Summary

Superheroes. America is full of them — complete with masks, nauseating pseudonyms, and neon spandex suits. There’s none of that nonsense in Britain, thank you very much…until Harry Styles’ X Factor audition takes an unexpected turn, and Britain’s first hero is born.

Also featuring Louis as a man of many masks, Zayn the rebel comic artist, Liam as Britain’s counter-attack to Justin Bieber, and Niall the trusty guitarist.

Notes

This fic doesn't take place in Marvel or any other comic book universe.

Many thanks to my lovely betas Ari and Brittany for caring about my strange fic child enough for me to get to the point where I'm actually putting it on the internet.
There were no superhumans in Britain, thank you very much.

Real-life American superheroes — together with their neon spandex costumes, godawful monikers, all-consuming obsession with the selling of franchised lunch boxes, and all their bloody onomatopoeia — made the perfect target for the British to lower their spectacles at over tea. Participating in the ego-maniacal mess that was the global superhero industry just wasn’t British. It exemplified a complete lack of class. Real superheroes notwithstanding, there was a Captain America and no Captain Britannia for a reason.

At least, these were the justifications the British general public had accepted. Harry Styles, certainly, had never thought to challenge them.

Not that he thought about supers much at all. He read the occasional comic book. He’d go to see the latest Marvel movie with his friends. He had nothing against a good scrap of cartoon violence, or a larger-than-life hero, or a cute love interest. But as it were, he’d been raised as a believer in the current British doctrine, which valued ordinary human heroes over flying American egomaniacs. Superheroes were glorified entertainers. Harry knew that if he wanted to do something heroic, he could volunteer, or fundraise for patients, or learn some life-saving skills. If he wanted to entertain, he could be a pop star or something. No capes or powers required.

Like any child, Harry had entertained fantasies of flying, time-traveling, turning invisible, and generally kicking arse. Come puberty, though, when the average young superhero was waking up to their new abilities, those fantasies had faded. But his love of music had stuck with him through thick and thin — through battles of the bands and garage practices and Bryan Adams covers.

And so it was that Harry Styles, aged sixteen, with a gaggle of friends and family watching from the wings, stepped up to audition before the judges for series seven of ITV’s The X Factor.

“Nice to meet you, what’s your name?” said Simon Cowell.

“I’m Harry, Styles.”

“Okay.” Pause for cheering crowd. “Okay, Harry — ah, how old are you?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Sixteen. Okay, so tell me a bit about you.”

Harry stalled. Simon’s repeated use of the word “okay” was somehow really intimidating, occupying a freaky medium between acceptance and frank rejection. With a steadying breath, he delivered his pre-rehearsed stock details — about his work at a bakery, finishing his GCSEs, college plans,
The crowd seemed quite impressed by his scholarly aims, which made his dimples pop in a pleased smile.

Confident as he was, there was enough of a churning feeling in his stomach that, looking back, every memory would be laced with a twinge of fear.

“Okay. Alright, what are you going to sing?”

“I’ll do ‘Isn’t She Lovely’ by Stevie Wonder.”

“Okay, good luck.”

The arena fell silent. Harry took a deep breath, adjusted his stance, promised himself that once he was through, Simon wouldn’t say “okay” another bloody time — and began to sing.

As soon as the first “Isn’t she lovely,” warbled out, to the approving hoots and hollers of the audience, Harry felt muscle memory take over. Most sixteen-year-old boys don’t pursue meditation, but to Harry, singing was near enough the same thing. Had the same effect, at least. He instantly felt more grounded, more present, more alive than ever.

At least for a moment.

“Isn’t she precious…”

In came a distraction. Not the crowd. Not Simon’s stare, not Nicole Scherzinger’s boobs. The strangest pulse of tension travelled up his arms, prickled through his shoulders, and made his stomach twist and clench even harder than before. Well-practised as he was, Harry was able to sing through it, focusing on the words, the audience, the sway of his body to an imaginary timekeeper…

It’s almost over, you’ve got the hang of it, the crowd likes it, and the judges —

Harry glanced at the judges’ table. Simon’s face bore a semi-interested smirk. Nicole’s wore a hint of a smile, and Louis Walsh was inscrutable.

Don’t focus on the judges, then.

Easy enough. He turned his attention back to the dangerous feeling that was still spreading through him, slowly turning him into a live wire.

“Less than one minute old…”

What Harry knew — though he wouldn't admit it to himself — was that this feeling had nothing to do with his audition. It was a warning sense. An alarm bell. As if he was walking, deaf and blindfolded, into an oncoming freight train, and some sixth sense was trying to save him.

It was a lot to feel while singing for his life. Like a true professional, he managed to tune it out once more.

“And I never thought/Through love we’d be…” Harry closed his eyes. He let himself breathe, let himself pretend he didn’t feel like he was hurtling off of a cliff.

Time slowed on his last notes. “Isn’t she lovely/Made from —”

And then came one of those moments where several things seem to happen all at once.

The first was a rattling sound from above him. The steel-strutted strip of lights chained to the ceiling...
pitched. The chains rattled again, and then something went snap. One end of the lighting rig swung towards the stage.

Before Harry could think, there was a second loud snap. He looked up to see the lighting rig falling rapidly, ready to crush him.

Harry could only stare like a frightened doe into headlights. He didn’t run. His eyes saw the looming danger in real time, but somehow, his body and brain slowed it all down.

When the rig was a few feet’s distance from his face, Harry ducked his head, reached up, and squeezed his eyes shut.

A thrill rippled through him as soon as he’d registered that he hadn’t been crushed. When he opened his eyes, he saw the rig balanced above his hands — floating. The air above his fingers seemed to be humming, rippling. The rig wobbled dangerously, but stayed suspended in Harry’s…force-field?

*Holy shit.*

He didn’t dare acknowledge the audience or the judges, lest eye-contact prove to be essential to keeping this thing from flattening him. But he could hear them — the crowd murmuring in awe, and Simon’s cold, clear voice as he said, “Harry? Set it down in front of you.”

*Um, what?* Harry was trying not to die. How the hell did Simon expect him to focus on anything else?

“Harry? Can you hear me? Try to set it down.”

Harry bit his lip. His hands started to shake. His head ached with the strain of concentration.

Nicole’s voice pierced the murmur. “Crew! Emergency! Can we get this boy some help?”

Simon’s shout felt softer than a whisper. “Just try, Harry.”

Harry did the closest thing to trying that he could. He remembered that he was still on stage, remembered that moments ago he’d been singing, and found himself back in that near-meditative state.


The rig wobbled even harder.

*C’mon. Steady. Hover down.*

The rig began to lower itself in front of him. The arena roared to life, in awe and confusion. Harry bit down harder on his lip, arms trembling. With one final effort, the rig clattered to the floor, just shy of his toes.

Harry took heaving breaths, trying to fight the lightness in his head. He drank in air like he was weak from thirst. His own breathing swallowed the hubbub of the arena until it was all he could hear.

The oohs and ahs and shouts and jeers faded into conflicted murmurs, and then came an unnerving silence. When the silence got under his skin, Harry stepped over the fallen rig and retrieved his microphone from the floor next to it. Shifting uncomfortably, and taking one last steadying breath, he raised it to his lips. “So, um…how did I do?”

Simon was tense, still and stiff, lips pressed firmly shut. Nicole’s chin was hanging so loosely she
looked like a jawless zombie (albeit a rather lovely one, whom Harry would probably allow to eat his brains).

And then Louis Walsh laughed. "Was that a part of your act? You want to be an illusionist singer now? And you told us you worked at a bakery? I tell you, we would have been a lot more interested —"

"For Christ’s sake, shut up!” Simon suddenly snapped. "You disrespectful, shit coward!” He waited a beat before adding, “You’re afraid of Harry, aren’t you?”

Louis sputtered. "W-what? I was just suggesting —"

“No, you’re laughing about it because you’re afraid of him. Can’t be anything else.”

“Um, hiiiii,” Harry waved. “Are you going to vote now? Or do I get comments first?”

Simon and Louis didn’t answer, still bickering, until Nicole put her hand up for peace. She smiled at Harry, a touch nervously. Still somewhat stunned. “I think Harry has something to say, and we owe it to him to listen.”

“Hello, Harry,” said Simon, suddenly composed.

“Hello,” said Harry. “I believe this is where you give me feedback, and then I go on my way.”

“Feedback!” Louis rolled his eyes. “How the bloody hell did you do that?”

“Um, I meant about my singing, but thanks.”

“No, but I really want to know —”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I just —”

“I’d like to say something about Harry’s voice,” Nicole interrupted. After a moment’s pause, Harry heard a few voices in the crowd cheer on Nicole’s proposition.

“I’m glad we got to hear you a cappella today. For sixteen years old, you have a lovely voice—”

“But we’re not going to vote,” Simon interjected, voice firm.

“Simon, please let me finish.”

“Okay, go on. But we’re not voting. Just thought you should know.”

“You can’t do that! We owe it to him, he came here to sing.”

“I still want to sing!” Harry piped up. “I don’t…I don’t know what that — what that was…”

Simon’s frown was thoughtful, but it gave no indication that he was even considering changing his mind.

Out of all the possible outcomes of his audition, Harry had never thought to consider this one. Had he lost sleep fearing he’d sweep the “no” vote? Sure. Given himself hell for every bummed note in rehearsal? Absolutely. He’d had a whole series of dreams about all he’d pictured going wrong — his voice cracking, his pants splitting, slicking the stage with vomit. He’d never imagined disqualification without even a vote. Nothing could have prepared him for how much it stung.
Nicole straightened. “Harry gave an excellent audition. And then he saved his own life with… whatever that miracle was. But his audition came first. We owe it to any contestant to consider that and judge fairly…”

“And it would be extremely unfair of me to let this proceed with a vote. Plain and simple.”

“For God’s sake, what is this about, Simon?”

“Nicole…”

“Let her say whatever she wants! It’s obvious this isn’t going on fucking TV,” Louis broke in.

“Well then.” Nicole sighed. “We’re going to vote…”

The crowd egged her on — but Simon wasn’t having it. “No, we most certainly are not.”

“Simon, I’m doing my job. We’re here to judge Harry’s singing talent — if that’s what Harry wants.” She looked to Harry, inclining her head.

Harry nodded. Simon shot him a grim look, so Harry focused on the crowd behind Simon's head and took a stab at making his case.

“I’ve been practicing hard for a very long time. I’ve been waiting for this for ages. And despite the end bit there…I think I did my best,” said Harry, trying to breathe normally. “I’d like to see you vote, please.”

Simon rolled his eyes. He muttered something that sounded like, “Have it your way…”

Nicole smiled. “Harry, you have a lot of potential. I’m gonna say yes.”

The crowd cheered, and Harry beamed. “Thank you.”

Louis Walsh, instead of speaking up, resumed bloody laughing. When he finally regained composure, he shared a glance with Simon, then said, “Harry, for all the right reasons… I’m gonna say no.”

The crowd booed. Harry added in a little boo of his own.

And then it was down to Simon. Unease prickled Harry’s gut. He couldn’t pretend he didn’t know what Simon was about to say. He was hurtling towards a pre-destined rejection that he had no control over, all because of what he’d done by some bizarre act of instinct, for the first time in his life, only minutes before. Simon was going to vote to let the Harry that Harry knew, the person he had worked to become — the singer, the performer — fall to the wayside, leaving this newborn Harry, wide-eyed and confused, to fend for itself. Harry balled his hands into fists. He bit his lip.

“No” was an awful word, but at least it wasn’t “okay.” At least it would be a conclusion.

At this rate, though, he was going to bite clean through his lip if that word didn’t come soon.

Simon raised a hand to quiet the buzzing crowd. He studied Harry for a long moment, brows pulled into a gentle frown. It was just a look, but Harry felt as if his body had been turned inside out for a thorough inspection.

And then Simon beamed. He fucking beamed. “For all the right reasons, Harry Styles, baker from Cheshire…”

A long, godawful pause.
“I’m going to say no.”

The audience erupted, boos and aws mingling with cheers. Nicole, applauding, rose to her feet with a sad smile, and Simon followed a beat later. Harry’s fists clenched. Muscles tensed. How was he supposed to handle the sickening bittersweetness of being rejected and somehow celebrated at the very same time?

He didn’t have time to mull over his feelings. Stage assistants all around were frantically waving him towards stage right, his exit. He took his final bow, flashed a meek smile, waved goodbye to the judges, stepped back over the rig with a sickening reminder of the incredible thing he’d made happen that he still couldn’t understand, and then he was being ushered away by a stage manager.

Harry had thought he’d seen every facial expression there was to see on his mother. But, by the time he found his family and friends backstage, still trailed by cameras and directed by assistants who were acting as if nothing unusual had happened, he’d seen a new one. In wine tasting terms, it was firm, with notes of terror, and an aftertaste of…something he couldn’t quite identify.

Harry liked her expression even less than he liked wine.

Gemma stood paralyzed for a second before running to pounce on him. Johnny followed suit. Squeals of “Thank God you’re okay,” alternated with murmurs of “Congrats, H.” Congrats for what, Harry wasn’t sure anymore, but he hugged them back with all of his remaining strength.

Robin was muttering something furiously under his breath when he brought Harry into a life-threatening hug. Over his shoulder, Harry saw the cameras turn away, deciding not to capture the typical post-audition-family-greeting segment. One particular stage manager was watching them quite closely, hand pressed tight to the earpiece of his headset. As Anne finally took her turn and guided Harry into a warm embrace, Harry caught her watching the man out of the corner of her eye, concerned, even while a honey-warm stream of her words met his ear.

“That was brilliant, Harry. My strong boy. My wonderful boy. Your gorgeous voice, and your…” This part was hard to say. “How you, you protected yourself — all of it. I love you, H. So much. God, you’ll never know. Brilliant, brilliant boy. And you’re okay.”

Harry closed his eyes and nestled into her arms, as cozy as he could get. He felt the overwhelming need to shut down — as much as was possible, what with the roar of the arena and the bustle of backstage. Anne understood without asking, reaching up to cradle the back of his head.

But before his heart rate had any time to slow, they were interrupted. “Harry Styles? Ms. Cox? Follow me, please,” said the stage manager guy who’d been watching them.

With a pat on Harry’s back, Anne gently released him, and they and the rest of Harry’s gang followed the man to a secluded green room.

What felt like eons later, another staff member came to retrieve just Harry and his mum. They were led to a makeshift office with three chairs and a collapsible table, behind which sat a weary Simon Cowell. It was a testament to how much that day had already taken a toll on Harry’s brain that he immediately thought of a washed up birthday party clown when he saw the slumping judge, who perked up slightly as they came in.

“Hello again, Harry. Ms. Cox, lovely to meet you.” Simon shook his mum’s hand, then reached out for Harry’s. Harry’s hand trembled as he grasped Simon’s and shook.
They all took a seat, and Simon heaved a long sigh before speaking. “I’d like the chance to explain myself to you, Harry, if that’s alright.”

Harry gave the slightest of nods.

“I’m sorry that my choice today seemed so unfair, and that I didn’t judge you in the way that maybe I should have. Truthfully, you have talent. You’re charming. You could make an excellent pop star, no doubt. But I hope you’ll understand why I absolutely couldn’t let you through.” Simon clasped his hands on the rickety table. “Because it is very obvious to me why you were brought here today, and what path it is that you are meant to take.”

Harry felt his face heating up. He tightened his hands in his lap like a patient schoolboy. Partly to keep himself from fidgeting, and partly to prevent them from doing anything superhuman while he wasn’t looking. Simon had to know it was all a mistake.

“I’m sure you like superhero movies, or comic books, or whatever. You know what the heroes in America are all about — their franchises, and their brawling, and the disgusting trends they call fashion?”

Harry nodded.

“Our whole national standpoint on it at this point is that we’re too good for that. Well, to be frank, that’s a load of total, utter shit.”

Anne gave a tiny snort. She laid a comforting palm on Harry’s knee as Simon continued.

“In fact, it’s more the opposite. We’re not good enough. The super talent in Britain has gone un-mined for centuries. The talent we’ve found has never been enough to hold a candle to those countries who’ve already built their own super industries. But year after year, there are scouts like me, who look, and keep looking, and help to assess what we find — to see if it’s what we’re looking for.”

“What are you looking for?” asked Anne.

“We, Harry,” said Simon, ignoring Anne to look him dead in the eye, “are looking for Britain’s Hero.”

Harry and Anne were still and silent for a moment, until Harry couldn’t help but blurt, “Um, but what’s that supposed to mean? Like, we need to be saved, or —”

Simon raised his voice to cut him off. “We need someone to be the first to break through, to establish Britain’s superhero industry, superhero culture. Someone outstanding. The point is to show the world that Britain is about real heroism. To protect our people and our values, and to inspire us — not to entertain us. To set a precedent for the role of superhumans for the world to follow. Because that’s what we’re best at, is it not? We lead, and the world follows.”

So there was a formula, then. A plan. And Simon wanted to rope Harry into this — into something so much bigger than himself, after seeing him perform only a small miracle. By accident.

Simon’s eyes bore into him, pressing him for comment. Harry managed to scrounge up some words from the back of his brain.

“That’s…that’s really great, and I hope it works out, and you find who you’re looking for…” Deep breath. “But that’s not me. I know who I am, I know I can sing…but I didn’t know I could do — that. And I still don’t know how I did it, to be honest. It’s not like — it’s not a part of me. It could’ve
been a mistake. Or maybe not, but I’m not outstanding, like you want. You made a choice for me, and it’s over now, and it’s alright, I guess…but I’m not going to be Britain’s Hero.”

“I never said you are. But what I saw there, why I made that choice to hold you back — you were promising. When I told you to set the strip of lights down, I was testing you. Most young supers we’ve scouted can barely control their powers. You did. You were composed, you were strong. You were a natural.”

“Thank you,” said Harry, “but —”

“All I’m asking, Harry, is that you consider further assessment. We’ll set up a meeting, we’ll see where you’re at, you’ll be tested, and then we’ll make a decision. And if that all doesn’t pan out, of course you’re welcome to come back and audition at any time. You’ll be even better in a year or two. But it would be a wasted opportunity, in my opinion, not to try to pursue what is clearly your superhuman potential.”

“What I’d like to know,” Anne spoke up, “is how you plan to have Harry pursue this potential.”

Simon leaned back. “ Associates of mine founded one of the best superhuman training facilities in the world today. Superior except for our lack of successful applicants, which means a complete lack of students. But rest assured if Harry is eligible, he’ll have a state-of-the-art place to train in London. And if Harry trains to his potential, whatever path he’s meant to take will rise to meet him; I have absolutely no doubt.”

“Is this a secret place?” said Anne, concern coming out in her tone. “It doesn’t sound like you have much experience dealing with students, and the respect for privacy that must involve, especially if your plan is to…unleash super young adults out into the world, publicly, to carry out this ‘super culture.’”

“If Harry is eligible,” Simon emphasized, “his identity and personal well-being will be well taken care of during the training process, as my colleagues, I’m sure, will assure you.”

“And how do you plan on seeing if he’s eligible or not?”

“We’ll set up a meeting, as soon as possible, and have Harry speak to the head of the school. He knows how to find what we’re looking for. If he approves, we’ll have Harry come to London for an assessment. That will tell us all we need to know.”

“What sort of assessment?” Anne pressed.

“A basic one. Of his powers, instincts. How he performs in certain controlled scenarios.”

“But I can’t perform,” Harry interjected. “That was an accident. I can’t just do things like that whenever I want.”

Simon’s gaze was firm. “But you did, Harry. I have reason to believe that you can do it again, in time. You have to trust yourself.”

After a pause, Harry mumbled, “But there’s nothing to, like…trust.”

“Look, I don’t have long left before I need to be back, but here’s my contact information. I’ll have an assistant email you and set up a meeting for next week. You can think on it for a day or two, but after that I’ll need a yes or a no. And since I won’t be in Manchester again next week, you’ll have to come meet me and my associate wherever I’m auditioning for X Factor at that time. We’ll take it from there. Okay?”
Anne looked to Harry. Harry looked at his shoes. His head hurt. He wanted to go home and collapse into bed, spread his fingers at the ceiling, and try to make something happen again. Get to know his powers — what were they? Did he have more than one? A mini-arsenal? How did they work? Or was he just a curly-headed baker child who liked to sing and had made one isolated incredible thing happen?

When he looked up again, his mum gave him a nod. As if she knew what he was thinking, or had at least perfected the art of sappy mum sympathy.

Simon’s tone was suddenly soft when he spoke up, his words trying to worm their way under Harry’s skin. “I don’t want you to miss out on your shot at winning The X Factor for nothing, Harry. I truly believe you can do this. This chance to do great things, to give back — it doesn’t come along for everyone, and certainly not to this scale, at your age. I know you can’t see much in yourself now…but you will. If you trust in it, it will come. I truly believe it will.”

Whether Harry spoke up because he believed in himself and in Simon’s ideals, or whether he just wanted to get the fuck out of that shitty room, even he didn’t know. He gripped his mum’s hand, waited for her consenting nod, took a breath, looked Simon in the eye, and said, “We’ll be there, for the meeting. Thank you so much for your time.”

Chapter End Notes

Eek, hope you enjoyed! All will become clear, don’tcha worry. Come say hi on tumblr here!
Chapter Notes

Last time on BFFTS: Harry's audition got weird.

Thanks so much to everyone who's been reading so far! Seeing your feedback means so much, gee. Much love!

Once again thanks to Ari and Brittany for all of your continued hard work. This really is a family effort and I'm so glad to have you both on my team/ship/side/etc.

Be advised that this chapter does contain mild fantasy/comic-book violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

School hadn't taught Harry much in the long run. Most valuably, it had taught him how to procrastinate. He had a knack for it, though he had never considered procrastinating from feeling something — let alone from feeling a whole bunch of things at once. And yet, on the drive back to Holmes Chapel that afternoon, that was exactly what he did.

Thankfully, no one prodded him for a first-person account of his audition, or asked about what Simon had said in their meeting. His mum kept shooting him smile after reassuring smile, as if she weren't busy trying to come to terms with the fact that her youngest child was — well. Harry tried to think of the proper word, the one they used on the news, that was all correct and stuff. Superhuman, he remembered.

Gemma kept everyone distracted with scintillating stories about her friends, pausing every once in a while to gaze around the car and gauge reactions. Anne would laugh, and comment, and then smile back at Harry as if everything were ship-shape, jolly good. Gemma would glance around the car again before starting a new tale. They settled into this pattern and repeated it many times before Harry and his support squad pulled into Twist/Styles HQ.

Clichéd as he knew it was, Harry moodily dismissed his dinner and took refuge in his bedroom. The most familiar place he knew, with a bed and a distraction or two, he figured, would be better comfort than food.

He was wrong on all counts. All of the feelings he had been avoiding came flooding back at once. For hours, he lay on his back, staring at the room that somehow seemed to have changed colour since that morning. His bed smelled weird. His stomach growled. The air felt heavy and tasted sour, as much as his mind insisted that nothing’s changed, everything’s the exact same.

He thought back to the comic books he had read. Had the comic book superheroes been through this? And all those kids with powers, in America, Japan, Australia? Had discovering their first abilities set their worlds into chaos around them? Had everything felt off for them, too? Or was Harry just seeing and feeling everything wrong?

Probably.

Beneath his unease, there glimmered a spark of wonder. Without imagining, or wishing, or trying,
he’d summoned a field of energy. He’d made the air buzz and crackle with life. Was an extraordinary power lying in wait, somewhere within him — in his brain or in his gut or in his long, clumsy fingers? If that was what he could do without even meaning to…what could he do with practice?

The idea brought feelings of pride and fear in equal measure. Fear of what he could do, but also fear that he wouldn’t stay grounded, that he’d lose himself in his own power somehow.

The same hopes and fears bounced around his mind for the better part of a week. In the evenings, he starfished on his bed, staring at the ceiling and mulling it all over. After a while, usually an hour or so, he would pluck up the courage to try to exercise his powers. There were some near-successes — like that time he managed to make the banana he was idly tossing float for a split second (or at least, he thought it seemed to). But mostly, Harry found himself paralyzed by the idea of causing a very unnecessary accident, so he closed his palms promptly after spreading them every time.

He kept his word on the meeting, though. Anne had been in contact to arrange it the day after the audition. It ended up being less than a week later that Harry found himself again in the car with his mum, driving across the country at ass o’clock in the morning for a second backstage meeting with Simon Cowell.

“Coffee?” offered Anne.

Harry shook his head. “M’alright.”

“Are you sure? You look just about ready to pass out. C’mon, you need to try to stay awake today.”

“There’s no point. M’not gonna.”

“Do your best, Harry. C’mon, drink up, I swear it’s not watery —”

“You haven’t even tasted it yet.”

Anne gave up, placing Harry’s cup next to hers in the cup-holder. Pulling out of the McDonalds’ drive through, she sighed. “I’m with you, you know. It’s a lot to ask for us to drive out there so early. God, he’s filthy rich, you’d think he could’ve booked a room for us, spared us the morning drive…”

For once, Harry didn’t just pass it off with his usual “S’fine.” “I just want to know why, that’s all. And why he wants us to be there several hours before he’ll even have a chance to talk to us…”

“Better much too early than a moment late in Simon Cowell’s world, I suppose. We knew we’d have to go out of our way a little for this to work.”

Harry scoffed under his breath. “Why can’t we just meet him in London already? With all his big cheeses in suits and ties.”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I’m just doing what Simon said.”

“You’re too old for Simon Says, mum.”

Anne rolled her eyes, trying to keep her small smile under control. “Maybe you’ll get to watch the auditions this time. You’ll know what it’s like for all of those people crossing the stage, but you
won’t have to go through it again. It’ll be a nice change of perspective."

And I’ll get to watch all of them being given a chance to live their dream and be judged based on vocal talent alone, Harry thought. I’ll sure know what that feels like.

Anne sighed. “H, I know you didn’t get the chance you and your voice deserved…”

“Can you read my mind?”

“…but life takes us in strange directions, as we know,” she continued, speaking slowly. “Sometimes, the ones that surprise us are the ones that end up making us happiest. This could be life’s biggest blessing in disguise.”

She sounded a little unsure of that herself, but Harry decided to protest rather than question her.

“I don’t have any gifts! It just kinda happened, and I just sort of reacted, and…that was it, really. I’m not hero material because a stage tried to fall on me and I didn’t die!”

“You’re more than you think.”

“I think you’re just trying to flatter me so I won’t be grumpy. So I won’t embarrass you in front of Simon.”

“It’s not about me!” Anne insisted. “I don’t want you to embarrass yourself in front of Simon. I’m trying to keep you in good shape, because you’re far too tired to care about presenting yourself, and all you want is this whole business over with.”

“You read my mind again.”

“I’m your mum. I can read you well enough without having superpowers, thanks.”

“Yeah, sure…” Harry wiggled his eyebrows, but Anne was no longer paying attention, focusing an oddly removed expression on the motorway.

The tension in the car was a foreign one. Anne was much more on edge than Harry had seen her in a good long while. Unable to stand it, he offered a gentle, “Are you alright?”

Anne gave a sad smile in return. “Well, I’m better off than the growing teenage boy who went to bed past midnight and had to be up at five o’clock and refuses caffeine.” She took a sip of coffee. “I’m fine, love. How about you?”

“Also fine.”

Not that this was all that true. The confusion, the bitterness, and the existential angst of this whole situation hadn’t left him in the slightest.

But the awe from that first day was still there. The hope was still there, too. And as much as Harry would groan, he had gotten his ass into the car that morning for a reason.

“I do want to do this, mum. M’sorry. We’re going to try, at least.”

Anne nodded. With a sigh, she set down her coffee and ruffled Harry’s curls.

“Hey!”

“Don’t apologize. I love you.”
“Love you too, mum.”

Anne gradually released him, turned back to the road and fell silent again. Harry put his earbuds in, cued up his choice Sleepy Tunes playlist, and slept the rest of the way.

As expected, they were several hours early for their brief meeting with Simon. Despite differing circumstances, standing backstage at a new arena felt like preparing to audition all over again. The sinking feeling in Harry's stomach was the exact same, the noise around him parallel. Gone were his mum’s encouragements, but her hand on his shoulder was a constant. It just wasn’t so steady this time.

Harry tried to lose himself in the backstage bustle, but it was a little difficult when all of the pounding and fluttering in his chest was only amplified by the faces of every passing contestant. Men with faces flushed red, women scrubbing hands down their cheeks, teenagers trying and failing to breathe deeply.

Harry fidgeted with his VIP lanyard. His bum squeaked against plastic as he shifted in his chair. His personal waiting area was so close to the action — just shy of the cameras capturing the pre-audition butterflies. He was engrossed in watching a contestant up ahead having their last chat with Dermott O’Leary before being sent up the stairs and into the wings, when he heard the voice of a young Midlander over his shoulder.

“VIP? Wow. How d’you get one of those?”

Harry looked up into a warm, curious smile. He met a pair of wide eyes half-hidden behind a drooping Bieber bowl cut.

Harry smiled cautiously back, and shrugged. “Apparently they’re only for superheroes.”

The boy laughed. “Aw, gutted! Can’t exactly reveal to them that I’m Batman.” The laugh became a giggle.

Harry nodded, eyebrows raised. “Well, unfortunately, you just told me. And I’m not very good with secrets.”

The boy waited a beat, looking concerned, before finally registering Harry’s amused expression and laughing it off. He bounced on his toes before settling down for some deep breaths, eyes fixed on the world in front of him. Just ahead, the crew and Dermott O’Leary were preparing for their next interview. The sound of the current contestant’s bell-pure voice made its muffled way backstage.

The Midlands boy buzzed his lips, cracked his knuckles, and turned back to Harry with a quizzical look. “You’re not actually a hero though, right?”

Harry bit his lip and shook his head. “There aren’t any heroes in Britain.”

“True enough, mate.”

“None of the super variety,” Anne corrected, chiding.

“Oh, yes. My mum’s a true British hero. The real VIP,” Harry amended, grinning. Anne rolled her
eyes and gave him a pat on the head.

The boy chuckled. “And my mum is…” He looked over his shoulder. “…just back from the toilet!”

“Huzzah,” said Harry.

The boy’s mother came to stand behind him, exchanging polite greetings with Harry and Anne. His father followed, with a gaggle of the boy’s very tall friends.

“Are you auditioning, then?” the boy asked Harry.

“Mn, not today,” said Harry, grin fading. Anne’s grip tightened on his shoulder.

“Liam Payne?” an assistant called. The boy and his entourage nodded, and were led toward Dermott and the cameras

“Break a leg!” Harry called after them.

Liam Payne waved over his shoulder. “With all me nerves and no superheroes around to protect me, I probably will. Haha!”

Harry sat back and watched as Liam made friendly with Dermott, shaking hands with shining eyes. After his interview, Liam took the stairs to the stage two unsteady steps at a time. His entourage followed. There was a roar from the crowd as the previous contestant left the stage, and a new roar as Liam was introduced. Harry listened hard to try to catch Liam’s banter with Simon. He caught a few casual remarks and the name of Liam’s audition song — “Croy Me a Riveh.” A cheer went up as Liam made ready to sing. Harry crossed his fingers in his lap, closed his eyes and waited to hear a voice.

It seemed at first that Liam had only taken an extra second to breathe. Harry listened for a reaction from the crowd, wondering if Liam had been overcome by a last minute surge of nerves. The audience was silent. The judges were silent. Secondhand embarrassment didn’t feel so secondhand in such a familiar environment, in a situation he had almost lived before, so Harry gritted his teeth. There had to be something wrong, but there was absolutely no way of telling what. Waiting only made him tense.

Harry opened his eyes.

The crowd, the backstage bustle — everything had gone completely still. A few crashes and clatters sounded in the distance, but then silence reigned again.

Harry turned to face his mum and stilled when she offered not even the slightest reaction. He startled. Her fingers on his shoulder were stiff.

Harry tried to stand, but couldn’t manage it until he had wriggled out from under her grasp. He immediately reached out and felt for her pulse. It was steady, thankfully, its beat a warm contrast to her rigid posture and her frozen, forward-gazing eyes.

Harry was startled again as an amplified voice rang through the silence. “Holy sh*t.”

It was Liam Payne.

Harry raced over to the steps, where Dermott and his camera crew were frozen. And up into the wings, stage left, where Liam’s friends and family stood, also frozen. Harry wove through them, stopping to check a few pulses, before he got the drill — frozen, but alive. He tore away from them,
avoiding looking into their glassy eyes.

By now Liam had heard Harry’s footsteps and was calling out frantically. “Who is it? Who’s over there? What’s going on? Hello?”

When Harry darted out onto the stage, Liam gave a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God it’s you, mate. I thought something might’ve been coming for me, there.”

Harry turned to scan the audience and the judges. The latter looked like wax figures, and the former were stiller than death. “Well, let’s not get our hopes up. M’ Harry, by the way.”

Liam nodded. “Liam. Er…why would someone be coming for us?”

Harry shook his head. “No idea.”

Liam’s next sentence was spat out impossibly quickly. “Then why did you say not to get our hopes up?”

“Everyone’s frozen, Liam. Except us.”

Liam's hands were fisted as he cast about the arena in a panic, squinting at every unmoving face he could see. “I can see that, smart one!” he snapped, brimming with false confidence. “But why not us?”

“No idea.”

Liam whipped back around to scrutinize Harry. “You’re biting your lip.”

Harry stopped biting his lip.

“You’re worried about something. You know what’s going on here.” Liam’s eyes were huge, imploring.

“I really don’t.”

“Is this all a trick? For the cameras? Do you, like, work for Ashton Kutcher or something? Is that, like, why they, like, made you a VIP?”

“No!” Liam's attempt at grace under pressure was noble, but certainly wasn’t helping Harry think straight.

“Is this some sort of mash-up they’re doing this year or something? The Prank Factor?” Liam chewed his lip for a half-second as he considered. “Cool idea, but honestly —”

“If you take a close look at any of these people, Liam, you’ll see that they’re actually frozen,” said Harry sternly. “Like, stiff. S’impossible for a person to stay that still.”

Liam squinted once more at the judges, frowning as reality hit afresh. He squeezed his eyes shut, took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and asked, “So why are you a VIP?”

Harry sighed. “I may have lied about the superhero thing. Sort of.”

Liam’s mouth made an O. His voice shot up an octave as he said “Fucking bollocks!”

“Being super may or may not have anything to do with this, I honestly don’t know.”
“What, like, a super villain is hunting you down or summat? Jesus…”

“I highly doubt they would be, but like…” Harry started to walk a circle around Liam, scanning the stage area. “Keep your wits about you, Batman.”

“I’m not actually Batman,” Liam felt it important to clarify.

“Well now’s your chance to be.”

Harry turned back to face stage left. He studied the nearest frozen people from afar. He clasped his shaking hands and tried to think clearly about what to do next.

He shouted his first somewhat sensible thought out as it came to his head. “Liam! Do you wear a watch?”

Liam was perplexed. “What do you care?”

Harry spotted a large digital clock off in the wings. The red digits were still counting down. Knowing that time hadn’t just inexplicably stopped was reassuring, sort of.

With a deep breath, Harry started to move towards the nearest frozen person — a stage assistant standing between them and the Payne entourage. His mouth was half open, frozen as he’d been speaking into his headset. Liam followed closely behind.

Harry began to inspect the man. He placed two fingers on the man's temples and concentrated hard, trying beyond all hope to see into his mind. With dormant superpowers, perhaps it was worth a shot.

“You’d best be joking about this whole superhero thing,” Liam whispered, as if not to wake the frozen people. “You are, aren’t you? Right?” When Harry was mum, lost in thought, Liam declared the stakes. “I’ve got an audition to ace, I don’t need to be falling for your…monkey business!” The emphasis he put into hissing “monkey business” made it sound like the English language’s most offensive curse.

Harry closed his eyes, bracing palms against the sides the man’s head. His concentration was ruined by Liam whisper-snapping “Hey!” into his ear.

Harry shook himself. “Sorry.”

“What the hell are you —”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. Trying…something.”

Liam made a frustrated gesture. “So what now? Can we wake them? We need to startle them or something…”

They set about trying some standard attention-grabbing tactics — shouting into the man’s ears, pinching him, kicking him in the shins — but gave up when all efforts proved fruitless.

“We need to leave,” said Harry. “Walk outside and see if everyone out there’s frozen too, yeah?”

“But I can’t just leave!” Liam protested. “They’ll come back to life when I’m supposed to audition! And I’ll be gone!”

“Leaving here might be the only way to get help,” Harry argued.

“Who’re we going to find, Doctor No-Freeze?!”
Harry raised his palms in surrender. He sighed. “I’m going out there. The sooner we figure this out, the sooner you can ace your audition. I reckon you won’t want to stay in here alone with…” Harry motioned around the arena. “…them.”

Harry set off — as surely as he could, despite his trembling — past the headset man, further into backstage left. After one glance back at the audience, Liam hurried after him.

They had barely gotten any closer to the Payne family before they heard a thud. It was their turn to freeze.

Footsteps sounded from behind them. Liam gasped.

The headset-wearing assistant they had been staring at walked over to plant himself in front of them, barring their way. His stare was resolute. Face expressionless.

“Shit,” Liam breathed.

With his heart rocketing in his chest, Harry could do nothing but stare into the man’s eyes for the longest, scariest moment of his life so far. The frozen man looked back at Harry as if he could see him, though his eyes never so much as twitched or blinked. He had the stillness of an object, but still somehow looked distinctly alive.

Harry tried for another deep breath — shaky as hell, this time — before deciding to test the automaton man. He strafed sideways, still staring the man in the face, watching to see if his eyes moved. Nothing happened. Harry stepped sideways again, and then took one step forward.

The man surged towards him. His hands were on Harry in a fraction of a heartbeat, a grip around his throat cutting off his scream.

Liam started screaming more than enough for the both of them, filling Harry’s ears as he struggled. Both of the stage assistant’s hands were now clamped around his neck, tightening as he lifted Harry into the air.

Harry gripped the man’s wrists and tried to tear his hands away as he was choked, but they only gripped tighter. His kicks couldn’t make contact, his scratching nails did nothing. His attempts grew weaker and weaker as he lost air and his limbs grew heavy. Sheer terror coursed through him, flooding his veins like new blood, overtaking him.

Liam’s shrieking only grew louder as the man shook him violently. Harry stopped struggling, putting every effort into gasping for air. He spluttered and choked. His limbs seized. With his vision fading rapidly, he spared one last ounce of will to look his captor in the eye, staring once more into a face of grim resolve. Harry gasped his last, feeling his mind start to leave him, his vision going dark.

Then he was let go.

Harry’s back slammed into the stage floor.

Liam fell to his hands and knees next to him. “I know First Aid! I know CPR! Are you okay? Fuck!”

Harry flung a hand out to Liam, and Liam held it tight. He gasped, his throat straining to open as wide as he needed it to. It took a minute for him to feel alive again, before the air in his lungs really felt like sweet relief.

When he was ready, Liam helped him to stand. As they straightened up, they both faced the
automaton man. His face had gone neutral again, eyes facing forward — making eye contact with neither of them, thank fuck.

After a minute or two, Liam demanded, “What now?”

They looked around. In a broken, rasping whisper, Harry said, “We exit stage right.”

“But there’ll be another one, won’t there? He can’t be the only one.”

“Yeah, well,” Harry paused for a hacking cough. “Maybe it was wishful thinking to think that X Factor screens potential employees for cyborgs. We’ll just have to see.”

They ran for the other side of the stage, constantly checking over their shoulders to make sure they weren’t being followed.

“But cyborgs can’t be real,” said Liam.

“Superheroes are. Can’t anything be?”

“But did you see his eyes? And he was shaking when he grabbed you. And he moved like a solider, not a robot —”

They skidded to a stop as footsteps announced a figure coming out of the shadows up ahead. The figure was followed by more frozen-eyed X Factor crew, this time forming tight ranks in front of backstage right, blocking their way.

Behind them, their headset man was, likewise, no longer alone.

There had to be a logical way to outwit the growing ranks of numb employees and squeeze past, but Harry wasn’t going to risk it. He would find another easy way out.

He grabbed Liam’s hand and pulled him to the edge of the stage. He hopped to the floor, turning to help Liam after him. Before he could take Harry’s hand, Liam let out a yelp, and dropped to the stage floor. Something hot and bright whizzed over his head a half-heartbeat later.

Harry turned. Another crew member vaulted over Simon Cowell’s head to assume a strong stance on the judges’ table. Her eyes darted from Liam down to Harry and back again. She spread her arms. A hot ball of light swirled as it grew in one open palm.

She took the ball of light in her other hand, pulled it back and aimed it at fallen Liam. Liam shrieked as the orb barely missed him, bursting into sparks against the stage.

It was then that Harry got an inkling of what was going on.

This was his test. One hundred percent organized and orchestrated.

If this was a video game, she was the final boss. He was worn down, still fighting to breathe, adrenaline probably the only thing keeping him together. But this was a fight. He was the superhero, and his villain had come.

And Liam wasn’t going to become the victim in this. Not on his watch.

“I’M INNOCENT!” Liam screamed, fractions of a second before the boss sent her second light-orb flying at him.

Harry was far below the arc of the throw — as far as he knew, powerless to stop it. But, never one
not to try dumb things, he jumped anyway. He watched as his outstretched fingers came nowhere close to intercepting the orb, watched as it whizzed over his head. He opened his mouth to shout a warning —

But the orb caught. It stuck in the air above Harry’s head, like it had hit flypaper. It took Harry a second to realize that he had trapped it, as if he had pulled a Peter Parker and shot a web. His energy field crackled against the boss’ white-blue sphere.

With all his fading might, he willed it to come down, to sit in his palm. It didn’t budge.

Not until he looked over at the boss, who was already preparing a larger plasma ball between her two palms, her frozen stare fixed on Harry. He gritted his teeth, and the ball wobbled its way down to rest in his left hand, sparking against his skin.

He didn’t think twice before lifting it from his palm with his other hand, raising it above his head, and throwing it right back at her.

It missed by a wide margin. Harry swore under his breath as the woman carried on building her next orb unperturbed, letting it morph into something bigger, like a wave gathering to strike.

“Liam, run!” Harry yelled. He heard Liam scramble to his feet and start to haul ass upstage, just as the woman unleashed a white-hot wall of energy. Liam screamed.

Harry ducked, face tucked against the base of the stage. He curled into a protective ball, pretending he would be okay.

Pretending, thankfully, seemed to work. When the blinding light and thunderous rush of the wave finally receded, he was left shaken, but unharmed.

There was only half a second of silence. Then the arena surged to life again, and he heard the audience’s laughter.

“Come on now, stand up!” said Simon. “Pick the microphone up, Liam, we’re ready to hear you.”

Liam was silent for a moment. He sounded dazed as he stuttered his apologies into the mic. He cleared his throat. The crowd went quiet. Regular quiet instead of absolute silence, this time.

Liam’s backing track cued up. Harry glanced around madly for the power-ball lady, who, to the best of his knowledge, still probably wanted to kill him.

Harry’s heart leapt when he caught sight of her. Behind the judges’ table in front of him, adjusting her glasses and muttering into her headset, shrugging off her confusion as she retrieved her clipboard from the floor beside her.

Back at her job, back in her own mind.

Harry stood up, hunching so as not to be noticed, and crept out of his pit at the base of the stage as stealthily as he could. Passing the end of the judges’ table, he cast a glance up at Simon.

Simon was watching him.

As soon as they made eye contact, Simon’s eyes flicked away, back to Liam. Liam started to sing.

Although nauseous and temptingly close to the exit, Harry couldn’t bring himself to leave. He accepted his front row seat to what turned out to be a first class audition, with Liam exerting
masterful control over his voice and over every single heart in the audience.

No sign of trauma, no sign of fresh memories.

Of course he got a standing ovation. Of course every judge voted him on to bootcamp.

Harry couldn’t bring himself to appreciate it at all. He couldn’t stop thinking about Simon’s eyes.

Simon had seen him. Had he been awake the whole time, somehow?

Harry recalled his stiller-than-death expression. No.

Regardless, Simon knew. And either he had planned that attack, or he had sat by and approved it — Liam’s involvement and all.

As Liam left the stage spewing gratitude, Harry ran from the arena, shaking.

Simon pulled out his chair and sat down, not bothering to look up as he scrolled through his phone. “My associate had to dash, I’m afraid. But he liked you. He says you seem quite trainable.”

He looked up at Harry expectantly. Harry didn’t sit down. His mum kept a white-knuckled grip on his arm.

Simon beckoned to the chairs. “We’ve got a better equipped office, this time. Take a seat, please.”

Harry didn’t move. Simon’s gaze, placid as it was, seemed to sear through to his very bones. Though trembling, Harry stayed firmly in place.

Simon cleared his throat. “I’m sorry if that all took you by surprise. My colleague wanted some further knowledge to work with before agreeing to —”

“What would have happened? To Liam. If I’d failed that…test. Or if I’d stood by and done nothing.” Harry clenched his fists, cursing himself for wearing all of his anger and fear in the way that he shook. He had had an hour to cool down, or whatever. He had taken a walk with his mum, told her everything. He had cried. Nothing had changed.

“Would he have been safe?” When Simon was silent, Harry muttered, “Didn't look like it.”

Anne gripped his arm even tighter.

Simon sighed. “Liam Payne is one of our best hopefuls this season. Even if he weren’t bloody brilliant, his return to X Factor would still make damn good television. Ask yourself, Harry, why on Earth would I risk —”

“But as a person,” Harry said, almost taken aback by the force in this own voice, especially with his throat still so raw. “If he were just a person. Not a person who could make you money.”

Anne gripped his arm even tighter.

Simon set down his phone and clasped his hands on the desk. “Liam doesn’t remember a thing, Harry. My associates and I take precautions. That's why the whole country isn't chattering about your audition. He won’t suffer any bad memories. And I assure you that I would never put him in any serious harm’s way.”
“Brilliant, that solves it then!” said Harry, livid. “Why doesn’t your mate just wipe my mind, too, while they’re at it! So I can forget feeling like I was going to die, that I was gonna let him get hurt, just for the sake of some stupid fucking test!”

There was a pause before Simon nodded. “I’m glad you felt that way, Harry,” he said. “Vulnerable. Protective of others. That’s how real heroes feel.”

Anne held Harry closer to steady him. She waited until Harry’s initial wave of rage at Simon’s words was done flooding his body before speaking.

“We’re very nervous about how you do business, Simon. To put it lightly. We’re putting all of our faith in you and your people when it comes to Harry’s talents — especially if Harry goes to London for this assessment you speak of — and you’ve been less than transparent, and on the whole not very trustworthy. You did not make it clear that Harry or anyone else could be subjected to random, supernatural…simulations.”

“It was in the waivers, that you signed. I can promise you.”

Anne raised her voice. “Hiding behind fine print — when we have no idea of what’s going on, and no legal counsel — isn’t good enough. We’re walking blindly into your arms, and we need greater assurance that our trust isn’t being misplaced.”

At least this time, Simon told the truth. “And I can’t give you that.”

Harry and Anne were silent.

“But we’ve seen all we need to see, Harry. And I stand by what I said in Manchester. Even more so now that I’ve been handed proof of how well you handled today. Power aside, your instincts alone are strong. The way I see it, you giving up a chance like this would be like Liam Payne quitting The X Factor now, when he has a real shot at winning.”

“But what if I don’t want to win?”

Simon shrugged. “Then that’s your choice. But there are so many people like you, Harry, who will never learn to use their powers properly. Who will keep them locked up inside themselves, a hazard for the rest of their lives. You could be miserable, and dangerous. Or, you could win.”

Silence again.

“But if you want to have a go at winning, there’s plenty of paperwork to go through before we can move you on to the formal assessment.” He dragged a few folders across the desk. He extracted several leaflets, slapping them down in front of Harry and Anne’s empty chairs. “So let’s get to work.”

After a moment’s pause, Harry and Anne sat down.

Harry cried on the way home. Anne cursed Simon and told Harry that he didn’t need to trust anyone if he didn’t want to, didn’t have to say yes to the assessment or to training or to anything. Harry kept crying. But when his mum asked if he had changed his mind about attending the assessment, after all he’d been through, Harry shook his head.

“I know, mum. I have my eyes open. And if it gets worse, I’ll drop it. This is the last time I’ll put up with it, I swear. But I’m going to keep going.”
It was the middle of the night, a week later, and Harry could hear his mother crying on the sofa downstairs. Gemma was murmuring comforts to her, but none seemed to be helping. Harry pulled back his sheets and slipped out of bed, stepping lightly over to the landing, where he sat in his all-togethers and eavesdropped.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, I really didn’t —”

“No, Gem, it’s only natural for you to want to know what’s happening with him.”

“But it was wrong, I shouldn’t have taken a look —”

“No, sweetheart, shhh. Believe me, I would have done the exact same. We’re all curious about this stuff. It’s mad. It’s…fucked up. No one here’s pretending it isn’t.”

Footsteps padded in from the kitchen. Robin’s voice joined the conversation. “What’s happened?”

“Gemma did some research, and that left her with some confusion about H, and she was worried about what he’s about to go through, and she was curious, so she searched for some more answers, and she found…well…”

Robin sighed. A sound like sandpaper — Robin’s calloused hands rubbing nervously together. “We can talk about it with you, Gem, if you like,” he offered. “I understand if you don’t want to, but we will, if that makes it any less…frightening.”

“I’m not frightened, it’s just…”

“She’s mostly worried for Harry,” Anne clarified.

“Your mother’s old business doesn’t mean anything about Harry or the way he will be treated,” Robin assured. “We’re looking at a very different Britain than we saw in the past. Harry will no doubt be a part of that.”

“I know he will,” said Gemma. “But he’ll also be living in London, alone, at sixteen! I know he can take care of himself — like, in the normal, domestic way — better than I can, better than anyone else at his age…But we’re leaving him alone, to figure all this shit out, in the company of dangerous people, in a country that hates people like him — and for what?”

Robin sighed. “For him to do what good in the world he can, with his abilities.”

“He was born to help people, Gem. That much is clear.”

“Exactly. He’ll be too concerned helping others to pay any mind to himself.”

“We’ll be there for him, Gem. I’ll go to London as often as I can. Promise. Every weekend, even, until he settles in. But remember how I tried the same with you when you first went to uni, and you were having none of it —”

“Uni! Real, normal-person uni. Isn’t there some actual school for kids like him? Sounds like they’re just gonna teach him how to tie a bandage before sending him off, all ‘Go on, save the world, there’s a good Harry!’”

“There are no other kids like Harry here, Gemma. Or at least —”
“I thought we were going to talk about…about…” Robin trailed off without finishing his sentence.

“This isn’t Harry Potter!” spat Gemma. “We can give names to scary things!”

There was a pause, before Anne answered, “Not at the moment, we can’t. Your brother’s listening in.”

Harry could almost hear his family’s necks craning up to try to catch a glimpse of him on the landing.

“Harry?” Gemma called.

“I know you’re there, sweetheart.” His mum’s exhausted voice held not an ounce of doubt.

“How did you know?” Harry groaned, getting to his feet and stretching. “I was being soooooooo quiet.”

“You know we mothers have our ways.” She delivered the joke like a death sentence.

Tension rose in the silence, before Harry broke it. “Gemma, I’m really sorry. I don’t know what’s going on either —”

Anne was quick to interrupt. “Gemma will be fine, love. Not your fault. You focus on taking care of yourself, yeah?”

“But what about you?”

“This isn’t about me. Or us.”

“Well you’re really worried, and you’re very bad at hiding it.”

Anne gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Get some shut eye. Big day tomorrow.”

“But I can’t. Not when everyone’s worried about me.”

A pause. “We’re so proud of you.”

“But I haven’t done anything yet. Could you hold off ‘til I get my first cat out of a tree?”

His family laughed.

“We’re always proud of you, Harry. Always.”

“Always,” Gemma echoed.

It took a second for Harry’s sleepy brain to think up a suitable response. In the end, all that seemed fitting was, “I really love you all.”

“We love you too,” said Anne. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Harry,” said Robin.

“Night!” called Gemma.

“Night, everyone,” Harry sing-songed sleepily. He made his way back to his room, and closed the door this time.

Sleeping wasn’t easy with more questions than answers in his head.
It seemed to Harry that he was living life in circles. The morning he left for London felt like the morning of his X Factor audition yet again. Up long before the ass-crack of dawn, wiping the lack of sleep from his eyes, and sliding into the car with his mum and Robin and a small duffel bag over his shoulder. Refusing his mother’s McDonalds coffee once again in favour of Sleepy Tunes and sleep. Or at the very least, attempted sleep. He managed to rest in that foggy place between dreaming and alertness for a while before nagging uncertainties got the better of him.

“So what are they gonna have me do, exactly?” he asked as Robin turned onto the road that led to the train station.

Anne sighed. “You know I know as much as you do about that one, love.”

“You’ve spent hours on the phone, and all you tell me is where and when. You promised me you’d make sure they were transparent with us. I just want to know what they’re going to expect of me!”

“I tried my best, sweetheart, I really did. They’ve assured me the assessment area will be highly controlled, and they won’t see you harmed. They’re going to let me watch. They said it’s a pass-or-fail type thing, and if all goes well, we’ll be talking about contracts and all of the legal and the business-type stuff the next day. That’s all they’ve said. I have us booked in to the hotel for two nights, and we’ll book a third if we need to. But we’re taking this one day at a time.”

Her explanations barely did anything to settle Harry’s nerves, but he let it go. He wasn’t game for a fight this early in the morning. His mum didn’t deserve any blame.

Robin dropped them off at the train station with a firm one-armed hug for Harry and a kiss for Anne, and then they were hauling their bags up to the doors. The reality of the whole London thing started settling in, a sucker punch to Harry’s gut.

Anne turned to Harry as they made their way to the ticket booths. “I’m not doing this so you can have money, or so you can be famous, or what-have-you. All I see is a boy with an extraordinary gift that might well make the world a better place…and I want to make that boy happy. And if I had my way, you’d still be on X Factor now, like you’ve always wanted, and you’d be happy. Or they’d have at least tested you fairly, and explained everything to me, instead of dragging us and that innocent boy into their bloody mess. But here we are, and you’ve been given a chance, and you’ve told me that you want to pursue it, and all I want to be is here to support you. And I know I’ve said this all before, but if at any moment it all feels wrong, or you know you don’t want to do this anymore…trust yourself. Tell me, and I won’t keep us in that city any longer than you want to be there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I am tumbling through [here](http://example.com)

I won't say much more than this, reader - but in our next instalment, someone special is
on his way.
Chapter Notes

Last time on BFFTS: Liam's audition got weird.

This is probably one of my favourite chapters in this whole thing, so buckle up and enjoy! Thanks again for reading and for the lovely feedback. Makes my day!

You know what else makes my day? Having damn lovely betas. Brittany, Iowa's Hero, and supergirl Ari, the editing powerhouse, who, if I ever acquire the superpowers of my choice, I will take back in time to see Augustana open for One Direction. Also to befriend Harry at some point so she can access his wardrobe. Her editing deserves payment in YSL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they arrived in Camden for the assessment, Simon wasn't there. Unfamiliar assistants shepherded Harry and Anne through an inconspicuous converted warehouse. Harry would have been charmed by the place, had it not been for its forebodingly white interior and the faltering smiles plastered on the faces of its staff.

He wasn't sure what to make of Simon's absence. His presence had come to mean uncertainty, even treachery. Was this a good sign? More likely, Harry suspected, Simon was out of sight, pulling the strings.

The waiting room they were led to was void of any comfort. Empty but for a bench, white and sterile. Once alone, Harry and Anne sat down.

“Ready, love?” Anne asked, patting Harry’s knee.

Harry laid his head on her shoulder, relaxed into her touch, and closed his eyes. “I don’t need to be ready, do I? It’s just gonna sort of…happen.”


“But I don’t know how.”

“My Harry doesn’t need to know how. When the time comes, he does it. And that’s just what you’ll do.”

Harry could have gone on and on about how scary that whole idea was, but his mum already knew. Words could only make it worse, other than his favourite pair of them. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

A new pair of assistants came in. “Mr. Styles? We’re ready for you now.”

After one last hug, Harry and Anne were led in opposite directions. Several minutes of white plaster corridors later, something finally stood out from the bland decor. A steel door. Harry and his chaperone stopped in front of it.
“Ready in ten?” the assistant asked, adjusting her earpiece with a finger.

“Ten what?” said Harry.

She was already counting down. “Nine, eight, seven, six, five — standby on doors — three, two, one.”

The door clicked open.

The assistant pushed Harry through by his shoulders and shut the door behind him.

_Clang._

Harry found himself in an empty, high-ceilinged room with a warm hardwood floor. Two sides of the room had proper walls. The one in front of him was windowed from floor to ceiling, looking out onto a vacant alley-street. The wall to his right was a mirror.

There was a circle marked in the centre of the floor. Harry took a deep breath and set himself a challenge: make it to the circle, unharmed.

Nothing happened to test him on his way there. No trapdoors, or pouncing creatures, or cyborg onslaughts. Harry sat down in the circle and crossed his legs. He kept on high alert, but remembered to breathe. _Slow and steady_. He tried very hard to relax, but he couldn’t keep it up for very long before the absolute stillness got to him.

“Are you gonna do something, or what?” he called out to the mirror in front of him. “I won’t lose focus, if that’s what you’re waiting for. Might as well get it over with.”

No response, of course.

“Um. Please?”

Not a sound.

Harry closed his eyes and let his breathing take over again. As if he had flicked a switch, his senses sparked to life. His skin tingled. And then it crawled.

His eyes snapped open. He looked around. More nothing.

This was now officially infuriating. Simon Cowell was most definitely behind that mirror. Harry rolled his eyes at his reflection before getting back to his breathing.

_Slow and steady._

The crawl on his skin grew stronger, pinching down his spine.

Then came the first _crack_ from somewhere behind him. Harry twisted around to look. Just as he turned, a section of the floor at the back of the room fell through, with another loud _crack._

A ripple moved through the floorboards. Patch by patch, they cracked and dissolved. The ground fell away in an approaching wave.

Harry’s heart caught in his throat. He scrambled to his feet and made to run, but the wave caught up to him. He pinched his eyes shut and begged himself not to fall.

Silence suddenly took over again. The thrill of falling never came.
Harry opened his eyes and gasped. Below him, the floor had given way to a big black pit. He was floating. All on his own.

Harry grinned. As a test, he wiggled his feet, watched them dangle. He stayed perfectly suspended. He giggled, he cackled. He was levitating above a bottomless pit, laughing his head off, and it felt amazing. Simon Cowell and his poor ethics and his mom jeans could suck it.

As he laughed, his sight seemed to grow sharper. The colours in the room around him grew more vivid. Brighter, more unnatural. They began to bleed together, like paint in water. Reds and blues and yellows swam around him, like he was closing his eyes on a sunny day and seeing the world through his eyelids.

He blinked, and the colours got thicker. Pinks and oranges and greens.

The laughter died in Harry's throat. His head began to spin. Was he hallucinating? He hadn't taken any food or water from the perky assistants.

True panic hit when the colours became a mist. His in-breaths started to taste sweet and toxic. More and more coloured mists drifted in from the corners of the room.

Harry's stomach twisted. What exactly was he supposed to do — fight the air?

With a deep breath in through his nose, he closed his eyes. He thought of the X Factor stage — of the place he had made in his mind to get himself ready to kill that audition. He breathed as best he could, trying to cancel out the air's poisonous taste. Shakily, he tucked in his legs and sat cross-legged in mid-air. He held on to his knees, focused back on his breath, and hoped.

The air slowly lost its taste. He opened his eyes. In a blink, the mist was gone.

But his testers were tired of creating suspense. Moments later, he heard the sound of machines whirring to life.

Down from the ceiling came two mechanical arms. They came at him from two sides. The tip of each arm unfolded to reveal a set of long blades. They began to spin in formation like a fan, with a circumference of roughly one Harry.

Harry's gut sank. Finally, the main event.

Patience was Harry’s friend that day. He let the arms continue their slow advance, keeping calm enough to work things out. I moved the lighting rig with my mind. I just concentrated, and I did it. Let's try something.

Focusing on the arm to his left — ignoring the possibility of being killed by the other one, just for now — Harry pictured it turning. Just a simple pivot.

Turn. Turn for me.

Nothing happened, and the arm advanced faster. Harry began to panic.

TURN!

The arm suddenly changed course, but continued its charge forward. It drove towards the mirror, smashing a hole in it with an almighty crash.

“Oops.” Harry winced. One down.
Harry turned to his right, where whirling blades were stirring up a hurricane a few feet from his face.

This time, he used his voice. And not his inside voice. “STOP.”

Surprisingly, the blades stopped. But then the arm produced a three-fingered claw. It pinched Harry around the waist and picked him up, ferrying him through the air, across the room, towards the mirror. Toward the blades of the still-whirring first arm.

Harry looked down. He had a choice: get chewed up by the blades, or be swallowed by the deep dark pit below. And he had to make the decision fast.

As his distance from the blades narrowed from feet to inches, Harry pried himself free from the claw and dropped.

He hit the floor with a thud. The black pit was no more, as if the floorboards had never fallen through.

The machines came to an abrupt stop. Harry hissed as he straightened and stood, back burning from his graceless fall. To be safe, he kept his eyes on the hole in the mirror, but his focus was dissipating. Somewhere within him, he knew that this meant that he was sensing safety. The test was over. He had made it.

A long minute later, the testing room door opened, and in came a man with close-cropped curls and eyes like jewels. He gave a weary smile, extending his hand. “That was hard to watch. Very nice to meet you, Harry.”

Harry was still shock-numb, but the man had an instantly calming presence. Harry understood his purpose there almost at once. “Likewise, Master Yoda.”

“It’s Chris. But works also, Master Yoda does.”

“I'll switch it up every now and again, then,” said Harry. After a beat of silence, he added, “Sorry for the, um, damage.”

Chris shrugged it off. “Not a problem. We have a lot of work to do with this facility anyway. Won’t cost us a thing, in the long run.”

Harry raised an eyebrow in disbelief. Chris shrugged that off, too.

“Um, are we supposed to talk about...that? The test?” Harry’s voice shook slightly.

