no fine lines, no scars or blemishes that bear evidence of the years he missed. He tries to imagine what Louis must have felt in the same position, faced with an artificial arm forged from vibranium and scars he couldn’t remember getting, and he feels ill.

Harry grabs fishing pants, socks, jeans, and a plaid shirt from his closet, and gets dressed on the
way to the kitchen. The box from the Smithsonian is still there, stacks of photographs surrounding it, and Harry makes the decision in a split second. He packs it all up without once taking a closer look, stuffs pictures and letters and folders back into the cardboard box, and only when his fingers close around Louis’ old dog tags does he pause, heart beating heavily against his ribcage. Zayn told him to let go and Harry is trying, but he can’t see any harm in holding onto a few things for a bit longer. He grabs the box to store it somewhere in his closet, but he leaves the tags lying on the kitchen table, bleak morning light catching on the metal pieces.

Harry spends the rest of the day trying to keep occupied. He bakes bread, does some more washing, and goes to the gym in the afternoon -- runs until his legs are practically screaming -- then joins Niall in the communal living room for a few episodes of Star Trek. They order Chinese for dinner, send one portion of prawn chow mein down to Liam’s workshop and leave one in the fridge for Zayn who, according to Niall, is sleeping off a headache.

And like Zayn predicted, it doesn’t take much longer for the Director to summon Harry back to SHIELD headquarters downtown. Harry goes with Zayn, schooling his expression into a neutral one and praying that it doesn’t betray everything that’s happened since London. He tries not to think about the dog tags sitting on his kitchen table, about Louis being gone, still trying to fight his programming, SHIELD and HYDRA after him.

The Director’s office is on the top floor of what appears to be a run-of-the-mill office building, and it always surprises Harry how seamlessly SHIELD inserts itself into its surroundings. As usual, people are subtly but unmistakably staring at him and Zayn as they make their way to the elevators across the lobby and ride all the way up without interruption. The elevator opens right into Cowell’s office overlooking Manhattan, and considering the array of screens adorning an entire wall, he overlooks a whole lot more from his spot on top of the city.

Director Cowell, clad in an impeccably tailored suit, has his back turned to Harry and Zayn when they step forward. Only his posture tells of his military past. Zayn saunters to the side of the room and sits down on one of the sleek black leather sofas, signalling to Harry that he’s got his support, but that he has to face Cowell on his own. Harry takes a deep breath, folds his hands behind his back and clacks his heels together.

“Director,” he greets him formally, waiting for his superior to address him. Cowell lets Harry simmer for a handful of minutes before eventually turning around and leveling him with a calculating gaze.

“Captain,” Cowell says, coming to stand behind his glass desk. There’s a touchscreen embedded in it and the Director bends over it -- he appears to be moving data or files, though Harry can’t be sure from this angle. “As much as I’d prefer to move you off of active field duty for a while longer, since your little stunt cost us valuable information and seriously jeopardized all of SHIELD’s ongoing projects, we do need you out there. The World Security Council has decided to be proactive and chase HYDRA down instead of waiting for them to strike, so you’ll join Agents Malik and Horan in the field under Agent Malik’s command. You will not overrule his decisions, nor will you disregard his orders. Do I make myself clear?” His eyes bore into Harry, hard and sharp.

“Crystal, Sir,” Harry replies. He knows he has no option but to obey at this stage, and he doesn’t want to, either. Following his own rules has led to disaster all around. Harry doesn’t fancy a repeat of that.

“Good.” The Director straightens his back. Harry refuses to squirm under his penetrating gaze. “Mr Payne will join you if necessary, but taking into account what we’ve come across on our search so
far, I believe three members of the Avengers and the STRIKE team will be sufficient in tracking down hostile bases.” Cowell allows himself to take a pregnant pause, not even blinking, and Harry hopes he’s learned enough to mask his unease. “Agent Malik, if you could step out for a moment?”

Harry doesn’t dare to avert his eyes, but he registers Zayn getting up almost inaudibly, moving like a ghost until the elevator doors slide shut behind him. It takes Harry by surprise, because he knows that Director Cowell is aware that nothing stays hidden from Zayn, apart from the glitch that was London, so he is confused as to what Cowell didn’t want to say in Zayn’s presence.

“You’re an important asset, Captain,” is what Cowell says once they are alone. He moves around his desk, leans back against it and folds his arms in front of his broad chest. Like this, he looks more like a corporate executive, an industrial magnate who spends weekends upstate and holidays abroad and goes to exclusive clubs to have dinner with business partners. Harry is pretty sure that’s very far away from the truth, but he’s also sure that, Zayn aside, he’s never met anyone with more secrets. “You’re invaluable to SHIELD, for many reasons. Some would even say you’re irreplaceable. But let me assure you now, if it is brought to my attention that you have put this mission and your team in jeopardy one more time, I will kick your arse to the curb.”

Harry nods stiffly. “I understand, Sir. It was an error of judgment on my part, and I apologize for any disruptions I caused. I promise it won’t happen again.” It’s what Cowell wants to hear, and if needed, Harry knows he can deliver. He wants to get back to work, and he wants to keep busy, even if Dr Watson told him that’s not a solution. Harry just needs to focus on something else for a while.

“I will hold you to that, Captain,” the Director says, as steely-eyed as always, and Harry does not want to openly cross him for a second time. “You’re dismissed.”

He swallows down his salute and turns on his heels with a slightly accelerated pulse. It’s not become easier to deal with Cowell, and he reminds Harry a frightening amount of his old Colonel in managing to make him feel like he’s shrunk back to five foot six. Just when Harry reaches the elevator, Director Cowell addresses him once more.

“Oh, and Captain,” he says, prompting Harry to freeze and turn halfway back to face him, “you shouldn’t forget -- I do have my eyes and ears everywhere.”

Harry isn’t sure if Director Cowell knows or if it’s an empty threat, but it leaves him frazzled enough not to actually look where he’s going once he gets back to the lobby. Zayn told him right away not to wait up for him, some super spy thing keeping him busy all day today and probably tomorrow, and all Harry wants to do now that he’s finally authorized to leave the tower again is run a couple of laps around Central Park, even though it is freezing outside.

So his mind is somewhere else entirely when he, eyes on his feet, collides with someone and nearly sends them flying. Luckily, Harry has good reflexes these days and he manages to reach out and grab a shoulder and steady them, looking up flustered and already uttering an apology.

“I am so sorry, I wasn’t watching –” He cuts off when he gets a look at the person he’s just run into. Dark hair and eyes, impeccable suit and meticulously trimmed beard. “Mr Winston, hello!”

Mr Winston still looks a bit pale and tired, and Harry feels a stab of guilt when he realizes he
hadn’t spared the man a thought in the past few weeks. “Please, no need for formalities,” he says, holding out his hand for Harry to shake. “Call me Ben. You saved my life on probably more than one occasion. It’s a pleasure to see you again, Captain.”

His hands are cold; his grip is firm but brief. “Likewise,” Harry responds. “It’s a surprise to see you in New York. How have you been?”

“As well as circumstances have allowed.” Ben straightens and smoothens out his rumpled lapels, adjusts his tie. It’s been a while since Harry’s been around someone wearing a tie. “But SHIELD’s medical staff are incredibly qualified, so the recovery was a very swift one, thankfully, because there is important business I have to attend to.”

“Is that what brings you to New York?” Harry asks, genuinely interested.

“Among other things,” Ben replies. “SHIELD called me in for a debriefing of the incidents, which I don’t need to tell you about; I’m sure you’re more familiar with the protocol. Hopefully it won’t take too long,” he adds. “I’m hoping to catch up with an old acquaintance of mine. We’ve lost touch for a while, unfortunately, but I’m sure I have a business proposition that will be of interest to him.”

“Well, I don’t want to hold you up, then,” Harry says, and shakes his hand again. “It’s very good to know you’re well and it was very nice to see you.”

“You too, Captain,” Ben smiles, nodding his head once. “It’s been an honor, as always. And I’m sure you and your team are very busy as well, but I would be very keen to show my gratitude. Perhaps dinner? My treat, of course. I hear the newly opened Mexican restaurant in the East Village is superb.”

“That is very kind of you, but really not –”

“I insist,” Ben presses. A few people pass them on their way in, since it’s still fairly early, but they try not to spare them any glances and Harry appreciates their attempt to give them privacy even in the open space that is the lobby. “I’ll be in the States for a couple of weeks, so I really hope we’ll find the opportunity. But now, I don’t want to take away any more of your time; duty always calls, I’m sure. I’ll be in touch, Captain.”

With another nod of his head, he leaves Harry to hurry towards one of the elevators. A woman in a navy blue blazer holds it open for him but rolls her eyes, perhaps already running late, perhaps not a fan of people who hold her up in favour of talking to Captain America. Harry watches the doors slide shut and continues on his way, leaving SHIELD headquarters behind and stepping out into the crisp morning air. He pulls his beanie over his ears and wraps his scarf tighter around his neck, then heads back to the tower.

It’s nice to go out again, take his usual running route through Central Park in the morning instead of using the treadmill. Harry likes it when it’s still early and the streetlamps are shining, sun nothing but a faint suggestion on the horizon that’s hidden by one row of skyscrapers after the other, when there aren’t any people to crowd the sidewalks and he can breathe in air that’s icy and unfiltered and makes his nose burn slightly.

He bakes soda bread for Niall, makes sure Liam stocks a few granola bars in his workshop so that
he doesn’t live off his awful energy drinks, and tries to hold it together. Keeping up a composed façade is probably not the best, but Dr Watson sees through him instantly when she comes back exactly one week after their last talk. It’s a bit surreal to think about how much has changed in the last seven days, and Harry doesn’t want to talk about Louis leaving at all, but as soon as they sit down at his dining table with cups of tea and a tray of poppy seed cookies he whipped up when he couldn’t sleep, it breaks out of him.

Harry remembers Niall telling him that having someone neutral to talk to might be easier from time to time, and Harry guesses he can understand it now. Dr Watson sits back and simply listens, patient and understanding and giving him room to let out his frustration and the anger he directs solely at himself without judging him. She stays quiet for a few more minutes even when he finishes, watching him and being a calm presence and Harry suspects she’s waiting for him to calm down before getting down to business.

“I’m sorry,” she says eventually, and Harry starts.

“You’re not gonna tell me it’s not my fault?” he asks and looks down at the cup between his palms. It’s fennel and aniseed, and Harry doesn’t particularly like the smell or the taste, but he’s run out of everything else and he needs to update his shopping list. There’s no flour either. He can’t work in a kitchen without flour.

“No,” Dr Watson cuts off his thoughts running wild. “I don’t think there’s a point in me saying that. I’m also not surprised.”

It makes Harry blink at her, mildly irritated. “What? Was it that obvious I was screwing it up?”

“No, Harry, that’s not what I mean,” she answers patiently. “I’m not going to tell you that it’s not your fault, but I am telling you that you need to stop thinking of you and him as a co-dependent unit. I am aware that that’s how it was for many years, and that it is something you’re accustomed to. But not all of Louis’ actions are an immediate response to yours.”

“But everything happened after I – I said those things and –” And Harry doesn’t understand. “How is that not responding?”

She has a sip of her tea, apparently not bothered by the taste. Today, she’s in a maroon turtleneck, paired with a chunky teal-coloured necklace, which is a surprisingly lovely combination, Harry notices absentmindedly. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to Louis myself, so I can’t be certain, but from what I gather, he was mostly angry with himself, very angry and frustrated, understandably so, and maybe your words caused those emotions to surface, but they’re not the core of the issue here.”

“Then what is it?” Harry asks, desperation sticking to his voice because he’s been circling around it for weeks and he hasn’t got the answer.

“The core of the issue is that time didn’t stop, for neither of you,” Dr Watson tells him and Harry stops short, because Louis’ voice is echoing in his ears, saying almost the exact same thing and he understood the words then but not the meaning and he isn’t sure he gets it now. “He spent the majority of his life without you, whether you like to admit it or not, and by asking him to just remember the good days, and expecting him to look past the fact that he lived on his own for seventy years, you are invalidating everything he has been through. You want him to be a person that died in 1945.”

It feels like she’s slapped him across the face. It feels like Liam has slapped him across the face in his Iron Man suit, and Harry knows nothing like that actually happened, but his body still throbs.
like a nerve laid open.

Dr Watson isn’t done. “And consequently, you’re also disregarding everything that you’ve been through since his death. You lost him and you never grieved, and you woke up almost seventy years into the future and you still kept going and suddenly, you found out he was alive after all, and you thought you could rewind the tape.” She leans forward, puts her forearms on the table in front of her and cocks her head to the side. “But you are both changed people, and you’ve evolved away from one another. You need to accept that.”

Harry wants to cry, but he thinks he’s finally dried up. “But how? He’s the most important person in my life, and I love him, and I want to help him.”

“And I’m not asking you to forget that,” Dr Watson says and reaches across the table to place a soothing hand on top of Harry’s that won’t stop trembling. “I’m asking you not to pin your recovery on him, because that’s not fair to him and it’s not fair to you either. A relationship’s basis should not be dependency, and that’s exactly what was happening, from what you’ve told me. Does that make sense?”

It does, Harry’s afraid to admit. When he looks back on it now, he gets that while he wanted to make Louis feel safe and welcome and provide a space to recover, he didn’t give him any other options. He guesses he was overwhelming in his care, not giving Louis any room to express what he actually needed instead of what Harry thought he did. And Harry is also starting to understand what Louis was saying to him; he was so sure he’d be okay if only Louis started to remember that he practically suffocated him with his presence. He felt stupid before. He feels really fucking idiotic now.

“Yeah,” he breathes out, then sighs, chest unpleasantly tight. “You know, Zayn told me to let go.”

“And he’s right.” Dr Watson nods. “Letting go is a good thing. Nobody is asking you to forget, but everything that’s happened – it’s done now. You’re here, the world is spinning, and maybe it’s time to get back out there.”

“But what about Louis?”

Dr Watson smiles sadly. “I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do at this point. I think he needs time and space to recover and remember, and I think you need to be your own person again. Have a life beside being a superhero.”

“That’s not gonna be easy,” Harry comments. He feels almost as exhausted as after the battle of New York. It’s quite astounding what some people can achieve with just using words.

“It’s never easy,” Dr Watson concedes and squeezes his hand. “But you’re not alone in this.”

It’s not until December that Harry is put back into action. There’s a plot in the north of Pennsylvania, close to Lake Erie, seemingly abandoned save for a couple of rundown, abandoned sheds, that has grabbed SHIELD’s attention. It’s mostly satellite data that shows suspicious activity -- a change in recorded soil density, a few glitches in electric currents, and something else Liam has pointed out, but Harry can’t remember it exactly. It doesn’t matter much to him either way, because it means he’s got something to do, an opportunity to be useful and redeem himself.

The sheer size of the complex that’s apparently hidden beneath the surface suggests it might be the
rats’ nest they’ve been searching for, so the Avengers are all aboard the Quinjet in magic-cap mode while the STRIKE team approaches from the ground. Liam is in the pilot’s seat, delegated to the second row unless something unexpected happens. He’s equipped all of them with bugs to be placed on the facility’s host so he can have JARVIS infiltrate their system to swipe data and cause all kinds of problems.

They’re approaching the collection of sheds that most likely marks the entrance to HYDRA’s underground base. Niall is doing a last-minute check-up on the arrows in his quiver, fine lines appearing on his forehead in concentration, clad in a black uniform similar to Zayn’s, who is sitting to his right and opposite Harry. He seems utterly relaxed, arms folded and eyes closed, but Harry can tell from the tight clench of his jaw that he’s not as calm as he appears.

“One minute ‘till I drop you, guys!” Liam calls from the front. “Better get your asses ready.”

“My arse is none of your business, Payno,” Niall shoots back with a manic grin, buzzing in his skin and readying his bow, “unless you want in, eh? Didn’t think you were the type to –”

“Niall.” Zayn cuts him off with a firm tone, but the soft twitch of his mouth betrays his fondness. “We’re a bit pressed for time, so please save the jokes for later and grab a rope.”

Niall shrugs and then winks at Harry before standing next to Zayn where the ramp is beginning to be lowered to bring them closer to the ground. Attaching a nylon rope to his belt, Niall shoulders his bow, pulls on his gloves and swings himself over the edge and out into the night. Zayn turns to Harry.

“Captain,” he says when Harry steps up to him. The air whirling around his ears is harsh and icy and Harry adjusts the scarf holding his hair in place, tightening the knot sitting at his neck. His shield is fastened to his back. Before he can jump, Zayn catches him with a hand to his shoulder.

“You should prepare yourself. Mentally,” he adds when he sees Harry’s questioning gaze. “Because if this is what we think it is…” Zayn trails off, apparently needing to think about how to phrase it, which is a rarity. Zayn is quiet and composed and he always knows what to say. Hesitancy isn’t really in his book. “They might have kept Tomlinson here on various occasions in the sixties and seventies. Perhaps also in the last decade. So – be prepared. We need you to be at the top of your game.”

Harry can’t do anything but nod. He realizes he’s gone the last few hours without consciously thinking of Louis, which is a first, but he figures that’s also a sign of progress. It only takes him another moment to understand what Zayn is implying and for his blood to run ever colder, not letting it show as he tells Zayn, “I know what we’re getting into,” and jumps after Niall.

The ground is nearly frozen. The impact of Harry’s feet hitting the ground would’ve shattered any normal person’s ankles, but he straightens again without pause and glances at Niall, who is already heading towards the largest shed with a curled back, bow in his left hand, hardly visible against the backdrop of the night. The Quinjet lifts off again almost soundlessly just as Zayn drops down next to Harry, graceful as ever and running a hand through his windswept hair.

Harry taps his earpiece, lets his military training take over. “STRIKE team, come in. What’s your position?”

There’s a bit of static before he has the Commander’s voice in his ear. “Approaching from southeast, perimeter is clear, no activity detected. Five minutes tops, Captain.”

He nods at Zayn. “Roger that. Do a sweep of the buildings once you’re here. Agent Malik, Agent
Horan, and I will proceed.”

The intercom flicks off and Zayn and Harry follow Niall to the side of the shed where he’s peeking through the cracks.

“Looks deserted to me,” Niall tells them, keeping his voice low and glancing over his shoulder.

“That was always a possibility,” Zayn responds. His eyes are flickering around; his stance is tense, right hand resting on his handgun. “HYDRA might have abandoned this base years ago, but I think it’s unlikely since our satellites picked up too much activity. We’re going in, but be ready to be met with resistance. Liam? Has JARVIS found any alarm systems?”

“You’re clear,” Liam’s voice fizzles through to them. “If there are any, they’re underground.”

“Keep that in mind,” Zayn urges them before he presses his body against the morose wooden planks that make up the outer walls of the shed and moves towards its front. Harry goes after him and Niall keeps an eye out towards the open field, bow ready and arrow pulled back, ready to hit any target once Niall lets go of the bowstring. Harry stays close behind Zayn. He can draw his shield in a fraction of a second, but if needed, he can do a lot of damage with his bare hands.

“I’m going in.” Zayn puts a gloved palm to the double-winged door and looks at Harry out of the corner of his eye. “Watch my back.”

The doors open with a hauntingly drawn-out creak. It’s a clear night, so up until this point, their mission hasn’t needed artificial light, but the inside of the small barn is pitch black. The damp, muggy smell hits Harry’s nose even from where he’s standing, and it’s even stronger when he moves to hover between the two doorposts, shielding Zayn with his body. He can’t afford to turn around, but considering that Zayn remains calm and quiet, Harry concludes that the shed is empty.

Only a moment later, Zayn says, “All clear,” and Harry feels Niall move close to his side, eagle eyes still swiping across the open space around them. Harry breathes calmly in and out and backs into the dark shed. He turns around only when Niall has slipped into his previous position.

Zayn is shining a small flashlight around, shedding light onto a floor overgrown with weeds, rusty vehicle parts stashed in a corner, everything else entirely bare save for the thick layer of dust. The particles are making the air dense. Harry swallows around the itch in the back of his throat, comes to a halt right beside Zayn, whose eyes are glued to a spot on the floor. Zayn’s gaze flickers towards Harry, then he directs the small cone of light to the spot, where, as Harry can see now, there’s a small rectangular space that’s oddly clear of weeds and roots.

“STRIKE team’s here,” Niall calls from the door and if Harry hadn’t been listening out for it, he’d have missed the soft clicks echoing through the night, indicating that their backup has readied various weapons to live up to its name.

“Perfect timing,” Zayn comments and kneels down as the STRIKE team presumably surrounds the building and breaks off into groups to investigate the other structures. His hands wipe over the flat surface. The particles are making the air dense. Harry swallows around the itch in the back of his throat, comes to a halt right beside Zayn, whose eyes are glued to a spot on the floor. Zayn’s gaze flickers towards Harry, then he directs the small cone of light to the spot, where, as Harry can see now, there’s a small rectangular space that’s oddly clear of weeds and roots.

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“And we’re in,” Zayn says, taking a cautionary step back when the trapdoor slides open.
“Looks pretty up to date if you ask me.” Niall joins them, bow lowered but still ready, looking at the revealed and illuminated staircase that is leading below the ground. “They even left the lights on for us.”

“I’m going down,” Harry says when nothing happens for a minute, pulling the shield off his back and holding it in front of his chest. If there’s a firing squad welcoming them at the bottom of the stairs, he’s at least got something to hide behind. Niall and Zayn nod their consent and Harry sets his right foot onto the first step.

Concentrating and alert, Harry takes the first two dozen steps before he has to take a U-turn, keeping close to the near wall. Another two dozen steps and the air becomes surprisingly fresh as Harry prepares himself to find agents waiting around the next corner. Foot on the last step, he takes a breath, tightens his hold on the shield, and steps forward.

There’s a noise, a surprised intake of air, just before a HYDRA agent clad in complete uniform whirs around in a long corridor and shoots his handgun at Harry. The bullet ricochets off Harry’s shield and hits the wall with a crash, and after weeks of not knowing how to react or what to do or what to say and practically turning his skin inside out – this is something Harry knows how to do. He doesn’t allow the agent a chance to recover or make a run for it. With a practiced motion of his left arm, he hurls the shield at him. It knocks his head back and Harry is already darting forward to collect it before it hits the ground.

The HYDRA agent falls like a sack of potatoes, unconscious, just as Niall and Zayn catch up to Harry. They have time only to exchange a meaningful look before a pair of agents is heading their way. Harry makes quick work of them, knocking them both out before they have drawn their weapons.

“Well.” Harry picks up his shield and turns to his teammates. “I guess this base is active.”

The STRIKE team joins them a moment later with thundering footsteps and they make it to the end of the corridor before splitting up, the Avengers going straight ahead while SHIELDs special forces go left and right to reach the lower levels. They have their own orders from Cowell. Liam wants them to get to the host before any important files can be destroyed.

Metal doors are at the end of the corridor, an elevator leading to a lower level and deeper into the earth and there are undoubtedly more agents waiting for them, this time with readied weapons. The doors slide open and Zayn steps forward to place a small, circular device in the center of the cubicle, then sends the elevator down.

“What was that?” Harry asks, because Zayn operates with a few quirky tools, but he hasn’t seen this before.

Zayn apparently checks the time, keeps his eyes on his watch to count the seconds. “Payne wanted me to give HYDRA his regards,” is all he says before signalling that it’s all right for them to go on.

Harry pries open the doors and jumps down the shaft, Niall and Zayn sliding down the ropes as he yanks off the elevator’s top and climbs through the narrow opening, landing in a crouch behind his shield to be protected against a potential hail of bullets. When nothing comes, he straightens slowly and looks straight ahead where the doors are open. Behind it is a small pile of passed-out agents.

“Nice touch, Payno,” Niall mutters appreciatively after he’s sidled up to Harry, a slight sweat on his brow. “Remind me to get some of these,” he adds, nudging Harry with his bow before cracking his knuckles and walking ahead. Niall fluidly draws another arrows and keeps his eyes ahead as
Zayn and Harry follow, anticipating another flow of agents that doesn’t come.

“They don’t have an infinite number of people at their disposal,” Zayn tells him just as they round a corner and find another empty corridor. “We’ve been tracking down their bases for months. I’m sure HYDRA thought it necessary to distribute their troops more evenly in case of an attack.”

“So this isn’t the rats’ nest,” Harry concludes with a sidelong glance. There are a few doors on either side of the hallway; none of them locked with a security code, so he assumes what they’re looking for is still up ahead.

“There are a lot of nests,” Zayn is quick to reply, steely gaze ahead where Niall is leading the way. “You know what they say about rats?”

“I’m not sure.”

There’s an enforced door just at the end, sensor pad on the side that most likely requires fingerprints or a retina scan, and Niall has stopped in front of it, already attaching another one of Liam’s gadgets that is supposed to disable the system without them having to spoon out anyone’s eye.

“The thing about rats,” Zayn continues, giving Harry a meaningful look, “is if you see just one, you can be sure there are thousands more within a one-mile radius.”

As if on cue, Harry registers movement out of the corner of his eyes and it’s only instinct and his above-average reflexes that make him leap forward, taking Zayn down to the ground with him, which is just in time, because less than a second later, there are bullets flying over their heads. There’s nowhere to go, and there isn’t enough time to really look up and take in the situation, but there’s no need, it seems. Niall, pressed to the wall and narrowly avoiding the salvo, shoots an arrow at their lonesome disrupter. It sticks to his chest and fizzles, and a beat later the agent’s body starts to twitch and he sinks to the floor, electrocuted.

Harry breathes out a sigh of relief and sits back on his haunches. “Thanks,” he tells Niall, and holds a hand out for Zayn, pulling him to his feet when Harry gets up himself, because he did crush him a little bit.

“No worries,” Niall shrugs. “Good teammates are hard to come by these days,” and he turns back to the door, where in the meanwhile, Liam’s tech has taken care of business, putting the lock out of service, leaving the door to be pushed open without any more disruptions. “Now, this looks more like it.”

The door opens to a dimly lit, rectangular room that seems to stretch on for at least fifty yards. A narrow path in a sea of dusty data carriers leads to what Harry assumes is the host, a couple of screens on an elevated platform, wires stretching out around it like a spider’s web. Shadows are swallowing up every corner and appear to be stretching towards them. The air smells – it smells like electricity, charged and heavy, and Harry feels every hair on his body stand on end.

Zayn rushes past him while Harry is still taking everything in, walking towards the center of the room with determined steps. Throwing a look over his shoulder, Harry sees that Niall still has his bow ready, blocking the entrance and making sure nobody is going to shoot them in the back, so he follows Zayn, eyes darting across the room, shield gripped tightly in his left hand. The console is a shiny semicircle and Zayn leans over it, attacks the keyboard with quick fingers, firing up the screens and lighting them up with codes.

“Shit,” he swears not moments later, “fucking shit,” and Zayn presses Liam’s bug to the console,
taps his earpiece.

“What’s happening?” Harry asks, because as much as he’s still trying to catch up with technology, this is a level that will forever elude him.

“The hard drive is deleting itself,” Zayn says through gritted teeth. “It must have a self-destruction mode that we triggered when we broke down the security system.” He hammers down a few more lines of code before addressing Liam. “Payne, get JARVIS in here right now. We might be able to salvage some.”

JARVIS’ tinny voice echoes through the room only a second later. “Good evening, gentleman. Oh my, this does look a mess, doesn’t it?”

“How much can you save?”

“I’m afraid I’m only able to secure thirty-seven percent,” JARVIS replies, while his own codes take over the various screens, turning the sickly green font into a bright blue that dips the room into a cold light. “Files may be incomplete.”

“We’ll take what we can get,” Harry hears Zayn say, but his eyes have stumbled over a door hidden away on the far left hand side, barely visible in the ghostly glow of the screens.