“I can answer questions, if you like. But we don’t need to talk about it. Up to you.”

Questions? About being attacked by giant robotic arms and battling strange illusions sent to play with his mind?

There was something else that Harry felt more pressed to ask. “Was it you? Who tested me before?”

Chris frowned, concern etched in the lines across his forehead. “You were tested before this assessment?”

“Yeah, um. Before I last met with Simon.”

Chris shook his head. “I’ll have to speak with him. I never asked for that. Was it difficult?”

Harry nodded. “And it involved...someone else. A bystander.”
Chris’ frown deepened. “I promise I’ll talk to him. That…can’t be accepted.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, then seemed to shake it off. “Right, any questions about today’s testing?”

Harry shook his head.

Chris led Harry from the room, speaking softly as he went. “Needless to say, we were all very impressed with what you can do. We’ve had others come through here — not many, but some. You’ve definitely shown the most promise we’ve yet seen.”

Harry shrugged, frowning. “I just kind of…reacted.”

“That’s it, really. That’s everything. It’s pretty straightforward once you’ve found the right state of mind.”

“Is that really how all the Americans did it?” Harry asked. “Just improvised?”

“Started out that way, at least,” Chris conceded. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but if you make yourself feel grounded, connected to your core, and you truly focus — you can do almost anything. It’s all control. You have such good control already, Harry.”

There wasn’t much to control, as far as Harry concerned, when everything superhuman he did happened accidentally-on-purpose. But he nodded, pseudo-understanding.

Chris frowned. “But of course it’s not easy, even when you have it. Control is power, and I hate to say it, but…’With great power comes great responsibility.’ Did Yoda say that one?”

“It’s from Spider-Man.”

“Yeah, I only watched Star Wars for Natalie Portman anyway.”

“M’not sure I trust you to be my Yoda, then, if you know shit-all about him,” Harry smirked.

Chris grinned. “That’s fair. How else do you suggest I try to gain your trust in a short amount of time, then, if I can’t rely on stealing his identity?”

“I won’t trust you. I’m a powerful skeptic.” Harry raised his eyebrows, smiling.

Chris laughed, mimicking Harry’s eyebrow-raise. “Skeptics are only skeptics until they sniff out the truth. Maybe I should trust you with a secret, then.”

“Sure.”

“I don’t technically exist.”

Harry’s first instinct was to study Chris to ensure that he wasn’t a hologram, after all of the Star Wars talk. Reading Harry’s confused expression, Chris just smiled.

As they reached the end of the corridor, Chris unlocked a door and led Harry up a wrought iron spiral staircase. At the top was a balcony, looking out over the rooftops of Camden.

Chris beckoned Harry over to the balcony railing. “Think we’re high up enough that we won’t be overheard talking about highly confidential stuff?”

Knowing Simon, he had probably already made the entire neighbourhood sign secrecy agreements. Harry settled his elbows on the rail, tilting his chin into the breeze. “What do you mean, you don’t technically exist?”
Chris' eyes picked a point on the western skyline. He stared for a moment before beginning. “When I was your age, I had no control. I got into an accident or two at school…well, that’s putting it nicely. Before I knew it, I was notorious in my hometown. And there was no glory in being notorious, let me tell you. It’s a little hard, when everywhere you go, someone has it out for you. When everywhere find you yourself, there’s someone who’s…terrified of you.” Chris took a pause, closing his eyes before continuing. “Just as I was getting ready for the law to come down on my head — that’s when I met my mentor. He helped me out of there, taught me to control all of the impulses that had put everyone around me in danger.”

Harry was hesitant. Curiosity battled his fear of coming across as a nosey arsehole, and won. “What sort of impulses?”

Chris shook his head. “I haven’t used those powers in years.”

Harry didn’t press further. “So when did you technically stop existing?”

“Soon after. We hid my identity. Or at least, we came up with an ending to Chris Martin’s story to give people back home some closure. I got a new name. Twisted all the official records.”

“So…no one knows you as Chris, then?”

Chris shook his head. “Hardly anyone.”

“Then why do I?”

Chris turned away from the view to look Harry straight-on. “Like I said, it’s a trust exercise. I need you to trust me. I’m going to train you, after all. If you choose to train, that is.”

Harry wanted to trust him. Whether it was out of desperation, or thanks to the kindness in Chris’ voice, or because of the note of fear in it that Harry figured he would someday hear in his own; he couldn’t quite tell. He offered his hand. Chris beamed as he shook it.

“Teach me, what will you, Master Yoda?” Harry quipped, laughing his way through a terrible Yoda impression.

Chris answered seriously. “More control. We'll make it even better than it was today. We'll figure out where the limits to your powers are, what your arsenal is, and we'll work with that. And then the practical stuff. Life-saving skills and knowing the law and how not to piss off the police, when appropriate — not that I know shit-all about that…”

Harry gave a snort-laugh. Thankfully, no police officers could be seen in the streets below them.

They spent a final moment on the balcony in silence. With a satisfied sigh, Chris stepped away from the rail, motioning for Harry to follow. “Anyway. Don’t want to keep your mum waiting. We’ll have a meeting tomorrow morning, and then if you’re feeling ready, Simon's team will have you sign all the legally binding things. But for now —” He clapped Harry on the back. “Rest up. You’ve earned it.”

The overly-perky assistant from earlier escorted them back to Harry’s mum. Anne pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, extending the other hand to receive Chris’ handshake. “Good to meet you. Your son did brilliantly. I’m Matthew Bellamy. Call me Matt.”

Harry cast Chris a confused look. Chris winked.

“Pleasure,” said Anne.
“I’ll be honest with you, Harry,” said Chris, as soon as Harry, Anne, and Simon’s team were all settled around a meeting room table the next morning. Chris’ soft smile grew broader. “We’ve just been talking to delegates from the UN’s Superhuman Relations task force, to begin to arrange a license for you —”

“Wait, what?” Harry blurted. Whatever that was, it sounded important.

“A practising license. We’ll need you registered with the SHR to train you, it’d be illegal to train you while undocumented,” Chris explained. “Anyhow, they’ve had a look at our comments on your assessment, and our footage, and, well…” Chris’ eyes were bright as he shrugged. “They’re stunned. They can see an incredible future for you. Not only in terms of power, but in terms of how well you manage it.”

Harry let loose a little grin, nodding along with Chris as if he was actually understanding it all. He looked to his mum, who mouthed “Wow!” before giving his shoulder a squeeze. Around the table, Simon’s associates were eyeing Harry with curiosity and some admiration, which Harry, though grateful, couldn’t help but think was misplaced.

Simon cleared his throat. “Well, I’m glad things have turned out for the best thus far. As most of you know, I head the Coalition for a British Super Industry — from which several of you with us today are hailing, hello to you all. Anyhow. We’ve had a vision for a long time of how to start this off on the right foot. To make Britain’s first hero stand out from all the rest. And by the sounds of it, we have the perfect candidate. One who already stands out due to the nature of his power.”

A sour taste developed in Harry's mouth. Playing into Simon's master plan made him uneasy.

“Our idea has always been this: we set ourselves apart from the ridiculous super entertainment industry in America and elsewhere — because that’s all it is, it’s entertainment to them. And we do that by presenting our hero as humble, tasteful, and above all, completely, overwhelmingly normal.”

To Simon's credit, Harry quite identified with that description. He could definitely manage to live up to "normal."

“If we apply our vision to his case, Harry will have no secret identity. His deeds will bring him fame — but as Harry Styles, and nothing else. He’ll wear none of that brightly coloured spandex bullshit, makes me want to vomit.” A round of sympathetic chuckles rose from around the table. “He’ll wear normal clothes, street clothes, ‘cool’ clothes. Tailored for high performance, of course — but to the onlooker, he’ll be fighting crime in high-top sneakers and jeans, or what have you. He’ll do a lot of giving back with the time that he has. He’ll be well mannered and revered. He’ll attend events and parties like any other young celebrity, and the PR machine will work itself. We won’t even need bloody comic books to sell him. That’s important, actually. No comic books.”

Harry frowned. “What’s wrong with comic books?”

Laughter around the table.

“Haven’t you been listening, Harry?” Simon rolled his eyes. “American! Pure American entertainment!”
“They tend to trivialize the super community, as well,” said Chris.

“Can’t we make them better, then?” Harry was suddenly felt quite attached to the idea of having his own comic books.

Chris must have seen something of it in his eyes. He smiled. “I think we’re best to stay free of them. Just for now.”

Harry gave a reluctant nod.

“He’ll be London-based,” said Simon, steering the conversation back, “and he’ll be focused on *helping* people. In what way that manifests, we have yet to tell, but that will be the goal. No seeking out challengers to prove his manhood or dominance, no fighting for sport. That way, our super industry won’t look like a joke. It will be seen as a positive force. That’s why people will buy into it.”

“But won’t that look a little…unexciting?” the red-haired woman opposite Harry piped up. “Won’t he be wandering aimlessly around the city most of the time?”

“We have to construct some sort of narrative,” said another associate, a bald man in a navy suit. “Create something to spur the action, build his reputation!”

“We need to establish right away that British heroism is new, and exhilarating,” agreed an almost-bald coalition member.

Simon put his hands up for peace. “Here is where my associate and I have a theory.” He looked to Chris, who nodded along. “We firmly believe — and yes, we are taking a bit of a gamble here, but that’s fine — we firmly believe that someone like Harry here has the power that he does in part due to incredible instincts.”

“From studying the way he performs, it’s like there’s a sixth sense guiding him,” Chris added. “When achieves the right state of mind, his actions happen seamlessly, and he can anticipate incredibly well.”

“And that’s the way it will be in his working life,” said Simon. “His instincts will guide him wherever he needs to go. He won’t need to go looking for trouble. He’ll find it, without even thinking.”

“But that’s mad!” someone said from the other end of the table, and there was a murmur of agreement all around.

“But have you *seen* this boy in action?” Simon pressed. “Did you even *watch* that bloody audition tape?”

“If what Simon’s saying is mad, Harry’s instincts are what’s really mad,” Chris added. “I say we give it a go. Let his instincts guide him for a bit, see how that works out.”

“But what will he be doing, while you wait to see how that works out?” said Anne, dubious.

“I’ll take charge of training him. Then I’ll teach him to patrol, get him used to applying his skills around the city. Eventually, he’ll start to do that on his own, when he’s not in training. He’ll graduate from training in no time, and we’ll go from there.”

“You’re truly willing to invest all of that in a gamble?” Anne asked.
Chris’ smile was small but sharp. “We have a lot of faith in him. As I’m sure you do.”

“I do. But it’s a lot of responsibility.” She ruffled Harry’s hair. Harry gave her a pout. He looked away when he caught a glimpse of the unease in her eyes.

“Again, Ms. Cox, this is for you and Harry to decide. We’d be sad to see such a promising candidate go, but we can’t determine his path for him.”

Anne leaned in to mutter into Harry’s ear. “What do you think, darling? It’s a lot to take in. D’you want to go outside and talk about it? You don’t need an answer just now.”

Harry shook his head. Despite nagging doubts, he had his answer, and it wasn’t going to change.

He said it out loud before doubt had the chance to take over.

After a half-hour’s debrief with his mum, Simon and Chris, some of the severe-looking suited people — lawyers, Harry realized — re-entered the room, spreading documents out along the table.

Harry could barely focus as the pages and pages of jargon and agreements and conditions were explained to both of them, though primarily to his mother. It seemed quite hefty, for what was only supposed to be his initial training contract.

All too soon, it was over. Just a few signatures, there and here and there, and Harry would be hired, set to train for the role of Britain’s Hero. He held his mum’s hand tight beneath the table, for fear that if he didn’t, he would float away and leave her alone with a pile of headache-inducing print.

When it all seemed safe and sound to her, Anne turned back to Harry, and mouthed, “You ready, sweetheart? You sure?”

He wasn’t sure of anything. How could he be?

Harry nodded. “You sign first.”

Hesitantly, Anne signed in every space she’d been told to. Chris signed next, as M. Bellamy. Simon signed quickly and efficiently. And then there were three blank spaces for Harry.

Neat and bold, he printed “HARRY STYLES” in each space.

Shaking slightly, he dropped the pen.

Simon Cowell stood up and offered him a hand. “Welcome aboard, Hero.”

Harry felt an odd mixture of glee and unease as he and Anne made their way southward from the financial district. On the one hand: it was done. Contract signed. Future sealed. Training awaited him. He quite liked Chris. Some of his questions had been answered, and everything left unclear would supposedly become clear as soon as he got settled into his new home in the fall.
On the other hand: nothing could be that simple. The whole paperwork process had gone too quickly, leaving Harry with the sinking feeling that there must have been some clause or other that they had missed. Something important. And as nice as Chris was, no one in that room had been easy to trust.

“What d’you think, love?” Anne gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “We can catch the tube, head back to the hotel for a bit, then have a swanky dinner out to celebrate. Or we can go for a wander. You seem quite tired, though. Up to you, darling.”

“Let’s keep walking.”

Anne gave him a concerned smile. “Trying to keep something off of your mind?”

Harry knew better than to lie to his mum. “Yeah.”

Anne nodded. “If it’s about today, and you want to talk about it…”

“I would, but that kind of defeats the purpose of keeping it off my mind.”

His mum nodded. Giving his hand another squeeze, she muttered, “I love you. And I’m proud of you.”

Harry squeezed back. “I love you, too.”

For the rest of their walk, they alternated between easy banter and silence. They walked through Leadenhall Market, then down to the Monument to the Great Fire of London, which Harry found quite underwhelming amidst the looming modern buildings on either side. But he enjoyed the reminder of how old this strange patchwork of a city really was.

They wound their way to the riverside, which they followed eastward, towards where the Tower of London watched over its young friend Tower Bridge.

As they approached the Tower, Anne began, “I know it’s a lot to take in, and a lot is going to change…but would you look at this! Very soon, you’ll be living here. All of the history will be your history, all of the atmosphere will be yours to just — breathe in, all of these people will be your people.” She clapped him on the shoulder. “No more little Holmes Chapel boy who works with Barbara at the bakery.”

“Sounds like the American dream,” said Harry dryly. Changing his tone, he put on an accent and a goofy smile. “Shakin’ that small town off amah feet, ain’t never lookin’ back!”

Anne laughed. She reached over and ruffled his curls. “Y’all come visit me back at the ranch every now and again, y’hear?”

“By golly, mah, a’ course ah will!”

Anne gave Harry’s shoulder a soft punch, and the conversation dissolved into chuckles.

As they were passing the Tower, Harry heard the first shrieks.

Neither he nor Anne paid much attention at first. People scream at random in big cities. There’s plenty to scream about. But Harry felt his pace quicken, as if instinctually.

More and more people around them began to notice something strange. They all rushed to the river's edge to get a better look. Harry sped up again, keeping his mum a few paces behind him. Everyone
seemed to be looking up, gasping and gesturing. What was so unusual about Tower Bridge?

Harry’s mum spotted it before he did. “Christ. How on earth did he get up there?”

Balanced precariously under the crest at the top of the bridge was a person. Harry could just barely see their mouth open in a big, triumphant grin, their brown hair fluttering on the breeze. By now, a small crowd had gathered on the banks to watch them. Apparently relishing the thrill and the attention, the person spread their arms to the sky.

Harry put on another burst of speed until he was jogging, leaving his mother in his dust, barely conscious of where he was headed or why he was going so fast.

The next events played out like clockwork.

Harry reached the river’s edge.

The person lost their footing.

Harry saw their heels leave the ledge. His heart leapt.

For the smallest amount of time measurable, Harry's vision went black. He felt his feet leave the concrete.

Next thing he saw, he was in mid-air, spiralling slowly downwards, with his arms locked around something solid and warm. He squeezed his eyes tight shut to bite back the woozy feeling in his head. When he opened them, he found a jean-clad crotch in front of his face, and a pair of feet flailing above him.

One of his hands was holding on to a rather substantial bum. The other held the bare small of someone's back. A yell of panic coming from somewhere close to his own crotch, and Harry scrambled to think of a way to bring his rescue-ee rightside-up.

One of the person's hands caught hold of Harry's wrist. Harry grabbed their shoulder. The person's other hand found Harry’s ankle. Playing Aerial Twister did not help Harry in his mission, but thankfully, the rescue-ee seemed to have gotten the rightside-up memo. Harry grunted with effort while they began to climb him like a human ladder.

The person's hands latched on to the love handles above Harry’s hips. Harry reached his free arm around their waist, and pulled on their shoulder with his opposite hand. There was a lot of grunting and panting and yelling before Harry felt a pair of feet come to rest atop his own. He heard whooping laughter, and he caught his first proper glimpse of the boy in his arms.

Tower Bridge Boy looked up at him with startled blue eyes. He threw his arms around Harry’s neck, clinging for dear life. He kept whooping with relief, just for the thrill of it, still grinning — fear apparent in his features, but never dominating his face.

Still spinning lazy circles, they sank lower and lower. Harry dared a glance out at the city — which lay not beneath them, but wonderfully spread out before them, thanks to their rooftop height. He was only gutsy enough to look for a half-second before turning his attention back to the boy. The wind was whipping his hair into a feathery quiff. It rather suited him. If they survived this gentle float through thin air, Harry would suggest he try a volumizing hairspray, he promised himself.

It occurred to Harry that he might owe this boy an explanation. Which was unfortunate, seeing as he didn’t have one, and “I think I just teleported” wasn’t going to cut it.
“Oops,” was the best he could do.

Somehow, the boy managed to laugh. His eyes crinkled with his smile. “Hi.”

Harry found himself laughing, too. “Hi,” he smiled back, the word coming out between a stupid giggle and an awful snort.

“Nice catch. Now, can we try not to land in the river? Or is that not how this works?”

“I dunno!” Harry squawked, his voice muffled by a surging updraft.

The boy gave him a disbelieving look. “Well how’d you get here?”

Harry would process that later. “Well, how did you get up there?”

“Dunno!” the boy yelled.

“Me neither!”

“Well then. Fat lot of good you are at rescuing damsels in distress, Prince Charming.” The boy raised his eyebrows and comically pouted his lips. Harry only managed a small smile before the river caught his attention. They were mighty close to getting wet. How was he supposed to break their fall?

The other boy’s eyes drifted over the scene around them, as if looking for a handhold to appear in mid-air. As far as Harry was concerned, that wasn't out of the question. He gritted his teeth and tried to remember what had gone through his mind during his test when he had levitated. What was it that had kept him afloat?

Harry lost his focus. The boy was staring at him, quite intently. Nose wrinkled, eyebrows imploring, and wide eyes fiercely blue.

“Try imagining!” the boy yelled in his face. “Picture solid ground! The bridge is right there. Worth a try?”

Harry closed his eyes and tried picturing the concrete. A part of him hesitated. He really liked the feeling of floating. This kind of falling was almost fun, and he was beginning to enjoy his companion's company.

“We’re getting wet then, aren’t we?” said the boy with a grimace. The water was now a mere few feet below them.

Although it was painfully obvious, Harry was too embarrassed to so much as nod.

The boy shrugged. “I’m Louis by the way.”

Harry smiled. “M’ Harry.”

The boy grinned back. “Nice knowing you, Harry.”

And then they hit the water.
NOW THE REAL FUN BEGINS. Come tumble with me!
Last time on BFFTS: Louis fell. Harry caught him. They fell together.

Time for Harry and Louis to do some serious interacting. Thanks readers for all your patience with my setting up of the super world. Enjoy fetuses being fetuses!

Many thanks once again to Brittany for all the many editing Skype calls and your tireless work whilst also birthing your own damn fic baby, and Ari for her work on this in between midterms and travelling. Y’all are my wonderful babies.

Harry and Louis managed to tread water for quite some time. They tried at one point to swim to the riverbank, but they didn’t get far before frantic shouting from one woman on the bridge in particular convinced them to stay put.

“You want us to drown out here? Love you too, mum,” Louis called up to her. His mother called him several odd pet names and explained that she had already phoned for the police, all in a yell that barely carried.

“Alright, alright!” Louis yelled back, panting a little as he strained to keep himself afloat. Looking back to Harry, he rolled his eyes. “Mums, eh? What can you do…”

Harry, taken aback by the near-immediate attempt to make small talk while awaiting rescue in a large urban river, laughed. It was a sporadic, awkward laugh, and it died rather abruptly in his throat. Louis picked it up where Harry left off, laughing louder. It was infectious. Harry forgot his tiring arms and chattering teeth just enough to join back in. They laughed themselves into hysterics.

To onlookers, the two boys who had met in mid-air were now two buffoons cackling at each other in a polluted river.

Louis paused for air. "Strange day today, innit?" he remarked between heaving breaths.

“At least we’re getting on swimmingly,” said Harry with a wink. Louis made a face before they both erupted into a new fit of cackles.

Eventually, with their bellies full of stitches, they had to stop. Catching his breath, Louis craned his neck to take in the clusters of people gathered on the bridge and along the banks. “Looks like us boys put on quite the show!” he smiled. His chin dipped in and out of the river as he struggled to tread water.

The sight made Harry’s gut twinge. If he had managed to spontaneously teleport into mid-air to save this boy, why couldn’t his powers automatically take care of a simpler thing, like helping him save his strength?

“Chin up, hero! You just saved my life,” said Louis, enjoying the irony of his sinking chin.

Harry comically lifted his chin as far into the air as it could go, before it got too strenuous and he had to surrender, letting the water rise to turtleneck-height around his neck. Louis chuckled.
The boys began to cut back on the gags as minutes and minutes went by without help. “Our chariot should be here by now,” Harry breathed, jokingly snotty.

Louis spared himself enough breath for a posh snort. “Honestly…”

Soon after, the people on the bank began to cheer. The boys turned to see a police boat coming towards them. They were plucked out of the water and wrapped in reflective emergency blankets as their little crowd whistled and clapped.

After quick checks to make sure the boys were unharmed, the police officers didn’t say much. While he and Harry got settled by the bow, Louis muttered, “S’like they’re afraid of you! Like they think you have laser eyes or summat. Like Cyclops, but without the cool specs.”

Harry looked over his shoulder. The officers certainly were giving them a wide berth. There was a pause before Louis amended, “You do have laser eyes though, don’t you?”

Harry smirked. “Not yet.”

Louis raised his brows and copied the smirk. “Nice.”

The boat began to move. Harry took the opportunity to wave to his new flock of fans, and Louis joined in. The police boat momentarily became the queen’s jubilee barge — though the queen didn’t often have her frenetic mother looking on from the riverside. That joy and humiliation was reserved for Harry and Louis.

When they arrived at the nearest dock, an officer escorted them down the pier towards a throng of people wielding phones. “Your fifteen minutes of fame start now, boys,” he declared, releasing them on the riverbank.

Louis shook his head and gave a \textit{pshaw}. “For me, maybe. But for \textit{him}? I tell you what, you’ll remember this moment when he’s busy saving your arse from the apocalypse.” He clapped a hand to Harry’s blanketed shoulder. “Right, Harry?”

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but —

“Oof!”

He was interrupted by the return of his mum.

After a pleasantly suffocating reunion, Anne pulled Harry back to hold him at arm’s length. She shook her head, bewildered. “You…you gave me a right shock!”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“We’re lucky we’re both alive! I swear, the heart attack was coming for me —”

“M’ sorry!”

“Oh don’t you \textit{dare} apologize! Harry, that was…” In lieu of superlatives, she jumped in for \textit{Suffocation, Volume Two: Now Comes With Twice the Kisses}.

Off to his right, Louis was getting similar treatment from his own mother. He beamed and beamed, even as his mum’s tone went from scolding to flabbergasted and back again. Harry noted a striking resemblance and a palpable warmth between them.

The police officers stepped up to hold back a growing sea of slackened jaws and iPhones. “Nothing
to see here!” was their line. Harry could pick out a few of the scattered protests in reply.

“Superheroes!”

“The boy’s a wizard!”

“Little boy hero!”

“They were flying! Did you not see?”

Anne’s hand traced circles across the small of Harry’s back. “I’ve seen them all on their phones. Lots of them took photos, videos… we don’t have long until the press knows, I’m guessing.” She gave him a concerned, checking-in type look, but a smile bloomed to cover it before long. She steered him over towards where Louis and his mum were just pulling back from one another.

Louis’ mum smiled in greeting. “Introductions, then?” she proposed. “Before this all gets mad?”

Louis piped up first, peering out from under a very wet fringe that, despite his efforts to rearrange it, was still plastered to his forehead. “Mum, this is Harry. He saved me.”

“I bloody well know that bit!” Louis’ mum brought Harry in for a massive hug, her clothes already damp from hugging Louis.

“Harry, this is my mum Johanna,” Louis said. “Or Jay, if you’re nice.”

“Saving my boy’s life had better count as nice! You were brilliant, Harry. Absolutely fucking incredible! Excuse my French!” She gave him his third python-squeeze of the day. Mums are powerful people.

Jay took a deep breath and fixed Harry with a serious look. "The relief I felt, when I blinked and you caught him...I could never describe it.”

"I only broke the fall a bit,” Harry got out. It didn't matter to Jay.

"Oh love, I could never thank you enough! Jesus, was I terrified.”

Harry accepted her thanks with a glow of pride. From over her shoulder, he saw Louis' smile.

When Jay eventually released him, Anne greeted her with open arms. Their introductions were barely over when a small group of people from the front line of spectators broke past the police and approached, asking for a selfie with the boys.

“Um...” Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. Louis.

“After you, hero,” he said. "Talk to your fans."

Harry shot him a frown — as much of a frown as he could make while delirious with relief and pride and adrenaline. “My fans?”

Before Louis could answer, as if those first few fans had opened the floodgates, they were well and truly swarmed. Together, surrounded.

That was the way it was for a good long while. They were swept up in posing for photos, introducing themselves, high-fiving and fist bumping people of all ages, who came away stunned that they had just touched a superhero. The brush of Louis’ wet shoulder kept pulling Harry back when the undertow of moving bodies tried to carry him away. They checked around for their
mothers every few minutes, and though they could see less and less of them each time, there they still were, still beaming.

At least until the media showed up. Must have been half an hour later, but it felt like only a few minutes.

Cutting through the ever-thicker crowds came microphones, cameras on shoulders, reporters adjusting their wigs. They greeted the boys with mics in their faces and cameras flashing and faux-polite requests for “just a second!” “just one second!” “half a moment!”

Accepting the first interview led to an endless chain of them. Harry was so overwhelmed he could only stammer, but Louis had a flawless camera façade. Glowing words poured out of him at Harry’s every stumble.

On Harry: “He’s just incredible, isn’t he? Literally no other words. Wow. He’s gonna be a force to reckon with — aren’t you, lad? Best keep your eyes on this one!”

On how the whole floating arrangement had worked (which Harry still didn’t quite comprehend): “Em — see, Harry’s very gentle, but he’s stronger than he looks. That helped quite a bit, obviously. He may be cute and curly, but he’s got some muscle, eh? Go on, show off.” Harry meekly displayed a bicep to a healthy round of applause.

On the experience of falling: “It was insane, really. Just…breathtaking. I don’t know why my lungs are still working.”

As the crowd grew denser, they lost sight of a few things. First, their mums. Second, the nearest patch of bare concrete. Third, the faces of selfie-ready pedestrians. The bigger cameras had taken over. Harry kept glancing over to see if Louis’ smile was still intact, and in a tiny, almost imperceptible way, it grew weaker and weaker each time he checked.

The names got bigger and the questions became demands.

“Hi boys, Sky News —”

“Boys, BBC News here —”

“Telegraph, over here boys!”

Harry was disoriented, trying to match faces to each name being shouted. He felt a nudge against his shoulder, and then a new camera was right in his face. A reporter fought to squeeze in next to him. Harry gave him a look, but then came the questions — first asking for his name and age, and then right to the chase.

“Alright then, Harry. Let’s set the record straight. Are you a superhuman?”

Harry thought of his training contract. Was he allowed to let the cat out of the bag? Was it safe to say anything of substance? He tried to look away, but the man was still in his face. “Could you explain a little about what you just —”

Louis leaned forward, opening his mouth to cut in. Harry raised his voice and put on a fake smile. “No comment.”

He began to feel queasy. His answers here had weight. Once they were out, he couldn't take any back. Simon would hear them. Maybe the entire country would hear them. What did he have to say, when he barely knew who he was or even what he had done?
The questions and demands wore on. Time passed in the aching of their joints, their throats getting sore, their clothes getting slightly less sopping wet. When the crowd got so thick that surely more journalists couldn’t squeeze through —

“Dan Wootton reporting for The Sun, hello boys. How does it feel, having survived such a —”

Harry looked to Louis and gave him a shrug, as if to ask “Shall we?”

The ensuing mischievous glint in Louis’ eyes said enough.

Harry felt Louis’ sweaty fingers interlock with his. Surprised at the contact, he turned to face his new companion with a question in his eyes. Are you sure?

Louis nodded. Completely sure

Harry scanned the crowd. He tried to memorize every detail of what the space just outside of the endless press of microphones and bodies looked like. There wasn’t much he could see, let alone commit to memory.

Louis gave his arm a gentle tug. Harry shut his eyes and made a leap of faith.

Dan Wootton didn’t even get a chance to shut his mouth before the boys disappeared.

Harry only knew that teleporting had worked when he heard Louis gasp, then cackle with triumph. He opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder at the startled gang of reporters down by the pier. They were all staring, baffled, at the reflective blankets the boys had left behind.

Harry gave himself a moment to smile, proud of himself, before Louis was yanking on their conjoined hands, hissing, “C’mon! Run!”

The boys tore off along the south bank. “Sorry!” Harry called over his shoulder, sending Louis into fits of laughter. Harry once more found it contagious.

A few cameramen came sprinting after them, but the boys had a solid head start, running and laughing and whooping along the bank. They only stopped once they had rounded the river bend. Cackles turned into hacking coughs, whoops becoming contented sighs.

Louis leaned back against the waterfront rail, staring a crouched, recovering Harry dead in the face.

“Where to now, hero?”

Harry gave a snort-laugh. "Hero?"

Louis shook his head. “You’re ridiculous. You saved my life, you do know that?”

Wet, freezing, and high on adrenaline, Harry just laughed again. Louis rolled his eyes and brought back his melody of a laugh. Harry forced himself to laugh more and more, just so that he could hear Louis laugh again. It worked every time, until they both truly ran out of breath. Lightheaded, they both doubled over with their backs to the river, clutching their stomachs.

After a minute, the boys took stock of themselves — neatening their smelly clothes, wringing out their wet locks, checking their pockets.

“What do you know!” Louis exclaimed. “My phone is alive!”

Harry glanced over at the iPhone in Louis’ hand. An ordinary, wet iPhone, with a red football team’s logo as its lock screen. It was functioning properly after a soak in the Thames.
“One super power I do have,” Louis explained, pocketing it, “is luck. Stupid good luck.” He nodded to Harry, citing him as evidence.

Harry nodded back. “That’s a good one to have.” He looked eastward, back from whence they had come. “D’you think they’re still chasing us? The media people?” He grinned at the thought of a frenzied parade of reporters on their tail.

“Nah. They ate our dust,” Louis smirked.

“I dunno, they were pretty determined. The bald guy waving the camera was great. He probably stole a scooter to come after us. He’s dodging grannies on the wharf. Doing flips over them.”

Louis smiled, bright and toothy. He struck up quite the imitation of the bald cameraman on a scooter, violent cursing and sound effects included. Harry tried to stifle his laughter to save his stomach, but it was no use.

As the laughing died back down, Louis turned to Harry. “So, Mr. Hero. You saved my life. What now?”

"So I'm Mr. Hero now?"

"Yes, you are."

Harry didn’t like being asked to make decisions. This one was particularly difficult. He had a fire in his belly, and the time was ripe for an adventure. New mate, massive city, and a clear schedule? Perfect. On the other hand, they were soaking wet, shivering cold, and they had left their poor mums behind at the wharf.

Sensible Harry won this round. “We should go back and find our mums. Don’t want them worried.”

Louis seriously considered this for a moment. He then shrugged. “Your mum will understand. You’re a hero. London is your oyster. Wouldn’t you like a victory tour or something?”

That was an enticing prospect.

Louis continued, “Besides, I owe you, mate. D’you reckon my bank card still works after our bath?”

He took out his wallet and dug through it, playing with soggy receipts and handwritten notes and cinema tickets. Harry caught flashes of dainty cursive writing and doodle hearts. A couple of youthful, shining faces in wallet-sized school photographs.

Not that he was staring.

“I don’t need your money, Louis.”

“Well, what would you like, then?” Louis stuffed the wallet back into his pocket, frowning. “If I’m going to be spending the rest of my days paying you back for saving my life, might as well start now.”

Harry smiled down at his feet, running a hand through his hair. “You owe me nothing.”

“Bollocks! Without you, I’d be dead!”

“You wouldn’t! You’d be the exact same. Wet. And cold.”

“And dead.”
"The water’s not that hard! And you can swim just fine."

Louis was adamant. “I could have swallowed Thames water and ingested toxins.”

“And you’d have got a bit sick. The Thames isn’t liquid arsenic.”

Louis shook his head. “You just don’t know that, now do you?”

"I guess not..."

Harry paused to size up his ridiculous companion. Louis’ hair was still stuck to his forehead and temples. Equally clingy were his t-shirt, circle scarf, khakis, and toms. With his eyebrows wiggling and a smirk on his face, he looked like mischief personified. There was something almost inspiring about how the tips of fang-like canines peeked out against his bottom lip as he tried not to laugh. Something about him made Harry feel quite game for an adventure, soaked and exhausted as he was. Louis had a spark, and he wanted more of it.

“Alright, serious talk.” Louis straightened his scarf, miming sophistication as if it were a bow tie, before his demeanour became solemn and curious. “How did you do that? Back there. Like, actually?”

"Um…like I’ve said all afternoon, I just, kind of…did.”

Louis raised an eyebrow. “That’s what you told the reporters. May I call bullshit, Your Honour?”

“I didn’t lie to them! That’s all I can remember. Honestly.” Harry cooled his defences as Louis’ face went soft, gaze attentive. As if he understood, or was at least trying his best to understand. “You never really answered me, either. How did you get up there in the first place?”

Louis’ soft face adopted a wicked smirk, turning into something sweet and bright with a hint of evil. “I dunno. Just kind of did, I s’pose.”

Harry caught the mockery in his tone. “Hey, m’serious!”

“So am I! I mean it! I sort of pictured myself at the top of the bridge, with the wind in my hair, and, boom! There I was.”

An electric pulse stirred Harry’s gut. Sure, it had been pretty alarming, seeing Louis atop Tower Bridge, untethered, for no apparent reason. Harry hadn’t questioned it afterwards. Surely a tour guide had left a few too many doors open? Or Louis somehow knew the operator of the lift bridge, and had been invited up for a tour? But no. Behind the twinkle of mischief, Louis’ eyes told the truth.

“I guess we have something quite big in common, then,” Harry said. His voice couldn’t quite mask the enthusiastic chanting in his head. Another super! Another super! He’s like me like me like me!

“Starting to sound a bit like a support group, innit?” Louis cleared his throat and put on his best confessional voice. “Hi, I’m Louis Tomlinson. I’m eighteen, I’m from Doncaster, and I’m…ahem…a superhuman.”

Superhuman. There was something so reassuring about hearing someone of around his age say those words.

“And you are?”

Harry played along. “Hi, I’m Harry. Harry Styles, that is. I’m sixteen. I live in Holmes Chapel,
Cheshire, and I’m...a superhuman.”

Carefully, Louis pressed further. “You don’t have to tell me anything, but...you’ve done things before, right? Super things?”

Harry shook his head. “Only a thing or two.” He paused, asking himself just how much he should let slip about his previous incidents. But what use was a superhuman support group if he wasn’t going to commit to full honesty?

“A lighting rig decided to fall on me when I was auditioning for The X Factor a couple weeks ago. It was self-defence.”

Louis’ jaw dropped. “X Factor? Get in! Guess why I’m here.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Bootcamp?”

Louis nodded. “Yessir. Got eliminated just yesterday. Gutted, but there it is. Gave it my best shot, and I’m happy I did it.”

Harry could tell that Louis wasn’t quite content with that, but he admired his resolve. “Congratulations!”

“Thanks, mate. So — you found your first powers...in front of Simon Cowell?”

“Yup. Just as intimidating as it sounds.”

Louis shook his head, awed. “Shit!”

“They heard me sing, and they liked it...but Simon didn’t let me through.”


“Busy man, that Simon. He moonlights as a superhero talent scout, turns out. Wanted to see how far we could take my super abilities before we let my singing get in the way.”

Louis shook his head. “Super scout Simon? Looking for a British superhero breakthrough all this time? Why am I not surprised...”

“Mhm.”

“But that’s rubbish, though. If they liked you, they should’ve let you through! Maybe we’d have met at bootcamp, who knows.”

Harry couldn’t help but beam. Another super-powered boy who wanted to sing and seemed just as enamoured with questions of alternate paths and crossing fates as he was? He really owed one to gravity for introducing them.

“What about you?” Harry asked. “You must’ve...done things.”

Louis smiled. Shrugged, almost sadly. “I can do stuff, yeah. Not so good at the controlling it part.”

“Seems we’re two of a kind, then.”

“You controlled yours enough to help me when I couldn’t control mine. So it sort of worked out, didn’t it? Maybe someday I’ll be good enough to return the favour.”
Harry rested his hands in his lap. He stared into the distance, trying not to think about the not-so-distant superhero somedays to come. Thankfully, Louis kept talking.

“Look, if you want to go back, I won’t stop you. I should probably be back there now. Surely my mum has some choice words waiting for me. But hey, not gonna lie — you’re pretty cool, Harry Styles.”

Harry took himself in, in all his Thames-wet glory, and snorted. “So cool.”

Louis chuckled, and Harry chuckled, but Louis stuck to his point. “I’m not kidding, you know. I’m sure you’ll be a big hero someday, and save loads more people. The country needs one, eh? You certainly have the hair for it.” He reached out, giving one of Harry’s wet curls a tug.

Harry self-consciously reached up to tame a few tangly ringlets. Maybe he turned a little pink.

“Anyway, if you’d just take a picture with me, I’d be honoured.”

That definitely wasn’t the conclusion Harry had been expecting. “That’s all you want?”

Louis shrugged. “I mean, what else can I ask for? Proof that I met a superhero, and he was really cool. Something I can show off when you’re famous, show me kids someday. Simple enough.”

“You don’t want anything…more than that?”

“What more could I want?”

Harry liked big coincidences. He liked large strokes of luck and twists of fate. He liked making friends in odd places. Making memories dotted with those faces, to photograph and tuck away somewhere nice in the back of his brain.

Ever since he and Louis had sort of clicked, in mid-air, that's what he had wanted. A friend and an adventure. Anything but an underwhelming ending marked by a selfie.

“I dunno, you could want to be…mates with a superhero?”

A gentle smile perked up the corners of Louis’ mouth. His elven features all seemed to light up a little with it. “Yeah, for sure.” He held his iPhone out in front of them, selfie cam mode.

“Except I’m not a superhero,” Harry corrected.

Louis gave him the gentlest-ever fist to the ribcage with his non-selfie-ing hand. “Not yet, maybe. Now pose.”

Louis took the first one, all wet hair and glistening foreheads and toothy, dimpled smiles. “Lovely. And another. Work it!” This one was ridiculous monster faces, eyes wide and gnashing teeth. “Excellent. And one last. Make it fierce, this time. Awww yeah.” Louis took two in quick succession — one brilliantly duck-faced, and the other featuring a giggling Harry, unable to keep up the fierceness.

“Alright, maybe one more. Completely serious faces.”

This one was against their very natures and it looked awful. Louis deleted it immediately.

“Sick, thanks so much.” He slid his phone back into his pocket and gave it a gentle pat. Leaning back against the rail, he smiled at the sky. “D’you reckon our fifteen minutes of fame have actually started? Or has the clock not even started ticking yet?”
“I dunno. We can check on your phone.”

Louis pulled his phone out again with a nod. After a few taps, he asked, “Siri, are Harry and I famous yet?”

“Harry Potter is famous, Lewis. You are not,” came the reply.

“Twat. D’you know how many burgers I flipped to buy you?” Louis muttered, putting it away. “I don’t know if we’re famous yet, Harry. We may never know.”

“A valiant effort, Louis.”

“Thank you, my liege.”

Harry chuckled, making Louis grin. Maybe the joy Harry took in making Louis laugh was mutual. Harry looked forward to making each other laugh until their throats crapped out and their funny bones broke.

Minutes passed without a word. The hum of traffic and the lull of the river and the chattering of tourists kept them company. The sun peeked out of the clouds to warm their faces. Perhaps it was the sudden light and warmth that stoked Harry’s belly-fire a little, or the beckoning call of the city. Maybe it was neither of those things, and maybe Harry was just high on life and promise — but something turned the tables in his head. He didn’t want to make the decision, but his answer was already there. Just waiting for a question.

“Shall we run along back to the mums, then?” Louis proposed.

Harry shook his head. “They’ll be fine. I think I was promised a victory tour.”

Louis grinned.

First thing was first. They found the nearest tourist shop and then a café bathroom. They emerged onto the streets of London twenty minutes later in The Wanted tees and sweats with “I <3 LDN” on the butt, their wet things stuffed into Spice Girls and Justin Bieber backpacks.

Not to mention the ridiculous plastic grilled shades. Louis had insisted. “We might be famous now. We can’t have our cover blown.”

“But won’t disguising ourselves just make it even more awkward when they find us?”

“Hey, famous people are strange. We have a reputation to maintain.”

Harry soon ditched his pair, placing them on Louis’ forehead. “You can look strange enough for the both of us then, hm?”

Louis nodded stoically, duty accepted.

They wandered north across a footbridge, earning themselves a few intrigued looks from strangers. By the time their feet touched the north bank, Harry was red in the face from trying to control his giggles, and Louis had finally broken persona to laugh with him. “Shut up, Harry. They’re staring ‘cause we’re famous!”
Harry shook his head. “We’re not famous yet! You just look ridiculous.”

“There were plenty more tourists who were dressed ridiculous-er, thanks. And no one was paying them any mind,” Louis sing-songed.

“Because you pull it off exceptionally well. Did I mention that you look smashing?”

“I thought you’d never say,” Louis cooed.

“Especially the bum print. Fits nicely around there. Fantastic.”

“Thanks. And The Wanted’s ugly faces look nice on your, um…chest. Must be those boss shoulders,” Louis reasoned.

“Why thank you. Now where are we going?”

“Somewhere with a lot of people so we’ll know as soon as we’re famous.”

Far up the street ahead of them, Harry could see the familiar roundabout that faced Trafalgar Square. His memories of London from a family trip or two had left him with a basic knowledge of the highlights. “Trafalgar Square’s just there. If we’re not famous by the time we get there…”

Louis pulled down his shades and adopted an old Hollywood hunk voice. “Oh, we will be.”

“Sure,” Harry allowed.

“You’ll need your safety glasses back to defend from the media when the time comes.”

“How about no?”

“I’m afraid it’s for your safety, Harry.”

“Y’know, I really don’t care.” Harry’s tone came out a lot saucier than he had intended, throwing both of them back into snorts and giggles.

Harry let a beat of silence pass before striking up a new conversation. “Do you really want to be famous? You seem quite excited about it.”

“I had some fun playing around with those reporters. Just got a little repetitive after a while, eh?” Louis pushed his main pair of safety glasses off of his face and into his drying hair, aiming a smile at his companion. “But if you don’t get some good coverage for what you did, I swear…you deserve the whole country’s respect, at the very least!” He shook his head. “I can’t even believe we’re just, like, hanging out, when I should be worshipping you or something.”

Trying to hold back his flattered grin just turned it into a smug little smile, but Harry tried for humility nonetheless. “You don’t worship people for things they do by accident. But I guess it was pretty cool.”

“If ‘pretty cool’ means bloody fucking incredible, then yeah.” Louis studied Harry's face with pursed lips and frowning brows. “Do you want to be famous? You don’t seem to care much.”

Harry shrugged. “S’not that important.” The prospect of being famous hadn’t really played into his decision to accept Simon’s offer. “I mean, it feels good when a lot of people like you. I like being liked. Maybe even a little too much.”

"Hah!"
"But when you're famous, people like you in sort of a…not very real, sort of way? Like, they like you 'cause you’re famous…And they use that to label your life, like…you’re not really a whole person, to them? Just a sort of picture. And then you’re not famous anymore, and they don’t care. Shouldn’t be important, if you’re famous or not."

“But suppose they like you because you bring something to their life — like, you inspire them to be better or something," Louis countered. "I think they’d see you as a whole person, wouldn’t they? Kind of?"

Harry bit his lip in thought. “Maybe, yeah. And it would be amazing, like, to give back to people like that. But they’re still only seeing…I dunno, they could be only seeing some part of you that doesn’t really exist. I would hate for people to see some image of me that’s not really…me.”

Louis nodded, eyes fixed on the sky as if inspecting invisible stars. After a moment, he said, “D’you know what I think?"

Harry considered him, wondering what thoughts could be brewing behind those eyes. “What?"

“I think…” Louis exhaled. “That you have the slowest fucking voice I have ever heard.”

Harry squawked a laugh. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be, it’s very entertaining.”

“Um, thanks? I… I guess?”

Louis put on the deepest voice he could manage, imitating, “Oom, thunks? Uh…uh goohz?”

“Shut up!”

Louis cracked up. He surrendered to his thoughts for a while before speaking again.

“You know, I was mostly joking. I don’t really care about this famous thing either, really. Just trying to have a little fun, yeah? I’m sure it hits closer to reality for you than it does for me. Sorry if I freaked you out or anything.” Louis placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

It was weird, meeting someone who reassured you like they were an old friend after mere hours in your company. Harry hoped that his smile told Louis that he didn’t mind.

“I want to be famous for today, too," Harry admitted. "It’s fun. I just don’t want to think about what comes after."

"Right. Because if this Simon thing pans out, you’ll be proper famous, yeah?"

“At least that’s the plan.” Harry sighed. “And fame…changes you.”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who would change,” said Louis.

Harry shot him a suspicious frown. “You’ve known me for how long?"

“Sometimes you can just tell, I suppose.”

“I’m not sure anyone can tell what fame’s gonna do to a person before it happens, to be honest.”

“Hey, maybe not. I could be very wrong." He waved a hand, self-dismissively. "Don’t bother taking anything I say seriously, hero.”
Harry smirked. “It’s kind of hard to, anyway, when you’re wearing that outfit.”

“I look goddamn cool, thank you very much.”

"Sure."

Nelson’s Column came into view, and then they were crossing the roundabout onto Trafalgar Square. Camera-wielding tourists lounged about on the benches and posed by the fountain. Louis launched into a tour guide impression, bullshitting his way through the riveting tale of Lord Curly of Curlshire, and how the column was his very own erection. The fountain had nothing to do with the erection but was in fact begun with a single one of his tears upon losing the love of his life, Lady Curlotta, in a great battle for London some thousand years ago.

Harry raised his hand like a good tourist. “Why did he let his lady go to war, then?”

“Don’t be sexist, Harry. She was a badass motherfucker, to quote historical records. Of course she wanted to help her country. Maybe that’s where you get it from.”

“Huh?”

Louis frowned. “Your heroism. I thought you were Curly’s great-great-great grandchild or something?”

“Oh, of course!”

Louis led them over to sit by the edge of the fountain, spray tickling the backs of their necks.

“So,” he began anew, “if there’s a chance you’ll be famous, I’m going to need a head start on my Harry trivia. Any exclusives I should keep for the future?”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“I’m serious, you know.”

“There’s really not much to know.”

Louis crossed his arms. “Aw, c’mon, now. Give us the origin story.”

Harry raised his palms skyward in a big bamboozled shrug. “I dunno! I don’t really have one.”

“Alright, maybe I won’t buy all your comics then, if they’ll be that boring.”

“I won’t have any comics. And it’s just my life that’s been sort of boring. I’m not boring.”

Louis fist-bumped Harry’s shoulder. “Didn’t say you were, babe. But you still have to prove it. Tell us something interesting.”

“But, like, there’s nothing —”

“C’mon, interest me!”

Harry supplied his go-to Harry trivia fact. “I work at a bakery.”

“Hm, very nice. What do you bake?”

“Whatsoever there is to bake, really.”
Louis rested his chin in one hand. “Got experience handling buns, then?”

Harry nodded.

“Superhero baker…” Louis mused aloud, as if picturing the origin story comic book in his head. “Alright, what else you got?”

“Um, I sing in a band?”

“Is that a question, or?”

“No, like. Sorry. I actually sing in a band.”

“An actual band?”

“An actual band. Called White Eskimo.”

“Interesting name. You any good?”

Harry pulled a face. What sort of question was that? “Smashing, actually. Killer. High-quality rock ‘n’ roll.”

“Excellent. Loving the confidence. What more do we need for your bio, then? Siblings? Pets?”

Harry listed them off on his fingers. “Sister named Gemma. Older. And a cat called Dusty.”

“Sister called Dusty, cat called Gemma. Got it.”

Either Louis was a practiced entertainer, or Harry was particularly vulnerable to stupid humour. Likely both.

“Alright, now this is where it actually gets interesting,” Louis announced. “What about your super powers?”

“What about them?”

“Say something interesting, c’mon!”

“I told you, they just sort of happen! Only recently, and I don’t know why.”

“Calm down there, Curly. Not to go all Harry Potter on you here, but well — before X Factor — did you ever see anything weird happen, and not know why? Something that you could’ve made happen, maybe without knowing it?”

There had been one time, when Gemma had locked Dusty in the basement. Harry had been lonely, and the basement door had unlocked and opened of itself, bringing the cat to him. And that one time a bully had been threatening Ellis, and Harry had come to tell him off, and the boastful lad had challenged him to a footy skills competition, with the prize being him fucking off. Somehow Harry’s meagre footy skills had worked magic, with the ball soaring and swooping, maneuvering as if Harry’s imagination were controlling it instead of his clumsy feet. And then that time when —

“No, not really. Did you ever make things happen?”

Louis grinned. “Loads of times. Mostly making teachers’ pants disappear, my sisters’ toys disappear and reappear, stuff like that. Never really made anything happen by thinking about it, though.”
That set something off in Harry's brain. “Do you think we could, like, maybe…do something?”

Louis frowned, confused. “How do you mean, something?”

“If we tried it together? Like, make something happen. With powers.”

Louis weighed the idea. “But what if we’re just as shit together? Or even worse?”

“Don’t knock it ‘til we try it.”

Louis raised his eyebrows approvingly. “So we’ll give it a go, then.”

“I mean, s’up to you. I’m happy to keep wandering. Go exploring or something.”

Louis clapped his hands. “Then we’ll go exploring. We’ll find a nice, quiet place, test out our powers, and we’ll see if we’re a dream team or not. Cool?”

Harry extended an eager hand, and Louis shook it. They exchanged a few half-assed fist bumps.

Louis put his plastic glasses back in place with verve, and they set off.

They didn’t have to go far. Just across the square to the north was an odd glass capsule with an elevator and a set of stairs inside. Crypts, read a sign. And what was more nice and quiet than a crypt?

They dashed down the spiral staircase only to find a crypt that had been converted into a snooty sort of cafeteria — the kind of place where one wouldn’t even have to check the menu to know that the fare on offer contained copious amounts of kale.

“Not so very nice and quiet, then,” Harry remarked, about to head back to the staircase when Louis set off through the caf at a sure pace. Harry had no choice but to follow.

Set into the far wall was a doorway. Louis cast a glance over his shoulder before making a beeline for it, weaving through tables. The little passage they soon entered was lined with art and artifacts. Louis rounded a corner and stopped across from an ancient vase on a pedestal. He looked to Harry. “Quaint enough for you?”

“I don’t think we’re dressed well enough for this place,” Harry observed.

“It’s a crypt. The dead won’t mind.”

“How do you know? You’ve never been dead.”

“How do you know I’ve never been dead?”

Harry let the weirdo win the argument. Louis seemed pleased.

“So, Harold.” Louis sat down with his back against the crypt wall, “show us what you can do, then.”

Harry sat next to him. “I thought we were going to try together?”

“You first.”
"I’m not very good at doing things on purpose unless desperate times call for desperate measures."

"With the notable exception of teleportation."

"My specialty."

"How many times have you done it?"

Harry chased some pebbles along the floor with his fingers. "Only twice."

Louis paused, then said in his most careful, sensitive voice, "Well, you’ve got a right knack for it, then. And I’m very thankful for that, else we wouldn’t be here."

Harry looked up into Louis’ eyes. Blue had turned to grey in the florescent light of the crypt-museum. They were heavy with gratitude, and while Louis’ thanks meant everything to Harry, Louis’ smile was of more concern to him. In an attempt to salvage it, Harry retorted, "And you’ve got a right knack for getting yourself into trouble."

Louis beamed. "Every small town needs a bit of mischief. I provide a service, really."

Harry hummed his agreement. He already had an image in his head of Louis amongst his school chums — the class clown who thrived on attention and relished making a fool of himself to get it. Definitely not the worst kind of person to help him turn a business trip into a bit of an adventure.

"What’s been the highlight of your service?" Harry inquired.

Louis crossed his legs. "Definitely has to be when I went invisible during an exam last year. My geography teacher threw a fit. Just for a bit of fun, I took me clothes off, to see if I really was invisible. And no one saw me. But then I walked up to the front of the class and started drawing on the board. Some very rude things, mostly. Everyone started laughing. My teacher started to notice, so he came back to the front to see what the matter was, and he walked right into me. He startled me so bad that I somehow stopped being invisible. And so I appeared in front of the class, naked. Really embarrassing, but it made for a good laugh."

Harry snorted a laugh. He wagged a mocking finger at Louis, who pouted. He then set his eyes back to the flagstones, watching himself trace smileys and flowers in the dust.

Louis sensed his discomfort. "We don’t have to talk about powers, if it’s weird. I know mine are…well, they come and they go. I’ve never really taken them completely seriously. I’ve never really had to. But for you…it’s a thing."

Harry shook his head. "No, it’s not. Or it wasn’t, until the audition."

There was a pause before Louis said, "You can talk to me about it, if you like."

A lesser instinct told Harry not to. But why? How could he resist the listening ear of someone like him, who might be able to understand?

"I didn’t, like, see it happen," Harry began, cautiously. "I knew something was about to go wrong, but I didn’t want to think about it, because I’d practised so hard and everything, and I was finally in front of the judges. I didn’t want to screw it up. And I didn’t, it sounded fine, it was even fun…"

Harry bit his lip. He looked to Louis. He was listening carefully, with an open posture and a gentle gaze.
“And then I saw it falling at me, and my head told me to run, but I didn’t. A part of me really didn’t want to. But I looked up, and then it just sort of floated there, above my head, like I’d caught it in an invisible net. I was making some sort of energy field with my hands or something, and everyone was staring...”

Harry took a long breath. Finally putting that experience into words felt weird. He had never told anyone about it, outside of his family, thanks to orders from Simon to keep it under wraps. How long would he have to keep it secret, now that hundreds of people had seen the incident at Tower Bridge?

“Wow,” Louis breathed. “Still think they should’ve given you a chance to get through. You could’ve been the singing superhero! Doing somersaults through the air as you hit your high notes! I would’ve voted for you.”

Harry chuckled. “That’s very American of you.”

Louis plucked at imaginary cufflinks. “Ooh, not posh enough for you, am I?”

“No. People here just don’t like the American superhero thing.”

“Which is why the lads and I went to see Iron Man 2 a few months back, and the cinema was packed,” Louis argued.

“Real heroes, though. People are tired of the heroes who are just trying to be real-life comic books — they want someone they can relate to. Someone who just stays themselves, who’s normal — and then, y’know, saves the world every now and again. Better than a guy in spandex who likes to pick fights.”

“That’s what Simon must’ve told you,” said Louis.

“But it’s true!”

“Whatever you say, Curly. Are we going to test our super duo potential, or not?”

Harry shook his head. “Like I said, I don’t do super things. I just let them happen.” But that didn’t mean he couldn't try. He bit his lip and began to concentrate.

“Don’t care to mess in the affairs of mortals? I feel you.”


“I'll have you know it was your idea!” said Louis, indignant.

The shades began hover above Louis' head.

"I’m not complaining, but I am a little disappointed here,” Louis admitted.

Harry made the shades bob up and down as Louis spoke. He bit back a laugh.

The look of glee in his eyes gave it away too soon. “Something the matter?” Louis asked.

“Nope.” Harry shook his head. The floating shades mimicked the motion.

Louis followed Harry’s gaze and gave a little jump when he saw the shades, twirling around above him. His eyes lit up. “Nice!” He stood up to catch them, but quick little Harry jerked them away,
dancing them to the other side of the corridor.

Laughing, Louis ran after them. Harry teased him, darting them left and right before giving Louis a chance to pounce.

"Gotcha!"

With his glasses back in place, Louis cocked his hip and gave a *tsk-tsk*. “A breach of trust is no way to start a friendship, Harry. I already know that you’re a liar. Anything else you’d like to tell me? I’d like to know before it further damages our relationship, please.”


“Aw, come on. You wet the bed? You want an open relationship?”

“Um, no. But I can juggle. And I can do a few tricks with matches…”

Louis hummed, interest piqued. He hurriedly settled himself back down next to Harry. “I’ve always wanted to make a fire, with just my mind. Y’know, like a little flicker, to dance over my hand — can you do one?”

Harry furrowed his brow. *Fire. You heard the boy.* He flexed his fingers, cupped his right palm and thought *firefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefire*.

Nothing seemed to change. He took a deep breath. Crossed his fingers on his other hand for luck. Shut his eyes so tightly they could burst. *Firefirefirefirefirefire*...

He felt a tiny warmth grace his hand. Like a spark against his skin.

“Aha!”

When he opened his eyes, there was no fire to be seen.

Harry clasped his hands in his lap. “I guess I can’t.”

Louis raised an eyebrow. “Are you giving up, Mr. Teleport?”

Harry crossed his legs and turned to face Louis. “Not on you. You try it.”

“No way is this working for me if it didn’t for you. You’re a lot better with happy accidents than I am. Fate seems to like you. Must be the curls.”

Louis cupped his left palm anyway. He swept his right hand over it, wiggling his fingers, pretending to mutter some ancient incantation. He cleared his throat. “Wait for it, Harry. *Waaaaaaait* for it…”

For a minute, Harry looked on as nothing happened. Suddenly Louis gasped, and a trickle of inky black smoke began to curl out of his hand. Harry quite nearly squealed in delight.


Harry looked closer — all smoke. “Think harder, then, you almost have it.”

Louis pinched his eyes shut and started murmuring again. The careful wisp of smoke became a thicker stream, billowing and billowing until the boys were engulfed in a black cloud. Luckily, the smoke seemed to be unnatural, with no acrid taste or eye-burning characteristics involved. Harry fanned it away from his face, but it only thickened. “Okay, we might want to stop that now, or
someone’s going to come back here and get the wrong idea.”

Louis laughed. The smoke kept coming, drifting through the air in more of a water-like way than an arid one.

“Louis, I’m serious!” Harry spluttered.

“Alright, I’ve got this, I’ve got this,” said Louis. He clenched his fist. The inky flow sputtered, but within seconds, the smoke was pouring out from between his fingers.

“Lou…” The nickname came out of nowhere. “Um, Louis…are you sure you’re trying to stop it, not make more?”

Louis’ voice went squeaky in protest. “Of course I’m trying to stop it —”

“Excuse me?” came a voice to Harry’s left.

Too late. A woman in a janitor’s uniform stood there, all but her feet obstructed by the inky cloud.

Harry could’ve sworn that his instant shit-eating grin had been transferred to him through Louis by osmosis. “Yes, can we help you?”

“This is a museum, young man. I don’t know what in God’s name you’re smoking, and I won’t ask, but you certainly may not smoke next to the art!”

“Yes, quite right! Young Harold and I were just on our way out.” Louis leapt to his feet, and Harry followed. Louis seized Harry’s hand and, giggling, he pulled them around the corner and out of her sight.

“Sorry for the bother, miss!” Harry called as they raced back into the lobby, leaving a trail of fading smoke behind.

They took the spiral staircase two steps at a time and burst out of the crypt entrance, panting, greeted by a spot of afternoon sunshine.

Harry burst into laughter once more. Louis followed, and for a good long minute, the two boys stood in the crypt entranceway, doubled over, grinning and laughing, eyes only for each other. No flinching away from one another’s gaze, no nervous need to turn away. Wordlessly sharing their triumph, their embarrassment, their giddiness; and laughing, and laughing, and laughing.

Louis finally broke the spell and said, “We should probably get away from here.”
Last time on BFFTS: Harry and Louis ran away from the press and their mums for a...secret little rendezvous?

(Not quite but I TRIED OKAY!)

This one's a bit of an interlude, really, but cute shit happens I promise.

Thanks so much for the lovely comments on the last two chapters since I last posted! Means a lot.

Many thanks once again to Brittany and Ari for all your great edits and suggestions and all your love for this fic. And especially for your patience with me this time around, damn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Our duo name could be The Northern Nightmares.”

“Why?”

“You’re from the north too, right?”

“Cheshire, yeah. But that sounds more like a villain duo, and I don’t think I’d be very good at being evil.”

“I was thinking we’d be nightmares for the bad guys. A little reverse psychology, if you like.”

“I’m still more of a Northern Noodle, to be honest.”

With adrenaline wearing off and exhaustion kicking in, the boys settled themselves in the grass in the middle of Leicester Square. Louis pulled out his phone, clucking concernedly. “Twelve texts and five missed calls from mum. Shall I let her know where we are?”

"Yes, you shall."

Louis put his phone to his ear. The first ring was cut short by an exasperated huff, the voice down the line sounding mildly upset. Louis did his best to appease his mum with sounds of agreement. After a long few minutes, he gave her their location and managed to hang up.

Anne and Jay showed up half an hour later to discover a nightmare and a noodle lying side by side in the grass.

“Harry!”

“Louis! What in the world is that outfit?”

In lieu of explaining, Harry and Louis simply lowered their shades and shared a knowing smirk.
Anne and Jay steered them away from Piccadilly Circus and down into the winding streets of the west end. Apparently a theatre district is the kind of place mothers like to take their children when they have a few choice words for them.

“So I’m texting like crazy, even though I doubt that your phone survived the river, and I get no answer, no answer, no answer. Two hours later, I get ‘Hi mum! Harry and I are in Leicester Square, come meet us!’ After you ran away...”

“You really should have had him call sooner,” Anne muttered in Harry’s ear. “You'd be in far bigger trouble it weren’t for this.”

She pulled his phone out of her purse. She had been holding on to it during the meetings, Harry’s own strategy to prevent distraction. Harry pocketed it with a nod of thanks.

“We just went for a bit of a wander!” Louis insisted.

“Well, next time, tell your bloody mother where you’re going, alright?”

“Course, mum. Am I grounded?”

Jay considered. “Well...”

As it turned out, the mums weren’t exactly in the mood for harsh punishment. They reached Covent Garden Market and snagged themselves a little table with an umbrella on a cobblestoned corner. The boys were treated to a late lunch of paella and chocolate, tea and lemonade.

“Is there any reason you can't take those glasses off, boys?” Jay sighed, halfway through dessert. “You've earned us a good few concerned looks from the public...”

Chewing on the lemonade straw in his mouth, Louis looked like a proud poster boy for shitty sunglasses. “Let them stare.”

Anne and Jay shared a look, bemused. “Is it the glasses, or the Spice Girls bag?” Anne wondered.

"It's Louis and I," Harry said with certainty. "We're famous.”

Anne and Jay both gave them slow nods of amusement. "I see,” said Anne.

"But how will you be recognized with those shades on?” said Jay, jabbing Louis with a finger. Louis poked her back.

“I'm serious!” Jay laughed.

Anne crossed her arms, curious. “Has anyone recognized you?” she asked Harry. Harry shook his head.

Jay stuck out her tongue and dealt her son a few strong finger-jabs to win the poking war. Louis threw his arms up in surrender. “Come on!” the victor insisted. "If you want people to recognize you, take them off!”

Harry saw this as his chance. He leaned in to Louis’ side. “Permission to take mine off?” he muttered in Louis ear.

Louis rolled his eyes, but relented with a curt salute. "Granted.”

"Thank you, sir."
To Jay's dismay, Harry placed his pair on Louis' face for good measure. "Now you're seeing double."

Louis embraced it. "All the better."

Anne inclined her head towards the square. "We've got some young people come to test your fame, boys. Good timing!"

Louis sat up straighter. "Oh?"

A crowd of school kids were being herded and counted a short distance away from their table. A good few of them were glued to their phones. Harry watched as they began to cluster, leaning in over each others’ shoulders, gaping at something on their screens. A teacher or two tried to break them apart, but the kids were quick to protest.

“But you have to see this! Superheroes, here in London!”

Louis gave Harry a nudge. “Wonder what they’re on about, eh?”

Harry shrugged, grinning. “Superheroes, apparently.”

He turned back to watch the kids, who had succeeded in getting a teacher interested in the video on their phones. Harry watched as they began to cluster, leaning in over each others’ shoulders, gaping at something on their screens. A teacher or two tried to break them apart, but the kids were quick to protest.

“Oh MY GOD, IT’S A REAL SUPERHERO!”

“Louis!” Jay hissed.

Harry gave Louis a scolding slap on the knee, turning his face down and going a little red. When he dared to look up, he saw the kids up ahead staring at them. One of them squinted hard and then began to point. A few jaws came loose.

“Yes, it’s HIM!” Louis called out again. “It’s a real live superhero! You better come get a picture, he won’t be here for long! For one afternoon, and one afternoon only, it’s a SUPER -”

“Shut up!” Harry begged, though he was giggling as he said it.

The first kid to come up to their table looked Harry right in the eye and said, “You’re not a superhero.”

Harry gave Louis a scolding slap on the knee, turning his face down and going a little red. When he dared to look up, he saw the kids up ahead staring at them. One of them squinted hard and then began to point. A few jaws came loose.

“Well, it’s HIM!” Louis called out again. “It’s a real live superhero! You better come get a picture, he won’t be here for long! For one afternoon, and one afternoon only, it’s a SUPER -”

“Shut up!” Harry begged, though he was giggling as he said it.

The first kid to come up to their table looked Harry right in the eye and said, “You’re not a superhero.”

Harry was taken aback. “Um…”

Louis laughed. “Oh go on, tell them.”

“Oh shut up, Vee, he completely matches the picture!” said another girl, right behind her. “See?” She held her phone out in front of Harry’s face. The first girl studied both, and didn’t seem quite convinced by the time her friend asked Harry, “Could I get a picture with you? That’d be amazing.”

“Sure,” said Harry. “Could I see that first, though? That picture of me?”

The girl looked confused, but held it out for Harry to see. It was a snap of Harry in his reflective blanket. Louis’ head could be seen peeking out from behind his right shoulder. A wall of reporters and microphones fenced them in. Harry looked wet and disoriented, but he was smiling. The watermark labeled it as having been taken for The Sun.
The girls posed behind Harry and held the phone out in front of them. “Cheese!” Louis yelled for them. Harry gave them his biggest, toothiest grin.

“Thank you!” said the second girl, pocketing her phone. “And, um, I’d just like to say...” She paused. “That was a, um. Really good thing you did. In that video, I mean.”

“Thank you very much,” said Harry, genuinely touched, though still struggling to process it all.

Soon, their table was surrounded by a small host of more tweenaged selfie-seekers. A video of their fall, full of shocked sounds and wind noise and screams, seemed to be playing on repeat on someone’s phone as they took photo after photo. Between snaps, Harry was asked over and over again whether or not he was really a superhero, and all he could bring himself to say was “Maybe.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Louis continually advised. “He’s just trying to be humble - aren’t you, sweetheart?”

The kids always laughed at that.

Before too long, they were all reluctantly whisked away. The boys smiled and waved, and were left to finish their lunch in peace.

Louis beamed. Unlikely as it had seemed, he had been proven right. “Told you we needed a disguise.”

“We’re not famous, we were recognized by literally two people,” Harry objected. “And then, like, others who wanted a picture just because the first people got one.”

“But you said yourself that if you were famous, you’d want to use that to impact people. And it looks like you already have. They seemed very happy to meet you.” Louis gave Harry’s back a gentle pat.

Harry smiled to himself. He would take that.

The sun had come out in full by the time they had finished eating. Anne and Jay steered them along, headed south.

Walking along behind them, Harry caught snippets of Anne and Jay’s conversation, which mostly featured the two mums bonding over the pains of having a child with superpowers.

“They’re very sporadic, Louis’ ones,” Jay was saying. “He seems to have very little idea of where in his head or in his body they come from, let alone how to control them. We used to go for weeks at a time with no incident, and then out of the blue I’d get a call from Hall Cross School saying that they had Louis with them in the office, and they’d like to speak with me right away, because of some sort of inexplicable thing that had been causing the teacher some bother. And then, on occasion, I’d hear the secretary scream into the phone, all ‘Where did he go! He dissolved! Into thin air!’ and I’d just be standing there, rolling my eyes...”

“Dear God!”

“But that was all a while ago. Most recently, he made several appearances flashing his arse on the school roof. I still have no idea if that had anything to do with powers, though. His friends refuse to rat him out. He’s settled down a little, since then. Well, of course, until today. God bless Hannah! Your average teenage girlfriend doesn’t have to navigate super-powered pranks, and yet she sticks with him.”

A girlfriend. Louis hadn’t mentioned that. Some part of Harry sagged, feeling let down. A more
reasonable part of him knew that that was far from fair. They had only known each other for a mere number of hours. Relationships had yet to come up in conversation. How much about Louis' personal life could Harry expect to know?

Perhaps Louis not having told him wasn’t the part that was really hurting. But whatever it was, Harry let it go.

“Oh, she must be very happy,” Anne assured. “He seems like a real sweetheart.”

“Yes, he is. A bit of a catch, I’d say,” said Jay with pride.


“Fine, a proper catch,” Jay called back to him.

“There we go,” Louis chuckled.

“What d’you reckon, Harry? A proper catch?” Anne winked, casting him a smile over her shoulder.

“Clever, mum,” Harry muttered, as he turned pink.

Jay gave the boys an appraising look and turned back to Anne. “Would you look at them, though. They actually fell into each other’s arms a few hours ago, and they’re already getting on. We’re going to have to keep them in touch. You’re in Cheshire, you said? You can’t be too far from us.”

“I doubt we are, but Harry’ll be living in London come September.”

“You’re moving here?” Louis overheard.

Harry nodded. “Gonna give this hero thing a try. We were here to look at a contract, and then…well, we signed it.”

“What kind of contract?”

“Contract for my super training. We’re gonna start with that, see where it takes us.”

“Shit, wow!” When Harry didn’t return the enthusiasm, Louis was quick to comment. “You sound positively ecstatic, Harry. Just signed on to become Britain’s first superhuman sensation, and all you can think to say is…” He put on the best mock-Harry voice he could achieve. This time, it ended up sounding a bit like how you might imagine a walrus would sound, were it to speak English. “There woohz…oom, contract. We, oom…we signed it, yeah. We — oom, yeah, oohz — we signed big million-pound superhero contract.”

“It wasn’t worth a million pounds!”

Louis’ eyebrows shot up. “Oh-ho, I bet it was!”

“It wasn’t.”

“Okay then, sorry. A hundred million pounds, my mistake.”

“Absolutely not —”

“Does it matter, Harold?” Louis snapped, jokingly. He rolled his eyes as he resumed, talking over Harry’s chortling. “Point is, you’re gonna be loaded. You’ll have a yacht in the Mediterranean. You’ll be attending Jay-Z’s garden parties.”
“Jay-Z has a garden?”

“Why else does he need all the hoes?”

“I don’t think he needs them, I think they just…”

“Like his company?”

“Yeah. Or they just want to steal stuff from Beyoncé’s wardrobe.”

“I think that’s only you, Harry.”

“Honestly?”

“Harry, one of my many superhuman abilities…” Louis said as he leaned in, resting his chin on Harry’s shoulder — making it rather awkward to walk, not that Harry minded one bit. “…is the ability to read a lot about a man with just one look. It’s like having Sherlock’s brain, but for lazy shits like me.” He put on a strange off-eastern European accent. “And youuuuuuuuuuuuuu, Harry Styles…sometimes, you go home at night, and you put on your best leotard… and you rehearse ze Single Ladies dance — which you know off by heart —,” he made sure to roll his R’s, “— in front of ze floor-length mirror.”

“Hey!” Harry began, but Louis shut him up with a finger to his lips.

“Shhhh. Do not challenge me, fool. I, ze great Tommo — I know zis.”

Eventually the mums found them all a quiet bench in Green Park, on which the boys eagerly popped out their phones and took a scroll through Twitter. As afternoon wore into evening, ample evidence showed that the legend of the Tower Bridge Boys had spread. Seeing the shaky cellphone footage of their fall going viral was very fulfilling, to say the least. They swapped their favourite reactions for the better part of an hour — all-caps keysmashes, wild speculations, and even early claims of “proof” that the videos were fake.

“Fifteen minutes of fame accomplished?” Louis concluded, pocketing his phone with a contented expression. Harry held out his fist, and they fist-bumped and shook on a job well done. Shoulder to shoulder, they reclined against the bench for a short nap, sandwiched between their mums. Dappled sunlight danced down onto their faces. Harry sighed, long and loud and satisfied. Anne planted a kiss to his temple. #TowerBridgeBoys was trending number one nationwide on Twitter. All was wonderful in their little world.

For about ten minutes, at least.

Anne’s phone went off in her purse. She cursed to herself. “That’ll be Robin. Forgot to call and let him know how it all went, after our hullabaloo this afternoon.” Harry opened one eye to see his mum taking her phone out, her expression changing immediately as she saw the caller ID. She turned to Harry, said, “I’ll just be a minute,” and stepped away to accept the call, face steely.

The call went on for more than a few minutes. Concern steeled Harry’s face to match his mother’s. Jay noticed and gave a reassuring smile. “I’m sure it’s nothing, love. Probably work-related, God knows that’s the exact face I make whenever work calls me.”
Harry smiled his thanks. His suspicions told him that it was indeed work related. Just not his mother’s work.

Anne turned back around to look at Harry. Harry knew the look — Anne used it when she was trying not to convey that things were less than alright. It was a terrible mask. Harry's gut sank.

Tight-lipped, Anne gave the caller a string of monosyllabic replies, then lowered the phone and called out, “Harry! It’s for you, sweetheart.”

Harry stood up and made his way over, trying to force down a rising feeling of dread. Anne gave Harry's free hand a squeeze as she passed the phone over. Harry took a breath, stared down at his toes and said “Hello?”

“I’m sure you’ll agree that we should keep this quick, so if you could hold off on interjecting until I’m done speaking, we can get this over with.”

Simon Cowell’s voice reminded Harry of the slumping version of Simon he had met after his audition — firm as usual, but a little weary around the edges. Harry bit his tongue and let him continue.

“Obviously, as I’m sure you’re well aware, we had a secrecy agreement. That was included in your contract. It was to protect you and our institution while you trained, and to give us some time to prepare your brand and PR strategy. You’ve now broken this agreement. We need to get started on the right foot here and we’ve already stepped off course.”

Harry suddenly didn’t care about keeping this call as short as possible. “But I saved someone! I couldn't help it, it was instinct. And it’s making the news! Isn't that a good thing? I —”


Harry lowered the phone and took a much-needed breather. Muffled in his palm, he heard Simon’s voice start up again. With one more deep breath he brought it back up to his ear.

“— only that control is key. There is something to be commended in what you did today, Harry. But now we must be careful to regain our control over your image. We need people to take this seriously.

“So I’ve lined up an interview for you over dinner. A television interview with the BBC. Your mum tells me the other boy’s still with you, and that you can have him come too. Good. He’s quite eloquent, but don’t let him speak over you. It needs to be you telling the story and him helping you along, not the other way around. I’ve already given the BBC all they need to know about where they are and are not allowed to prod, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t need to keep your wits about you. You may not address your audition. Not until we decide when and how to release that story. You may not mention your prior involvement with myself or with Mr. Bellamy. Absolutely no mention of training, or of having been discovered prior to today. You can speak truthfully about any small super experiences you were forced to hide growing up, anything sweet or relatable, any good TV moments there. Do not mention the kinds of powers you possess today, or their extents.”

As if I even know...

“If they ask about talents, talk about baking, juggling — your mother tells me you can juggle. Let them laugh it off. Be charming. Don’t allude to our plans, but say that you’re looking forward to potentially making a career out of heroism in the future. Be likeable, be intelligent, be yourself. Be hopeful. Promise the public they’ll be seeing more of you, and that’ll give them all they need for now. Don’t engage in specifics, and we should be able to get back on track from there. Alright?”
Harry nodded, forgetting that Simon couldn’t see him, only hear his heavy breathing.

“As for the breach of contract,” Simon added, “it’s early days yet. We will not be taking action against you. But remember that you’re a professional now, Harry. We have an agreement. There are rules, and there will be consequences.”

Harry gave another nod. He looked back to the bench, where Jay had her arm around Louis. Louis met his gaze the moment he looked over, smiling hesitantly, sending a little wave. Harry smiled back, then turned away. Back to the ground beneath his toes, and taking deep breaths.

“Harry?”

“Yeah. That’s fine. That’s all fine.”

Simon gave it a pause. “I picked out the restaurant, too. I’m sure you and your mum will enjoy. Good steak.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Simon took another pause, long enough for Harry to look over his shoulder. Louis had gone cross-eyed and was still waving at him. Harry clamped his mouth shut to keep from unintentionally giggling at Simon Cowell.

“Do you have any questions, then?”

Harry shook his head. Louis, still cross-eyed, shook his head in tandem. Harry bit back another laugh. “No,” he told Simon, struggling to keep the mirth out of his voice. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Alright then. Make me proud tonight.” And with that, Simon hung up.

Harry stayed put and listened to the dial tone for a moment. “I will,” he told no one. Was it really worth his while to try to please Simon when he had already failed spectacularly, just by trusting his instincts?

Harry passed the phone back to his mum, leaning in to her as she put an arm around his waist. They made their way back towards the bench, where Harry was finally able to laugh as Louis pulled yet another ridiculous face.

Sitting back down was a bit of a relief. The bench helped him shoulder what felt like a new weight bearing down on him. Maybe it wasn’t all that new, but it was now making itself very present, piercing through the calm and the sunshine and Louis’ laughter.

Trying to keep his head above water, Harry gave Louis a smile. Louis saw through it immediately. His face grew concerned. He opened his mouth but before he could speak, Harry’s mum made the announcement.

“Well, turns out we’ve had our plans made for us. Would you lot care to join us for dinner?”

“Boys will be boys” is a saying used to dismiss all sorts of nefarious behaviour that shouldn’t be dismissed. Harry wasn’t much of a fan of that saying.
That’s not to say that it didn’t have its redeeming moments. He rather enjoyed it when Louis’ mischief at their fancy SoHo hotel dinner was enough to make the BBC reporter exclaim “Boys will be boys!” and turn her focus over to their mums. The cameras turned with her, leaving the boys to finish building a snowman on Harry’s plate with balls of mozzarella, undisturbed.

Louis placed the last cheese ball at their creation’s feet, and fixed a wilted arugula quiff atop its head. “There. Now it’s David Beckham.”

Harry frowned. “I thought we were making David Hasselhoff!”

“Hey, I built most of him!”

“On my plate! Also, maybe they’re not a he.”

“Fine.” Louis took his appetizer fork and tapped the snowman on both non-existent shoulders. “Rise, David Hasselhoff Beckham, genderless mozzarella person.”

Harry nodded his approval. Once Louis had sat back in retreat, he gobbled David up in two mouthfuls.

Louis gave an offended squawk, but his time of mourning was short-lived. He folded his hands and set them on the edge of the table, looking very bored. The interview questions so far had largely been the same old questions they had gotten earlier that day. Harry couldn’t stand to imagine a few more years’ worth of them.

He had tried to keep Simon’s directives at the forefront of his mind. But between feeling overwhelmed, Louis making faces at him from across the table, and his self-described goldfish memory, he probably hadn’t done so well at that.

He did his best to put it out of his mind. He raised his champagne flute to toast Louis for the third time (maybe he was starting to like wine — a bit). When David’s remains were whisked away atop his salad plate, he found Louis fixing him with an inquisitive look.

“What is it?”

Louis shrugged. “S’just a bit weird, y’know, that I feel like I know you when I don’t really. Is that weird?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s nice.”

“I dunno, I just feel like…I should know more. Tell me more.”

Harry couldn’t resist. “Tell me more, tell me more/Did you get very far?”

Louis’ eyes crinkled at the corners. “I love Grease.”

“Me too!”

“We put it on at school. Had a fantastic time.”

Harry smirked, narrowing his eyes at Louis. “You were Danny, weren’t you?”

“I was indeed. You should have been there. You would have made a fantastic Kenickie. Or a Rizzo, even.”

“I’ve always thought I was a Sandy, myself.”
“You are remarkably versatile,” Louis agreed.

Harry covered his mouth to stifle the inevitable burst of laughter. He managed to hold on to it as the waiter came by and topped up their sparkling water, but despite his best attempts, a massive burp came out instead.

Louis lost it, letting out a raucous laugh, gripping the table to avoid face-planting into it. Harry nearly fell backwards in his chair. Anne, mid-interview, took a pause and tried very hard to conclude her sentence without cracking up. Jay cracked up first, leading Anne to cave only a split-second later.

Louis fondly shook his head. “Mums, eh?”

“What can you do,” said Harry.

By the time his mother’s composure had finally returned, Harry had an idea. “Alright. Twenty questions. We each have twenty for each other. We can ask anything, but no one has to answer anything they don’t want to. Alright?”

Louis nodded. “Cool, yeah. You start?”

The first prompt came rushing out. “Your first kiss.”

“That’s not a question.”

Harry sighed. “Dearest Louis, would you please tell me about the first time you made romantic lip contact with another human being?”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Girl from school. Year five. You?”

“You can’t ask me the same questions.”

“That’s a stupid rule.”

“Keeps things interesting! And you didn’t give much of an answer for yours.”

Louis frowned — hard done by, but amused. “What was I supposed to say?”

“What was it like?”

“I don’t much remember it, to be honest.”

“Your first kiss? Really?”

“What, you remember all the details of yours?” Louis looked at Harry in disbelief. He rolled his eyes. “Oh, of course, you’re a sap! Exactly how moist were her lips? How snotty was her nose? I assume this was kindergarten, and you got married that same day.”

That Harry’s childhood love interests had all been snotty-nosed and female was quite untrue — though he had indeed married most of them. “You’re not allowed to ask me about kissing, Lou. I asked you first.”

Louis pouted, fanning his lashes. Both his pout and lashes were rather impressive. Thankfully, along came Harry’s steak.

Louis spoke up as Harry tucked in. “The only other thing I can say about my first kiss, Harold, is… well, it was alright, I guess. As good as it can be in year five.”
Harry frowned pityingly from his steak-filled cheeks, and Louis laughed it off.

Harry swallowed. “Good enough,” he conceded. “Now ask me.”

Louis pondered, looking Harry in the eye as he plumbed his depths. Harry braced himself for a question about fame, or heroism, or *X Factor*, or music, or girls. Or his hair. All of the things Louis had so far taken an interest in about him. Part of him hoped that Louis would take the chance to ask outside about something outside of those. To get to know the Harry underneath the image that had already, apparently, started to cloak him.

Louis’ voice went low and grew soft. “What’s the first memory you have?”

“Like, the farthest back I can remember?”

“Your oldest memory. Yeah.”

Nostalgia had never driven Harry to put his memories into any sort of order. He was quite content to have them all buzzing around his head, blurring together, as long as they were still alive in there somewhere. But he took the time now to mentally go down the line, sorting through images — Granny Styles’ house, his very first day of school, getting cross with Gemma and throwing crayons for no good reason, dipping his tiny toes into a creek in the woods...

“This might be completely wrong. I might’ve made this up, actually. But when I think of the oldest one…all I can see is Gemma holding out a piece of paper, with a drawing on it. And I remember calling it a cat, and hearing mum congratulate me, and seeing Gemma just go nuts with rage. It wasn’t a cat, apparently. But I think I had a lot of fun calling it a cat just to see her reaction, and because mum would keep congratulating me for saying it.” Harry shrugged. “Exciting, I know.”

Louis smiled. “Sounds like it could’ve been your first word, though. Was it? Imagine, if you’d remembered learning your first word…”

This Louis was different from the one Harry had been seeing for most of that day. That Louis had been all goofiness and laughs, doing anything to be brighter and louder than their surroundings, than anyone else in their vicinity. Here, Louis was simply caring. Taking Harry’s silliest memories seriously. Finding something to be in awe of in something so simple.

“I think it was my first word,” Harry said. “But who knows if that’s the first time I said it.”

Louis nodded. “Still pretty special, though. Impressive memory you’ve got there.”

“Thank you. And now, to test yours…”

They continued to pose questions back and forth — questions about favourite desserts, favourite animals, concerts — “So we went to see The Script at the same gig? How mad is that?” Parents’ professions, most embarrassing moments, best pranks they’d ever pulled, best friends, pet peeves, outlooks on life. Until steaks had been replaced by sorbets, and the interviewer had finally gathered the courage to turn her attention back to the boys.

“Quite the conversation going on over here! Your mums and I are missing out!”

The boys shrugged. They forced broad grins for the cameras and answered a few more serious BBC questions, though drowsy and full and unfocused.

They continued their game under their breaths in the back seat of a cab as the dark maze of London wound by. By the time they got to Harry and Anne’s hotel, their first stop, they had barely gotten
past each boy’s sixth question.

“But we’ve got to finish the game!” called Harry, stepping reluctantly out into the cool night air.

“Could we see them for breakfast tomorrow, mum?” asked Louis. “Else I might miss him.”

The mums and boys swapped numbers and arranged for an early breakfast meet-up. Phone alarms were set for seven o’clock. Harry and Louis waved goodbye with tired smiles. As heavy as Harry’s limbs felt as he trudged into the hotel, there was a thrumming in his veins that he knew would never let him sleep.

“Goodnight, Harry. Don’t stay up, alright? I know the adrenaline hasn’t worn off yet, but you’re more tired than you feel, trust me. And tomorrow morning we’re meeting for breakfast bright and early. And then our train —”

“Alright, mum, I know. Night!”

Anne took a pause before adding, “I’m proud of you, sweetheart.”

Harry couldn’t suppress a small smile. “Thanks.”

“Extremely proud, Harry.”

“Thanks, mum.”

“Are you? Proud of yourself, I mean.”

Harry gave it a moment. “Um…yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Good,” said Anne. “I’d be quite worried if you weren’t.” She leaned over to give him a goodnight peck, then slid under her covers and switched off the bedside lamp. The hotel room went dark, except for the glow of Harry’s phone as he alternated between Facebook and Fruit Ninja. Despite his mother’s advice, he had no intention of sleeping just yet. He was waiting. Because Louis would text, he knew it. And so far today his intuition had only been proven right.

“Louis’ a wonderful boy,” came Anne’s voice through the dark.

Too bad I’ll never have a comic series. “Wrath of The Mind-Reading Mother” would be an epic issue, thought Harry.

“And Jay is absolutely lovely,” Anne said. “We’re lucky to have met them. A part of it seems almost…meant to be, doesn’t it?”

“Something like that,” Harry concurred. “It all just sort of…fit, today. Almost too well to be real.”

Anne gave a happy hum. “We’re never going to forget today, love. What an incredible day it was.”

“That’s enough now, mum. I need my beauty sleep.”

“Hah! You need to beat your score on Fruit Ninja, more like.”

Did that count as a Mind-Reading Mother moment, or was that just an apparent truth? “Just a few
more minutes, promise!”

Because Harry knew that Louis was going to text before those minutes were up. As he slashed a virtual banana in half with a pang of guilt, he got antsy. His innards became popping candy. He slashed fruit with more and more vigour, focusing hard on the game so as not to let his entire world revolve around whether or not he was about to get a text.

His phone buzzed. Had Harry been on his feet, he would have leapt two feet into the air. Seated in bed, his bum gave a happy scoot. He exited Fruit Ninja.

cant sleep :/ read Louis’ text.

Me neither 😞 Harry texted back.

There was a pause, punctuated with belly-tingling anticipation. Harry gave another little start when his phone buzzed again.

fancy a night walk then?

Harry grinned. meet outside my hotel in 20.

20?! I’ll be there in 2. cant wait 😊

Harry’s grin grew so big it was a wonder it didn’t illuminate the whole room, waking his mother before bringing the upholstery to spontaneously combust. He threw the covers aside, hopped to his feet, made a dash for the entryway closet, and —

“Harry, what’s wrong?”

— completely forgot about his not-so-asleep mother, whose skills beyond mind-reading included observation and common sense. Harry froze.

“Are you alright? Where are you off to? C’mon love, it’s late —”

“Umm…I just need a wee. S’Alright. Go back to sleep.”

Anne's tone quickly became suspicious. “Harry…”

“Mum, s’ok! I, um, beat my Fruit Ninja score. I finally got to eat that fruit salad. Yum. So now —”

“...now you’re going for a run to burn off the fructose?”

“Umm…something like that?”

Anne groaned into her pillow. “Harry, you’re not leaving the hotel this late at night. It’s eleven thirty, and if you want to have time to meet Louis and Jay before we get the train out at ten tomorrow, you need your sleep. Now have your wee…”

“I will. You should get a head start on me. In the sleeping contest, I mean.”

“Hey. Just because you’re a hero now doesn’t mean you can boss your old mum about.”

“It was only a suggestion!”

“Goodnight, Harry.”
“Night, mum.”

Harry slipped into the bathroom and flicked on the light. He swore under his breath. If Louis was true to his (perhaps exaggerated) word, he would be outside already, beginning to grow impatient. And here was Harry, trapped in a hotel room with a vigilant, mind-reading mother on high-alert, sleep be damned.

His bare feet began to chill on the tile floor, so he slid them into the pair of slippers he’d left between the toilet and the shower, wiggling his toes to feel the warm press of fake sheepskin between them. He began to pace, staring at his phone, wondering whether it was time to text Louis and give up.

His nagging thread of intuition spoke up again. No. Not yet.

“Harry? Is everything alright in there?”

“Sorry! I lied, it’s a number two!”

“Alright then…”

Eventually Harry did have to pee. Whilst he did so, a new train of thought began.

He could hear a few loud drunks staggering out from their rooms on the other side of the bathroom wall. Their unintelligible shouts came through the wall particularly well. Any thinner and it would be paper. Any thinner and I could walk through it.

Walk through it.


Harry hurriedly shoved his dick back into his trackies, washed his hands and padded over, silently as possible, to the wall by the shower. He put his ear to it and waited until the drunk patrons were gone. He then took a deep, deep breath.

His gut began to twist. Deep breaths became shaky shallow ones. He tried to will himself into that meditative state that always seemed to be around whenever his powers were, but nothing could stop his trembling, excitement and nervousness filling his head with static.

He pictured Louis, standing outside the lobby doors, staring up at the sky and smiling his gleaming little smile. Louis. Happy Louis. Shall we go have an adventure with Louis, Harry? Let’s not keep him waiting. Grim determination swallowed a bit of his anxiety. He pressed an open palm to the barest patch of wall and repeated that thought over and over. Adventure. Louis. Smiling Louis. Let’s go find him.

Through the wall. Through the wall. Through the wall.

He gave it a moment. He pulled back and lifted a finger, bringing it gradually towards the wall, hoping it just might pass through.

It was a hard wall.

Harry took yet another steadying breath and tried again. Louis’ big bright laugh. His big bright grin with his big bright teeth. I’m going on an adventure with Louis, wall, so if you wouldn’t mind...

He leaned his head against it for another test. The wall was still a wall.

Third time’s a charm?
He spread both of his hands against the wall, took a big breath in —

“Harry, are you really alright?”

“I SWEAR I’M FINE MUM I PROMISE.”

“Just checking!”

He pressed his forehead to the wall between his hands, bracing himself. He leaned back and brought his head forward again. Closing his eyes, he bit his lip, and thought of —

His phone vibrated against his thigh from the pocket of his trackies.

*here !! u coming ?* read Louis’ text.

Harry’s heartbeat quickened. He tensed every muscle he could control at once, then released them with a sigh, placed his hands and forehead back against the wall, and tried to think of Louis without letting his pulse get ahead of him.

After several minutes, it was still no use. He was caged. The time to give up was most surely upon him. His mum was nowhere near asleep. He wasn’t going to be leaving by the door or by the godforsaken wall. Feeling bloody useless, Harry tried to bang his head against it.

He anticipated the blunt ache of impact. Instead, he tumbled through the wall, head first, his face slamming into the carpeted floor of the corridor.

His head immediately began to throb. He tasted blood in his nose and in the back of his throat. Regardless, he was on his feet in seconds. There, behind him, was a perfectly solid hotel corridor wall. He stroked it and poked at it. Solid and real. There would be no falling back through it.

He was free. Louis was outside, and Harry was going on an adventure — in his dirty spare shirt, his trackies, and an old pair of slippers. He could barely contain a victorious squeal as he ran for the lift bank, jamming the down button and hopping from foot to foot as he waited for the damn lift to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...shit’s going down. Good shit. Come say hi to me on [tumblr](https://tumblr.com)!
In hindsight, it felt like it was only seconds later that the cool night air was ruffling Harry’s curls, and the beanie-clad boy standing on the curb was fixing him with a beacon-like smile.

“Took you long enough,” said Louis, throwing an arm over Harry’s shoulders.

“Sorry. Had some trouble sneaking away from my mum.”

“Ooh, sneaky devil! So how d’you manage?”

Harry grinned. “I have better control over my powers than I’d thought.”

“Sick. So what happened, did you —”

“I walked through the wall.”

Louis gaped. “Get in!”

“Or more like, um…fell through it.”

Louis chuckled. “Why does that not surprise me?” He clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Well done, Haz. Now let’s go have our fun.”

“Until we see the sun.”

“Rhyming’s overdone. Where to first, chap?”

Harry shrugged as they headed westward. “Anywhere.”

“That’s not very helpful, I’m afraid.”

“Did you have anything in mind?”

“Well, my mate Aiden’s at a club — he got past bootcamp, see, so he’s probably smashed, having the time of his life. How old are you?”
“Sixteen,” Harry pouted.

“Shame. I’m guessing you don’t have a piece of false identification stashed in your gran’s slippers there. And the tube’s gonna be closed before long anyway. And we have no friends to mooch off of for a cab. No partying for us, then.”

Harry didn’t bother feigning disappointment. “To be honest, I’d be happy just to walk around. Explore. Maybe finish that game, get to know each other better.”

Louis nodded. “Sounds nice. Not that I’ll have much more to say about myself — you’ve heard it all by now, I’m guessing.”

“I’ve got the memory of a goldfish, so you’ll have to tell it all again several times before sunup, if I’m to remember.”

“All of it? The story of my life?”

Harry nodded. “Everything about you.”

Louis smiled up at the sky. “Where to begin…”

Not long after, they were lying on their backs in the grass by the edge of Hyde Park, with the memorial to Prince Albert sticking up over the tips of their toes. A few scattered stars peeked out through the murky city sky, and Harry made them into fake constellations for Louis’ amusement, using the same two stars for practically every formation. By the time The Mango was discovered inside of The Platypus, as Harry insisted that the platypus tail was also Scooby Doo, Louis caught on to his fraud. They both went back to plucking grass before Louis broke the silence.

“How did you ever feel like the world’s given you a burden or something?” Louis pillowed his head with his hands. “That you have all of these abilities, but really, they’re not just, like, for you, and they’re not for fun — because you feel like you’ve been given a responsibility to, y’know…do something meaningful with them?”

Harry gave it some thought. “I feel that way now. Now that trying to help people is, y’know, gonna be my…job, if you can call it that. Before, I think — God, I was so stupid about it.” He gave a little laugh in spite of himself. Louis smiled, but remained silently attentive.

“Being super felt like a burden, yeah. It terrified me, actually. And when I wasn’t thinking about how afraid I was, I was thinking about all of the random stunts I could pull off if I ever learned to control my powers.”

Louis laughed knowingly. “Same.”

“But as I started to figure everything out…” Harry stopped, wondering if what he was about to say was actually true. “D’you know what? It was today. Today changed that for me. I was sure before that I wanted to help people. I’ve always wanted to have a job where I could help people. But today…I saw that I actually could, and that I actually really, really want to. That it makes me really happy.”

There was a long pause before Louis said softly, “That’s a great thing to know. Incredible, really.”
“Well, thanks for being a little shit and falling off of Tower Bridge, ‘cause without that, I wouldn’t have realized it yet.”

Louis beamed. “Any time.” He took a shivering breath in, released it with a sigh. “I wish I had that. Knowing I could use my powers for something good. To keep people safe, to make people happy. They’re pretty useless for that kind of thing.” He shrugged, shoulders to his ears in the grass, before continuing in a stronger voice. “Even just one person! If I got to save one person, and do what you did — even if I could only make one life better, I’d feel so much better for having to deal with these stupid powers in the first place. The best thing I can do with them is entertain me little sisters. And that never lasts long before mum tells me off, takes the girls away if I can’t control what I’m doing. Tells me that I shouldn’t encourage them.”

“Are they prone to mischief too?”

“Oh, absolutely. Family trait.” Louis paused. “But that’s not what scares mum. When the twins first saw me just playing around, she told me that if they have any powers locked up somewhere, in their lovely little selves, they’re better off not finding out. Not growing up like me.”

Harry frowned. He tightened his grip on fistfuls of grass. He thought of Louis’ wonderful mum, and could barely picture her instructing Louis to hide a such a huge part of himself from his own family. “Why would she say that?”

“Why wouldn’t she?” Louis said, his voice flat.

“Um, because I’m sure you’re a great big brother, and powers are nothing to be ashamed of?”

Louis went quiet. Harry felt a pang of regret at having clearly said something wrong, but when Louis spoke up again, he sounded more sad than cross.

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Oh,’ as in…you don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“S’weird, I really thought they’d have told you by now…”

Harry’s gut twinged. What the hell else could Simon have kept hidden from him? Had Chris’ story been some incomplete or diluted version of the truth? He wasn’t sure he was ready to learn anything new about the world of supers and superdom tonight. Not now, when his impending training terrified him, constantly stirring up fears in the back of his mind. Not when tonight felt like his last chance to enjoy the thrill of being a super without feeling the weight of repercussions.

As usual, though, his curiosity couldn’t be staved off for long. “Told me what?”

“The whole history bit.”

“What history?”

Louis stretched his arms, cracked his knuckles, and re-adjusted himself in the grass, settling in for a long story. “Basically, it’s never been easy for us. They don’t teach you this in school…well, actually they do. Just not the important part. Know anything about witchcraft? Witch trials?”
“Like, in the middle ages?”

“Mainly, yeah. But they continued on quite a while here, I’ve been told. Anyhow, bet you can guess where the whole ‘witch’ idea came from in the first place.”

“You mean...they were supers?”

“Exactly. Knew you were bright. There were lots of ways we persecuted supers in the past, but that was a big one. Let’s see, what else...Australia. Have you heard of that new Australian super team? 5 Seconds to Save You? They’re sick.”

“And they’re important to super history in Britain?”

“I mean, not really, but you could make the argument. There’s tonnes of supers down under. I assume you’re aware of what we often did with dangerous criminals back in the olden days...”

“Sent them to Australia?”

Louis nodded. “Couldn’t well keep supers in regular jails or in hospitals, could we? They’d escape. We have a poor justice system to thank for 5 Seconds to Save You and their mates. A lot of supers managed to stay in hiding, though. If they couldn’t learn to hide, they went to America. That’s why they became so accepted there, so ‘mainstream,’ if you like. They tried to set themselves apart from Britain, declaring independence and all that, so they let supers be their heroes. That’s why it’s an American thing, having supers.

“Meanwhile, nothing much really changed here. Even when some people's attitudes changed, we thought it was too — we couldn’t well compete with the super industries in America, Japan, Korea, and all our former colonies, too.”

Harry nodded, trying to process everything. It all made sense, as much as he desperately didn’t want it to. “So that’s the real reason that there aren’t any superheroes here.”

“Yup. Not the ‘we’re too good for them' shit. Quite the opposite, actually. We were never good enough to treat them well.”

Harry thought back to what Simon had said, about superhuman talent in Britain going "un-mined."

“There are still plenty of supers here though, aren't there?”

“There’s all of us who stayed in hiding,” Louis said, in a meek voice.

Hiding. Harry didn’t want to think about hiding, about fear and shame and concealment. “When I had my first assessment with my new trainer — he’s a super, and he said that there were more before me. Just, all of them weren’t quite good enough.”

Louis paused. “Well, they were looking for a very special sort of person, weren’t they?”

“I mean, I guess. But you’d think that if they’d just found someone good enough to get the job done...”

“But the job’s quite big, Harry. There’s a reason we still pretend we’re too good for supers. There’s a lot of prejudice. It’s been passed on for ages. And lots of people here just don’t like the American way of doing things. So Simon set himself a big task, didn’t he?”

“Those just sound like reasons he should have quit while he was ahead.”
“No. He just needed someone who could break the American mould, if you will. Someone charming enough to get people to like them. And selfless enough to make the job about helping people, so that people here can start to trust supers, for once. And that, my friend —,” Louis scooted over and slid an arm beneath Harry's shoulders. “— is where you come in.”

Harry sighed. Louis laid his cheek down in the grass, leaving his nose a few inches from Harry's neck. Harry felt the tickle of warm breath from the other boy’s smile.

Harry turned his head to look into Louis’ eyes. Their colour didn’t show in the dark, but they glinted in the park’s lamplight, and Harry could clearly see all that they had to tell him. Though they held a hint of uncertainty, they were unwavering. More than anything they spoke of faith. After less than a day in his company, Louis Tomlinson had come to have faith in him. Harry felt a flicker of strength take root where, moments ago, he had only felt unease. It was enough to help him muster a gentle smile. He hoped that it showed Louis just how much his faith meant.

“M’really not all of that,” Harry mumbled, half because it was true and half because he badly needed to hear Louis express his faith out loud.

Louis’ expression didn’t change. “I think you are,” he said softly.

“Thanks, sweetcheeks,” Harry replied, unsure of whether he truly meant the hint of sarcasm in his voice.


With a grunt, Louis pulled himself up and sat on his haunches. “So, now that we’re a proper loved-up couple, shall we go crash a party? There’s got to be a cocktail soiree at one of those there mansions…” He gestured to the houses along the perimeter of the park.

“Those are townhomes, idiot.”

“Townhomes that cost more than I will ever make in my lifetime, so they’d better be goddamn mansions, minus the size. Come to think of it, you’ll probably live in one of those someday soon. Shall we go scope out some property for Harry Styles, Hero of Britain, and his seven buxom wives?”

Harry made a face. “Seven? Really?”

Louis shrugged, brushing himself off and standing. “It’s a low guess.”

“Seriously?”

Louis began to run for the street, jumping and twirling like a manic ballerina. Laughing, Harry gave chase.

A few minutes later, they were standing on the opposite sidewalk, a few doors down from a party.

“Ooh, did you see the girl who just went in? The bling on her wrist! Only really rich people wear watches, Harry. We’ve come to the right place.” Louis took an eager step forward. Harry caught him by the elbow and dragged him back.
“We’re not going in there.”

“Why not?”

“Lou, how the hell are we gonna get in? And what the hell are we supposed to do if we get in?”

“Assess your potential bachelor pad, of course.”

“There’ll be loads of people in there.”

“We’ll go hide in a bedroom or something.”

“There’ll be monarchs of small nations shagging underwear models in each one of those bedrooms, I guarantee it.”

“All the more fun!”

“Do you really want to spend the rest of tonight hiding in a closet and all of tomorrow morning in jail?”

Louis snorted dismissively. “It’s not like we’re gonna steal anything. We just want a look!”

“We?”

“What? Don’t you want a glimpse of your future? Ooh look at her, coming in now — no, not there, that bird, there. I think I’ve found your first trophy wife, Hazza.”

Harry gave Louis a light slap on the arm. “Enough with the wife jokes already.”

“What makes you think I’m joking?”

“Girls aren’t trophies, Lou.”

“It’s a turn of phrase, Harold.”

“Not a very nice one. Look, are we going in, or not?”

Louis answered with a smirk. He inclined his head to watch as a spiffy couple passed them by, heading towards the lighted doorway. Putting a warning finger to his lips, Louis grabbed Harry by the wrist and tugged him along. They followed in the couple’s wake, mere feet behind them.

Harry’s skin began to prickle. Was this Louis’ idea of stealth? “What are you —,” he hissed, before Louis clamped a hand over his mouth. The couple whirled around, looking frantically for the source of Harry’s voice. Somehow, their gazes passed right through the two boys standing immediately behind them.

As the couple started to walk and talk again, Louis held Harry back, arm stretched in front of his stomach like a car barrier. When the couple had gained a few paces on them, Louis beckoned him on again, this time emphasizing the finger on his lips.

They climbed the stairs in the couple’s shadow, so close that Harry could smell the pre-consumed high-grade alcohol on their breaths. They tried not to breathe too loudly as the doorman took the couple’s coats. He crossed their names off of a guestlist, and showed them into a marble-floored foyer. The boys crept along behind. Louis sprouted a grin at their miraculous luck. The doorman showed the couple to a doorway on their right, raising an arm to direct them — an arm that came dangerously close to hitting Harry in the face.
Louis ducked, yanking Harry down into a crouch with him. The couple nodded and flounced off into the adjoining room, and the doorman took his leave.

“Quick, quick!” Louis hissed, hurrying after the couple, still in a crouch.

The next room was so small and so lavish that it brought to mind the word “antechamber”. A sliding panel wall at one end of it opened up onto a vast modern sitting area, all angular couches and leather benches and islands with bar stools, where the majority of the schmoozing seemed to be taking place. Harry stared as a staff clad in all black waited on flocks of old elegants and young urbanites. Louis didn’t give him much time to admire the strange assortment of privilege before putting an arm around his waist and ushering him behind the potted palm in the antechamber’s corner.

Harry really didn’t know how long Louis expected him to stay hidden there, but he knew in an instant that he didn’t have the emotional stamina to hold out for long. He could barely distract himself from how very close Louis’ nose was to his own face, how Louis’ arm was still draped over his shoulders, how lovely his smile was as he celebrated the so-far success of his knavery. Between the thrill of party crashing and the thrill of Louis, Harry was supremely overwhelmed. He had no choice but to burst into giggles.

“Shush!” Louis hissed, seizing Harry’s chin in one hand and covering his mouth with the other. “Or they’ll find us out!” His tone was a warning, but he still grinned.

“Mgmrmphmrrph?” Harry asked against Louis’ fingers. When Louis only pressed down harder, Harry tried an old childhood tactic and gave Louis’ fingers a sneaky lick.

Louis gave a muffled squawk and withdrew his hand, giving Harry’s cheek a scolding finger-flick.

Harry restated his question in a whisper. “How come no one saw us come in?”

Louis shrugged.

“Were you using your powers?”

Louis shrugged again.

“You turned invisible!”

“Did I?”

“Well, I dunno…”

“Could you see me?”

Harry nodded.

“Then I guess I didn’t.”

“Were you trying?”

“I was trying something…s’pose it worked!”

A woman’s chortling heralded the arrival of a new tipsy company to the antechamber. Louis immediately smushed Harry further into the corner — one arm around his shoulders, and the other framing him protectively, his hand balanced on the wall next to Harry’s head. Harry kept a panicked eye on the new partygoers, pretending to be more alarmed by the fact that they were on the verge of being found out than by the warm crush of Louis crowding into his space. Thankfully,
Louis was also being watchful. Too watchful to notice the flush in Harry’s cheeks.

The willowy women who had entered were taking quite a long time fixing their hair in the mirror above the mantelpiece, dangerously close by. Harry was too focused on Louis’ gentle panting to eavesdrop. He barely noticed when he started to pant in sympathy. Quite loudly, apparently. Noticing, Louis grabbed Harry’s wrist again and squeezed, fingers fluttering over Harry’s pulse. If the aim had been to get Harry to actually quiet down this time, it most certainly did not work. Nothing much worked, as the closeness itself got Harry’s skin to tingle and his heart rabbiting. Eventually, though, one particular bit of conversation grew loud enough to break Harry’s reverie.

“It’s her fault for planning her birthday party on the night of the party for his summer collection. She knows full well that we’ve priorities!”

“She did it on purpose, cheeky bugger.”

“But what if they’ve already run out of cranberry for cosmos?”

“They probably still have enough of your shitty cotton candy vodka to black you out, anyhow.”

“Not that you’ll be needing much, at this point.”

“Yes, dove, I can guarantee you half a shot of cotton candy vodka.”

The two mocking friends laughed, while the third friend whined, “It better not be the blue kind!” And with that, they were swallowed up by the haunting lounge-club tunes of the schmooze room.

Louis took his hand off of the wall, finally giving Harry some bittersweet room to breathe. With his arm still around Harry’s shoulder, he gave Harry a hearty clap on the back. “Happy birthday, Hazza.”

“Um, thanks? S’not, but…”

“Well, you sort of invited all of your friends to come party at your bachelor pad — on the night of the party for his summer collection, no less — so it better be your half-birthday or something.”

“Something like that.”

“And you, sir, seem to be quite the pussy magnet,” said Louis matter-of-factly.

“That’s a rude way to say that lots of people like me.”

“As do cats.”

“As do potted palms, apparently. But I’d rather not spend my entire half-birthday behind this one, if I’m honest.”

Louis pursed his lips and shook his head. “Shame. I thought you were waiting to snog me here, where it’s private.”

It was only a joke, Harry knew, but he found himself inspecting Louis’ face for any hint of intent anyway. Right when Harry thought he had seen a sign of interest, of fluster, of seriousness, Louis was back to joking. “Not even after a few drinks?” He nudged Harry in the ribs.

“But they’re going to run out of cranberry for cosmos, Lou! Can’t see the point of drinks now.”

“Aw, c’mon, Harry. Imagine what we could find behind the bar…” Louis carefully got to his feet,
craning his neck to peer into the next room.

“Cotton candy vodka?”

“Not a chance. A fine half-birthday boy like you deserves nothing less than their finest champagne.”

Harry stood up after him. “So you’re going to go fetch me some then, yeah?” He fluttered his eyelashes at Louis.

Louis folded his arms. “Depends if I’m still getting a snog after.”

“Course, sweetcheeks.”

Louis smiled sweetly. “Alright then, babycakes.” The coast was clear, so he set off. When Harry didn’t move, he stopped to look over his shoulder. “You’re coming, aren’t you?”

“Um…”

“You’re a terrible host, Hazza.”

Stepping as lightly as he could, Harry joined Louis in the doorway. No one noticed them, standing in plain sight though they were. Harry turned his head to see if Louis was still visible. He sure was — profile glowing in the light of the post-modern chandeliers, eyes glinting as he took in the scene. No doubt he was formulating a plan. Glancing back and forth between the party and his companion, Harry reached a conclusion. *I can see him…and no one else can.* Harry beamed.

Louis turned, beaming back at him. And wow, maybe Harry did need that drink. Much more than he’d thought.

Louis drew him in closer, brought his lips up to Harry’s ear —

*Okay yes drink please alcohol now.*

— and whispered, “Right, so I’ve figured it out. This is mostly where the older crowd hangs. You see that man, there?” He pointed to a white-bearded man who was the sun to his own solar system of people. “He’s important. Maybe he owns the place? But it’s not his birthday. I’ll bet he’s showing off to the hip crowd, putting this party on for someone younger. And that —,” he pointed to a glass staircase in the very far corner — “leads to the dancefloor. Feel the beats? The birthday person is down there somewhere, smashed out of their mind, grinding on their fellow socialites. But, most importantly — *that* is the bar. The main one, at least.” He pointed to a black marble kitchen island with a hole in the middle near the centre of the room, surrounded by people, manned by two studious bartenders. “Can you imagine the looks on their faces if someone fucked with their drinks? Swapped the bottles on them, filled them with hot pepper oil or cat piss or something —”

Harry almost regretted it immediately, but he said, “*Especially* if it were two invisible boys.”

It took quite the militant operation to cross the room to the bar — ducking behind sofas and coffee tables, slipping under trays of champagne flutes, and the occasional dive-and-slide — but Louis guided Harry along with a hand on his arm the whole way through. They collided with guests several times, but whatever Louis was doing (or not doing) to keep them hidden worked. They were invisible, or as good as. This meant that on occasion, whenever they were stopped behind a
particularly obnoxious conversation, Louis would begin a most flattering re-enactment, gesturing and mouthing along, until he had to stop in time to squeeze Harry’s giggling mouth shut.

Despite the difficulty of the mission, it was only a few minutes later that they managed to sneak into the bartender’s nook at the centre of the island. A few minutes after that, they were happily crouched under the counter, shielding “borrowed” cocktail glasses and decanters and tumblers and bottles, grinning as they mixed to their hearts’ content.

“For the madam, the birthday girl’s signature cocktail,” announced a bartender, his legs inches from Harry’s crouching butt. As soon as a clink from above them indicated that the woman had received her signature drink and set it down, Louis popped up, replaced it with his masterpiece concoction, snatched the woman’s drink, and popped back down again, offering it to Harry. “For the birthday girl,” he whispered.

Harry accepted. He took a sip. It was heavy on the artificial citrus. He made a face.

Louis stuck out his bottom lip. “Sorry I haven’t caught you any champagne yet.”

Harry shrugged. “What was that you gave her?”

In answer, a shower of saliva-infused alcohol came tumbling over the counter. Harry heard the woman’s stunned hoot.

“What was it?” Harry hissed.

Louis’ eyes twinkled in delight. “I think it was —”

“Christ, does she really have a taste for bourbon, Irish cream, and sparkling water?” came the woman’s voice from above.

“Sounds about right,” Louis muttered.

Harry smiled and took one more sip of his drink before pouring the remainder into an empty glass with a grimace. He then added copious amounts of a blue syrup. As he was a classy little shit, he rested a speared olive on the rim of the glass.

Seconds later, Harry saw the bartender set a similarly olive-topped cocktail down on the other side of the bar. As soon as he had shuffled away, Harry was on his feet, reaching out for it, ready to switch it with the one in his hand.

He felt a yank on the cuffs of his trackies and nearly tripped. And then Louis yanked again, harder. Harry slipped. He dropped the glass and fell to his hands and knees. He began to scramble backwards, narrowly avoiding Bartender Two as she came through with tumblers of scotch. By some miracle, the glass hadn’t shattered, and Bartender Two skirted by the puddle of blue drink without a second glance.

Back under the counter, Harry bit his lip and focused hard. As if recreating his accident in reverse, he made the liquid retreat into its glass. The olive repositioned itself, and the glass stood itself up. With a little more focus, the glass hovered. Higher and higher…if he could just get it onto the countertop...

“Fuck!” cried Bartender One. Harry lost his focus and the glass fell, smashing this time. Louis grabbed him by the curls and pulled him as far under the countertop as he could go.

Bartender Two arrived promptly with a cloth. She stooped to clean the shards as Bartender One said, “It was hovering! Levitating! Did you see it?”
“Oops, sorry, forgot to tell you about my magical powers. Which I am now using to clean up after you,” Bartender Two deadpanned.

“No, I swear!”

Louis and Harry tried very hard to contain their snickers.

“Do it again!” Louis whispered. But, Harry being Harry, his next act of telekinesis was to make the glass sweep itself into a tidy pile, and to make the pile move itself into the furthest corner under the counter before Bartender Two could return with a dustpan.

Louis rolled his eyes. “Heroes…”

After inciting a few more guest vs. bartender arguments about “drink confusion,” and watching several more of their disgusting creations come fountaining out of mouths, Harry began to pity the bartending staff, and Louis got bored. With an exchange of glances, it was agreed that they would get back to surveying the real estate.

Their only problem was that the bar made an unbroken ring around them. They had no choice but to get out the way they got in — by hopping over it. The countertop had gotten considerably fuller since they had been there, despite the decrease in quality of drinks. Harry poked his head out to look for a hopping spot. A knot of dread formed in his stomach.

Louis didn’t let him wallow. He stood up, still hunched over, and scurried to the end of the island, which was currently bartender-less. Harry followed. Louis heaved himself up onto the counter, tiptoed daintily over a row of drinks and reaching hands, and hopped down on the other side. He turned to beckon urgently to Harry.

Harry’s gut sank, fearing his own baby giraffe clumsiness — but the bartenders were turning around, and he had no choice. Following Louis’ example, he heaved his hips up to bar height on arm strength alone, and managed to land a knee and then a foot on the counter without knocking over any drinks. His heart nearly stopped at the sight of the thick cluster people in front of him. One of them signalled to a bartender for a refill. Harry couldn’t stay invisible for long.

He waited until the man directly in front of him was done gesticulating with his drink, and then made a go for it. One toe found its place. Harry lifted the other foot, and it searched and searched until Harry wobbled and then pitched and lost his balance.

He fell on his bum on the counter, scattering glasses with a crash. His heart leapt as he met the eyes of several onlookers. No longer invisible. But there was Louis’ hand, reaching for him, unnoticed. Harry grabbed it. Louis tugged him to the floor, where he landed on his feet, and before anyone could react, the two were running, hand-in-hand, squeezing out of the bar crowd and dodging elegants like crazy.

Every guest’s eyes were still trained on the site of Harry’s accident. No one could see them anymore.

As Louis darted up the glass staircase, beckoning him along, Harry cast a glance over his shoulder at the squabbling crowd. “A boy!” a woman squawked, slamming her fist into a puddle of alcohol. “A boy did it! Appeared out of nowhere!” A chorus of voices called out for the boy, frantic eyes wondering where the hell he could have gone. Harry cackled, sending them a grin and a two-fingered salute. He dashed up the stairs after his partner-in-crime.
Louis sighed into the most sumptuous pillow either of them had ever seen. “Careful!” Harry said, grabbing Louis’ ankles to keep him from kicking his dirty toms into the king-sized bed’s immaculate sheets. Louis struggled like a bastard, forcing Harry to leap onto the mattress and pin him down with the weight of his torso. Maybe that had been Louis’ goal, or maybe that was Harry’s wishful thinking talking. Either way, Louis laughed, pink in the face with glee, and flailed and kicked and struggled and generally made Harry’s life more difficult — until Harry heard the clicking of heels out on the landing.

“Shhh!” Harry hissed, holding Louis’ face into the pillow. They froze as the sounds drew closer.

It was a well-inebriated couple, giggling and sharing sloppy kisses as they made their way down the hall. The boys held their breaths, waiting for their door to swing open. They heaved a sigh as a door closer to the landing creaked and then slammed shut, muffling some increasingly obscene sounds.

“Phew,” said Harry, rolling onto his back.

Louis followed suit, grinning. “Things almost got really interesting just then.”

‘Interesting,’ meaning we came really close to being arrested.”

“You really think drunk horny people are gonna care enough to have us arrested?”

Harry shrugged.

With his limited space, Louis made snow angels on the bed. “Welcome, Sir Harold, to your bachelor’s bed…where your lovers will lose their maiden heads.”

“Hey. I respect my lovers. And no one’s really that good in bed when they’re headless.”

“Harry’s getting heads, then.” Louis raised his eyebrows at the ceiling. “’Maiden heads’ are virginities. It’s Shakespeare, or summat.”

“So you think that’s what I’ll do when I’m a hero? Collect virginities?”

“I dunno, maybe. It sounded a lot better in drama class, to be honest. See, I’m trying to apply my education to real life, and it’s only making me dumber.”

Harry hummed in empathy. So much for the closed door muffling the couple’s sounds — with Louis and Harry quiet on the bed, they could be heard clear as day. Whining and moaning and gasping and giggling, lips smacking and bodies being shoved against walls...

“Yeah, maybe they won’t have us arrested,” Harry mused under his breath.

Louis nodded. “Hey, at least they got a room. That’s a hard instruction to follow, for some people.” Right as he finished his sentence, they heard the door of the lovers’ room being flung back open.

“For some people,” Harry echoed, as sounds of the couple stumbling back down the hallway, banging into walls and slurping each others’ faces as they went, came closer and closer and closer...

“Lou, hide!” Harry hissed, making to scurry off of the bed.

Louis held him down with a hand to his chest. “S’alright, shhhh, listen, they’re already past us, they’re going for the next bedroom over.”
“There is no next bedroom over!”

Bang. Their door was thrown wide open.

When Harry had fallen through his hotel wall that evening, he sure hadn’t been looking forward to a night of amateur cocktail mixing and accidental voyeurism, but here he was.

For quite a while, the two women remained obliviously locked in a passionate embrace. Dark and light skin grabbed and clawed and squeezed and stroked in a vicious flurry. Some partial nudity and rather animated dirty talk had occurred before the dark-skinned woman — blouse hanging open and glasses askew — caught sight of the boys out of the corner of her eye, and gave a little jump. Her partner soon clued in, stilling her hands and tongue and teeth and lips and hips and obscene sounds all at once as she took in the sight of the strange boys clad in sweats, still gaping.

“Sorry! Were you here first?”

There was a shaky silence before Harry murmured, “Um, well…yeah. Sorry.”

“But not for what you think we’re here for,” Louis clarified.

There was a pause before the girls burst out cackling.

“Of course not, little darlings!” the first one pshaw’ed.

“Are you quite sure we’re not interrupting, love bugs?” the other one cooed, gently raising her striking set of eyebrows. “You two are so cute! If I were you, Bowl-Cut Elf-Kid….” She stumbled into her partner as she threw a wink at Louis. “I’d grab your boy by his springy little curls and fuck him right senseless while you still can on this love-a-ley bed! Very special mattress, you know. Designer made in Paris. Expensive as all fuck — by my standards, even. And the sheets are some expensive brand of silk, or something. Perfect for prematurely ejaculating on!” She howled with laughter, full-on barrelling into her partner this time. The other woman stroked her hair, shrugging to the boys.

“Sorry, lads. She’s a bit pissed.”

Louis grimaced in sympathy. Harry shook his head. “She’s just very excited.”

“Well, I was…” The strikingly-eyebrowed blonde sing-songed, “but now my big birthday plan to make naughty with Celine has been put on hold for a little, hasn’t it?”

Celine chuckled under her breath, planting a few sloppy kisses to the blonde’s neck. The blonde practically purred. And just like that, the resplendent ladies seemed to be snapping back into fuck mode, and Harry and Louis were still sat there gaping on the rich-ass Parisian bed.

“We could…um, relocate, if you like,” Louis said in a hesitant squeak.

When that sentence didn’t seem to pierce the soundscape of gasps and moans and active lips, Harry added, “I mean, it is your birthday. You deserve some privacy. Our birthday treat!”

This seemed to reach the blonde and pique her interest. She pulled away from Celine and stalked her way over to the bed, drunken stumbling matching up beautifully with the sway of her hips. “Oh dear me, I can’t walk straight!” she laughed to herself. “That’s what I have to do, for my job, and now I can’t, and I’m going to be laid off, and it’s a right shame…”

She flopped down onto the bed next to Harry, caught his chin in a bony hand, and smiled. “My
birthday is for lovers,” she whispered. “It’s like Valentine’s — but better! More fucking, and less crying and drowning in ice cream! So, what I’m saying is…you, as my guest of honour, should fuck your elf boy. In this bed. And I don’t want to see you two leave this room until you’ve had the best time, alright?”

“Um, Curly and I aren’t at that point in our relationship yet…” Louis muttered. “We just met, like, this morning…”

The blonde and Celine burst into hysterics at that. “Celine and I met two hours ago! Her boyfriend’s downstairs,” Blonde grinned.

Harry nodded, smiling. He figured that keeping her entertained for a bit longer might well lead to escape. And in this state, she could easily be entertained by Harry’s meagre attempts at conversation, thank fuck. “So…how old are you turning?”

“Rude little Curly!” Her breath contained enough evaporated alcohol that she would have been breathing fire in Harry’s face if he would had a match. “I don’t get older.”

Louis approved. “Foreeeever young,” he half-sang.