It’s odd, Harry thinks as Zayn tinkers away, conversing with Liam and JARVIS simultaneously, that there seems to be something that needs to be kept even safer than all this data. He focuses on this door and wonders what might lie behind it, what HYDRA would want to hide perhaps even from their own agents, and it’s like honey dripping from a spoon, thoughts gooey and stuck together, taking a while to trickle to the very bottom of Harry’s mind. It suddenly hits him, and he feels like Niall just hit him in the back with one of his arrows, sending electric shocks through his body.

He’s darting towards the door before he’s consciously aware of doing so, breath stuck halfway up his chest and an uncomfortable sense of dread seeping into his bones like quicksand. There’s not an inch of Harry that bothers to hesitate before he kicks the door in, pulverizing the lock and sending it flying. The space he steps into is dark, but it must be covered in tiles, because the noise of the metal plank crashing to the ground sounds hollow in his ears and gets thrown around until it’s multiplied innumerable times. The air is vibrating.

Faintly, he registers that the other two curse and that one of them follows, but Harry only fumbles blindly for a light switch, finally finding it to his right and he’s done well not thinking about Louis every second of every day, not imagining what he was up to or what had been done to him, but – that’s all blown to pieces. God knows Harry’s taken blows and stomached them somehow. Yet the neon lamps flicker on with a low buzz, cold and clinical and illuminating what Harry is sure he can never unsee.

There is a chair in the center of the room and Harry knows with a sinking, sickening feeling in his gut that it’s the chair; the one Louis had talked about, the one he’d been so terrified of, and now Harry understands why. It’s a horrible contraption, hard metal and leather, two dozen buckles hanging open that had strapped Louis to it, exposing him to his torturers and leaving him entirely defenceless. Open wires are dangling from the sides, some connected to a work station that sits a few feet away, but most attached to –

“Oh, shit,” Niall says next to him.

Harry’s blood runs cold when he looks at it; these curved metal plates that embrace the headpiece,
insides speckled with tiny spikes that served to direct electroshocks into Louis’ brain to make him forget, to turn him into a puppet, a mindless weapon. He walks towards it in a trance, light-headed and heavy-hearted, and it was one thing to imagine it all and another thing entirely to see the physical proof of what’s happened, and distractedly, Harry remembers Dr Watson telling him that he was unwittingly invalidating what Louis had been put through. In retrospect, Harry can understand why he’d done it, and how he’d been able to do it.

Seeing this, Harry is never going to make that mistake again.

“Come on, Cap.” Niall shifts in the doorway, tense and unsettled. “We need to get a move on.”

But Harry can’t move. His eyes flicker up ahead where, against the far wall of this room that’s making him sick to his very core, a small cubicle is placed, big enough to fit only one human being, scuttle at eyelevel. There’s still ice clinging to the glass. Harry doesn’t realize he’s moved until his fingers latch onto the indents on either side of the steel door and with a surge of panic in his chest, he rips it off like it’s plastic.

For the tiniest fraction of a second, Harry is downright terrified that somehow, HYDRA have managed to snatch Louis up again, putting him back into cryogenic suspension after frying his brain once more. But the cryo tank is empty and inactive and all that remains, Harry recognizes with horror, are scratch marks scarring the inside. He knows what it’s like to freeze being at peace with the world he was leaving behind. Louis hadn’t even been at peace with himself; he hadn’t even been aware of himself.

All this time, Harry’s anger has been considerably abstract in the way he couldn’t direct it at anything or anyone. It was an unfiltered feeling, not lessened by spending hours and hours of battering punching bags, simmering deep within him. But now it’s rising to the surface and it’s boiling over and Harry feels overwhelmed with a sort of rage that makes him want to track those bastards down, every single one of them, and tear them limb from limb until they bleed and scream and suffer.

His hands shake and his head is far away from being clear, mind without real focus, and he can’t hold it back anymore. Harry doesn’t have the people responsible in front of him, but he can make sure that these machines can never be used on anyone ever again. He strikes out and the steel dents and groans beneath his fist and he does it again, and again, and again, until the cryo tank is nothing but scrap metal and Harry can feel the cold seeping through his gloves.

Blood is rushing in his ears when he spins around and throws the shield, splitting the work station in half. It comes flying back to him and Harry uses it again to break the chair’s socket, watches with a satisfying lurch how the chair crashes to the floor. Harry steps up to it, looks at the headpiece and the spikes and crushes everything with his foot without hesitation. With his pulse thundering, he dismembers the chair, just rips it apart until the floor is covered in its parts.

“Cap!”

Harry’s head snaps up. His chest is heaving. Niall and Zayn are standing in the doorway with wide eyes and Harry takes a rattling breath that doesn’t reach his lungs. He feels like he’s going to pass out any second. His hands are burning and when he glances down at them, he sees that he’s shredded his gloves; his knuckles are raw and bloody, red rivulets trickling down his fingers.

“Harry,” Zayn says again with force, “we need to go.”
They make it back to the Quinjet without any further incident, leaving the STRIKE team to clear out the place and take surviving agents into SHIELD custody. If Liam sees the state Harry is in, he doesn’t comment on it, just takes the bug Niall hands him and puts in coordinates for New York City. Zayn kneels down in front of Harry once he’s sat down and takes care of his bloody hands, cleaning and wrapping them up.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says once he’s done and pulls his headband off to wipe his face with it. “I’m just – I shouldn’t have lost control like that.”

Zayn moves to sit opposite him, assessing him quietly for a moment before saying, “I’m not going to report this to Cowell. You didn’t jeopardize this mission.”

“I could have easily, though.”

“But you didn’t,” Zayn insists, and adds with a sigh, “you just had an emotional reaction to what you saw, and frankly, I don’t blame you.”

“You don’t?” Harry can’t help but ask, and Zayn shakes his head.

“No,” he says and pauses for a moment. “A bit over two years ago, I had a run-in with former handlers of mine, from my time with the Red Room.” At Harry’s raised brows, he elaborates, “It was a training program by the KGB. They snatched children from orphanages and refugee camps and trained them to be spies. Needless to say, they used rather… questionable methods on us. After I changed sides, one of my first missions for SHIELD was to infiltrate a group of illegal arms dealers that were affiliated with HYDRA, north of Peshawar. And they were there. So one night, before I left with the collected intel, I went into their tents and shot them in the head.”

Zayn taps the bridge of his nose. “Right between the eyes. I put the cold barrel of my gun to their heads, and waited until each opened their eyes, so that they knew it was me who killed them.”

“Jesus,” Harry gapes at him and Zayn eventually lowers his eyes to the floor, leaning back and folding his hands in his lap, once again the picture of composure.

“So trust me, Captain,” he tells Harry, “I don’t blame you.”

It’s Dr. Watson’s suggestion -- or rather, Caroline’s, as she insists after their fourth session together. Harry can’t say that he’s entertained similar thoughts and he still has trouble even thinking it, so when Caroline asks him, “How have you been dealing with your homosexuality?” – he finds himself staring at her with his jaw hanging open and his mind screeching to a halt.

“What are you…I mean what –” and he has to awkwardly clear his throat. “What do you mean?”

“You grew up in a very different social climate,” Caroline elaborates. “Did you struggle with realizing you were romantically and sexually attracted to men? Did you find it hard to accept that side of you?”

“Not really,” Harry says without having to think that hard about it. “It was just Louis, you know? I didn’t think much about anyone else and I didn’t think much about what it meant. I just loved him – still love him. And he loved me. We didn’t really think much else of it.”
Caroline smiles at that, and Harry feels his face warm up. “Has anything changed for you since then? Have you given your sexual identity any thought? We’ve opened up the conversation quite drastically since the forties, I’m sure you’ve realized. Bisexuality, pansexuality…” She trails off and tilts her head and Harry tries not to flush.

“No, I think I’m still, like – I haven’t thought about anyone else. But –” His throat feels dry. “I mean, I’m pretty – gay, I think.” He hopes he’s not bright red in the face. Harry doesn’t know what his problem is, because he’s not a prude and he’s not ashamed, but there are still so many inhibitions in place and he can’t seem to rid himself of them.

“How was your experience in the military?” Caroline continues after a beat, apparently not bothered by his stuttering. “It’s a very different environment, a hypermasculine environment at that, and you were put into its center. It’s an image that’s lived on until this day.”

“It was always just Louis,” Harry repeats. “So until I found Louis, I didn’t really think much about anything else. And I guess out of the two of us, I was a bit apprehensive, a bit cautious,” he remembers, thinking back on the rapid increase of his pulse whenever they’d manage to steal a moment alone and how terrified he’d been of being found out. “Just at first, though, and then we formed the Howling Commandoes, and Louis trusted them, and so I did as well and I never really understood how they knew, how they could tell – but they did. But they had our backs, regardless.”

“That’s very lovely.”

“Yeah,” Harry says. “We were family, you know? For those few years, we were all we had, and I think doing what we were doing…it put things into perspective. At least that’s what James said to me.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Caroline responds with another genuine smile. Harry still feels a soft sting in his chest, thinking about his friends and comrades, but they’ve all lived a long and happy life, and Harry has gained enough sense to stop feeling sorry for himself. “The reason I’m asking,” Caroline continues, “is because I think it would be a good idea for you to explore your identity as a gay man, but also a gay veteran.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are support groups for non-straight veterans where they are able to share their experiences. The VA hospital I work for, for example, is very keen to provide a safe environment for everyone,” she explains. “There are regular meetings, people chat, about anything really, and I think it might be good for you to explore your identity as a gay man, but also a gay veteran.”

And that’s why Harry is now standing on a sidewalk in Brooklyn, achingly close to his old neighbourhood, beanie pulled over his ears and hands in the pockets of his coat. They’ve had a few warmer days that have melted the snow, but the weather is still bleak and grey and Harry feels nervous like he hasn’t in a while. It’s a multi-story brick building cover in flyers that advertise for Yoga and Pilates and organic bakeries and part of Harry wants to turn around and run back to the tower as fast as he can. But he’s supposed to meet Caroline here and he promised her he’d go at least once and Harry – he does want to get better, is the thing. He doesn’t want to spend the rest of his life hiding away.

He looks up from his scuffed boots to see Caroline walk up to him, holding the gloved hand of another rather stunning woman who’s got big, loopy earrings poking out from underneath her hat. Harry knows he probably gapes at her for a few long seconds, but he tries to compose himself and school his face into a more neutral expression. He can’t help the sheepish tone clinging to his voice
when he tells her, “I nearly made a run for it.”

Caroline smiles and gets up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. “But you didn’t,” she says. “This is my wife, Julie.”

“Oh,” Harry says stupidly, blinking at them and fumbling to take off his gloves, reaching out to shake Julie’s outstretched hand. “I didn’t – it’s so nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Captain,” Julie says with a smile and red cheeks. “It’s an honour to meet you.” Her Bostonian accent is more prominent than Caroline’s, and Harry has an easier time picking it up. “I’m only dropping Caroline off on my way to work, and I’m really running late, but you have to come and have dinner with us sometime.”

“Thanks, I –” Harry stumbles over his tongue, “that would be lovely.”

Julie grins widely, fine lines around her mouth and eyes becoming more visible as she beams at him before turning towards Caroline and pecking her on the lips. “I’ll see you tonight, babe. Don’t forget, we’re out of washing powder. And your dad called about Boxing Day earlier, so give him a ring, yeah?”

She waves at Harry and takes off down the street, disappearing behind a corner after a minute. It’s still early, and it’s a Saturday, icy air giving the morning sun a frosty glow. Harry breathes out, a small cloud forming in front of his face when he turns to face Caroline, who’s rubbing her hands together in an attempt to warm up. They’re alone on the sidewalk and it’s soothingly quiet.

“She seems wonderful,” he tells Caroline as he follows her to double-winged door leaning into the building. It screeches in its hinges as it opens to a long hallway that is all shiny floor and brightly coloured walls adorned with photographs and artwork. It looks lively and welcoming, but Harry still can’t shake his anxiety.

“She is,” Caroline muses, leading the way. There’s a door at the end, slightly ajar, and Harry can hear faint chatter.

“How’d you meet? Is she military as well?”

“Oh no, Julie runs a small concept store on Bedford Avenue. We met through a mutual friend, now – God – almost ten years ago? Got married a day after they passed marriage equality in New York State. Our daughter’s nearly three.” Even from this angle, Harry can see her glow, and he finds it overwhelming, the idea of marriage and children and so many opportunities. There is still this small corner of his mind that remains positive, hoping that maybe some day he can share all of that with Louis.

“She isn’t a fan of the US Army,” Caroline continues as their steadily getting closer to the room Harry assumes the meetings are held in. “But she’s a big fan of you and your headscarves. She’s even added a little Alexander McQueen silk scarf feature to the shop.”

“Who’s Alexander McQueen?”

“Oh, honey,” Caroline chuckles. “She’s gonna have so much fun with you.”

With that, she pushes the door open and Harry’s instantly hit by warmth and an earthy smell mixed with cinnamon and nutmeg. A window front on the far side of the rectangular room allows enough natural light to fill every corner. There’s a small group of people standing on the left-hand side, crowded around a table that’s covered with a holiday-themed tablecloth. A few trays and bowls hold seasonal baked goods: cinnamon rolls, gingerbread cookies, some slices of fruit loaf.
Someone has neatly assembled plastic cups and three thermos flasks with what Harry assumes is a variety of tea and coffee, as well as two jugs of milk and a stack of paper napkins.

It hits Harry, right then, what he’s about to do. He’s been nervous up to this point, but now it seems to amplify by a hundred. He feels his heart beating all the way up to his throat and he digs his heels in, frozen to the spot. Usually, he doesn’t mind meeting new people, even if he prefers a more familiar environment. But this isn’t just meeting people. And Harry agreed, Harry wants to do this, but he’s also downright terrified, because these people aren’t Niall or Liam or Zayn and they aren’t Caroline and he’s – he’s never come out to anyone else before.

“Harry.” Caroline has noticed him stopping and turns around, walks back to where he’s standing, laying a gentle hand on his arm. The small group of people has started to turn their heads towards them, but their expressions give nothing away. “You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with,” she says with a lowered voice. “You can go home if you’re not ready. And you can stay here, but not say anything about yourself. You don’t have to share anything.”

Harry takes a shaky breath. “No, I just – I just need a minute. I want to do this.” Because he does. He’s not ashamed and he doesn’t want to hide and he trusts Caroline, is the thing, probably more than he trusts himself at the moment. This seems like the right thing to do.

“This is a safe place,” Caroline continues to assure him calmly. “They’re good people.”

Harry nods jaggedly. “I know. I know. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Ready?”

He’s not. But Harry doesn’t want to keep standing a couple of feet away when everyone’s clearly already seen him. And they’re veterans, he reminds himself, and so far, every member of the military he’s encountered, active or not, has been nothing but respectful and calm. So he really doesn’t know why he’s as anxious as he is.

“Yeah,” he breathes and keeps close to Caroline as she makes a beeline for the group of people standing in a rough circle. Walking closer and clearing his head a bit, Harry can see that there are fourteen people gathered, men outnumbering women but not by much. They’ve all got easy smiles on their faces, some holding a cup of coffee and some talking quietly until Caroline walks up to them. The circle opens up a little to accommodate the two of them, but Harry is quite relieved that Caroline decides not to slot right in.

“Good morning everyone,” she greets the group, opening the buttons of her coat and apparently making sure that she looks everyone in the eyes. “Seems like winter is coming, right, so how about you all grab a hot drink for yourself and we get this party on the road? The sooner we can all be back home in our beds, the better.” Caroline turns to Harry with a smile, placing a hand on his elbow. “This is Harry,” she adds without making a fuss. “He’ll join us for today.”

They don’t make a fuss either, for which Harry is grateful when he tries to plaster on a tense smile and gives a small wave and everyone is quick to grab a drink and take a seat in the arranged circle of chairs in the center of the room. Harry feels unsteady on his legs when he approaches the last empty chair between a lanky young man in a novelty sweater and a woman with bright red lipstick and, as he sees when he sits down, staggeringly high and pointy heels. He wonders distractedly how she had managed to walk here, considering the frozen sidewalks.

“Right,” Caroline starts them off, clapping her hands once to get attention. “Let’s get going then. Anyone who wants to go first?”
The woman next to Harry raises her hand immediately and lets out a sigh when Caroline signals her to start. “Well, unfortunately I live with my mom in between tours, and since the last time, she’s gone on this crazy macrobi-whatever diet, so she doesn’t eat dairy and she doesn’t eat carbs or, you know, anything that’s tasty. Basically, she drove me nuts, so I took everything she would eat and made pies out of that.” She starts twirling a dark strand of hair around her finger. “And they were really good. I know it’s just baking, but I felt really accomplished and it’s another thing I can add to my list, you know? It’s hard to get up some days, but putting makeup on and some nice clothes and now baking the bread in the morning…it’s a new routine.”

“I’d love a recipe,” a middle-aged man throws in. “My partner’s allergic to gluten and I’m an absolute disaster in the kitchen. He used our blender to make a smoothie in the morning and the noise had me looking for my Glock.”

The conversation flows naturally after that, Caroline only jumping in with the occasional question and prompt. A woman with an artificial foot talks about phantom pains and physical therapy. A man in what Harry assumes is mid-twenties explains how disconnected he feels from his ex-boyfriend and friends, and another one who doesn’t look much older says he’s afraid of coming out to his comrades. And as the stories go on and on, every person outlining a different set of demons they’re facing every day in a world that’s still not ready to fully accept them, Harry is starting to feel more and more insignificant and his problems inappropriate.

All of these people are going through the same things Harry is going through, or at least very similar things, and they’re doing this while dealing with normal day-to-day life, having to take care of not only themselves, but also partners, children, and other family members and friends. They don’t have the luxury of a multi-billion dollar tower and not having to worry about paying bills and choosing not to face the world if they don’t feel up to it.

Up until this day, Harry has repeatedly refused to interact with the public, mainly because he doesn’t want to put on a mask and he doesn’t want to pretend to be someone he’s not, and now he’s sitting in a room full of people who’ve not hesitated to treat him like anyone else, facing a woman who has shown him nothing but understanding and support and unlimited kindness, and suddenly he realizes that it might be quite all right for him just to be himself. He doesn’t need to put on an act or a brave face. All Harry needs to do, he guesses, is show that he’s one of them. That without the fancy uniform and shield, he’s just a regular guy with a lot of baggage.

It’s quieted down somewhat, but all Harry hears is the thundering of his heart, reverberating inside his entire body and his skin is burning, so many sets of eyes directed at him and it shouldn’t be hard, it really shouldn’t be this difficult just to be honest, but Harry still needs another moment, a handful of breaths, before he finds his voice.

“Hi, um,” he starts shakily, not really knowing where to look, and staring at his boots is not an option. “I’m Harry. Um, I was actually born quite close to this place and I guess it’s…nice to be back.” Harry takes another trembling breath and lifts his gaze. Caroline is looking at him with a soft smile. She gives him a nod. “And I lost – I lost my boyfriend in the war.”

Just like when he came out to Liam and Niall, the world doesn’t end and no hole opens beneath his feet to swallow him whole. He doesn’t know why he’s still expecting God’s wrath to rain down on him. Even when he’d still gone to church every Sunday, he hadn’t shaken with fear when Father Cleary had condemned sodomy in his sermons. Harry needs to stop thinking that this is a part of himself he can’t share with others, and he needs to stop believing that he can’t talk about the relationship that he and Louis had shared, because it was the best part of Harry’s past life and it’s still the best part of himself. He’s felt how hiding that did his head in.
“And, um,” he continues shakily, still trying to find his verbal footing, “kind of everyone else, after that. I’ve not really been coping at all until just recently, especially when I’m left to my own devices.” Harry swallows down another jumpy breath that tickles in his throat and his neck feels like it’s on fire from everyone looking at him. He catches Caroline’s eyes again. “I’ve been talking to Caroline and that’s been helpful and – and I guess I’ve been baking a lot too,” he adds, glancing at the red-lipped lady to his left. “Soda bread, mostly. My – friend Niall is Irish, and he eats a loaf per day, or at least close to that.”

“I’ve tried baking soda bread before,” she jumps straight in, not missing a beat, and Harry doesn’t heave a sigh of relief, but it’s close. “I’m Daisy, by the way. So nice to meet you. But back to the soda bread. Mine is always really dense and heavy and I can’t figure out why.”

“It’s probably over-kneaded,” Harry is quick to reply. This is something he’d be happy to discuss all day. The knot in his chest begins to loosen and it gets a bit easier to breathe. “I just mix it with a butter knife and don’t really knead it before I shape the loaf.”

Daisy hums, looking rather pleased, and gives him a wink. “I’ll grill you about that after,” and the conversation flows on without stopping once more.

Harry is quite baffled. He’s not sure what he expected, but certainly not this. The tension that has been clinging to his spine all day is slowly falling away; Harry can almost feel it seeping through the back of his sweater and dripping down his chair, disappearing through the cracks in the floor. He can lean back a bit more and enjoy listening to others talk without dread sitting heavy in his belly and even though it’s not as spectacularly liberating as some people may expect, he feels calmer than he has in a long time.

It’s just over an hour after he first walked in when Caroline wraps up the conversation and people start getting to their feet. Harry, strangely enough, feels a bit dazed and unsteady still and is one of the last people walking over to the coffee table, grabbing his chair in one hand to stack it away on the side. Just as he’s shrugging on his coat and searching for Caroline in the small crowd, he sees Daisy, out of the corner of his eye, come up to him, tailed by the guy who was sitting on his right.

“Don’t slip away before telling me the secrets of soda bread baking,” she says and winks again, putting on a navy blue beret. She ties a matching scarf around her neck and raises her brows at Harry when he’s too slow to answer.

Harry still needs to polish up on normal social interaction with people who aren’t spies, assassins, or actual geniuses, and he’s aware he’s awkward at the best of times. “I could – I could give you the recipe at the next meeting,” he suggests. “It’s not that hard.”

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“He’s tall and his hair is done up in a way that reminds Harry of how Zayn likes to style his when he’s got time. There’s an array of slim, silver necklaces around his neck. “Hi.” He reaches out a hand. “I’m Nick.”

“I’m Nick.” he replies superfluously and shakes Nick’s hand. “Nice to meet you. And no, I mean, I think I’d quite like to come again. It was nice.”

“You haven’t tasted the coffee then,” Nick says with a smirk. “Because that’s fucking dreadful.”

Next to him, Daisy gasps and slaps his chest. “Don’t swear in front of a national icon,” she hisses, prompting Nick to bark out a laugh and Harry to feel warmth rising to his cheeks. “You’re quite literally defiling the poster you probably had on your bedroom wall.”
“Oh, that’s fine,” Harry throws in quickly, because he is not as wholesome as so many people would like to believe. “I don’t mind.”

“It was a poster of Tom Cruise, thank you,” Nick corrects her. “Top Gun. I like a classic.”

Daisy turns back to Harry with a dry tone to her voice. “Sure you’d like to come back? This one doesn’t have an off switch. Don’t get him started on his new boyfriend.”

“He’s an actor,” Nick jumps right in as if to prove her point. “He’s on Broadway at the moment in an adaptation of *A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder*. They won a Tony Award.” There’s something about his expression that reminds Harry of how Niall looks whenever Zayn is within a hundred-yard radius. “He’s brilliant,” Nick continues as Daisy rolls her eyes pointedly, which he either doesn’t notice or is happy to ignore. “If you fancy a change of scenery, you should come see a matinée show, if you’re into theater.”

“If you haven’t scared him away before now, you’ll scare him away then,” Daisy comments and buttons up her coat, adjusts her scarf. “How about a baking crash course first? And some coffee that’s not brown piss like this one.” She drops her plastic cup in the trash to underline the statement.

“That’d be lovely,” Harry replies. “Though I might have to work up to that.”

Nick claps a hand on his shoulder, a few rings catching the overhead light and shining with it. “We’ve all been there. Trust me, we’ve all been there.”

Harry takes a longer route back to Manhattan, keeping his beanie pulled down low and his shoulders hunched to slip by without drawing attention to himself. The air is still fresh and crisp, but life is flooding into it; smells, noises, the morning rush of a city that doesn’t ever rest. He thinks there might be life flooding back into him as well.

Christmas creeps up on him. Harry doesn’t pay attention to the days and weeks in between his meetings with Caroline and the group sessions in Brooklyn and a short hostage situation off the coast of Panama, which takes up a good chunk of time. But there’s suddenly a tree up in the common area, incredibly tall and decorated with miniature gadgets Liam must’ve have created and a few elegant, silver ornaments that are undoubtedly Sophia’s doing. And suddenly, there’s a small pile of presents under it and Liam takes off to spend a few days in Malibu.

Suddenly, it’s the twenty-fourth of December, and it’s Louis’ birthday, and Harry spends the first couple of hours after midnight sitting upright in his bed, clutching Louis’ dog tags to his chest, crying quietly as it starts to snow once more.

It’s almost white outside when Harry comes up from the gym after a thorough workout and enters the communal living room. He’s thinking of calling Niall and Zayn down for a late breakfast, asking if they’re up for watching a few movies together, because as much as this is a bittersweet day for Harry, he doesn’t fancy spending it alone. That thought is rendered irrelevant the second he’s passed the threshold of the lift, because sprawled out on the couch in green briefs, a Christmas hat, and not much else, is Niall.
He’s got his head tipped towards the ceiling and when Harry walks closer, he can see him holding a carton of—something—in his hand that’s slowly but steadily dripping into a small puddle that’s already formed on the couch.

“Niall?” Harry tries, rounding the couch. Everything all right?”

For a minute, Niall doesn’t react at all. His open eyes are glued to the ceiling and Harry seriously contemplates poking him before he lets out a long sigh. “I fucking hate Christmas,” he tells Harry, sounding rough. “Want some eggnog?”

“Right.” Harry’s gaze drops to the carton Niall is clinging to for dear life. “It’s not even noon. How long have you been drinking?”

“Since Zayn left,” Niall says before taking another swig of his eggnog. The carton appears to be nearly empty.

“I didn’t know he was going somewhere,” Harry replies. He creeps closer, wondering how he can best pry the eggnog out of Niall’s hands without spilling even more of it onto Liam’s expensive upholstery. “When did he leave?”

Niall empties the carton and throws it over the back of the couch. With a hearty groan, he lets himself flop to the side and buries his face in one of the cushions. His voice is muffled when he says, “A while ago.”

Harry sits down on the couch opposite Niall, feeling slightly overdressed in his jeans and sweater. “He didn’t say.”

“He never fucking says.”

Niall’s voice is unexpectedly loud and biting, a tone Harry hasn’t heard from him, and it comes as such a surprise that Harry flinches, looking at Niall in bewilderment. But maybe Harry shouldn’t be surprised by it, because he can’t claim to know a lot about their dynamic. He’s been up to his neck in his own problems, going through life with blinders since SHIELD defrosted him, and he realizes he’s not been paying attention to anyone else’s wellbeing as much as he should have as their friend and teammate. Zayn goes off without telling anyone quite a lot, but Harry thought he told Niall at least. Apparently not, and apparently their relationship isn’t as harmonious as it sometimes seems. But Harry only has himself and Louis to compare to them. He can’t call himself an expert on the subject.

“He just fucking left,” Niall goes on, “the day before Christmas without saying a bloody thing when he knows I hate it and he should be here, because that’s what you do, right? That’s what I’d fucking do for him, ‘s what I always do for him and he takes and he takes and I’m fucking dry, mate. He’s a damn bloodsucker.”

It’s not the right moment to be speechless, but Harry doesn’t know what to say to that. “You don’t really mean that,” he says after a beat. Niall might have a fast metabolism and a high tolerance for alcohol, but if he’s been drinking for hours already, even he must be three sheets to the wind.

“I do,” Niall disagrees heartily. “He’s everything to me, God help me, but sometimes I really fucking hate him.”

“Well,” Harry comments weakly, “it’s probably good you’re letting it out now. You told me that’s supposed to help.”