“Hey, I like this one!” Blonde leaned forward to give Louis props, ruffling Harry’s hair on her way back to her side-lounging position. “These boys know how to have fun.” She cast poor, sober-ish Celine a look over her shoulder. “Can they join in?”

Celine adjusted her glasses and looked appalled. “Are you for real?”

“What do you mean, am I for real? I am the realest real in the entire universe. And no offence to your boyfriend, love, but these lads are much cuter. And also…” Striking eyebrows and plush pout combined to make a formidable frown. “…they’re familiar-looking. Are you two famous or something?”

Louis gave Harry’s shoulder a squeeze and nodded. “Very. Right Haz?”

Glasses in place, Celine studied the boys until her jaw fell open. “No. Fucking. Way.”

“Aw, darling, but it’s my birthday! You’ll be missing out on so much fun —”

“No, I don’t mean that, I just mean — Tower Bridge! Today! They’re the Tower Bridge Boys! He’s the superhero — Curly one, there!”

Blonde ran a delicate hand over Harry’s cheeks, gaping. “Is this true, Curls?”

Harry pinked a little, then nodded. “M'name’s Harry, by the way. And this is Louis. And we’re the Tower Bridge Boys.”

“Really?”

Harry nodded.

“So you have super powers?”

Harry nodded again.

“And you — wait, Elf Boy fell, and you — you, like, disappeared, and appeared in mid air — and you caught him? That’s what happened, right?”
Nods.

“It was on the news! It’s trending worldwide on Twitter!”

Louis’ eyes widened. “Worldwide? Sick!”

“Wait, tell me your names again. And tell me you’re the Tower Bridge Boys again. This time don’t lie!”

Harry bowed his head, eyes reverently closed. “M’Harry — ‘Elf Boy’ is called Louis — and we’re the Tower Bridge boys. Not lying.”

The blonde froze for a moment, finally gasping out, “Wow.” So fast that Harry fell back against Louis with a start, she leapt off of the bed, pitching side to side as she twirled back to Celine. “And I’m Cara, Cara Delevingne, and this is my early birthday party, because who doesn’t need one? And I have the pleasure of having a real-live British superhero and his elf as my guests of honour! Ab-so-lu-tely fucking fabulous!”

Cara slung an arm around Celine’s neck. Celine was still staring at Harry and Louis, stunned. “Did you invite them? They’ve been famous for not even a day.”

Cara shrugged. “Must’ve been destiny!”

“Either that or they snuck into the house uninvited…”

“Shut up, Celine! Shut up and kiss me!”

Cue snogfest.

“Um, so,” Harry called, over the snogging and laughter, “we’ll let you get back to your…um, business. Nice to meet you! Happy birthday!” He sat, helping Louis up with him.

Cara broke away from Celine. “Leaving? But you’re the guests of honour! I need to spoil you first!”

And, well. That sounded okay.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!”

Cara managed to get the attention of all of her guests in the lounge below as she half-stumbled down the staircase. They fell mostly quiet. “May I have — I mean, I have — the pleasure of introducing my guests of honour! To prove I am truly on top of all things current, I introduce to you Britain’s latest viral celebrities — THE TOWER BRIDGE BOYS!”

It sounded like a band name, and a pretty bad one, but Harry would get over that.

They didn’t get a rock band reception — rather, relative silence. The guests all worked quite hard to piece together the familiarity of these underdressed younguns in their inebriated minds.

Cara folded her arms, disapproving. “Ah, come on now, ladies and germs! That’s not a good enough welcome for a SUPERHERO AND HIS ELF.”

“A superhero?” one woman called.
“Yeah! A fucking superhero!” said Cara.

A buzz slowly spread throughout the room. Cara ordered for the news to be displayed on the multiple flat screen TVs on the walls. Sure enough, soon after they turned on, they showed Simon Cowell addressing the media.

“We’ve been mining Britain’s super potential for years now, and I think it is finally time for us to step out of the shadows,” Simon was saying as Harry passed by one of the screens. “Today was a big day for our country. I look forward to working with Harry Styles in the future.” Simon was composed, but Harry could see the hint of smugness in his expression.

Guests clustered around TVs and phones, and all around them, Harry and Louis heard the tinny noise of the viral videos of their fall, and of their post-fall interviews.

As they mingled with the crowd, some guests stared at them as if they weren’t real. Some of the oldest ones shied away, not deigning to make eye contact. But all too soon, as the word spread and the party music was turned back up to replace the newscasts, Harry found himself surrounded by hordes of fancy people. They introduced themselves with names and titles and company names, with the expectation that he would find them familiar. He did a pretty good job pretending. He had heard legend of his charm from his family, friends, and secret admirers, but he had never really come to recognize it in himself. But now, with a smile, a half-hearted bad joke and some manners, he had half of the party eating out of his hand.

Most of the other half cheered for Cara as she twirled Louis across the bar.

Harry watched with baited breath. He was impressed, what with Cara drunk in stilettos and Louis bopping a little too hard to the loud bhangra club mix that had migrated up from the party downstairs. Even more surprising was that Cara managed to catch his eye in the crowd, and beckon him hither.

The man he was talking with — an executive at Burberry — tried in vain to keep his attention a little longer. Cara, who had danced over to the nearest corner of the bar, hollered over, “Take his champers for him, eh, granddad? Let the boy dance!”

Harry nodded respectfully to the man, handed over his (third) champagne flute, and squeezed through the gathering. Thankfully, people other than Cara helped to haul his skinny ass onto the counter.

When he got to his feet, Cara was gone. Standing before him was Louis, impish grin in full force. Harry stood there, stunned, as the crowd cheered him on.

From somewhere below, he heard Cara instructing him, rather colourfully, to dance with Louis. Louis extended a graceful arm and gave a gentlemanly nod. Harry didn’t dare do anything but oblige.

Louis twirled him until he was dizzy. He almost fell off of the counter. Louis reigned him in with a hand on his waist, a teasing chuckle in his ear. Louis then led them in a sloppy back-and-forth tango along the countertop. Guests cheered. The boys snorted and giggled in time with one another. Their sweaty palms slid against each others’, toms and slippers squeaked on the marble. As the song reached a crescendo, Harry let himself be tipped back, and stuck his leg in the air with a triumphant howl. Louis twirled them once more, landing in a power pose. Harry fell into him, wobbling into his own pose.

They had barely broken contact the whole time, eyes always meeting, bodies parting and touching, parting and touching. There was absolutely no way to read into simple contact, Harry reminded
himself. And if there was, it was most certainly the champagne talking.

Time began to move like putty, bending and twisting and moulding and snapping until Harry couldn’t make sense of it. He had no idea of how long it was before Louis showed up back at his side, holding a drink which was legitimately blue. Louis begged him to come with him and join the miniature club scene downstairs. Harry linked their arms and wouldn’t budge, as much as Louis whined and tried to dance him away. If he had to endure drunk old businessmen (which he did, because they were very nice, and he didn’t want to disappoint them all), he would do it with company.

Coming out of nowhere, Cara plucked the blue martini from Louis’ sweaty fingers. “That’s enough for you, Elf! Thank God for Curly keeping an eye on you.” She ruffled Harry’s hair again. She seemed to like doing that. Harry didn’t mind.

Louis groaned, trying to snatch the drink back, but he was no match for Cara’s height in stilettos. A server whisked it away in no time. With a polite nod to Harry’s admirers, Cara leaned in, pulling Harry and Louis together by the shoulders. “Excellent work on the networking, boys. But I hate to say — this party is about to get a lot more boring.”

“Awwww, come on! The beats downstairs are banging! I was going so hard. And there are those twinkly star lights, just like in me bedroom. C’mon, Harold, you have to see —”

“Ah, ah!” Cara yanked Louis back. “It’s empty down there now. Some friends and I are off to a rather special after party for…” She rattled off the name of some fancy-sounding person that meant nothing to Harry. “And like, you’re not exactly dressed for it, buuuuu…come with?”

Louis let off an obnoxious whoop at the prospect of more party. Harry got the sense that he wasn’t quite as drunk as he was acting. As he saw the younger partiers start to gather to leave in the foyer, Harry leaned in to speak into Louis’ ear. “But Lou — don’t you want to see more of the city? We don’t have all that long ‘til our mums’ll be waking up…” He wasn’t sure how true that was, but he played up the urgency.

Louis’ focused gaze confirmed Harry’s suspicions, but the elf boy kept his drunkard façade up for long enough to get away with a few more things. “Thank you very much, love,” he said to Cara, “but I promised Haz here some more one-on-one time. We were having a couple’s night out when we stumbled in here, you see. He really can’t get enough of me, so I should fulfill my duty and continue our date.”

Cara rolled her eyes, but her smile was brighter than a firefly’s bum. She sifted through Harry’s hair. “Are there lovebirds nesting in these curls?” She laughed. “At least allow us to drop you off?”

And that was how Harry and Louis found themselves pressed against each other in the back of an SUV limousine, shoulder to shoulder with London’s young and rich. They traded swigs of expensive champagne as they laughed along with the company, bumping knees to remind each other where they were. Next to you.

Cara fairly shortly called for the driver to stop, and the door was held open. She ushered Harry and Louis off of their bums. “Here you are, gents, a nice place for a romantic walk! Go steal yourselves a diamond ring or something!” They squeezed out of the vehicle amidst laughter and wolf-whistles and young socialites begging to be invited to a superhero wedding.
With many calls of thanks yelled out between giggles, Harry and Louis bid Cara goodbye. And then proceeded to belly-laugh, heads thrown back, whoops and cackles echoing down the street and into the London night.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear your thoughts/feels on this chapter! If you wanna spread the word about this baby bean, reblogging the tumblr post here would make me very grateful.
With only a vague idea of where they were in the dark, Harry and Louis picked a direction and began walking again. They walked up what turned out to be Bond Street, where they had been dropped, pressing their faces against shopfront windows to admire glassed-in luxuries. Louis spun everything they saw into his predictions for Harry's future. Even boats. “That yacht there? There's the model of it, there. You're gonna have one of those next year — or would you rather cash in on some kind of super vehicle? The Curl Mobile?”

“M’not that tacky, Lou.”

“You're not that fun, more like.”

They crossed the deserted Oxford Circus, mocking the massive prints of smouldering models with their own selfie renditions. Before they knew it, without once discussing which way to go, they had made it to the bottom of Regent’s Park. They wove through gardens and crossed bridges and skirted ponds. They crept past the vacant zoo to arrive at Primrose Hill.

They climbed it and sat side-by-side on the hilltop. Louis produced a flask from his back pocket with a wink, explaining how Cara had snuck them some take-away for the road. Most wonderfully, it turned out to be full of more fancy champers. They toasted the night and the city twinkling at their feet. They choked on bubbles as they began to tell long, tipsy stories. Louis told Harry more about X Factor and Aiden, his four little sisters, his “lads” in Doncaster. Harry told him what little more there was to tell about sleepy old Holmes Chapel — about the bakery and Barbara, about Gemma and her uni life in Sheffield, about his now-forgotten college plans and his mum’s impending marriage to Robin.

Then there was silence. More welcome than uncomfortable, as if their words had lingered. Harry let himself drink in Louis’ silent company, let the sounds of the city around him do the talking. He tried to relax, but city sounds couldn’t quiet the ticking clock in his head, counting down the hours until they would have to return to their mothers and board separate trains. And then Louis would be back in Doncaster, and Harry would have a month or so left to get his affairs in order before moving to London, and then would come…who knew.

Harry’s heart rate picked up just thinking about it. Some combination of anxiety, eagerness and
inebriation slowly took him over, bringing the question he had been toying with in his head to his lips.

“Have you ever been in love?”

“Hah!” Louis grinned ear-to-ear. “Changing up the vibe, are we?”

Harry shrugged. “I was thinking about how much you’ve told me, and if there’s anything you haven’t, and you haven’t told me that. I just wondered…”

Louis took a swig and swished the bubbly between ballooned cheeks. He swallowed, then said, “I mean, I’ve liked people. Dunno if that counts as love.”

“I think…we’re the only ones who can say what counts,” said Harry. “We sort of have to decide for ourselves.”

Louis let out a massive burp, and Harry snorted. The other half of Louis' answer was silence.

Harry couldn’t let him leave it there. “I mean, s’alright if you don’t want to talk about it. But...I heard your mum say you have a girlfriend. Hannah, I think?”

“Yeah.”

“She sounds nice, from what your mum said. What’s she like?”

Harry could see the slight sag in Louis’ shoulders as he thought up a suitable answer. “She’s…” There was the slightest waver in his ordinarily bold voice. “She’s lovely. She’s always been a great friend to me — and that’s what they say’s great in a partner, right? That they’re still your best friend, through everything, as well as this person who, like, kisses you and brings you chocolate, all that romantic stuff…”

Harry almost held back on the badgering, hearing how Louis’ voice was losing strength; but his need to know overwhelmed his caution. “Would you say you love her?”

“I mean, yeah. Of course.” There was a pause before Louis amended, “It’s just, like…I don’t know if I love her in the right way or not.” He took a big, steadying breath. “Can I tell you something? And can you try not to judge me? Because I haven’t told this to anyone, and I just feel, like…maybe I just need to say it.”

“Oh course.”

Louis gave a grateful little nod, and then began, “To be honest…” Pause. “She always wants to kiss me, and when she does, I can tell that she’s…happy. That she likes it. And…I dunno, it just feels like kissing to me. It’s not something, like, life-changing, I s’pose…like in the movies. It just is, y’know?”

There was a beat before Louis muttered, “Is that weird? I know it’s all overblown in movies, so I thought that maybe it’s normal, for it not to be all that great in real life. But is it supposed to feel…I dunno. Different?”

Harry took a second to arrange his thoughts. “I think it is supposed to feel special. Just, like, when you’re with the right person. Like, someone who makes you feel happy…and alive, I guess. And safe.”

“That’s what they all say,” Louis sighed. “And the problem is, she does make me feel all of those
things. Just…not in the way that she wants me to feel them, I think.” He reconsidered. “Not in the way that I want to feel them. I genuinely want to be the best that I can be for her, because she deserves that. But there’s always been something missing, on my end. And I feel so shit for that, Harry — for leading her on for so long, when I thought that it was all mutual, and —”

“You shouldn’t feel like shit for that.” Harry reached for the flask, his fingertips grazing Louis’ as the other boy relinquished it. Harry took a sip and stifled a burp. “And I think it’s…it’s good, really, that you say you still love her. Even if it’s not in the way you want to. And you really want her to be happy. That’s important.”

“Yeah?”

“But if you keep trying to be there for her, in the way she wants you to be…it’s going to stop feeling genuine at all, and all she’s going to get is more hurt, and all you’re going to get is more hurt…”

“I know. I just wish…” Louis scrubbed his hands down his face. “I wish I knew what’s wrong with me.”

Harry was all too quick with his reply. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing, Lou.”

Louis hung his head. “Oh believe me, Haz,” he muttered, “there’s a lot wrong with me.”

“No, there’s not,” Harry said. Louis didn't deserve to feel any shame. He would protect Louis from shame with every word he had. “Feelings aren’t nice, all the time.”

“Oh really, Sherlock?”

“No, I mean — they aren’t…straightforward. Then love would be easy, and then there’d be no reason to write poems about it, and make movies about it, and sing songs about it. Can you imagine?”

“I don’t know what songs you’re listening to, but everything I hear is about how fucking great love is. And it hurts, ‘cause, like, I just don’t…” Harry turned to see Louis’ lashes settle on his cheeks, glinting a little in the distant streetlight. “I can’t understand.”

Harry felt the sudden need to pull Louis in towards him, let him rest his head on his shoulder, stroke his back and tell him just how good he was at loving others. Even if Harry had only seen the barest evidence of that fact, it had been more than enough. Louis wore his love on his sleeve. Harry wanted so badly to tell him how easy to love he was, and how it would all work out in his favour, someday.

“It’s like, I believe in love…” Louis rubbed at his eyes, perhaps to force sneaky tears back into their manly dens. “Love just can’t be bothered to believe in me.”

Harry decided to pivot. He had to try flattery. One order of mushy praise, coming up.

“Lou, you’re amazing. If love can’t believe in someone like you…”

Louis opened his eyes, casting Harry a cautious glance.

“…then love’s a shit, isn’t it?”

Louis chuckled, but the mirth didn’t last long. They observed the next beat of silence together with their heads hung.

“M’sorry,” Harry said. “I thought talking about love and that sort of thing would be…fun, I guess.
Didn’t mean to remind you of not-so-fun things.”

Louis shrugged. “Nah. It’s good to talk about them. You’ve got to sometimes, right?” He took a pause. “It’s hard, finding anyone to talk about that sort of stuff with.”

Harry waited for a “thank you” that never came. Instead, Louis prompted, “Tell us something happy, Hazza. I’m guessing there’s been a special someone or two around to make you happy, dashing fellow that you are.”

There had been. Harry didn’t care to mention them. “I’m happy now. Right now.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Stop right there. You’re not trying your charms on a man with a broken heart.”

“Louis, I wasn’t —”

“Suave my arse. Heroes are tasteless.”

“Hey!”

“But seriously. Have you ever been in love?”

Harry felt an answer, ready to go, on the very tip of his tongue. *Never really before, not really… but…*

But what? He chewed on his lip to keep from saying anything stupid, as there were so many deliriously stupid thoughts making the rounds in his head. He felt like he was on the precipice of something, one step away from a freefall, but more than ready to dive. Kind of craving it, actually. All he needed was something to nudge him, to tell him to jump. If Louis would just make him laugh one more time, or seize his hand and squeeze it tight again, or throw another careless arm around his shoulders, maybe Harry would bring himself to say...

“Not really,” he said. “I don’t think. Not yet.”

“Yeah. Same,” said Louis.

It wasn’t exactly a surprise, but Harry’s hopeful heart still sank. They barely knew each other, and they were friends, and Louis liked girls. That was that. Louis wasn’t about to declare Harry the solution to his struggles with love, and snog him silly and leave his girlfriend and run away to London to live with him. This wasn’t a fantasy, though the night’s events so far had made it seem like one.

Though they were sitting next to each other, each with a leg pressed against the other’s, Harry felt a sense of distance seep in between them. But despite it, and through the weight of what felt like rejection bearing down on him, Harry didn’t feel alone.

It occurred to him that sharing silence with someone was something rare. Usually, he could only do that with someone he knew quite well, or else it felt stiff, and cold, and awkward. But nothing felt wrong about sharing silence with Louis.

Eventually, Louis turned to Harry with a shy smile. “Thank you.”

Harry snorted and nudged Louis in the ribs, and that began a bit of a poking war.

“Tonight’s sort of romantic, isn’t it?” Louis suggested after a while, withdrawing his pokes to look
around at the night. Harry mulled the idea over. Louis suddenly pointed to the nearest street, yelled “Punchbuggy!” and jabbed Harry in the stomach. He leapt to his feet and ran down the hill, yelling with glee as he pitched and stumbled.

Harry wobbled to his feet and followed, feet trundling under him faster than he could think. He reached the bottom of the hill after Louis, panting. He shook his head. “Super romantic, Lou.”

Louis laughed. Side by side, the two of them set off towards the streetlights.

They soon found themselves in a maze of a neighbourhood where gridded streets met winding ones, dotted with hip bars and quaint specialty shops, lined with Rolls Royces and Range Rovers and Mercedes. After snaking their way southward for while, Harry spoke up.

“Remember our game, at dinner?”

“Indeed I do.”

“D’you want to play it again?”

Louis smirked and jumped right in with a prompt. “Favourite superhero.”

“Um…Invisible Bartending Boy.”

“You yourself, then? Fair enough.”

“Me? I was shit at that! I meant y—”

“You don’t have a favourite then? Like, a favourite famous one?”

Harry shook his head.

Louis inspected him with a look of pity. Likely because he was still a bit wasted, his calm tone gave way to something very loud, featuring mighty gesturing. “You didn’t ever read a comic and go ‘Yeah, I want to be that bloody good’? You didn’t have that one hero that made you want to run out and save the whole world? Like, ‘I’M HARRY STYLES AND MY CURLY LITTLE FACE IS GONNA SAVE THIS ENTIRE PLANET! GET IN!’”

Harry scrambled to shush him, his giddy expression sending Louis quite the wrong message. Someone whooped at them from across the street. Louis pumped his fist back. “Fuck yeah!”

Harry gave up on the shushing to laugh and whoop along with them. When Louis’ zen had somewhat returned, Harry resumed, “So who’s yours, then?”

“How?”

“Your favourite hero.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “I dunno, maybe the one who saved my life…”

Harry gave his waist a jab. Louis squeaked.
“No, your real favourite. Like, famous one.”

“Mmm. Guess.”

“David Beckham.”

“Yes, of course, but I think you meant the super kind. And the fictional kind.”

“Batman?”

Louis buzzed his lips. “Hardly a superhero, is he? Doesn’t have powers, he just gets everything he needs ‘cause he’s bloody rich.”

“I like him! Yeah, he’s super rich, but like, he’s sort of normal, too? Tells people that, like, you don’t need to be born with talents to change the world or anything. You just have to be dedicated. And have an epic voice.”

“And money.”

“Yeah, I know, but —”

“And come on, Harry, he only spends time helping people so he can use his sexy gadgets and dress up in black spandex.”

Harry pouted. “There’s nothing wrong with doing something good just for an excuse to look fabulous.”

“You have a point, Styles.”

Harry bowed his head in thanks. “But Batman’s not my favourite, by the way.”

“Then who is?”

“Don’t have one. Not important. I want to guess yours.”

“Suit yourself,” Louis conceded. “It’s easier than you think.”


“Hey, you’re the hipster here, not me. But he’s not my favourite, no.”

“Got it. Um…”

“You haven’t even mentioned any Marvel names yet,” Louis chided.

“Ah! It’s an Avenger.”

“Maybe…”

“That’s a no then? Makes sense, I guess, since none of them have proper powers or anything.”

“Well you’re wrong, but we’ll open that can of worms later.”

“Well —”

“I still can’t believe you haven’t guessed it yet,” Louis groaned.
“Wait — Spider-Man?”

“Finally!”

Apparently they were still being loud enough for the lads who had been whooping at them earlier to hear from up the street. They began a rousing rendition of the Spider-Man theme song. Louis joined in, so loud that the whoopers went back to hooting and hollering at Louis’ expense. “Go to bed, Justin Bieber!” one of them called. Louis blew them a raspberry.

“Are you going to tell me why he’s your favourite?” Harry prompted.

“Does there have to be a reason for everything?” Louis sighed.

“No. But we’re having an interesting discussion, and I quite enjoy your insights.”

“And I yours, Harold. Em…” He chewed his lip, thinking of a place to start. “He’s just fucking amazing.”

“The Fucking Amazing Spider-Man?”

“Exactly. And Peter Parker’s way more normal than Bruce Wayne will ever be, thank you very much. He’s a down to earth. He works hard, likes girls sometimes...supports his family a lot, ‘cause they need him. I guess I can sort of relate.”

Harry nodded. “Do they need you?” he asked. “A lot?”

“I mean, between all my sisters, and a working mum and step-dad…yeah, I think they do. And mum and Mark have been…not so good, lately. So yeah, I guess.”

“Sounds like a lot of pressure,” Harry said with compassion.

Louis grimaced. “It can be.”

“Do you feel like…talking about it? Only if you want.”

Louis shrugged. “I mean, sure, but we’ve talked enough about my problems, haven’t we? You’re gonna remember me as The Annoying Yorkshire Lad with All the Issues.”

“Sounds like a fantastic new comic book.”

“I would one hundred percent not read that.”

“But I think I’ll remember you as Louis the Amazing Invisible Bartender. And Louis the Tower Bridge Boy. And Louis who I got on with really well, and who is very funny. And nice.”

“And I shall remember you as the curly one who saved my life, and who was an excellent partner-in-crime and a real stand-up lad. Not that I’ll have to think much to remember you. I’ll own all your comic books.”

“That’s looking unlikely.”

“Oh come on, Harry!” Louis gave his tummy a light jab. “You legend, you!”

Harry giggled, swatting Louis’ finger away from his ticklish bellybutton. “Even if I am, it said in the contract — no comic books.”
“Rubbish!”

“Comes with the anti-American thing, I s’pose.”

“That is just plain unfair. If you become a big hero, Curly, I’ll see to it that you get a comic. Contract permitting or not. You have my word.”

“Sure. Go for it.”

“You don’t sound like you trust me,” Louis said. “But trust me. I am powerful. And with great power…" He slipped into a dramatic American accent, wiggling his eyebrows for effect. “…comes great responsibility.”

They then saw a couple of cops, and pretended to be afraid of the potential that Harry would get busted for underage drinking just for an excuse to run away and chase each other down the back streets, laughing. Always laughing. That seemed to be a constant with the two of them.

Much as Harry seemed to lack super-speed, getting through the city on foot in the wee hours of the morning was surprisingly quick. Central London wasn’t quite as vast as the maps and the multitude of tube stops made it out to be. By the time four o’clock rolled around, the boys stood in the shadow (or lack thereof) of a white-lit giant called St. Paul’s Cathedral.

“I haven’t been to the top. Have you?” Louis asked.

Harry shook his head. “A long time ago. I only remember being too short to see over the guard rail.”

Louis rubbed his hands together, eyes glinting with mischief. He fixed Harry with a bright, tight-lipped grin. Casually, he turned and began to jog up the western façade’s marble steps.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Lou —”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Based on the time of night, Lou, there’s a slight chance it’ll be closed,” Harry called after him.

“Oh? And you’re going to let some closed doors stop you? You’ll make a smashing superhero.”

“Yeah, I will, thanks. A smashing, law-abiding superhero.”

Louis pouted like a toddler. “Aww, c’mon. We’ve broken plenty of rules tonight, and look what that got us!” He motioned to Cara’s flask, sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans. “And haven’t you heard what all the really wise blokes say? Live fast, have fun, be a bit mischievous?”

Harry begrudgingly started up the steps. “Who exactly are all these wise blokes?”

“They’re me.”

“I figured.”

Feeling the ache in his joints from hours of walking, Harry sighed and took a seat on the top step. Ever-restless Louis groaned. When Harry didn’t budge, Louis began to kick at his bum. Masterfully, Harry ignored him, until Louis gave up and sat down next to him.
“Tired, granny?” Louis asked.

Harry put on a creaky voice. “M’not as young as I used to be.”

Louis chuckled. Adopting what Harry had come to recognize as his most genuine tone of voice, he said, “If you really don’t want to — if it gets on your conscience… I understand. Only, we don’t know how long it’s gonna be before we next see each other, do we? And in such an incredible place, we might as well make some memories.”

Harry laughed. “Because I was just about to forget crashing a socialite’s birthday party in a mansion and becoming her celebrity guests of honour.”

“Celebrity? That’s odd. How did that happen again?” Louis mused. “Oh right, because I fell off of a national symbol and you caught me.”

“Oh, did I?”

“I sure hope so.”

“And then, did we hide in a crypt and try to conjure fire like a little cult?”

“After we teleported away from the media. And then you escaped through your hotel wall for a night on the town.”

“No! Really?”

“And now here we are.”

Choosing to embody a little of Louis’ carefree philosophy, Harry laid his head on Louis’ shoulder. He could feel the vibrations in Louis’ throat as he gave a satisfied hum. Smiling, Harry hummed back.

“Well, even if you’re too scared to teleport us up for a view, Haz,” Louis said, “I still would consider this a day very well seized.”

Harry nodded into Louis’ collarbone. “A diem well carpe ’d.”

“But I still want you to teleport us to the top of the cathedral.”

“I’m considering it.”

“Are you accepting bribes?”

Harry shook his head. It was a pretty good cover for outright nuzzling Louis.

“Why not?” Louis protested. “Why are we sitting here when we could be —”

“You’ve been using me all along! You only like me because I can teleport!” Harry harrumphed.

Louis threw an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Having a teleporting friend is pretty sick. But given the choice, I’d take just Harry over your average teleporting guy any day.”

His words had the same emotional effect on Harry as being confronted with a massive dessert. They were too wonderful to digest, too decadent to process; he could practically feel his heart swelling dangerously. “I’m a pretty average teleporting guy,” he insisted.
“Oh, stop it with your ‘I’m so humble’ shit!”

“Only being honest!”

Louis scoffed. “That’s what they all say.”

“But you’ve seen me! In all of my stupid, pimple-ridden glory. I’m quite unglamorous. Not extraordinary enough to be an ordinary hero, let alone a super one.”

“Well excuse me for reading you horribly wrong, then. You seemed rather extraordinary to me.”

Harry smirked. “You’re sucking up.”

“I mean it!”

“You just want me to teleport you!”

“That’s only part of it!”

Harry reluctantly wriggled out from under Louis’ arm. He stood up, stretched, and opened his arms to his companion.

Louis blinked up at him. “Um, hug?”

“If I’m going to teleport with you, I don’t want you to fall.”

Louis grinned and got to his feet. His expression suddenly turned somber. “But what if you fall?”

“Do you want to teleport or not?” Harry grumbled.

“Sorry!” Louis threw his arms around Harry’s waist and squeezed him tight.

If he was being totally honest with himself, Harry wasn’t so sure that teleporting upwards was going to work. Worry made his aching muscles tense. Hurriedly, he managed to shut a good most of his worries out, knowing full well that he had to be confident if he was to have any shot at success. And he needed a shot. The thrill of making Louis grin, of watching those eyes crinkle and those fang-teeth poke out over his bottom lip — that was worth everything.

Harry closed his eyes. “Ready?”

“Ready,” said Louis.

Sneaking another peek up at the dome of the cathedral to inform his mental picture, Harry gripped Louis tighter and bit his lip. He pictured standing behind the marble rail on the highest viewing gallery, looking out over the sleeping city. He concentrated until he could feel the wind in his hair. His toes began to tingle. The tingle spread up into his feet, up the back of his legs, up his spine...

And then his heart leapt, and his stomach lurched, and a head rush filled his skull. The wind grew suddenly stronger. Harry's eyes flew open, but he couldn't make sense of what he was seeing — all darkness, all shadows. He heard Louis gasp. He felt the soles of his feet touch marble, and then slip —

“Gotcha!” Louis panted. Harry was forced backwards. He felt Louis press up against his chest, securing him in place. His heels found a bit of purchase. A marble railing dug into his back.

With a start, Harry realized that he had teleported to the wrong side of the railing. The dome sloped
away beneath him. His toes were hanging over mid-air. Louis' feet sandwiched his, with his heels hanging. Only Louis' arms around his waist tethered them to the gallery, keeping the both of them from falling.

All too soon, Louis' fingers began to loose their grip. His toes struggled to grip the marble ledge. “Harry, quick, you're gonna have to hop over backwards.”

Harry's stomach lurched. His shoes squeaked. Any second now, he would slip again. If he fell, Louis would too. His body rattled with panic at the thought. Paralyzed, he could only listen as Louis barked, “Harry, you have to get over the rail. Use your legs, use your body, something!” Louis tried to regain his hold on the rail, but his sweaty hands gave him too much slack. “I'm falling!”

Harry trembled. His instincts screamed at him to do something, but how could he trust his own body when he couldn't trust his powers?

“Now, Harry!” Louis shrieked, but Harry couldn't move. In an instant, he saw the terror in Louis' eyes turn into resolve. He shoved into Harry with all of his might, knocking him backwards.

Harry’s back arched over the marble rail. He cried out in pain. Louis scrambled up and over him as if he were a bridge, hitting the floor of the gallery with a grunt. He stood, whirled around, caught Harry under the arms, and dragged him over the rail to safety.

Harry's bum hit stone, rather hard. Louis stretched him out and laid him on his back.

“Thank fuck!” Louis exhaled. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Harry sat up, panting. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the panic to subside. He felt Louis' hands on his shoulders, but he didn't dare look up. He couldn't meet Louis' eyes. What had Harry done to deserve his care? The only comfort he could stomach was the cold stone floor beneath him. He laid his palms against it, hoping it might help him feel safe.

“You're alright, Harry,” Louis said in his ear. “You're alright.”

“No,” Harry said. Everything was wrong. He had done wrong, and he was still here. That couldn't be right.

Louis quieted his thoughts with a warm “Shhshhh.” He got Harry on his feet and guided him away from the rail. When they were as far back from it as they could get, they finally caught their breaths.

It took a good few minutes more for them to gather the courage to walk back to the view together, in silence.

The city glimmered in greeting. From their height, it looked like an illuminated map spread out around them. The river was an obsidian ribbon, edged in white and blue and gold. The Millennium Bridge straight ahead of them was lit up, silver and ghostly, a heavenly path across dark water. To their left, the financial district’s towers were outlined in tiny red lights, forming a connect-the-dots across the skyline. Just downriver stood Tower Bridge, watching over the Thames.

“Gorgeous,” said Louis, brushing his fringe back from his face. Harry studied Louis’ profile in the city’s glow. He wanted to agree, and to let himself take in the view, but his stomach was a mess of knots. Guilt gnawed at his insides. He should have known not to trust his powers. At least not with
something as important as Louis’ life.

Louis’ smile turned sour as he looked Harry over. “It’s alright. Doesn’t bite. It’s just a view.”

Harry bowed his head. “I’m so sorry, Lou. I know that's not enough, but I am.”

Louis looked confused. “We’ve got all of London at our feet. And the night is young. That's enough for me. What’s there to be sorry about?”

Harry fixed Louis with a look of alarm. “Honestly, Lou?”

“Honestly what?”

“Lou, you nearly died.”

Louis spread his arms. “But I didn’t, did I?”

“That’s not the point! You nearly died, and it was my fault. I nearly killed you,” Harry huffed. “You shouldn’t be talking to me right now. You should be dangling me over the rail by my toes!”

“I think I’ve had enough dangling for right now.”

“Metaphorically!”

Louis rested his elbows on the rail and his head in his hands. He looked up at Harry, his face half blue in the city-light. “Harry. I’m alright. And I’m enjoying this. And you’re not perfect. We’re both alive, and we’re here, and I’m happy! And the whole teleporting thing was my idea, anyway.”

“But I could’ve said no.”

“Then I would’ve been a right shit about it until you’d have given in.”

That bit was undeniable. “But I still did it. It’s the action that’s the worst. I did it, when I knew I should’ve said no!”

Louis trilled his lips, fixing Harry with a hopeful smile. “Is it bad that I’ve already forgiven you?”

“Yes!” Harry snapped.

Shrug. “Too late.”

“No, it's not. Throw me over the railing now, before I become the worst superhero in history.”

“I told you, I’m done with the dangling, Achilles!” It took Louis a second to recognize that Harry wasn’t in the mood for Greek mythology jokes. “And shit, Hazza, give yourself a break. I’m the first person you’ve ever saved. I’m the guinea pig. You should be allowed to make all your mistakes with me.”

Liam had been a guinea pig, too. *Training* was for making mistakes. “I can’t make mistakes.”

Louis’ smile wilted. He heaved a faint sigh. “We all do. Even heroes.”

“Easy for you to say. If I make a mistake, someone dies.”

Louis’ smile tried to creep back into place, and nearly succeeded. “But, point is, we’re alive! Still a little inebriated and really sore, but alive. Can’t we focus on that?”
With a deep breath, Harry turned back to the view. Louis led them in a loop of the gallery deck, a tiny tour of the city with their eyes. The London Eye twinkled from the opposite bank. The Houses of Parliament stood sentinel at the next river bend. The lights of Wembley Stadium winked in the distance. With its suburbs crawling out to the horizon, it looked like London was the entire world.

As they returned to their spot, Harry sighed away as many of the stomach knots as he could, and made a last attempt to apologize. “I'm sorry I wasn't more careful. I'm sorry I didn't do better.”

Louis was resolute. “Apology not accepted.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Louis’ touch held him back. The back of his hand brushed against Harry's. Harry’s heart gave a flutter.

Louis’ fingers closed the gap between them, and wriggled their way into the spaces between Harry’s. He clasped their palms together and squeezed. None of this made Harry feel any less guilty, but it coloured his surroundings with warmth. The city seemed to brighten, its paler lights turning golden. He managed a gentle laugh as the breeze picked up, wreaking havoc on his and Louis’ recently-adjusted hair situations. Louis chuckled back, and Harry let himself feel the moment as bliss.

Fixing Harry with the beam of his smile, Louis squeezed his hand just a little tighter and muttered, “We're gonna be alright.”

Those words meant next to nothing. Harry had no way of knowing if they held any truth. But Louis said them with renewed faith, so Harry took another gulp of night air and believed them.

The third staircase they encountered on their way down was winding and wooden. It ended in an arched stone doorway that led into darkness. Cautiously, Harry stepped through it, Louis right behind him. His extended reach caught a railing. He followed it as it curved, running his fingers along wrought iron.

“There’s a railing, Lou,” he called over his shoulder.

“Got it, thanks,” Louis called back, still catching his breath from endless flights of stairs.

It took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, but when they did, Harry could see the inside of the massive dome of St. Paul’s above them. An expanse of pillars and chairs across marble floors lay below them. He wasn’t sure if it was the size, or the sanctity, or the beauty of the place, but something scared him into silence. He and Louis guided each other the rest of the way down with slight touches, cautious murmurs, and the occasional hiss as they stubbed their toes in the dark.

The last set of stairs took them to the ground floor of the massive beast. Looking around, Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. It was, in some ways, an immaculate haven. In other ways, it made Harry’s skin crawl. Swathes of streetlight and moonlight came through stained-glass windows, lighting up the faces of pale marble statues, bringing them to ghostly life. Tiny candles lit for offerings were glowing dimmer and dimmer, flickering out all around them. The light filtering down from the dome formed a halo on the floor beneath it.

“There, that’s the exit,” Louis gestured ahead, to the right of the dome. He stepped over a guard rope. Anticipating Harry's clumsiness, he spun around to give him a hand, then led him forward through the empty leviathan by his fingertips.
The eerie quiet began to get to Harry, even with the brush of Louis’ fingers for comfort. As they made their way down an aisle, he felt the need to make a bit of conversation.

“This place kinda makes you feel…like, if God exists, that he must be here. Sometimes, at least. On His holidays. Like, over there, in the corner somewhere, listening to us.”

“Hmm.” Louis cast his eyes around the dome above them, full of awe, though his voice tried its best to remain unaffected. “Well, then, you might as well go have a chat with Him. Got anything to confess?”

Harry shook his head.

Louis let go of Harry’s fingers to poke him in the love-handle. “C’mon, Harry. Fess up.”

“I haven’t got anything!”

“No sins in the Harry bin?”

“No sins. Just secrets.”

“Give us a secret, then.”

“M’not telling you.”

“That’s right!” Louis concurred. “You’re telling God.”

“God already knows them. If He exists, that is. If He’s even a He.”


“I don’t think so. Unless you count masturbating, I guess.”

“Hah! That’s sin number two then, right there — talking about wanking in a church.”

“Cathedral,” Harry corrected.

“Even better! That has to count for two!”

Harry laughed — gently, as if for fear that some kind of holy spirit was listening in and genuinely cared about the small talk of two teenagers.

Harry stopped in the pool of light beneath the dome. He opened his arms and began to spin on the spot. “Say God was real, and you had a chance to talk, to...” He gave the pronoun some thought. “Them. What would you say?”

Louis put his hands on his hips. “Other than ’The world’s really fucked up so can you please fix it?’”

Harry stopped spinning (the room didn’t) so he could fix Louis with a chiding pout. “Don’t swear in a cathedral!”

Louis rolled his eyes. He looked up at the dome. “Lord, pardon my French!”

Harry chuckled and went back to spinning, which he soon realized was a terrible idea. He stopped much too fast this time. Louis came over to catch him with a grunt. “Alright, there?”

Harry stood and steadied himself before pressing on. “But that’s really what you’d say?”
“What, you don’t think I care about the world being fucked?”

“Shhh, church!” Harry hissed.

“Cathedral,” Louis corrected.

“Whatever. But that’s really what you’d say?”

“Well yeah. I’ve got a limit, don’t I? One question?”

“What if you had a couple more?”

Louis began to tug a still-disoriented Harry toward the door. “I dunno, I’d probably ask for…advice, I guess? ‘Cause God knows everything, of course.”

“About what?”

“I was getting there, Harold.”

“Sorry.”

“You should be. Em…maybe I’d ask for some tips on being a better son and brother and that. Jesus was a pretty good son, wasn’t he? He might know. I dunno. It’d just be nice not to be a burden on mum.”

Harry frowned. “You’re not, though. She was telling my mum earlier —”

“It’s okay, Harry, it’s not a big deal. Let’s see — a couple more questions, you said? Maybe some football advice, God’d be good at that. I could ask to be introduced to David Beckham! That’d be something. Aaaaand…” He smacked his lips. “Perhaps some dating advice. I could ask if…” He clenched and unclenched his fist. “…if I’m doing the right thing with Hannah or not.”

Harry felt an awful, familiar feeling: the desperate desire to help someone, paired with the inability to find the right thing to say. Maybe dumb humour wasn’t the right thing to use in the end, but it was all he had. “I don’t think God’s ever had a girlfriend. They might not be the right — um, entity — to ask about that.”

“Ah, well. Isn’t that how it always works, in life? The hardest questions that you really don’t want to answer yourself are always the ones other people can’t answer for you, and even God doesn’t know shit…”

“Cathedral!”

“Sorry!”

They reached the door. Harry tried to pull it open, but as expected, it was very securely shut. Louis laid his back against it, beginning to slide down to the floor with a sigh. “I guess God wants more of our company, eh?”

Harry sat down next to him as soon as his bum hit the marble. He cleared his throat. “Louis.”

“Harry.”

“Does Hannah make you happy?”

“Not being trapped in a bloody church at four in the morning makes me happy, Harry.”
“Cathedral,” Harry corrected again.

“CATHEDRAL!” Louis yelled. The sound echoed like crazy. Harry was startled into silence by the sheer power of it. He continued in a whisper.

“Just answer me. We’ll find a way out, promise. But for now, just yes or no. Does she make you happy.”

“Yes, she does.”

“Do you make her happy?”

“Apparently…”

“Good. Now, does the two of you being together make you both happy?”

Pause.

“I guess not.”

“Yes or no?”

“No.”

“Then you should break up with her.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“It’s not easy like that, Harry.”

Harry bowed his head. “It’s not easy. But it’s true.”

Louis sighed. He stared back up at the magnificent ceiling, matching Harry’s volume to avoid that bone-chilling echo. “I just wish I knew why…”

“Why what?”

“Why it all looked right, once…but then it all felt wrong. All of a sudden…”

Harry hummed his sympathy. “S’not easy, you know. For everything to feel…right, I guess. To find that right spark, like they say. My parents were married, even, and now I’m not sure they ever had that at all. It’s rare, Lou.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“That’s why I’m always kind of amazed, like…that love is everywhere. Real, true love. The kind of thing that doesn’t happen every day to us. It’s always happening to someone. You know?”

“Yeah, pleasant thought, if you’re not afraid that that’s never gonna be you.”

Harry slid a hand up between the great wooden door and Louis’ back, resting it on the nape of Louis’ neck. “It’s gonna be you someday, Lou. I know it.”

“Sounds great, Haz. Thing is, you don’t know that. No one does.”
“Who are you to tell me the extent of my own powers?”

“I’m physics, Harry,” Louis deadpanned. “Nice to meet you. Believe it or not, you’re not above me.”

“Well, God is.”

“I’m sure God is.”

“And that’s God, over there, in the corner, like I told you. And They’re telling me that the love of your life is out there, and that someday you’ll meet them.”

_Actually, Harry thought, God, if They exist, is probably just enjoying the dramatic irony._

When Louis said nothing, Harry added, “You’re at the very least welcome to share in the company of my seven buxom wives.”

Louis snorted a laugh, then went back into serious mode. “But that’s not the problem, is it? The problem is me. And if Hannah is so great, and lovely, and funny, and gorgeous — why can’t I love her?”

Harry had nothing to say to that.

Louis pinched and stretched his cheeks. “Aw…fuck it, Harry, I’m so sorry.”

_Cathedral —_

“Yeah, right, I know, it’s just…” He let his face fall into his hands. “I’m not like this. I don’t get this down in front of other people. I’m usually pretty good at being happy, being in the moment. And I don’t want this to be what you remember of me, so like — I’m sorry. I’ll stop now. And we’ll make haste before the sun rises and all that.”

“I think it’s ‘while the sun shines,’ but —”

“Rise, shine. Church, cathedral. Who the hell cares.”

This time, Harry was much too concerned with consoling Louis to scold him about invoking hell in a cathedral. “Don’t apologize. If it makes you feel better, say whatever you want.”

“You say that, but —”

“Shush. I mean it. I’ve had fun today. And I nearly died, too, but that happens. So as long as you don’t try to kill me, and I don’t nearly kill the both of us again, I think I’ll keep being happy. And you can say whatever you like, and I’ll listen. Honest.”

Harry saw the outline of Louis’ grateful smile in the faint light. “Thanks, Haz.”

“It’s nothing, Lou.”

Louis leaned into him. Harry leaned back. They shared the next few minutes without speaking. They held each other up and kept each other pressed together, connected by shoulders and hips and thighs. They shielded each other from the cold and the dark. The door had their backs, but they held each other's sides; sayings be damned, that had to be just as important.

Louis broke the silence with his softest voice. “You’re…like I said, you’re really easy to talk to. More than anyone I’ve ever met, actually. Is it weird, that I feel like you’re my best mate already?”
Harry’s insides went warm and gooey. “I don’t think so. But that’s probably ’cause I feel the same.”

Louis chuckled. He placed a hand on Harry’s thigh. “Good to know I’m at least as sane as you.”

Harry placed his free hand on top of Louis’, like a protective cover. Louis’ didn’t flinch. He stilled for a beat, then wrapped his thumb around Harry’s.

Harry’s heart grew loud in his ears. His breath quickened. Louis heard it, and began to trace soothing circles on the back of Harry’s hand.

Harry’s pulse raced and raced and raced. He couldn’t get ahead of himself. He couldn’t put any more pressure on Louis, not after putting his life in danger. All of the wrong words came to mind, so ready to be said. Every feeling, every truth — ready to erupt, to split him open.

Not tonight, he told himself. “Not tonight” probably meant never, and that was for the best, but Harry found the sugarcoated version much easier to stomach. Just not tonight. Not tonight.

Louis’ thumb eventually stilled. He rolled his shoulders, cracked his ankles, restless. “Can we get out of here? I think God wants some ’Me’ time.”

Perfect timing. Harry stood, shook himself off, and stared at the very solid wooden door. He pulled Louis up by the hand, and kept holding it as they faced their opponent together.

Louis tensed. “We’re not going to walk through the door, are we?”

Harry wasn’t much a fan of the prospect either. He couldn’t imagine it resulting in death, but injury seemed likely. After their incident atop the dome, he felt less than comfortable trusting his powers to get them out of a pickle. This was certainly his masterpiece disaster waiting to happen.

Reluctantly, he said, “What choice do we have?”

“Sleepover with God, or we walk through the door,” Louis gathered. “Got it.”

Harry let out a long exhale, stretched, gave his stiff bum a quick shake, and then closed his eyes, gripping Louis’ hand tighter. “Ready?” he asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” Louis answered.

Harry hesitated. He couldn’t just dive into this. How could he slip into that perfect superpower mindset? He was a sleep-deprived mess.

He imagined a series of attempts, all ending in a thud. The staff there would find them bruised and bloodied in the morning, Harry convinced himself. That’s how this had to end.

“You’re overthinking. You just have to do it,” Louis counselled. “Trust me.”

Harry nodded. It was like jumping off of a diving board, he told himself. Or falling into the Thames. With no logic or sense behind it, it just had to be done.

“I’m going to count to three, and you’re going to do it,” Louis said. He took a deep breath. “One, two...”

And just like that, Harry brought them surging forward. In a few disorienting seconds, they tumbled out onto the south steps of St. Paul’s.
MADE IN THE A.M. IS OUT AND MY FAVOURITE SONGS ON IT ARE NEVER ENOUGH, NEVER ENOUGH, NEVER ENOUGH, AND NEVER ENOUGH. (i have a few more too but.) Come talk to me about it on tumblr!

If you'd like to spread the word about this fic I'd be honoured! You can reblog this baby.
The boys were too exhausted to relish their freedom. As soon as they were settled back on the cathedral’s front steps, Harry declared, “That’s enough excitement for one night.”

Louis grimaced. “Yeah.” And then, a minute of silence later, said “Sorry.”

“You already said that.”

“No, I mean. For the teleporting thing. For putting pressure on you.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You saved me, idiot.”

“It doesn’t count if I was the one to put you in danger in the first place.” Louis had his head hung, tapping his toes on the marble at an anxious pace, as if enough taps could erase his guilt.

Harry bit his tongue, racking his brain for a soothe-all sentence or two. “Remember what you said, back in Hyde Park? About how you wish you could use your powers to save someone? Just one person?”

Louis shook his head. “Yeah. Saving someone. I never said anything about correcting my own stupid mistakes.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, you know, something they teach you in Super School — my mentor was telling me about it before our meeting yesterday —”

“Oh, fuck off, Harry. Honestly.”

Harry gave it a moment. When Louis began to fidget with his beanie, Harry resumed, “A super
doesn’t get to decide if they’ve saved someone, Lou. According to international super law.”

Louis raised his eyebrows for a second, intrigued, but his interest wore off in an instant. “Because when they do save somebody, it’s blatantly obvious who did the saving.”

“But sometimes it isn’t. And when it isn’t, it’s the person who got saved who gets to have the official word on how they were saved.”

“That’s ridiculous! So I could make up some bullshit about getting brutally attacked by — I dunno, a sea urchin, and even though — sure, Aquaman saved me — I could say it was a bloody dolphin and get away with it?”

“Interesting example, but yeah, potentially. Witnesses would help.”

Louis let his head fall into his cupped hands. “Can we just, like, not talk about this right now? I’m tired. We should probably get back.”

“Lou, you —”

“No, Harry, I’m not going to listen to you try to salvage my self-worth again, okay? I didn’t make it to the live shows this week, my powers drive me absolutely mental and they aren’t worth shit, school is a headache, I can't love my girlfriend, Doncaster is fucking boring except for our football team, and it’s not your job to make me feel better. It’s mine. Let’s go back.”

For all his huffing, Louis didn’t stand up to leave.

Harry folded his hands in his lap. He tried to entertain himself through the next few quiet minutes by trying to see through the tinted glass and count the drunken figures all stuffed into the back of each passing Addison Lee. It was somewhat entertaining, until the silence between them started to feel like an itch, surrounding him and pestering him and making him feel lost and guilty and angry that a night of such wonders had to be ending like this. That this ridiculous and spontaneous connection he had made, and that he had tried to nurture — that it was all dead with one small misdeed, and one small accident, and Harry’s pathetic little attempts at comfort.

“Louis Tomlinson,” Harry said, a slight question in his voice.

Louis took one hand off of his face, turned his head and quirked a tired eyebrow. “Mmm?”

“Did you fall off of Tower Bridge yesterday?”

Louis took a slow inhale, hesitating. But, in the end, he decided to play along. “Yes.”

“Did I save you, yesterday?”

Louis took a slow inhale, hesitating. But, in the end, he decided to play along. “Yes.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Good. Now it’s my turn. You saved m—”

Louis didn’t meet Harry’s eyes. “Harry, I told you…”

“Look, I did a really stupid thing tonight, okay? I pushed my powers when I wasn’t ready. And I had some encouragement, but in the end, it was me, and I didn’t use my best judgement. And I’m sorry for that. Really sorry.”

The headlights of a passing vehicle — another damn Addison Lee — lit up the irises of Louis’ eyes. Harry had to keep talking, the beauty and the sadness written on that face threatening to erase all
reason, all restraint, and lead him to say and do things that would most certainly taint all of Louis’ memories of him, for the rest of his life.

He interrupted his train of thought with words. “Louis Tomlinson, you saved me tonight. I would say that I owe you my life, but I already saved you yesterday, so. We’re even.”

Though Louis still didn’t meet Harry’s eyes, that was enough to coax a shy smile into the corners of his mouth. Harry smiled back, maybe a bit too eagerly, before catching himself, schooling his features. He looked back in time to see Louis’ smile widen — maybe just a slight bit, or maybe he couldn’t see so well in the streetlight, or maybe it wasn’t there, he was just imagining, but he could have sworn that on the other boy’s lips he saw —

*What if I kissed him?*

The possibility made Harry feel light as air. What should have been simply and exclusively terrifying was actually a wonderful and liberating thought, so he told it to himself again. *I want to kiss the boy that saved me. The boy I saved. I want to kiss Louis Tomlinson.* He laughed at himself, aloud.

Louis shot him a confused glance. He snorted, and gradually started to laugh with him, as if he had the slightest clue as to why Harry was laughing. The dramatic irony made Harry laugh even harder, and Louis laughed even harder with him, and they sat there and laughed once again, just like on Bond Street, just like outside the crypts, just like when Louis had burped at dinner, just like when they had run away from the media at Tower Bridge. Like the truest pair of buffoons.

But all too soon — so much sooner than every other time — the tired ache settled back into their bones, and their laughter died in coughs and splutters. At least their silence was now considerably happier, more at ease.

Louis stretched as if preparing to hibernate. He laid his bum and legs out flat on the step, and leaned back to let his head fall into Harry’s lap. Harry patted him on the shoulder, and he closed his eyes. The pats lengthened until Harry’s hand was just resting there, gently squeezing and releasing as Louis took a deep breath and a long sigh.

They sat that way until the sky turned that shade of hazy blue that signals the retreat of the last scraps of night before dawn. Harry pulled Louis’ phone out and saw that the time was 5:02, and in the grand scheme of things, it wouldn’t be too long until their mothers would wake up and panic at the sight of their empty beds, and interrupt the boys’ quiet with frantic calls and texts…

Harry softly shook Louis awake. “Shall we go find somewhere to watch the sunrise?”

Blinking away sleepiness, Louis sat up. “Where to?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, there’s that Kinks song about the sunrise on Waterloo Bridge…or is that a sunset?”

Louis turned to face him and smiled sweetly, the smile lines on his face delicately etched against the streetlight and the growing light of dawn. Harry’s breath caught at their closeness, the bridge of Louis’ odd little nose being within reach of his lips. Louis paused, looking Harry in the eye, and Harry came so close. So bloody close to closing the distance, but his stomach lurched every time he tried to lean the tiniest bit forward. Time slowed and gave him ample opportunity to try again, to just pluck up the courage, but Harry found himself saying no at every moment. *I can’t. I can’t. Not today.*

Louis eventually stood, dusting off his trackies.
He waited for Harry to follow suit before throwing an arm around his shoulders. “Sunrise or sunset? Let’s go find out, love.”

And it was just any old term of endearment, Harry knew, but.

Love.

*RIP: Harry Styles’ fledgling superhero career, robbed from him by dumb terms of endearment and a pair of twinkling eyes.*

They walked to the river’s edge and kept westward, watching the city begin to stir. They stood on Waterloo Bridge, looking out at the Eye and the Shard and the glass towers, as the first glimmers of a new day began to show.

“One day, maybe I’ll be like you,” Louis sighed, breaking their silence. “I’ll be a mighty hero with a hot model girlfriend and I’ll fly her up to the top car of the London Eye at midnight and we’ll make out.”

“Mmm,” Harry nodded. He could feel some stupid part of him twinge at the idea of Louis making out with some attractive random other.

“Oh, here comes the sun!”

“Doo-doo doo-doo,” sang Harry.

Louis chuckled, eyes going crinkly. Harry tried very hard not to stare at the way the pink light softened the edges of his face, or how pretty his eyelashes looked as they shone a little in the morning glow.

“This is proper romantic, like,” Louis noted.

Harry knew, and it was making him antsy. *Not long now,* he promised himself, until he wouldn't have to think about the possibility of kissing Louis, and what that would mean. They would leave each other behind, and both start again. And it would be for the best.

But he didn't want to feel the hurt just yet.

For a change of mood, Harry grabbed Louis’ beanie and yanked it down over his face. Louis squawked, and reached out to try to slap him in vain, but Harry had backed away a perfect couple of inches. He chuckled as he watched Louis fumble, taking swipe after swipe at him, timing his moves and adding tasteful touches of exaggeration, a true slapstick comedian.

Louis finally managed to find Harry’s chin with his fingertips. Middle finger following forefinger, he began to walk his fingers up Harry’s face. He couldn’t get past Harry’s lips, as Harry took the opportunity to grab them with his teeth. Louis squealed. Harry gave them a teasing nibble, before realizing exactly how strange eating a friend’s fingers in public was. He paused, giving Louis the chance to wiggle his fingers free.

In an attempt to salvage his dignity, Harry joked, “Mm. Salty,”

*Nice, Harold.*
Louis sighed. Before he could comment, Harry said wistfully, “Wish we could do this every day.”

“Be a pair of London vagabonds?”

“Yeah.”

“What a way to live…” Louis mused. “Well, who knows. Maybe if I get this A-levels thing right, I could come here for uni. We could move in together. I’ll be the cool guy who lives in the posh flat with his superhero roommate. We could make it a reality show. That is, unless you require a bachelor pad for the hordes of women you’re gonna be bringing home. S’cool, I totally get it —”

Harry laughed. “Not at all.”

“Are you kidding? Money, power, and curls, Harry. Good luck keeping them away!”

Harry shook his head. “No. You should come live with me.”

“It’s a deal, then. We’ve known each other for all of — what, fifteen hours? And look at that, we’ve already planned our futures together. What’s next, children? Even as young as we are?”

“Aafter last night...I may already be pregnant.”

Louis fitted his beanie over Harry’s curls and pulled it over his eyes. “Now there’s a rumour to get your name in the press! But whatever I did to you last night, biologically speaking, you won’t be getting preggo.” He clapped Harry on the back. “Sorry, mate.”

“Who needs biology. I’m special.”

“Yeah, you are.”

The sudden lack of sarcasm in Louis’ tone took Harry by surprise. “I didn’t mean actually.”

“Well I did.” When Harry didn’t respond, Louis continued, “No, I’m serious. Maybe not about getting you pregnant…” he chuckled, “…but about moving in with you, and everything.”

Harry pulled the beanie back up, freeing his eyes and giving Louis a goofy smile. Louis stared back, unfazed. His gaze was serious, but not stern. Those eyes were telling Harry just how much weight there was behind every word he spoke. Overwhelmed, Harry let his grinning cheeks go slack.

“I’ve just never met anyone like you before.” A hint of nerves clawed at Louis’ words. “Someone I get on so easily with — never mind the fact that you saved my fucking life…”

There were words Harry desperately wanted to say, but they were saccharine, and he had no idea if Louis truly believed in any of this fate bullshit —

Aww, fuck it.

“I never told you what happened, did I?”

“What d’you mean?”

“With the Tower Bridge incident.”

Harry chewed his bottom lip as he thought of the right way to say it. “Before all that, I was…just walking with my mum, and for some reason, I just felt like I had to walk really fast…like I was gonna miss something if I didn’t speed up. You might as well have been standing up there with bait on a fishing line,” he smiled, pausing to check in with Louis, who was listening, rapt.

“It’s like, before I even left the shore, I felt...a bit of panic, I guess. And then once I’d caught you, it’s like I didn’t give a shit that we were about to hit the water, or that we were in mid-air, I just knew… that…everything was alright? Everything was as it was…meant to be, I guess.”

Harry paused, before making a gagging sound, laughing in spite of himself. “That was disgusting.”

“I’m a big believer in fate,” said Louis calmly.

“Hmm,” Harry said softly.

The sun had now risen, and the bustle of the city had begun, with its early-rising employees just starting to congest the streets. The boys went reverently quiet once more. Harry had noted many times before that his best friends were the ones that he could be completely silent with and still enjoy their company. Unforgettable people always had a certain presence that hung in the air around them. Something that spoke for them when they weren’t speaking. Looking out over the city in the sunrise, Harry figured that he must have been looking at Louis’ aura, big and bright enough to cast all of London in gold.

He wanted to tell Louis. He was burning to tell him, to spill his big gay thoughts all over this boy he had barely met. To tell him how much he meant every touch, every look, and all of his waxing-poetic about fate.

“We’d best be going, Haz,” Louis announced, standing and shaking out his stiff limbs, cracking his knuckles. “I’ve got a train to catch, you have a world to save, and we both have mothers who’ll be rather cross if we try to do otherwise.”

Harry stretched. “They’re probably out for croissants before the spa, to get mani-pedis and forget we exist,” he yawned.

Louis’ phone vibrated, making him jump. He took it out and frowned. “Well, according to my new angry text, that simply isn’t the case.” He narrated his reply as he typed. “Yes… mum… Harry… and... I... were... just... having some... last-minute... male bonding... urgent stuff... be back soon.” He turned back to Harry with a pixie smile. “And now the tube is open again. Should get us back in no time. Happy days.”

“Or we could walk. S’not far.” Anything to buy a little more time.

Louis raised an eyebrow. “We’re all the way north of Hyde Park.”

“The tube’ll be packed. S’gonna be rush hour. Walking’ll be nicer.”

“Yeah, but it’ll take a year.”

“It won’t, promise!”

“And I’m knackered…”

“A little walk should wake you up!”

“As if, we’ve been walking all night! Mum needs to get back for the girls, she’ll be gutted if we miss
the train because of me. Believe me, happened before! Still have the nightmares.” Louis bit his lip. “I’m sorry, Harry, I wish I could —”

“The girls! You were gonna tell me more about them! Why don’t you tell me on our walk?”

“On the tube, Harry. I’ll tell you on the tube.”

“But you won’t have time! We’ll be back too soon! Come, walk with me.” Harry grabbed Louis’ sweaty hand and tried to drag him towards the north shore.

Louis was stubbornly still, so Harry nearly yanked his arm out of its socket. “Harry, please, the tube’s just across the bridge.”

Harry spun around, still clutching Louis’ hand in his. He couldn’t think of anything better to say, so he gave the most powerful and immature of answers — a whiney “No.”

Louis smiled. He squeezed Harry’s palm, as if bracing for something, and suddenly Harry felt the distance between them shrink, and Louis’ eyes were practically glowing, and they were still holding fucking hands, and before Harry knew it he could feel himself take the teeniest of steps forward, closer.

“Harry…” Louis shifted his hand in Harry’s grip, interlacing their fingers.

Okay, now Harry was well and truly leaning in, almost close enough to feel the tip of Louis’ nose on his, to touch his cheeks, his mind already racing dizzying circles, drunk again on hope, and —

“Oh my God, are you the boys from Tower Bridge?”

The remainder of their time on Waterloo Bridge mostly consisted of Harry nodding and smiling through a cheerful conversation with the morning joggers who had discovered them. Before long, Louis’ phone buzzed, and he gave an adorable jump. The call was from his mother, and as soon as he had hung up, Louis politely made their excuses to the kind pair of people and yanked Harry towards the tube stop.

The city was now well and truly awake. Through the bustle, Harry caught sight of the front pages of several papers in the fronts of stalls and stands. Each bore a picture of two sopping-wet, grinning boys, arm in arm. Headlines speculated and hyperbolized and jumped to conclusions. “Is This The Face of Britain’s New Hero?;” “Superboy Saves Boy from Deadly Fall;” “‘Unreal’: London Pedestrians Witness Something Super;” and even “Dawn of the British Superhero.”

But to Harry, that image alone said all that needed to be said. Two boys, side by side, grinning as they talked to the press. Two boys, arm in arm, laughing as they skipped down to the tube.

They were silent for the first few stops. All of the things Harry wanted to ask, all that he wanted to know, all of the disgusting feelings he wanted to spew at Louis before they went their separate ways clogged up his throat and chest, until he could barely remember a single one of them above the clutter in his head.

Finally, after several minutes of biting his lip, Harry remembered one thing that he had meant to ask Louis all along. “I can’t believe we’ve talked about nearly everything, but we haven’t brought up music! D’you have a favourite song?”
“I’m quite partial to ‘Who Let the Dogs Out,’” Louis nodded.

“Hah!”

“What, you don’t think I’m serious? It’s a melodically brilliant track!”

“But it lacks substance, I find.”

“Substance? Oh, go grow a moustache and curl up with your vinyls in an exposed-brick corner, then.”

“Fine. Maybe I will.”

“Alright then. Go on.”

“No, but m’serious. Is that really your favourite song? Ever?”

Louis pondered. “Hmm…maybe not quite. I like a good ballad. I think my favourite song, for the moment, at least — would have to be…”

He slipped his phone out of his pocket and unwound the ear buds, giving one to Harry. The song was already on pause on Louis’ screen. He restarted it, a progression of piano chords playing.

“If I don’t say this now, I will surely break/ As I am leaving the one I want to take…”

It felt like something almost sacred, sharing earbuds with Louis. The distance between them narrowed in Harry’s mind. Lost in the soundscape of a little world all their own.

“Be my baby/ And I’ll look after you…”

“And now you know what a sap I am,” said a sheepish Louis, as the first chorus went by.

“As if I didn’t already know,” Harry said, making Louis chuckle. “Takes one to know one.”

“D’you like it?”

Harry nodded. “It’s kind of perfect.”

Louis smiled.

“Mum, Harry and I are at King’s Cross. No, we’ll be waiting for you here. No, you come here!
Noooooooo, youuuuuu come heeeere…”

“Lou, the hotel’s not far. We could go give your mum a hand.”

“Shush, Harry. No mum, that was Harry. No mum, Harry’s far too young to know what he’s talking about.” He patted Harry on the head. “Yes, I know, I left it all a big mess, but you just need to shove it all in my suitcase, there’s nothing important there. We’ll just have breakfast here! Please, mum?”

“Lou, let’s go give your mum a hand!”

“Hungover? Drinking? Of course not, mum! We just went for a walk. Yes, a walk, all night. Big city, lots to see!”
“Louuuuuuuu we need to helllllllllllllp.”


Louis hung up with a nod to Harry. Harry tried his best to look disapproving.

“What?”

“We should have helped her! She’s been so sweet to us, and we’ve gone missing on her twice.”

“But my head is pounding…” Louis slumped back against their bench for emphasis. “And I’m sore all over, and I’m exhausted. Aren’t you?”

“Course. But you didn’t look like it a minute ago. Or does being loud not take any energy out of you?”

“High on life, I s’pose.”

“Happy?” Harry asked.

Louis nodded. “Course. And you, Harold?”

Harry nodded back. Louis smiled, and that’s when Harry realized that he wasn’t really happy at all.

If Louis was happy now, was he happy about what had happened? Something that had ended? Louis was very much a moment-by-moment person. If he was smiling, it was for the present.

Harry was trying to look cheerful, but his half-hearted, tight-lipped expression couldn’t compete with his ordinary smile, big and toothy and dimply. Harry wasn’t happy to be leaving the city, his new best friend, and an old chapter of his life behind. Louis seemed perfectly fine with it all. He had new beginnings of his own to greet, of course, and the rest of his summer post-X Factor to enjoy. Maybe he was simply excited.

Or maybe Louis just hadn’t read so much into the bond they had formed that night, like Harry had. Maybe he was realistic. Maybe he didn’t care so much as Harry did. Maybe he was just ready to move on, from whatever they were and whatever they had been.

Harry certainly wasn’t. But Louis seemed to be, and that hurt.

Fortunately for Harry, a convenient thing about being cared for and hurt by Louis Tomlinson was that he often healed hurts almost immediately by treating the ones he hurt kindly, or making them laugh.

Bastard.

“We have twenty minutes to kill, then. Unless your mum needs you back?”

Harry shook his head. “Train’s at ten, m’already packed. Mum says she’s just getting up.”

“Excellent.” Louis scrolled through his phone contacts, tapped on one, put the new call on speakerphone, and held it out between them.

“Why are we calling…” Harry squinted. “Aidy Boy Grimshaw?”

“We’re waking him up to congratulate him on getting to the live shows. Just go along with me here.”
“Won’t he notice that we’re in a train station?”

“Not if he’s still drunk.”

Louis slapped a hand over Harry’s mouth just as Aiden picked up. There was a rustle of sheets before the most hungover voice in existence slurred, “Hullo?”

Louis’ voice shot up about seventy octaves, and his accent moved south. “Aidy, dawwwwling! I’m so proud of you!”

“Umm…excellent,” Aiden finally got out. “And who might you be?”

“D’yeh not recognize meh? Ah, c’mon, love. It’s yer gran!”

“Oh, really?” Aiden’s laugh was sleepy and deep. “I like your new Yorkshire accent, gran.”

“Yorkshire?”

“Oh, right-o, now you’re Cockney. Fantastic.”

Harry couldn’t help but giggle, lack of sleep guiding him into hysterics. Louis gave his knee a scolding slap, and Harry squawked in surprise.

“You alright there, gran? Is someone listening in?”

“That’s just the cat, dear.”

“The cat died a few months back. You really didn’t research for this role, did you, Danny Zuko?”

Louis pouted. Harry careened over with laughter.

“Seriously, though, who’s giggle friend? I’m picturing a fuzzy chinchilla perched in your Bieber hair. Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know what on Earth you mean, biscuit.”

“Biscuit? You’ve stooped to a new low, Tommo.”

“What? What did you call me, young lad? I mean, my scrumptious buttered muffin?”

A whoomp announced that Aiden had beat his phone with a pillow. “Uggegggggh why didn’t I sleep through this shit.”

“What did you just call me, Aiden Elizabeth Grimshaw?”

Harry gave a very loud snort.

Poor Aiden sighed. “I called you Louis. Tomlinson.”

“That’s a gorgeous name, sugarbuns. Is that one of your friends?”
Aiden’s voice only grew stronger with conviction. “Louis Fucking Tomlinson, I’m coming to Doncaster to beat the shit out of you next time you’ve got a hangover.”

Louis was now comfortably half-assing the grandmother voice. “Will you bring me tea and crumpets in bed, my little apple blossom?”

Harry just melted this time, stomach aching as he emitted the strangest-sounding laughter he himself had ever heard.

“Honestly, though,” Aiden mumbled, “whoever is with you thinks a comedian lives up your bum.”


Harry put on his closest approximation of a chinchilla voice. “The name’s Harry.”

Aiden gave as much of a laugh as his sleepy self would allow. “Hi, Harry. Sorry I’m too tired to be impressed by this, but — are you a superhero? I think someone told me last night that Louis did something with a superhero, and it went viral. I really didn’t believe him, and then I got proper pissed, so. Maybe I made that up.”

“Um...sure.”

“You don’t sound very convinced of that.”

“M’not, to be honest.”

“Well, neither am I. Maybe some more sleep will help me out. If you’ll excuse me, Lou.”

“Ooh, someone has excellent manners.”

“And you really don’t deserve them, for waking me up at fuck o’clock in the morning to entertain yourself. So goodnight, lads. Nice to meet you, Superhero Harry.”

“Bye, Aiden!”

“You really should come to Donny sometime,” Louis piped up, “but the beating me up part is optional.”

“I really don’t think it is. But yeah, ‘course I’ll come. See you then?”

“Tooold-oo, Aidy.”

Aiden snorted and the call ended.

“That was mean,” Harry said into the momentary silence between them.

Louis sighed with satisfaction. “I’m starving. Breakfast?”

“I’ve got no money.”

Louis slapped his pocket where his wallet was poking out. “My treat.”

The nearest Pret-a-Manger had croissants and buns that Harry insisted weren’t on par with the ones he helped to bake with Barbara back in Holmes Chapel. Louis humoured him in between mouthfuls. With several half-eaten fistfuls of carbs and scalding cups of caffeine in hand, they set off to reclaim their bench. Louis promptly called two more X Factor friends who mercifully didn’t pick up, and
then got on the line with a directory assistant, whom he and Harry badgered for information on a mysterious character whose first name they were unsure of.

As they collapsed once more into fits of giggles, mischief managed, Jay spotted them through the morning crowd and headed over, two suitcases in tow. Louis hurriedly hung up.

“Good morning, sunrisers.”

“Morning!” they chorused — Harry rather perkily, and Louis barely moving his lips enough to form the words.

Jay shook her head fondly. “Sluggish, are we? Worth it? Did you have a good adventure?”

Louis slumped against Harry with a tired smile. “We did, didn’t we?”

“Yep.”

“You got here safe and sound? No illegal activities involved?”

“Nope.”

Jay beamed. She hesitated, fidgeting, as if putting off the inevitable goodbye for the boys’ sake, giving them a second to collect their emotional belongings before they boarded their very literal trains. Eventually, she had to cut the moment short.

“Well, Harry, it was incredible meeting you.” She leaned down to hug him, and Harry stood up into the embrace. The rest was a whisper in his ear. “And I’ll never, ever forget what you did for him. You’ll do great out there, love, you will — but just remember you’re already our hero, alright?”

Harry hummed and nodded his thanks, words not really registering in his sleep-deprived brain. “Great to meet you, too,” he smiled into her neck. “And thank you.”

With one last pat on his back, Jay straightened up, beckoning to Louis. For a moment, the droopy-eyed boy didn’t look up at either of them, gaze fixed on his lap. He twirled his thumbs. Slowly and deliberately. Procrastinating from the moment. Stringing out the past, just a little longer. It was an odd technique for a boy so good at living in the present to have mastered, but Harry couldn’t blame him. He was still hoping beyond hope that somewhere inside of him was the power to control time. Maybe he’d find it someday.

But for now, there was Louis. And there was silence.

And then there was the mousiest of smiles on Louis’ face, and he was looking up at Harry and saying, “Take care of yourself, Hero.”

Harry chuckled, offering a hand and pulling Louis to his feet. “Myself? I’ve got the whole world to take care of.”

“Yeah, well, that too.” He pulled Harry in for a hug, resting his chin on his shoulder. “But you’ll always be around to look out for the world. The world just won’t be nice enough to return the favour. And we like our heroes best in one piece, thanks.”

“Then you should come and visit. Look after me for a bit.”

Louis smirked. “But I can’t cook.”

“Sure you can.”
Jay laughed. “Oh, he means it, Harry. You’ll have to teach him a bit. Alright, Boo, no more clinging! Let’s go find this train!”

“Mum, I told you, run at the wall between platforms nine and ten, it’s not that hard.”

Jay rolled her eyes. “We’re not bringing our Harry to Hogwarts. Come on now, Boobear.”

Before pulling away, Louis muttered in Harry’s ear, “But I’ll come over and make you tea. And be an idiot for your amusement.”

“Sounds lovely, Boobear.”

“Shut up.”

And as much as Harry had been expecting an epic end to an epic adventure…

“Yep. And you’ve got mine.”

“Cool. Take care, Hazza!”

“Bye, love!”

“Bye Lou! Bye Jay!”

…it was an overwhelmingly ordinary goodbye.

The Tomlinsons grinned and waved over their shoulders until they were lost in the thick of the morning crowd. Harry, with a pounding head and an aching body, surrendered to the bench while he tried to work out what to do next. He had quite a few bodily needs to take care of — his thirst, exhaustion, slight hangover and full bladder among them. He decided to tackle one or two before calling his mum. Maybe that would put him in a better frame of mind. A frame of mind that could maybe start to accept that Louis Tomlinson had just left.

Or maybe even begin to admit that he had a crush on Louis Tomlinson, and Louis Tomlinson had just left.

Maybe from there he could start to reason himself out of things. Recognize that Louis lived far from London and was straight and was an excellent friend.

Best friend.

But for now, Harry needed a wee.

It took a few minutes to drag himself up off of the bench and set course for the toilets. As a stroke of luck would have it, the men’s was mercifully empty, perfect for a pee and a think. Once he got his aim worked out at the urinal, Harry closed his eyes with an almighty exhale. A chant began to loop in his mind over the backing track of pee. Hopeless words, like done, gone, over; and words like phew, which were total lies, little excuses to trick himself into thinking that he didn’t care, when in fact he cared too much. The chant slowly devolved into a spiralling stream-of-consciousness. Now that his little forever in Louis Tomlinson’s Neverland was over, the future was coming for him like a freight train, and I’m not ready to move on, not ready to move out, not ready to be a hero, not ready to move to London, not ready to leave my family and friends and live alone, not ready to miss
“Well, I guess that wasn’t goodbye after all.”

Harry was startled out of his perfect aim, and some of his pee ended up landing on Louis, who was now stood at the urinal on his left and was too busy grinning to mind much.

“Hazza!”

Harry stared for a beat in horror, before saying, “Well…fuck,” and laughing nervously.

“You might want to finish and zip up, first, before you mark your territory on me again.”

Harry did as he was told. Louis finished up and did the same.

When they turned to face each other, Louis was glowing. And Harry swore he could feel himself glowing right back. And so they stood there for a wordless moment, just staring at each other and glowing.


Harry pouted back. “But surely she’d love to have me along? There’s room in your suitcase.”

“Giraffe transportation just isn’t as simple as you think, Harold.”

Harry shook his head. “Crying shame.”

“But I’ll come visit you here sometime, yeah? I meant it.”

“You’d better.”

“And by then I’ll have cleared it with the relevant authorities, and I’ll bring you home to Donny in your own personal Carry-A-Harry™ transporter, guaranteed suitable for all Harolds, Hazzas, Curlies, accidental teleporters, and giraffes.”

“Sounds brilliant.”

“I am brilliant,” said Louis, and Harry couldn’t argue.

Louis swallowed, and then adopted a solemn tone. “Harry, just now, I…did what you suggested.”

“What did I suggest?”

“Well, maybe this wasn’t the best way to go about it…and I feel sort of stupid, but…I sent her a text…”

“How?”

“I told her I want to talk. About…”

When Harry was silent, Louis clarified. “We’re having a talk, once I’m back. I’m…gonna break up with her.”

Harry held back a smile and nodded tersely. For fear that opening his mouth would lead him to say something rash, he said nothing. When he caved in to his smile, he made it sad, reassuring.
But there wasn’t much time for smiling before Louis leaned in and kissed him anyway.

Louis’ lips were soft. Louis’ lashes fluttered against Harry’s cheek. They were soft. Louis was soft. Bliss was soft, and warm, and it enveloped Harry, shutting the entire world out of his and Louis’ haven.

This overwhelming softness was the only sensation that Harry could really register before he felt Louis pull away.

Harry kept his eyes closed, brain short-circuiting, and took a deep breath. “Lou…” he began, and he reached out —

He grabbed on to thin air.

Harry opened his eyes.

Louis had retreated back several steps. He scanned Harry’s face for a reaction, a sign that what he had done hadn’t been uncalled for or unrequited, and Harry’s mind said no I liked that, that meant everything to me, come back closer and let’s do it again, but his face must have been trapped in shock mode. Louis’ cheeks flushed pink up to his ears, and his eyes showed fear and regret and shame and everything Harry wanted him not to feel.

Harry could barely react before Louis mouthed “Shit,” and turned to run.

And the worst part was that Harry’s legs trembled. It took a few frantic heartbeats too long for him to come to his senses and give chase.

“Lou!” he yelled. “Louis!”

He nearly slammed head-on into several innocent new toilet-goers on his way out, skidding around corners with his slippers squeaking. The tip of Louis’ beanie disappeared behind the last entranceway corner.

“Lou, stop!”

Those were the last of his own yells that he could hear, the rest swallowed up as the hubbub of the station rose around him.

He’s not too far ahead. I’ll see him when I round the bend, and he’ll stop for me, and I’ll tell him it’s alright, and then —

He rounded the bend, and only saw throngs of passing strangers. Louis was gone.

Louis, who, mere hours ago, had been invisible to everyone but Harry, was now just plain invisible.

Euston Station had wifi. Harry had his phone.

Harry googled “Louis Tomlinson.”

At the bottom of the first page of results was a YouTube account. “louistomlinson07.”

Promising.
Within a minute of finding it, Harry was watching the crush of passengers come and go as a new voice guided him through the lyrics of a now familiar love song.

Anne nodded to Harry to stay put with the suitcases while she went to retrieve their tickets. Harry nodded back, and leaned against a signpost, cases balancing against his knee.

“When I'm losing my control, the city spins around/You're the only one who knows, you slow it down…”

Harry stepped out into the middle of the bustle, spreading his arms and slowly spinning, picking up speed and then slowing down, until the lyrics almost came true.

With his eyes closed and the music loud, Anne had to grab him by the shoulders and drag him along until he realized that she had even returned from fetching tickets. Yanking the earbuds from his ears, she sighed. “What was that? Trying to throw your arms around the world?”

“Mmmph,” Harry shrugged, putting the earbuds back in and reclaiming his suitcase.

With every note, the world felt smaller. With every word, Harry found a new inflection in Louis’ voice. It was imperfect, it wavered. Something untouched. Innocent, but never fragile. Innocent and strong.

He had replayed it four times by the time they met their train at the platform.

Boarding the train and settling in was a haze. Pulling out of the city and watching its suburbs blur together was difficult. Like abandoning some part of himself. The part that had met Louis.

His mum brushed a hand against his leg, probably trying to cheer him up. “Just think: next time you see this city, you’ll be moving here.”

But he would be someone else. He would be living on his own. Training parts of himself that he had only just discovered, in the city that had been his playground for a night. But it would look different, sound different, with different colours and a different feeling in the air, without Louis.

He took out his phone and stared at it for quite some time.

Louis was probably pulling into the station in Doncaster by now. Trying to forget an unrequited crush which he didn’t know hadn’t actually been unrequited.

Harry normally wasn’t the absolute best at putting feelings into words. It was worse when he couldn’t even begin to untangle his feelings in the first place.

So he said all that he could say.

“Thank You.”

And he hoped that Louis would text back.

Chapter End Notes

Baaaaaaaaah come say hi to me on tumblrrrrrr
Interlude

Chapter Notes

Short and sweet. Just a little bridge into the world of Volume II.

Thanks as always to Ari and B for their valiant efforts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At this point in their story, a hero usually features in a montage, demonstrating their progression from *incapable idiot* to *badass motherfucker* in a minute-long segment. This, however, being a written work, makes such techniques rather tricky. Perhaps the transition can instead be summarized by describing a simple telephone call.

“Hello?”

“Hello, love,” said Anne. Her smile somehow shone out through the receiver. “Oh, it’s good to hear that voice! Even deeper than last I heard it, dear God.”

Harry smiled back. “Gotta love puberty. S’good to hear you, too. Miss you, mum.”

“Miss you too, every day, sweetheart. Still settling in? How’s London been?”

Harry thought for a moment. “…Super.”

Anne snorted. “Did you just do what I think you did?”

“Be honest. You’ve missed my puns.”

Anne chuckled — half exasperated, half amused. “I’ll admit, they’re not at the top of the list of things I’ve missed. But at least it’s good to know that hero work hasn’t changed my baby just yet.”

Harry shrugged, and was silent until he realized that his mum couldn’t see his pouty little frown. “S’not hero work really, so far. I haven’t saved anyone.”

“Of course you have. Don’t forget Annabelle!”

“Annabelle is a cat, mum.”

“You saved a life! A hero has to start somewhere.”

“I mean, cats are great, but I’m pretty sure most heroes started the saving stuff with human beings.”

Her eye-roll was just as visible through the phone as her smile. “You don’t know that. Not about the real heroes, at least. None of us are sure how this is supposed to go, Harry. You’re blazing a trail. You’re not a failure.”
“I never said I was. I just don’t think I’m a hero.”

He was well prepared for the sappy mum line when it came. “You’re always a hero to me, H.”

“But I didn’t do anything! You raised me and carried me, and Gems too, and you taught us to be nice and smart and stuff. Which maybe we’re still learning, but yeah. You’re the family hero.”

“We’ll each save each other, then.”

“We can be a dynamic duo.”

Anne sighed. “If I wasn’t old and creaky, and if I had any of your talent, I just might be up for that.”

“You’re not creaky!”

“Heroes don’t have crows’ feet.”

“Heroes don’t have pimples, either, but you’re calling me one.”

There was a beat before Anne said, “I guess we’re all just going to have to change what we think a hero has to be, then.”

“Mhm.”

“Anyway, how’s training? They working you hard?”

“You could say that, yeah.”

“But you’re having fun, aren’t you?”

“It’s…”

The pause went on for a while.

‘Fun’ wasn’t really the word. ‘Grueling-yet-gratifying’ was more like it, but Harry wasn’t keen on burdening his mother with the details of how stressful it had been, getting used to being pushed and pulled by the situations Chris and his team liked to put him in, all while being constantly told to relax, to focus. It felt like being told to stay perfectly still and not touch anyone in the middle of a raging mosh pit.

He swerved his mum’s question by highlighting the positive. “There are some really great people here. Everyone’s really nice. Simon’s brought some people in to watch me train, and it’s…kinda scary. But they’re all quite kind.”

“That’s good. But you’ve got to be careful. A lot of these people who want to see what you’re capable of might be thinking of how they can…use your talents, to satisfy their wants.”

“I know, mum, but —”

“Use you, Harry.” She gave the tension a moment to elapse. “You can be friendly with them, but don’t open up too much. Don’t give them the chance they might be looking for. Promise?”

“Yeah, of course,” Harry assured. “They’re not just nice people, though. Chris and Simon trust them. There’s Caroline and Lou — you’d love them, mum, they’re helping me with clothes and style and stuff. Not sure why I need it yet, but hey, s’fun. And there’s Ben, he helps Chris out. Knows a lot of people in the super world in America, and he’s done documentaries and stuff, it’s so cool. We had
lunch yesterday.”

“Well, glad you have friends. Anyone your age helping out? Or training, too?”

“No, mum. You already knew that.”

“Sorry. Guess I just thought...you’ve met supers your age, haven’t you? There was Louis, so I’m sure —”

“I’d have told you if I’d met more, I just, y’know. Haven’t yet.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Love, are you ok? What’s got your tone like that?”

Harry shook his head, before once more remembering that telephones are an auditory tool of communication. “S’nothing. Just...friends my age would be nice, I guess. People going through the same things.”

“Mm, of course.” Psychic Mum got right to the point. “You should give Louis a call sometime. Have you talked?”

Not since Harry’s text on the train. Not since a kiss goodbye and two seconds of the wrong reaction. Sure, Harry had then spent a few weeks obsessing over how to get Louis to talk to him, searching every variation of Louis’ name on Facebook to no avail, spewing thank-yous and apologies and small-talk texts out into nothing. Not since the train had it seemed that Louis had been listening.

“No, not yet.”

Harry’s mum took a cautious pause. “Well, maybe you should, soon. Tell him what training’s been like, I’m sure he’ll be curious. You’ve got to keep your biggest fans in the loop these days, hm?”

Sure, keep Louis in the loop about the superhuman strength tests Harry had been subjected to, testing his wits to the point of snapping. About the kind people whose faces turned dark after a long day of administering bizarre simulations. And about the things that would probably make Louis jealous, too. The excitement of it all. The plans, and the potential, and all of the hard work and support others constantly poured into him.

Louis had made it clear that he didn’t want to hear, and Harry was done trying to make him listen.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

Another pause.

“You know, Harry, if you need to talk about something, I’m always here. Any time of day or night you need. A morning’s drive away, if need be.”

“S’fine, mum.”

“You sound exhausted, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, mum. I really am okay, though.”

There was a short silence, before Anne piped up, “I know what the two of you should do. Pull some strings with Simon and get tickets for the X Factor finale.”
“Louis will be sort of busy with school, I think.”

“From what Jay told me, that won’t be an issue with him. I’m sure he’d love a short trip. You can re-meet Liam Payne when he wins.”

“Sounds like you’re the one who wants to go, mum.”

“No, you boys should have a fun night out!”

“Liam’s too young for you, mum.”

“Oh shut up, you!” Anne snorted. She resumed with a stricter tone. “Also, I just received your monthly report…”

“What monthly report?”

“Your new one. Haven’t they sat you down with it yet?”

“They’ve told me I won’t be seeing reports anymore. Must be afraid they’ll go to my head and,” Harry adopted a faux-distinguished voice. “‘hinder my progress.’”

Anne gave a p’shaw. “They still don’t know my boy very well, do they? I’ll tell you a secret, then. So long as you don’t let it go to your head and hinder your progress.”

Harry chuckled. “What is it?”

“Do you remember what projected class you were, on your last report?”

“Three, I think. Or not quite. Two point eight, but that doesn’t round up to three, for some reason. They said my form was lacking, or something. Am I supposed to be graceful?”

“Well, I don’t know about that department, but you’ve come very far, love. They’re saying you’ll reach Class Four by the end of the year.”

Harry’s tired mind thought back to the databases full of images of heroes past and present that Chris had shown him, next to profiles noting their powers and class rankings. There had been a decent-sized group of famous Class Threes, a whole gaggle of Twos with only a few notables, barely any well-known Ones, and only a handful of Fours. But the Fours were stacked. Lightning-handed Electraheart, mountain-muscled Atlasteroid, and tough-as-nails American sweetheart The Swift were among them. Harry had so far only saved an idiot boy and a cat, and yet, technically, he would soon be powerful enough to join their ranks.

“That’s got to be wrong,” he told his mum.

“That’s what it says here, Harry. I’m reading it right off the paper. They don’t send me lies.”

“How do you know they don’t?”

“I can spot a lie.”

“You’re not foolproof!”

“Mums have special powers of their own, remember.”

There was no reason not to trust her. All Harry could really say was “Wow.”
Anne sighed. “Wow is right!” And then, after a beat, “Is everything alright, Harry? Is there anything you need to talk about?”

Too much. Nothing that talking would make any better. “Not really, to be honest.”

“Really, Harry?”

“Really, mum.” It sounded sincere enough.

“Alright, then. I’ll let you get back to…whatever heroes do on Thursday nights.”

“Not-quite-heroes watch *Sky High* and eat fajitas on Thursday nights, apparently.”

“Sounds brilliant. You’ll have to have me over for tea or dinner sometime soon then, eh?”

“Hey, hang in there. I’ll be back for Christmas, not long now.”

“Right you are. I’ll say goodnight then, sweetheart.”

“Night mum. Love you loads.”

“Love you too…my hero.”

“Heeyyy, I told you, woman, m’not a —”

Anne hung up.

Left in silence, Harry stared down at his laptop screen, where a gaggle of high school superheroes-in-training stood frozen. High school superheroes being trained together, with camaraderie, sharing the experience. Such a film probably hadn’t been designed to make the average sixteen year old boy feel lonely, but hey. Harry was, for better and for worse, not living a life one could call average.

Chapter End Notes

Volume II is on its way. It takes place four years after Volume I. Niall and Zayn await, and Larry will be reunited, I can promise you.

It's on its way, betas and I are working damn hard...

Hope you enjoy! As always I am on [tumblr](http://tumblr.com), come talk to me!
Volume II: Issue i

Chapter Notes

AAAAAAAAAAAAaaAND WE'RE BACK!

Volume II takes place four years after Volume I, in an alternate 2014 (can you even imagine Harry's long-ish hair? Or a world without Pokemon Go?). Be prepared for pets! Starbucks! The other boys! An obvious mystery! And of course, Super Larry. All grown up!

Massive apologies for the long wait time - editing and coordinating with betas is hard when you're all in work and/or school. Hence thanks to Ari and B for sticking with me and for believing in this fic.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Name: Harry Edward Styles  
Age: 20  
Signature abilities: telekinesis, energy manipulation, teleportation, levitation  
Weaknesses: lacking agility; incapable of flight

Harry snorted. “Accurate.”

Class: Five  
Limits Unknown.

He was up at seven o’clock after a meagre night’s sleep, head throbbing from a hangover. He had woken up to see the magazine waiting for him on his bedside table. The cover still drove him a little mad. It was disconcerting to see himself staring so severely up from the cover of TIME, beneath the headline “The World’s Most Powerful Man.”

He wasn’t so sure about that title. There were so many people with far greater powers — those who controlled governments and banks and the mafia, not those whose job it was to manipulate matter and energy in the attempt to save a few lives. True power was game his superhuman abilities didn’t make him privy to playing, and that suited him just fine.

Muffled in the sheets at the foot of his bed, his phone went off. Curled up beside it, MJ lifted her little cat head with a jolt, leapt up and fled the bedroom. Harry didn’t blame her. It was playing some godawful song — apparently, his new ringtone. He didn’t recognize it at first, but after several bars of pounding four-on-the-floor beats, it all came flooding back to him. The number one smash hit of the summer, “Txt Me if U Want Me.”

First single from an album called On Top of the World. Released on the eighth of May by Syco Music. It had gone platinum in twelve countries, gold in ten, and the official music video had one hundred million YouTube views. And fuck me for knowing all of that, Harry thought.
They had been at Liam Payne’s favourite club last night (he couldn’t quite remember the name of it, beyond that it contained some sort of odd religious invocation) and of course the bugger had gone and changed Harry’s ringtone to his own damn song.

Nursing his headache with one hand, Harry answered his phone with the other, goggily groaning, “Hello?”

“Hello, Harry Styles. Someone sounds perky this morning!”

“Now’s not a good time, Grimmy.”

“Why, what’s got you busy? Re-reading the *TIME* cover story on yourself?”

“…while listening to Liam Payne’s summer single in bed, yeah.”

“Ooh, love that track. How does it go again? ‘Got dem bad girls all over me…””

“*But text me if u want me,*’ yeah.”

“Brilliant. I have *no* recent texts from you, Harry. Should I take that to mean something?”

Harry sighed. “I thought…” he yawned, “…our bond ran so deep that there’s no need to prove how much I want you. Guess I was mistaken, then. You’re a needy lover, Grimshaw.”

There was a murmur of laughter in Nick’s background.

“Hey, am I on air?”

“Absolutely. Say hello to the Breakfast Show audience, Harry Styles.”

Harry rolled over in bed with a sigh. “Hi. I really shouldn’t be awake right now.”

“Well, tough luck, mate, because there’s some news that, apparently, *we* have been given the privilege of breaking to you.”

“What kind of news?”

“Ehm...how to say this…” Grimmy gave a nervous chuckle. “You could take it as good news. A healthy obstacle. A chance to up your game a bit.”

“I don’t like where this is going.” Harry felt a nervous jab in his chest, but quickly dismissed it. Grimmy wouldn’t be speaking this casually if he were in actual danger. This had to be some charity event thing another celebrity had challenged him to.

“Might as well give you the truth then, eh Harry? Are you up for that?”

“Hey, it’s seven in the bloody morning, I just woke up, I have a headache, and Liam Payne is stuck in my head. M’up for anything.”

“Anything, Harry?”

“Yeah, go for it.”

“Alright, roll the clip, if you please.”

It began with an epic horn intro, something akin to the Twentieth Century Fox opening fanfare.
Harry rolled his eyes. Grimmy had, once again, gotten him worked up over some dumb thing a comedian had directed at him.

“Oh come on!” he called down the line, before a record-scratch announced the end of the horn section, and an ominous hum began, overlaid with a robotic voice.

“Harry. Styles,” monotoned the voice, “I have watched you fight. You fight valiantly. Your powers are outmatched by any in this universe…but I am not of this universe. You have fought challengers before. You have been too kind to them. You have defeated them all, but let them live. I admire your humanity, but when I come for you, one of us is leaving as the most powerful being in this universe, and the other will have fought to his death. Try to resist me, and I will see that your London burns. You have forty-eight hours until I find you. I. Will. Find. You. Harry. Styles.”

The recording ended there.

“So, Harry.” Nick cleared his throat. “How do you feel about that?”

There was a pause before Harry burst out laughing, laughs turning to coughs in his burnt-out throat. “You can tell James Corden that monologues still aren't his forte.”

Harry could practically hear Grimmy’s reassuring smile. “Ex-pats, eh?”

“Bloody ex-pats,” Harry grinned.

In preparation for his “fight to the death,” Harry took it easy for the next day and a half — treating the hangover, stocking up on groceries, making sure to treat himself to a nice wine, a tin of matcha, some froyo, and some very nice looking mangoes. He even made sure to treat the bloody cat, even though she had gotten into his wardrobe and wreaked havoc the other day, and she really didn’t deserve it.

In the dying light of his Tuesday, Harry found himself with much more energy than he had hoped to possess that day, and so he challenged himself to a little patrol. Well, one half of his brain called it a patrol — the other half called it a walk.

He missed the days of the casual patrol, walking the streets of London, turning corners and just stumbling upon opportunities to do good deeds. It hadn’t been all that glamorous, but it had been good fun. It had paid enough, in sponsorships and endorsement deals. And it had felt right.

As his celebrity had grown, the envious had come thick and fast. He remembered the first few times a challenger had shown up, in their caped all-American glory, flying above the Thames, trying to start shit with him. Time and time again, he had tried to get the damn asshole to stop disturbing the peace in the most humane way possible. But these shits really knew how to rile him up. They would do anything to an innocent bystander just to provoke him.

Harry was thankful, at least, that his mother and stepfather were still in Cheshire, his sister was at uni in Sheffield, and his father was in Manchester. His friends mostly spent their workdays indoors, and avoided chasing superhuman nonsense when possible. No one yet had been able to use his loved ones against him.

Upon his return home, he poured himself a glass of wine and gave the TIME article another go. It was thorough, he could give it that.
“Experts have long been puzzled by his famed ‘right-place-right-time’ instinct…

“...just separated from recent girlfriend, tech heiress Caroline Flack...”

Harry scoffed into his wine, blowing accidental bubbles.

“Styles’ first public act of heroism made waves across the globe, when...”

He rubbed his temples. Of course they had sought out some choice old photos. Of course they had made a pleasant collage out of Harry’s first steps into superdom. His clothing choices at age sixteen were hard enough to look at on their own, but there was a worse matter. Harry’s wasn’t the only face smiling out of those little rectangular memories.

He blinked hard and shook himself, as if he could shake that grin in that photo from his memory. It had the crystal-clear sting of times long-gone that felt like they had been yesterday, with an added stab-to-the-gut feeling of loss.

Some dreams came true. Rooming with Louis in London had been too stubborn of a dream. He had reached out to Louis, over and over in those six months after they had parted, and had never received so much as a reply.

He had numbed himself to Louis memories, over time. Or at least, so he liked to think. His mum still asked about him sometimes. Harry could only ever shrug, but his feelings weighed more than any gesture concealing them.

Revisiting them felt particularly heavy this time. The pure joy in those photos of two wet boys on a pier got to him. He closed the magazine and set it face-down.

He had gotten the gist of the article anyway. The overview of British hero-dom, a new wave of young British supers coming out of hiding, many of them moving to America to become objects of celebrity worship. As for the focus on himself, it was a very spot-on portrayal of the Harry he had begun to see reflected back at him: a humble-yet-charismatic, stylish young lothario who did the impossible for a living.

Four years later, Simon’s plan had worked.

Harry stood and waited for the “challenger” from Grimmy’s recording on the Millennium Footbridge. He had figured that the location would make it easier for the disguised comedian with a camera crew to find him. Centrally located, outdoors, and in plain view. He couldn’t hide from a charity stunt. Might as well give them a tourist shot while they were at it.

If they looking for attention, they were certainly going to get it. In the hour Harry had been there, it was a wonder the entirety of Scotland Yard hadn’t been called in to deal with the traffic jam. Or maybe that was testament to Harry’s own crowd-control skills — politely ushering fans along after a selfie, whilst assuring concerned onlookers that his presence didn’t mean trouble. Someone asked about the challenger, having heard the news, and whether they could watch.

Harry smiled for their camera. “Sounds like it’ll a good gag, to be honest,” he told them. “I’d like to watch as well. But...” He shrugged. Some worried voice in his head wanted to overcompensate for the tiny potential of danger, tell these folks to move along, but what sense did that make? No alarm bells were going off in his head. If something was wrong, he would know. “Just keep the way clear
As noon rolled around, the crowd on the bridge grew thicker and thicker. Harry indulged in a light lunch of candied pecans that a fan had bought him from one of the vendors at the end of the bridge. He tried to nibble away the doubt creeping into his system. It was small, uncertain, nothing like the strong pulls of instinct that warned him of danger…but it gnawed at him nonetheless. He stomached it with reason. It had to be a joke. What sort of real challenger communicates via Grimmy?

But, better safe than sorry.

Harry began waving his arms as the crowd reached an impossible density. “Can I make an announcement?” Miraculously, after a minute or two of trying to get everyone’s attention, the majority of the crowd stopped and dropped their voices to a hush.

“Right,” Harry shouted. “Can everyone hear me?”

Harry wondered if he could somehow use his nebulous power to project his voice. He had never tried, but it didn’t seem too far-fetched.

“Can everyone? Oh, perfect.” Harry mentally added that to his growing list of abilities.

“Hi everyone, this is Harry Styles speaking. For those of you who don’t know, there’s a slight chance I might end up doing the worst part of my job today. So if you could please — I’m happy for you to stick around, it’d be nice to talk to you, but if you see anything suspicious, please do get yourselves out of harm’s way — don’t panic, but take cover, get yourselves inside. And if you hear me warn you, please do the same. Okay? It’s probably just James Corden trying to take the piss out of me for a spot of good TV, but please be prepared. Thank you, be safe!” He made prayer-hands in thanks.

The crowd cheered, then began to shift. More fans flocked in for selfies, and everyone else packed into the throng tried to get out of each other’s way.

Above the din came the first sound. A shriek, like an almighty knife slashing struts of metal, and then —

_Whoomp._

The bridge began to sag. Screams rose above the clatter. To his left, the northern end of the bridge’s middle section — upon which he and the majority of the crowd were standing — had been severed. Harry watched it begin to pitch, as if in slow motion.

He knew what was coming before he heard the next sickening slice.

Following his instinct, he teleported down. Levitating near the underside of the bridge, he spread a humming force field along the bottom of the severed section. Shrieks turned to gasps. Harry gave a silent thank you to the powers that be that no one had gone pitching into the Thames. Yet.

“EVERYONE! GET OFF THE BRIDGE, NOW!” he yelled, but he could barely hear himself, unable to focus enough to use his newfound voice-projecting power whilst maintaining a powerful field. Yells and screams and scrambling footsteps filled the air above him.

Breathing heavily, Harry tried to think straight. But here he was, with his back to the west, putting every ounce of effort into holding up this damn piece of bridge. He couldn’t let go until everyone had made it to safety, leaving himself completely vulnerable for however long that would take. He had walked right into a trap. A rookie mistake. A mistake that could kill thousands.
He heard a shriek and a splash to his left.

Holding the bridge’s field in place with a wave of his right hand, he conquered the mental strain as best as he could, and slowly raised his left hand, conjuring a field to raise the fallen man out of the water.

The river bubbled. Nothing happened. Harry felt ready to black out from the pressure building in his head, but, biting his lip until it bled, he mustered up enough concentration to bring a gasping form flying out of the river.

Slowly and carefully, he placed the spluttering man on the fixed part of the bridge. A massive wave of relief washed through him as he turned his attention back to levitating the broken section of bridge.

But by now, the distraction tactic had worked. A hot blast met his back, shooting him a hundred yards forward until he met the concrete-hard surface of the river face first.

It felt like drowning.

His boots and jeans and jacket were waterlogged in an instant and weighed him down like lead. He could feel his lungs straining as he sank, kicking in vain for the surface, though his aching brain was already beginning to forget which way was up. He clenched his fists and bit his tongue, his body savouring its last reserves of air while his brain savoured panic, confusion —

_Breathe in, breathe out_, he told himself. It didn’t make sense, but in his state of panic, it didn’t have to.

His entire being protested, but slowly, he managed to clear his head a little.

And also breathe, underwater. That was new.

Through the murk, he could see something large and shiny sinking up ahead. The central chunk of the bridge. A modern landmark was now sinking in a filthy river, just because some little shit — who apparently wasn’t much of a comedian after all — wanted Harry’s attention _real_ badly.

_I hate my job_, Harry thought.

He felt himself rising, pulled like a puppet on a string, before he could think up any potential fixes to the issue at hand. It didn’t feel like he was in the clutch of your standard force field — it felt like something far more powerful.

As he rose from the water, shaking his wet locks out of his face, he looked around frantically for the challenger.

Nothing.

He kept rising, into the air. Screams erupted from the banks. Chants of “Ha-rry! Ha-rry!” and sing-alongs to the riff of “Seven Nation Army” were already building, as if this were some kind of sporting match.

The challenger now had attention. That would give them confidence. The situation was quickly
turning dangerous. Harry had never felt so out of control, so helpless as this. He never fell for traps. He always managed to fight back.

Up and up, he kept rising.

Concentrating hard, he put on his loudspeaker voice again. It cracked and trembled from exhaustion. “Everyone on the banks,” he boomed, “I want you to take cover! It’s not safe out here, and we can’t give this idiot the attention they want. Now!”

The people only hesitated, milling about, murmuring.

“DO IT!”

A small portion of the crowd began to scatter. Many spectators held their ground. Harry forced his focus back to searching for his opponent.

A voice echoed out over the scene — the same computerized voice from the radio message. “Well-well-well. If it isn’t Harry Styles, Patron Saint of England, Guardian of London, Master of the Elements…the Most Powerful Man on the Planet.”

*If that this is what my bio sounds like,* Harry thought, *I really need to update my website.*

“Well-well-well, if it isn’t…” Harry looked around, “…an unnamed, invisible coward who’s decided to create a costly diversion on an otherwise lovely Wednesday.”

The crowd on the banks goaded him on. Moments later, their hoots and hollers became screams and gasps. Harry finally caught sight of what it was they were all pointing at.

A speck in the morning sky bloomed into a humanoid figure. They stood bow-legged, about three hundred feet in the air, wearing reasonably un-super attire — a purple hoodie, a purple snapback, a dark mask, and extremely low-riding leopard print trousers.

“Low trousers and flying don’t mix, friend,” Harry advised as the challenger flew closer.

The challenger gave an eerie chuckle — or at least, their mask’s robotic interpretation of it was eerie. “Your ball-squeezers are better, eh?”

Harry burst out laughing. Already this was shaping up to be one of the worst bouts of banter he had ever had the pleasure of engaging in, and it was making the entire near-death-experience much more comfortable.

“If you’ve got it, flaunt it?” he shrugged. He shook his head, bemused, as the challenger came closer — now parallel with him, and moving ever forward. “I’m having trouble taking you seriously. If you want to frighten me, you’ll have to try harder.”

“Who says I’m trying to frighten you?” the challenger said. “Already got you trapped.”

Harry threw up his arms. “Well done, I guess. Time to try something new?”

The challenger floated closer, now less than thirty feet away. “Alright, then,” they said, inclining their head. “You’re free to go.”

Harry felt the levitational force that he had been trapped in release its grip, and he sank into freefall for a moment. He caught himself, and came aloft again on his own force.

The challenger flew even closer, throwing their arms out in a wide gesture, letting their pants ride
even lower. “You’re free.”

Harry didn’t move, expecting some sort of harsh reaction if he did. Some sort of trip wire. He expected this challenger to be predictable. They looked predictable. They spoke predictably. Hero instincts left momentarily to the wayside, Harry stood still.

The villain shrugged. When they next spoke, it was in a young man’s American-accented voice — soft and intimate, but as loud and as present as if it were in Harry’s ear, for only Harry to hear. “Your move, man. I’m not gonna do anything ‘til you do.”

Harry shrugged, crossed his arms, and stared lazily at his opponent. They both just floated there for a good long time.

“You think you can out-wait me, man, but you won’t,” the challenger eventually promised, in that same whisper-soft voice in Harry’s ear. “You’re gonna have to fuck with me eventually.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. He had definitely heard that wrong. He gave his watch a coy glance. He shrugged again.

The assembled masses started to grow restless. Some cheers turned to boos. The attempt to escape the American model of heroism had never truly worked, and Harry was reminded of that in moments like this — when he felt like a cage fighter more than anything.

“MOVE! LEAVE!” Harry yelled to them again. Some gasped, some jumped, but most returned to their shouting not a second later.

The challenger smirked. It wasn’t going to get any better than this. Harry didn’t have the strength to levitate forever. He had to take the bait.

He let himself rise upward, cautiously, and the challenger rose with him, a faint smile in the creases of their eyes. Harry scanned their face. Their mask — responsible for the computerized voice — covered their nose and mouth, leaving only dark brown eyes and a hint of a fringe visible. Had the voice in his head not been American, Harry may well have suspected this to be Liam Payne, Gone Bad. Though Gone Bad was probably going to be his next album title.

Rising, rising, rising…

“Agh! Shit!” Harry’s head hit some sort of invisible hard ceiling. Spots clouded his vision.

The villain cackled. Harry felt the sudden urge to tackle them, so he teleported a few feet in their direction, reappearing within reach of them. He leaned forward with his whole upper body, and — bang — hit another invisible wall.

Thinking as quickly as he could, though still shaken, Harry kicked out in front of him, pushing himself off of the wall to go floating backwards, arms outstretched behind him. In a matter of seconds, his fingers met another wall. Teleporting downwards only confirmed the presence of a fourth.

“The crowd’s going crazy,” said the villain, in the computer’s voice once again. “Wanna set them at ease?”

Panting, Harry levitated back up to match the challenger’s altitude. The challenger turned their back.

For the most part, Harry had become quite good at tuning out fear. It was always there, always perched on his shoulder, whispering in his ear — he could usually ignore it. But now, for the first
time in a long time, he couldn’t. This fight was smashing every formula he had gotten used to following, and his famed adaptability was failing him.

He reached out gingerly, testing the walls again. He hissed upon contact. Each one was now burning hot.

The challenger turned back to face him. They backed away from the invisible box, eyes glinting. “Maybe I’ll just psych ‘em out a little first, huh?” they cooed, in that small, intimate voice again. Without a second’s hesitation, they threw open a fist, and Harry’s box was swallowed by a cloud of violet fire.

The invisible walls held back the flames, but not the smoke. Harry tried to take a breath and inhaled thick lung-fulls of it. His eyes stung like mad. Gritting his teeth, he raised his own palms. He could fight fire with fire. Quite literally, if need be.

His hands became the centre of a globe of white light. It swelled, growing brighter and brighter, but its hum couldn’t be heard over the roar surrounding him, the sound of being trapped inside the flame of an almighty blowtorch.

Purple embers hissed as they struck the walls around him. His sopping clothes were suddenly completely dry. His bare skin felt like it was getting sunburnt several times over with every passing second.

And the smoke. More and more smoke. It was thicker, and hazier, and it left him barely any room to see, or to breathe.

The globe of light in his hands petered out.

Spluttering and choking, he felt himself sinking to the bottom of the box as the fire raged on, the roar consuming his head, the blistering heat searing away at his body. He tried to teleport up and out of the box — but that involved thinking, which involved breathing, and breathing involved gasping for air, with his windpipe burning.

Sinking turned into falling. He couldn’t even hear himself scream over the flames as he hit the scalding bottom of the box and curled up like a child, writhing in pain.

And then the fire was gone. The heat beneath him faded.

Harry heard his own sweet relief echoed with a cheer from the audience. The sound at once filled him hope and with dread. They should all have been gone, long ago. They were in danger, and it was his fault. He was failing at his job.

After hacking a cough, Harry hovered back to his previous height, limbs weak and trembling, head pounding. The challenger was still in front of him, with their back turned again.

Wasting no time, they spun around and raised their arms. Harry, never one to plea, gasped out a “Don’t!” as the challenger beamed.

As they moved their arms together and apart, the box stretched and compressed, completely malleable — and Harry was stretched and squashed with it, putty in his challenger’s hands. His joints and bones screamed, his skin ready to tear, his limbs moving beyond his control like a marionette’s, contorting themselves into the most unnatural positions —

“STOP!” Harry managed.
The challenger dropped their arms, and the dimensions of Harry’s world snapped back to normal, like a rubber band being released. Harry gasped, forcing himself aloft, not about to collapse back onto the red-hot invisible floor. The challenger eyed him with an odd sort of…respect? Whatever it was, it melted away into smirking eyes. “What can I do to you next…” mused the robot voice.

“Nothing,” Harry panted. “This is torture!”

“They say great things about you. They never shut up about the most powerful man on this planet.” They snorted. It sounded really weird with the robot voice filter. “I expected more from you. More swag. I expected a challenge. But instead, I got…a toy. Your golden age is coming to an end…isn’t it, Harry Styles?”

“I know you think you’re above the law, mate, but you’re not!” Harry yelled, megaphone powers failing him. “You’ve violated every right under the Superhuman Convention in two minutes! You’ll be fairly punished.”

The challenger clasped their hands in front of them. “You’re in a box. I can’t hear you.” Still floating there, they looked almost comically bored.

Harry braced himself, waiting for his next ordeal. He didn’t notice it, for many a restless second…but it was there. Creeping in.

The air inside of his translucent box was getting thinner.

As with the smoke before, he was being oxygen-starved.

“This is a violation,” Harry spat, gasping. “You can’t torture me and then finish me off…when I have no chance, to — to retaliate. That’s, ah…not how this works.”

“Not how this works?” the villain purred. “I’m not the one trapped in a box. If one of us gets to decide how this works, it’s sure as hell not you, buddy.”

Harry threw himself forward one last time, slamming into the wall as the challenger laughed. But instead of the wall burning his flesh, it fizzled under his fingertips. It made a crackling sound, like a faulty connection. Fresh air seeped through the cracks.

Cracks?

A tiny black line began to snake its way up the translucent panel. Followed by another. And another. As if the invisible wall were shattering like a vase. The cracks spread from each other like flowing rivulets, making their way across the entire box, swifter than wildfire.

Soon, a shadowy haze was sweeping the box, making more fizzes and cracks as it touched the wall, cool air rushing in. The walls began to dissolve, being eaten away by what looked like smoke.

Harry squinted. No, it wasn’t smoke. Tendrils of shadow, tongues of sheer darkness behaving like smoke in broad daylight. It was so odd-looking, it was almost hard to look at.

The challenger’s head darted left and right. They knew that this wasn’t Harry’s doing. Brows furrowed, they spread their fingers and tried to re-animate the charged walls. Electricity crackled against shadow. The black haze ran along the four walls still. In his mind’s eye, Harry could see the box exploding into invisible shards. He wrestled together whatever strength was still left in him, concentrating it into his hands. His stance wavered, but he kept his concentration. A countdown began in his head.
Three, two…

One.

Harry became the epicentre of his own massive force-field. An almighty crack split the air as it spread, breaking the sound barrier, throwing the masked villain backwards.

Cool, fresh air finally met Harry’s lungs. He gave himself a second to catch his breath.

A second, he soon realized, that he couldn’t afford.

The challenger had already caught themselves, and was now letting long spikes of fucking lighting grow from their fingertips. But they weren’t aimed at Harry.

His opponent spun around. They seemed to be facing something else at their same altitude, and, whatever it was, they seemed intent on destroying it. Harry craned his neck to try to see what it could be, but his view was fully blocked by the challenger and their fucking lightning.

The challenger began to back up, towards Harry. Whatever was on their other side was enough to intimidate them, make their lightning-fingers crackle brighter.

But Harry still couldn’t see it. It had to be pretty small, for Harry to be unable to see it from behind the challenger.

The space between Harry and the lightning grew smaller and smaller.

Harry’s fear was eclipsed by sheer confusion.

The space between them grew dangerously small…

“Alright, fun’s over,” came a shouted voice. It was barely audible over the whip of the wind and the crackle of electricity, but it was enough for Harry to know that there was another human floating on the challenger’s other side.

“Playing Zeus with me, are you, babe?” came the voice again. “Not today.”

The challenger raised a hand. Electricity pulsed from the masked villain’s fingers as they prepared to swipe their new opponent out of the air. Harry found himself paralyzed, unable to muster up enough concentration to teleport forwards and stop them.

As the lightning came down with a crack, that same smoke-like shadow spread through the air like ink through water, forming a shield that swallowed each and every shock.

The villain yelled, the sound garbled by their computer’s attempted translation. They went to strike with their other hand, but the wall of shadow was already spreading, circling around them, threatening to engulf both the challenger and Harry —

Until a new voice sounded inside of Harry’s skull. One that matched the timbre of the shouts from the challenger’s new opponent.

“Work with me here, Styles. Finish the field.”

The inky shadow spread closer and closer. The villain lashed out like a maniac, stray sparks flying everywhere in his rage. Harry just floated there for a moment, mind flitting in a million different directions at once as he observed, stunned.
Until the voice in his head was back — this time, pissed off. “Come on, let’s finish him! I can’t hold this for much longer!”

Snapping out of it, Harry teleported a few feet backwards, out of reach of the shadow-field, dodging a flying fork of electricity. Imagining a ring of his own energy merging with the spreading shield of darkness, he lifted his palms to face his opponent.

The crowd below roared as Harry’s field spread, taking the shape of a million shimmering ropes of light snaking their way across the darkness.

“Good,” said the voice in his head. “And now for a taste of his own medicine.”

The villain sprang for the sky in vain as the darkness formed a dome, and finally a full globe, trapping them. Harry reinforced the new walls with energy of his own, ignoring his screaming muscles and panicked thoughts, as he had done so many times before. Now that he was half-responsible for a massive ball of roiling shadow and energy, though, his panic went a little more unchecked.


Challengers most often surrendered to him. Once they had exhausted every power, every move, and every catchphrase, and Harry’s adaptability had still outdone them, they most often shook hands with Harry, or cowered and begged for mercy, or immediately called all of the relevant authorities to ask to be pardoned for property damages. Not many still struggled from inside an impenetrable globe of darkness.

“We can hold on ’til he tires out,” the voice in his head assured him, not sounding very sure itself.

Harry bit down harder on his lip, and thought thoughts of strength and energy and zen and all the other shit he had learned in training that really isn’t that helpful when you’re actually trying to save the world.

Strained gasps sounded inside Harry’s head. He couldn’t be sure if they were his or not. His mouth was parched, and his head felt so light it barely seemed to be there. The edges of his vision blurred. His focus began to lapse. Every fibre of his being felt ready to dissolve. Lightning still flashed from inside the dome. It wasn’t over yet. But Harry couldn’t hold out much longer. For the first time in his life, he knew for certain that he would be done with before his opponent was.

“Hold on, don’t let go,” begged his collaborator’s voice. For the first time, it prickled with familiarity, but Harry accredited it to his oxygen-starved brain.

By now, Harry was trembling all over, pants and groans slipping from his lips beyond his control. Pain pounded at his skull. The silvery sheen of his energy field was fading, retreating like a wounded animal.

“H-hold...on!”

He couldn’t. It was a matter of seconds before his body would force him into surrender.

He spluttered for air. The lasts of his energy fell away. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the globe of darkness begin to dissolve. Every muscle in his body grew tight, as if trying to squeeze out a little oxygen that was still left in him somewhere. No luck there. He felt his feet fall out from underneath him, and he was too weak to catch himself.

“D-don’t let...go!” was the last thing he thought he heard before he was free falling, and his mind
He woke shortly thereafter. He was cradled in an unfamiliar pair of arms. Strong arms. They were still aloft. The crowds on the banks were still there. Still cheering.

Looking up, his rescuer’s face was half-hidden beneath a grey hood, but the rest of it seemed to be completely concealed by pitch-black shadow. The sky was overcast. Why so many misplaced shadows, rogue, with no light to cast them? Not so easy a sight to process, especially for someone who had just exhausted all of their superpowers to the point of blacking out.

His rescuer had small hands. One supported his back, the other held his legs up from behind the knees.

Harry could hear the figure panting. Quite gently, high-pitched. Pretty.

“Don’t let me go,” Harry croaked. A delirious giggle came out, too.

His hero said nothing.

Harry smiled. His mouth was still as dry as the dunes of hell and tasted of blood. But he smiled up at the figure keeping him aloft.

They looked rather scary. But their arms felt safe.

Harry let his head loll back, and the world went dark again.

He woke up next on a stretcher on a road bridge. As he slowly came to his senses, he noticed three things.

The police were blocking the road, trying to hold back a crowd that was craning to get a look at him, yelling his name.

He was being carried into the back of an ambulance. So much for that little nagging hope that he was still in ship-shape, despite all odds.

He couldn’t see his hooded saviour anywhere.

He lost consciousness once more.

Peering down at him as he came to in his hospital bed were three creatures who quite resembled two puppies and a teddy bear.

It took several minutes for Harry to feel more or less awake, and to actually register his friends’ banter instead of letting it pass through him. It took several minutes more for him to confirm that his
“Hello box was still functioning.

“Hello, popstars. And Niall,” he eventually got out, groggily. “So nice of you to visit.”

Ed looked down at him with a hint of surprise in his smile. “Hello, sugarplum. We may or may not have received orders from your mum and sister to make sure you were alright…”

“So this isn’t for charity? I don’t get a bedside serenade to help me feel better?”

“Tough luck, mate,” Liam smiled. “Although Ed and I did once rehearse a brilliant a cappella version of ‘Txt Me if U Want Me,’ if you’d like to be serenaded.”

“Nah, m’good, thanks.”

Liam pouted.

“Feeling alright? Your head okay?” Ed asked.

The world inside of Harry’s head was still swimming. His skin still felt burnt and raw from the burning box ordeal, and he felt ready to vomit when he tried to lift himself up off of his pillow — but all things considered, he felt amazingly decent. “I’ve been better. Just really tired.” He looked around the hospital room. “Why am I here? Any damage?”

Niall shook his head. “Not so far as we know. You don’t look as dead as you should, but that’s probably the whole invincible thing acting up.” He laughed. “You lucky fucker.”

“The doctor was just in here, actually,” Liam chimed in. “They’ve been at it for ages, trying to figure out whether there’s something wrong. He just came in and was like, ‘I dunno what’s wrong with him, I don’t know superhuman stuff,’ and left.”

“Well that’s just dandy. Any gaping wounds I should know about?”

“Liam’s exaggerating,” said Ed. “They didn’t say that they don’t know. Severe dehydration, had you on an IV for a bit. And there’s water there for you when you’re ready. Exhaustion, of course, and other exposure-type symptoms; some burns. But nothing fatal. They just don’t know what could have drained you so fast.”

“And by that he means that they’re cunts — you were floating in mid-air and making a wall of darkness, for God’s sake,” Niall scoffed. “Cool new trick, by the way. But can’t be a bloody walk in the park.”

“But I wasn’t.”

Liam furrowed his brows. “Yes you were. Can you still remember —”

“The darkness part wasn’t me. The other stuff was me, but not that part. That was someone else.”

Harry’s guests went quiet.

“Look, was I dreaming, or was there someone else?” Harry asked, closing his eyes and scrunching his brow. “Someone who saved me.”

Ed nodded. “Short fellow, grey hood?”

“Yeah. You were there? You saw them?”
“We all saw everything.”

“Everything after Hoodie Guy showed up,” Niall clarified.

“They made all of the shadows. Had to be,” Harry insisted.

“Saved you from a free-fall, too,” said Liam. “Dunno how much you saw of it yourself, but there was a point at which you just — stopped, and like, fell from the sky. We were all panicking. I thought we were about to lose you. I was absolutely terrified. But then suddenly the big ball of shadow dissolved, and the guy in the hoodie — I dunno how he did it, ’cause like, he was over there one second and then the next thing we saw, he’d scooped you up, but he didn’t teleport the way you do it — it was like he dissolved in one place, and, I dunno, like — re-materialized? Is that a word?” He shrugged. “He had you in his arms, and he just, like, floated there for a second. I was afraid he was gonna strangle you or something, he looked pretty frightening. And then you both did that dissolve-y-thing and I got really scared…”

“And then you showed up on Blackfriars Bridge, with the necessary authorities and services standing by,” Ed half-smiled. “He handed you over and disappeared, no fuss out of him.”

Harry had millions of questions, but the one he managed to ask was, “Are we sure it’s a he?”

Liam laughed. “Hoping for a hot bird, are we, cheeky?”

“It’s only a guess,” said Ed. Niall shrugged.

Harry nodded, as best as he could with his head glued to his pillow. “I wonder why they cared. I wonder why they just showed up and…did that for me. Out of nowhere…”

“Who wouldn’t?” said Liam. “You’re Britain’s Hero. Imagine saving Harry Styles’ life, how much that could bring you…”

“Done it a few times. Hasn’t done much for me,” Harry quipped. Niall humoured him with a chortle. “But they didn’t do it for attention. If they had, they would have stopped and posed for the papers after, and even I couldn’t see their face.”

“Mystery sells too, remember,” said Ed. “Honestly, nobody knows anything about who or why at this point. Not us, not any other witnesses — and there were lots. Definitely not the media.”