“And now you’re making me eat my own damn words!” Niall exclaims loudly and—
surprising coordination considering his general state – flips onto his back, throwing his arms over his head. He lets out another frustrated growl and kicks a pillow off the couch with fervor. “You’re supposed to be on my side, Cap. Fuck, I need something deep-fried. Are there any donuts?”

“No, sorry. I could make some French toast?”

Niall tilts his face towards him. His cheeks are dotted with red blotches and his eyes are glassy. It’s fair to say that he doesn’t look on top of things. “I think I love you,” he tells Harry, then turns back over and hides his face in the cushions.

After an impressive amount of bread slices, eggs, and coffee, Niall starts to look more like himself again. Yet he remains uncharacteristically quiet throughout their meal, keeping his eyes glued to his plate as he demolishes his food. Watching him, Harry tries to think about places where he might have hidden more alcohol other than the few beers they keep in the fridge, because Niall probably shouldn’t have any more until evening.

Niall seems content when he’s done putting the plate in the dishwasher on shaky legs. He’s still in just his briefs and Harry wants to get him a sweatshirt, but doesn’t want to leave him alone, so they wander back into the living room together where their tree is standing tall, shining in the cold sunlight that’s hitting it at an almost perfect angle. The snow has let up for now, but when Harry looks out the window, there are more heavy clouds on the horizon heading their way.

The rest of their day is spent in front of the TV and, considering his self-proclaimed hate of Christmas; Niall is very enthusiastic about its themed movies. He appears to know them all as well, from cartoons to musicals, from black and white classics to modern takes. He doesn’t mention Zayn’s absence again, or what prompted him to react the way he did, and he doesn’t elaborate on his feelings about Christmas, so Harry is unsure how to handle Niall at the moment, except for making sure that he doesn’t attempt to drown his sorrows in overly sweet eggnog.

He tries not to think about the burning feeling the dog tags are leaving on his skin and he spends half the day regretting his decision to put them on, contemplates tearing them off and throwing them out as he whips up an early dinner of crispy chicken and mashed potatoes. Harry doesn’t dislike Christmas and, to his surprise, he’s in a relatively good place, considering everything that’s happened. Still, Harry knows deep down he’s only trying so hard to be good because he doesn’t want to be completely shattered if Louis ever decides to come back.

If Louis is even still alive.

Niall falls asleep tightly wound around Harry’s upper body just as the sun is beginning to set and the sky opens up again for a new downfall of thick, white flakes that, according to the weather report, are supposed to keep falling until the day after Christmas. Harry can’t claim to understand Niall, and not everything is out in the open. They’ve all been taught to keep a few secrets to stay alive for longer than they’ve been told to be honest, but Harry locks his arms around Niall just as tightly because he can understand that neither one of them want to be alone.

He stays in that position for what must be a few hours, Niall practically dead to this world and TV muted, but Harry can’t find rest, and there is an itch in his legs that won’t quiet down. It takes some clever shifting and a handful of minutes until he’s successfully maneuvered his way out of Niall’s embrace without waking him up, and only a short while later, he’s in boots, beanie, and coat, hands digging deep into his pockets, making his way away from the tower and heading
downtown without any real direction.

The fallen snow crunches underneath the soles of his boots and it’s freezing. If Harry closes his eyes and holds still for a moment, he can almost pretend to be back in Europe – in Austria, in Germany and France and Switzerland. But he can’t hear a train. It’s incredibly, eerily quiet, streets completely deserted, as most people are in their homes with their families, calming down after a raucous dinner with overly excited children. Harry doesn’t blame them, and he feels stupid walking through New York City on Christmas Eve on his own and without any sense and purpose. So he keeps his eyes on his feet and doesn’t realize where they’re taking him until he’s reached the Brooklyn Bridge.

A few yellow cabs are crossing the Hudson on both sides, because even at its most quiet, New York is never quite still and Harry’s gone so far already, he figures it can’t be much harm to keep going for just a little while longer. The route is familiar, ingrained in his mind like not too many things are, and when it’s this dark and this silent, it almost feels like home again, walking through the streets of Brooklyn with Louis by his side, pestering their mothers until they’d let them go so they could steal just a few hours together.

But Mrs. Burden’s bakery isn’t there anymore and so many other places have changed names and colors and purposes, Harry feels like a wandering ghost, haunting his own dreams. He’s not been to their old apartment building before, avoiding it at all costs because of an unnameable fear that even the last shred of his past was erased and he can’t decide whether it’s cruel or kind when he rounds the last corner and all of a sudden, it’s there.

It looks a bit different for sure, modernized to a high standard and altered to fit a new lifestyle, but the fire escape is still there and when Harry squints in the dim, flickering light of the streetlamps, he thinks he can tell which window had been theirs. Harry closes his eyes and he takes a deep breath, practically smelling the fishmonger down the street and hearing the butcher yell even as high up as they’d been. He can see Louis sitting on their windowsill, sleeves of his work shirt rolled up, looking a bit grimy yet still so beautiful as he’d run a delicate hand through his hair – winking.

Harry can hear his voice in his head; can see the cheeky tilt to his lips and all the life that’d been in his bright, bright eyes.

The tears on his face are cold when Harry wipes them away with trembling fingers. He feels so cold despite knowing that he’s not as susceptible to temperatures anymore and it’s all in his head. But it’s his head that’s proven the biggest obstacle in all of it and Harry should stop trying to let go of the past, which seems to have a damn good grip on him. Harry has made so many mistakes in his young life; perhaps this is just the weight he has to carry in order to redeem himself eventually.

But it’s time to get back to the tower and check on Niall and figure out how to get to the end of the year without either of them becoming seriously damaged, so Harry turns on his heels and walks a couple of steps, keeping his head down again. It’s not until he hits the corner of the street that he notices a second set of footprints in the snow, keeping close to his own. However, they stop right there, shuffling on the spot and it looks almost as if someone’s been watching him. Harry’s throat tightens up and so does his chest, because there are two people in the world that can sneak up on him, and one of them is unlikely to be following him around Brooklyn when his absence is the cause of Niall’s heartache.

“Louis.” Harry doesn’t call his name out loud, but he says it clearly and he doesn’t expect a reply and he doesn’t expect to see him, yet at the same time he doesn’t understand how Louis could’ve just disappeared into thin air.

The footsteps just stop, and there’s no door, no ladder, no nothing, just a few traces in the snow
suggesting his presence. Harry looks around frantically and he follows the trail of their almost perfectly in stride steps for as long as he can, hoping to figure out where Louis appeared and where he could’ve gone to. But it’s still snowing and it’s picking up and soon, far too soon, there’s nothing but a crisp, white blanket covering the sidewalks, all evidence swallowed up.

Harry tries to breathe past the flaring pain in his chest. The sheet of snow is immaculate, microscopic crystals catching the light and making the night sparkle. Louis remains invisible, and Harry starts to wonder if he was there at all.

to be continued.
VIII.

Chapter Summary

“Most likely. And like I said, the base was abandoned and all weapons, mostly stolen shipments, disappeared. But Cowell wanted me to have a look at it anyway, thought the retreat might’ve been so hasty that they left something behind.”

“Did they?”

“No,” Zayn answers him and Harry is close to holding his breath. “But I ran into your boyfriend.”

Chapter Notes

hello again and apologies for the slight delay. i hope the fact that this chapter is the longest so far makes up for it. also, we’re getting close to the end, and i’m not quite sure i’m ready to let go of this yet. i’m working on chapter nine and will possibly add a short epilogue but - that’s it.

i want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who’s been reading and reviewing so far, and also anyone who’s waiting for my slow arse to finish so that they can start reading. i am really blown away by the response to a story that is basically pure self-indulgence.

also, thank you once again to geeb for putting up with my britishisms and love of run-on sentences. you’re a gem.

feel free to come and say hi on tumblr.

enjoy!

for general warnings, please see the tags. italics are flashbacks.

DISCLAIMER: the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

CHAPTER VIII.

“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with
Time passes.

It doesn’t fly. But it passes, because life is just cruel enough to gently move on without checking in if everyone’s doing okay. The last year bleeds into the next with fluorescent fireworks lighting up the skyline and Harry just wants to sleep through it, would give quite a lot to hit pause and catch up and maybe just breathe for a few peaceful moments. He needs more time, he thinks, to figure out how to stitch everything back together again so that it holds.

Harry spends the first few weeks of January filling his schedule and watching over an unusually and increasingly manic Niall, who’s not handling Zayn’s absence well at all, disappearing for long stretches of time and coming back in a worrying state. He’s not sure why this time is different from before, because Zayn has made quite the habit of disappearing for weeks on end without signs of life, but Harry doesn’t want to pester Niall, and when Liam comes back, sun and laughter lines etched onto his face, he can’t make sense of it either.

“It’s not like I’ve ever understood them,” Liam comments quietly, leaning against the doorjamb and looking at their super-archer. He looks at Harry and shrugs.

“You haven’t heard anything from Zayn?” Harry still tries. “Or about him?” He knows how regularly Liam lets JARVIS dig through SHIELD’s files, following the principle of trusting but still verifying. Harry doesn’t exactly blame him. Liam knows far more about corruption than he does, and he’s experienced its effects firsthand. He’s got the arc reactor sitting in his breastbone as a daily reminder of what greed can do to people, and to what lengths it pushes them.

Liam shakes his head. “Nah. I doubt even Cowell knows exactly where he is, or what’s going on. He trusts Zayn to get the job done. And knowing him, he will. He’s probably had to drop off the radar to do that.”

“Yeah, but,” Harry starts and motions at Niall lying on the couch lethargically, “I feel like we ought to do at least something to – I don’t know. Cheer him up?”

“If you’re feeling charitable, Cap,” Liam suggest with a smirk that doesn’t bode well, “you could always give him a blowjob.”

Harry’s mouth drops open, which isn’t the best reaction, all things considered, and he feels his cheeks heat up before he catches himself and slaps Liam on the arm. Deservedly, Liam winces and Harry levels him with an unimpressed stare. Niall has rubbed off on all of them, which – again – is probably not the best thing to think given the conversation. Harry shakes his head at himself.

“I meant something a tad more – comradely. I’ve already baked chocolate chip muffins and I’m running out of ideas.”

“I don’t think muffins are going to help much,” Liam says with a glance at Niall, who’s stretched out in underpants and a black sweatshirt. He’s been watching cartoons all morning, squeaky voices
and bright colors flashing over and reflecting off of the otherwise rather muted interior of their living room. “I mean. Look at him.”

Harry is looking at Niall. He has been looking at and watching him since Christmas and he doesn’t want to imagine what would happen were Director Cowell to call him in or send him off on an important mission. Not because Harry doubts Niall’s professionalism, but mainly because Niall would choose his professionalism over his own wellbeing. Just when he’s about to reply to Liam, Niall turns his head and looks at them with tired eyes.

“I heard that,” he says pointedly but without any obvious interest. Just a second later, his eyes are glued to the screen again. “ Wouldn’t say no to a blowjob, though.”

Liam chuckles at that while Harry just raises his left brow; they share a glance before heading towards the elevator. Harry thinks he might get started on this fantasy trilogy Niall’s been rambling on about for ages, insistent that Harry can’t watch the films until he’s read the books. That’s something Harry doesn’t necessarily understand, but now that he’s got the time, he figures he might as well get started. Before he can continue with his thoughts or on his way, Liam stops him with a hand to his elbow.

“Hey, um,” he starts, suddenly looking a little bit shifty, digging his hands into the pockets of his jeans. There are a couple of smudges on there, like there seem to be on every item of clothing Liam owns. “If you have a minute, I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

For one frightful, horrendously long second, Harry thinks Liam is going to tell him that something happened to Louis – that they found his lifeless body, or evidence that HYDRA had gotten him back. “About what?” he asks, feeling breathless, but thankfully, Liam apparently senses his distress and holds out his palms.

“Oh, nothing bad. Probably not even that important, it’s just – some of SHIELD’s public relations people have brought to my attention that…well. I know you don’t pay attention to that kind of stuff, and I don’t blame you. I’ve been through the media grinder and believe me, I’d rather not be in the public eye as much as I am, and I’m sure you’d prefer to stay out of it as well, it’s just –” He breaks off, mulling over what he wants to say next and Harry doesn’t start visibly twitching, but he definitely feels restless, skin tingling and crawling as the sounds from Niall’s cartoon wash over them.

Liam sighs. “There were books,” he goes on, and for a moment, Harry can’t quite follow. “Technically, you were a historical figure, so people started snooping into your life and they wrote books, and they speculated, especially after the Smithsonian revealed new material. And apparently, people have seen you going to that inclusive veteran group thing and now they’re putting it all together and – yeah.”

“Oh.” Harry doesn’t really know what else to say to that. He guesses that a few months, perhaps even a few weeks ago, he would have been gripped by panic. It’s not a pleasant feeling, not at all, having people dig up his personal life without his consent and speculating and maybe even following him to some extent, but he’s gained perspective. Considering everything he’s been through, everything Louis’ been put through, and everything he’s experienced with the Avengers, people piecing together that he’s gay is the least of his worries. “And?”

“Right,” Liam says. “Nobody wants to tell you what to do, obviously, it’s kind of up to you. But I thought you should know. What people are, you know – saying.”

“Do I have to do anything?” Harry asks. “I don’t think I’m ready to like, properly address it. If they figure I’m gay…can’t I just let them?”
It’s easier these days, to call himself gay, to acknowledge that that’s part of who he is. Harry is still far from being entirely at ease with everything and at peace with himself and what has happened to him, and he’d probably still struggle with talking openly about it to people outside his small social circle, but ultimately, wondering what others are thinking about him isn’t at the top of his list of priorities at this point.

“Sure. I mean, you’ve not been very public so far, so I doubt people will be surprised. Not that you owe them anything,” Liam adds hastily and continues with a slight frowns, “and it’s not like any of us do. I just thought you should know and, well, be prepared when you head out again. Those media leeches don’t respect privacy, and they don’t care about boundaries.”

“Thanks,” Harry tells him, “I’ll keep that in mind.” He’s just about to continue on his way when Liam stops him for a second time and – without much preamble – wraps him up in a big hug that traps Harry’s arms to his sides and takes his breath away for a moment. Liam doesn’t have superhuman strength, but he’s not far off. Harry gets a whiff of his subtle cologne and a hint of motor oil, and before he can hug Liam back, he’s already released.

Liam clears his throat and takes a step back. “Sorry, it’s just – it’s good to see you doing better, you know? I know it’s been tough, everything that’s going on, but you’re doing well, I think. I mean, I hope so.” He steps from one foot to the other and drops his gaze to the floor before letting his eyes lock with Harry’s once more. “I think you’re being very brave, talking with Caroline and the group and – yeah.”

Harry needs a moment to find his voice. “Thanks, but…I don’t think it’s particularly brave.”

Liam shakes his head. “You need to stop belittling what you’ve been through, and what you’re doing now. I’m sure it means a lot to those people in your support group. Even if they don’t say so. My grandfather once said to me that you were the best person he’d ever met, and I think I agree with him.”

It renders Harry dumbstruck. Liam beats him to the exit with a smile and a slightly awkward wave, disappearing towards his workshop and leaving Harry to stare after him with wide eyes and parted lips.

Zayn comes back in February. It’s anticlimactic, considering that he’s been gone over a month, when the doors of the elevator suddenly slide open on a surprisingly sunny Wednesday afternoon and he walks into the living room, still clad in his black uniform and a nondescript overcoat. Niall moves faster from his place on the couch than he’s ever moved in the past weeks and Harry can only watch as he grabs the nearest object and hurls it at Zayn with impressive speed and strength. It seems to come as a surprise to Zayn as well, who just barely manages to duck out of the way of what Harry realizes is a cup that had previously held his peppermint tea. The cup shatters with a crash against the elevator doors, broken pieces falling to the floor in an unsolvable puzzle.

“You fucking bastard,” Niall yells, skin already flushing in apparent anger as he takes hold of a bottle of water and throws it at Zayn as well. The bottle doesn’t burst, but it collides with the wall with an impressive thud as Harry holds his breath, eyes flickering to Niall and Zayn and then back to Niall. “You lying, selfish, heartless fucking bastard!”

He spits it out and spins round on his heels, stalking towards the balcony and opening and slamming the door shut with so much fervor that Harry half expects the glass to shatter just like the
cup. It doesn’t, but the silence that follows is equally eerie and Harry directs his gaze towards Zayn, who is unsurprisingly stone-faced after everything that Niall has just thrown at him – verbally and physically. Harry thinks he sees Zayn’s lips twitch downward as he kicks the bottle out of his way and walks towards the array of couches that are set up in a semi-circle in front of the large TV screen. He places his palms on his knees, pushing to get up and greet Zayn properly, but Zayn stops him with a shake of his head.

“You should be sitting for this, Cap,” Zayn says, and he might not look it, but he sounds exhausted to the core, weary and tired, holding himself together by sheer force of will. Harry wouldn’t be surprised if underneath solid fabric and leather, he’s hiding dark bruises and fresh wounds.

Zayn’s movements are slow but precise, a telltale sign that he’s concentrating hard not to let it show how hurt he actually is, and he peels himself out of his coat, drops onto the couch to Harry’s left, and pulls out a manila folder. It instantly takes Harry back to that moment months ago now, after Zayn had returned from Kiev, and he doubts he’s going to like what’s hidden in that folder either. Harry eyes it warily as Zayn puts it down on the glass table in front of them.

Then he clears his throat and turns his focus on Zayn. “Good to have you back,” he tells him. “You were gone for quite some time.”

“Couldn’t be helped,” Zayn replies inexpressively. “I think you might be interested in what I’ve found.”

Harry’s gaze flickers towards the folder briefly before his common sense kicks back in. “Shouldn’t you talk to Niall first? He’s been going a bit mental. I think you had him really worried. Us as well, but him especially. Everything else can wait.”

“He needs a moment to calm down,” is what Zayn says to that, and he doesn’t delve into it any further. It startles Harry, and it throws him off a bit, because Zayn never disregards Niall like that. They’re not big on open displays of affection (although Harry thinks that might be more on Zayn’s part than Niall’s), but Zayn is usually very attentive and finely tuned to Niall’s mood.

“I followed a lead to a location near Novosibirsk,” Zayn continues unperturbed, “north of the Kazakh border. It was a focal point for illegal arms dealers, remote and an undisturbed pathway to many areas of conflict, until it was cleared out a few months ago. Cowell thinks that they were tipped off by an insider who had access to SHIELD intel.”

“The mole?” Harry guesses and Zayn nods.

“Most likely. And like I said, the base was abandoned and all weapons, mostly stolen shipments, disappeared. But Cowell wanted me to have a look at it anyway, thought the retreat might’ve been so hasty that they left something behind.”

“Did they?”

“No,” Zayn answers him and Harry is close to holding his breath. “But I ran into your boyfriend.”

Harry feels his stomach drop so rapidly and so violently that he fears it might bounce off his groin and up his throat, ending up on the floor to his feet. Zayn’s got one of his eyebrows raised and his eyes narrowed slightly, watching him so intently that Harry’s skin crawls on top of everything else. “You saw Louis?” he asks and can’t help the tremble that sticks to his voice. “In Russia?” and his mind starts running away from him.

If Louis was in Russia, maybe Harry just imagined his presence on Christmas Eve. Perhaps he’d
thought about coming back but seeing Harry had reinforced his decision and he’d left for good, he’d left for bloody Russia to get as far away as possible and Harry knows, he knows he’s already overreacting. Yet he can’t wrap his head around it, around Louis not even being aware of having to feed himself but being able to travel thousands of miles to a remote place in Central Asia.

“Not technically,” Zayn pulls him out of his thoughts a moment later, most likely sensing that Harry’s about to drive himself mad with questions. “I knew the base was abandoned, but not entirely deserted. HYDRA likes to monitor the area and the facilities are all there. So I expected one or two dozen agents. And instead, when I got there, I found this.”

Without any more preambles, he opens the manila folder. A few photographs fall out, shiny surface catching the flickering lights of the TV screen that’s still showing muted cartoons. Harry reaches out with shaking hands and lifts one of them up to his face, his blood running cold as he takes in the grim scene that’s captured there: bodies lying still in a sickeningly large puddle of crimson, necks twisted at an odd angle and lifeless eyes wide with horror.

“No survivors,” Zayn continues, sounding far away. “He took them out, destroyed remaining weapons and equipment, wiped the system, and left.”

“How do you know it was him?” Harry asks.

“There were finger-shaped indents in some of the metal doors. He peeled them off like plastic. I know of two people who are capable of doing that, and I’m pretty sure it wasn’t you.” Zayn pulls out another picture. “Plus, he left a message.”

A part of Harry still doesn’t want to believe that Louis is capable of doing this, of – slaughtering these people, crushing them like bugs underneath his boots. Yet at the same time, there’s a significant part of him that’s secretly happy, cruelly so, and it sends a strange thrill down his spine when he sees the destroyed machineries, the dead HYDRA agents littering the ground. The dark red Cyrillic letters painted across the wall.

“око за око, зуб за зуб,” Zayn reads it out. “Eye for an eye; tooth for a tooth. He might not exactly be on our side, but he’s certainly not on theirs. And he wants them to know it.”

“Christ,” Harry breathes out. “When was this?”

“A few weeks ago. I tried to follow him for a while after, but I lost his trail north of Damascus.” Harry drops the photograph. “Damascus?” He gapes at Zayn. “You followed him to Syria?”

Zayn simply shrugs. “You told us he was crafty. But I doubt you realize how damn crafty he really is. And what he’s capable of. In a way, you still don’t realize what you yourself are capable of. Tomlinson has been doing this since the fifties. Don’t be so surprised.”

“Sorry, I just –” and Harry struggles to organize his thoughts and he struggles even more translating them into proper sentences. “He was so confused when he left. How did – what happened?”

“Time,” Zayn replies. “Necessity. You’d be surprised what people can do when they have no other choice.”

“No. I think this is him doing what he thinks is necessary.”
Harry doesn’t know how to respond to that. But he remembers Zayn recounting his conversation with Louis and it fills him with unease, something lodged solidly in his throat and making it hard to get the words out. Niall is still outside and he’s got no idea what Liam is doing, so he’s on his own in this. Then again, he shouldn’t rely on them to ask uncomfortable questions.

It’s probably telling that he’s back to being a mess as soon as Louis is mentioned.

“When you told him about HYDRA,” Harry manages to say eventually, tension in his body making his head hurt, “did you mention their bases? Things they were doing?”

Zayn isn’t stupid, quite far from it, and it doesn’t take him more than a fraction of a second to understand what Harry’s implying. He leans forward, resting his lower arms on his legs and curving his back. “Not in detail,” he tells Harry. “He didn’t make his way to Russia because I told him. It’s more likely that he’s recovering pieces of his memory, bit by bit, and he’s remembering HYDRA and what they did to him. This is him getting his revenge, and at the same time making sure that it can’t happen again. Not to him or anyone else. But that’s just speculation on my behalf.”

“Then why return to a base that’s abandoned?” he can’t help but wonder, trying to put himself in Louis’ position for a moment. “Wouldn’t you go back to where everything started?”

Zayn’s hesitancy responding to his question already tells Harry that there’s more going on than meets the eye and this is Zayn debating whether to tell Harry or not. “It’s not a place where he was kept,” Zayn settles on eventually. “But it’s linked to whoever’s leaking SHIELD intel to HYDRA. And I think Tomlinson might have come in contact with our mole one way or another. Whether he’s aware of that is another matter.”

“Is that why you followed him?”

“No,” Zayn says, eyes darting toward the balcony doors. “I wanted to make sure he was okay. Because you did the same for me.” He sighs wearily and gets to his feet. “And now, please excuse me. I’ve got some grovelling to do.”

And with that, he walks past Harry, opens the door leading out onto the balcony and disappears from view. Harry doesn’t even have time to utter thanks. He stays frozen to the spot though, listening out for anything that might indicate Niall throwing things again, but it remains quiet, probably due to the soundproof windows. Harry still sits there and stares ahead at the cartoon about talking tortoises that are also ninjas, but he’s not really following the plot, if there is one. He’s not actually watching it either, mind stuck on Louis ripping HYDRA agents to pieces and even shaking Zayn off on his way through a Civil War–ridden Syria.

Louis was okay then, but Harry’s insides churn when he tries to imagine where he is now and what he’s doing. He’s done quite well not thinking too much about him lately, or maybe that’s not the way to describe it. Harry has gotten better at not worrying about Louis as much, since there’s nothing that he can do to actively contribute to his well-being, but he remains on Harry’s mind as a quiet but constant presence.

Well, that and Louis’ old dog tags burning into the skin right next to his heart.

Whatever happened in Novosibirsk, in addition to before and after it, hasn’t made Director Cowell
happy. Harry doesn’t see him in person (he knows Zayn goes to see him a few times over the next handful of days), but whenever the Director is particularly displeased, it can be felt throughout SHIELD headquarters. Nobody knows why that is, but it’s noticeable when Niall – thankfully back to his old self – asks Harry to join him at the underground shooting range of the building.

Harry doesn’t like target practice much and he chooses not to use his handgun on most occasions, but he’s so relieved that Niall isn’t lying around in his underwear anymore that he’s happy to go with him. They have the facilities to themselves, which is undoubtedly an Avengers bonus, but they only empty two magazines before Niall moves on to his bow and Harry is happy to just sit back and observe.

It’s interesting to watch Niall in his element. When it comes to Zayn, there’s not really a difference between him on- and off-mission. Liam is not much different either, because he only puts on his Iron Man suit. But Niall is such an easy-going and happy person normally that it’s almost jarring to suddenly see him with a hard gaze and set jaw. At the tower, he slouches about in sweatshirts and baggy t-shirts, not revealing the set of steely arms that his muscle shirt is showing off now. With unwavering concentration, brows drawn together and eyes narrowed, he draws one of his practicing arrows and readies his bow. Harry sees him take a deep but shallow breath, then he releases.

With a quiet thud, the arrow hits the target right in the center, unsurprisingly, and Niall turns to him with an easy smile. “Wanna throw me some targets, Cap?” he asks, pointing to a bucket filled with fuzzy tennis balls. “Bit old-school, I know,” but Harry is grateful for a bit old-school. The last thing he needs now is getting acquainted with yet another piece of Liam’s complicated tech.

So he ends up tossing neon yellow tennis balls into the air for nearly two hours until Niall’s had his fill, then they head back to the main floor that’s strangely quiet because of the Director’s foul mood. So they shrug on their coats quickly, pull hats over their heads and deep into their faces to blend in, but Harry notices that his hair has gotten so long there’s no hiding it under his beanie anymore.

On their way back to the tower, air cold and wet around them, Harry notices that there are a few people pointing their phones at them. On two or three occasions, someone follows them at a distance for a block and he’s never paid much attention to it before, but he can’t help but do it now, wondering what the point is, and what these people have to gain from a few grainy pictures of two Avengers in dark coats just walking through Manhattan.

But all in all, they’ve had a few calm and quiet weeks, so Harry doesn’t know why he’s surprised when they get back to the tower just in time to see Liam take off in his suit. “What the hell,” Niall comments, looking up at the sky although Liam’s so quick that there is no visible trace of him only seconds later. “Where’s he going all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replies as they enter their private elevator. “He didn’t mention that he was going anywhere. That looked urgent.”

“That looked more than urgent.” Niall squints at him. “What’s a word for more than urgent?”

The doors slide open and Zayn’s right there, sharp as ever, pulling up the zipper of his uniform and fixing the two of them with narrowed eyes. “Fucking finally,” he breathes out and throws Niall’s phone at him, nearly hitting him between the eyes. Thankfully, Niall’s reflexes are fast. “Take that with you next time. We have to go.”
“A Congressman has been shot,” Zayn tells them on the Quinjet after they’ve suited up and joined him in the cockpit.