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” said Niall, giving Harry’s shoulder a very gentle pat. “He hasn’t shown his face since then. I doubt he ever will again, to be honest. Doesn’t seem like your average superhero, make-a-show type. Just one weird guy doing a very good deed.”

“How long’s it been? Since they disappeared.”

“Just over twenty-four hours now, I’d reckon,” said Liam.

“And how long are they gonna keep me here?”

“Until they see you’re well rested. It’s just precautionary. They don’t have any super specialists on hand and the healthcare system’s fucked and they don’t want to be sued over your death,” Ed shrugged.

“Nice,” said Harry. He would make an appointment with his specialist as soon as they released him.

“Wait, hang on,” he remembered, “the challenger! What happened?”
“Oh, him!”

“Seemed pretty exhausted once the black ball-thing broke. He had a free-fall right around when you did, ’cept Hoodie didn’t seem to care too much about catching him,” Niall explained.

Liam continued. “He hit the water, and managed to make it to shore after a bit. And there were these people, like, waiting to catch him, wearing like, beekeeper costumes? Or something…”

“The SHDU?” Harry supplied, relieved.

“The what?”

“Superhuman Detainment Unit. They clean up after me.”

“Ahh,” said Liam. “Probably them.”

Harry closed his eyes, too tired to use the forty-something muscles required to frown. Confusion and stress weren’t the nicest things to wake up to, along with the feeling that he owed a life debt to someone who hadn’t even left the smallest trace of themselves behind, leaving the debt destined to go unpaid. And not to forget the nagging feeling that he had finally failed spectacularly at his job, and had the mysterious shadow not been there to save him, he would have been killed.

In an attempt to drown that all out, Harry focused on gratitude. “Thank you all for being here for me. S’good to see you.”

The musicians smiled. “It’s the least we could do,” said Liam.

“Aren’t you all busy? Albums to promote? Gigs to play? You shouldn’t have the time to look after me.”

“Funny you say that,” chuckled Niall. “Yesterday, Ed had just finished his set down at Queen’s Quay for the Summer Fest, and Payno and I were just about to go on, do a little acoustic…”

“It was mad!” Liam interrupted. “I was running around everywhere backstage trying to look for these two, ’cause everyone else was out by the river, but they were catching up on their bromance or something. Anyway, you and your super stuff stole our audience!”

Harry grinned. “Sorry. Can’t help being cuter than you.”

Liam pinched Harry’s cheek. “Rude!”

“I was born this way, Liam.”

“Which way? Cocky?”

“Emphasis on the ‘cock,’” Niall laughed under his breath.

Harry’s attempt at an affronted look was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in, he’s awake!” Liam called.

“Not very!” Harry hissed, but it was too late.

A nurse gently nudged the door open, ushering in a frail girl in a hospital gown who looked no older than ten. Ed went to hold the door open for them, but the girl froze in the doorway as soon as she laid eyes on him. Her eyes widened even further as she spotted Liam, then further again at the sight
“D’you mind if we come for a visit?” asked the nurse. “Daisy here has been with us for quite a while, and she’s a big fan of Harry’s.”

“Hello!” Liam waved, beaming. “I’m sure Harry wouldn’t mind, would you? He’s a little under the weather at the moment, probably too tired to answer you, but —”

“Hello there!” Harry called, sounding as alive and chipper as possible just to spite Liam. “I would come over and say hi, but I’m not feeling my best right now. Sorry.”

The girl looked them both up and down before muttering, “I brought something for you.”

“Ooh, for Harry? That’s very thoughtful of you!” Liam squeed.

Clutched in one of her hands was what looked to be a comic book.

The nurse took hold of her other hand, and they went to Harry’s bedside together. Liam helped the girl place the issue in Harry’s lap. “D’you mind if I share Harry’s comic, seeing as there’s not enough for me?” he asked.

“I didn’t bring one for you,” Daisy informed him, chin held high. “Mum says your songs are inappropriate for young women of my age.”

Niall burst out into cackles. “Your mother’s wise!” he assured Daisy. “Protect your ears at all costs!”

“Ooh, well then,” Liam nodded. “Um, that’s — well, it’s —”

“True,” Ed grinned. “Mine are better.”

“Yours are too mushy,” Daisy declared. Niall laughed harder and Ed shrugged, fine with that assessment.

Harry lifted a finger to ask for silence, and, to his relief, that was enough to shut everyone up. He reached out a hand to Liam, who helped him sit up, propped against his pillows.

He waited for his vision to stop spinning, then squinted down at his gift. Upon first glance, a few things became apparent. It was indeed a comic book. It was a superhero comic book, and the figure on the front cover was Harry Styles.

He remembered one thing very clearly from the earliest meetings of his career: no comic books. No fantasy versions of Harry had ever been sold in fictional works. Tabloids, not graphic novels, were the medium for his message. Management had strict control over his image rights, and thus only authorized its use in certain circumstances from which they could reap a profitable cut. They weren’t exactly fond of unauthorized artists’ interpretations.

Harry took a flip through. The illustrations were gorgeous — sharp lines and colours that captured the furious pulse of any superhero comic, but with textures and frame shapes that he had never seen in any sort of graphic novel. It was more sumptuous. It didn’t have the look of anything professionally published, but neither did it look anywhere close to amateur. The artist didn’t seem to ever mention Harry’s name, so Harry figured that without it, perhaps the use of his likeness was questionably legal.

The likeness itself was captured so superbly it scared the crap out of him. The artist seemed to have an incredible knowledge of Harry’s powers and fighting style, too — beyond the level of an ordinary
superfan. Every move, every frame, every expression, every use of onomatopoeia — it was spot-on.

It was far too much for his fatigued brain to handle, and even more intense were the last two pages.

At first he thought it was just another random hooded figure.

But it was the hooded figure. Rather short, with small hands, and that strange dark haze that obstructed their face.

Nothing much happened in those last pages — the Harry figure saw the hooded figure sneaking away after the issue’s climactic fight, and then followed them at a distance for some time. But as soon as Harry got close, the figure disappeared.

“…like smoke,” read the text in Harry’s thought bubble.

Niall, unable to help himself, leaned in to read over Harry’s shoulder. “Holy fookin’ hell,” he breathed.

“Niall!” snapped Liam. “Language, there’s a child in here!”

Daisy snorted a laugh, mostly at Liam.

Harry traced the figure’s outline with a finger. The image called to mind a snippet of one of his super history lessons from back in training. He had studied a few fictional heroes, including one from the thirties and forties called The Shadow. A man whose signature ability was clouding others’ minds to turn invisible. If there was a modern day Shadow, Harry figured, here they were. He quietly decided that calling them The Shadow was far preferable to “Hoodie” or “Person With Hood,” and so internally, he did just that.

Harry pointed to the comic, frowning at Daisy. “Have you read this, love?”

She nodded.

“Are there more?”

She nodded again. “There’s loads you’re supposed to read before this one, but I gave those away already, to my friends here.”

“That’s very thoughtful. Could you tell me…” Harry shifted uncomfortably to try to lean down and show her an image from the back pages, getting dizzier as he went, “…who this is?”

The girl gave the second-last page a close inspection. “That’s…you. Harry,” she said.

“No, the other person. Can you tell me who that is, that there?” He pointed to The Shadow, before Liam grabbed him and made him lean back against his pillows again.

The girl bit her lip, looked at Harry nervously, and mumbled something.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. Can you repeat it?”

Daisy hesitated, then mumbled “The Shadow.”

No fucking way.

He almost laughed. “Is that what they call them, in the other comics?”
“My friends said that’s what his name is,” said Daisy quietly. Harry nodded. She hung her bald head, empty hands clasped behind her back.

“Sorry love, too many questions? I’ll stop boring you, then,” said Harry. “Here, have your comic back. It’s lovely, I enjoyed it. Thank you.”

Daisy shook her head. “No, you keep it. It’s my favourite, but it’s for you. Keep it.”

“Are you sure? I can see you really like it, and I’m not going to be here for much longer…”

“I can always get another copy to read,” Daisy insisted.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t want you to have to buy another —”

“Her brother is friends with the artist, it’s not a problem,” the nurse reassured with a smile. “She’s always the first to get to read a new issue when it comes out. Aren’t you, Daze?”

Daisy beamed.

“That sounds excellent,” croaked Harry. “Wouldn’t mind having that kind of deal myself. What’s your brother’s name?” The brother knew the artist, and the artist knew more about this Shadow than Harry did, and Harry craved answers.

Daisy shook her head. “You wouldn’t know him. He says he’s not cool enough to be friends with superheroes. Only people who can draw them.”

Liam, Niall and Ed gave warm chuckles. Harry tried his best not to frown.

“Well, we’d best get back to your visitor then, eh, before visiting hours end?” the nurse suggested. “Say goodbye to Harry and his friends, Daze! So kind of them to let us visit. Say thank you!”

“Thank you!” said Daisy. She reached out a thin, pale pair of arms. The nurse lifted her onto Harry’s bed so she could bend down for a gentle hug around the neck.

“Take care, Daisy. Thank you for the comic!” said Harry, in the least broken voice he could muster.

“Bye, love!” waved Ed.

“Lovely to meet you!” called Niall.

“Goodbye Harry! Goodbye Inappropriate and Mushy Ginger and…” she shrugged at Niall, “whoever you are.”

Niall and Ed started laughing as soon as the door clicked shut.

“I like it!” Ed told Liam. “Should be your new stage name. Inappropriate Payno. Or maybe something with a little more swag — Inapprop Payno? Inapropes? There’s a ‘pro’ in ‘inappropriate’…”

Liam gave Ed his famous teddy bear frown. “Shut up, Ginger! Mushy Ginger.”

Which Ed did, because at that very moment, the doctor gave a knock on the door, and didn’t wait for an answer before opening it and striding in like he owned the place, clipboard in hand.

Not bothering to greet anyone, he cut right to the chase. “Feeling any better, Mr. Styles?”
“Yeah, thanks. Just a little faint. And the burns on my — ”

“Good,” said the doctor. “You boys leave him alone, let him sleep. Someone’ll be by to check on you when you come to again, and then you’re free to go whenever you feel like it.”

Harry gave him an incredulous frown. “Just like that?”

The doctor rolled his eyes. “Just like that.”

Harry paused. “So, you’re sure I’m alright? I don’t see why you were holding me here in the first place, if you think —”

“Well, you sure look alright to me,” the doctor shrugged. “Besides, you probably have some sort of healing powers, right? Don’t know why you’re wasting your people’s resources here, Mr. Styles. Sleep tight!” With a sweep of his white coat, the doctor was gone.

“Helpful,” Liam summarized.

“God bless the NHS…” groaned Ed. “But he’s right about the sleep, at least. You’re fading fast, Haz. Time to leave?” he asked Liam.

“Yeah, sure. Could use with a bite to eat.”

“I still think we should’ve had some take away two hours ago, but of course no one listens to me…” Niall sighed.

Ed pecked Harry lovingly on the forehead. “Sweet dreams, princess! Enjoy your rest. Text me if you want me!”

“Oh, please, don’t get Liam started…”

But Liam had already started, squeezing his farewells in between the notes of his under-his-breath rendition of the earworm chorus to his summer smash single.

“Great, now I’ll have it stuck in my head all night.”

“Price you pay for thinking you’re cuter than me, Stylesy.”

“Why must the truth always come at a price, Liam?”

Harry definitely hadn’t meant for that to be taken seriously. Trust Liam to miss a joke. Liam shot a glance back at the comic book, before prying it gently from Harry’s fingers and laying it on his bedside table. “Dunno, mate. But I wouldn’t think about it if I were you.” He squatted next to Harry, forced a smile, and gave his wrist a reassuring squeeze before taking his leave of the room and closing the door behind him.

As soon as they were gone, Harry switched on the light next to his bedside, found the last page of the comic book, and stared at it until his eyelids could no longer keep themselves open. He read his own narration bubble over and over.

“Describe them? How could I? One second they were there, looking at me, as if they were watching over me, and then…”

“…like smoke…”

“…like smoke.”
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

As always let me know what you thought below! Or come say hi on my tumblr!

Also heads up, betas and I have decided to release Volume III as a sequel - so this will be a wee series! woot :)}
Harry felt more than ready to walk after allowing himself a six-hour nap in his hospital bed. After a nurse had declared him ship-shape, he stood, shrugged on his torn battle clothes, and took his leave. He gave Daisy’s comic book to a receptionist, asking for it to be returned to her, along with the potted lily Ed had bought for his room. It was after midnight, but, still cautious from his last hospital experience, Harry wasn’t ready to risk a media storm by leaving through the main entrance. Side exits were a necessity in the life of a superhuman celebrity, and thankfully, Harry had become quite adept at finding them.

He hailed a cab for the ride back to his flat. The doorman of his building looked pleasantly surprised to admit him.

“I’m alive!” Harry said.

Paul looked him up and down, side-eyeing his tomato-red skin and tattered clothes, before conceding, “Very good, sir.”

Upon entering his flat, he was greeted by a very hungry, whining cat, pawing at his jeans and boots like a damn dog. Harry hurried apologetically to get MJ a bowl of food, a good handful of treats, and a new tray of water. He then settled himself with a sigh on a stool by his kitchen island to check his there-waiting phone. A note on the fridge caught his eye — a cat doodle with an arrow pointing to it, with the caption Beast has been fed, and yesterday’s date. He recognized the handwriting and gave a sigh of relief. Thank fuck for Cara. Their recent-ish PR relationship had granted her ownership of Harry’s spare keys, and despite her pranks, she’d done more than her share of good with them. The cat was mostly being a drama queen, as usual.

His smartwatch, which handled his emergency and work-related communications, had bitten the dust during the fight, and so Harry had had a peaceful respite from the fallout of the battle. But Chris, Simon and Ben all had his personal contact info. Harry sighed. He would probably have to deal with them now regardless.

He made a point of checking his mum’s and Gemma’s texts first, each a long string of please call if you’re okay’s and please please please tell me you’re okay’s, eventually concluding with their hugs and kisses upon hearing reassuring reports from Liam, Niall and Ed. What kind friends he had.
Anne had made no mention of news reports or of Harry’s unlikely saviour, but Gemma had sent him a snap — a clip of a BBC report playing on her laptop, showing Harry limp in his hero’s arms, presented with the caption “You’ve Got A Friend.mp3.”

Harry didn’t pay it much attention. He couldn’t stomach it now. He read Niall’s impressive all-caps text account of the battle, before taking a deep breath and checking his messages from Chris.

Well, message, singular. It was only from the previous morning. *might want to meet at hq tomorrow.*

Typical Chris, predicting his recovery time with accuracy.

Still too weary to teleport, Harry arranged for a car to pick him up for a meeting next afternoon. He was unprepared for the amount of pleasant smalltalk the driver seemed keen on. Thankfully, she carefully skirted the topics of giant energy spheres and disguised vigilantes. Harry felt bad for just how fake-chipper his tone was in his every reply, but tipped generously to make up for it.

He made his way through the office floor of his old training centre on autopilot, letting his feet guide him to Chris’ conference room while his mind wandered. He found it empty. A text from Chris followed.

*Ben’s office.*

Ben and Chris were sitting stiff and upright around a glass table when Harry walked in. Harry raised an eyebrow, poking fun at their postures. Ben snorted. Chris’ eyes gently crinkled in a tired smile.

“You tan quite nicely,” Chris teased.

Harry pouted, but his eyes smiled. “Oh, shut it.” Chris had a way of getting him to laugh about his battle scars.

Ben shifted in his seat, losing his smile. “Business, then?”

“Business,” Harry nodded. He took a seat.

Ben cleared his throat. “Might we discuss your last encounter, Harry? I know it’s still fresh, I wanted to check if you were alright with that.”

“I’m alright with it, thank you.”

“Oh, how I love your questions,” Harry said, resting his head in his hands with a tired grin. “But first, I just remembered — if you could put in a request for a new watch for me, that’d be nice.”

Ben smiled. “Your cat is the star of Cara Delevigne’s Instagram. She seems fine. But seriously,
Harry — who is he?”

“Who?”

“The hooded man, of course. The one who saved your life.”

“How d’you know if it’s a man?”

“Well I assumed you’d know, seeing as you’re the one here who’s had more...intimate contact with him than the rest of us.”

“Intimate?”

Ben snorted. “He carried you in his arms like you were his Roman bride, for God’s sake.”

“I honestly don’t know them,” said Harry with a broad shrug. “I haven’t even seen the news reports. You’ll know more about them than I will.”

“Sure?” said Ben, quizzically. “In all of the footage, there’s not a hint of his face…”

“Their face is hidden,” Harry explained. “In, like, this cloud. It makes their features all dark and murky. It’s hard to explain.”

Ben frowned. “Couldn’t have been one of your super friends, running around in disguise?”

“What super friends?”

“Oh come on now, Harry. Just consider —”

“Super people all either want to fight me or they’re afraid of me. They don’t make the best friends.”

“So you know nothing about who that is?” Ben double checked, skeptical.

Chris jumped in before Harry could answer. “We’ve been analyzing their powers, the research team and I. And so far, I think it’s safe to say we’ve never seen a superhuman with an arsenal of that kind — not in the modern, documented super world, at least.”

Harry leaned in a slight bit. “What’s so special about it?”

“It was hard to see from the footage, but they seemed to be emitting their own sort of ink-like vapour, into the air.”

“And that’s new?”

“Emissive powers are rare themselves — as well you know. You yourself channel the energy around you, rather than generating it. But whatever they’re working with —”

“Darkness,” said Harry. “It’s, like, pure darkness. If that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t, really. At least, it’s not in line with what we’ve seen before, a superhuman being able to control that sort of energy. And to do it so fluidly…”

“This would be a valuable person to be able to talk to, H. He could bring knowledge and skill we haven’t yet dreamed of to our school,” said Ben.

“Who’s to say they know anything?” Harry shrugged. “We don’t even know who they are.”
“I know what training looks like,” Ben assured, “and he has at least six years of it.”

“And he can’t have had it here,” said Chris.

“I say we aim to talk to bring him in. But be skeptical, Harry. It’s very likely he doesn’t have your best interests at heart.”

Harry wasn’t ready to accept an unfounded warning. “But what could they want from me? Attention? That doesn’t seem worth all their effort…”

“They’ve captured plenty of interest,” Chris pointed out. They put on a spectacle. It may be too early to tell.”

Harry frowned. “Maybe.”

“Trust, Harry,” said Ben, voice harder and colder now, like steel. “He might be looking to gain your trust, and whether that’s simply for information, or to play you like a pawn in his unforetold game, he could be keeping you alive and well to serve his purpose.”

“We can’t know exactly what they’re interested in ’til they show up again,” Chris reasoned, “which I’m sure they will. Keep an eye out. Don’t trust them, not even if they play the hero’s hero again.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Harry said.

“But let him trust you,” said Ben. “The closer you get to him, the more chance we have of learning from him.”

Something about Ben’s tone made Harry suspicious of what Ben meant by learning. “I’m not going to be rounding them up and bringing them here. Unless they hurt me, there’s no point bringing in the SHDU.”

Ben’s eyes softened with concern. “This is an unlicensed vigilante trying to play with licensed professionals, Harry. Your caring is important, but it is in your mandate to bring people like this to justice.”

“Can’t I just focus on the ones actually trying to harm people?”

Chris spoke up. “Harry, letting this man go unquestioned will do us all more harm than good.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “So it’s the licensed people who deserve the respect, obviously, ’cause they’ve already paid for it.”

“With their efforts, Harry.”

“I know exactly how much my license at age sixteen cost, thank you Ben.” Harry poured himself a glass of water, but didn’t stop talking long enough to drink it. “And, license or not, doesn’t matter who they are — detainment treats them all the same anyway. Not like heroes, and not like people.” He lowered his voice to a mutter. “My challenger from the other day is probably just now figuring that out…”

“And good thing too, Harry. He broke the superhuman code more times than I’d ever thought possible, and he nearly killed you,” Chris reminded.

“And so we want to treat the one who saved my life with just as much respect…”

“Rest assured,” said Ben calmly, “he will be treated with full, humane respect.”
“The license requirement isn’t for fun, or for government bullshit purposes, either,” Chris interjected. “It’s to keep the public out of harm’s way. This vigilante might be friendly now, but that could change. It could put people at risk.”

“And if he’s no harm at all, we will learn from this man, and if he’s interested in doing the public some good, we will acquaint him with a license,” Ben said.

Harry gave it a moment’s thought, then nodded. What was the likelihood he would be able to capture The Shadow anyway? He could go along with Chris and Ben for now, and blame his failure to capture The Shadow on their elusiveness. Besides, Chris and Ben weren’t the ones responsible for the centre’s inhumane track record when it came to super detainees. He would continue to fight, alone and quietly, against the centre’s detainment staff.

“Is it time for the elephant in the room?” Harry asked, a minute and a glass of water later. “I’ve just had the biggest possible blow to my career. The one we’d all feared. That challenger had more power and more versatility than I could have imagined. I’m not undefeated anymore. I don’t know what I need to get back on form, or if that’s even possible...but that’s our priority here. Not...whoever the fuck they are.”

There was a silence before Chris said, “Just be careful out there. That’s all we need from you.”

“Did something feel off at all that day?” Ben asked, carefully.

“My Spidey senses didn’t warn me properly that the attack was coming,” Harry said, eyes on the table. “I wasn’t as responsive as usual, either.”

Ben nodded, worried creases working their way into the spaces between his features. “Maybe it’s time to start increasing checkups,” he said, “to make sure everything’s alright.”

“Make sure your midichlorian levels are fine,” Chris agreed, smirking.

Ben rolled his eyes. Harry smiled.

“When can you book him in, Chris?”

“Next week?” Chris proposed.

Harry gave him a thumbs-up.

Chris wrote in an appointment on his phone. “Your watch will be ready for you tomorrow, by the way,” he told Harry. “Stay home, though. You’re ripe for a day off. I can have it dropped off, if you like.”

“That’d be great, thanks.” Harry sat back and tried to picture the perfect day off — a tea party for one? Another homemade spa day? A Breaking Bad marathon with Liam? Anything at all to mask the stench of corruption and failure that seemed to be consuming everything he touched?

“You’re dismissed,” said Ben, breaking his reverie.

Harry shook himself. He took a deep breath and sat back up. “Could I talk to you, actually?”

Ben looked to Chris, who nodded his consent. Harry stood to hug his former training master before Chris took his leave.

Ben was patiently twiddling his thumbs when Harry sat back down opposite him. A long beat went
by before Harry said, “I need your help.”

“I know.”

Harry sat up straighter. This was news. “You’ve been getting my messages, then?”

“I have. I’m sorry I’ve been so busy, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting. I know someone in America. It may be difficult to ship him over on short notice, but he’s been interested in your case for a long time, so we’ll find a way to have you meet him. He specializes in contract law in entertainment. He’s worked with heroes before — remember the case between Echelon and their management, over licensing?”

Harry hummed. He’d studied that case back to front.

“Will this be too much stress, though, to tackled at once?” Ben asked. “I thought you wanted to focus on getting back on form…”

“It’s now or never,” said Harry plainly. “My career is only going to get worse.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I know it, Ben.”

Ben clasped his hands together on the desk. He shook his head. “This has been a long time coming. Jesus, if I’d had a look at that contract, this never would’ve happened.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“At least the Cara stunt’s over. That was a mighty weak joke,” Ben smiled. “Caroline, too.”

Harry snort-laughed. “You’re telling me!” Caroline hadn’t really seen much sales benefit due to the relationship, so tensions were still high, but Cara was happy, at least. Her new girlfriend was a blessing.

“I still can’t believe that Simon thinks all of that was perfectly alright,” Ben sighed. “Carefully sculpting such a farce for you to act out...keeping you held back…”

“My image is working out for me, so far as he’s concerned. He wouldn’t want to take a risk that could put that in jeopardy.”

“Simon’s an oaf. Risk, that’s the very core of your image,” said Ben animatedly, as if delivering a pitch. “You were a massive risk. You’re all about breaking boundaries, changing our idea of what ‘hero’ means. You set others free just by being who you are and leading by example. That’s the source of most of your actual power — your freedom, your light. If anyone could rob that from you, Harry, you wouldn’t be the most powerful man on Earth.”

“I’m not the most powerful man on Earth in any case, Ben.”

Ben smirked. “Let’s ask your enemies about that.”

Harry drummed his fingers. “They just like picking on someone so cute as me.”

“Perhaps that’s part of it. Part of your power.”

Harry chuckled. He lifted his head to look back at Ben once his expression had sobered. “If you’ll let me speak to this connection from America —”
“No, Harry, it’s taken care of. I’ll contact him straight away.”

“Great, thank you. And keep me updated?”

“Absolutely.”

Harry stood and pushed his chair in. “Thanks.” After turning to study the door for a breath, he turned back to Ben. “This is part of my power, too. I’m ready to take my power back.”

“I know, Harry. Me too.”

He’d been eighteen when he’d gotten the tattoos.

The pain of the needle had made him question why he was putting a bird on his chest who would always return home, to represent a boy who would never return to him. But swallows also stood for freedom, he’d read. And for hope.

Also, Harry loved the irony of flying birds tattooed on a man who could do so many superhuman things, but couldn’t bloody fly. Teleport, levitate — but never fly.

All told, they fit.

That Sunday, Harry found himself at the back of an abysmally long queue in an unfamiliar Starbucks, waiting for a caffeine fix that was long overdue. The state of things was definitely not helped by the brunette girl at the front of the line, who was taking the time necessary to flirt with the baristas.

He couldn’t blame her. One had tousled brown hair, the other a brown-black quiff, and both had choice features, from what he could see. She had excellent taste, but Harry found it difficult to support her conquest when she was causing such a serious delay. His goal was to be somewhat awake by the time his mother and sister came for tea that afternoon. Having enough time to clean up after the cat would be a bonus. Both ideals were looking more and more unlikely by the second.

“Usual, please,” the girl finally ordered. “With soy. *And* whip. You remember how it’s done, right boo?”

The brown-haired barista raised his eyebrows in warning to the dark-haired one. “Coming right up, love,” he told the flirt, moving over to the bar to get started.

Something about his voice jogged Harry’s memory, but he blinked it away. Silly Harry.
The dark-haired barista rang the girl in with a softly amused smile. With her change still in her fist, she darted to the receiving counter to make small talk with her ‘boo,’ much to the barista’s chagrin. He answered question after question with as few syllables as possible, and occasionally, a tentative chuckle. Harry cringed in sympathy.

Boo gave a sigh of satisfaction when he finally presented Flirty with his creation. “There you are, love. One mocha-nutty-frappy-whatever, with soy and whip. Have a lovely day.”

“You’re a doll, Lou. Cheers, Zayn!”

“Cheers, El.”

As soon as she’d left, the tone of conversation between the barista boys changed. And who was Harry to tune out of free, harmless gossip? He had nothing better to listen to. The pounding in his skull existed in dread of his headphones.

“Jesus, Zayn, I’ve tried every hint in the book — won’t you just make out with me the next time she’s in, and tell me all the ways you want to hypothetically ravish me later?”

“She’ll just find it cute.”

“God forbid. What does a boy have to do to seem gay around here?”

Harry smirked to himself. Poor Flirty Spice… lucky Harry?

“You’d still be fucked, even if she knew,” Zayn reasoned, in between orders. “She’d just bring you out shopping with her more.”

“Oh come on, I own two pairs of garbage jeans. I’m not the kind of gay the straight girls like to commodify.”

Harry racked his brain for relevant chat-up lines. *I like my men how I like my coffee…not straight…?*

“If I were a straight girl, I’d commodify you,” Zayn cooed.

Boo snorted. “Ta, love.”

Harry leaned over to try for a better look at them. The lighter haired one seemed rather attached to the far counter, and was harder to see. How would Harry make do without a disarming compliment tailored to his appearance?

*Hello, I would like a venti… dick…?*

“I haven’t even told you about that couple name she made for you two,” Zayn chuckled.

“She what?”

*Well sure I’ll pay, but I’d rather…gay…?*

“Yesterday, when she came in and you were in the loo —”

“My dear blessed bladder!”

*My cup says “contents are hot.” Why doesn’t your nametag?*

“— and I said you were on break, and she said it was too bad, ‘cause everyone was asking her how
‘Elounor’ was going.”

"What?"

“El-Lou-nor.”

There was a good long beat of silence before Boo resumed, “And she ordered…”

“The usual,” the baristas said in unison.

“Is she alright? The amount of sugar in that thing she calls a drink…”

“She tried to ask for coconut milk instead of soy yesterday.”

“Bloody hell, she’s branching out…bless her…”

By this point in the conversation, Harry had finally reached the front of the queue, and he had no worthy chat up line prepared. Zayn was putting together a string of lattes at the bar, so Boo stepped up to take his order, his eyes cast down, trained on the cash.

From further away, Harry had only seen the man’s face in puzzle-piece glimpses. Delicate brows, a lazy swoop of hair crossing his forehead, lovely cheekbones, a little peekaboo of a rosy tongue as he nervously licked his lips. An enticing, incomplete picture.

But now, standing in front of him, more details fell into place — long eyelashes, puffy lower lids, a strange sort of nose. Others fell away. The picture shifted before his very eyes.

As the barista looked up to address him, the picture finally coalesced, and it was a familiar one.

“Hello, sir,” said Louis Tomlinson. “What can I do you for?”

Harry let out a squawk of a giggle, flustered at once by his realization and by Louis’ choice of words.

Louis raised an eyebrow.

“Oops,” Harry blurted. He did a double take, glancing down to check the barista’s nametag. Louis.

Louis’ face was inscrutable. He shrugged. “S’alright. What would you be fancying, then?”

“Um, uh…” God be damned if he even knew what a beverage was anymore. Should he order a drink? Or just cut to the chase? Ask Louis how he was, how he’d ended up in London, squeeze four years worth of news out of him, ask him to dinner, now that he was finally before Harry’s very eyes?

He started with the drink. “I’ll have…what she had. You know. Brown hair, flirty.”

The shocked expression that Louis managed was pretty spectacular, and if Harry had had his way, it would have been immediately immortalized in emoji form. “You mean a grande mocha-nutty, frappy-wappy, hanky-panky, buttery-caramelly thing?”

“With soy,” Zayn smiled from the bar.

“And whip, please,” Harry beamed.

Louis held the face a little longer, before charging him curtly and swapping places with Zayn. It took Harry more than a moment to digest what had just happened — in particular, the way Louis had
treated him like an average customer. No excitement, no relief, not even a hint of recognition after four years apart. Unless this was Louis’ evil twin, something was wrong.

But perhaps he just needed to keep engaging Louis, asking him questions, trying again. He assumed Flirty’s former position by the counter, watching Louis closely as he shook some ice into a blender.

With a deep breath in, he rallied up his courage — or maybe it was his recklessness. He said the best worst thing that came to mind, hoping his famed charm would carry him through.

“So, now I guess it’s my turn.” He shrugged, smiling coyly for good measure.

Louis looked up with a quizzical frown. Harry’s heart skipped a beat from the eye contact alone.

“Um, to flirt with you,” Harry supplied.

Louis looked back down. “If it’s all the same to you, mate, I’m not in the mood. I’ve had quite the week, just trying to get through today. Now, did you really want the soy?”

Harry shrugged. “Why not?”

“Nothing wrong with it, like. I just expected something different.”


“From a man whose shirt says ’Hot N Hard’ in massive print.”

Fair enough. “I’ve got many different facets and some depth to me,” Harry explained.

“Don’t we all. Here you are, sir,” he half-smiled, handing Harry his frappuccino. “One flirt-powered, thigh-gap-enhancing miracle tonic, with plenty of depth and soy levels sure to increase your manhood. Enjoy your day.”

Harry took the drink in his hand, but couldn’t bring himself to move. That was it. Louis had said his farewell. He had to act fast.

“It’s me — Harry — by the way,” Harry added frantically as Louis turned around to prepare someone else’s coffee.

Louis paused, looked over his shoulder, and once more met Harry’s gaze with tired versions of those familiar blue eyes. Harry couldn’t even see a glimmer of caring in so neutral a look. “Nice to meet you, Harry. Have yourself a good one.”

“Yeah, um…see you.”

Someone may as well have pulled the roof down and buried him in the rubble. That was Louis, no doubt, his name tag said Louis, and it had been years, years with no contact, all leading up to...this. Even failing at his high-stakes job hadn’t left him feeling this crushed.

He forced himself to take another deep breath and to remove himself from the counter. Though he had no desire to coat his overly-syrupy, overly-whip creamed concoction with a flavoured dusting, he retired to the condiments table to buy himself some time, absent-mindedly applying copious amounts of cinnamon.

There had to be some way to get Louis to acknowledge him. Who he was. Who they were to each other. Little mischievous Louis, who he’d become friends with so instantly, who he’d fallen for so quickly, who had plucked up the courage to kiss him — he owed it to that Louis to reconnect,
somehow. Taking the drink and leaving was not an option here.

He hesitantly found himself a table only a few feet away from the receiving counter and pretended to be ensconced in fascination for his frappuccino. It made his stomach churn. After a few minutes of just staring at it had gone by, he hesitantly drove a straw into the mountain of whip and gave it a taste. As he inhaled a steady stream of mocha-nutty-manliness, he couldn’t keep his eyes from lingering on Louis.

His train of thought soon became a narration of Louis.

*Joking with Zayn.*

*Preparing another latte.*

*Oh, they’re out of lactose-free milk.*

*Replacing the bag of lactose-free milk.*

He was beginning to feel like a much less eloquent David Attenborough.

*Making the latte look pretty, probably.*

*Handing it to the lady with a smile.*

*Why didn’t I get a smile like that?*

*Back to the cash. Taking an order.*

*Oh, so he didn’t say “What can I do you for” just for me. That must be his thing.*

*Bastard.*

Louis returned his gaze briefly as he set the next macchiato down on the receiving counter. His look was basically a groan, but with eyes.

All too quickly he was back to work, and Harry was back to breathing.

Breathing and thinking about Louis. What about his powers? What had happened to them? Had he developed them? Were they gone? Had they never amounted to anything? Or was he currently working on a contract with a PR agency or a management company?

He needed to get Louis’ attention again. He needed an actual conversation with him, and he needed it within the next fifteen minutes, so he had time to get back to the flat and tidy up for Anne and Gemma.

But perhaps if Louis gave in, family could wait.

Resolving to do something without knowing what, Harry rose to his feet. He made a swipe for his frappucino, but instead of grabbing it, he sent it flying off of the table. It landed with a crack, and oozed onto the floor.

Even though there was a crowd around the receiving counter now, it didn’t take long for Louis’ eyes to find Harry. He looked from Harry down to the frap puddle, and back up to Harry. He raised his eyebrows, unimpressed.

Harry froze. His heart matched the pace of a jet turbine. He felt his cheeks flush.
Louis turned away.

Gathering back a bit of confidence, Harry stared down at the sad puddle and telekinetically scooped it back into the cracked cup. He picked it up and set course for the bin.

He made his way through the small crowd of people waiting for their drinks as politely as he could. He tried to keep Louis in his line of sight as he passed the counter. There he was. Not returning the eye contact. Reaching out to hand a very pink drink to a cluster of girls just in front of him.

Feet on autopilot, as he tried to swerve towards the bin, he bumped one of the girls to his left. Her shoulder knocked the drink from Louis’ hand, and pink liquid fell to the floor.

Louis didn’t bother looking at Harry this time. He huffed, his puff of breath ruffling his fringe. “I’ll come clean it up, love.”

“No, it’s ok, I’ve got it,” Harry said. Everyone turned to face him, eyes going wide, except for Louis. Biting his bottom lip, Harry went into concentration mode. The girls oooh’d and aaaah’d as the pink water and ice evaporated instantly before them. As a finishing touch, Harry made the cup levitate and dance its way into the nearest bin. A few people laughed, or whooped, or cheered, and Harry smiled.

“Are you…are you really Harry Styles?” one of the girls stood next to him asked.

“That I am,” said Harry.

“I thought I’d recognized you!” a blonde-haired one said. “But when I told Jade here, she said it couldn’t be you, and I couldn’t see past your shades and the hat —”

“Of course I knew! I just didn’t want to bother him!” Jade protested.

“Ahem, who was the first to know it was ‘im?” said a third girl.

“It’s a tie!” Harry declared. The four girls and the queue behind them all laughed.

Turning around, Harry was very pleased to see Louis looking on, even if he wore a bit of a frown.

“Alright then, bartender?” he managed, trying not to look sheepish.

“Barista, if you would,” corrected Louis, tongue-in-cheek. The girls laughed again.

“Barista,” Harry corrected with flair. “One more of those pink drinks? I’ll meet you at the cash.”


Harry frowned, shaking his head. He ignored the girls’ protests and extended a five pound note out to Louis.

Louis refused to take his cash from the receiving counter and made him line up again, which at least gave Harry some time to reflect on what he could say to disarm him. Would it be too much just to ask Don’t you remember me? What was Louis being so stiff about? What joke, what memory, what in the world could he say to re-animate the boy who had once laughed at his every quip?

Out of options, he settled on doing what he did in his hero work. He improvised.

“One tall pink drink?” Louis asked, eyes on the register’s buttons.

“Actually, make that two.”
“Not satisfied with the soy and whip combo, were we?”

“No, I’d like you to have this one. To apologize for being a pain of a customer. Take enough money for two of them, and then have Zayn whip something up for you.”

“I’m alright, thanks. I *do* work here,” Louis assured.

“I insist.”

“I’m really fine, thank you.” He looked Harry firmly in the eye and repeated, “Thank you.”

“Well I’m not fine until you take my offer.” Harry gave him the money.

Louis rang him in for one pink potion.

At least one thing hadn’t changed — Louis was still stubborn as fuck. The direct approach was the only thing left to try.

“Look, do you…remember?”

Louis seemed intensely focused on counting change into his lovely little palm. “Remember?” he asked.

“Yeah, remember…when, us, when we…” Harry’s gaze met the floor. Flummoxed. Here he was, someone who risked his neck for a living, unable to keep on talking to an old crush...

“You’re an odd one,” Louis finally said.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “I sure am.”

Louis handed him his change. “Take care of yourself, Harry.”

“You too, Louis.”

Louis’ gaze fell back to the register. “Cheers,” he said in a small voice. And that was all.

Feeling fed up and drained, Harry decided to play along in the avoiding-and-sulking game, if that’s what Louis was going to insist on doing.

Or maybe Louis had genuinely forgotten, a small part of Harry’s brain nagged. Just maybe.

Harry walked back over to the receiving counter to watch the girls give a triumphant welcome to Pink Potion II, after which they all requested selfies with him. His brain was a useless haze by this point. He was brutally aware of Louis casting him glance after glance, this time with a furious curiosity, but Harry was too drained to allow his eyes to say anything much in return.

The furious curiosity slowly started to look more like jealousy. But so what? If Louis wasn’t going to open up to him, he deserved the cold shoulder — didn’t he?

Soon the entire latte-sipping populous of the café was crowded around, waiting for their turn at a selfie. Harry’s patience would have worn thin a lot quicker, if not for Louis’ continuous glances.

By this point, Harry was going to have to race home if he was going to have the time to neaten the place even the slightest bit before his mum arrived and insisted on doing it for him. Unfortunately, teleporting such a distance hadn’t been something he’d tried yet, and he certainly wasn’t going to give it his first try whilst suffering from a hangover and a lack of caffeine.
He promised the swiftly growing crowd around him five more minutes with which to fulfill all of their Instagram needs, and then he was going to have to leave to prepare for tea with his mum. The people around him gave him an awwwwww.

Over the tail end of it, Harry could hear Louis say to Zayn, “So he wears innuendos, drinks soy frappuccinos, uses telekinesis to make plastic cups dance, flirts with an entire coffee joint at once…”

“He was only flirting with one of us, far as I could tell,” said Zayn.

“He was born to drown in pussy —”

“Louis…there are children…”

Louis cleared his throat. “Yes, and all I said was that superhero Harry Styles is destined for a suffocating end as a cat lady. Dear me, Zayn, were you paying attention?”

“Your humour’s shit when there’s pretty boys around. Now go get an Insta with him before he leaves, I’ll cover the bar.”

“Pretty boys are everywhere, and I don’t need an Insta with some egomaniac who makes a name for himself by sleeping around.”

“He looks nice. Don’t be a dick.”

“I already talked to him!”

“Yes, but be nice this time.”

“Fuck off, Zayn.”

“The children, Louis…”

“Yeah, fuck them, too.”

Louis was pissed, somehow. Harry heaved a soundless sigh. The time had come for him to make his exit, as quietly and graciously as possible, so as not to hurt himself or Louis any further. He finished posing for selfies, waved goodbye to everyone, and made his way towards the door.

There was a shelf of take-home products very close to the exit. Tazo-brand teas, mostly. Harry’s eyes lingered on a stack of tea boxes labelled “Refresh.” A rogue few boxes of “Awake” were mixed in, far removed from the full basket of “Awake” on the other side of the room. What could be the harm in a bit of help? Harry figured. He could spare a few seconds. It was the polite thing to do.

He narrowed his eyes at the first box, making it float. It sailed through the air, crossing the distance between the shelves in a scant few seconds. He set the tea box down gently amongst its kin, and turned back to find the next one.

He repeated the process, taking his time a little with this one. Watching things float was fun. He was fully absorbed in the fun of it all, until quick footsteps sounded behind him. A hand reached out and snatched the box of tea out of the air.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the dark cloud of fuck off over Louis’ head as he manually set the box of tea down in its correct pile. He turned back to Harry, face stern, eyes firm.

“Look, Mr. Superhero,” he said, “I’m getting paid to do this. Go somewhere where journalists are waiting and prove to them how fucking humble you are in real life.”
Harry took a look out the window. A few camera flashes went off in the distance.

Louis followed his gaze, sighing as he caught sight of the paps, poised and ready for Harry’s exit. “Why don’t you go save some puppies on your way out, then.”

“I’m on a tight deadline, actually. I have family coming.”

“Then perhaps don’t waste your time auditioning for a low-wage job you’ll never need.”

It took a beat for that to sink in. Louis’ pain was real and clear. Harry felt heavy with it. “I only meant to help,” he said meekly.

“Please don’t,” Louis said softly. “Just…”

Harry nodded. He didn’t need Louis to finish. He was already on his way out.

“Have yourself a nice one, Louis Tomlinson,” he called over his shoulder.

Louis spluttered into silence as Harry tipped his hat and left.

On the tube back to his flat, he kept his head down. No one bugged him. The first thing he did upon arriving home had nothing to do with tidying. He posted a tweet.

*Thanks for your patience Lewis. x*

In five minutes’ time, the tweet had five thousand likes and eight hundred retweets, his mum was ringing the doorbell, and he hadn’t tidied a thing.

Harry certainly did *not* keep a journal of his next many visits to That Starbucks.

Not even a mental one.

Only half a week went by before he *somehow* found himself drawn to the corner of Kingsway and Great Queen Street. His centre of gravity seemed to be located in That Starbucks.

His first time back, Louis wasn’t in. And if that hadn’t been a sign from the universe to give up, then what was? But Harry was stubborn enough to ignore any sort of sign and continue following his damn sense of gravity.

Exactly a week after the initial incident, he was lined up for a Sunday fix that he only recently had begun to need. Louis greeted him at the counter with another “Hello, what can I do you for?”

Harry’s attempts at wit weren’t quite endearing. “Um, I didn’t really come to be…’did,’ to be honest…”

“Then what did you come for?” Louis looked up briefly from under his long eyelashes, and that was enough to fry Harry’s brain to the point of no return.

“Um, ah, er…coffee?”
He gratefully accepted a tall black coffee from Zayn a minute later. The name on the cup read “COFFEE.”

He only made it three more days before a wee challenger coaxed him over to an area not far from That Starbucks for a brawl. It was all the challenger’s fault, of course. Starbucks was a natural way to recover from a fight. It was natural to want to soak your benevolent hero spirit in the coffee-flavoured blood of a corporate empire. Or something like that.

Lo and behold, Louis and Zayn were behind the counter again. Harry strained his neck to try and catch Louis’ eye the entire time he was queued up, to no avail. Zayn took his order, smirking to contain his amusement.

When his slightly-more-thought-out-than-usual order — a grande iced coffee — arrived, there was a doodle of a penis on the cup beneath his name.

The fourth time around, Louis flat out ignored him. Zayn said “Hi again hero,” as a consolation greeting, and that was about it.

The fifth time, Louis once again seemed hellbent on ignoring him, though he was, once again, taking Harry’s order.

“That’ll be five fifty, sir — cash, I presume?”

Zayn passed behind the counter as Harry handed over the last of his pocket change. Louis still wasn’t making eye contact as he accepted it. Something had to be done.

“Zayn, is that a new apron?” Harry called over, very enthusiastically.

Zayn’s eyebrows met in a soft frown. “Why?”

“Just looks smashing, is all. You look lovely, too. Not that you don’t always.”

Was Harry dreaming, or did Louis tighten his grip on the counter?

Zayn looked taken aback. He barely managed a nervous laugh. “Uh, thanks, man. Appreciate it…I guess.”

Harry shrugged sweetly. “Anytime!”

As Harry swept over to the receiving counter, Zayn motioned to the nearest window. “I’ll make your drink quick as I can. Looks like you have a fanclub to greet.”

“That’d be your fanclub, Zayn. Not mine.”

“Nah, bro, pretty sure they’re here for you.”

“But don’t you think you deserve a fanclub, Zayn?”

“Not really…”

“I think you do. You’ve got the cheekbones for it. And the jawline. And dreamy eyes.”

More nervous laughter from Zayn.

“I’m serious!” Harry insisted, his cheeks dimpling as he put his elbows on the counter, propping up his chin in one hand. “Don’t be shy. Do you really not know? You don’t know you’re beauti —”
“Mind leaving my mate alone over there, hero?” Louis called, in between orders. “He is trying to make your latte.”

Harry’s heart pumped its non-existent fist. Louis had directed words at Harry. Mission accomplished.

It was only as Harry went to dispose of his empty cup twenty minutes later that he noticed the tiny sharpie text around the bottom.

“Zayn is straight.” Penis doodle.

_That doesn’t mean anything, Harry_, said the rational side of his mind.

Meanwhile, the irrational, predominant side of his mind said _You should return to That Starbucks as often as possible to determine whether or not that meant anything, Harry._

So he did.

Louis always seemed tense. Zayn gave him hesitant smiles, but nothing more. They became frighteningly good at ignoring him.

And so this is where, with a heavy heart, Harry ended his mental Starbucks journal.

Louis had become so good at ignoring him. All Harry could think to do was ignore him back.

He didn’t want to. But he had to try.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAAAAH I’M SORRY I PROMISE THEY STOP BEING STUPID AND HAVE A HAPPY ENDING I PROMISE!!

Thanks for bearing with me in the meantime. Come talk to me on tumblr or in the comments!
Last time on BFFTS: Harry side-eyed "Elounor" and made a mess in a Starbucks.

Thank you so much for your wonderful comments and kudos! And thanks to B for solo editing this mother (Ari come back).

If Harry had gotten to pick the restaurant for that night’s dinner meeting, reservations would have been made at some exposed-brick-with-hanging-lightbulbs type place. Much as he would admit his love for such aesthetics, there was also something calming about the places themselves. They let Harry unwind. No constant attention, no young elites trying to network with him — just tables, and drinks, and good food, and pretty lights.

But Harry hadn’t had his pick, and whoever the hell had picked the thirty-first floor of The Shard. Europe’s tallest building, centrally located. Hub for rich tourists, fuelled by Russian mafia money, piercing the skyline and looking like an oddly crystalline phallus…

Not so quaint. Not Styles’ style.

I know a few places that won’t be as busy, Harry told Ben via text. Does your American have his heart set?

Seems so, said Ben, adding an apologetic emoji. The place says it does ‘British food.’ I think he wants a slice of the culture.

Harry snorted. If that were the case, he’d invite this Mr. Azoff over for a fry-up breakfast with blood pudding, or beans on toast. Or bloody scones.

He set his phone down, scrubbing a hand through his hair. From his lap, MJ looked up and asked “Mrow?”

“It’s for work, love,” Harry replied. “Like you’d know anything about that, eh? Lucky girl.” He stroked under her chin, and she purred. “You like that? Want to text him back for me? Go for it.” He offered her his phone. She ignored it and stood up, walking up his chest to lick at his nose. And then at his lips, venturing a little too far into his mouth. Harry snorted and gently tossed her off of the couch. “You’re a dog.”

It was raining when Harry and Ben arrived. Harry dusted the last of the cat hair from his lapels as he got out of the car.

The driver held an umbrella for them and escorted them to the lobby door. Harry thanked him profusely. He took a deep breath as the lobby’s wash of silence and unnecessary air conditioning hit him. Ben guided him to the lifts.
Harry tapped his toe as the lift rose, anxious to get this all over with. He knew that today’s meeting didn’t necessarily mean solutions to his problems, but any sort of progress would alleviate at least some of the stress of living with his lips shut tight. He would settle for that.

Ben notified the maître-dé of their reservation at the reception, and they were led towards a window table with a panoramic view, looking westward. Already there, perusing the menu, was a small older man, glasses seated on the tip of his nose. He greeted Harry with a soft smile, eyes skimming past Ben.

Once Harry and Ben were seated across from him, the man set down his menu, crossing his hands atop it. “Thank God you both arrived when you did. I was about to get hammered.”

Harry and Ben chuckled. “Better watch it, Irv,” said Ben. “I know the drinking age is lower over here, but that shouldn’t mean —”

Azoff rolled his eyes. “Oh fuck off, Winston. We know you’re the only one still getting carded at your age.”

“No more, I’m greying.”

Azoff smiled. “Only took you a thousand years.”

“Give or take,” Ben conceded.

Azoff turned to Harry, extending a hand. “Mr. Styles. Good to meet you, sir.”

Harry shook it. “Just Harry is fine.”

“Well, Just Harry, I’m Just Irving,” Azoff said, and Harry snorted at the dad humour.

Leaning in a little, Azoff said in a slight hush, “I requested that we have a little room on either side of us, for privacy’s sake, as the private spaces are all booked, and your office folks said…”

He was interrupted when a server came by with a bottle of red wine — “A hint of California, my treat,” he declared. Harry nodded gratefully to both his guest and their server. Once she’d left, Harry spread a hand and waved it gently, enveloping their table in a weak field — just enough to protect their secrets without Harry having to work too hard to maintain it while they talked. It gave off a pleasant hum. Azoff raised his eyebrows, impressed, and Harry gave a smug little smile.

Azoff produced a tablet from his dossier and laid it on the table between them. “So as I understand it, Harry, an appearance clause you unknowingly consented to is forcing you to remain closeted, while your boss and PR team insist upon stunts and rumours to reinforce a hyper-masculine, assumed heterosexual image. And you wish to come out?”

Harry took a sip of wine and thought about that for a moment. “Originally, I just wanted to get rid of the stunts, and, um…live more honestly, I guess. At least not be actively involved in deceiving people.

“But now, I’ve decided… I’m going to have to be open with people, and I have fans — fans who might be going through the same sort of things. The last thing I want to do is — sort of lie to them by staying quiet, when they might be needing help.”

Azoff nodded slowly, bringing up some documents on the tablet. “So as a gay man —”

“Pansexual,” Harry corrected. “I lean towards men, usually, but not exclusively. That’s important,
too. That’s how I identify — I don’t want that to be overlooked.”

“Right,” said Azoff.

Ben cut in rather abruptly. “But where we’re meeting the most resistance is with the PR tactics. We’d prefer a glass closet to the hell we’re getting right now — there’s a constant stream of tabloid rumours with barely any truth, which is to be expected at any point, but it’s our folks setting them up. And then the PR relationships —”

“I’ve done my research!” Irving interjected. “For Team Model, we have Cara Delevingne, Daisy Lowe, and Nadine Leopold. And for the supers — Kendall Kardash-Eon, VicTory, Bellatron, Lily Fever, Crimson Curse, and of course, your very own Dr. Flack.”

CRASH.

Thankfully, the weak field Harry had put up was a little stronger than he had intended. Irving ducked, Ben scrambled for cover, and Harry just sort of startled and fell backwards off of his stool as glass from the fresh, gaping hole in their floor-to-ceiling window came raining down around them.

Looking up, Harry saw the flash of a heavy-duty power suit go by over their heads, exhaust dissipating as the figure landed just beyond their table. A helmet came off, and —

“Speak of the devil,” said Harry under his breath.

For a moment, she just stood there. Harry let time tick by with baited breath as the suited woman shook out her hair and surveyed the room. All of the other diners froze in fear.

Harry waited for her next move. He didn’t have to wait long.

Back still turned to Harry, she raised a fist — and, with what seemed like a bullet of sound, shot the glass out of the window directly opposite them. As the shards settled and the sound wave dissipated, and cold wind rushed into the room all the more. All those who hadn’t taken cover in time doubled over, holding hands to their ears and foreheads in pain.

“Fuck,” Harry whispered.

The woman barely hesitated before pointing her power-gloved fist over at the bar in the centre of the room. “Heads up, bartender,” she called, and fired again.

Another crash echoed as every exposed glass and bottle behind the bar exploded.

Caroline Flack raised her voice. It rang clearly through the room, amplified by something in her suit. “How much more must I do to get you out to play, Hazza?”

Harry couldn’t bring himself to move. If he reacted, he knew, he would be provoking, and most likely walking into a trap. And who knew what the hell kind of technologies she’d been working on lately. Who knew what he was up against. But if he didn’t interfere —


She shot out several more floor-to-ceiling windows and blasted away several tables. Some people still cowered, some ran frantically for the lift banks. It was chaos. Harry shook with pent-up rage and energy, but he still couldn’t make himself move.

Until she turned to face him, looked him dead in the eye, and shot at Irving Azoff.
Harry threw his hands up, quick as he could, strengthening his field until it glistened. He could only see Azoff’s legs from his position under the table. He saw them convulse. He struggled to get his ass off of the floor and stand whilst maintaining the field, but when he did, he almost wished he hadn’t. Azoff was clutching a hand to his stomach in pain. There was no blood that Harry could see, no wound that his hyper-senses could detect as they attuned. But the man was gasping, writhing in pain. Caroline’s stone-cold eyes were still watching him.

Regaining eye contact, Harry raised his hands and strengthened the shield again, pushing it outward as he slowly advanced. Cooperating, Caroline backed up. Once he’d put some distance between Caroline and the table, Harry ran to Irving’s side, gentle hands probing for vital signs as he asked, “You alright?”

Azoff grunted, nodding. “Fine. Just hurts like hell.”

“You good to stand?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, don’t. Get under the table and don’t come out.” Azoff didn’t hesitate to obey. Looking over his shoulder, Harry locked eyes with Ben. “You too.”

Ben nodded. “Aye aye, Hero.”

Harry turned back to Caroline. She was waiting for him by the bar at the centre of the dining room, casting him a glance as she tapped a toe impatiently. Harry stepped out of his force field. Caroline frowned a little, suspicious, and Harry just shrugged back.

Stopping a few feet shy of her, Harry asked, “So, you want to dance?”

Before she could reply, a commotion over by the lift bank caught Harry’s eye. No one had been able to leave. They’d been trapped.

Caroline laughed. “Caught between a rock and a hard place, I see. You’re inviting me to dance, but you’re afraid of what that might mean for these poor, innocent people who have no escape.”

“It might have been a rhetorical question,” Harry muttered as he stood his ground.

“A rhetorical invitation? You really are hip these days, aren’t you?” Caroline swept her eyes over him, up and down, in a way that would have been read as warm and proud, had the context not made it creepy. “I’m sure you’ve guessed by now that that’s just why I need your help.”

“Why?” asked Harry.

Caroline gave a tiny smile and raised her gloved hands. Harry raised his hands, reinforcing his shield. Caroline only smiled brighter.

There was a half-second’s pause before Harry felt himself get torn out of his force field, and then he was being flung through the air. Right as he was about to collide with a wall and have his lights knocked out, he was caught. A new energy field floated him down through the air, back to his former position. Harry tried to budge, but it kept him frozen there. It felt so unwelcome, so cold and awful, making his skin crawl.

He forced himself to contain any reaction, to face up to Caroline with smooth confidence and bravery and all of those good things, but he was scared. She was controlling him, much as the last challenger had. He tested out some powers — tried breaking the field, tried teleporting out of it, tried
manipulating objects beyond his reach — nothing. He was contained.

“Seems the field generator works, then!” Caroline beamed. “And to the exact, most powerful degree I had hoped. I spent months on that one, blimey.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you haven’t caught on by now, Styles, so allow me — there are cameras all over this suit I’ve designed. You are my experiment and my advertisement. These people all around us, quaking in fear…” She cast a glance around the room, clucking her pity. “They’re my first audience. And they’re rich, mostly. I’ll have plenty of investors in my new technology, now that they know it can make even power such as yours completely obsolete.”

Harry forced a chuckle and a dimpled grin. “There’s this little thing they call the law, Caz —”

“Oh sweet Hazza!” Caroline cooed. “You obviously know nothing of history. Should’ve gone to uni! Tell me: when has the law ever stopped dangerous, violent technologies before? We have nuclear weapons, drones, chemical —”

Harry cut her off with his best loud and dramatic sigh. “You don’t have to do the hero-villain banter thing with me, you know. I’m supposed to be staying clear of convention. It’s my brand.”

Caroline cackled. “Once a hipster, always a hipster, eh?”

“You know, it’s kinda cruel of you to have me stuck here while you just gab,” Harry shrugged back. “Pity I’m still just a publicity stunt for you. But if you want to actually test your technology, you’re best to give me a chance to fight it.”

Caroline snorted. “But that’s the point. You can’t. You’re stuck.” She looked very wickedly pleased with herself.

Harry shrugged, smiling sweetly. “Oh dear!”

Caroline scoffed.

“Yes, I am,” Caroline grinned. She began to walk around the bar, dragging Harry along with her, his force field searing through anything in his path as she scraped his feet along the ground. “Because I have you trapped, so I have the luxury of talking to you, for a change. You talk so slowly, and so little, when I really just want the people to hear you.”

Harry was quiet, except for the occasional soft grunt of pain. He kept his eyes on Caroline, unwilling to show surrender in his face.

Thankfully, she had what she wanted, and seemed content to draw that out for a painfully long time. Which was, in the end, maybe less painfully long than she would have liked.

By the time they’d completed one full tourné of the bar, Caroline bantering all the while, she was starting to re-hash a lot of the same lines, and the whole affair had become quite stale and awkward.

Until Caroline screamed. Loud and long and harsh. Harry at first thought it was just to regain her audience’s attention or something — but then he saw it, licking out of the the corner of his vision.

The curl of inky smoke.

It started to pool around her boots as if her feet were on fire. She tried to stamp it out, but there was
no flame. It clung to her suit, eating at the metal and hard plastic. It slowly spread upwards, starting
to engulf her legs. She tried to move, but dark tendrils clung to her like roots, tying her feet to the
floor.

Harry pushed against the field containing him, but it was no use. Caroline started to scream as a thick
black ribbon began coiling around her like a boa constrictor. Her eyes locked on to Harry’s, gaze
acidic. “Alright then. Game’s up. Let me go.”

Harry’s face steeled. “Let me go, and I’ll help you.”

“Sly dog! I had no idea you were going to be umbra-kinetic! It’s not programmed for this!” Caroline
spat through gritted teeth, as she tried to fight the shadows. “Now give it up!”

Harry offered her his empty palms, guiltless. “I’m not doing anything. I swear.”

“Oh, of course you’re not, darling!” Caroline spat.

The climbing smoke reached her throat, and the terror truly broke in her eyes. The tentacle-tendrils
were snaking over her arms now like veins, engulfing her in a new, hazy skin. Harry’s smile
vanished, his heart sinking. This was strange and serious.

Strange and serious and perhaps familiar.

There was no way in hell he was going to sit there, captured and petrified, while Caroline was
consumed.

“Caz, let me go!” Harry called out, trying to reach for her through her field. “Let me out and I’ll try
to help!”

Caroline just glared at him as dark mist encroached on her chin. “I won’t let you trick me! This is a
cruel illusion! This is your power at work, I can feel it —”

“It’s not, I swear!” Harry yelled, desperate now. “Please, you’ve got to let me try to stop it!”

Caroline’s eyes bulged suddenly.

“Let me down! Hold on to me! Please,” Harry pleaded. But Caroline was pleading louder.

“Tell him to stop! Don’t let him take me! Please, Harry! Tell him! NOW!” The darkness crept up her
cheeks —

“What are you saying?” Harry yelled.

And then she shrieked. Harry was released and fell ungracefully to the floor. He scrambled to his feet
in time to watch as her eyes went huge, ready to spring free from their sockets. Harry held her hand
tight as the dark ribbon began to stifle her cries. He tried to manipulate the darkness, but his own
shocks of energy were simply absorbed by it, assimilated into the tangle strangling Caroline. Her
eyes grew wider and wider, focused straight ahead of her, on something behind Harry, and so Harry
whirled around —

And of course.

The Fucking Shadow.

Harry could feel his gut sink, his skin crawl, his heartstrings stretching to snapping point as his heart
tried to hammer its way out of his body.
Beyond the fear, the rest of him really wasn’t so surprised. Hadn’t it been about time for them to show up? The edge of Harry’s defeat, the brink of his peril?

The Shadow seemed to inhabit this place. Thrive on this place. Had a knack for finding it, anyway.

But, fear or no fear, surprise or no surprise, and friend or foe, Harry wasn’t going to be playing games with them.

“Let her go,” he commanded. Deep and steady, his voice shook the room. He swore he could see The Shadow shiver as his words passed through them. Good.

But they weren’t prepared to bend to his will, it seemed. Caroline still squealed and struggled, lips bound shut with the tail of her shadowy bindings.

“Put her down. Now,” Harry tried again, voice shaking. He stared into the depths of The Shadow’s clouded face. The friend-or-foe debate was just starting to resolve itself, in favour of foe, when Caroline hit the floor with a gasp, her restraints beginning to dissolve.

“I’ve got her,” Harry promised. He knelt down next to her, helping her get her breath back, checking for signs of trauma. The Shadow stood calmly, watching him.

Once he was sure that Caroline wasn’t seriously injured, he looked over his shoulder to The Shadow. “You can leave, now.”

They did nothing but stand there.

With a sigh, Harry gently placed Caroline back on the floor and stood, reaching out his arms. The air below his fingers twinkled. His energy spread into a shield, caging Caroline down in a long cylinder.

“Happy now?” Harry asked The Shadow, who once more was quiet and still.

“Go on your way, then,” Harry instructed.

The Shadow inclined their concealed head, indicating that they weren’t quite so sure that that was a good idea. Harry felt like he was being mocked and patronized by a mime. “Go!” he implored, his voice higher and more desperate than he’d intended. The Shadow surveyed the scene once more and shrugged as if to say “Have it your way, bro,” and began to walk slowly and casually over to the lifts.

Harry tried to keep his eyes on Caroline, but one quick glance led to him watching The Shadow leave from over his shoulder. There was a sway to their hips, their hoodie rising up over the swell of a rather poignant arse, made all the more poignant by their tight black skinny jeans. Maybe they’d learned to hide their face so well because they were a model, and vigilantism didn’t complement a modelling career. Who else could it be, when their casual walk was a strut?

The Shadow felt Harry’s eyes watching them and stopped, casting a glance back over their shoulder. Their blurred-out face held Harry’s gaze for a moment, before they gave a tiny shrug and proceeded out of the dining room entranceway towards the lift bank.

A haughty laugh met Harry’s ear. He whipped around to come face to face with a standing, unenclosed Caroline.

“Oh, baby Hazza,” she chided. She pointed to a gadget on her glove. “Field neutralizer. You should learn to pay more attention.”
With a zap, the gadget was spilling back all of the energy it had taken apart, creating walls around Harry. He lunged out, but as far as his enclosure would stretch, it would snap back, elastic, packing a sting.

Caroline resumed her strut-monologue around his enclosure. Harry saw the flickers of tiny camera lenses swirling across her helmet and visor. She was capturing her moment of triumph.

“Let it be known,” Caroline began, “that no matter how much the public worships power, it’s no match for ingenuity. Look what we’ve become, Britain! Our floundering hero, trapped in his cage. Heroism is bought and sold here, too — just like in America. Just as we as a nation promised ourselves we would never do! It’s time to buy and sell something else. Something for all of us, and something truly British — progress.”

When he’d given up struggling about a quarter of the way through this schpiel, Harry had devoted himself to making stupid faces for Caroline’s cameras, adding his voice to the discourse in the only way he could.

“Now what am I going to do with you?” Caroline mused, oblivious, starting to prattle on about trophies and mantelpieces and more British progress while Harry stopped listening. He turned back towards the dining room exit. The Shadow was truly gone. Harry immediately regretted telling them to leave. His fear, his pride, and concern for his odd saviour aside, there had been no reason to send them away. He felt his panic swell.

Caroline seemed angered at having lost his attention. “What say you, hero?” she roared, and when Harry opened his mouth to try to laugh, nothing came out.

Caroline clucked in pity. “See?” she told her audience. “No more titans. No more power given to some, and not to others. Just power for the people, and true, British —”

“Oi!” came a voice from nowhere. “I’ll show you something truly British.”

And that was when The Shadow swirled into being behind Caroline in an instant and swiftly punched her lights out.

Her eyes went eerily black — the punch had evidently been assisted by powers — and she flopped to the floor and was still.

“A good blow to the head! That’s about as British as it gets,” The Shadow declared gleefully, in their smoky, garbled-sounding voice.

“I reckon you’re right,” Harry whispered, numbly, as he looked back and forth between Caroline and The Shadow with a mixture of awe and horror.

“Well, she’s out now,” The Shadow shrugged. “Sorry I didn’t try that one before.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s, um…it’s alright,” he muttered. The Shadow shrugged again, gave Harry a gentle pat on the back, and headed back towards the entranceway on foot.

Harry just stood there, stunned, watching as The Shadow parted the lift crowds as if they were the Red Sea, and calmly pressed the button for the lift. One arrived promptly. The Shadow entered it alone, and disappeared.

Well, at least the lifts were working again.

Clusters of relieved people swarmed the lift buttons and piled into the next few to arrive. Everyone
still in the dining room gathered themselves hurriedly and darted for the lifts. Ben ran straight for Harry, face beet red. “You’re letting him get away! Go after him, Harry, teleport, make it fast!”

As strong as he should have been after one of the tamest fights of his life, Harry was exhausted. He felt confused, humiliated, and defeated. Unbeknownst to Ben, teleporting really wasn’t easy amidst emotional murk.

“Call the SHDU,” he told Ben. “They’ve dealt with Dr. Flack here before, they’ll know what to do.”

Ben nodded, and Harry set off for the lifts.

“You complete oaf, I said teleport!” Ben screamed after him. “You’re wasting your time, he’ll be gone!”

Harry ignored him, but managed to squeeze his way through the crowd and secure himself a spot in the next available lift.

There were already reporters and camera people waiting for him in clusters in the lobby, jostling for his attention as soon as the doors opened and the lift voice announced the ground floor. Harry tried to be as polite about shoving journalists and paps out of his way as he could, but he made no attempt to hide the fact that he was on a mission.

Some reporters were shouting, “Did you see the hooded man, Harry?” “Was your accomplice on the scene today?” “Are you looking for your sidekick?”

“Sorry, some other time!” Harry called to them, elbowing his way through a horde of microphones and cameras. As soon as he made it to the doors, he broke into a run.

The was no reason The Shadow couldn’t have just dissolved into thin air to escape, as was their wont. But something told Harry that they hadn’t. They had taken the lift, after all. They hadn’t wanted escape; they had to be playing hide and seek.

Harry trusted instinct to guide him in the right direction. He ran blindly for a good minute or two, anticipation in his stomach heightening and heightening, before he saw a black hood and a bare ankle disappear into an alley up ahead.

He lengthened his stride. He rounded the corner. The Shadow stumbled as they looked back at Harry over their shoulder, face still hidden.

They picked up speed, but Harry kept closing the gap between them, until the two of them were less than thirty feet apart.

Up ahead, the alley took a turn, but before The Shadow could reach it —

**Wham.** The air crackled to life as Harry raised a fist and slammed a field over the mouth of the bend. Seeing that they were trapped, the figure began to slow down, panting, until their run became a saunter.

Harry slowed, matching his pace to theirs. His mind raced with all of the many things that he wanted to ask the faceless hero, but one thing had to make it to his lips first.
“How do you always know where I am?” he wheezed.

No answer, only more panting and sauntering.

Maybe that was too invasive of a question. Maybe Harry had to start with something a little kinder. “I want to thank you! Properly, this time,” Harry called. “I want to know who you are!”

The figure stopped as they reached the field, cocking a hip, back still turned. “Well, they say everyone’s got a dark side. I guess I’m yours.”

Harry bit his lip and decided to play along. “Thanks, but..I’ve got one already.”

“Shame, that.” Their voice had elements of familiarity, but warbled and darkened every time Harry thought he’d recognized it. It was elusive. As well disguised as their face.

Harry sighed. “Let’s start nice and simple. You must have a name.”

The figure sighed back, clasping their hands behind their back. “Oh, come on. *Some*body has to have a secret identity around here, Styles.”

Harry was just about ready to give up on the pesky creature. “Look, at least turn around, take off the hood, and let me look you in the eyes and thank you properly.”

They shifted uncomfortably. “How about you send me a fruit basket or something? Or a bouquet. Or a Tesco gift card —”

“Please, just allow me this once. I won’t tell anyone.”

“— with a nice home-made thank-you card with a smiley little stick-drawing of yourself. Or a pic of your cock with a flower on it…” Harry couldn’t see it, but the smirk was in their voice.

“I would. If I had your address. Or your number. Pity I can’t even get your name.”

“Just bring it with you the next time you’re about to be murdered by a skilled aggressor, and no doubt I’ll be along to save your skinny arse.”

Harry thought for a moment. Would The Shadow open up if Harry opened up first? Showed his gratitude by showing his vulnerability?

*Worth a shot.*

“M’ not exactly used to being saved, so —”

The Shadow didn’t grant him much room to try. “Well, don’t get used to it. I’ve been in the right place at the right time a few times for you now, but who knows when I’ll fuck it all up, as I inevitably will.”

“I dunno, mate,” Harry sighed. “That’s what I thought when I started in this business. I’ve done alright with not fucking it all up so far. Until recently…”

The figure was silent for a moment, before concluding, “Well, we’ll see if fate likes me as much as it likes you.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Thank you…for all you’ve done for me,” he tried, his voice wrought with emotion.
The figure said nothing and didn’t move.

Slowly, soundlessly, Harry closed the gap between them, arm outstretched. As his fingertips brushed The Shadow’s shoulder, his two-time saviour gasped and-whirled around. Harry caught sight of two glowing blue eyes before his fingers met thin air, and all that was left of the stranger was a dark haze in Harry’s vision.

Recovering from a hard night of hero work and recovering from a terrible hangover were often similar experiences for Harry. Lucky for him, today he got to do them both.

He forced himself to crawl out of bed and take a walk in the early afternoon, much to MJ’s dismay. And that’s how he found himself lying defeatedly on a bench in Regent’s Park, perfectly equipped for a joyous recovery. Pills for his pounding head? Check. Vomit-free clothes? Check. Fresh air? Check. A massive fluffy teddy bear to cuddle? Check.

The bear had been a generous gift from a six-year-old girl at the nearby playground. Seeing Harry fading under his hat on a park bench, she had asked her caregiver, “Why is that man so tired? Is he alright?” To which the caregiver had replied, “He probably saved the world yesterday. Leave him alone.”

A few minutes later, Harry had woken up from a very brief nap to find a fluffy companion in his arms. He’d heard a shrill voice exclaim, “Thank you for saving the world!”

“A anytime,” he’d replied meekly, giving her a thumbs-up as she’d scampered away.

Now, a few hours later, he found himself immensely grateful for the toy’s company — even if those were indeed dried boogers on its face. The afternoon sun soon beat down on him in full force, though, compelling him to finally stand up and stretch and consider actually doing something with his day.

Of course, by ‘doing something,’ he meant getting brunch. A heaping fry-up could do him some good. He texted Grimmy to see if he’d be game.

*While you’re at it,* he added, *never take messages from my challengers ever again.* X

Standing up, he took a deep breath, trying to finally clear his mouth of the various disgusting tastes of the night before. It proved slightly more successful than trying to clear his brain of the swamp of awful thoughts in there.

He’d gotten pissed last night to forget that he would ever have to deal with challengers again. He’d gotten pissed to forget that his presence in his favourite city on Earth brought with it the threat of aholes wreaking havoc just to fuck with him. He’d gotten pissed to forget that Louis the Latte Boy and Louis his first real crush didn’t seem to want to be the same person. And he’d gotten pissed to forget The Shadow, rescuing him and had vanishing, without even accepting Harry’s thanks.

Though still weighed down by it all, at least he was now feeling completely ready to make the transition from binge drinking to binge eating.

Tucking the bear under his arm, he set off. About to pass the playground, he was stopped by some shouts.
“Hey! Harry Styles? Could you spare a second?”

He turned to see a group of teenagers approaching, comic books clutched to their chests.

“Hey, man, could you please sign this? I’m a big fan,” said a boy, holding out his comic and a sharpie.

“Yeah, mine too, please!” a girl next to him piped up.

“And mine, please.”

“Only if you have time! We don’t mean to bother you.”

Harry mustered up the strength to smile and nod. He took the sharpie and the first comic book and was about to ask for the first boy’s name for a dedication, but the cover caught his eye. Frowning, he inspected it.

He recognized the artist’s style from the comic book back at the hospital. The front cover once again featured a drawing of Harry. This time, he was perched atop the London tower called The Walkie-Talkie, with his curls and green Burberry coat floating on the breeze as he looked out over the city. His hand was outstretched, the air around him shimmering as he emitted a field. The nondescript outline of another humanoid figure floated in the background. The city streets below seemed packed and chaotic. A title in tiny print in the top right corner read, “Volume II, Issue #7. ‘A Spot of Bother.’”

The first girl to have spoken chuckled under her breath, watching Harry inspect the comic so thoroughly, as if he were entirely new to the art form. Harry raised his head to find the rest of the kids grinning.

“So you know who makes these?” he asked.

“The artist who sketches in the Embankment Gardens on days that start with T,” said another boy.

“Y’know, with the dark hair, an’ lovely eyes, an’ perfect cheekbones…” said a girl.

“Molly’s got a crush,” the first boy fake-whispered to Harry, shaking his head.

Ah, crushes. “What’s his name?” Harry pressed.

Another girl gently pried the issue from his hands, flipping to the back cover, pointing to where a little swirly signature read “D.J. Malik.”

“I heard him say his name was ‘Zen’ once. Probably some joke about how quiet he is. Nobody laughed.”

“Does he publish these himself?”

“Yep, goes and prints ‘em and sells ‘em for two quid each, every other Tuesday. He’s quite popular now. There was a bit of a lineup yesterday, and he had a couple a’ huge boxes full,” said the first boy.

Harry nodded, taking the comic back for another flip through. He smiled, skimming through an intense action scene that was at once amusing and achingly familiar. He turned the page.

Holy shit.
Well look who it was. Sneaking around, getting in on the action, fighting on Harry’s side, and then running away, a wide-eyed Harry chasing them down empty streets until they disappeared.

“When did you say this one came out?” Harry asked urgently.

A boy pointed to the date on the cover.

Yesterday.

Harry shook his head, re-examining the drawing of the distant floating figure.

Harry flipped through again. One of the boys peered over, turned to his friends and said, “Told you The Shadow would be back in this one!”

Molly gave him a jab to the ribs. “No spoilers, Al!”

“Why wouldn’t he be back? He’s a central character.”

“Didn’t used to be.”

“Oh really? See, I have a theory…”

“Oh, not another one…”

“He’s been around from the beginning, see. I’ll prove it!”

Harry tuned out their banter and forced himself to focus. He signed each of the gaggle’s comic books, wished them all a good day, and went on his way. Their talk of fan theories and heroes and spoilers faded away into the late afternoon sun.

Brunch was priority at the moment, but after that, Harry would get ready to execute a new plan.

*I have to find this artist.*

Harry did manage to meet up with Nick, who had a generously clear afternoon schedule.

“So he just vanished? Again? Rude,” said Nick, as they walked in what was supposedly the direction of food.

Harry nodded.

“And what of our friend Caroline?”

“SHDU’s dealing with her. No doubt she’ll buy herself out of any legal penalty…”

“Ah, the rich know no justice.” Nick smacked his lips rather loudly. “So you didn’t get to talk to this American then, did you?”

“Thanks to Caroline, he’s in the hospital. He felt fine at the time, he said, but Caroline’s sonic-bullet-things aren’t so easy on the body.”

“Ah. A well-known fact.”
“M’ going to visit him tomorrow. The legal counsel bit’s been postponed, though.”

Nick left a beat of silence, then gave Harry a pat on the back. “You’re going to do it, you know. You’ll come out. And the internet trolls will be unforgiving, and some days you’ll ask yourself ‘Why the fuck did I do that,’ but then you’ll remember how good it felt. And then you’ll have some hot stud on your arm at Vanity Fair parties and the internet trolls and Simon Cowell’s mum jeans will be long forgotten.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Thanks, mate. Here’s hoping.”

“Here’s knowing,” Nick corrected, fist-bumping Harry’s shoulder.

That was when Harry’s dreams of brunch were killed. Nick got distracted by the Starbucks on the corner of Kingsway and Great Queen Street.

*That Starbucks.*

“Didn’t get enough of a fix this morning. Mind if I pop in?”

One glance sideways into the shop made Harry’s heart flutter at the sight of Louis Tomlinson manning the counter. “Nick Grimshaw, giving his hard-earned five quid to an evil corporate empire? Utter shame.”

“Giving in to corporate evils every now and again is really fun, actually. I highly recommend it.”

Harry rolled his shoulders, trying to stretch away the fatigue. A Starbucks-sized wealth of caffeine and sugar did sound quite appealing — but of course it had to be at *That Starbucks.* Harry really wasn’t ready to have his heart trampled on again.

“M’ serious, let’s go find a real coffee shop or something. Maybe somewhere with coffee and food?”

“You’re trying my patience, Styles.”

“Well you’re the one making me wait for my food, and I saved the world yesterday!”

Nick smiled and rolled his eyes. “I do love a whiny superhero. ‘Ooooh everyone needs to give me everything I want because I saved the world yesterday ooooh!’”

Harry was growing desperate. “Who even hangs around in this area, anyway? Lawyers? Surely not young *arceests* like you or I…”

Grimmy chuckled. “If prank calling on the radio and shoving little punks into alternate dimensions are considered art nowadays, then colour me concerned. Or are you talking about the haikus we write in our spare time?”

“Want to hear my latest?”

“I’m alright, actually. And would you look at that, the barista’s kind of cute. I’m going in. You coming, diva?”

Harry reluctantly followed.
Louis didn’t look up as he fired off his usual. “Hello there, what can I do you for?”

“Oh, well!” Nick chuckled, taken aback. “Anything, really. Lovely of you to ask.”

Louis looked up, eyes already full of judgement. “Sorry?”

“You asked what you could do me for. I really don’t think someone like yourself needs any sort of occasion for which to do me, is all.”

Louis raised his eyebrows pityingly.

“I’m sorry, is it too early in the day for that sort of thing?” Nick smiled.

Louis fixed his eyes on the countertop again. The corners of his lips twitched up into a grin that was somehow both nervous and cocky. “It might be, yeah. May I take your order, then?” And then under his breath, “…if you actually have one.”

“Yeah, sure. Um, a grande hazelnut macchiato.”

“Ooh la-la,” Harry cooed.

Louis looked up with a jolt, eyes meeting Harry’s. Harry gave him a weak wave. Louis blinked, eyes wide, and gave his head a cleansing shake, as if Harry were only a rather troublesome apparition. He turned and called “Grande hazelnut macchiato!” over his shoulder.

“With a shot of dog piss for flavour, free of charge,” he muttered to Zayn as he passed by.

Harry snorted. Louis’ head snapped up in alarm once again.

“We heard that, you know,” Nick smirked.

Louis shrugged. “It appears you did. Why either of you high-up blokes, of the radio and super variety respectively, bother to eavesdrop on lowly Starbucks employees beats me, but —”

“Ah, c’mon — you’re so much more than that,” Nick supplied.

Louis snorted. “Oh, really?” He gave it a second’s thought before relinquishing. “Go on, flatter me then.”

“Well, for starters, your hair alone deserves its own salary and benefits. On the whole, you’re tragically under-employed.”

Louis slowly shook his head. “Shame you’re just trying to get in my pants. That could have been a really lovely sentiment.”

“I meant every ounce of sentiment.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Back off, before you give me a big head!”

Nick smirked. “A what, sorry?”

“A bloody big head —”

“Head? Now there’s an idea. Have you got a bloody big bed for us?”

“No, thank you. I live rather modestly, as I have nothing to compensate for.” Louis gave his upper
thigh a slap through his apron, grinning coyly to himself. Harry felt the heat start to rise in his cheeks.

“I won’t believe it ’til I see it,” said Nick.

“Don’t believe it, then.”

Grimmy sighed, pretending to adjust his quiff as he said, “Not taking a chance on me, are you…” He glanced at Louis’ name tag. “…Louis?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

Nick started to sing the opening of ABBA’s “Take a Chance On Me” under his breath.

“You’re welcome to keep flattering me, though,” Louis continued. “I’d love to hear about my attractive qualities aside from my hair and the fact that I’m giving you caffeine.”

“Well, you’re devilishly witty, plenty clever,” Nick immediately chimed back in. “I’d say quite well-educated, too — those glasses aren’t for the faint of heart. You are, um, excellent at what you do, I’m sure. Good with your hands. You’re bold enough to make a lesser man quake in his boots, and you’re also rather adorable —”

Harry shook his head, placing a hand on Grimmy’s shoulder. “I’d go with ruggedly handsome, myself.”

Louis’ eyes met the floor. He inclined his head, considering. Harry could’ve sworn he saw him blush, but that could have been his eager imagination.

“Fine, you’re ruggedly handsome — and cute as a button. Don’t know how you pull it all off.”

Zayn, over yonder making drinks, laughed. In an exaggerated accent, he called, “All lies, Loueh! Lies!”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind Zayn — English major. Bullshiting is second-nature to him. Any other traits of mine you’d like to wax poetic about before your macchiato is ready?”

The woman behind Harry coughed. “Um, excuse me —”

“Yeah, hold on, love — Zayn’ll get your latte started in a second. I’m busy being hit on at the moment. Zayn!”

“Sorry, bro, still working on Quiffy McFlirt’s macchiato…”

“Which he still hasn’t paid for. That number there’s the price, sir, in case my rugged handsomeness has distracted you.”

As Nick dug for his wallet, he told Louis, “For the record, I’m still not keen on ‘rugged.’ Harry came up with that one. Perhaps he’s the one who’s distracted.”

“Hey!”

Nick leaned in over the counter to emphasize his point, grinning. “Also, listen, um — I don’t suppose you’d happen to have any discounts for — ahem — people who protect the city from evil on a regular basis? And friends thereof?”

Louis frowned, as if Nick had just asked him to try a kale-based juicing diet. “Um, no. Not at all.”
“Really? No rewards for the heroes? For their great sacrifice and social service? ‘Cause you see, my friend here is —”

“Yeah, I know who he is, thanks. Just so happens to be a regular here. And he’s filthy rich, is he not? We don’t offer a discount for the overprivileged here, surprisingly.”

Louis looked to Nick as if expecting an entertaining display of disappointment, but Nick had already moved on to teasing Harry — one particular line of dialogue stuck in his mind.

“Regular here, are we? What’s your usual order, then?” Nick wasn’t doing a very good job of lowering his voice to a whisper. “Ruggedly handsome barista? Whip or no whip?”

Harry gave him a tiny kick in the shins. Louis raised an eyebrow, but didn’t look up as he counted change into Grimmy’s palm.

“Ooh, exact change!” Nick cooed. “Good with numbers, this one.”

“Not at all, t’be honest, but I think I know where you’re going with this...”

“Speaking of numbers, could I maybe —”

“No, you may not. Cheers.”

Nick turned to Harry with a half-crestfallen, half-disgusted expression, and Harry couldn’t help but laugh.

“Really, Harry? Come on, pity me.”

Harry laughed even harder. Nick didn’t have Louis’ number. Louis had well and truly shut him down. Dismissed him, quiff et all.

As soon as Nick opened his mouth to make a redeeming move, Louis was shooing them on with a frantic hand. “Oi! Radio! Hero! You’ve ordered! Move it!”

Harry tried to cut in with an, “Actually, I —” but Louis completely ignored his desperate menu-pointing and began his apology to the woman next in line.

“Nice try,” Nick chuckled under his breath, as he caught Harry by the wrist and dragged him over to the receiving counter.

So no cake-lolly thing to tide Harry over, then. And no talking to Louis.

Louis had barely looked at him. He’d acknowledged his presence several times, but the second his eyes had found Harry’s, they’d unfocused. As if Harry was a transparent blob.

Why had he obliged Nick, again? Why was he doing something other than eating a lot of brunch?

Zayn was still trying hard not to laugh at the pair of them as he delivered Nick’s macchiato. “It’s been ready for ages,” he smiled. “Hope it’s not too cold!” He gave a nod to Harry, with a gaze that seemed almost...apologetic? Or maybe Zayn was just trying to be friendly, now that Harry was officially a regular. Before Harry could return the gesture, Nick was dragging him out the door, pulling him past the few clusters of people waiting for selfies with them, armed with phone cameras, calling Harry’s name as they squeezed past.

As soon as they were out the door, Nick knocking back his lukewarm liquid without a care in the world, Harry felt the urge to spill the beans. Explain why he was a creepy-ass regular. Why that all
had been so awkward, beyond the mere reality of Louis Tomlinson being Louis Tomlinson (Making Others Delightfully Uncomfortable Since 1991™).

Harry stopped Nick at the curb as they went to cross the street.

“Nick.”

“What?”

“Did you recognize him? At all?”

“Who, the barista?”

Harry nodded.

“No. Why, does he have a walk-on role on EastEnders?”

Harry shook his head. “You’re pathetic. He’s a theatre student, though. Wouldn’t be surprised if he did.”

Grimmy gave Harry a look. “So, he’s right? You come by regularly, and absorb random facts about him, and he tries to get you to leave him alone, but you’re a right creep and you keep coming back?”

“No! Just…no! But that’s not my point. Do you know who he is?”

“Yes, but —”

“But why, Harry? Why does it matter? Is he the long-lost heir to the throne of a small nation or something?”

“Look, do you remember when I first came to London? How I got started?”

“Yes, I’ve memorized everything. Got it all on cue cards. I need something to recite to you when you’re drinking away your self-esteem.”

“Good. Please summarize.”

Grimshaw rolled his eyes. “Once upon a summer’s day, Tower Bridge Boy happened — but I don’t know why you’re making me bring this up when…” It took a hearty second for everything to click. “Oh.” And then, “Fuck off, that’s him?”

Harry nodded.

“Fucking can’t be, the guy in there’s name was Lewis or something, and Tower Bridge Boy’s name was —”

“Louis Tomlinson.”

Grimmy took a sobering breath, and then nodded. “So that’s him.”

“Yeah.”

“Tower Bridge Boy. All grown up. With stubble and sexy glasses and incredible hair.”

“Yeah.”
“I just hit on your very first crush in front of your face.”

“Mhm.”

Nick pouted mockingly. “The first bloke to ever kiss our Hazza.”

“M-hm.”

Nick snickered. “That’s amazing.”

“No, s’really not.”

“Aw, don’t sound so hurt. It was just a bit of fun.”

“Good, I’m glad. But it’s not fun when someone you used to get on with refuses to acknowledge you and won’t even remember that you saved his life and that you’re —” Harry sighed, “ — you were good friends —”

“Good friends?”

“— and then your best mate happens to hit on him, almost successfully, in front of your face.”

“Good grief, that was nowhere near successful. Were you even listening? And more importantly, have you told him he’s a dickhead for ignoring you to his face yet?”

“’Course not.”

Nick promptly hooked his arm through Harry’s. “Then you and I have some unfinished business in that Starbucks, don’t we?”

“No, Grimmy, we don’t. C’mon, m’hungry.” Grimmy responded by giving his arm a sharp tug. “No, don’t drag me in there to up and tell him, no, fuck, he’s done nothing wrong, he may have just forgotten —”

“Bullshit! God, how are bloody superheroes such cowards? He fucked you up. You still have a crush on him, and he’s breaking your heart all over again!”

“Shut up Grimmy. I don’t give a shit, m’over it —”

“Ah-ah-ah! We’re going back in to put diva-pants in his place, alright?”

“Some other time, c’mon —”

“No time like the present!”

“M’ hungry!”

Harry tried to pull away, but Nick managed to wrangle him through the door and back into the queue.

_Note to self: Nick Grimshaw is an awful sidekick and wingman._

It was proving quite difficult for him to blend in with that quiff, too. Not to mention how he was
blatantly holding a newspaper in front of his face to hide from the scrutiny of the baristas, which was essentially having the opposite effect. Harry was pretty sure that the staff had already noticed them both, given that Zayn had resumed his muffled giggling, and Louis had rolled his eyes several times in the past minute or so. So…

_Fuck._

Harry wasn’t sure what exactly was keeping him in that queue. It was probably some combination of his hunger, his fear of what kind of scene Nick would cause if he were to duck out now, and insanity. “Insanity,” here meaning “an unhealthy desire for Louis Tomlinson’s attention,” a feeling Harry pledged to never endorse. He’d stick to selling lunchboxes with his face on them.

Nick gave him a thumbs-up as he finally neared the counter. Harry made a tiny scowl in return. Without Nick, he wouldn’t be standing there with sweaty palms and a growly stomach and a mile-a-minute heart rate, waiting to say _fuck-knows-what_ to the long-suffering hot barista who didn’t seem to have any care for him whatsoever.

He was forced to act long before he had a plan.

“Back again, Curly?” Louis’ eyes were questioning, but not cold, as he scribbled “Chraloot” onto a paper cup for an order for “Charlotte.”

_Quick, tell him he’s an arsehole before your head gets all nicey,_ Harry begged himself.

But then Louis’ lips quirked up into a stupid smile, and all hope was lost.

“Um…ind-d-deed I am.”

Louis nodded. “Alright. What would you like?”

_You._

Harry shook himself and pursed his lips thoughtfully, looking up at the menu. He hadn’t expected Louis to be quite this…nice? And, as usual, he’d forgotten to actually look at the menu whilst in the queue.

“Uuuuuummm…”

“Take your time,” Louis reassured. “I mean, so long as you’re not here to shove Grimshaw’s digits down me apron…”

Harry shook his head, cautious smile perched on his lips. “No. He’s a shit wingman, so I’ve given up on helping him with that sort of…” Harry trailed off as soon as he’d realized that he’d labeled Grimmy as his wingman, and therefore this conversation as a chat-up. _Shit._ “…yeah, that sort of thing.”

Louis nodded, unfazed. “Good lad. Putting him in his place! That’s the way to go.” He drummed his fingers on the countertop for a beat or two, as Harry tried in vain to scan the drinks menu with the five percent of his brain capacity that was still available, not occupied by Louis being _there_ and being _nice._

“Have you got an order yet?”

Harry shrugged. “Surprise me.”
“What?”

“Make me anything. Just not that Frappuccino…thing.”

Louis laughed. “Only Eleanor has the stomach for that. Zayn!” he barked.

“What?”

“Special drink for Curly. Ideas?”

“Um…dunno.”

“You can do better than that, Mr. Artist!”

Zayn shrugged. “Just a latte, then?”

“God, Malik, when did you get so boring?”

“Living with the Tommo is pretty draining, I’m sure you know.”

“Bullshit. I’m all good times. Smooth as a pina colada on the beach.”

“Or straight whiskey on the edge of a cliff.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “Okay, get Curly…y’know what? Could you go for something simple, Curly?”

Harry bowed his head and shrugged. “I’m in your hands.”

“Alright. Nice and simple. Tea?”

Harry nodded. “Green, please.”

“Perfect.”

“And…that cake-lolly thing…”

“Sure. Grab me the pink one, Zayn!”

“I’m doing all the work over here, you dick.”

Louis sighed and fetched it himself. He rang Harry through and accepted Harry’s ten-pound note. As he presented Harry with his change, he looked up, finally looking Harry in the eye.

Louis Tomlinson didn’t do normal, casual eye contact. His gaze was unwavering. Those eyes spoke, just as they had on the day they’d met. And though Harry could barely think, let alone begin to read them…at least he didn’t feel so transparent anymore.

“Well, hero, we make a good selection team,” Louis said with a smile and a nod.

The statement wasn’t anything extraordinary. There was no longing or sentiment or burning passion bursting forth from Louis’ faceholes. It was normal. Casual. Cheerful. And it made Harry’s heart leap up into his throat and gallop like all hell.

Because it was normal. And sort of sweet, and —

“Grande green tea,” Zayn called, and there was Louis shoving the baggy with his pink cake-lolly
thing at him, and ushering him along, with a pleasant “Cheers, Curly.”

And before he knew it, he had his tea in hand and he was rushing out the door, nerves fluttery, stomach queasy, Nick already rushing to his side like an eager shiatsu.

Harry didn’t talk until they’d made it back to Nick’s car. Harry settled in the passenger seat with Snottington Bear on his lap. Nick tried to get a mission report out of him as they set course for a late lunch in Shoreditch.

“So. Did you manage to tell him he’s a right dick?”

“Nope.”

Nick sighed. “Did you…ask him any questions? About why he’s ignoring you and all that?”

“Nope.”

“Did you give him your number?”

“No. ‘Course not.”

“So…nothing to report?”

Harry smiled. “He was…nice.”

“Probably the least exciting ending that story could’ve had.”

“Yeah, but…” As much as Harry’s brain was all knotted in confusion now, there was a certain peace, knowing that Louis didn’t hate him.

It was a decent enough start.

Except it wasn’t the start. Not for Harry and Louis. That was long gone.

As they veered northward, Harry vowed to take a break from that particular Starbucks for a while. Lest his confusion continue to plague him. And his inklings of hope plague him worse.

Chapter End Notes


*Jon Snow voice* happy is coming...

In the meantime I'm on tumblr!
Chapter Notes

Last time on BFFTS: Nick Grimshaw is a terrible wingman.

Thanks so much to Ari and B for editing this one again.

Superheroism wasn’t a profession with many middle-grade, meh, neither-here-nor-there days. There were the intense days, on which Harry would have to save both his city and his own arse. There were the eventful days, on which he met a lot of fancy people, had several speaking engagements, and promoted more than one brand of fragrance or lunchbox or charity.

Then there were the golden, electric days. He’d spend those mornings cleaning to his latest favourite records, then prepare hors d’oeuvres and bake treats and buy booze all afternoon. In the evenings he’d host the best party that had ever been (he beat his own record every time).

Finally, there were the down days, on which next to nothing happened. He patrolled, popped into some cafes, and What’sApped with whoever would have him.

It seemed, though, that after four years, new kinds of days were starting to invent themselves.

That Thursday was busy and golden, intense and gentle all at once.

He visited a children’s charity in the morning, then saved some ill-fated daredevils from being crushed under a train. He corralled some escaped animals at the zoo. He managed to soothe them with what was either just his incredibly calming presence, or a newfound ability to talk to animals. Either way, happy zookeepers, happy animals, and Harry got to split a banana with a chimp named Eli for his efforts. Happy Harry.

His day took a calmer turn as evening fell. He treated himself to a gentle stroll down Piccadilly in the sunset. Gentle, as he was still pooped from his encounter with Caroline, still wonky from his Tuesday-night bender, and still reeling from Louis Tomlinson Being Nice. Today’s events had done their job of distracting him from all of that, but now he had some time to kill, and a new distraction was needed.

Passing Fortnum and Mason, he considered picking up a gift for his Latte Boy, as a reward for being nice. Then, having bought several boxes of rose and violet chocolates, he began to wander riverward.

There was no point in going back to his flat. He knew that as soon as he did, he’d be lost in thought and booze and poetry books and bad rom coms, and he’d eat all the chocolate. He wasn’t ready to let the Mystery of the Kind Tommo drag him under quite yet. Until he was, he figured, there were other mysteries hanging around in his life that could do with a little sleuthing.

The Embankment Gardens were rather lovely at sunset. The setting sun gave every passer-by a long shadow. Sounds of chatter and clinking glasses carried on the breeze. Harry carefully stepped around some hell-could-care pigeons as he made his way towards a row of benches, scanning for anyone who looked to be an artist.
For whatever reason, he expected the creator of his comic book to be some kind of beat-poet type. Working on an easel, wearing a beret; twirly moustache and goatee optional. Maybe with a faded Superman shirt, just to throw in some comic nerd cred. His heart sank a little when he found no such someone seated on any of the benches around him.

The gardens stretched on at length from where he stood, so Harry took a stroll. He walked up and down the path, several times. There were no berets, easels, sketchbooks, boxes of comic books, nor any other signs of an artist at work. He checked his phone multiple times to reassure himself that it was indeed a day that started with a T, and hence a day on which this artist was supposed to show up. It was Thursday. But there was no artist.

He found himself back where he’d started, near the Embankment tube station, slumped on a bench, eyes drifting shut. Getting peckish, he figured that Louis would probably turn his nose up at Harry’s fancy chocolates. So he helped himself to two rose chocolates and a violet one before letting himself close off from the world in earnest.

Harry’s thoughts, of course, wandered back to Louis. It was stupid, he told himself, to hang his happiness on whether or not one boy returned his affections. He was a popular superhero. Notoriously charming. He had friends of all ages, from all walks of life, enough of whom weren’t clinging to him for money or status’ sake. He had a loving family who had always supported him and his superhumanity, never once treating him as anything other than human and Harry. How could he feel lonely when there was so much love in his life?

Maybe Louis was fine. Maybe he didn’t feel the emptiness that Harry did. Maybe Louis had simply grown, and changed. Harry had seen people change like lightning. There had been plenty of time over the past four years for plenty of lightning to strike. Plenty of new people to care about, and more than enough clingy old ones to forget...

Harry felt as if he hadn’t changed a bit in all those years. It hurt to think that maybe Louis had.

Or maybe Louis’ hadn’t. Maybe treating Harry like a regular human being had been step one on the way to seeing something more in Harry again.

Or maybe Louis had a legitimately awful memory.

Maybe, maybe, maybe maybe maybe...

A voice approached the other end of the bench, sparking up a conversation with someone seated there. Harry didn’t bother opening his eyes to investigate.

“Hey, bruh! Man, how’re you doing? Meant to come by last week, but I got busy in the studio. Long hours, man, but I’m building my CV! Are those last week’s? Looks sick, can’t wait.” There was a clink of change before the unfamiliar voice said, “Thanks, Zayn.”

Harry blinked himself awake.

There was indeed an artist on the other end of the bench. Sketchbook in his lap, a stray lock of dark hair falling over his face, pencil wagging. His latest customer was now trying desperately to recapture his attention, taking a flip through his new comic book and commenting on every frame.

“You’re the shit, man. You’ve got such a gift.”

Zayn looked up from his sketch. “Don’t look through like that, bro. You’re gonna spoil it.”

Zayn smiled softly. “It’s a comic book. You have to read it.”

“You read it.”

The man took a pause before finally relenting. “You’re the best, bruh. You know what? I’m gonna go read it.”

“Good plan, Shahid,” Zayn nodded, focusing back on his work.

The customer left. Harry watched Zayn carefully. Keeping his distance, staring and squinting.

Eventually, Zayn looked up and cast Harry a slow-burning smirk. “You’re alive.”

“And you’re an artist.”

Zayn shrugged, smudging a line with a dutiful thumb. “I like to think so, yeah.”

Harry’s eyes fell on the cardboard box at Zayn’s feet. Sunlight glinted off of the laminated comic book covers inside.

“You draw comics?” Harry asked, feigning surprise.

“Write and draw, yeah. When I’m not doing school work or my job. Or cleaning the flat ‘cause Louis can’t be bothered…”

“You live together?”

“Yeah, we do.” Zayn paused to smile. “It’s probably better that he’s not bothered. His attempts at cleaning might do serious property damage.”

Louis, the failed domestic. Why was Harry unsurprised?

“How much are you selling your work for?”

Zayn gave the box a gentle kick in Harry’s direction. “Just take one, if you like.”

“But don’t you sell them?”

“Yeah, but mate…they’re kinda yours already, like.”

Harry went for his wallet. “Give me a number.”

“Mate, I meant it.”

“Number, Zayn.”

Zayn chuckled. “Fine, name your own price.”

Harry slid closer and laid two notes in Zayn’s lap. “Twenty quid, then.”

With a somewhat reluctant smile, Zayn pocketed the cash.

Harry bent over to pick an issue from the box. It matched the one he’d seen in Regent’s Park the day before. Immediately, he found himself flipping through to the back pages and re-reading them, watching The Shadow disappear around corners. His own face stared back at him, mouth agape,
The Shadow fled.

Harry scooted in even closer. He pointed down at the comic and said, “You’re prophetic, you know that?”

Zayn nodded. “Good to know.”

“Well, either that or you’re stalking me.”

“I see enough of you at Starbucks. Promise I’m not stalking.”


“This…this happened, pretty much. At least, something very similar did. Two nights ago.”

Zayn scanned the pages, expressionless. “Really?”

“When did you make this?”

“Just got it printed on Tuesday.”

Yup. Prophetic.

“You’re good at, like — *capturing* them,” Harry praised. “I haven’t even seen them enough to get that good of a read on them. But you’ve done it perfect. Looks just like them.”

“Thanks.” Zayn pursed his lips and turned his attention back to sketching.

Harry let his mind wander, trying to distract himself from asking the inevitable *why, Zayn? What makes you so good at it?* But he couldn’t go for the throat just yet.

“So. The Shadow,” Harry said simply.

Zayn raised his eyebrows. “The Shadow.”

Harry smirked. “Original name, that.”

“Hey, I may be indie ‘n shit, but it’s still a bloody comic book.”

“Fair enough.”

“Seemed like the best fit, so I went with it.”

“Smart.”

Harry inclined his head to try to see more of Zayn’s sketch in the fading light. He laughed — it was a cartoon of a cross-eyed, tongue-out Louis Tomlinson.

“What can I say,” said Zayn, noticing Harry’s amusement. “He’s my best mate, my colleague, my roommate, my partner in crime…my muse.”

“He’s not going in the comic, is he?”

Zayn shook his head, then reconsidered. “If you keep coming to Starbucks on our shifts, I may have no choice. Your fans will know you’re an awful flirt.”

“Hey!”
“Sorry for being honest...”

“I’ve been told I’m an excellent flirt!”

Zayn shrugged. “Maybe you are. Just with him, it means something different.”

Fucking Zayn was prophetic, just as psychic as Harry’s mum.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Harry protested.

Zayn pursed his lips, erasing a few lines in cartoon Louis’ hair. “You’re a bad liar, too, aren’t you?”

“Not in the least!”

Zayn smirked, turning back to his sketch. “You haven’t gotten better at pretending to like Starbucks coffee...”

Harry opened his mouth to challenge him, but Zayn was right.

Zayn’s current drawing was a lot more of a caricature than the proportionate, lifelike characters in the comic book. But it seemed that whatever he drew, the essence of his subject was always there, breathing through the page. The cartoon on Zayn’s lap was ridiculous, but it was Louis. It was adorable.

“You’re spaced out,” Zayn observed.

“Sorry.”

“S’alright,” Zayn said pensively. “You’re just...” He shook his head a little and turned back to his drawing.

“I’m just?”

_Swooning over a drawing? In way too deep, beyond recovery? Ding ding ding. We have a winner._

Zayn thought for a moment. “I guess, like, I always expected you to be...a hero? And like, you are a hero, but...”

Zayn turned over the page and began flipping through the sketchbook. “I used to always draw you like what everyone made you out to be.”

He settled on a page full of earlier sketches of Harry. His face was cold marble, his eyes dark. Firm stances, strong brows, hard frowns. The likenesses were uncanny, but they were of another Harry. Or at least, a part of himself that he didn’t count as a friend.

“You were a hero, you were better than the rest of us, and everything about you was epic,” Zayn elaborated. “You were a legend. Everyone was always talking about how, like, girls were fighting for your attention, the lads would all kill to be you, and all that. And I ate it up. I thought that was who you were, and I loved it. But then I met you, and now...”

Harry smiled down at himself on the page. “You acknowledge that I am completely hardcore.”

Zayn grinned. “You’re a sugar cube.”

“Sugar cubes melt in the _rain._”
“Alright, you’re a cupcake, then.”

Harry batted his lashes. “So you think m’ cute, is that it?”

Zayn gave an incredulous snort.

“Are you flirting, Zaynie?”

Zayn shook his head. His expression grew more solemn as he stared out across the path. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Harry frowned up at the sky, mighty confused. More questions were swirling now, running laps in his head, all in opposite directions, crashing into each other. Zayn wasn’t someone he wanted to bombard with his thought tornado, though. Harry liked his steadiness, the way he balanced his words with his silences.

And so, when curiosity got the best of Harry yet again, he carefully chose the least invasive question he could.

“So, the comic series…it’s a series, right? What’s it about?”

“Well, there’s this super bloke, right?”

“Yup.”

“His name is Harry Styles.”

“Oh. That bloke.”

Zayn’s tone reverted back to seriousness. “Except I couldn’t call him that, so he doesn’t really have a name. The fans of the series are Harry fans. They know it’s you without having to be told.”

Harry nodded.

“It’s inspired by his life, I guess. I watch the news. But I take some…creative license. Here — I guess this is show and tell now…”

From the back of the box, he plucked an older issue. He flipped through it briefly, only giving Harry a few images to hold on to. Flashbacks of a younger Harry, bewildered eyes and tame curls. Discovering his powers for the first time. The amazed faces of the *X Factor* crowd. Tower Bridge.

Zayn closed it and placed it back in the box all too quickly. “Well, that’s the first one.”

“Tower Bridge? Did you, like…did you go back and explain, um, everything about me? My origin story?”

“Only in flashbacks.”

Harry took a steadying breath. “Does he…ever talk about it?”

Zayn took an equally long, unsteady breath.

“Louis?” Harry clarified. “About Tower Bridge?”

“I know.” Zayn nodded. “I don’t know how you could think that he’d ever, like…*forget*…about something like that.”
Harry gave his head a sad shake. “Well what else am I supposed to believe? He acts like he does.”

“He’s being his twat self. He remembers.” Something was off about Zayn’s voice. Like it was a living thing, losing its skin. Rubbed raw.

“Then why doesn’t…” Harry gave up. Too many questions.

There was a moment of silence before Zayn spoke. “He’s an odd one. But give him time.”

“What does that even mean? Keep coming to Starbucks?”

Zayn shrugged, bit his lip, and reassessed. “I think he feels…intimidated by you.”

“Because my apparent taste in chain caffeine is horrifying?”

“No, like…like he’s not good enough.”

“Not good enough? For the idiot who turns pink and forgets what coffee is every time he asks what he can do me for?”

Zayn cracked a brilliant smile, letting his head fall back against the bench. Harry tried to resist, but a smile that angelic insisted on lighting up the faces of all who bore witness to it. How ridiculous was it that Zayn and Louis shared a roof, both with their sun-shaming smiles? What a lucky fucking roof.

“Although you’re not a coffee guy, you are a Class Five super hero. Who saves plenty of lives. And is well fit. Lou finds it hard sometimes, not being the brightest light around.”

“But why did he feel like he had to be…cold?”

“He’s defensive by nature. Turtle-like.”

Harry made a face. “Turtle-like?”

“He likes hiding in plain sight almost as much as he loves to be seen.”

Two things at once struck Harry as truth.

Firstly, Zayn knew Louis better than Harry did. Harry didn’t have a reason not to trust him. Therefore, Zayn was probably right. Louis was intimidated by Britain’s Hero. Afraid to reach out because he was — jealous? Overwhelmed? Scared that Harry had changed? All of the above?

Yeah. Probably.

And as for Thing Two…none of Thing One made any sense.

The Louis he’d known had loved Spider-Man for Peter Parker. He’d taken the time to get to know Harry the Human. He’d forgiven Harry the Human for his human flaws — even when Harry had nearly gotten both of them killed.

Louis had admired and romanticized and envied the hero, but his eyes had shone for the human. Didn’t he care enough for the human, deep down, not to be fazed by the hero?

“Maybe I’ve changed more than I think,” Harry conceded. He fidgeted with his hands in his lap. In his peripheral vision, Zayn gave a slight nod. “And your Lou’s not the one I knew, I guess,” Harry concluded, muttering.
Harry felt Zayn slide a reassuring hand between his shoulder blades. “He’s changed. But believe me — Tommo never changes that much.”

Harry nodded. Maybe.

“Neither do you, I’ll bet,” Zayn smirked. “Cupcake.”

“Hey!”

Zayn stroked Harry’s back and used his free hand to sneak himself a chocolate. His eyes (almost amber in the dying sun, which was unfair) got huge as he tasted violet. “’Ow can you stand tha?” he grumbled. “’Hat’s so much sugaah.” He swallowed it with a grimace. “So fucking sweet.”

“I am what I eat,” Harry winked.

Zayn rolled his eyes. He took out a cigarette and lit it, scratching away a little more at his doodle before giving up. Pathetically, Harry attacked the chocolates. Fuck the potential romantic gesture. There was no good reason not to eat them all.

Neither was there any reason not to plumb Zayn for clues about the second of Harry’s life’s recent mysteries.

“You act like…or at least, your work acts like it knows something about…about The Shadow. Do you know something? Anything? Because I think it’s in my best interest to know.”

Zayn swallowed. “I’m pretty good at guessing. I’m perceptive. But I don’t know any more about him than anyone else.”

“Him?”

“Them?” Zayn corrected. “Sorry.” But there had been an ease in Zayn’s voice, before. One that didn’t suggest an assumption.

“Do you know that they’re a ‘he’?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say so. I draw them more…more masculine. Not that that means anything. They could be anyone. Honestly, I don’t know.” He stroked through his sketchbook again, avoiding Harry’s eyes.

“Have you ever…seen them? In the flesh?” Many people had. There had been crowds on the riverbanks on that first day. Witnesses aplenty.

Zayn chewed the end of his pencil. “Not that I can remember, no. Just like, seen photos and stuff. Watched the news. ITV’s sort of batty about…them.”

The photos and news clips had mostly been blurry. Certainly not good enough to capture so vivid a likeness as Zayn had in his comic.

Chocolate planted firmly in cheek, Harry seized Zayn’s most recent issue from the comic box. He found the Shadow pages in a heartbeat. Upon further inspection, the parallels between Zayn’s Shadow scene and Harry’s last Shadow encounter were beyond uncanny.

In the final frame of the second-last page, a brief flash of blue further obscured The Shadow’s face. Harry turned the page, and once more, The Shadow was gone.

“Zayn — you know who it is. Who The Shadow is.”
Zayn exhaled an elegant ribbon of smoke, watched it fade into the sunset. “I told you, I don’t.”

“Zayn, you’re mates with The Shadow!”

Zayn frowned. “Seriously, bro. I’m not.”

Harry jabbed an indignant finger at the blue patch on the page. “I’ve seen their eyes light up like that. For like, not even a half a second. Only once. I’ve seen all of the news reports, all of the photos, and not a single one had any of that crazy blue stuff. You can’t lie your way around this one, Zayn. You know The Shadow, and I know it. Tell me — who are they?”

Zayn fished in his pocket and pulled out a tiny Nokia phone. “Uni’s pretty shit, mostly. But it does teach you some things. Like how to do research.”

He brought up a blurry picture. It was a screenshot from a video, one of the YouTube clips of The Shadow fleeing the crowd after their first appearance.

The Shadow was looking over their shoulder. Under the darkness of their hood, one eye could be seen — twinkling, a brilliant electric blue.

“It’s only for a half-second in the video. Hard to catch. But yeah, their eyes, like, glow or something. Weird.”

Harry was speechless. Somewhere inside, he’d been so sure that Zayn had had a connection, but now his gut was doubt spaghetti. Fear crept up out of nowhere and stole the show.

“They’re not…maybe they’re not human?” Harry suggested.

Zayn shook his head. “Absolutely human.”

“But they’ve got powers no one’s ever seen before,” Harry wondered aloud. “And the way they can disguise themselves like that…”

“But, like, you’ve got powers no one’s ever seen before. Are you human? You’ve just always got the benefit of the doubt, is all.”

Zayn was quite good at pacing conversations. He gave his words some time to sink in before continuing. “And there are so many, like, types of powers that haven’t even been discovered yet. Thanks to all the oppression and shit, they’ve stayed hidden for years. Who knows what kind of supers are out there, and how they look, and what they can do. Who says that Shadow here’s an anomaly?”

“But that’s exactly it,” said Harry. “People like us…stay hidden. Or at least, before now, they mostly did. Especially the weirder among us. Why not The Shadow?”

Zayn shrugged. “They’ve got something to fight for. And they’re brave.” After a beat of silence, he said, “Maybe they care about you.”

Harry’s mix of discomfort and flattery manifested as a frog-like grimace. “They just happen to show up whenever I most need protecting…”

Zayn smiled back down at his sketchbook, thumbing through pages again. “Right place, right time. Now where have I heard that one before?”

Harry sighed. “Not a clue.”
They shared a chuckle, Zayn spluttering curls of smoke.

The sketchbook pages kept turning. Harry felt like a bit of a creep, gazing so intently at Zayn’s drawings, but he couldn’t help it. Louis’ frequent appearances made it worse. There were doodles aplenty. Louis lounging sensually on a pile of putrid laundry, getting scolded by a fed up Zayn. Stickman Louis skateboarding. Life-like Louis drinking tea and raising his eyebrows. A collection of blunt-smoking, speech-bubbled Louis doodles labeled Actual Quotes from Lou When He’s Stoned.

Best of all was a Louis staring straight up from the page, with his hands on his hips, shouting, Oi! Stop looking over Zen’s shoulder and go do ur drama shit, wanker.

Curvy letters next to the speech bubble read My nose is prettier than that, wanker ©. There were eraser marks near the drawing’s crotch, covering what seemed to be the remains of a vandalized penis.

Zayn caught him looking. As a distraction, he held the last rose chocolate up to Harry’s mouth. Harry nibbled it out of the air. Zayn’s brows raised in slightly perturbed amusement.

“Made of sugar is right,” Zayn remarked.

“And spice. And everything nice,” Harry supplied.

“And some Chemical X, for good measure.”

Harry gawked at the reference. “I’m not a Powerpuff Girl!”

Zayn turned to a new page and pointed out a large-eyed, stumpy-limbed character. “Not gonna lie, man — there’s a resemblance.”

“You sketch Powerpuff Girls?”

“Had three sisters growing up. Was sort of forced into appreciating the cartoon style.”

“You mean you secretly binge it?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Buttercup kinda reminds me of you, actually. Do you see it?”

Zayn snorted a laugh and declared, “You’re the most pathetic superhero that ever was.”

Harry bowed his head. “I’ll take it.”

“S’like, how the hell does anyone think you’re this macho hero guy —”

“They think I’m macho? Me?”

“— when really you’re just a…” his smile shook with laughter as he said it, “…big gay cupcake…”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but there was no way he could deny that.

As the sun finally set, everything was stillness but for the lazy drift of Zayn’s cigarette smoke, winding through the inky night. Harry’s mind was, as ever, a restless sea of questions, but something about Zayn’s presence kept them from ever reaching his lips. He made himself take deep breaths, relax.
Zayn eventually picked himself up, slid his sketchbook into his backpack and said, “Well, it was nice talking to you, but I think I’ve got to be off.”

Harry pouted like a toddler. “You’ve got more important people who need your attention?”

“More like a paper due in the morning. Analyzing some literary shit or something.”

“Hey, literature’s fun.”

“Like, yeah, but not when you haven’t read it.”

“Oh.”


“I can see why. Well, not Starbucks. But the series, it’s…brilliant.”

Zayn smiled. “Yeah? Well tell your management, then, and I might make a living.”

Harry frowned. “We’ve got a ground rule from ages ago. No comic books.”

Zayn didn’t look too surprised. “That’s just a disgrace, that is.”

“You’re telling me! What’s the point of being a hero without a comic? I was afraid I’d never have one. But then it all turned out rather nicely, thanks to you.”

“Glad I could help. I love making them. Extra quid or not.”

“But you deserve all of the extra quid in the world! Especially if you fail uni.”

“Yeah, that could happen. We’ll work something out, I guess. Goodnight, then, cupcake.”

“Can I walk you to the tube?”

Zayn scoffed, but his smile was mirthful. He set off down the path with no objections. Harry disposed of his empty chocolate boxes and followed.

“Romantic, are you?” Zayn said.

“Only polite.”

“Sure,” Zayn muttered. “Romancing me at Starbucks…to be polite.”

Thankfully, Harry’s blush couldn’t be seen in the dark.

“You got Lou’s attention, like,” said Zayn, “so it worked.”

Again, the blushing.

They reached the station entrance. “Good luck with your super-ing,” said Zayn in farewell.

“Good luck with your bullshitting. I hear you’ve got a talent for it.”

Zayn rolled his eyes and set off down the stairs. “Do you keep a Louis Tomlinson quote diary or something?”
Before Harry could answer, Zayn was gone.

Night patrols were hardly Harry’s favourite, but they were arguably much more important than daytime ones. While the super villains slept, regular villains wreaked more than enough havoc on their own. Some night patrols would stay forever etched in his mind — the times he’d stopped bullets with his bare hands; the times he’d teleported into hospitals with battered victims in his arms. Nighttime was when Harry did his real job. Daylight was for spectacle.

A welcome bonus was how well the night hid his summer humidity-ridden hair.

Tonight’s instincts led him to the back alley of a nightclub. He waited and watched carefully as a van pulled clumsily up to its back entrance. Minutes later, out from the club came a small group of people, dragging a half-conscious partyer into the van.

Harry popped out of the shadows, demanding the victim be put down.

The group stood their ground. Harry opened a palm and enveloped the victim in a field. The group let go of the partier and fell back, eyes wide.

But it didn’t end there. Each kidnapper was armed. Harry had just disarmed two gunmen when tendrils of smoke began to tug at the kidnappers’ wrists. Glowing blue eyes appeared at the mouth of the alleyway. The group let out a collective scream and hauled ass into the night, with the van bringing up the rear.

Harry kept his back to The Shadow and focused on the victim first. He called for an ambulance, called the person’s friends. He called in the van’s license plate number to the police. He then met the friends at the front entrance and handed the victim over to the paramedics.

Harry then returned to the alley. He was greeted by a floating pair of blue eyes.

“Well,” said The Shadow. “This alley sure does look lovely tonight. I was going to hit up the clubs, but then I figured…” They trailed off, a hint of whimsy in their odd voice.

Harry took a deep breath. Best to be frank. He hadn’t been in danger, so: “Why are you here?”

The Shadow mulled it over. Harry grew impatient. “I believe you owe me an explanation.”

The Shadow scoffed. “Hey, let’s not forget who’s helping who here. I owe you nothing.”

Harry spread his arms wide. “Fine! You win. I give up. Whatever it is you’re trying to gain from this, you can have it. I’m done.”

Instead of bargaining, The Shadow went silent. Harry inclined his head, imploring. People are hard to read when their faces are shrouded in a permanent cloud of shadow.

Harry turned away and shrugged his surrender.

“You should feel defeated more often,” The Shadow called after him. “Looks good on you.”

Harry turned back around, exasperated. “Alright, since I’m supposed to trust you —”

“Whoever said you were?”
“I haven’t forgotten who’s helping who, here,” Harry retorted. “You’re doing it on purpose. You want something from me, that much is clear.”

“But is it really?”

Twat. “I assume it’s my trust, for now. I can’t even guess what else you might want. When I think about it logically, nothing else fits.”

The Shadow was silent. And then they laughed.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “So now you’re mocking me.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to mock you.” They sounded genuine.

“So what do you mean to do?”

The Shadow shrugged. “I’ve done everything I’ve meant to. Except for getting you to like me.”

Harry, for the millionth time, tried to look The Shadow in the eye. “So you came here to be likeable?”

The Shadow bowed their head and tapped their feet, suddenly resembling a guilty school child. Silence was still not enough of an answer for Harry.

“I’d be happy just to know a name. Not even a full name,” Harry sighed. “Just something.”

“It’s The Shadow.”

Harry wasn’t moved by their cheek. “Your real name. Secret identity, if you like.”

“Name’s not mine to give out, I’m afraid,” said The Shadow.

“Really? Who’d you sell it to?” Harry cracked a smile, tried to laughed at himself, and then gave up the act. “Forget it, this is hopeless. Have yourself a nice night, Shadow.” He turned to leave once more.

That set The Shadow off. They stormed right up to Harry until they were a breath apart. The Shadow’s faceless face looked down on him.

“You see this?” The Shadow pointed at their face. “This is a mask.” With a wave of their hand, the face-cloud thinned. Harry saw the faintest outline of a nose and mouth and jaw before the darkness set back in, seconds later. “I am a mask. And it wouldn’t be fair to the actor beneath for me to be anything more to you.”

Harry bit down on his tongue. What was he supposed to make of this? He crossed his arms and said, “Have you told them that they should go back to the theatre, and stop wasting their time on me?”

The Shadow said nothing. Harry gave up again, and began to walk away.

“He’s already in the theatre,” The Shadow called after him, “…and it’s not making him happy.”
Harry stopped walking and listened, back still turned.

“And he thinks that doing this stuff, all the heroic bullshit...he thinks that’ll help him be better, someday. For the people who depend on him...and for the person he let down.”

Harry turned back around. The Shadow’s eyes were solemn, even though they shone like Christmas lights. Their hands were clasped. They rocked back and forth from their heels to their tiptoes. Jittery and vulnerable. As if they’d just told a tender truth that the actor underneath it all might not have wanted them to tell.

“Well,” said Harry, pausing to think. “I hope that whoever he let down forgives him. And you can tell this actor for me — tell him that there are more important ways of being a hero than looking out for just one person who shouldn’t need the help in the first place. There’s more important things, and people, and others days to be saved.”

The Shadow nodded. “I already know what he’ll say to that.”

Harry gave it a moment before taking the bait. “And what’s that?”

“That even...just one person. Even getting to save one person, and make one life better, makes him feel so much better for having to deal with his stupid powers in the first place.”

Harry’s mind gave a jolt. He saw a different night sky, toes in grass, a boy lying next to him. His heart rabbited. Things began to line up, threads connecting. Louis had been able to make smoke. Smoke, with no fire. He had turned invisible without even knowing it. His powers had been strange and unruly, difficult to control.

An actor. In the theatre.

The Shadow knew Harry intimately, and had from the get go. How could they have?

Harry’s heart swelled. Had he really been there, the whole time? Fighting by his side, saving his life, asking for nothing in return?

The Shadow’s eyes winked out, leaving only their dark outline visible. This time, it was their turn to leave, gliding towards the mouth of the alley like a ghost.

Harry ran to keep pace with them. “And tell him another thing,” he panted. “That he does make my life better. And he has saved me. A lot. And I’m grateful.” He made sure to give each and every word enough weight, to let The Shadow hear just how much he meant them. “But tell him that he doesn’t always have to be here for me. I can protect myself — s’part of my job, innit? And also tell him not to be so bloody hard on himself.” The Shadow kept drifting, sliding out of Harry’s reach.

“And tell him that I—” Harry grunted. He put on extra speed and swiped out a hand. He caught The Shadow by their wrist. He heard a soft gasp as The Shadow froze.

Harry looked down at their forearm, and saw a rope there, inked in. He blinked, and it was gone. The Shadow tried to pull away, but Harry grabbed their hand, clinging tight. The Shadow’s eyes flared to life again, casting Harry’s world in blue. Harry looked right into them with intent, blinding as they were.

“And tell him that I love him,” Harry said, in a voice so wrecked he hardly recognized it. “Louis. He’s your actor, isn’t he?”