“Isn’t that a job for the FBI?” Niall asks, securing his seatbelt and adjusting the straps, ready to co-pilot. “Why do we get called in?”

Harry doesn’t miss the way Zayn’s gaze flickers to him before he directs it out the windshield and when Zayn replies, Harry understands why.

“Because Cowell thinks it was the Winter Soldier.” A heavy pause follows. Harry feels his heart plummet to his gut and a very familiar nausea settle in his chest. He stares at Zayn, willing him to go on, to say that Cowell is wrong in assuming that, but Zayn doesn’t do that. Instead, he says, “Cowell is on his way to the Triskelion to meet with the World Security Council. The Soldier potentially being in DC and killing politicians calls for heightened security. He wants to launch the new Helicarriers.”

“Fucking hell,” Niall breathes, puffing out his cheeks.

Harry still feels dizzy with the news. “But –” he starts and he’s barely able to move his jaw at first. “But how? Why would he think it was Louis? He’s not – it can’t be him.”

Zayn doesn’t look at him. “I’m afraid it’s most likely him. That’s why Payne’s already there. He’s scanning the area. The public can’t know until tomorrow, but in case the Soldier shows up again, Liam can apprehend him better than us.” Harry is about to protest again; protest against everyone assuming it’s Louis, protest against Zayn calling him the Winter Soldier again like the last months haven’t happened – like Louis suddenly isn’t a person anymore.

“There’s security footage,” Zayn says, tone not allowing any objection. “So unless there’s another masked assassin with a metal arm, it was him. He shot Griffiths in his office on Capitol Hill. Came in through the window. Griffiths’ staff members heard the shot from their respective offices.”

“Isn’t Griffiths that old Republican from West Virginia?” Niall points out. “The one who’s part of the Homeland Security Committee?”

“He was also an advisor to the last conservative administration.”

“Any ties with S.H.I.E.L.D?” Harry asks Zayn, who shakes his head.

“He’s chummier with the CIA. Goes golfing with the Deputy Director every other Sunday.”

“But probably not number one on HYDRA’s shitlist,” Niall adds. “It’s a bit weird, if you ask me. If they got Louis back after a few months of him being AWOL, why let him shoot a Congressman?”

“I think it’s more the proximity to the White House that’s making everyone twitchy,” Zayn says. They’re getting close already, the sky bright and clear and the Capitol barely visible on the horizon.

“But that doesn’t explain why Griffiths would be a target,” Harry has to interject. His pulse is quickening and he knows it doesn’t have much to do with their direct mission. If Louis is in DC, that’s the closest he might come to Harry, and Harry is desperate to find him. “HYDRA are not going to risk exposure by assassinating a politician in his office in broad daylight. Especially if he isn’t an immediate threat.”

Zayn’s hands tighten on the control lever. A muscle in his jaw twitches. “Captain, I think your bias –”
But Harry doesn’t let him finish. “I know I’m biased,” he admits, “but that doesn’t mean my entire judgement is clouded. If there’s footage of him shooting the Congressman there’s nothing I can say against that. But you know that this doesn’t make sense, Zayn. Come on, you know it.” He leans forward, angling his body towards Zayn as much as his seatbelt allows him. “Winston was actively interfering with their arms deals and the conference in Prague was the perfect opportunity to get close to him. But this is different. What motivation does HYDRA have to have Griffiths killed close to the Triskelion? If anything had gone wrong, SHIELD teams could have flooded the area in minutes. Why not wait until he’s on his way home when it’s dark? Why shoot him in the middle of the day?”

Zayn doesn’t immediately shut him down, not that Harry thinks he would have. If there’s one thing they have in common, it’s instinct, and Zayn knows as well as Harry that there are many puzzle pieces that don’t fit together.

“What if Louis acted on his own?” Niall throws in after silence stretches on, turbines humming in the background. “Might not be HYDRA after all.”

Harry registers what he says, but he doesn’t directly respond to him, keeping his attention on Zayn and his stony expression. “You said yourself: there are rats everywhere. And you also said that Louis might have come in contact with the mole.”

Zayn looks at him. “Griffiths wasn’t the mole.”

“But he could have been a rat.”

They lock gazes for longer than they probably should, considering that Zayn is operating a high-speed aircraft, but Harry is sure that Zayn understands what he’s getting at. Louis made his way halfway around the world to deal HYDRA a decent blow and even if they had managed to get their hands on him again after Damascus, Harry is certain that it would have taken them more than a few weeks to make him compliant again. The more he thinks about it, the surer he is that this is Louis dealing out a second blow; this is Louis enacting his revenge.

Zayn lets out a sigh. “What do you want us to do?”

“I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. Let’s find out what exactly happened, and why, before allowing SHIELD to call a manhunt,” Harry suggests, suppressed anxiety causing heat to trickle up and down his spine. “Let Cowell deal with the Security Council and the White House. That will buy us some time. We can stay under the radar and figure out what Griffiths has been up to.”

For a handful of beats, Zayn assesses him with narrowed eyes. “You do realize this is what the Director was worried about. And if this backfires, there’s more waiting than just house arrest and a firm telling off.”

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“I’m aware of that,” Harry replies, and he is, but he doesn’t care. There are certain things he’s not willing to do, and won’t ever be ready to do. And maybe he’s gotten better and maybe he’s learned to let go to a certain extent, but when push comes to shove, Harry will choose Louis over everything time and time again. “But I can’t – Zayn, you know what SHIELD will do to him. I’m happy to take the blame, and full responsibility.”

“Oi, you don’t have to do that, Harry,” Niall interjects from Zayn’s other side. “And to kind of weigh in on it – I’ve never trusted politicians and I ain’t starting now. Sleazy and corrupt, the lot of them. Wouldn’t be surprised if he was one shady fucker.” He shrugs. “No need to be a martyr, Cap.”
“Thanks,” Harry says, grateful and relieved. They need to make a decision now and whatever it is they decide to do, Harry would prefer a united front to having Zayn stand against them. And considering Liam’s history with Washington, Harry is pretty sure he’s on Harry’s side.

Zayn and Niall share a heavy look that says a lot that Harry can’t grasp, but after a few beats, Zayn rolls his eyes almost imperceptibly and switches on their intercom.

“Payne? What’s your position?”

Only a second passes before Liam’s tinny voice sounds through the jet. “In Downtown DC, close to Griffiths’ office. Trying out my new stealth mode. Everything’s calm, no trace of anything suspicious. You guys far away?”

“Few minutes out,” Zayn tells him. “But we’re switching to stealth as well, circle the area for now and stay off the radar. Cap thinks Griffiths might have had a couple of skeletons in the closet,” and he turns to Harry as he adds, “and Niall and I agree with him.”

Harry mouths a silent thanks as Liam replies. “Wouldn’t be surprised if Cap’s right. I’m guessing Cowell doesn’t know of the change in plans?”

“Correct.” Zayn flicks a few switches and presses a few buttons, concentration weighing his brows down. “So please, no explosions. Can you send JARVIS in and have him dig up whatever he can? Suspicious phone calls, coded files, and so on.”

“Give me five minutes,” and with that, the intercom fizzles out, but Harry has no doubt that Liam will get back to them in record time. He can see Washington, DC beneath them now, shimmering in a surprisingly bright winter sun. The Triskelion looms at its outskirts, an architectural masterpiece bordered by the Potomac River, a physical reminder of who they’re about to defy.

It’s not the first time Harry has opposed his superiors and knowing himself, it certainly won’t be the last.

Only a short while later, Liam gives them coordinates for a location Griffiths had visited in a rough pattern but at odd times, and according to him, it’s a dodgy area where no white-vested politicians would normally go. Zayn finds a secluded forest spot to land the Quinjet and they travel the last quarter of a mile by foot, taking them a good half hour out of Washington by car, Harry assumes.

When the trees part just ahead of their final destination, they reveal a gravel road curving past an open iron gate. It leads onto a concrete yard with what looks like storage units on either side, weeds growing through cracks and litter gathering in corners.

They approach the plot slowly, Niall and Zayn with weapons readied, Harry with his shield in front of his chest. Gravel crunches beneath his boots, but otherwise it’s almost eerily quiet. It’s risky, entering an open area like this in broad daylight, even if the numbered garage doors close in on it, but Harry’s mind is occupied with trying to understand what a high-profile politician like Griffiths would do here. If he had needed storage space, surely he would have been able to find a more exclusive spot.

Just when they pass the gate, Liam drops out of the sky and it probably says a lot that not one of them moves a muscle as Liam straightens from his crouch and slides back his faceplate.

“What a shithole,” he comments, and they stop, four pairs of eyes flickering from side to side.
“A storage unit,” Niall says after a beat. “That’s already shady as fuck. Anyone wanna bet ten bucks on us finding a severed head swimming in its own juices?”

Harry can’t help but make a face at that. “Wasn’t that what happened in one of the films you made me watch?”


“I’d rather you pay attention to this,” Zayn interjects and elbows Niall in the side before taking a few steps ahead. He turns to Liam. “Did you find out which unit is his?”

“Not exactly,” Liam replies. “Should be on the left hand side, further to the back, I think. We could check each one?”

Zayn nods his assent and they swarm out, keeping their eyes and ears open for any disturbances, any irregular sound of movement. Harry keeps his shield ready and he notices that Niall has slipped his sunglasses over his eyes, bow ready with the string pulled tight. Each of the garage doors looks the same; weathered and old paint job, flaking number drawn on in black, corners rusty with age. As Harry walks closer to door number twenty-eight, the back of his neck starts prickling and he freezes. Sending a quick look over his shoulder and finding nothing, Harry takes another step, and then another, squinting at the handle that’s surprisingly shiny and catching the sunlight.

“Guys,” he calls out without averting his eyes. “I think it might be this one.”

It takes the other three a second to step up to his side, all eyes looking at the one garage door that appears to be in a better condition than the ones surrounding it. There’s a lack of weeds in front of it, and there’s no moss covering the edges, indicating that it’s moved regularly.

“The door is enforced,” Liam says after sliding his faceplate back down. “Looks pretty solid, and I can’t see what’s inside, but I could probably rip it out.”

“Is it a good idea to just rip it out?” Harry asks him and Liam shrugs, his suit clicking quietly as he moves his limbs.

“I’ve always liked a big entrance.”

Liam waits for Zayn to give a curt nod, then he steps forward, lifts his arms, red and gold glistening in the afternoon sun. His right gauntlet digs into the door with a crunching sound, the second following shortly after, Liam’s suit whirring as he channels energy into the arms and pulls. With a crunch and a screech, Liam removes the garage door from its frame, walks a few steps to the side to lean it against the storage unit to its left like it weighs nothing at all, when in fact, the removed door is at least ten inches thick. Harry is pretty sure that Griffiths wasn’t using this unit for storage.

When the swirling dust has fallen again, Harry sees that the inside of the garage-sized space is entirely bare and his stomach falls slightly. There are concrete walls, painted white, oddly enough, while the floor has its original grey. In the center is a dusty, circular carpet in numerous shades of beige.

“Well,” Niall says after a moment. “This is odd.”

It is odd, Harry guesses. He doesn’t know what he expected, but it certainly wasn’t this. But he thinks about their last mission, the collection of barns and sheds in the middle of nowhere and the hidden trapdoor, so he walks inside and up to the carpet and brushes it aside with a single swipe of
his foot. There’s a surprising lack of dust. And a second later, with a square metal door laid open, Harry hears a quiet beep.

They only have just enough time to exchange a quizzical look before everything descends into chaos. Harry doesn’t get a chance to even think, let alone react, before something hits his back hard, and he goes flying to the ground, air knocked out of him completely. It’s not even a beat after that he hears a hail of bullets thundering over him, loud enough to deafen his ears, body weighed down onto concrete. He can’t move and his vision is patchy but, cheek pressed against cold stone, he can see Niall and Zayn beside him, lying with their limbs stretched out, arms protecting their heads. The odd metallic clank reaching his ears is probably Liam’s suit getting hit.

Harry takes a breath and then another, scolding himself for not being cautious, for walking into what appears to be a trap, and he tries to think on his feet, to find a way out of this mess. He isn’t aware of the weight that’s been pressing him down until it’s suddenly gone, leaving his body aching dully and he doesn’t have any clue what’s happening, not able to really turn around because there’s something or someone still shooting at them. But Harry catches Niall’s expression, wide eyes peeking out from under his arm and mouth hanging open in the face of whatever is going on behind Harry’s back.

The bullets are thundering away, but they don’t change in angle, so Harry figures it’s part of an alarm system they’ve triggered somewhere along the way. He’s about to reach for his shield to use against the onslaught of lead when he notices that it’s gone, and a second later, he hears what he knows to be bullets hitting its vibranium surface. It’s another second before a loud bang and a strange crunch reach his ears.

The salvo stops.

“What –” Harry starts, moving his aching limbs, but a familiar voice cuts him off, and it makes Harry’s heart jump so rapidly that it hurts.

“Fucking useless,” sounds through the remaining silence, “not even checking for motion sensors.” Harry turns around just as Louis rips a contraption out of a gap in the wall, wires dangling off of it, and throws it over his shoulder. “Bunch of amateurs.” Then he turns around.

Harry can’t quite feel his legs, so he’s less than graceful when he scrambles to his feet, not once taking his eyes off Louis, who is still holding his shield in one hand. He’s in battered sneakers, faded black jeans that are torn in many places, and a sweater and parka that are far too big on him. His hair looks long, curling at the ends that are peaking out from underneath his beanie and his face is scruffy, but overall – overall he looks okay. Harry doesn’t know what he expected. He’s not ready for Louis’ bright eyes to focus on him, so when he throws the shield, Harry struggles to catch it, nearly dropping it – to Niall’s amusement – because he can’t stop gaping at Louis.

Fuck, Louis.

“You need to get out of here,” Louis says, dropping his gaze and reaching inside his parka to pull out a handgun. A leather glove covers his left hand. “It’ll take them less than five minutes to swarm this place.” He turns on his heels, marches out of the garage and across the yard, and Harry’s left staring after him, breath suspended in his throat.

He feels faint. It’s Zayn who takes him by the elbow and urges him to move and it’s like single drops slowly filling a large pot, realizing that Louis is actually here, that Louis was the one pushing Harry to the ground and saving his damn life and saving all of them by being more prepared and alert. It’s a miracle he doesn’t fall over his own feet as they follow Louis, Niall and Liam just slightly ahead, bullet holes visible in the armor of Liam’s suit.
A few feet ahead, Louis is pulling a tattered backpack, along with a rifle, out of a crack in the wall. He shoulders both and doesn’t spare them another glance as he leaves the compound with quick strides, gravel crunching beneath his sneakers. Harry’s not really able to process it all and thankfully, the others are quicker to react. Liam ignites his jets and shoots ahead, drops down right in front of Louis, prompting him to stop short and preventing him from making a run for it.

“Wait a second,” Liam says, sliding his faceplate up again as they get closer to the mismatched pair. “You can’t just run off like that.”

“I told you, there’ll be agents here within minutes. I don’t fancy a run-in.”

Louis tries to dart forward again, but Liam blocks him, touching a gauntlet to Louis’ shoulder and it’s so fast Harry has trouble catching all their movements. With a solid grip and a quick flip of his prosthetic arm, Louis’ flipped Liam upside down, sending him crashing to the ground. He steps over him unceremoniously and Harry feels panic rising in his belly, can already see Louis disappearing behind the first line of trees when next to him, Niall lifts his bow.

“Stop right there,” he calls out just as Liam gets to his feet, cracking his neck.

Louis turns around. He looks more like a broke university student than a deadly assassin, but his eyes are steely. “Or what?”

Niall doesn’t have an answer for that, and Harry knows he wouldn’t shoot Louis, thinks Niall is probably aware that he couldn’t shoot Louis even if he tried. Harry doesn’t know what to say either and he has a hard time coming to grips with this seemingly new version of Louis. He looks better, yes, and he appears to be strangely collected, but that doesn’t mean all is well.

Zayn steps forward. “We just want to talk,” he says. “About Novosibirsk. About this place. About why you killed Griffiths.”

Louis lets out a dry laugh that sounds so much like him Harry feels like throwing up. “You know, I’m really not joking about agents swarming this place.”

“Then let’s go back to the Quinjet,” Zayn insists. “It’s not far. And we can all catch our breath.”

It reminds Harry of months ago at the tower, after Louis had attacked Niall, the way Louis and Zayn just stare at each other for a moment, intense and penetrating and solid like stone. Louis’ fingers twitch at his sides, then he nods almost imperceptibly and continues to walk away from the compound. Zayn follows in quick strides while Harry stays back with Liam and Niall, frozen in place as he looks at Louis’ retreating back, entirely out of breath.

After a beat, Liam and Niall get behind him and gently urge him forward. Harry hardly registers his feet moving, eyes zeroing in on Louis, Zayn now caught up to him, and he’s – he doesn’t quite know. His chest hurts, and so does his head, although that might just be due to the fact that he’d knocked it against the floor when Louis had pushed him down. And – Louis had pushed him down and saved his life and Harry hasn’t a clue why he did that or what he’s doing here now and he doesn’t know what to do or say.

“Are you okay, mate?” Niall mutters, leaning close, but eyes trained ahead as well, most likely feeling slightly on edge for Zayn’s sake.

“I don’t know,” Harry breathes out shakily. “How is he – I mean why –”

“Don’t hyperventilate,” Liam says from his other side. “He’s not going anywhere.”
“Not yet.” Harry knows he can’t make Louis stay with him. But the idea of having to watch him walk away again makes Harry’s insides constrict so painfully he wants to double over and spit the bile he’s tasting onto the wet forest ground.

“Don’t worry too much, Cap.” Niall slings an arm over his shoulders. “Zayn can talk people into anything. That’s how he got me to try –”

“Please don’t finish that sentence,” Liam pleads before turning to Harry again. “But yeah, I understand this is weird. I think it’s weird, too. He seems to be doing all right, though, so maybe all we can do for now is wait and see what happens.”

“And it seems like you were right about Griffiths,” Niall adds. “I mean, what the fuck was that, eh? Could’ve done a bit more to save our necks there, Payno. Did your suit get rusty?”

“Excuse me for being a bit stunned back there,” Liam throws back, and they half-heartedly bicker back and forth after that. Harry tunes them out because Louis is right there, now walking strangely close to Zayn. They appear to be talking, chunks of words echoing back to them, and from what Harry can tell, it’s Russian or some other Eastern European language he can’t understand. Annoyingly, it already makes his hackles rise and it his skin prickle with the same unfounded jealousy that had overcome him when he’d discovered them on the balcony of the tower.

It’s stupid. Harry feels so damn stupid.

The trees part to reveal the small clearing where they landed earlier, Louis and Zayn already standing next to the lowered ramp of the Quinjet. They’re still talking and pointedly stop when Harry, Liam and Niall are within hearing distance and while Zayn raises his eyes to look at them, Louis keeps his gaze focused on an undefined spot in the distance.

“We need to stay off the map for a while longer,” Zayn says when they’ve caught up, in a tone that signals to Harry that there’s no time for sentiments. They have to get down to business, because with Cowell and SHIELD, as well as HYDRA, on their heels, they can’t waste a single second.

“Going back to the tower is not an option and keeping the Quinjet in the air for too long isn’t a good idea either. The stealth mode swallows too much energy and fuel.”

“Can’t exactly walk into the Triskelion though, can we?” Niall replies with a pointed look at Louis. He unzips his jacket and puts his bow onto the ground, leaning it against his hip so he can flex his hands.

“I might have a place,” Liam pipes up. He looks slightly uncomfortable. Harry doesn’t know why, but he doesn’t blame him. “My – my grandfather’s old property.” And now he does. “I can fly ahead, send JARVIS in to get everything ready. Nobody’s been there in like, a decade, I think. But it should have everything we need.”

“Sounds like our best option.” Zayn’s gaze slides over Louis briefly and he crosses his arms in front of his leather-clad chest. “I’m assuming Cowell won’t have the place searched within the next hour?”

Liam shakes his head. A gust of wind blows through the trees, making twigs crack and the scrub groan. “He doesn’t know it exists,” Liam says and elaborates when all of their eyebrows shoot up.

“My grandfather got a bit paranoid in his last couple of years. Rightfully so, but I only found out about that way after his death. And he didn’t trust the government; he didn’t trust SHIELD even though he founded it. So he built a safe house, south of Alexandria. Never thought it would come in handy.”
“Then why are we still standing here?” Niall asks, grabbing his bow. “Let’s get a move on.”

Louis sits opposite him on the jet, avoiding his eyes, and Harry’s hands won’t stop shaking. He can’t look away either, not even when Niall’s hand closes around his wrist and gives it a solid squeeze as if he were trying to pull Harry out of his trance, soaking up and simmering in Louis’ presence. He’s pulled off his hat and stuffed it into the backpack that looks like Louis fished it straight out of a dumpster, and, Harry realizes with unease, that might very well be the case. It might also be the case for everything else Louis is wearing, faded and dirty and ripped in places.

He looks like he’s been to hell and back, red-rimmed eyes and haggard face, in need of a shower and a shave and definitely a hairbrush, but – and that’s something Harry finds hard to admit to himself – Louis doesn’t look worse than when he left the tower all those weeks ago. It makes Harry feel relieved and angry at himself at the same time, because this is probably solid proof that he wasn’t really helping at all.

As for everything else…Harry doesn’t know if Louis remembers anything, and if yes, then how much, and he fears he might never find out because Louis isn’t even acknowledging his existence at the moment. It hurts worse than the knife he’d plunged into Harry’s stomach.

It’s not long before the Quinjet drops down, and through the windshield Harry can see that they’re descending into an underground landing space in the middle of nowhere, doors sliding shut above them as soon as Zayn kills the engine. Artificial light flickers on around them. The ramp opens and Niall is first on his feet, hurrying out with Zayn close on his heels, and before Harry has willed his body to move, Louis has grabbed his rucksack and rifle.

“Louis,” he calls out, scrambling to his feet and leaving his shield behind, but Louis doesn’t turn around. He exits the jet and Harry hurries after him. “Louis, please.”

A quick glance over his shoulder, hair falling into his eyes, but Louis keeps walking towards the door where Liam is waiting, out of his suit, Niall and Zayn on either side. Louis pushes past them and Harry can’t bear it; can’t bear the pitying looks the other three send his way, can’t bear having Louis near but not close and not talking to him and not looking at him.

“Perhaps I should go,” he says, suddenly feeling even more deflated and useless, because he should just get over it and realize that there are more important things at stake. But he’s a coward, and he’s selfish, and he was lying to himself when he believed he’d be okay with Louis not loving him back anymore.

“Don’t be stupid,” Liam tells him. “We’ll go inside, we’ll get down to business, figure out what’s going on, yeah? One thing at a time.”

“Right,” Harry breathes, but the feeling of inadequacy remains at the forefront of his mind, even when he follows Liam inside.

They walk down a long corridor, a door open at the end, presumably because Louis already went through it, and up a narrow staircase that leads to a spacious foyer, tastefully furnished and free of dirt and dust. Harry assumes that Liam has this place maintained because he can’t quite let go of it, and he understands that well, figures they all have more than a few trunks of baggage to drag around with them.
Liam leads them into what’s probably only one of many living rooms and Louis is already there, stalking around the room and eyes flickering towards the windows and glass doors that show a well-kept garden and the first line of trees. The sun is already setting slowly, dipping everything into warm light that catches on a few reflective surfaces, like the big glass table in the middle of a group of worn leather sofas. There are bookshelves and cabinets filled with strange looking gadgets and it smells odd, a scent Harry can’t quite put his finger on.

“It’s safe,” Liam tells Louis, who is still scanning the room, posture stiff and tense. “This house doesn’t show up on any satellite footage, my grandfather made sure of that. Neither SHIELD nor HYDRA can find us here.”

But apparently, Louis doesn’t believe him and continues to move around until he has concluded his search as they all settle down on the sofas, Zayn next to Niall and Harry next to Liam. After a beat, Louis chooses the sofa opposite them which, not coincidentally, Harry is sure, also gives him the perfect view of the door and windows. He doesn’t take off his parka and he doesn’t remove his gloves.

“Why did you kill Griffiths?” Zayn eventually breaks the silence, not beating around the bush. And it’s not like they have time for that either. This place might be hidden from view and satellites, but Harry wouldn’t be surprised if Cowell still found a way to track them down.

A joyless smile tugs at the corners of Louis’ lips. “Why do you think?” he retorts. “You know that HYDRA has ears and eyes everywhere. I thought they could do with a pair fewer.”

Zayn narrows his eyes at him and Harry’s heart lurches at hearing his suspicions confirmed. “How did you know he worked for HYDRA?”

“Because I remember him being there,” Louis presses out after a minute, lowering his gaze to the floor. His arms are covered in oversized layers, but Harry can still see how he tenses. “On multiple occasions. Meetings. I – he took me with him, when he met with Griffiths.”

“Who’s he?”

“I don’t know,” Louis replies. “I don’t remember what they called him. I don’t remember his face. Just his presence.”

Zayn leans forward. “Why Griffiths? Why not anybody else? There must be more.”

“I saw a picture of him. In a newspaper. And I remembered his face.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Zayn!” It breaks out of Harry, sharply and apparently so unexpectedly that even Louis’ eyes shoot up to stare at him. “Stop it.”

“Why were you at the compound?” Zayn continues entirely unperturbed. Next to him, Niall squirms in his seat. “How did you know about the alarm system? How long it would take agents to get there?”

“I don’t need you to believe me,” Louis cuts in before Zayn can say anything else. “And I don’t need you to trust me either. This was your idea. I was happy to walk away and I can leave right now. I don’t owe you an explanation.” He heaves a breath, shoulders lifting and chest visibly expanding under his sweater. “My mind’s a mess. Things are coming back but they’re – patchy. Incomplete. I can’t explain how I know some things and not others. I don’t remember learning how to speak Russian, or French, or Arabic, or Kazakh. I can fly a helicopter, and I can build a bomb out
of scrap metal. I don’t know how, or why. I just can. And I don’t owe you anything.”

It renders them all speechless. Somewhere in this modern house with the strange, rustic charm, is a grandfather clock that ticks away, filling the silence with a steady rhythm. Louis looks unhinged and collected at the same time, a medley of contradictions and contrasts. Harry can’t imagine what it must be like for him and he figures any other person would’ve crumbled under all this weight already.

“There’s a hidden base quite close to the Triskelion,” Louis goes on. “It was – it was always my first stop when they sent me over. It can be accessed through three entries. One is where we just were. I’m not exactly sure where the other two are, but I know how to get there.”

He pauses. The breath he takes in is shaky, bottom lip trembling when he averts his eyes again and focuses on his hands. Then, very slowly, Louis peels off his gloves, revealing the shimmering prosthetic, and he moves it almost devoutly in the light, looking at it with a mixture of horror and awe. He runs careful fingertips along the ridges – then he closes it into a fist.

“I want answers. I know I don’t deserve any. Probably don’t deserve to still be alive,” he adds with a self-deprecating smile, “but neither do they. And I plan to take as many down with me as I can.”

Harry feels ill. He didn’t want Louis asking Harry to shoot him then and he doesn’t want him to think that he deserves to die now and Harry’s probably screwing it all up again, but he can’t bear the thought of Louis truly believing that he deserved anything that happened to him.

“Please don’t say that.” His vision swims briefly but Harry swallows down a lump and forces himself to continue. “You don’t deserve to die. You deserve answers and you deserve to have your life back and make them pay for taking it away from you. But – but you don’t have to do it alone. You don’t have to sacrifice yourself.”

“Cap’s right,” Niall jumps in and Harry is so grateful because his throat is closing up again. “We’ve got the same goal here. You wanna make ‘em pay, we wanna kick their arses to the curb and figure out who’s the double agent so we can kick their arse to the curb, too.”

Liam chuckles quietly and the tension around the room lifts slightly. “I want to do a bit more than kicking, thank you.”

“Personally,” Niall turns to him, “I’m not objecting to a few explosions along the way.”

“I don’t need your help,” Louis objects and Zayn sighs pointedly in response.

“I think you do. If this is where they pull their strings from in North America, you’ll encounter more than just a dozen agents or so. And you say you want them to pay, but they won’t if you go in there on your own and get yourself killed. Or worse.” They all know what Zayn is implying. Louis, if possible, pales even more. “Our best chance is going in together. We need a plan, and probably a back up plan too, and you need to try and remember as much about that base as you can. If we have a faint idea of where we’re going, we’ll be much more efficient.”

“But you don’t trust me.”

Zayn shakes his head. “Not entirely. But Styles here does, and for now, that’s good enough for me.”

This time, when Louis looks at him, it’s not just for a second. Their eyes meet and Harry feels it zip through him like an electric shock, hotly curling from his neck to the bottom of his spine and back up again. His heart does a desperate lurch and Harry can’t read Louis anymore, doesn’t know
what’s really going on inside his head, but it doesn’t change how Louis still makes him feel.

Harry barely registers that Liam gets up and comes back, tablet in hand. He stays quiet and keeps his eyes on Louis even as Louis, Liam, Zayn, and Niall start hashing out the best way to proceed, with JARVIS drawing up floor plans and diagrams. It’s strange to see them come together like this, Harry’s two worlds colliding in front of his eyes, a marriage of past and present and Louis – Louis looks almost normal like this. Or perhaps it would be more suitable for Harry to think that Louis looks almost like he had in perhaps 1944, leaning over maps with Stan and James and Tom, trying to plan out routes through Western Europe.

And that’s what Caroline has been telling him, that he’s projecting an image onto Louis, that he’s holding onto the image of a person who’s long evolved into someone else and Harry gets that now, and he’s aware that he’s doing it, but at the same time, it is so hard to stop, not to see the connection and not to feel pulled back into the past. But back then, he could’ve sidled up next to Louis and pressed close, letting their fingertips brush beneath the table and away from view, and they’d have had the night together to get even closer and map each other out and remind each other that amidst all the death and despair and chaos, they still had each other.

That’s not the case now, and it’s sobering to admit. So Harry watches Louis and he listens with one ear and tries to pay attention, but despite knowing and reflecting and taking in everything Caroline and Zayn and Niall and everyone have been telling him, he just can’t help it.

Louis’ eyelashes fan across his pronounced cheekbones as he looks down at the 3D mockup of the HYDRA base Liam has drawn up with his descriptions and he’s chewing on his lips, not meeting anyone’s eyes when he speaks up. He keeps his left hand cradled to his upper body and only uses his right one to point things out. There’s dirt beneath his short fingernails and two thin red lines that look like recently healed cuts and when he leans forward, the stretched out neckline of his jumper shows his protruding collarbones and a collection of purpling bruises.

Harry wants to grab him and take him away and hide him from anyone who could ever do him harm again, and it sits uncomfortably with him, the fact that they’re about to head into the lion’s den and it’s not the first time by far, but it hadn’t been easy for Harry to stomach then, either; to pray every second that Louis wouldn’t get hurt, wouldn’t get killed while they were recklessly chasing the Red Skull and his henchmen across Europe. It’s not easier now and the thought of anything going wrong, of having Louis ripped from his grasp for good this time – it makes Harry feel sick to his core.

“When you mention him,” Zayn tears Harry out of his own head, “do you think he was your handler? Or does he hold another position?”

Louis shakes his head. “No handler. They changed, depending on the mission, if it was with a team. But mostly I worked alone. Reported back to Zola and then he – well. You know.”

It hits Harry like a punch to the jaw. “Zola? As in –”

“As in the one who was acquitted and got recruited by SHIELD’s scientific branch,” Liam finishes for him with furrowed brows. “Fuck. Double-faced bastard.”

Zayn’s gaze flickers over Liam before settling back on Louis. “Are you sure it was Zola?”

“Believe me,” Louis replies with a wry smile, “I’m never going to forget his face.”

“Zola died in the late sixties,” Liam tells them.
“He had an assistant who took over from him,” Louis goes on. “Don’t think he was a double-agent, but I’m sure there were plenty anyhow. And when he died they… deactivated me, I think. There’s a big gap, a big chunk missing in the middle and the next thing I remember is him telling me… actually – I’m not sure what he said.” Louis brings his hand to his face and rubs at his eyes, gritting his teeth. “I’m not – his face is always blurred, no matter how much I try and – and I can’t –” He breaks off, squeezing his eyes shut like there’s pain shooting up between his temples.

“According to our sources, HYDRA put you back into business shortly after the Battle of New York,” Zayn says after a minute, rubbing the scruff on his chin thoughtfully. “Shortly before that, I started hearing about a shift in power. At the time, there was nothing substantial enough to confirm those rumours, because HYDRA’s top tier has always remained secret. But it makes sense that a new leader might bring you back to solidify his power.”

“That would explain why you can’t remember him,” Niall adds. “Probably made damn sure you couldn’t expose him if you were caught. Or when SHIELD prodded you.”

“If he were to be at the base,” Zayn addresses Louis again, “do you think you could recognize him?”

“I don’t think so,” Louis shakes his head. “Maybe his voice, but – I don’t know. I don’t think I could.”

“That’s okay,” Harry feels the need to clarify, because Louis looks shaky again and like he’s fraying at the edges and Harry doesn’t want Zayn to keep pushing. “All we need for now is proof of Griffiths’ involvement. Liam can send JARVIS in as soon as we get there and whatever else we find, I’m sure we can use it to get SHIELD off your back for now.”

“I think we’ll find more than that,” Zayn says and then gets to his feet. “And I should go check on the Quinjet. We need to be ready to go at 0300 hours. Make sure to get some rest before then.”

He gives Harry a pointed look, and then he leaves the room without any further preamble.

“Right,” Niall says, slapping his own thighs. “I better help him. If he doesn’t get enough sleep, I’ll never hear the end of it.” He exits the living room as well, leaving behind Liam, who isn’t subtle in looking between Harry and Louis, then jumping up so rapidly that Harry nearly flinches.

“I should prep JARVIS and, you know, try to figure out – stuff, and, yeah.” He grabs his tablet, waves awkwardly with a tight smile and suddenly, they’re alone.

Louis doesn’t move, and Harry couldn’t move even if he tried. The thudding of his heart echoes in his ears and he is beginning to feel rather light-headed. Harry doesn’t think he’s breathed properly since realizing that Louis had been the one to save his life. And now he’s just sitting on this lavish leather sofa, small and almost swallowed up by his jumper and parka and he’s –

He’s like a landmine made out of glass.

He’s explosive and fragile at the same time and Harry is caught between being terrified of breaking him and terrified of setting him off. Harry is scared of saying the wrong things or doing the wrong things, because it’s gone so horribly wrong already, and even though Louis appears to be more stable than he did back then – Harry just doesn’t know him anymore. He doesn’t like it, but it’s the truth. Louis isn’t the person he lost seventy years ago.

“Right,” Harry breathes out nonsensically. The others left them alone for a reason, probably to give Harry the opportunity to right some wrongs, to clear the air, to…talk about anything really, but
Harry doesn’t know how to start. He doesn’t know if Louis wants to hear anything he has to say. “I’m – I’m glad you’re okay,” is what he settles on. “I was worried. I mean; we all were.”

Louis doesn’t show any sign that he’s registered Harry’s words. Not that Harry expected him to react immediately. The silence is once again interrupted by the continuous ticking of the grandfather clock that’s probably in one of the adjoining rooms. Harry is starting to find it irritating. He shifts and wrings his hands, looks at his feet and then out the glass doors where everything is at delusory peace.

Distractedly, Harry wonders what the Director must be thinking at this moment – about what they’re doing and where there are, but he guesses Cowell has a pretty good idea what’s going on, even if he can’t know the details. He has no doubt that the STRIKE team is looking for them, that SHIELD is monitoring all security cameras in the Capital’s vicinity. Their whole operation is probably seriously diverging resources.

“I wanted to apologize,” Harry continues. “For how I acted. For pushing when you needed space. For not being able to help.” Part of him wants it to rain. The bright sunshine outside doesn’t really match his mood. “I wasn’t quite well myself. And I’m not all good now, and I probably won’t be able to help much now, but if you wanted…I mean if you – what I want to say is –”

He cuts himself off, because his rambling is getting nowhere and he’s not making much sense, so Harry tries to take a deep, calming breath to organize his thoughts.

“You’re always welcome at the tower. If you need a place to stay. You can have your own space and I – I can leave you alone and I promise I won’t – I mean,” and he breaks off again with a silent groan, rubs his palms over his face in irritation. “God, I’m pushing again, aren’t I? I’m sorry, I really am, and I don’t mean to – be like that. It’s just –”

“You lied to me.”

Harry’s head whips around so quickly that his neck cracks. “What?”

Louis’ lips are pressed into a thin, pale line. “You lied to me,” he repeats, eyes glued to the shiny tabletop, body as stiff as a salt statue. “You said you wouldn’t lie to me, but you did.”

“I never…Louis, I swear I haven’t lied to you. I wouldn’t.”

“I didn’t want to remember.” He doesn’t look at Harry, goes on imperturbable. “I just – I just wanted to go home. But I couldn’t remember where that was. And everything in my head was just disconnected and there was just something wrong, so deeply wrong, and I couldn’t figure out what it was.” Louis takes a rattling breath, fingers twitching against the denim of his trousers. “And I thought, maybe, if I could start putting everything in order, it would become easier to fill in the blanks and it would be easier to figure out why nothing made sense.”

He moves suddenly, hands digging into the deep pockets of his parka. Harry watches with bated breath as Louis pulls something out of them, and only when he puts it all on the table does Harry see the uncountable scraps of paper.

“I wrote it all down,” Louis explains, almost frenzied now, pulling out more and more pieces. Harry sees receipts and paper napkins, chewing gum wrappers and odd pieces of cardboard, covered in small writing and he figures Louis didn’t have anything else, just had to take what he could find. “I was scared I’d just suddenly forget everything again, so I wrote down everything that came into my mind and I tried to…connect it all.”
Louis looks a bit lost looking at the pile that’s now lying on the table; dozens of memories balled up and put away and something tears violently at Harry’s heart. With trembling fingers, he takes what turns out to be a faded takeaway menu, words hardly distinguishable, but there’s a line that reads, Corporal Ed Sheeran, birthday in February, with the guitar. On the back of a receipt it says, 1979 Kabul, dubs? dubs dubs, and then half the paper is covered in Arabic. Harry can’t even begin to imagine what else is written down here.

He doesn’t want to look further, scared of not finding his name a single time.

“There are so many things I want to undo, or forget,” Louis goes on. “And it’s probably a fitting punishment that those are the things that I remember the most, that are the most vivid in my head. But there are other things as well,” he adds and Harry holds his breath. “The entire time I was at the tower there was just something – off. And I didn’t understand, but I knew, I knew, that something was wrong and I knew that you were lying to me.”

“I wasn’t,” Harry tries again. “I promise, I wasn’t lying to you.”

Louis looks up and their eyes meet, Louis’ so clear and blue and piercing right through Harry’s chest. “But you were,” he insists. “I started dreaming and I didn’t know if that’s all it was and I didn’t – I don’t know what I thought then. Because it wasn’t vivid and it wasn’t precise, but it was there and something told me it had always been there and I could…I could feel it. I just didn’t understand why you – why you wouldn’t tell me. And then I thought, maybe it’s not real after all. Or maybe…maybe he just doesn’t want me anymore.”

It hits Harry like a bucket full of freezing water. His heart plummets or maybe it jumps higher than ever before, because everything in his chest constricts and twists hotly, painfully, and he doesn’t have a moment to let it sink in, because for all the silence that’s surrounded him until this point, now it seems like he isn’t able to stop the flood of words tumbling past his lips.

“We went to Coney Island. On your sixteenth birthday. You wanted to go on the Ferris wheel and you had cotton candy stuck to your face and I – I kissed you.” His eyes are watery, but Louis’ gaze doesn’t waver and neither does his voice. “And when we were held by the Germans, Stan asked me if I had a sweetheart back home, and I told him I had you. I think that was the only reason why I got through their torture. Because I thought, who’s gonna look after you, if not me? And I can’t believe I forgot. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. You said we were best friends but that – that isn’t true, is it?”

It’s been rising up and building slowly, but when it breaks out of Harry, it does so with full force. Louis’ contours blur in front of his eyes and the first oddly cold drop hits his cheeks as his lungs start to burn.

“I’m so sorry,” he forces out, and at the same time, starts gasping for air, because none of it travels past his throat. “You didn’t know who I was, and you were so hurt and I just – I didn’t know what to do. You didn’t even know me.”

Frantically, Harry rubs at his eyes, his shoulders shaking and his entire torso feeling like it’s being ripped to shreds. He can’t look at Louis and his confused and hurtful expression, because Harry did lie and he’s done everything wrong. He gulps in breath after breath and presses his hand to his lips to muffle the sobs that are suddenly threatening to break out of him. Louis is the one who suffered and he doesn’t need Harry breaking down in front of him when it was Harry who couldn’t save him, couldn’t protect him, couldn’t even be honest with him.

Harry hears floorboards creak and then tentative fingers touch his knees first and his lower arms after, a cold and solid hand wrapping around Harry’s wrist and pulling it away from his face. He’s
a mess and he feels like a mess as well, but Harry sees Louis kneeling in front of him through a
curtain of tears, parka abandoned on the floor, and he can’t quite believe it.

“Harry,” Louis says, “I know you now.” And Harry sags forward against him.

“God, Louis.” He hasn’t held Louis in his arms like this in seventy years and Harry wasn’t even
conscious for all that time, but it’s still the best thing he’s ever felt. It’s the first bit of sun after a
long and hard winter, the first deep breath after being underwater for too long, the first spot of
color after spending a lifetime seeing only black and white. It’s all of this and so much more when
Harry wraps his arms around Louis’ shoulder and turns his face against his neck, and it’s like
coming home.

They’ve finally come home.

“I missed you so much,” Harry whispers into his skin. He can’t stop crying, but he doesn’t care. He
doesn’t care about what happened before and what lays ahead. All he wants, all he needs is to have
Louis in this moment.

“I’m sorry I forgot.” Louis’ breath tickles his ear.

“Not your fault.” Harry shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now.”

“We both are.”

Harry takes another breath, one that finally fills his lungs with air, one that finally clears his mind
and unclenches his chest. He moves his hands along Louis’ bony shoulders and up his neck; he
cradles Louis’ face in his palms, stays close.

“Took us long enough,” he says, a smile tickling at his lips as he moves his thumbs along Louis’
cheekbones. It’s not over, and it’s not easy, and they’re both absolute train wrecks, Harry knows,
but Louis looking at him and seeing him and knowing him is more than he thought possible. “I
love you. You have no idea how much I love you.”

“You shouldn’t,” Louis replies, and tries to turn his head away, but Harry won’t let him. “You
deserve better than something like me.”

He won’t make the same mistakes again, either. Caroline has told him quite a few times that it’s
not in his power to change how Louis thinks about everything that’s happened to him and it’s not in
his power to change how he feels about it. The one thing he can do is to love him nonetheless.
Harry doesn’t even remember a time when he didn’t.

“Too bad,” he tells him. “I’ve loved you all my life. I doubt I could stop, even if I tried.”

It’s not quite a smile that ghosts around Louis’ mouth, but Harry will take it. “I might not stay,”
Louis says quietly, eyes flickering to the floor. “Even if tomorrow goes well, I – I might leave.”

“That’s okay.” It’s not. The thought of saying goodbye again is killing him, but he can understand
that Louis might be far from ready to stay at the tower for good. “As long as you come back from
time to time. As long as I can see you once in a while, if that’s all right?”

Louis nods imperceptibly. “I think I’d like that,” he answers.

Harry wants to kiss him. He always does, but they’re so close now, and he can feel Louis’ warm
breath on his lips, wouldn’t have to move much to tilt Louis’ head back and press their mouths
together. But Harry doesn’t want to push it too far. They’ve taken such a big leap forward, such an
unexpected one too. Harry figures this is good enough for now.

“When was the last time you slept?” he asks and moves his hands to Louis’ arms, urges him to get off the floor and up on the sofa with him. Harry can feel the hard metal of Louis’ prosthetic and not for the first time, he wonders how much Louis feels with it, how much he notices it and is reminded of what it represents.

“Few days ago,” Louis tells him and it’s evident in the dark circles underneath his eyes. He’s been on the run for months. He deserves not to feel hunted for a handful of hours.

“You should rest then,” Harry tells him. He’s surprised to find that Louis allows himself to be gently guided into a horizontal position, but it might very well be physical and emotional exhaustion finally taking over. Harry feels close to passing out as well. “I’ll keep watch.”

He guesses it pacifies Louis enough to lay back, eyes barely open. His pulse is still racing and Harry can feel it with his fingers resting just below Louis’ jaw. Slowly but steadily, it calms down, but their gazes remain locked until Louis’ eyelids start fluttering and sleep takes over.

Harry can’t find rest straight away. He lets his body slide off the sofa and leans his side against it, folds his legs under himself and reaches out to carefully brush a strand of hair out of Louis’ face. Pressing his cheek into the soft leather, he gently places his right hand on top of Louis’ right one lying on his chest and he traces the curve between his thumb and forefinger almost devoutly, runs along the ridges of his knuckles and follows the thin red lines that are still healing.

And Harry knows that the two of them might never heal entirely and he knows that they’re not going to be what they were, but he wants nothing more than to nourish that timid flame of hope that has started fluttering in his chest. Somehow, despite everything and against all odds, he and Louis have managed to come out the other end. They’ve found each other again and this time, Harry won’t let him fall.

He reaches for a throw that’s folded up on the armrest of the sofa, spreads it out over Louis, and eventually, Harry’s breaths even out and he succumbs to sleep as well.

The forest floor is frozen. It crunches with every step. Through the occasional gap in the trees, the moon shines a cold light onto them and dips everything into a silvery sheen. Louis leads them through the shrubbery with unforgiving pace, nearly invisible in the black uniform Zayn had handed him earlier. His rifle is slung around his shoulder. Harry is close on his heels, followed by Niall, with Zayn bringing up the rear. Liam is about three hundred feet in the air.

They’ve parked the Quinjet a mile away to be safe, and he doesn’t know how far they still have to go. Even Louis doesn’t know exactly, he clarified earlier, but soon enough, the trees start dwindling and they leave the last line behind them. Not too far ahead, across the Potomac that’s snaking through the scenery, looms the Triskelion, a few lights still on. On the horizon, DC is fast asleep.

Louis stops. “It’s somewhere around here,” he says just as Liam drops out of the sky. “A dark tunnel, some sort of…chute.”

“Lovely,” Niall comments dryly. “I swear, can’t we for once fight a villain whose hideout is in a brewery or something?”
“How about a spa?” Liam throws in. “I think I saw that in a Bond movie once.”

Zayn sighs pointedly. “How about you two leave the spa and drinks until after we’re finished here? And help us look.”

“Of course, oh light of my life,” Niall quips with a grin that probably serves to lift some of the tension that’s been building since they had to leave their safe house. Harry can hear Niall’s voice carry over quietly even as he and Zayn head in one direction and Liam in the other, leaving him and Louis to search the vicinity, which was probably very much intentional.

It wasn’t exactly awkward, waking up with his faced mushed against the sofa cushion and Louis looking at him calmly. But Harry still feels a bit unsure where they stand, what he’s supposed to do. To be honest, he is glad to be able to slip into a well-known pattern, even with Louis. They’ve been on countless missions together and beneath decades of training and programming by HYDRA, Louis is still the same when it comes to the details.

It’s only a few minutes until Liam calls them over, standing in front of a chute that’s partially overgrown with weeds and moss. “Is that it?” Liam asks, and Louis walks up to it. He bends down and clears the entry, peering down into its black gorge.

“How deep is it?” Zayn asks.

“Sixty feet, give or take,” Louis replies. “There are steps. You don’t have to jump.” He secures his gloves, jaw tight, throws a quick glance over his shoulder. “I’m going in first.”

Harry steps forward. “Louis, I don’t think –”

“I’m going in first,” he repeats, expression calm when he looks at Harry. “I know what to expect. I know where to go. And if there are agents, they won’t sound the alarm straight away.” He tightens the strap on his rifle. “I’ll send you a signal if it’s clear.”

Nobody objects and Harry has to bite back his worries. Just as he expects Louis to disappear, he suddenly moves close. His lips are cold and chapped, but the kiss is hot and urgent and Harry feels it down to his toes, just quick enough to return it for a moment, automatically chasing after him when Louis moves away again. Their mingling breaths create small clouds between their faces. Louis’ eyes have been blank for such a long time. Now, they’re full of life, and Harry can see so much.

He’s not ready to let him go.

Louis takes two steps back, rounds the chute, and jumps. Harry breathes out.

“I think I’m gonna cry,” Niall says after a bit, sniffing for emphasis and even in the dark, Harry can see Zayn roll his eyes affectionately.

“Maybe wait until after,” he says. “Payne, you should go next. Then Cap and Niall. I’ll make sure nobody followed us.”

It’s a minute until they can see light flashing from below and a moment later, Liam slides his faceplate down and flies down the chute. When the light flickers again, Harry steps up to the edge. He inhales, smelling frost and pines and a hint of smoke, and then he jumps. The fall is short and he lands gracefully, which surprises him time and time again. Getting out of his crouch, Harry can see that they’re in the middle of a grey corridor, lights dimmed and air slightly muggy. Louis and
Liam are a few feet away. Harry makes space for Niall, who climbs down right after Louis has shone a small flashlight up again.

“Like I said,” Niall says in a hushed voice and with a mildly sour expression, “a different atmosphere would be appreciated.”

“Be glad they’re not shooting at us,” Harry tells him.

“Yet,” Liam adds with a wink.

A moment later, Zayn joins them, not a hair out of place. His dark eyes scan the corridor in a matter of milliseconds. “Which way?” he directs at Louis, not wanting to waste any time, and he takes his handgun, releasing the safety catch.

Louis doesn’t reply. He just turns on his heels and starts walking, not giving them any option but follow him, keeping close together. There’s not a camera in sight, which Harry finds unusual considering that this is supposed to be HYDRA’s main base in North America. Surely they wouldn’t just leave entire sections of their underground complex unguarded. He’s sure the others notice the same.

Eventually, another corridor branches off to the left, prompting them to stop and peek around the corner until Louis declares it safe to move on. Liam is starting to get twitchy on his right, Harry notices, because their plan was to find cameras or other devices tied to the main server so that JARVIS could latch onto them and infiltrate the system. If they run into agents before Liam can do whatever it is he actually does, it’s quite likely that, once again, any important files will be deleted before they can download them.

They don’t exactly reach a dead end, but after about ten minutes, the corridor splits into two, and Louis seems unsure which direction to take.

“Something’s not right.” Zayn chooses that pause to say what everyone must be thinking at this point. “It’s starting to feel like a trap.”

Harry swallows thickly. “They couldn’t have known we were coming. We were careful.”

“It’s possible that they pulled a few dozen agents from this place and stationed them somewhere else. SHIELD has been more aggressive lately. It’s not unlikely,” Niall says, but he still has his bow ready, sweat collecting at his hairline.

“We’re not going back,” Zayn decides. “But be alert. Left or right?”

“I’m not sure,” Louis replies. He looks uneasy and tense, and if it’s uncomfortable for them to be here, it must be a hundred times worse for him. “At this point, there was usually someone else with me. They barely left me unattended.”

Which is why this is so strange, Harry guesses, walking closer to Louis and hesitating a second before putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. Louis doesn’t visibly startle, but his eyes are widened slightly when he looks at Harry. “Take your time,” Harry tells him, squeezing once.

“Liam?”

“I’m not picking up on any body heat apart from ours,” he answers instantly. “But I think it would be our safest bet to go left.”

“Let’s do that then,” Harry decides on the spot, keen to take the pressure off Louis, who’s worrying his lip again.
The two of them walk ahead. The air remains uncomfortably stale and it makes Harry wonder if they’re too late, if this place was abandoned a long time ago, Louis getting his timeline mixed up a bit. They’d take important equipment with them, and they wouldn’t leave more than a handful of agents behind, if any, and it would explain this downright eerie silence. It makes the back of Harry’s neck prickle and his hair stand on end and he never thought the day would come when he would actually want a few people to shoot at him.

It’s starting to feel like they’re getting buried alive.

And then out of the blue, there’s a door up ahead. Louis stops so suddenly that Harry is surprised Niall doesn’t run into him.

“There’s something in there,” he presses out, eyes focused on the door. It looks inconspicuous, with what appears to be a retina scan security system next to it. But Harry trusts Louis’ judgement and instinct. He can’t remember that it had ever failed him. Louis shakes himself out of his stupor quickly and draws his gun, stalking towards the door so fast that Harry and the others only catch up to him when his eyes are getting scanned. For a moment, it looks like nothing is going to happen. It’s possible that Louis’ security clearance was wiped, and it’s also possible that he never had it in the first place.

But then a quiet beep sounds through the corridor and with a gasp and a swoosh, the door slides open. Harry takes the shield off his back and follows Louis into the room. And a second later, he realizes what had Louis freeze outside and what has him frozen to the spot now.

There’s a chair. It’s almost identical to the one Harry ripped to pieces. Like rays, wires spread out around it and attach it to numerous pieces of equipment. It looks shiny, unused. All the walls are bare, except –

The door slams shut. Harry’s head whips around and he stares with wide eyes as Niall gives it a solid kick, steps back and readies his bow. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees that Liam’s left gauntlet is glimmering, ready to shoot, but Zayn – Zayn is looking to the right with his brows drawn together, where a spiral staircase leads up onto a gallery. And standing there –

“Shooting at it won’t help, Mr Payne. Please, you’re insulting me.”

Ben Winston is looking down at them with a calm, satisfied smile, and in a three-piece suit with his meticulously trimmed beard, he looks entirely out of place. And fact is, he is out of place. Everything only started because they were sent out to save him from HYDRA, to make sure Louis wouldn’t kill him in Prague and then in London and he was under SHIELD’s protection. Harry doesn’t understand.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised,” he says. “Although…I guess it is a bit of a shock. Well done, Soldier.”

Harry stops short. “What –” The barrel of a gun points right between his eyes. Louis is facing him, all unease and discomfort fallen away from him. “Louis?” With a swift movement of his thumb, he releases the safety catch.

His eyes are blank.

to be continued.
IX.

Chapter Summary

Harry’s mind draws blank. “What do you mean?”

Winston smirks self-satisfactory. “Well, I thought to myself, why just settle for one supersoldier, when I can have two?”

Chapter Notes

**WARNINGS for this chapter:** tw for blood and graphic violence, proceed with caution

for general warnings, please see the tags. *italics* are flashbacks.

**DISCLAIMER:** the marvel universe is not mine, which sucks because being stan lee would be pretty awesome. i do also not hold any ownership over the people featuring in this fic, fictional or non-fictional. they belong to marvel or themselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER IX.

“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.”

*Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar*

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The sound of Louis releasing the safety catch of his gun is quiet, but in the heavy silence that is gripping them all so tightly, it echoes through the entire room. Harry forgets to breathe, staring down the barrel that’s pointing at his forehead. Louis had been trembling and shivering beneath the surface up until this point, burdened and confused and shaken while coming face to face with his past, but now – now he seems calm. No, more than that, he seems lifeless and frozen in place, his right arm not shaking in the slightest as it points the gun. His face is the blank mask Harry saw in London and he doesn’t – he doesn’t understand.
“Louis?” His voice sounds hollow in the almost empty room. “What’s going on?”

Above them, Ben Winston looms like a preacher, hands on the railing, with a bemused tilt to his lips. “He’s not going to answer you, Captain,” he calls out to them, cufflinks catching in the cold light. “He only answers to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry turns back to Louis. “Louis, please. Look at me.” And he is looking at Harry, but at the same time, he isn’t. He doesn’t seem to see Harry, really, his expression wiped clear and face entirely immobile. “Please.”

“How endearing,” Winston comments drily, moving down the stairs until he’s on their level. He snaps his fingers and a second later, concealed doors on the left and right slide open, allowing a dozen agents to fill the room. The agents have them circled in seconds, weapons pointed at their heads while Winston stays back with an almost tauntingly relaxed stance.

“You’re the mole,” Zayn concludes to Harry’s right.

“Mole,” Winston sighs. “What an ugly word for what I do. But first things first: kindly drop your weapons to the ground and leave them for my men to collect. And Mr. Payne, I would appreciate it if you could take off that magnificent suit of yours. I’m sure you don’t want your Captain to end up with a bullet in his brain.”

“You fucking –”

“Niall,” Zayn cuts him off. “Not now.” He’s the first to pull out his weapons. Two handguns fall to the floor with a hard thud, followed by the clatter of knives and widow bites. Niall grumbles something unintelligible, but he drops his bow and quiver, two small hand grenades, and a gun. Liam steps out of his suit, which immediately folds up into a small case.

“Captain,” Winston addresses him, “the shield as well.”

Harry still feels dumbstruck. His movements are sluggish as he drops the shield and takes a step back, closer to the other three. He watches as HYDRA agents surge forward and snatch everything up, drawing back just seconds later and leaving Winston and Louis in a circle with them. Harry tries to gain Louis’ attention, tries to shift his focus back to Harry, but Louis is not moving and he doesn’t even flinch when Winston comes to stand right behind him, slightly off his right shoulder.

“Now, that is more comfortable, isn’t it?” Winston asks them. He smooths out the lapels of his suit jacket, adjusts his collar after stretching his neck, smile never leaving his lips. “You look awfully put out, gentlemen. Did I overestimate you?”

“You’re a SHIELD consultant,” Liam eventually replies. Harry doesn’t turn his head, but he knows how much Liam’s face has darkened. “You were under our protection. We saved your life.”

“Ah yes, Prague,” Winston muses. “And I guess London as well. But I’m sorry to say that technically, my life was never in danger.”

Zayn is the first to draw the right conclusion. “You set it all up. A threat to your life put all negotiations regarding the arms trade deals on hold, you got yourself catapulted to the heart of SHIELD, and at the same time, you wiped your name of any suspicion.”

Winston bares his teeth. “In a nutshell, yes.”

“Why?”
“Why not?” Winston asks back, looking almost delighted in the face of Zayn’s thunderous expression. “People these days seem to lack imagination. They lack ambition. But that’s something I’ve always possessed. An inimitable drive to get things done.”

Niall lets out a dry laugh. “You’re mental.”

“I prefer to think of myself as an opportunist, Agent Horan,” Winston replies, moving to Louis’ left. He puts a hand on his shoulder and Harry feels his heart lurch, wants to jump forward and rip Winston’s head right off for daring to – “See,” he continues, “SHIELD came to me years ago, asking for my cooperation. Around the same time, HYDRA approached me as well, and what can I say; they simply gave me a better offer.”

Harry feels it boiling deep in his belly and it’s threatening to rise to the surface. “So you played both sides,” he presses out, eyes zeroed in on the hand that is still gripping Louis’ shoulder. Harry wants him to let go. Harry wants Louis to turn around and shoot him in the head.

“As I said, I’m an opportunist. And HYDRA – well. They had all the resources, all the potential, this gem here locked away,” Winston says, looking at Louis with such a reverent expression that Harry struggles not to leap forward. “But since the end of the Cold War, the organization was like a headless chicken. I seized the opportunity, and I gave them direction. And then you reappeared, Captain America, and I thought it was impossible that my luck just wasn’t running out.”

Harry’s mind is blank. “What do you mean?”

Winston smirks, self-satisfactory. “Well, I thought to myself, why just settle for one supersoldier, when I can have two?”

Harry feels his eyes widen at that. His heart is already racing and his head hurts with the onslaught of information, but this – this is insane. “I would never join HYDRA.”

To his surprise, Winston doesn’t laugh in his face. “Oh, I’m aware of that,” he tells Harry. “But don’t forget, dear Captain – I have him. And I can’t help but wonder what lengths you would go to to keep him safe.”

Color drains from Harry’s face. “You bastard,” Niall snarls next to him and it sounds like Zayn is holding him back. “You fucking bastard.”

“You don’t have him,” Harry forces out, starting to seethe with suppressed rage. “Louis, please. Tell him you’re not – you can’t be –”

But Louis doesn’t respond. He doesn’t react in any way, still a stoic figure with his gun aimed at Harry’s head, allowing Winston to move his hand from his shoulder to his jaw, fingers cradling his face; calculating, observing, deeply admiring.

“Please, Captain. Do you really think we didn’t have control over him this entire time? Do you really think I would allow my most valuable asset to walk away?” He chuckles quietly to himself and brushes a thumb along Louis’ cheek. “I’m afraid he was ours all along.”

“You’re lying.” Harry shakes his head. “Please, Louis, tell me he’s lying.”

“I already told you, Captain. He only answers to me,” Winston says. “Because he’s mine. And he’s been HYDRA’s for seventy years.” A disquieting grin stretches across his mouth. “Although, Zola and his assistants recorded everything, and you should have heard how he screamed for you in the beginning.”
Harry wants to throw up. He sees red, and he lunges forward, but arms lock around his shoulders, the joint effort of Niall, Zayn, and Liam. Winston holds up his left palm, signalling him to stop moving.

“Ah ah ah, Captain. Control your temper. You don’t want him to shoot you if you get too close, do you?”

Harry shakes the other three off, but he doesn’t move. He balls his fists at his sides, arms trembling and shoulders shaking with suppressed tension. “He wouldn’t. He’s not your pawn.” He grits his teeth when Winston keeps his hand around Louis’ neck. “Don’t fucking touch him.”

Winston chuckles. “Awfully possessive, aren’t you? Not that I can blame you, Captain. He’s quite something. Perhaps a bit plain before, but HYDRA turned him into quite the masterpiece. Entirely exquisite.” He looks Harry dead in the eye. “I don’t know why I was surprised when I figured out you two had been lovers. Tell me, Harry. What would you be willing to give to have your little boyfriend back?”

“Go fuck yerself, arsehole.” Niall can’t seem to hold it in anymore. Harry throws a look over his shoulder, and they’re all huddled together, glaring daggers at Winston and gritting their teeth. “Once SHIELD gets here –”

“Please,” Winston huffs, but he steps away from Louis, puts a foot between them and pushes his hands into his trouser pockets. “I’ve been right under SHIELD’s nose for years and nobody caught on. Cowell likes to think of himself as all-seeing, but he’s a blind old man on the last leg of his reign. And I’d be careful if I were you, Agent Horan. You aren’t particularly valuable to me, so for your own sake, keep that foul language to yourself.”

“Don’t threaten us,” Zayn bites out sharply. “You’ve not won yet.”

“Indeed, I haven’t,” Winston agrees, and he waves his hand, prompting half the agents to leave the room. “But that’s only a matter of time now.”

Harry knows he should be trying to come up with a plan. But he can’t tear his eyes away from Louis, searching his face for any clue, any hint that this is all a big double bluff, that he’s just a moment away from turning on Winston and shooting him instead. Harry should have never let him go in the first place. He should have…he doesn’t know, but he should have done things differently, should have known, should have kept Louis safe. But part of him can’t believe it; refuses to believe it.

“Louis,” he tries again, desperately. “This isn’t you. I know this isn’t you, please. You don’t have to do this.”

Winston sighs. “How tragic. But love really does make you blind, doesn’t it?” He takes a look at his watch and claps his hands all of a sudden, sound echoing between the walls. “Now, let’s talk business, shall we? It is rather late and I’d love to catch a few hours of sleep before taking down SHIELD.”

“We’re not gonna talk business with you, Winston,” Liam says, stepping forward. “We don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

“And how would you describe yourself, Mr. Payne? Considering that the majority of weapons currently killing people in the thousands stem from your own manufacturing. Still, Payne Industries has provided HYDRA with weapons for decades,” Winston replies fluidly. “I don’t appreciate your moral condescension. You apply your worldview to our society, and I apply mine.
We shall see who will be more successful.”

Harry knows the comment about Payne Industries’ former weapons manufactory hits Liam right where it hurts, because despite putting a complete stop on any new production of new weapons, he can’t exactly call back everything that’s already shipped out and in circulation. He was nearly killed by his own technology. Liam snaps his mouth shut; face an angry red as Winston slinks around them like a predator on its nightly prowl.

“And to make myself very clear,” he continues, all traces of amusement wiped from his features, “you are in no position to negotiate. I think we can all agree that I am the one who’s holding all the cards. But since everything has worked so flawlessly to this point, and you four walked so naively into my trap, I’m in a good mood. So I will make this very easy, and very simple.” Winston pauses for effect, strokes his beard once, before looking at his watch. “All I want is Captain America. You three are of no further interest to me. If you surrender to me, Captain, nobody will come to harm. Not your dear Louis, and not your fellow Avengers. If you don’t, then I’ll have your friends killed first, before I will order the Soldier to kill you.”

It takes Harry a moment to process the words before they trickle down into the core of his mind, and at first he wonders what Winston would want with him, because surely he’s aware that Harry wouldn’t ever cooperate with him. Then his eyes fall onto the chair in the middle of the room, and suddenly it dawns on him.

If Harry surrenders himself, Winston will have him strapped to this horrible contraption and will take away his memories and his life, break his mind and his spirit and turn him into another weapon to instill chaos and bend others to his will. Should he surrender, Niall, Zayn, and Liam will live – if Winston is a man of his word – and perhaps they will come up with a way to kill him and make the world a safer place.

If he doesn’t…Harry doesn’t want to imagine what will happen if he doesn’t.

He’s about to subconsciously step forward when Zayn extends his left arm across Harry’s chest and pushes him back, putting himself in front of Harry as a barrier. Louis’ gun is still pointed at Harry. Bemusement tickles around Winston’s mouth.

“Убирайся к чёрту!” Zayn spits out venomously, shedding his composure. “Go to hell!”

Winston remains unimpressed. He shakes his head to himself and shrugs. “Well. Then perhaps you need more of an incentive. Soldier!”

And Louis pulls the trigger.

For a split-second, just as the shot is ringing in his ears, Harry expects his lights to go out. He expects darkness or blinding pain and drops his eyes to his chest, almost astounded to find himself unharmed. Then his brain catches up with the sound and with his own heartbeat thudding loudly in his head, he can only watch as Zayn doubles over, eyes wide and lips parted in a silent scream. Niall’s resulting scream reaches Harry’s ears as if oozing through a heavy curtain.

The smell of gunpowder is poignant and dominant in the air.

Zayn’s legs are giving out and Niall steadies him as best as he can, both with matching pale faces, but Harry finds himself frozen in place as he averts his eyes again, looks at Louis still aiming his gun at Zayn and –

“I’ll give you some time to deliberate about how to proceed here,” Winston says, checking his
watch again. “A few hours until he bleeds out, I assume, so I wouldn’t drag it out if I were you. We’ll see if you’re still so feisty once you’re choking on your own blood, Agent Malik. Guards?” he directs at the agents still surrounding them. “Take them away!”

An agent drags a semi-conscious Zayn away by his collar and Niall lashes about until they put a rifle to his chest and unceremoniously kick him along. Harry still can’t move. Louis’ right arm falls to his side, eyes staring ahead at nothing, lips in a thin line, and Harry doesn’t understand. Liam puts a hand on his back, urging but comforting, as agents start blocking Harry’s view.

“Come on, Cap,” he utters quietly, pressing against his spine, “let’s just –” But he doesn’t finish, probably doesn’t have a clue either what the hell is going on at this point.

Harry’s head continues to buzz, vision cloudy and slightly off-kilter on their way along cold and bare corridors where air is thick and heavy and making it hard to breathe. After a handful of minutes of walking in absolute silence, they’re not so gently pushed into a small, rectangular room with only a single overhead light and grey concrete floor and walls. Zayn collapses against a wall, dragging a wet trail of red down to the floor with him, and Harry should do something other than stand there, still and dazed.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Niall curses, sinking to his knees and grabbing Zayn’s shoulders to steady him once more, frames his face to force his eyes to focus on him. “Fuck!” He undoes buckles and zips and peels Zayn out of his jacket. The simple top he’s wearing underneath is drenched. Niall’s hands come away red.

Liam crouches down next to him. “We need to stop the bleeding.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Niall snaps at him, beginning to sound hysterical. “We need to get the bullet out as well, so if you don’t have a pair of tweezers up yer arse, why don’t you shut up?”

“Calm down, Niall,” Zayn manages to croak. His eyelids are fluttering and unsurprisingly, he seems to be struggling to remain conscious. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine!” Niall all but yells at him. “Jesus fuck!” He rakes his hand through his hair and across his forehead, smearing blood into his skin. “What the fuck just happened?”

Harry doesn’t know. There’s the phantom touch of Louis’ lips against his. He still tastes his urgency and desperation on his tongue, he still feels Louis’ fingertips digging into his arms, his eyes as clear as the Arctic sea stretching towards the horizon before Harry had been enveloped by ice and darkness. Harry’s mind has trouble processing, stuck in a treacherous circle of promising touches and hope and so much love that’s still throbbing in his chest, refusing to dwindle. This is just all wrong. It’s not how it was supposed to go and Harry doesn’t understand and – it’s just all wrong.

“We should have been more careful,” Zayn grits out as Niall rips his shirt to shreds while still trying to keep pressure on the wound. “We shouldn’t have trusted him.”

“Can’t change that now,” Liam comments. He looks vulnerable and uncomfortable in the tight black uniform he always puts on under his suit, the arc reactor giving off a bluish glimmer and blanketing their little cell with a weird light. He’s wringing his hands, undoubtedly feeling useless while stripped from all his tech. “Do you think – do you think he really was a sleeper then?”

“Don’t know,” Zayn replies, wincing when Niall ties the strips of fabric around his torso and presses his palms to the wound. “Fuck!” He grits his teeth, face ashen and wet with cold sweat. “But I don’t think so. I think it was planned from the start.”
“Stop talking,” Niall urges him, helping Zayn settle in a more comfortable position, using his discarded jacket to pillow his head. “Stay still, and shut up.”

“Planned from the start,” Liam repeats and folds his legs under himself, leaning back against the opposite wall. Harry remains the only one left standing, but only in the literal sense. Figuratively, he’s very much already crumbled to the floor. “As in –”

“As in Winston having planned everything – meticulously – from start to finish,” Zayn says, not listening to Niall. “He planned getting shot, planned his shipment to London and us apprehending the Winter Soldier. Probably figured that Cap would help him escape, too.”

It pulls Harry back, at least partially. His lips still feel numb when he parts them. “But Louis didn’t return to HYDRA. He broke their programming, he ran away.”

Even through the pain he is undoubtedly feeling, Zayn meets his eyes dead on. “And I think Winston planned that as well. Kept tabs on him while he was staying with us, and when he left, he had HYDRA follow him.” He has to cough briefly, and Harry is relieved to see that he’s not coughing up blood. “Probably snatched him up after I lost him near Damascus. ‘s probably the reason I lost his trail.”

Harry shakes his head. “But that doesn’t make sense.”

“Really?” Zayn raises his brows. “Or is it that you don’t want it to make sense?”

“Guys,” Liam starts carefully, holding up his palms, but Harry cuts him off instantly.

“He saved our lives just hours ago,” he throws at Zayn, suddenly glad that he’s still upright and towering over him. His thoughts are falling all over each other in his head and he has trouble picking out the right words, he just knows that Zayn can’t be right. “And it was him. It wasn’t some brainwashed version of him with the goal of leading us into a trap. It was Louis.”

“He fooled you before,” Zayn reminds him unkindly. “You think he couldn’t do it again?”

Harry’s heart rate is picking up. His mind keeps flashing back to Louis’ hands framing his face, to him kneeling on the floor and saying – “That was different. This time he didn’t. I know he didn’t.”

Niall sighs heavily. Slightly irritated, red splotches shimmer through his pale skin, and he looks nearly as sickly as Zayn in this light, the dark circles underneath his eyes emphasized. “He shot Zayn. I’m sorry, Cap, we all wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I don’t think there’s any doubt left.”

Harry shakes his head. “No. There’s no way. There’s got to be another explanation for this.”

“It’s the only plausible explanation,” Zayn says with Niall looking like he’s a moment away from slapping his hand over Zayn’s mouth. Instead, he squeezes Zayn’s shoulder and goes on for him.

“SHIELD’s investigation was probably close to digging up evidence that indicated Winston as a traitor,” Niall says. “So he organized his own assassination but instructed the Winter Soldier not to kill him, which put him under SHIELD’s direct protection and rid him of any suspicion. He’s not stupid. But he’s clearly fuckin’ insane.”

“But why,” Liam interjects, “would he let SHIELD capture Tomlinson and prod at his most prized and valuable possession? I mean…SHIELD could’ve executed him on the spot.”

“Because Cap had to see him,” Zayn deadpans, and Harry feels all air leaves his body. Zayn looks
directly at Harry. “Because they knew how you would react, and that you’d do anything in your power to ensure his safety. Winston is insane, but he’s smart. And HYDRA scientists are smart.”

Harry finally sits down. He drops to the floor ungracefully, head feeling like it’s stuffed with cotton and the quiet humming of the overhead lights echoing in his ears. The floor is cold to the touch, rough beneath his fingertips.

“I know he’s my weak spot. And it probably wasn’t hard for Winston to figure that out, and that part of his plan – that makes sense. I get it. I do. But Louis didn’t fool us, he didn’t fool me.” He rubs a hand over his face. His gloves feel itchy and he pulls them off irritably, throws them to the side. “I’m not sure what happened exactly, and how it happened, but the person spending the last couple of hours with us was not some brainwashed assassin. It was Louis.”

He sounds like a broken record. Harry’s perfectly aware of that. But while everything else is up in the air and unclear and chaotic, Harry knows with imperturbable clarity that the person who saved his life, their lives, who talked to him and fell asleep next to him was as close to the Louis he’d lost in Switzerland as he could possibly get.

“He’s manipulated you before,” Zayn insists, but Harry resolutely shakes his head again.

“Not this time.”

Liam clears his throat almost carefully. The arc reactor keeps glowing in the middle of his chest, black material fitting tightly over his curved shoulders. “In some areas, HYDRA is years ahead of us. They’ve developed things we’re not cruel enough to come up with. I think we need to accept that it’s possible that they treat his brain like a hard drive and can upload and download data however they please.”

It’s like they’re back where they were months ago. Harry knows that this situation is much more dire and that he shouldn’t compare it to what happened in London or New York, but the others keep depersonalizing Louis and despite everything, it doesn’t sit well with Harry. If Louis is not in control of what he’s doing, Harry doesn’t want him to be treated like the villain. Like a machine.

“Unfortunately,” Liam continues, “thanks to decades of research and that damn exhibition, your life is public knowledge. They probably spoonfed Tomlinson everything that’s out there. Taught him behavior patterns and…stuff like that.”

Harry’s throat starts to hurt, but he’s got enough of a grasp on his voice to press out, “No. Maybe before, but not now. I know, okay, I know I’m an easy target for him because I – I want him to be…I just want him back. But what he said – they didn’t feed him it. They couldn’t have.”

“What makes you so sure?” Niall asks. His hands are entirely red, up to his wrists. There’s a crimson smudge over his brow from when he’d rubbed over his face in anxiety.

The memory of it makes his eyes burn. The memory itself does a very good job of shredding the inside of his ribcage. He thinks he can still remember the exact taste of the cotton candy, and how sticky it had been on his tongue, feathery strands stuck to his cheeks when Louis had leaned in and nudged his nose. Harry presses a firm hand over his mouth and swallows down a sob, taking deep breaths through his nose until he feels at least a little bit calmer.

“He remembered our first kiss,” he rushes out. “We went to Coney Island for my birthday. Talked me into going onto the Ferris Wheel although I was fucking terrified, held my hand the entire time. And – we told nobody where we were going. We never told anyone about Coney Island. It was our secret. Just – ours. They couldn’t have known about that.”
It’s a heavy silence that follows, Liam keeping his gaze lowered, Niall’s eyes glued to his bloody hands that are still pressing down on Zayn’s torso. Only Zayn is focusing on him with that penetrating look Harry knows all too well. Distractedly, Harry wonders how much time has already passed and how much time they have left until Winston drags them out again. Time is ticking, he thinks, as he meets Zayn’s eyes and takes in the way they’re already slightly dimming, lids starting to droop.

“Maybe we should – move on,” Liam suggests diplomatically, before anything can escalate. They’re all on edge and the last thing they need is to waste time arguing. Harry knows that. But once again, when it concerns Louis, he’s likely to leave rationality behind, which is undoubtedly coming back to haunt him. “It’s no use talking about what happened. It’s all semantics at this point anyway. We need to figure out what to do going forward. He’s found our weak spot, but Winston’s got to have one too.”

“What?” Niall pipes up. “His inflated ego?”

But Liam furrows his brows in response. “Maybe,” he hums. “He’s awfully bigheaded. He thinks he’s already won. We’ve just got to – I don’t know – take him by surprise?”

“By licking our way out of this cell?” Niall suggests sarcastically, making Liam hold up his palms.

“Hey, I’m just trying to –”

“I know,” Niall cuts him off only a second later, sighing and hanging his head. “Sorry, Payno. I’m sorry. But Zayn’s been shot and we’re stuck in a cell in a fucking underground maze that’s also a bloody fortress. Plus, there’s a maniac with world-domination plans who’s already got a brainwashed supersoldier on his hands. And now he wants a second. What on earth are we supposed to do at this point?”

“You’re usually more optimistic,” Liam comments with a frown, folding his arms. “Look, maybe we’ll just have to wing it, seize the moment. I can’t reach JARVIS right now, but maybe he’ll find a way in anyway, mess with the security. It’s not like what Winston’s proposing is an option.”

It creeps up on Harry slowly, but perhaps not so slowly at all. He knows this feeling. He knows it well. This sense of forlornness and inevitability, and it’s not exactly like it had been in 1945, but maybe that’s a good thing. Everything back then had gone so fast that, at the time, he hadn’t been consciously aware of the decision he was making and what it implied and what it said about him. He hasn’t lost Louis in the same way he thought he had then, but he doesn’t have him either, and he can’t think of a resolution to this where they all come out unharmed.

Technically, Harry’s an old man. He’s been given a second life he possibly doesn’t deserve. And Harry – he had a decent first life, he thinks. He’d been happy. He had friends and he had purpose and he had the chance to love someone beyond what he believed to be possible. It doesn’t seem fair to cling onto the second chance he’s never wanted and deny Liam, Niall, and Zayn their first. And without Louis, when it brutally comes down to it, he’s not sad to let go.

He made peace with that seventy years ago.

“What if it’s our only option?” he asks eventually, but it’s not a question, and the expression on the faces of the other three signify that they realize that as well.

“That’s bullshit.” Liam doesn’t take long to respond. “That’s fucking bullshit, Harry. We told you, you’re not sacrificing yourself. There’s got to be another way.”
“What if there isn’t?” Harry finds himself insisting, and all of a sudden, he feels eerily calm. “If you don’t get out of here soon, Zayn won’t make it.” He doesn’t like to think about it, but it’s the truth. Zayn has lost a lot of blood and although the bullet seems to have missed his lungs and stomach, that doesn’t mean he can just sleep it off. “If I – if I give myself up, he’ll let you go, and you might have enough time to get help.”

“You do realize,” Zayn manages to choke out after a beat, “that Winston won’t spare us for long, right? If he lets us go now, he won’t wait long to chase us down.”

“But you might have enough time. You might have enough time to come up with a plan. Get SHIELD involved. Cowell has resources,” Harry says. “If you get just enough time, Winston won’t come out of this as the winner.”

“But you won’t come out of this as yourself,” Niall says bluntly, and he’s right. This might not exactly be a war like Harry’s used to, but there are always sacrifices. He failed in taking down HYDRA when it had started and he failed Louis over and over again and he thinks this might be the moment he can redeem himself.

Harry nods. “I know. But I’ve had a good run. It’s okay.”

“It’s fucking not,” Niall bites out and points a red finger at him, face still pale but blotchy. “It’s not an option. We’re not agreeing with him. Payno’s right, there’s got to be something we can do.”

But they don’t have any other suggestions, and a heavy silence settles over the four of them sitting in their small cement cell with the flickering light and the muggy air. Harry doesn’t exactly feel lightheaded, but there’s a certain airiness in his mind, because despite the arguing, he knows what he’s got to do. All the work he’s done with Caroline, the many times he’s talked about trying to build a life in the here and now; he’d done it all secretly and silently hoping that somehow, Louis would find his way back to him. And he knows that it goes against everything Caroline told him, but Louis remains his motivation and his purpose and to see him be himself again just moments before getting completely wiped again…maybe it’s more than Harry can stomach.

Harry knows he can’t go up against Louis. And now he’s pretty sure he can’t watch the others go up against him either. Perhaps it’s time to give Louis his peace. Harry just – he doesn’t want to be there to witness it.

“I can’t fight him,” he confesses, eyes dropped to his hands. Bones and sinews are protruding with tension as he kneads them. “I know I should, and I should think of the greater good, but I can’t do it. I’m sorry. That’s just…a line I can’t cross. So I think – I think it’s our best shot if I give Winston what he wants. And he’ll wipe me. God, I know it’s not ideal, but you are more than capable of first taking both of us out, and then HYDRA.” Harry takes a deep breath, filling his lungs with air that’s so thin it’s barely satisfying. “I just have one request.”

Liam looks torn up. Niall keeps shaking his head to himself, but Zayn seems out of it, which is reason enough for Harry to want to go through with it.

“What is it?” Liam asks, although he clearly doesn’t want to.

Harry tries to plaster on a smile. “Please kill me first. I can’t watch him die a second time.”

He doesn’t succeed.
One hour passes, or maybe two, before the door slides open to reveal half a dozen agents in uniforms and visors that cover most of their faces. They say nothing, only raise their weapons, and Harry gets to his feet, sees Liam do the same, Niall carefully pulling Zayn up with him. As soon as Harry steps out of their cell, there’s a barrel pressing between his shoulder blades, not giving him a choice but to walk along.

It’s been a while and Harry’s a bit disoriented, but it’s clear that they’re being led back to where they came from. There’s only the click of heavy boots on the floor and Zayn’s laboured breaths sounding through the corridors and despite feeling calmer than before, Harry’s heart is pounding.

Winston’s face is a smiling grimace when they’re pushed into the room that seems to have been built around that abominable chair. Now there are three scientists busying themselves around it, appearing to be readying it to fry Harry’s brain. Louis is standing to the right when they walk in, changed out of his tattered clothes and into a black nondescript uniform that leaves his prosthetic bare and shimmering in the artificial light. Apparently they haven’t bothered to let him clean up, hair still messy and dirty and too-long strands hiding most of his stony face.

He’s still the love of Harry’s life. That’s what it comes down to. Harry thinks that after seventy years, they’re allowed to find peace.

Louis is staring ahead, unseeing, and the urge to call out to him again, to make him look and see and remember is crawling in Harry’s chest, tickling his insides. In a burst of randomness, he remembers something Louis had told him when they were kids, not older than eight or nine, about Egyptian bugs that would eat you alive. Harry had had nightmares for weeks. He knows it’s impossible that there’s a scarab in his chest now, but that’s what it feels like – like something’s eating him up from inside.

“You’re looking awfully pale there, Agent Malik,” Winston starts, strutting into the center of the room like he’s on a fucking stage. “We can do this quick and easy, you know that. It’s in your own hands.”

Zayn can barely stay on his feet; his jaw clenching so hard Harry can practically hear his teeth churn. It’s his responsibility to step up now, Harry knows, but before he can open his mouth, Liam’s fingers circle his wrist, squeezing once and keeping him in place. Harry sends him a questioning glance, but Liam’s eyes are focused on Winston.

“You can shove that so-called proposition up your ass,” he bites out and if Erskine’s Serum didn’t enhance Harry, his bones would definitely get bruised.

“Please watch your tone, Mr. Payne.” Winston scoffs. “Evidently, your two-hour break hasn’t done much to cool your tempers. And evidently, Agent Malik hasn’t suffered enough.”

Harry watches Liam pale in fast motion. None of them have time to react. Louis darts forward and has his hand around Zayn’s throat in a heartbeat, tearing him out of Niall’s grasp. Niall only flinches before there’s the barrel of a rifle between his eyes, forcing him to freeze with a genuinely terrified expression on his face. Harry holds his breath.

Louis slams Zayn into a wall and Zayn’s broken-off scream makes Harry’s blood curdle. There are multiple weapons pointed at them, and there’s absolutely nothing they can do but watch Louis press Zayn against metal-enforced concrete with his artificial arm, making sure he’s putting pressure against Zayn’s throat and the bandages snaked around his torso. Zayn’s face is a grimace, teeth bared, and Louis’ apparent indifference is a tough pill to swallow. His face is blank, his lips a thin line, his eyes only a steely front. He tightens his hold, and Zayn gasps for air.
“One snap of my fingers,” Winston continues, “and the Soldier will break his neck. So how about I count to three. One. Two –” Liam’s nails dig into his skin.

“Stop.” Harry steps forward, pulling his arm out of Liam’s grasp. “I’ll do it, okay? I’ll do it. Just fucking stop.”

Winston’s eyes give off a dangerous glint. But he nods his head at Harry almost as if in greeting. “Soldier!” he calls out. “Step away!”

Without any further preamble, Louis lets go. Zayn falls to the ground and crumbles in on himself, gasping and trying to fill his lungs with air, coughing and retching and trembling on the spot. Niall looks like he’s about to tear himself in half, biting his lip bloody and clenching his fists so hard that his entire body is vibrating. Liam shifts from foot to foot, but Harry can’t focus on them now. Zayn is still alive and they should have enough time if Harry convinces Winston that he’s serious.

“Well, Captain,” Winston practically leers, and suddenly, it seems like the entire room is drenched in silence. “It took you long enough. I seriously feared for Agent Malik’s life.”

“Cut the crap.” Harry’s got no patience for this. He’s got no nerves left to handle this situation. He needs this to be done and over. He needs his boys safe and he needs them to proceed like he asked them to. “Let them go, all right? You’ve won. You don’t need them. Let them go and I’ll –” Harry can’t actually finish, but judging by the wolfish grin that takes over Winston’s face, he’s happy to fill in the blanks.

Louis is still looming over Zayn’s hunched-over figure and Harry looks at him, drinks in his whipcord-like posture and his sculpted profile and – this isn’t how things were supposed to go. But it’s too late to change anything now. Harry still doubts that anything in this world will manage to erase Louis’ memory from his mind, but still, he wants his last conscious thought to be of him; he wants his first and last memory to be of Louis.

“Let them go,” Harry tells Winston, “and you can do with me whatever you want.”

But Winston shakes his head. “Oh no, Captain. That’s not how it goes. I’ll make sure you won’t do anything to help your little friends before they’re allowed to make a run for it. So feel free to – how should I put it?” He pauses for effect. “Buckle up.”

Harry feels frozen to the spot and, despite his earlier calmness, starts to tremble. There are three agents pointing guns at him – one at his back, one at his head, and one at his heart. He guesses it would be too kind for them to shoot him on the spot. There isn’t much Harry can keep his eyes on, surrounded like this, but he can tell that Louis is still positioned close to Zayn, ready to step in whenever Winston commands him to. Niall and Liam are held at gunpoint as well.

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?” he asks, managing to keep his voice even.

“You can’t,” Winston replies nonchalantly. “But I am literally the one pulling the triggers, so you have no choice but to trust me. And Captain,” he smiles, “believe me. I might be what you view as the villain in this scenario, but I’m an honorable man. You have my word.”

As far as Harry is concerned, Winston’s word means next to nothing. But unfortunately, he’s also right. It’s not as if Harry has any other choice at this stage. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he glances over to where the HYDRA scientists seem to be preparing the chair and firing up machinery, a paradoxically delicate hum now filling the silence that was permeating the room.

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“Harry,” Niall speaks up, but he doesn’t follow up with anything else. There’s nothing else to say,
There’s nothing else to do.

The rifle pressing into his spine is an uncomfortable pressure and Harry attempts to take a subtle but deep breath before willing his legs to move. He hears commotion behind him, most likely Niall and Liam getting restrained, but he doesn’t get the chance to look over his shoulder. Several pairs of hands take hold of his arms and shoulders and Harry isn’t even resisting at this point, but they’re still using a lot of strength to force him into the chair. There’s a flurry of movement around him, more noise and the sound of safety catches being released in case any of them move a muscle, white lab coats in Harry’s periphery as his view of everything becomes restricted.

His heart is throbbing against his ribs, sending ripples all over his body as they strap him in, additional metal restraints sliding out the sides and clicking shut around his shoulders, his sternum, his hips and his thighs, and soon enough, Harry can barely moves his fingers. Blood rushes in his ears as the magnitude of what he’s about to do finally catches up with him. Panic starts to boil, voices barely reaching past the shell of his ears, a jumbled mess of sounds before he can process any of it. But Harry can see Winston when he steps up right beside him.

“That was much easier than I thought,” he smirks, and Harry flexes his muscles, a satisfying groan of the restraints prompting Winston to take a step back out of caution. “How the mighty Avengers have fallen. When stripped of all your toys and gadgets, you’re nothing more than a group of damaged children with no sense of direction. All you needed was someone to teach you a lesson.”

“You’re insane,” Harry presses out, suppressing the urge to spit in his smug face.

“We’ve been over this, Captain,” Winston scolds him. “Don’t insult me. But then again, the line between insanity and genius is a tightrope. It’s a shame you won’t be able to witness my whole plan coming into fruition.”

“You’re not going to get away with this. If we can’t stop you, others will step up.”

Winston sighs dramatically. “Ah, the daily dose of your faith in humanity. I find it unfathomable how you can trust in them and want to save them when all mankind has ever done is blow each other to pieces and stand in its own way. But you see, when HYDRA finally succeeds in installing a new world order, we’ll take care of those stepping out of line and the world will have peace.”

Harry scoffs. “You mean you’ll execute everyone who disagrees with you. That’s not peace.”

“Sacrifices need to be made, as you’re very well aware. People don’t know what’s best for them,” Winston explains soberly. “I do.” He leans over him again, the ghost of a smile gracing his features, eyes two dark, bottomless pools. “I must say, as much as our little project was flawless, you are something else entirely. But I guess that’s to be expected from the original.” He traces the star in the center of Harry’s uniform chest piece and adds, “All the wonderful serum from Dr. Erskine still circling in your body in its purest form. Having two supersoldiers will be devastating for anyone opposing me. Imagine what I could do with an army of you.”

Harry tastes blood. He can’t move and he can feel the electric currents running through the machinery surrounding the chair, he can smell it in the air, he can hear it fizzle. This isn’t how he imagined his last moments. This isn’t what was supposed to happen and he just hopes that Zayn, Liam, and Niall can get away, that they and SHIELD can find a way to stop this madman and HYDRA once and for all. And Harry’s ready. He takes one deep breath, and then another, sees the spiked metal plates coming closer, grits his teeth and closes his eyes. He’s ready.
But the pain never comes.

Amidst the blur of muttering voices, one stands out loud and clear. “Now!” echoes through the room, and only a fraction of a second later, chaos breaks out. At least a dozen shots ring in Harry’s ears and they sound strangely precise, yet it takes only another second for more voices to start yelling and feet to thunder around the room, but Harry can’t see, forced to face the ceiling. Things are crashing all around him, more shots fired and so much movement that just barely happens on the fringes of his limited vision and Harry can’t fucking –

“Just a second, Cap,” Liam suddenly appears in his vision, face sweaty and blotchy. His voice is shaking and so are his hands as he apparently starts working to get Harry out, and for the second time in as many hours, Harry doesn’t understand what just hit him. He doesn’t understand what the fuck just happened.

As soon as his head and upper body are free, he shoots up in his chair and can’t stop his jaw from dropping, because all the agents are knocked out, scattered across the floor, the small group of scientists huddled in a corner with Niall pointing one of HYDRA’s rifles at them. Zayn’s at the other end of the room, one arm draped across his middle, collecting discarded weapons.

And Louis has Winston at gunpoint.

The last straps fall away and numbly, Harry slides off the chair, Liam holding his elbow to steady him because Harry feels faint and dizzy and turned upside down. He doesn’t know if his heart’s stopped beating or if it’s beating so fast he’s unable to count. After not even a minute of absolute mayhem, the room is gripped by a tense and eerie silence. Winston’s hands are trembling at his sides and his previously calm and collected expression is gone, replaced by a subtle panic he’s still trying to hide.

Louis is as still as a statue, but his eyes are afire with pure, unadulterated hate.

A trail of bullet holes decorates the wall behind Winston, showing that Louis has fired at him multiple times to get him into this exact position, cornered in and away from all of them.

“You dare turn against me,” Winston snarls at him, eyes narrowing when Louis chuckles dryly.

“I was never with you,” Louis bites back. “Not by choice. But I’ve made my choice now.” The metal of his arm glimmers threateningly in the light when he takes one step closer to Winston. “Did you honestly think your people could scare me back into submission after everything you’ve done to me?”

“They were ordered to wipe you, they –”

“They didn’t think it was necessary, seeing as I was already so docile and cooperative when I let them find me in Aleppo,” Louis tells him, and the last bit of color drains from Winston’s face. “You’re not the only one who knows how to play both sides.”

Harry’s heart is in his throat and it’s not sinking in yet, at least not properly, and he’s barely able to move at all, but all he can think is that he was right. He was right about Louis and now, it seems, Louis has saved them all once again. Harry drapes his hand over the one Liam still has anchored to his arm and holds on as Louis lets out a joyless laugh.

“It’s probably poetic,” he says. “Killed by your own creation. At least technically. You could have kept me on ice, so this is all your doing.” Louis moves another step closer and now it finally seems to dawn on Winston as his eyes widen with horror. “You’re not Zola. But you’ll have to do.”
Before Louis can shoot, in a last desperate attempt to turn the tables again, Winston pulls a small handgun out of the inside of his jacket with surprising speed and starts to fire. Harry and Liam leap forward, rushing to Louis’ side, but Louis only needs one shot to fire the gun out of Winston’s grasp. Winston yells in pain, clutching the bloody remnants of his hand, but this time, Louis doesn’t grant him a window of opportunity. He shoots again. One, two, three, four times and Harry stops counting. Winston’s body is thrown backwards with the sheer force of the bullets hitting his torso and Louis closes in on him like a predator stalking his prey to deliver the deadly blow.

A bloodcurdling scream penetrates the heavy air and they can do nothing but watch, frozen as Louis closes his fingers around Winston’s jaw until his scream is reduced to a desperate gurgle. Louis pushes him to the ground and his prosthetic glistens menacingly as he swings back and Harry closes his eyes reflexively, the sickening crunch that follows already telling him what’s happening. But Louis doesn’t stop. When Harry forces himself to look, Louis is still pounding into the direction of Winston’s head, but the crunch has been reduced to a disgusting squelch, a wet sound that makes him taste bile as blood splatters around, a big puddle of red and grey matter already surrounding Winston’s lifeless body.


Slowly, Louis straightens his body and in contrast to his earlier stiff posture, he’s shaking like a leaf from head to toe, undoubtedly exhausted and overwhelmed, and Harry can’t believe it’s over.

“No…”

Louis’ lips twitch. “He was insane,” he chokes out, “but he wasn’t a bad shot,” and Harry leaps forward just in time to catch Louis before he collides with the floor.

“No, no, no,” Harry mutters repeatedly, clutching Louis to his body, feeling his warm blood soak the front of his uniform. “Please, no.” Louis is still awake, but his eyelids are fluttering and a moment later, Niall, Zayn, and Liam are at their sides. “Fuck,” Harry curses, and if he felt panic before, it’s nothing compared to what is gripping his body now. Not this, he thinks, not after everything.

Niall is quicker to react, ripping Louis’ jacket apart. “Looks like Winston hit his stomach. Even with accelerated healing, I doubt we have more than twenty minutes.”

“It’s fine.” Louis’ eyes are already clouding over. “I’m fine. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not fine!” Harry calls out and his voice breaks. “You can’t die on me! Not after everything.” Clear drops are hitting Louis’ forehead, mixing with the blood and making it trickle down Louis’ cheeks like they were his own tears. “You stupid idiot! You can’t die on me now!”

He tries to stop the blood flow from the wound, but it’s hopeless, because this isn’t something they can patch up, this isn’t a scrape. This isn’t something they can handle. Zayn’s hands appear in his blurry field of vision, stopping his frantic hands clutching at Louis’ torso. Harry makes himself look at Zayn, who suddenly seems far better than he had just minutes ago, but Harry doesn’t have the time to ponder on it.

“Harry,” he says quietly, “you need to calm down. He’ll be fine. But we need to call SHIELD.”

“There’s no time,” Niall interjects, evidently not noticing how steady Zayn is on his own feet.
“They won’t get here in time.”

“I’ll take him.”

All their eyes turn to Liam, who is rising to his feet and taking a few steps back, snapping a bracelet onto his wrist.

“What?” Harry blinks.

“I’ll take him to SHIELD,” Liam says again and with a single press of a button, the suit comes flying at him, assembling in record time, and only a second later, Iron Man is standing in front of them in all his glory. Kneeling down next to him, Liam turns to Harry.

Harry refuses to let go of him, but Louis is becoming heavier in his arms. They’re running out of time. “SHIELD will take him prisoner again. They won’t –”

“Harry,” Liam cuts him off. “Do you trust me?”

There’s no doubt in Harry’s mind. “Yes, of course.”

Liam places a shimmering gauntlet on his shoulder. “I’ll keep him safe. I promise you. I swear on my life, I won’t let them hurt him. I promise.”

Harry breathes in and the smell of blood is nauseating. There’s no other option. “Okay.”

A beat later, Louis is no longer in his arms and Harry feels like Liam has ripped his heart straight out of his chest as well. “JARVIS is already infiltrating the system,” Liam explains quickly, “so he’s already taking care of security systems and data. You just need to get out of here. I’ll see you there.”

In the next moment, he blows the door open, lifts off, and is out of the room before Harry can blink. Then the alarm goes off.

“Oh, fucking hell,” Niall huffs. “Do we have to fight our way out now?”

“Stop whining,” Zayn tells him, zipping up his jacket and putting his Widow Bites and guns back in their rightful places. He hands Niall his bow and quiver with a raised brow. “See it as an opportunity to let go of some built up tension.”

Harry only really comes back to himself when Zayn holds out the shield. He’s still kneeling in a pool of Louis’ blood, feeling numb.

“Come on, Cap,” Zayn says, but his voice is unusually gentle. “You have to pull yourself together. He’ll be fine. But we’ve got to get out of here.”

There’s the sound of dozens of footsteps thundering in the close distance and Zayn hands him the shield before walking across the room and throwing three Widow Bites at the remaining and conscious scientists to knock them out and make sure they’re not going anywhere. He turns back to Niall and Harry, still pale and looking worse for wear, but he’s on his feet, and Harry thinks he can do this too.

“Back where we came from?” Niall asks them. “To the Quinjet and then to the Triskelion?”

“Definitely our best option,” Zayn agrees, readying a gun and facing the door, but before he can go, Harry manages to shake himself out of his stupor.
“I’ll go ahead,” he says, necessity making him feel a bit more like himself as he pushes all concerns to the back of his mind for now. There’ll be plenty of time to worry after they’ve got themselves out of this base.

It doesn’t take them too long to fight off two dozen agents and get out into the fresh morning air. They’re Avengers, after all. Harry takes a deep breath, and it’s like he breathes a new life into himself.

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It’s too bright, Harry thinks, looking out the window front opposite from where he’s leaning back against the white wall of the corridor. There’s not a single cloud in the sky and absolutely nothing that surrounds him bears evidence of what happened in the last day. Physically he’s completely unharmed, but the emotional rollercoaster of the last hours has drained him. A stinging pain sits right behind his forehead, pressing against his eyes from inside his head, exhaustion clinging to every fibre of his body.

He could find an empty bunk to nap on. The Triskelion has plenty of sleeping quarters for agents to crash in after a long mission. That’s what Zayn and Niall are doing, Harry thinks. Zayn spent less than an hour in the infirmary, surprisingly, and Niall was insistent that they both sleep off the remaining stress. It’s probably the sensible thing to do, but nothing in this world could lure Harry away from his spot next to the door that leads to Louis’ room.

It’s locked, but Liam has assured him that’s for Louis’ safety, and not to imprison him. Harry suspects that it’s also to keep him out of there. But Liam is not here now. He’s gone back to the base with the STRIKE team and a number of SHIELD agents to comb through the data JARVIS was able to collect, and Harry doesn’t doubt that they will make sure the base doesn’t remain standing once they’re finished. It’s only mildly satisfying.

He lets himself slide to the floor and stretches out his legs, looks out where the Potomac glistens in the sun, spring evidently just around the corner.

It’s been a long winter.

At one point, exhaustion must take over, because when someone nudges his foot and he opens his eyes, the sun is already setting and Zayn is standing in front of him. Harry groans softly and rubs a hand over his face and through his hair. His neck feels stiff.

“Sorry,” he croaks, “I must’ve fallen asleep.”

“I don’t blame you,” Zayn replies softly. Atypically for him, especially in an official SHIELD building, he’s in black jeans and what looks like one of Niall’s green sweatshirts. He’s still a bit pale, but – unlike Harry – he looks like he’s had a nap and a long shower.
Harry clears his throat. “Any news?”

Zayn shrugs, then moves around his legs and sits down next to him, facing the sunset. “Payne just got back. And Miss Smith has landed.”

Harry throws a confused look at him. “Sophia? Why?”

“They’re meeting with the Director,” Zayn tells him and doesn’t elaborate. They sit in silence for a few minutes, while Harry wonders if Zayn doesn’t know or just doesn’t want to tell him. But, he mentally corrects himself; it’s probably the first option, because Zayn tends to know everything. Which reminds him –

“What the hell happened after they strapped me in?” he asks, because he still doesn’t know, and he hasn’t had the headspace to think about it until now. Now Louis is safe and he has been treated and he’s hopefully going to fully recover.

“Right,” Zayn utters and he actually looks slightly sheepish, which confuses Harry more than anything, but before Zayn can go on, Niall comes walking down the corridor towards them, rocking a pair of blue jeans and a grey t-shirt. Harry is starting to feel a bit stupid still sitting here in full uniform. He’s not had any opportunity to change out of it.

“What’s up?” he smiles and sits down cross-legged, facing them.

“Zayn was just about to fill me in on what happened,” Harry tells him and turns his attention back to Zayn.

“Right, yeah,” Niall says, “what the hell happened? I didn’t really get it either.”

Harry’s head snaps towards him. “What do you mean? You saw.”

“Well.” Niall scratches his skin, sinews in his arms shifting. “Kinda did, but I didn’t really follow. Tomlinson just yelled ‘now,’ and then Zayn shot at –” He cuts himself off with a frown. “Wait. Why the fuck did you have a gun?”

Zayn heaves out a sigh, digging thumb and index finger into his eyes and rubbing them before he says, “Because Tomlinson slipped me one. When he had me by the throat.”

Harry needs a minute to process it. When it sinks in, he can’t do anything but gape at Zayn while Niall does the same. Eventually, Niall is the one who finds his voice first.

“What,” he says, and it’s not even a question.

“He slipped me the gun,” Zayn repeats. “And when he gave the agreed-upon sign, I shot the agents surrounding you.”

“The agreed-upon sign,” Niall echoes, pulling his brows together, and then suddenly his eyes go wide. “Did you know he was bluffing? Did you fucking know he was playing Winston?”

It’s Harry turn to say, “What.”

“I did,” Zayn says simply, no explanation offered, but by the look of Niall, he’s going to demand one anyway.

“You argued against him,” Niall exclaims with reddening cheeks. “You said it was stupid to trust him and – when did you know?”
Harry might be a bit dumbstruck, feeling like he just got hit by a freight train, but he doesn’t miss the way Zayn starts to squirm uncomfortably. It’s strangely fascinating to see Zayn being anything other than utterly composed. Harry should probably feel bad about that, considering Zayn was also shot in the last few hours, but he can’t help feeling slightly amused on top of everything else.

Eventually, Zayn spills the truth. “Kind of the entire time.”

“What?” Niall lets out, unusually high-pitched. Then again, “What? Are you actually – the entire time?”

Harry is speechless, but fortunately, Zayn doesn’t leave them hanging in suspense. “It was his idea. We talked about it on the way to the Quinjet. Said that he’d gone back to HYDRA in Syria, because he wanted to take them apart from inside out. He’d successfully fooled them into believing he was following their orders. I simply offered my help.”

“On the way to the Quinjet,” Niall repeats, looking dumbfounded. “When you were walking ahead? That was only – minutes! You came up with a plan like that in minutes?”

“You learn to be efficient.”

“But,” Harry blinks confusedly, “he shot you.”

“Ah, yes,” Zayn admits, scratching his head. “That was kind of my idea.”

“Your idea?” it explodes out of Niall and he jumps to his feet. “You told him to shoot you? Why the hell would you do that?”

Zayn shrugs. “It had to be convincing.”

“Convincing!” Niall stalks down the corridor, turns on his heels and walks back, pointing his finger at Zayn. “I thought you were gonna fucking die in my arms and it was your own idea? Are you insane?”

“He didn’t hit any vital organs,” Zayn tries to defend himself, but Niall is having none of it. Harry can’t blame him. He can’t quite believe it either. “He’s a good shot.”

“He’s a good –” Niall looks like he wants to hit something, or someone. The color of his face matches the color of the sky behind him. “I fucking swear, Zayn, if you hadn’t been shot I’d fucking shoot you meself!” Then he visibly deflates and drops down like a sack of potatoes and burying his face in his hands, lets out a long, frustrated groan and doesn’t move again.

Harry turns to Zayn. “That was your plan from the beginning?” he asks. “To go in there, have him pretend to be on their side, have him shoot you and then – the entire fight we had, you argued with me, that was all…that was all show?”

Zayn nods. “It wasn’t flawless. But it was out best option.”

“I thought you were going to die,” Harry admonishes him. At least Zayn has the decency to look guilty. “I thought we were all going to die at one point. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because Tomlinson said you can’t lie to save your life,” Zayn replies, raising his left brow. “And I agree.”

Niall snorts through his fingers and Harry just manages to suppress a squawk. “I can lie,” he insists and Zayn smiles and shakes his head.
“You’re great, Cap,” he says, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder, “you really are. But you’re the worst liar I know. But how about we forget all that’s happened for now, and go see how your boy’s doing?”

Harry actually feels his heart lurch and his mind wiped completely clear; he scrambles to his feet so quickly and ungracefully that Niall laughs at him unabashedly. Harry’s limbs still ache as Zayn presses his thumb to the touchpad next to the door, waiting for him to get the clearance to actually enter the room. The lock clicks open just seconds later and although Zayn opens the door, he steps aside to allow Harry to enter first.

The inside of Louis’ room is just as bright as the corridor, but it’s with artificial light. Even if Cowell has agreed not to make Louis a prisoner at this stage, Harry doubts he would have been happy to give him a room with a panoramic view of the Capitol. The walls are bare, the ceiling covered entirely by one large pane that combines all bulbs to make it look like daylight. The bed rests at the opposite wall, the only piece of furniture in the room, not even a plastic chair next to it, and Harry has been in this game long enough to understand that it isn’t because they don’t expect Louis to have a visitor. It’s just that any trained assassin can turn a chair into a deadly weapon. On either side of Louis, machines are measuring and documenting his vitals, a few lights flashing in green and red. The sheets are white and crisp.

Louis has his eyes focused on the ceiling and he looks like he’s drowning in the bed, small and pale and still too skinny. Harry takes one step closer and sees that someone has strapped Louis’ prosthetic to the bedframe with two metallic cuffs. He pushes aside the anger boiling up inside him at the sight of that and waits another moment before he clears his throat.

“Hi,” he says, sounding faint and shaky, but Louis seems to hear him, letting his gaze wander over to where Harry’s standing in the door. Harry’s breath hitches.

“Hi,” Louis replies equally quietly, voice particularly raspy, and it sends shivers down Harry’s spine.

Harry feels his lips tingle and he really hopes he’s not blushing. He walks into the room and Louis’ eyes stay on him until he’s at Louis’ bedside, gesturing to its edge. “Can I sit?”

Louis doesn’t say yes, but he doesn’t say no either, so Harry waits a beat before sitting down. Their gazes are still locked and it’s making Harry’s heart beat faster and faster until he’s sure Louis can see it through his ribcage.

“I’m sorry,” Louis says suddenly, unexpectedly, Adam’s apple bobbing as he tries to wet his throat. There isn’t even a glass of water.

“Don’t be.” Harry shakes his head. He hears Niall and Zayn step into the room and close the door, but he pays them no mind, and neither does Louis. “It all worked out in the end. That’s all that matters.”

Louis opens his mouth again, but a cough shakes his body and Harry’s fingers grip the duvet, tighten in it. He throws a quick look over his shoulder where Niall and Zayn are standing at the foot of the bed, looking calm once again.

“I didn’t want you to go through this,” Louis rasps, and Harry knows that he means everything, from watching Louis turn on him and shoot Zayn to sacrificing himself, getting strapped to that chair that had dictated Louis’ life for seventy years. Absentmindedly, Harry wonders if all the brainwashing they did, all the wiping – if the chair was something Louis always remembered. If this process, this pattern was the only thing that was familiar to him.
“I’m a tough cookie,” Harry replies gently. “You know that.” At least he thinks Louis does by now.

Louis doesn’t exactly smile, but Harry thinks his expression brightens minimally. Then he takes notice of Niall and Zayn as well.

Niall smiles widely. “Glad to see you’re not bleeding all over the floor anymore.”

But Louis looks at Zayn and Zayn returns it and once again Harry finds himself witness to a silent exchange that probably says more than he can imagine, and he doesn’t realize he’s pulling a face until Zayn addresses him.

“Jealously doesn’t look good on you, Cap,” he says, and Harry is pretty sure he blushes all the way to the tips of his ears. Harry doesn’t grace Niall’s cackle with a response.

“Sorry I shot you,” Louis tells Zayn after a beat, but Zayn waves him off.

“Third time’s the charm,” he comments dryly. “Let’s not make a habit out of it.”

If Harry has his way, Louis will not be near any kind of weapon for the foreseeable future, but he also knows he can’t be as overbearing as before. It’s just – Harry’s lost him so many times now, and somehow, they’ve always found each other again, but frankly, Harry is fucking terrified that the next time won’t have a happy ending. He’s also quite terrified of Louis walking out of his life by choice and also choosing not to come back. Harry wants to enjoy having him close in this moment, and worry about everything else once the time comes.

But apparently, nobody wants him to have at least a little breather, because before even another minute passes, before either Harry or Louis, or Zayn or Niall can say anything else, the door opens and Director Cowell walks into the room, menacing in a black suit and black shirt, prompting Harry’s spine to go stiff. He doesn’t look pleased.

Not that Harry expected anything else.

Behind Cowell, Liam shuffles quietly into the room, slotting into the empty space between Harry and Zayn and Niall, looking tired but calm, so Harry hopes that whatever it was he had to discuss with the Director went over well.

“I’m not even going to ask what you lot were thinking with this stunt,” Cowell starts, his firm gaze digging into each one of them separately for effect, “because clearly, you weren’t actually thinking. You four have more luck than common sense.”

“To be fair, Sir,” Niall dares to pipe up, “this wasn’t really down to luck.”

“Quiet, Agent Horan, or your next mission will be to North Korea,” Cowell responds, and Niall audibly snaps his mouth shut again, looking at his feet. “I do not appreciate you four constantly going against SHIELD’s orders, and the only reason I haven’t suspended or shipped you off is because somehow, despite your inability to follow order or protocol or even the slightest guideline, you do manage to produce results.”

Harry doesn’t think that sounds too bad. But he’s been wrong before. He wouldn’t bet on it. Cowell’s face isn’t as red as Harry has seen it before, but he’s had time to cool off, so this could still go either way. Briefly, his eyes search out Louis’, but they’re looking at the duvet, his right hand clenched into the fabric so hard his knuckles protrude.

“The damage Winston managed to do can’t be undone, but thanks to the data gathered with the
help of Mr. Payne here, I’m confident we can track his contacts down to the very last source and expose any double agents still present in our organization.” He pauses, then his eyes zero in on Louis. Harry’s heart drops. “As for you, Sergeant Tomlinson…” He trails off, expression calculating and penetrating, but Louis looks up and doesn’t flinch, doesn’t hesitate in meeting Cowell’s eyes dead on. “I’m sure there is valuable information you are keeping to yourself. You’ve become quite the enigma in the past decades, and there are others than SHIELD and HYDRA out to get you.”

“Over my dead body,” stumbles past Harry’s lips before he can stop himself, and he nearly slaps his hand over his mouth. Only Louis’ eyes flickering over to him again stop him from moving a single muscle. Harry clears his throat, then he looks at Cowell. “With all due respect, Director. If you want to lay a single hand on him, you’ll have to go through me.”

To his surprise, Cowell holds up his palms, conciliatory. “No need for threats, Captain. Mr. Payne and Ms. Smith have already chewed both my ears off on Sergeant Tomlinson’s behalf. I don’t need you to get your claws out as well.”

“They have?” Harry looks at Liam, whose ears have turned slightly pink. He refuses to meet Harry’s eyes.

“Indeed,” Cowell replies with an atypical eye roll. “And although Ms Smith’s lecture on federal law and human rights was lengthy, I do have to admit that Sergeant Tomlinson’s status as an American citizen and, arguably, a prisoner of war would put SHIELD in a precarious situation if his return were to become public.” He sends Harry a poignant look he doesn’t quite understand. “So,” the Director continues, “especially in light of recent events and your contributions, SHIELD would like to officially welcome you as part of the Avenger Initiative.”

Harry gapes at him. To be fair, so does everyone besides Liam. “What if Louis doesn’t –” Harry starts, but Cowell cuts him off immediately.

“This offer is non-negotiable. I will also only make it once. Sergeant, if you decline, which you are free to do, SHIELD will outlaw you and anyone who decides to side with you. So I advise you to graciously accept it within a reasonable amount of time, and if you do, I expect your utmost cooperation with this organization. I am aware of your condition, but with SHIELD’s resources, I’m sure you’ll be back on your feet in no time. Everything clear?”

Louis stays immobile for a few beats before he slowly nods his assent.

Something like a smile briefly flashes over Cowell’s features. “Welcome to SHIELD, Sergeant.” He turns to leave, but before he’s out the door, he turns to face them once more. “And just so you know, gentlemen, if something like this happens again, I won’t hesitate to kick all of your asses to the curb.”

Then he’s gone.

Niall whistles. “Fucking hell,” he says with a chuckle, “he was not amused, was he? Good job, Payno. Looks like the Avengers have undergone an upgrade.”

But Harry still worries about Louis. He hasn’t actually said a word and Harry’s sure that after seventy years of not being his own person, he can’t want to just serve once more. “Louis,” he addresses him with a lowered voice, “you don’t have to agree to this, okay? One word, and I’ll do anything in my power to –”

Louis’ cold hand to his forearm stops him from saying anything else. Louis looks tired and
exhausted, but he also looks calm. “It’s okay,” he tells Harry. “It’s not like I know how to do anything else.”

Harry shakes his head. “But you shouldn’t have to –”

“Harry,” Louis interrupts him a second time. “Don’t worry. It’s fine. It’s one less organization that wants my head, so I’ll take what I can get.”

“Still,” Harry insists, and slowly, gingerly, he covers Louis’ hand with his. Louis doesn’t pull away. “You shouldn’t be forced to do anything you don’t want to do. You don’t have to stay because Cowell tells you to.”

A thin line appears between Louis’ brows and he seems puzzled for a moment. “I’m not staying because of that,” he says, and Harry feels the softest pressure on his arm, Louis tightening his hold of it. It takes a few seconds for it to sink in for Harry, but when it does, warmth spreads through him from head to toe like a wildfire, and it leaves behind a pleasant tingling sensation that Harry wants to keep for a very long time.

“Oh.”

Harry feels breathless and overwhelmed and so in love he wants to cry. His eyes are wet, but he’s not going to cry with the other three standing right next to him. They wouldn’t ever let him live this down. Louis still doesn’t smile, but Harry doesn’t need him to because, finally, he can see it in Louis’ eyes. It’s not all laid out there, and Harry can’t blame him, doesn’t expect him to lay open his very soul at Harry’s feet, but he hopes that now, they actually have a chance to work on this together.

A sudden clap makes Harry flinch. Niall has brought his palms together, smiling so wide his face is definitely about to split in half. “Think that’s our cue to go, right lads? Good to have you, Louis. Make sure Harry here doesn’t get snot all over himself.”

Zayn swings for him, but Niall is quick enough to duck away. “We’ll see you both later,” he says calmly. “Try to get some sleep before we head back to New York.” Then he follows Niall out the door.

Liam is the last to leave but before he can do so, Harry calls out a “Thank you” after him.

“You’re welcome, Cap,” Liam replies, “but this was all Soph. If you want to say thanks…she likes those pistachio macaroons from that bakery on Atlantic Avenue. Just FYI,” and the door falls shut behind him.

Given everything, Harry feels a bit mortified to be alone with Louis again. He doesn’t have any reason to and he’s aware of that, but since Louis heals as fast as he does, they might be ready to leave the Triskelion in a few hours and then they’ll be back at the place where everything went wrong. Harry knows they’re both in a very different place now, but he’s still absolutely terrified of screwing this up.

“You look pale,” Louis says when Harry refuses to meet his eyes. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Harry shakes his head. “I’m good, I’m – really good, I just,” and he swallows thickly, tries to get his breathing back in control, “I don’t really know where to go from here.”

He’s trying to warm Louis’ hand between his. It’s small and delicate and when Harry pays attention, he can feel fine scars on Louis’ palm. He doesn’t know how they got there. But he hopes one day Louis will be ready to tell him.
“I don’t know either,” Louis replies, tilting his head to the side, his still-knotted and messy hair spread out over the white pillow like a halo.

“Starting from scratch, huh?” Harry tries to joke, but it falls flat, and he feels like he’s fourteen again, trying to impress Louis with a joke he’d picked up on the street, holding his breath until Louis would break out in laughter and feeling so accomplished his chest would swell.

“Not from scratch,” Louis disagrees, and even in the harsh glow of the overhead lights, his features are soft, and he’s so breathtaking that after all these years, Harry still can hardly believe his luck. “But I could start with a hug.”

Harry presses his free hand to his mouth to muffle the sob that’s already worked its way up his throat. His eyes burn as much as his throat, and he squeezes them shut for a second, vision blurry when he opens them again, but Louis remains as clear as day. “I’ve been told I’m quite good at those,” he manages to press out and there it is, a soft twitch at the corners of Louis’ mouth and it makes Harry’s insides explode like the fireworks he’d watched on New Year’s Eve, wishing for nothing more than Louis back at his side.

“Harold,” Louis teases, and Harry wants nothing more than this for the rest of his life. “Are you crying?”

“Shut up,” he chokes out and leans forward, careful not to put any weight on Louis, but still wrapping his arms around Louis’ shoulders, pressing his face into hair that smells like dust and ash and hospital. Harry breathes and breathes and breathes, and he feels Louis’ heart thud against his chest. “You can have your own floor, by the way,” he suddenly remembers, refusing to let go, especially when Louis’ right arm tentatively comes up around his back. “There’s plenty of space and – and you don’t have to share with me if you’d rather –”

“Harry,” Louis breaks him off gently. “I don’t need my own floor. If you don’t mind sharing.”

“Sharing is caring,” Harry says and rolls his eyes at himself. He turns his head slightly and, feeling bold, presses his lips just above Louis’ ear. “Maybe this time, we’ll make it off the floor and onto an actual bed.”

“Maybe,” Louis agrees, and he’s there and he’s alive and his fingers are digging into Harry’s back, holding him close and anchoring him to the present.

“Only took us seventy years.”

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Chapter End Notes

well.
here we are. it's done. when i started writing this back in november of last year, i thought it would be a light-hearted, family-friendly superhero fic around 30k. knowing myself, i should have anticipated that this would turn into a 113k angst monster. it was also intended to be a birthday present for brit, which was in january. only seven months late. sorry, babe.

i'd like to thank geeh for cheering me on while I was working on the last chapter and for being patient with my constant complaining and self-doubting. and also for beta'ing.

thank you to everyone who's been reading and commenting and leaving lovely messages, and also to everyone who has patiently waited for me to finish so they could read it as a completed story. i've been kind of blown away by the response to this, because i really did start this thinking my tag the avengers au nobody but me wants was very accurate. thank you for bearing with my updating schedule, with all the push and pull and angst. i know the ride was a bumpy one, but i still hope you enjoyed it.

this is the end, but i will add a short epilogue in one or two days. and since i have innumerable headcanons about this verse, you are always welcome to have a chat with me on my tumblr.
Waking up is difficult.

It’s those few moments of uncertainty and opaqueness when contours have yet to sharpen and his eyes struggle to adjust and his head is trying to catch up with his surroundings. It’s only a few seconds, but long enough for panic to seize his body and make him shoot up, arms coming up reflexively, ready to fight, heart pounding and blood rushing in his ears.

It always takes a while for him to notice the duvet pooled in his lap, so soft against his bare skin, and to take in the room he finds himself in – not bare, but only sparsely covered in furniture, a few items of clothing and pairs of shoes covering the floor. Large windows and a bustling city and then slowly, just slowly, the digital clock signalling early morning on the bedside table, the stack of paperbacks, the distant sound of music filtering through the air – the warm but empty space to his right.

The cool and delicate pressure of his dog tags against his sternum.

His left arm whirs quietly, but it’s the right hand that closes around the tags and grips them tightly for a second before releasing them into his open palm. The edges are less sharp these days, softened by his own fingers tracing the same letters over and over again, as if their presence was somehow a validation of his own existence.

*Louis William Tomlinson*, he thinks, his name digging into his thumb as he presses it against the tag. *Your name is Louis William Tomlinson*.
He takes a few moments to breathe, to calm his pulse and collect his thoughts. His head always stings in the morning and people have told him that it might very well stay that way for a long time as his brain is literally piecing itself back together again. It does that, and still, there isn’t a day he wakes up and isn’t terrified that everything is suddenly gone again. As his mind scrambles for information, for a brief second every day, he is gripped by absolute terror. The dog tags help. They’re a solid reminder that he’s not a figment of his own imagination, that he’s not dreaming or frozen or anything in between. He wishes he wouldn’t need them; wishes that everything else could be enough.

There are good days and bad days.

Days where he can get out of bed without hesitation and everything falls into place and feels fluid and familiar, days when he’s perfectly aware of himself and his past and his presence and somehow still manages to function without a hitch. There are days when Louis wakes up, always facing the door, and turns over to find Harry sleeping beside him, arm bridging the gap between them. And sometimes he can stay in the same spot for a very long time, feeling calm and rested and as close to happy as his broken head is able to be. On the good days, Louis can reach out and trace Harry’s features and watch as he slowly comes to, nose scrunching and eyes twitching and lips smacking and the first sight of Harry’s eyes anchoring him to a life he never thought he’d have.

But there are also days he doesn’t manage to calm down enough to become aware of the tags dangling around his neck. Days when the first things he sees is that glimmering monstrosity catching in the light and the only thing he feels is its weight dragging him into a bottomless pit; where all he hears is a train thundering through freezing valley, a drill punching holes into his skull, electricity fizzling and lighting his skin on fire. Screams echoing deep into his soul. He has days when he wakes up and all he can see is red, not remembering who or what or where he is. He’s broken the bed a dozen times. Bedside tables and lamps have come and gone at the same frequency. He’s even managed to crack a window on two occasions, and Harry – well, Harry has taken an unfair share of blows, resulting in broken ribs, fractured fingers and a lot of bloody lips and noses. That’s the worst part of it, he thinks. Snapping out of it and realizing he’s a second away from slitting Harry’s throat with one of the shards they’re lying in.

It’s been a couple of months and the good days have started to outweigh the bad, and it’s not like either of them expected this to be easy.

Louis pushes the blankets to the side and swings his legs over the edge of the bed, places his feet on the floor and gets up. He turns around and takes the duvet, straightens and smoothens it out neatly, grabs the throw that’s been kicked to the foot of the bed during the night and pulls it up as well, walks around the frame to tuck it in neatly. There are five paperbacks on his bedside table and he counts them like he counts them every morning – if one is missing or exchanged with another, Louis will know that there’s a gap in his mind.

He checks the time again, and glances up and out the window. It’s not snowing, but it looks cold, frost clinging to the windows and clouds hanging low. Pressing his flat palm to the tags around his neck for five more seconds, Louis takes a few deep breaths to settle completely before heading to the bathroom, eyes assessing all corners of the room instinctively before he can stop himself.

Even with all the considerable luxuries surrounding him now, Louis can’t shake the mechanical nature that sticks to his morning routine, the same every day. He steps into the shower, washes his hair and his body, steps out again. He dries off and folds the damp towel over one of the rails that are mounted to the wall and proceeds to brush his teeth and shave. It’s not a necessity that he shave every morning, but Louis finds it easier to follow an unchanging list of things that he can tick off
each morning. It took him quite a while to distinguish hunger from anxiety and he’s not ready to start thinking about what level of facial hair is deemed appropriate.

His hair is much shorter now, mostly because it’s easier to deal with. It’s not quite like the army had trimmed it down, but Louis still combs it away from his forehead and stares at himself in the steamed-up mirror, trying to connect the person he sees to the person he was, is – still tries to be.

It’s as hard as ever to see the scars and metal arm and not think of himself as a monster.

It’s not what he tells Harry whenever he catches Louis squinting at himself. It’s not anything Louis would say out loud. He tries to be more open about things that are on his mind and he tries to be more honest about things he’s done, but there are a lot of dark corners remaining in Louis’ mind, and even scrubbed clean the way he is now, he still sees blood dribble off his reflection.

There are good days and bad days and then there are days he wakes up and is terrified that Harry won’t be there anymore. Terrified that he’s finally realized that Louis is too broken and too damaged and too tarnished for him; that he’s more trouble than he’s worth. Part of Louis wants Harry to up and run and the other part, the more selfish part, is grateful, just oh so grateful that Harry is as stubborn as a mule and refuses to let go. But Louis is terrified.

Terrified, because Harry is the one reminder of his own humanity, and Louis doesn’t know how he’d be able to cope without him.

He’s tried it, and God knows how that turned out. Louis doesn’t exactly fancy a repetition of the last seventy years. So he looks at his own reflection and for a moment he tries to imagine how Harry manages to reconcile this image of him with the one from before; wonders if love really does make people blind.

With a sting in his throat, Louis touches a hand to his face and traces the contours, spends a moment feeling his skin and is almost surprised that his fingers don’t come away red, because he still feels blood stick to every pore no matter how many times he showers. Louis sighs and reaches out, wipes condensation over the mirror and smudges his own face beyond recognition. Then he turns and leaves the bathroom, steps back out into their bedroom and makes his way towards their closet.

Harry’s left the doors slightly ajar for him, but he hasn’t laid out anything, not for months, not since those weeks in the middle of summer when he’d insisted Louis had to choose, that it was his choice, and Louis had spent hours staring at the piles of clothes not knowing how until Harry had pushed a stack into his arms. Louis feels pathetic when he thinks about not being able to pick up a fucking sweater and he feels pathetic now, sticking to the same few items every day.

He prefers winter, because he can wear Harry’s sweatshirts without being too hot in them and he can hide his arm, doesn’t have to look at it, can keep it limp at his side. Underwear, a t-shirt and jeans, and a sweatshirt Harry’s washed so often it’s threadbare and soft, faded and slightly contorted. The jeans are too long, so Louis bends down and rolls them up to his ankles.

When he leaves the bedroom, the music becomes less of a tangle of sounds and more distinguishable, but Louis still can’t place it, though he’s in no rush to do so. In fact, as Harry proclaimed just a few days ago when he’d somehow convinced Director Cowell to give them two weeks off, they’re in no rush to do anything over Christmas and New Year’s Eve. It’s supposed to be an exercise in – Louis doesn’t know what exact word Harry used. But they’re supposed to spend two weeks not thinking about tracking down remaining HYDRA agents or saving the world and Louis doesn’t quite know how to do what most people probably consider normal. He doesn’t really know how to switch off.
But Louis guesses it’s about time he learns. They don’t go on missions together, Harry and Louis, for the simple reason that the public doesn’t know about Louis’ existence and he’s quite happy to keep a low profile.

(That’s not the truth. That’s another one of those dark corners Louis hides from everyone else. He thinks Zayn sees through him more than he lets on, but Louis still doesn’t talk about it. Doesn’t say that he’s scared Harry will turn away from him once he witnesses Louis in the field; witnesses him torture and tear apart, because although Louis has reclaimed parts of who he was, it doesn’t erase what he’s been turned into. Louis is not a hero. He is not a good person and he doesn’t save people – he kills them.)

Louis only hears afterwards how Harry has fared while he was away and it’s nothing he likes to think about too much. Harry told him once after Louis had returned from his first mission with S H I E L D, in the middle of the night while it was so hot every layer of fabric had stuck to their sweaty skin, but they’d still clung together and Harry had pressed the words into the crook of Louis’ neck. He’d gone to Azerbaijan with Zayn to track down HYDRA agents that were trying to regroup, and in the process, a building had collapsed on top of Louis. To be fair, he’d only broken a few ribs and they’d healed within two days, but he’d done the healing at S H I E L D headquarters while Harry had, according to Niall, driven himself up the walls with worry.

So now they try to share and talk and make their relationship as normal as possible, but to do normal, according to Harry, they need to have an old-fashioned holiday season with – as Louis recognizes now – awful Christmas music. There’s also the smell of something sweet in the air and Louis walks slowly but surely through the living room, the fairy lights Harry had stuck to the windows illuminating the entire area.

And Harry…

He’s standing at the stove, stirring a pot of something, humming along to the radio and swaying his hips in time, and he’s wearing the most ridiculous sweater Louis’ ever seen. But everything about him makes Louis’ breath hitch and his heart clench in a way he finally understands isn’t bad; it isn’t bad to be overwhelmed because his heart and chest were hollow for decades and are struggling to accommodate the onslaught of feelings filling them now.

Harry is the best fucking thing that’s ever happened to him twice over, and Louis is determined to hold onto him for as long as he’ll let him.

He doesn’t turn around to face Louis, although he’s sure to have noticed his presence by now. Louis knows that Harry wants to give him space for as long as he needs it in the morning. They’ve learned how to navigate through what feels like a minefield, and it’s working so far. Somehow it’s working. So Louis takes a few more breaths before rounding the kitchen island and stepping up behind Harry. He waits a few beats before wrapping his arms around Harry’s waist from behind and pressing against his back from head to toe, burying his nose between Harry’s shoulder blades, and this, more than anything else, is home.

Harry takes a hand off the pan and places it on top of Louis’. “Good or bad day?”

“Still making up my mind on that,” Louis replies and clings just a little bit tighter.

“Can I do anything?” Harry asks and turns around in his arms, leaving the scrambled eggs to sizzle along quietly in the background as someone croons about dreaming of a white Christmas.

Close and upfront, that sweater is even more hideous than Louis could have imagined, but it’s soft when Louis presses his face to Harry’s shoulder as his arms come up to circle him and pull him
even closer. “Nah,” Louis mutters into wool. “Just need a couple of minutes.”

Harry sways them back and forth to the music until Louis feels less unhinged, not as threadbare as the sweatshirt he’s wearing, but, as Louis has come to learn from spending months in this tower and with the other Avengers, peace is generally short-lived.

The elevator doors slide open with a bing, but Louis refuses to let go, hugging Harry close even as the person he knows is Niall strides through the living room and into the kitchen to burst their comfortable, quiet bubble.

“Are you decent?” Niall calls out, sound muffled because he is undoubtedly covering his entire face with his hands since – well.

“It’s fine, Niall,” Harry tells him patiently. “Open your eyes, you’re gonna run into something again. And it was one time.”

He hears Niall snort and pull out a chair, falling onto it heavily. “On the couch!” he exclaims. Louis rolls his eyes against Harry’s chest. “You were on the couch. In a room without actual doors. And now I am scarred for life.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit dramatic?” Harry suggests, laughter rumbling deep and pleasant in his chest, tickling Louis’ skin.

“I don’t think so,” Niall insists, and by the sound of it, starts tearing into one of the bread rolls Harry has already placed on the table.

“He’s just jealous,” Louis says to Harry conspiratorially, just low enough so Niall can understand every word, “because Zayn is still in Libya and he’s not getting any.”

Harry lets out a full-body laugh that drowns out Niall’s indignant squawk, and Louis can feel a smile pull at his lips. It’s starting to feel like a good day. He turns around to find Niall glowering at him from across the kitchen, mouth full of unchewed bread roll.

“Serious case of blue balls,” Harry chuckles, keeping one arm around Louis but using the other to stir the eggs some more.

He presses a kiss to Louis’ hair to the sound of Niall pointedly gagging from his spot at the table, and Louis feels anchored enough to step out of Harry’s embrace. He chooses his regular chair, from where he can overlook the entire kitchen as well as the windows, and raises his brows at Niall.

“You should take a long shower. Release some of the pressure.”

At the stove, Harry tries unsuccessfully to muffle another burst of laughter. Niall looks at him with a flat stare, very unimpressed.

“You know,” Niall says as he takes another bite of his roll, “I liked you better when you were brainwashed.”

Louis knows he certainly did not, as Niall has made very clear already, but he lets him have the last word, feeling content enough to stay quiet. His feet are getting cold from the tiles, so he pulls his legs up and wraps his arms around them, curling up in his chair as Harry loads an impressively large portion of scrambled eggs and bacon onto a serving plate.

They settle down for a quiet breakfast as the sun rises over a quiet and sleepy Manhattan, and if
Louis has any nerves stirring in his belly, he suppresses them for now, listening instead as Niall tell them about things he wants to do over the holidays, things he used to do in Ireland when he was little, and as Niall starts waxing poetically about his ma’s Bundt cake, Louis finds himself zoning out a little, eyes focusing on Harry’s profile against the light.

He watches dust particles dance around him, getting caught in the long, dark curls that fall way past his shoulders by now. The gentle line of his nose, the pronounced bow of his lips, which always seem unnaturally pink in contrast with his pale skin. His vibrant eyes that spark up with warmth and life when they meet Louis’.

Caroline told him right when they were beginning their separate sessions in late spring that it was a bad idea to cling to Harry the way he does; that it would be better to find something else to anchor him, to remind him of his humanity. She told him to build a separate life before trying to rebuild one with Harry. This co-dependency, this obsession they have with each other, the focus they have on one another…apparently, it wasn’t healthy when they were normal and it’s not healthy being who they are now.

But what does she know? What does anyone know?

Louis doesn’t care if anyone thinks this is unhealthy. He doubts anyone really knows what it’s like, how it feels, how *he* feels, and he doesn’t need anyone to understand. With a surge of emotion, he reaches over the table for Harry’s hand that’s already waiting, and squeezes his fingers, putting everything he is still unable to say into this one gesture, this one look, and when Harry smiles at him, brushes his thumb over Louis’ knuckles – it feels like the first ray of sunshine after a dark and cold winter.

And doesn’t that ring true.

Louis bundles up in one of Harry’s coats, pulls a beanie over his ears and puts a pair of glasses on his nose. It’s not the best disguise in the world, but Louis has other ways of blending in, and people have started to get nosy. He puts on two pairs of socks before slipping into his favorite pair of worn sneakers, meeting Harry by the elevator. Harry is holding a bag of baked goods in one hand, but he holds the other out for Louis to take.

Not many people are out on the streets and not many cars are on the roads. It’s strangely quiet, like the city wants to give them a few moments of peace after the year they’ve had. Louis deliberately keeps a hold of Harry’s hand the entire way. He knows what people are saying, that they’ve taken notice. SHIELD has reminded them both repeatedly that they can only keep the nature of their relationship ambiguous, and Louis can only remain anonymous in the public eye, for so long. Walking around Manhattan and Brooklyn holding hands isn’t exactly going to quiet down any rumors.

But Louis doesn’t care. No outcome can be worse than everything they’ve already been through.

“You really don’t have to come along,” Harry tells him once they’ve crossed the bridge, cold air whipping around their heads, like he’s sensing Louis’ general discomfort. “If you don’t feel ready, you can head straight back home. I don’t have to go either. We can, you know, take these brownies and find a park bench to sit on.”

Harry worries too much, as always, and it’s not that Louis is looking forward to this. His bellyfills
with dread when he thinks about what he’s about to do and what could hypothetically happen, but this is important to Harry, and in a way, it’s important to Louis as well. He was never ashamed of being with Harry and loving Harry and everything that implied. That’s not the problem. The problem is his metal arm and his scrambled egg–like brain and his past as a hitman and assassin.

They’re close now, Louis can tell, because he’s walked Harry there a few times, never quite finding the courage to actually step inside with him. Brooklyn is still familiar in a way that makes him ache to the marrow of his bones, albeit more colourful than it used to be; more eclectic, more eccentric, more fitting of the person Harry’s become and Louis understand why he feels so comfortable being here and surrounded by those people.

It’s just – Louis doesn’t know if there’s a place for him. And it’s scary.

“It’s fine,” he says, perfectly aware that he doesn’t sound like it. “I’m fine. It’s just,” he adds when they come to a halt in front of the community center, “what if – what if they hate me?” He lets out a ragged breath and lets go of Harry’s hand to clench both of his into fists at his side. “And I don’t…what am I supposed to say?”

Harry doesn’t give him a chance to distance himself. He moves in immediately, bringing his gloved hands up to frame Louis’ face and still him. “You don’t have to say anything. And you don’t have to come in if it makes you uncomfortable. It’s perfectly okay if you’re not ready. But they’re good people. Great, even. And they’ll love you. Actually, I’m afraid they’ll love you more than me. Hence the brownies.”

It doesn’t make Louis laugh, but it does make him smile, and although his heart is still beating fast, he feels slightly calmer. “Okay.”

“And I’m here, yeah?” Harry continues, nudging their cold, red noses together and dropping his voice like he’s telling a secret. “I’ll always be here. And whatever happens today, or tomorrow, or any day after – that will always be the case. And we will always be okay.”

Louis barely has time to nod before Harry is pressing their lips together, calm and unhurried and almost chaste, yet it still makes Louis’ toes curl and his heart jump and his head feel more at peace with himself and the world he’s been tossed into again and again and again. It’s been a long journey and a long journey still lies ahead, but Louis trusts in Harry more than he trusts in anything else, and he believes him.

Out on a frozen sidewalk in Brooklyn, surrounded by overflowing trash cans and fading and flaking posters, one year later, over seventy years later, an entire lifetime later – Louis knows that they will be okay.

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