The Shadow said nothing, as was to be expected, but Harry kept on, with the faint hope that Louis
was listening. “Tell him I still love him, and I want him back. He doesn’t need to do anything more
for me. He means so much to me already. Make sure he knows.”

The Shadow was silent still. Tears clouded Harry’s eyes, until all he could see was blue light. He
cracked a smile, wiped them away. “M’sorry. This is...embarrassing. Not proper, macho hero
behaviour.” He closed his eyes.

The Shadow squeezed his hand. Warm and tight.

With that, Harry slowed. He focused on the warmth, tried to feel grounded.

The Shadow’s hand squeezed again.

“Tell him,” Harry said again. “Make sure he listens. Promise me.”

When he opened his eyes, The Shadow was gone, indistinguishable from the columns of steam
rising up from the sewer grates.

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Harry went to a good number of West End stage productions over the next two weeks. Independent
company shows in warehouses and studio theatres, too. The Shadow hadn’t exactly specified what
kind of actor was hidden beneath their mask, had they? Neither did he know where and when Louis
might be doing any end-of-semester productions. He followed any lead that might bring him to The
Shadow, or to Louis...to both.

The search was largely fruitless. At the very least, he got to see some excellent theatre.

One evening, towards the end of his stint as a theatre junkie, he was combing for rush tickets, and
ended up wading through a flood of people who were queuing for a production. He soon noticed the
posters by the theatre’s entrance, and the programs that were being handed out. Mistaken for part of
the queue, he was given one. The performance was to be an ensemble piece from a small cast of
graduating theatre students.

And, lo and behold, named on the list of performers was Louis Tomlinson.

Harry was suddenly a spinning magnet, pulling himself towards the theatre as he pushed himself
away; part of him imagining Louis’ face were he to discover Harry in the audience, and another,
stronger part of him feeling curious, and caring. Wanting to take an interest in and support the work
of someone he still supposedly loved, like any old friend would.

The “friend” in Harry won out. He bought a ticket from the student manning the door after the rest of
the crowd had filed in. Thankfully, no one recognized him under the brim of his large hat. He settled
himself in the back row of the tiny theatre.

Harry sat there in silence as the rest of the audience found their places. He tried to make sense of the
program, but its description of the forthcoming piece was vague and bizarre. He crossed his fingers
and made a silent plea that this piece would not involve audience interaction. He’d already been
dragged on stage at one of the past week’s performances, to the audience and the media’s delight. He
fidgeted, thinking of the look on Louis’ face, were he to see a bumbling Harry playing along with his
classmates.

In a few short minutes, the stage lights rose on a set of simple black boxes, and that was all that happened for a another few minutes, until there was a cry of “AAAAAAAAAARRRGHHH!” and one of the boxes was flung into the air.

A squatting cast member was revealed beneath the box, and one by one more boxes flew, until a small ensemble had joined him. Harry’s eyes found Louis in a heartbeat. A tank top hung loose over his torso, showing off a right arm full of tattoos. Harry found himself squinting to try and make out each of the many images as the cast assumed new positions and froze.

One performer stepped out and began winding through the forest of frozen people on stage. Harry didn’t pay much attention, too busy watching Louis, admiring how at home he looked on stage. His admiration wasn’t lost on the fact that his leg-coverings were skin-tight and probably not jeans, either.

It was perhaps the strangest piece of theatre Harry had yet seen. Ensemble members picked each other up at random and threw each other quite frequently. The “dialogue” mostly consisted of awkwardly-strung sentences and repeated words — halfway between wonderfully poetic and caveman-like. At one point, the entire cast “transformed” into animals for absolutely no reason. It was wonderfully athletic, and it was a pleasure to watch Louis’ body at work. There were some sides to himself that Louis just couldn’t show in his day job, so Harry thanked all that is holy for the theatre and its penchant for black tights.

As the production neared its end, Harry was beginning to consider himself a bit of a convert to...whatever one was supposed to call this type of piece. If it always involved muscular men, and a use of the English language stranger than that of his own Twitter account, he was ready to declare himself a fan for life.

Just as the performance seemed to be wrapping up, the performers suddenly fell silent and still. Louis walked to a spot downstage centre, planting his feet and taking a big breath.

By now, Harry had gauged that the nature of the piece was pretty personal. Each actor’s words, though not always the most concrete, scratched at the surface of a story — one of pain and change.

But that in no way meant that Harry was ready for what came next.

Louis fixed his eyes on the ceiling above the audience and spoke one word. “Guilty.”

“Guilty,” the ensemble echoed.

“Guilty.”

“Guilty.”

“And I’m sat here thinking ‘I wish.’”

“I wish.”

“…that I hadn’t been so young when you happened to me. Because I’ve always believed in —”

“Fate.”

“— but I never thought I had a role to play. To bend circumstance — to work with what it gave me, to make tools out of time and change. To show up to the gamble, to roll and roll ‘til I change my
luck. Change my fate.

“But I was clueless.”

“No.”

“So fucking clueless. And —”

“I wish —”

“— that I’d seen what fate looked like when it stared me right in the face. Because it looked like you.”


Harry could see Louis shiver. Rock back and forth on his feet. Bite down on his lip. He had stepped out of his actor’s skin. Every choice of sound and movement made him look more and more brutally honest, and bare-to-the-bone himself.

“And I like to think that I was brave. I poured everything I had to say to you, word for word, into one gesture, and I called it a kiss…” Here the ensemble was silent. “But everything you gave, I couldn’t give back. And I ran away, rather than face you; and I shut down, rather than rise to meet you, because you shone too bright.

“One blink and I’m back.”

“Guilty.”

“Falling from the sky. Clinging to you, I’m bursting with it, ready to yell out, ‘Look, hey! Virtual stranger, fellow victim of happenstance! I believe in fate! And maybe...’”

“Maybe.”

“‘Maybe we could be enough.’” Louis smiled.

Harry’s heart was beating many miles a minute, and instead of blood it was pumping confusion and empathy and this isn’t the same Louis Tomlinson that gives people their manhood at Starbucks.

Louis bowed his head. “Guilty.”

“Guilty,” then ensemble whispered.

“And so I do what I can for you.”

“Guilty.”

“I fix the wounds you can’t see; I am your every remedy that I can bring myself to be. But I am scared.”

“Guilty.”

“Of what you think of me. Of what I did. Of what I’ve become. Or if you even care anymore. And so I cover myself from you, until all I am is —”

“Guilty?”
“And all I do is…”

“Wish…”

There was a long pause before Louis spoke again.

“For a day we can both remove the masks. And boys who fell from the sky can finally pull the cords on the fucking parachutes. Or, better yet, get jetpacks. God knows you can afford them, you rich bastard.”

The crowd chuckled.

Louis spread his arms and shrugged. “I’m terrified. Terrified that I still love you. But I have a choice.”

“Guilty?”

“And I owe it to you, I think,” he took a final deep breath. “To stop wishing, and choose.”

He bowed his head. The crowd applauded.

The performance ended shortly after, and Harry had to leave. Had to go away and process it all. To let himself feel the relentless stream of things that he was trying not to feel in public.

He needed out, badly. But, as fate would have it, a stream of early-leaves flocked to the door, and a sneaky exit grew more and more unlikely.

The remaining audience members got to their feet and applauded. Louis and his classmates took their bows and then sat themselves down on the edge of the stage.

“Alright, we’re gonna take a few of your questions now. Anyone have questions? About the performance? C’mon, let’s hear them! This is part of our grade, you know, so speak up, or else we won’t all get jobs at massive theatre firms straight out of school —”

“Tommo!” One of Louis’ classmates slapped him on the leg.

The theatre laughed.

Louis grinned. “And for God’s sake, move in a little closer now. Yes, that’s it. Yes, even you, guy at the very back!” Harry’s heart leapt, but Louis moved on to heckling some teenage girls in the middle rows without a second glance.

The Q&A was moderated by the whole cast, but none so much as Louis, who constantly cracked jokes, questioned the questioners, picked on the distracted teenagers of the audience for questioning, and explained the theories of a few core theatre practitioners that had underpinned their work.

“How come it made no sense, did you say, love? This is devised theatre, folks. We had absolutely no obligation to have it make any sense.” Another of his classmates began to refute that, diving into all the piece’s the deep thematic threads. Louis burst out laughing halfway through. “Sorry, I can just see Professor Mulligan in the front row, giving me the stink eye. My grades are going down, I see it in her eyes. Give it up for Professor Mulligan, everyone!”

And then it was Harry’s turn to run away. While the audience was distracted. While Louis was up there, being warm and strong and bright and witty and pleasant and brave. He couldn’t handle it. He
slunk away and was greeted by a rainy London night, and the renewed urge to curl up on his couch into as tiny a ball as his lanky limbs would permit and stay there for a very, very long time.

“I’m terrified. Terrified that I still love you. But I have a choice…”

“Stop wishing and choose.”
Chapter Notes

Last time on BFFTS: Louis studies theatre.

Thank you so much for staying with me thus far. We're almost there! I hope you're enjoying it.

This chapter is going to be a little crack. Be warned.

Thanks again to B and Ari for tireless editing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry woke to quiet. Blissful, unnerving quiet.

He got himself out of bed by seven o'clock for a patrol disguised as a jog. Mists swallowed up the fields of Hyde Park, until Harry felt like the only person alive. He remained on high alert as he circled back home through the dawn streets, but no civilian danger troubled his senses.

With the runner's high, he started off on the right foot, as far as going about his day as normally as possible. Every time his thoughts wandered back to the night before, he gave himself something new to chew on. The first time he thought of Louis, he made himself a disgustingly perfect cup of tea. The second, third and fourth times, he cooked up an omelette, fed MJ, and wrote a haiku. The fifth time, he checked his emails.

There was an email from Chris. It was a forward from Dr. Turner, the Superhuman UK researcher who had been overseeing his testing, investigating the lapse in his powers. Chris’ addendum said: Check below. Results were inconclusive. We’ll need to get you in for another round of tests. Call me and we’ll organize. Best, C.

Harry heaved a heavy sigh. He didn’t feel up for a chat right now, especially not for work reasons. And whatever “inconclusive” meant, it wasn’t going to be good.

Going back to his inbox, his eyes fell on an unopened message from Ben, entitled: Update. Reluctantly, he opened it. Just this one, it’ll be the last. Remote communication with other humans was hard work, and he already needed a break.

Ben’s email didn’t start with his usual greeting. Azoff’s made a full recovery back in California, and he’s ready to speak again when you are. He advises you make the trip over there, though, if Skype gets too bothersome.

Harry’s heart sank. He hated to admit it, but the opportune window of time to deal with the process of coming out had already passed, at least for now. Between the guilt of continuing to involve Azoff, even when his involvement had gotten him hurt, and Harry’s fear for the future of his job....and to top it off, the bloody storm in his heart, not knowing what to do about Louis Tomlinson...

Ah, fuck it. Harry needed to turn off his brain, just for a moment. He closed his laptop and took the last swig of his tea, wishing it were vodka. MJ followed him to the couch and settled herself on his lap, eagerly watching the blank screen.
When Harry flicked it on, it was ITV News. The headline along the bottom of his screen read, *Super Special: Who Is ‘The Shadow’?*

MJ gave an intrigued *mrow*.

“Yesterday evening marked the third appearance of Harry Styles’ mysterious last-minute rescuer. Known to Styles’ fans as ‘The Shadow,’ the hooded vigilante was spotted last night in Shoreditch, *alone,*” said the news anchor. “This footage comes to us from viewer Katie P., taken on her mobile phone.” The footage showed a blurry Shadow standing on an empty street, waiting for something.

“No fucking way,” said Harry aloud. He gripped the remote as if clinging to it could ground him. He inadvertently changed the channel and started watching some kind of desolate soap.

“*Mrrrow?*” MJ asked again, turning around to face Harry and do stretches on his belly. As Harry whole being began to shake, she gave up, and hopped down onto the couch.

Harry held his face in his hands, as if he wasn’t alone. As if he had to hide his tears from watchful eyes. He knew who The Shadow was, and the knowledge had him more lost than before. What was there to do now? Keep doing everything that hadn’t worked? Get himself into another spot of trouble on the job? Show up at That Starbucks?

Wait? Would Louis come to him, if he did? Come to him in human form, uncloaked and vulnerable?

“Fuck.”

MJ nuzzled his side, and then took off towards her water bowl. So much for support.

The morning trickled by like the rain down his windowpane. He found himself engrossed in his issue of Zayn’s comic. Turning pages and then turning them back again, admiring and analyzing and thinking too much. Turning more pages to get lost in the action.

When he was finally done, he took a picture of the issue lying on his marble countertop and posted it to Instagram. With his own eyes staring back at him from the cover, he captioned his post “Selfie.” He tagged Zayn’s artist handle, @d.j.malik.

He went for a late-afternoon patrol, and covered plenty of ground all across the city. Despite a few fan interactions and a lot of running in the rain, nothing much happened. He stood on Tower Bridge and stared out at the city until memory began to eat away at him and he couldn’t keep himself there anymore. He returned home after dinner-for-one that evening and swaddled himself in a fuzzy blanket on his couch. Exhaustion weighed down his limbs while his insides thrummed, too awake to sleep.

He sat there, numb, for all of two minutes, until Liam texted.

*Yo u see this shit on itv??!!?!? :0*

Apparently they were still on about The Shadow. Fuck twenty-four hour news.

*Yeah, Harry replied, I don’t wanna talk bout it.*

If he thought that would get Liam to leave him alone, he was wrong.

*Comin ova. B thr in 10. U better b watchin brkng bd.*

*Breaking Bad??*
Liam would likely kill him for not being caught up.

*Bringing Mr. Niall too you betr be readyyyyyy*

Harry didn’t bother to put on any clothes over his boxers.

Liam and Niall brought booze. When Harry inquired as to whether Ed would be joining them, as often he did, Niall gave a noncommittal hum, and Liam said sweetly, “Drink first, then talk.”

Liam logged into Netflix and put on *Breaking Bad*, settling himself in Harry’s favourite armchair. He didn’t say much as the minutes wore on. Harry didn’t press, but a silent Liam was a very strange thing. He started to doubt the potency of whatever Liam was drinking.

Niall sat next to Harry, wrapping him in a long-lasting one-armed hug, so at least his presence could be felt. But he was strangely silent, too.

All too quickly, Harry was too tipsy to give an award-winning television series the attention it deserved. A few episodes after that and he was spectacularly, wine-mom drunk. Liam and Niall were still being freakishly quiet. If no one was going to talk about their problems, this was a very bad sleepover. Harry felt a toddler-like inclination to sit on the floor, which he did, with a harrumph.

Niall slid off of the sofa after him. “What’s bringing you down, big guy?” He made himself comfy on the floor, guiding Harry’s head to rest on his shoulder.

Harry had to think for a while. “Gravity.”

“I’ve said it before, Haz, but you’re really not a comedian when drunk.”

“M’not drunk! M’not funny, but m’not drunk either!”

Liam chuckled. He paused the show and swivelled the armchair to face them, his expression snapping into Serious Concern Mode. “Yeah, what’s up with you, mate? Was it the ITV stuff?” He eased himself out of his chair and onto the floor. “Work been overwhelming? Or underwhelming, underwhelming’s far worse —”

“Alcohol is not my friend,” Harry mumbled. He raised his glass to study his wine in the glow of the living room lights. “It’s very pretty, but it’s also very mean.”

“It also allows big ol’ heroes to open up to their mates about their feelings,” said Niall. “A social lubricant.”

“Niall’s been getting social with a whole lot of lubricant lately. Haven’t you, you dirty dog?” Liam grinned.

“I really don’t want to talk about it, if I’m honest, Payno.”

“Horny Horan!” Liam wolf-whistled, and Niall threw a pillow at his face. Liam squawked as the kitten-patterned throw pillow hit him square on the nose. “You’re gonna make me spill my wine!”

“You know better than to piss off a man who practises hand-eye coordination for his living,” Niall chastised. He turned his attention back to Harry, stroking back his curls. “I’d reckon our Harold’s problems are of the personal variety. He’s told us all about the trials of the workplace. Is our Harold
feeling lovesick this evening?”

Liam nodded. “What d’you reckon, Harry?”

“I reckon…” Harry stretched, then slumped across Niall’s lap in surrender.

“Oh dear,” said Liam. “This about Cara? I feel you, mate. She moved on really fast there. I mean, so did you, like, but. Oh well. Next time your lady won’t be a lesbian. Probably.”

Harry looked up at Niall, who rolled his eyes. Someday, Liam would realize that The Daily Mail really wasn’t an accurate source for news on Harry’s love life. Niall gave Harry’s head a consoling pat.

“I’m not sad about lesbians, Liam,” Harry muttered, words dragging and starting to slur, deep and slow.

“Then what’s got you like this? You can tell us, you know. I don’t know why you’re always too shy to —”

“Shhh, he’ll tell us if he wants. All in good time.” Niall stroked Harry’s head in an ever-slowing rhythm. It was almost soothing. But not soothing enough to negate the fact that Harry was drunk and felt like shouting things.

“Fine, I’ll tell you! I’m in love with a guy at Starbucks who hates me but is also The Shadow!”

Niall’s whiskey nearly came shooting out of his nose, but he ended up swallowing and laughing. “Whoa there, hold the fuck up!”

Liam took the statement more seriously and remained in denial. “Wait, weren’t you dating a Kardashian-Eon just recently? Y’know, the superlady who can’t read!”

“Kendall?”

“Or is she a lesbian, too?”

“Can’t read, eh? Maybe you should go for her, Liam — you’ll have a lot in common!” Niall laughed.

Harry groaned, removed himself from Niall’s lap, and began to roll himself into a cocoon with the corner of the carpet. “Why do you both still have brains, and I can’t…I can’t brain?”

“Moderation,” said Liam, at the same time as Niall said “Irish, duh.” Both of them stared intently at the place where Harry’s eyes were just peeking out from the roll of carpet, waiting for him to say something.

Harry huffed and released the carpet. He grabbed two large strands of his own hair and used them to shield his eyes. He conveniently forgot about covering his ears, though, and the conversation was far from over.

“So who’s The Shadow?” Liam begged to know. “I can’t believe you know and you’ve never told us!”

“I don’t know!”

“You don’t know who you’re in love with?”
“Payno, you’re only making this worse. Let me talk,” said Niall.

“Hey, your active sex life doesn’t make you the relationship expert here, Horny Horan!”

Harry looked up at Niall. “Sex with who?”

Niall shook his head. “Not important.”

Liam begged to differ, and started talking very loudly to that effect. Harry reached out and poked Niall in the nipple over and over until Niall looked down at him.

“Niall, who?”

Niall slapped Harry’s finger away from his nipple. “I’m not saying shit ’til you tell us who Starbucks guy is!”

“He…” What did he know about Louis again? “…he works at Starbucks!”

“Got that, thanks. Anything else, Hawkeye?”

“He’s very…pretty. And very mean.” Harry blew a very long raspberry. “Just like wine.”

Niall laughed. Liam frowned. “Mean? How’s he been mean?”

It all came out in a big stream of verbal diarrhea.

“He fell off Tower Bridge, and then I caught him, right, and then we ran away, and we were best friends all day and all night, ‘cause we stayed up all night, and then I started to love him very much, ‘cause I’m very, very stupid…”

Niall nodded in agreement.

“…and then he kissed me at the train station, and then he ran away and turned invisible, and then I texted him to say thank you but he ignored me for four years…”

“Wait —” Liam began.

“…and then I found him again and he works at Starbucks and now he’s all handsome and rugged and he pretends he doesn’t know me, and The Shadow told me —”

“The Shadow talked to you? Jesus, I never thought I would say this, but slow the fuck down, Harry —”

Harry took a deep breath before beginning again, words tumbling from his lips. “The Shadow told me that they’re really not The Shadow and that their secret identity is an actor, and I told him that he was Louis, and he disappeared!”

“I am never bringing you wine again.”

“See, Louis is an actor, and I saw him perform and he did this piece that he made up about feeling bad for leaving someone, and The Shadow turns invisible just like Louis did, and he has blue eyes almost like Louis’ except they’re like neon lights, and it all makes sense!”

Liam raised his hands for silence. “Alright, first off, I can’t believe you’ve never told us about kissing Tower Bridge Boy.”
“I mean,” Niall shrugged, “I’ve always figured you had a crush on him, unlike Liam, who remains spectacularly gaydar-less, but…”

Liam looked like a dying atheist seeing the light. “Am I the only one who thought you were straight?”

Niall cackled. When he was fully red in the face, he said with conviction, “Yes, Liam Payne. You’re the only one in the world who actually believed that.”

Full of a sudden resolve, Harry stood, wobbling past Liam, and made a beeline for the door. He began to pull on his chelsea boots, which were a strange match for bare legs and boxers. He added a long trench coat, pulling it tightly around his bare chest.

“Are you coming?” he asked his friends, tone commanding.

“Hold your fucking horses, Liam’s trying to mop up your carpet where you spilled his entire glass of wine!”

“Never mind that! We’re going to Starbucks! We have a Shadow to catch! I’m rich as fuck, I’ll buy Liam some more wine later. And I was due for a new carpet...that one’s really passé.”

“Harry, you’re drunk, and we’re not driving, and you’re not fucking teleporting, that’s for sure.”

Niall pointed a warning finger. “Oh no, don’t start this with me! The last time you teleported drunk —”

“Isn’t Starbucks closed?” groaned Liam.

“Well we’ll sure as hell find out!” Harry declared. “Come on!” He looked pointedly at Niall. “I’m calling a taxi.”

“Just saying...Starbucks guy…” Liam began. “I’m willing to bet he’s at Funky Buddha now, getting smashed with his mates, having the time of his life. And there’s only one way to find out if he is or not!”

Harry paused, hummed, and studied Liam through his drunken haze. “If Louis Tomlinson and I get engaged, we’ll all go to Funky Buddha for my stag do, okay? But in the meantime, we have bigger fish to fry. And by fish, I mean Shadows. We aren’t going to go around frying Buddhas, funky or not — that’s immoral.”

“He’s not a comedian when drunk, but you have to hand it to him, he’s sort of poetic,” Niall admitted.

“I am not leaving this carpet!” Liam whined. “I will lie down in this wine stain and never move!”

“But Liam.” Harry stomped. “You could help uncover the secret identity of The Shadow!”

“I’ll sooner die in this wine stain.”

“C’mon! You sexy detective you!” It was do or die, and Harry wasn’t about to storm out the door in his boxers without his boys. He was so high on anticipation, on the idea of seeing Louis and confirming what he already knew, that he couldn’t back down now.

“Mate, your reasons weren’t super convincing, like,” said Liam. “I’m sure there are loads of blue-
eyed young male actors in London. I’m sure at least a handful of them are also gays who can turn invisible.”

Harry crossed his arms. “You’re missing out.”

“Oh, no you don’t, Stylesy. Don’t you try the teddy bear stare on me. That’s my thing,” Liam sighed. “What’re you gonna do, anyway? Walk up to him like, ‘Are you The Shadow? Can I have your number?’”

Harry shrugged, stumbling backwards as he pulled his door open. Niall scrambled to his feet as Harry gave a big wave to a still-seated Liam. “Sayonara!”

His friends made it into the lift after him just before the doors closed.

They spent a few awkward minutes waiting for their cab, staring off into the night next to Harry’s doorman.

“We’re going to Starbucks to meet the love of my life an’ tell ‘im he’s an asshole,” Harry explained.

Two minutes later, Paul replied, “Is Starbucks open at this hour, sir?”

Harry smiled, reaching a hand up to stroke the doorman’s cheek. “‘Course it is. Nothing stands in the way of true love.”

Luckily for said friends, Harry did nothing but sigh wistfully as he gazed out the taxi window on their way to Front and Queen. His imaginings had all started to swirl together — visions of himself bursting into Starbucks, proclaiming Louis to be The Shadow, Louis’ eyes flashing neon, guilty as charged. Or The Shadow pulling down their hood, cloud dissipating to reveal a familiar face, before sweeping Harry away on a shining steed, et cetera.

Harry was twice drunk from make-believing the myriad possibilities by the time he burst through the doors and came tumbling into That Starbucks, Louis’ Starbucks, soon to be his Starbucks-in-law, the land where bullshit coffee tasted like dreams.

He’d rehearsed plenty of entrance lines for this moment, but they’d all drowned in his soup of a brain, and all he managed to say as Niall and Liam followed him into the near-empty shop was “Guuuuuuuuuuh.”

He looked up to find Zayn staring at him from behind the counter, with that damn look that told Harry that Zayn knew just about the whole story.

“He’s not here.”

It took Harry’s brain a long time to digest that. Niall understood better. He yanked on Harry’s arm, trying to lead him back out the door. “Alright then, that’s all we needed to know. Thanks for your time, haha!”

“Oh course he’s here!” Harry barked back at Zayn, planting his feet to resist Niall. “When I need him, he’s always there! He always just, like, appears, and it’s…he’s…always there for me.”

Zayn started putting something together behind the counter. He soon plopped a venti ice water with a
slice of lime on the receiving counter. He beckoned for Harry to come and grab it, smiling gently, though Niall and Liam were still restraining him as if he were a hungry lion and Zayn was the world’s most scrumptious gazelle.

“If he were here,” Zayn said, “no doubt he’d be telling you to ‘Stay hydrated, loser.’” His Louis impression fell a little flat, but he laughed it off.

Cautiously, Liam and Niall started walking Harry forward. As they neared the counter, Liam went ahead and retrieved the humble beverage, put a straw in it, and held it out to Harry. Harry bit down on the straw and started to drink it as if he was five years old and it was a juice box. He barely got through three loud slurps before he was leaning over the counter, demanding, “Where is he hiding?”

Zayn shook his head. “He’s not hiding, bro.”

Harry spat away his straw. “Yes he is! He just doesn’t want to see me ‘cause m’drunk, and he’s an asshole. But he’s the love of my life, and he should want to see me even…even if m’drunk up my asshole.”

Zayn bit back a grin and shook his head. His expression sobered. “No, he just left. Had an emergency. I’m covering for him.”

Harry frowned. “I’m not in danger, though.”

“You better drink up if you’d like to stay that way.”

Harry turned up his nose, took his cup from Liam, and thrust it defiantly into Niall’s face. Cold water sloshed all over the unsuspecting Irishman, but Harry didn’t give him so much as a backwards glance.

“But he never saves other people! He only saves me! I’m the only one who’s talked to him! I’m the only one who’s not afraid of him!”

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about, bro. I can get you a drink, if you like, but I’m afraid Lou won’t be coming back tonight.”

“I know what I’m talking about! And you know, too!” He pointed an accusing finger at Zayn, and then started pointing at his friends. “You know, I know, you know — even you!” He yelled at Zayn’s poor innocent co-worker conducting inventory in the distance. “Louis is The Shadow. He spends his time saving me ‘cause he loves me and he’s too afraid to tell me that to my face and he’s a big rotten bum! But he’s got a big rotten heart and he’s always there to protect me. Except for today. Except when I want him to tell me he loves me.”

“Jesus, Niall, why aren’t you filming this?” said Liam. “This is some Notebook-level shit!”

“Where is he hiding?” said Liam. “This is some Notebook-level shit!”

“I would, if he hadn’t just soaked me like a bloody whale at SeaWorld!”

Zayn stepped out from behind the counter. Harry felt a gentle hand between his shoulder blades. Zayn led him over to a table for two. When they were settled, with Liam and Niall each pulling up a chair behind Harry, Zayn reached out and conjoined their hands across the table.

“I’ve got three things to offer you, Haz, and then I think you should get home and sleep, okay?”

Harry pouted, trying to think of reasons to petulantly say no, but his brain still wasn’t doing much for
“Okay,” Zayn nodded. “First off, I need you to know that Lou knows. Lou knows you care about him, yeah?”

Harry perked up. “Yeah?”

Zayn nodded. “Yeah. So you don’t need to go proving that, okay? He knows.”

“And…he loves me?”

Zayn considered for a moment, the corners of his mouth twisting thoughtfully, but he eventually nodded, eyes closed.

Harry lit up, releasing a sigh of relief. “You have beautiful eyelashes, Zayn,” he added. “Have I ever told you?”

Zayn smiled. “Thankfully not, you drunk. Are you ready for the second thing?”

Harry nodded.

“Man, you’re good at this!” Liam remarked. “We should hire you. Shrink for sad-drunk supers.”

Zayn gave a nod. “Thanks, but no thanks, Liam Payne.”

Liam turned a happy shade of pink.

“Anyway, Harry, the second thing is this.” Zayn took a paper bag out from behind his back and presented it to Harry. “S’for you.”

Harry reached inside and found a thin lolly stick. He pulled out a pink cake pop. “Really? For me?”

Zayn nodded. Harry bowed his head and popped the whole thing into his mouth. What good people Zayn was. He should get drunk and come to Starbucks more often.

“Good?” asked Zayn. Harry hummed happily.

“Good. ‘Cause the third thing is important. Are you ready to hear it?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, there’s a lot more going on with Lou than you think. I know he’s hard to understand sometimes, but he has his own reasons for doing things. It’s not just you. He’s been through a lot lately. I know you love him, but if you really want to show him that, you need to give him his space.”

Harry worried his lip. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t assume things about him when you don’t know. Don’t come looking for him here. If you’re patient, he’ll come to you. I know that.”

“That was more than one thing, mate,” said Liam.

“Besides the point, Popstar,” said Zayn, his eyes not leaving Harry’s.

Harry stared into Zayn’s eyes for a long time — eyes just as inscrutable as Harry’s mind was soupy.
The idea of waiting felt like a stab wound. Harry had waited. A long and silent time had passed between him and Louis, and he was so ready for that to be over. So ready that he shook with it, the table rattling under his grip. Drink had made him a child, but every ounce of emotion was genuine, would linger longer than his hangover. There was no way he was going to wake up and keep waiting. How could Louis not be ready for him?

Harry started to blubber. “But how is Louis not The Shadow?”

Zayn shook his head. “I think you need to stop caring so much, Harry.”

“BUT I LOVE HIM! AND I’M SCARED!”

“Social lubricant,” Niall muttered to Liam.

“And he loves you, too,” said Zayn. “And he’s scared. Even more than you are, I reckon.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel, Mr. Starbucks,” Harry grumped.

Zayn smirked. “That’s Captain Starbucks to you,” he said dryly.

“And I’m Batman!” Liam exclaimed.

Zayn rolled his eyes, sighing. “I’m gonna call you three a cab, if that’s alright.”

“Good thinking. Thanks so much, man. Sorry ‘bout all this,” said Niall, starting to tug on Harry’s arm.

“No! Five more minutes!” Harry looked back to Zayn, fire in his eyes. “Say it again. Number three.”

“He takes responsibility for far more people than just you. But if you let him go, he’ll come.”

A swell of tears came hot and fast. “No he won’t! He’ll forget about me again!”

The sureness in Zayn’s eyes faded, a gentle sadness flooding in. Under his breath, he said, “He’ll never forget you, Harry.”

Harry huffed. “He might as well. If he won’t come, why should I wait for him?” He stood up, Niall steadying him, Liam leaping in to pull back his chair.

Zayn kept hold of Harry’s hand. As Harry was about to kilter away, his arm was stretched taut. He looked over his shoulder. Zayn looked straight back and once again delivered an answer.

“Because he’ll be worth the wait. He’ll be worth everything.”

Harry only stared at Zayn as Liam and Niall hollered their goodbyes and dragged him away. He tried to glare, tried to be angry, tried to make Zayn feel the stab he’d felt as he’d thought about waiting… but Zayn looked sad. Really fucking sad.

And so Harry just coughed out another sob, and his head spun, and he tripped over his own feet before Liam caught him, but he didn’t stop looking at Zayn until he was out of sight. Zayn didn’t break eye contact with him as he stood up and moved back to the bar, wringing his hands, pressing his lips together.

Harry sobbed again, and Liam patted him on the back, and Niall said, “Easy there, fellah,” and then they were out the door, and the cool night air slowly began to sort out Harry’s soup of a brain, making his confusions look a little more like a rigid maze than a complete blur.
They’d only walked a block and hadn’t even hailed a cab yet before Liam said, “Now can we go to Funky Buddha?”

Harry ignored him, escaped his friends’ grasps, crumpled to the curb, and cried for a quite some time.

Niall and Liam saw him safely home and tucked into bed in the wee hours of the morning. He woke up just after noon, having semi-successfully slept off his hangover. Unfortunately, being a nearly invincible superhero still didn’t afford him anti-hangover powers.

After a long shower and a massive green smoothie, he turned on the TV in search of distraction. He was immediately faced with further Shadow speculation reports, based on no new information whatsoever. He turned it off.

After a few long, aching hours of feeling numb and empty, he texted Ed. Ed had the day off, and promised to come over as soon as he’d won his game against Arsenal on FIFA 14. Harry gave him a small shopping list, being careful not to include alcohol, weed, or pizza, though he knew Ed would bring all three anyway.

For most of the afternoon, Ed sat on the couch with Harry’s acoustic guitar cradled in his lap, smoking and playing and chatting to Harry as Harry worked on the kitchen island across from him. Harry made tacos and Ed contributed beer and the few remaining slices of cold pizza, and they had themselves a feast, spilling all over the white carpet that Harry had resolved to replace anyway.

They watched a terrible Sex Ed-themed quiz show over truffles, Ed shouting out all the answers and making crude comments as Harry laughed.

“It’s vulva, you idiot!” Ed kept shouting, and Harry collapsed in stitches. “No, the cervix is further inside! Fuck, he thinks the cervix is the clitoris. For God’s sake man, IT’S A VULVA!”

When Harry’s laughter died down, Ed turned to face him. “Now, speaking of vulva — tell me about your love life,” he smirked.

“Thanks, Dan Wootton,” Harry grimaced.

Ed chuckled. “He’s gonna throw a fit when you come out.”

“Not that we’ve made much progress with that.”

There was a pause before Ed said, “I thought that maybe, with the way you’ve been approaching this coming out thing…that maybe you’d met someone. I could be totally wrong, though. Just, from the way you were acting, it felt…really important to you. And I’m not saying it wouldn’t be otherwise, it just…felt that way? I dunno.”

Harry fell silent, biting his lip enough to taste a bit of the chocolate, before perking up and saying, “How about you, Edward? Any special someone in your life?” Ed just laughed and shook his head. “Oh, come on — you’ve had that well-fucked glow about you all day. Spill the beans, Sheeran!”
“Spill what beans?”

“All of them. Because funny enough, another close mate of mine has been looking quite the same way recently, and the two of you are quite close —”

“Oh, get off it, mate.”

“Have you had sex with Niall Horan yet or not?”

“Yet?”

“Answer my question!”

Ed punched Harry in the gut and stole a truffle from his fingers instead of answering. Harry whined. “Why does it always have to be me talking about my lack of a love life and you lot trying to help me? Why don’t you take my relationship counselling for once in your life?”

“I don’t need it, twat.”

“Because you’ve begun a healthy sex life with Niall Horan!”

Ed crossed his arms and paused. “You know what I’ve been thinking about?” he said plainly.

“Niall Horan’s penis.”

Ed sighed. “As a stand-alone penis, it’s not all that incredible, to be honest.”

Harry grinned. “But you’ve obviously been giving it quite a lot of thought. Observing it.”

“It doesn’t take too much of a pub night before you’re suddenly observing Niall Horan’s penis, alright? But I’ve been thinking —”

“That you love it anyway, despite its human mediocrity?”

“Fuck off, Harry. I just remembered an actually a cool idea, I thought you’d like it.”

“What?”

Ed inclined his head. “Glitterbombing.”

Harry frowned. “Come again?”

“It’s where you call a group or a person or a company out for their bigotry by just throwing glitter at them,” Ed explained. “Tonnes of it.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, a grin slowly spreading across his face.

“If worst comes to worst, and progress continues to be slow, and even this American lawyer guy has trouble with the higher-ups…” Ed shrugged, taking another drag from his joint. “Not really a solution, but I’m just saying.”

Harry nodded. “Brilliant. Contract’s up in the new year. If no proper amends have been made by then, we’ll glitterbomb management on my birthday.”

Ed chuckled. “Are you serious?”

Harry snatched Ed’s joint for a pull. “When am I ever not serious about glitter?”
Ed clapped him on the back, and Harry coughed out smoke before resuming interrogation about Niall.

Thus, with mirth and extensive chatter about someone else’s love life, Harry started to feel a little better than he had the night before.

That weekend was uneventful, except for one measly thing.

Harry received a knock on his door at nine in the morning on Sunday. It was Paul the doorman with a package in his hands. A very thin package, wrapped in brown paper and tied with humble twine. Harry approved.

“Ooh! S’not my birthday yet, Paul,” said Harry, adjusting his bathrobe.

“Well I know that. Not sure your suitor does,” Paul shrugged.

“Suitor?”

Paul raised his eyebrows. “Am I supposed to believe that the young man who looks like a bloody Chanel model is leaving you gifts at ungodly hours of the morning because he’s not getting in your pants? Or trying to?”

Harry narrowed his eyes, and said softly, “Zayn Malik?”

Paul shrugged. “Probably, not that you can tell your admirers apart by now.”

“He’s my shrink, actually,” Harry clarified.

“Jesus, that’s unhealthy.”

“He has a degree in healthy. I trust him.”

“If you’re sure…”

Harry smiled sweetly and reached out for the package, cradling it against his chest with one hand, stroking it with the other. “This must be that book on meditation he found for me.”

“Don’t you have a job to do today?”

Harry placed the package on the floor, held out his hands, closed his eyes and hummed. Paul startled as he realized he was levitating.

“Meditation helps me work,” said Harry, voice disturbingly calm.

Paul then demanded to be set down, bid Harry a cautious good day (Harry waved creepily back, wiggling his fingers), and stepped into the lift.

Harry went back to his cold pizza and green smoothie breakfast at the kitchen island, setting the package down in front of him. He knew exactly what it was, and he knew it had to be important.
Zayn was way too busy to start hand-delivering the adventures of Harry’s likeness to him, Harry’s likeness though it was. He stayed hesitant while he took his time draining the smoothie. When it was done, he set his glass down with declarative force (it shattered, but Harry quickly telekinetically reassembled it).

He tore open the package and was met with the glow of one piercing blue eye. It was set in darkness, drawn on the cover of a comic book.

This was no standard issue.

Harry turned to the first page. A long, deserted London street in the dead of night. High-angle framing made the reader loom over the scene. A figure stood far into the picture, just around the distant bend in the road.

This page was likely one of the least action-oriented ones Zayn had ever drawn. All that moved was the figure, continuing their walk toward the reader.

After another full page of approaching, The Shadow looked right into the reader’s eyes. But their eyes were human, gray-blue eyes, colours swirling like a turbulent sea. Zayn had dedicated one full page to The Shadow’s portrait, half-disguised face and human eyes.

It was a rather uneventful eight pages, but it was hypnotic. The streetlamp and silent colours drowned out the noise drifting in from Harry’s balcony, bringing Harry along on The Shadow’s night walk.

The few changes to the action that Harry observed were minimal: The Shadow clasping and unclasping their hands, eyes twinkling and fading, twinkling and fading. They walked along the Thames, always facing straight ahead, as if nothing was changing around them. They walked past derelict theatres with crooked signs.

Just as it seemed that The Shadow’s London had become a crumbling dystopia, a bright hospital sign appeared in the corner of a frame. Another high-angle, as if the reader was sitting next to the sign, showed The Shadow stopping beneath it. Tiny white text revealed the softest “*sigh*.”

As they continued their walk into the last pages, captions appeared.

“You’ve been waiting.”

The Shadow looked over their shoulder in the last frame, human eyes glinting. The contours of their face were visible for the first time, cutting into the light of the street lamps.

“I’m here.”

Harry retired to his couch alone with his thoughts that night. He knew things in his head were upside down when he found himself longing for a good scrap at work, dying to get out of his head in the only real way possible.

He was overthinking again. But what was there to overthink? What analysis could better explain something so simple?

“I’m here.”

Tomorrow was Monday. Tomorrow, Harry would get back to patrolling. Tomorrow he would be in the right place at the right time. He would meet Louis there.
Tomorrow, he would invite destiny.

Chapter End Notes

As always please come say hi! I'm on tumblr heeeecere. Also reblog this post if you want to share this bean with your friends!
WE'RE HERE!!! WE'RE FINALLY HERE!!!!!!!!!!

Thank you so much to everyone who has been sticking with this while it's been a work in progress. I'm very sorry for the long wait. So much went down in my life and my betas' lives, and we'll spare you the essay. But we did it! We hope you enjoy!

Big thanks to R for all of her hard ass work seeing this thing through. Also shout out to my dad for looking over the G-rated bits. You the best.

I love you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After every quiet period at work comes a shitstorm. Superheroism, as a career, is particularly susceptible to this pattern. The week before had been Breaking Bad and booze, but Monday brought bad guys and Hugo Boss for Harry. He found himself running like hell through the beauty hall at Selfridges, leaping over fragrance counters and dodging giant falling posters of himself, posing for Boss: The Boss by Hugo Boss.

Heck, there were even cardboard cutouts of Liam, puckering up next to his debut fragrance 4 U Shuga Babe. They too were being trampled on by the supercriminal on his tail.

To Harry’s disdain, supercrime was now a thing. The Legend of Harry Styles was supposedly responsible for increased awareness of superhuman potential amongst Britain’s youth, and many preferred to use their newfound abilities for spying or kidnapping or stealing. Today, he had two such super-robbers to catch.

Or currently, to run away from. And then eventually catch.

Ducking behind a Givenchy counter, Harry dodged a blast of strange, fibrous goop. These blokes certainly had the oddest powers he had ever seen. After a mere few seconds of refuge, his pursuer caught up. The counter was lifted into the air. The robber flung it aside, as if it were light as a handkerchief. Fleeing customers and employees shrieked and dove for cover.

With his enemy bearing down on him, Harry shut his eyes for a half-second’s concentration. He teleported behind his adversary. That gave him time to stand and give the robber a powerful kick to the sternum with the heel of his Yves Saint-Laurent chelsea boot. Such versatile footwear. Harry threw the robber to the floor.

The second robber now caught his attention. From the top of the nearest escalator, they raised a fistful of stolen jewels like some kind of pirate, and yelled, “Come and get it, pretty boy!”

Harry directed his thoughts to the escalator. Reverse and jam. Fast.

The machinery did as it was told. The second robber went flying. Jewellery and watches came showering down with them.
Seconds later, Harry found himself caught in a grip like a boa constrictor’s. Robber 1 hoisted him over their head and threw him across the room. Harry slammed into giant versions of Liam’s lips, face first. He crumpled to the floor.

His world pitched as he tried to stand. His nose bled, possibly broken. But with his adversary already coming at him full-bore, standing to fight again was the best available option.

He turned and hauled himself up onto the Eau de Payno display counter in front of him. As Robber 1 closed in, he made a flying leap over their head and landed in a wobbly crouch behind them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Robber 2 running in to rejoin the fray. He straightened up and spread his hands.

The two robbers froze, pained expressions glued to their faces as they were caught in Harry’s force fields.

Harry took a moment to catch his breath, wipe a bit of the blood off of his face, and allow the floor to stop spinning beneath him. His panting echoed in the now empty hall — the only sound save for the clink as shattered glass fell, and the distant sound of emergency alarms.

Harry coughed, hacking up blood and mucus. He stretched his burning muscles. Aching joints rolled and cracked. He was only beginning to feel like he had a body again when, out of nowhere, he heard a clunk.

He turned and immediately ducked as a new, identical robber took a swing at him.

The force fields dissolved, leaving Harry surrounded. All three robbers held him in razor sharp focus, moving in to attack.

With a sudden jolt of madness, Harry scurried out through the legs of his newest attacker. He made for the escalators. If absolutely nothing else, the fashion floors above would have much less shattered glass.

He leapt over the carpet of scattered jewellery at the base of the escalator. Maybe these assailants weren’t robbers, if they cared so little about treasure and so much about attacking Harry. They weren’t challengers, either — what kind of challenger scares away their audience?

As he scrambled up the steps, too frantic and weary to teleport, it dawned on him — these guys had to be hired goons. Super assassins. Or super bounty hunters. Whether they wanted him dead or alive, he was their target.

As soon as he looked over his shoulder, there were more of them.

Five more, to be exact. All gaining on him.

*What the flying fuck...*

He reached the second floor of women’s clothing with an ever-growing gang of bandits hot on his heels. On the landing, he was greeted by two more.

He dodged the first one, telekinetically throwing them down the escalator to slow their mates. He took a kick to the gut from the second. He bit back the pain and made himself focus hard enough to stick the bastard to the ceiling with a field.

There wasn’t far he could run before more and more practically poured out from the walls, from
beneath counters and from behind mannequins. It was as if they were multiplying on the spot.

By the time the original bandits reached the landing, Harry was surrounded. His head spun again as he took in the kaleidoscope of covered faces. There were about forty of them. They took their sweet time closing in on him, parading makeshift weapons and showing off their powers with snaps of their fingers. Fire, water, crackling energy -- and of course, more stupid fucking goop.

Harry grew well and truly terrified, feeling his body weaken and his powers wane and his confidence drain dry quicker than ever before.

He’d once teleported all across the skies of London, fighting a pair of Class Four flying challengers. He’d had a violent chase hopping from car to car on the motorway, he’d been tortured in front of thousands, he’d saved flailing children from burning buildings in which he had barely been able to breathe. But now, more than ever, when he should have been able to wipe his enemy out cold with a simple thought, his composure was slipping away, and he was well and truly caught.

The only power left to try was his voice.

“Why are you all here?” he called out, voice shaking, betraying too much. “You’re definitely not here to rob the place. Which I don’t understand, to be honest — this season’s prints! Doesn’t all black get boring?”

His banter wasn’t disarming in the least. His attackers advanced in some sort of rhythm, picking up speed. A whole wall of them — Harry could’ve sworn he’d seen them dividing like cells. His voice shook harder as he gathered himself for another go.

“Tell me why you’re here, and I’ll cooperate with you,” he promised.

There were murmurs and chuckles and snickers, but no replies. The swarm kept on closing in, slowly, as if they were savouring it. In seconds, Harry would have no choice but to attack ten of them at once, with his face bleeding and his body screaming and his concentration slipping away. At least he was destined to meet his end amongst designer women’s clothes. He would have preferred some sort of flowery meadow, but this wasn’t such a bad place to die.

A bandit on his left struck out first, ensnaring him in a web of goop. Harry kicked and struggled as Goopy reeled him in, thinking teleport teleport teleport — and when that didn’t work, dissolve the goop dissolve dissolve the —

The goop did dissolve, in a haze of inky smoke, and Goopy’s eyes instantly went black. They hit the floor.

The other bandits surged in for the kill. Harry spread his hands, deflecting any attack he could with a weak shield.

He found himself backing into someone. He whirled around, ready to set upon the attacker, until he saw their face. Or rather, lack of visible face.

Dark smoke. Right.

“Fancy seeing you here!” Harry called over the ruckus. “Shopping for a new gown?” He chuckled, dodging some more goop.

The Shadow didn’t answer. Typical.
As the inner ring of assailants narrowed around them, Harry and The Shadow were locked into a frenzy of close-quarter combat. They stood back to back, picking off attackers one by one. As one would fall, others would rush in, not even a heartbeat later.

Harry levitated the bandit in front of him and sent them flying into the crowd. *Next.*

He caught the next one’s punch, twisted their arm enough to dislocate it with a crack, and finished them off with a knee to the gut. *Next.*

And then, out of his blind spot, he was caught. A bandit put him in a headlock and slammed his skull into The Shadow’s.

Harry cried out. His feet slid out from underneath him. Behind him, The Shadow doubled over and was brought down, too.

A playground-style free-for-all began. The bandits took their turns stepping on his face, kicking him, harming him however they wanted.

*Teleport out. Teleport out. Even just to the next room. Somewhere. Get out of here,* he heard a distant, rational part of himself beg. He tried his best, but every attempt was interrupted by a new sharp burst of pain.

Between his own cries, he could hear higher-pitched yells and groans and gasps and growls. The Shadow was getting the same treatment.

Harry darted out a hand and grabbed on to The Shadow’s bare ankle. It left his flank exposed, and for a moment or two, the cluster of foes took full advantage. They wreaked havoc on his chest. Harry forced himself to focus on the warmth of The Shadow’s ankle, though it was a ridiculous thing to have to devote your mind to in the midst of a beating. It was a lovely ankle, at least. He’d make sure to tell that to The Shadow one day, but for now, he closed his eyes, ignored the blood trickling from his nose into his open mouth, and pictured the closest safe place he could think of.

First to come to mind was the liquor department, several floors below them. It wasn’t the worst idea — it would at least afford them a few seconds’ recovery, and that was all they could hope for right now.

“*Just hold on,*” he yelled to The Shadow, before someone stuck their boot in his mouth. Gritting his teeth around it, Harry pictured the large basement room with fancy cabinets, the pale wooden pillars and floors. He closed his eyes tight. He couldn’t ignore how much his wounds burned and stung. He breathed into the pain. *In, and out. In, and out.*

All of a sudden, he and The Shadow were sprawled in the liquor department’s central aisle. Their gasping breaths echoed in the silence.

The Shadow was the first to stand, nervously testing their bloodied fingers, shoving them into their pockets.

“*Whoever those blokes were, they won’t be long,*” they said, in a rusty voice. “*Call the SHDU. Have them block the doors and seal the windows and shut those shits down. It’s not our fight anymore.*”

As much as Harry’s body protested, he pulled himself up. The Shadow didn’t turn to face him.

“We can’t just leave our mess here. This is not the SHDU’s fight, either.” With his reputation already sagging, Harry couldn’t afford to run from fights. This *was* his fight.
“Sorry to kill your mojo, hero, but you’re in no shape to fight.” Sensing the protest building in Harry’s throat, The Shadow gave a little sigh. “It’s alright — you’ve done enough for now.”

They shot Harry a look with those LED-blue eyes. It was stern, but empathetic, and somewhere in there, Harry thought he could see a flicker of pride, too.

But no. Empathy and pride and pretty eyes weren’t the point here.

“I need to stay. I have a job to finish.” Harry paused, looking for the right words to make his hunch sound convincing and not just plain rash. “It’s an instinct.”

“You trust your instinct so blindly,” The Shadow observed. “Ever thought of using your head now and again?”

“My instinct hasn’t let me down so far. And I’ve been doing this for years. I know what I’m doing.”

“No you don’t,” deadpanned The Shadow. “Isn’t that the entire basis of your style? You just sort of do things?”

“Yeah, and somehow it all works out.”

The Shadow planted a defiant hand to their hip. “Well, sorry love, but recently, that hasn’t been true. Not to brag, but if it weren’t for little ol’ me, you wouldn’t be here.”

It was true. Harry chewed his lip like a four-year-old instead of admitting it, but it was really, really true.

“And you certainly did not have today under control. You got a call, didn’t you? Someone had to tell you about the situation here, right? Today wasn’t right-place-right-time, you were lured into a trap —”

That was also true. “Look, don’t tell me how to handle this!”

“Fine. Ignore me. But I’m the one who came to save you after you got yourself into this mess, and I’m not going to come back and pick your sorry arse up after you fuck up again. I’m your personal Jesus, not your babysitter.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. It gave him a feeling so alien amidst all of the aching and burning and twisting in his chest. “Noted, Shadow. Thanks.”

Relenting, Harry tapped his watch and traced an X over its face. Immediately, a dispatcher picked up.

“Problem, Styles?”

Harry got right to the point. “We need a cohort blocking off every possible entrance to Selfridges. Sealing windows, too, if you can. There’s rogue supers. A pack of forty, I’d say. Wearing all black.”

“Estimate of their level?”

“Twos and threes. But they’re overwhelming. I lost control of them, I could barely concentrate —”

“Any civilians injured?”

“They all escaped alright, from what I could see. The supers had no interest in them.”
“Are you injured?”

“Yeah.”

“Get yourself out of there. You okay to teleport?”

“Yeah.”

“Squad dispatched.”

“Amazing, thanks.”

The responder hung up without another word.

The Shadow reached out a hand for Harry to grab. “C’mon. We’re leaving,” they murmured.

“We can’t leave yet. Not until the squad is in place.”

“How d’you know it isn’t in place as we speak?”

Harry’s frown turned incredulous. “I sent for it, like, five seconds ago!”

“We don’t have the time to wait.”

“Well, sorry, but I have a duty to wait.”

“What’s with you and duty?” The Shadow sighed, shaking their head.

More sounds caught their attention. The thumps and clatters from earlier were coming closer. The bandits certainly weren’t as stealthy as they looked. They came swinging off of the escalators and into Kitchen Appliance Land, next room over. The first ten hit the ground one after another.

“Take my hand, Harry,” The Shadow hissed, through gritted teeth.

“M’not going with you. Not yet,” Harry said.

The first robbers saw them and began to taunt. They yelled a few things in particular that boiled Harry’s blood. The Shadow, to Harry’s surprise, had the audacity to laugh.

“Homophobic slurs, eh? That your kind of humour?” Harry said.

The Shadow didn’t react, but Harry saw them tense.

By now, the full swarm had assembled. A wall of black-clothed bodies advanced on them, cheering and screaming.

“Take my hand, Harry,” The Shadow insisted.

Harry knew that there was absolutely no way that they could face the enemy again in their current states and get out alive, but the stubborn little flame of heroism inside of him was what spoke up. “No. I have to see this through.”

“You’re not protecting anyone, hero,” The Shadow spat. “Can’t you fucking see? They’re only after you.”

Their hand snatched for Harry’s, but Harry snatched his away just as quick. “Louis!” he snapped.
The Shadow gave a start, and the name seemed to send a ripple through their whole body, but neither they nor Harry had time to think on it long. The horde was closing in once more.

Harry tried to get his mind back in gear, prepare a wobbly defensive stance. The Shadow heaved a sigh and stepped forward. Further into the danger zone.

“Louis, no!” Harry yelled again, before he could stop them.

The Shadow raised their hands. They turned their palms toward the shelves by the doorway, which stood between them and the pack. Thousands and thousands of bottles took to the air on The Shadow’s command, cradled on a wave of curling black smoke. The bottles shivered against one another, rattling in anticipation.

As the wall of bandits reached the doorway, rearing to pounce, each and every bottle burst in mid-air, and an almighty tidal wave of alcohol bore down upon them.

It was almost beautiful to watch — a whole spectrum of reds and golds and browns crashing together, choking the victory cries of the entire troupe of goop-spewing bastards — but Harry wasn’t granted much time to watch. The Shadow used the distraction to seize his hand before he could protest. His vision filled with smoke. The Shadow reached an arm around his neck and shoulders, bracing him. The smoke began to swirl, forming a funnel cloud around them, and then Harry’s feet were no longer on the floor.

He could taste the night air and hear the crawl of the city before the smoke cleared.

“Where are we?” he called, no longer feeling the press of another body against his. He swatted at the smoke, and it recoiled, like fronds of fern growing in reverse.

In the corner of his eye he caught the glint of the river. Then the familiar half-dome of city hall, gleaming on the opposite riverbank.

Then the hooded figure, walking away across the bridge in front of him. Tower Bridge.

Despite the ache in his lungs, the way the cold air reawakened his wounds, and not to mention his fatigue, Harry chased after his Shadow, stopping for a breather a few feet behind them.

“Are you sure this is far enough away…,” he panted, “…from Selfridges? They’re smarter than they look.”

“When have I ever not kept you safe…” The Shadow snarked, continuing south.

Harry sighed. As per usual these days, he had so many bloody questions. Though it hadn’t been much help in the fight, his famed instinct was stirring now. Telling him to keep searching, keep prying. Maybe if he did, tonight would finally be the night for some answers.

“You seem to know a lot about me,” Harry called after The Shadow. “You know where I am all the time, how I think, how my powers work…where I met my first love.”

The Shadow stopped at that. “Your first love? Hm.” They rested their forearms on the bridge’s railing, just past the north tower. “I s’pose this was just the first place I thought of. Hope it’s not inconvenient. But if it is, consider it confirmed that I don’t in fact know where you live. I’m not a creep after all.”

Harry drew up next to them, resting his elbows on the river rail. They stood there in silence for a while, as the city drew breath around them.
“Tell me about it,” The Shadow eventually said.

“About what?”

“About falling in love here, I s’pose.”

Harry stared down at the river. He rubbed some drying blood from his face. Whatever The Shadow was playing at, he took a deep breath and decided to play along.

“Um...I saved a boy from falling here, once. It was only a happy accident, but it was the first thing I’d ever really done as a hero, in public.”

After a moment’s peace, The Shadow shifted one of their small hands towards Harry’s on the railing. When Harry didn’t say anything, they said, “I remember that.” And then, a little frantically, “Hearing about that, I mean.”

Harry smiled. A flicker of promise spread through him. The Shadow was playing dumb, but Harry was getting somewhere.

“I didn’t know how I’d done it,” he continued. “I didn’t even know I liked men. I didn’t know anything. But I just kind of knew, when we were falling together — that this was someone important. To me, at least.”

Harry burst out grinning. “When we were floating down through mid-air, and we’d literally just met, seconds ago...he made me laugh.”

“Sounds like a stand-up lad,” The Shadow said, a twinge of melancholy in their voice.

Harry nodded.

They slipped into silence again. Uncomfortable, The Shadow prompted, “And then what?”

Harry took a deep breath, fixing his eyes on the ghostly dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

“We fell into the Thames,” Harry shrugged. The Shadow gave a faint laugh. “And then a police boat came, dragged us out, soaking wet. When we came to the banks, we were surrounded by reporters. Um, and we felt famous for a bit, and that felt good — but then it got boring pretty quickly, and he just gave me this look, and then we ran — er, teleported — away — and we spent the day together. And then we snuck out, alone, late at night, and explored the city together...watched the sunrise...”

“And the rest is history?”

Harry let his chin fall into his hands. “No.”

“The one that got away?”

“He’s in London. We met again, a while back. He doesn’t seem to remember me.”

“Rubbish.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at the blurry, half-visible face. He smirked.

“What?” said The Shadow. “You don’t just forget falling — literally or otherwise — for Britain’s Hero, for God’s sake.”

“I wasn’t Britain’s Hero, not back then,” said Harry.
“Still!”

Harry chewed his lip, thinking. What now? The emotion in The Shadow’s voice was a good sign. But how many more winks and nudges did they need?

Telling his own truth, that was all he could do. As frankly and as deeply as he could tell it. Maybe that would get The Shadow to spew forth their own.

“He kissed me once, back then, and it drove me mad...but then he went and forgot. I never forgot it, but I guess he wanted to.”

“I wouldn’t put my money on that.”

Harry shook his head. “You probably shouldn’t put any money on the feelings of a boy you’ve never met.”

“Harry, one of my many superhuman abilities is the ability to read a lot about a man from very little information.”

Harry paused. Not hero, they’d said. Harry.

And here came a rush of old feelings, filling Harry like a churning flood. Stubborn heartache pooling in his every organ, each one of them a vessel for hurt; hurt he’d been carrying with him for four long years. It was time to release it all, or else Harry would drown in it.

Thankfully, he had a listener. Somewhere in there, beneath layers of Shadow, Louis was listening. The Shadow beyond him was unflinching. Good, Harry thought.

He took a deep breath before continuing on.

“I thought we got on — more than got on. Like a house on fire, my mum said. When so many coincidences happened in the same day, it just...It felt like it was meant to be.”

Harry took a heaving breath. Everything felt fresh, as if he were still sixteen. “I’d thought that the way we’d connected, and the way he’d acted around me...I’d thought it was special. But when he didn’t answer my messages, for those first few months, I started to think he was just — one of those people? The ones that are, like, so easy to get on with. They’re just...really charismatic, likeable people. You think they like you, but they’re just good at, like, making everyone they meet feel important. Those people.”

Harry closed his eyes. The soundscape of the city rushed in to fill his silence. Sirens, and the trundle of far-off trains crossing bridges, and drunken laughter, and the careful lapping of the river.

The night air felt empty, like it was waiting for something. Harry was waiting for something. Waiting for The Shadow to speak.

“Have you ever thought,” The Shadow finally said, “that he might have thought that way of you?”

“How?”

“Charismatic. Likeable. That you didn’t actually like him, you were just that good to everyone.”

That stung. How could Louis not have seen the blinding affection? The heart that had practically been oozing out of his pores with every second he’d spent in Louis’ presence?

The Shadow gave a tut-tut and placed a caring hand on Harry’s back.
“Why do you always save me?” Harry burst out. He knew the answer, but he needed to hear it told to his face. He needed to know that Louis was ready. *Stop wishing, and choose.* “Why do you go out of your way to find me, and protect me?”

The dusk around that face cleared enough for Harry to see a stubbled chin and a gentle, pained smile. “There are sides to me that I haven’t shown you yet.”

“And what sides would those be?”

The Shadow held back their answer. They clenched and unclenched their fist on the railing and kept their gaze forward. Harry stared at them, his eyes repeating the question.

With a shiver of a breath and a sigh, The Shadow relented. “How to put this…”

They turned and lifted a callused palm to Harry’s cheek.

Harry looked down into their suddenly *clear* face. He gave a start, but The Shadow kept their hands steady. Harry didn’t pull away.

That *face*. There, finally, was Louis’ face, shining through from beneath, bold and sharp and stunning. Just as stunning as the mask The Shadow hadn’t quite removed. Their sapphire eyes were eclipsed by what looked to be facial tattoos — but for the fact that they were *alive*. Delicate lines snaked all around the contours of their face, weaving intricate patterns as they shifted, quivering with life.

Louis had indeed changed, since the day they’d first met. He had built himself into new and different people. This eerie, tantalizing visage was very much a part of him. Only a mask; not a lie.

But not a mask to hide behind — he wasn’t hiding anymore. Louis was baring every bit of himself, new and old, shadowy and human, for Harry to take stock of. There was discomfort in his defiance, shining out of his eyes, but Harry was unfazed. He stood there and admired every detail that Louis had to show him.

“I know it’s not *nearly* as pretty as yours, but it’s my face,” The Shadow shrugged.

Harry gave the faintest, shakiest chuckle. “I like it. You should show it more often.”

Harry felt their fingertips slide off of his cheek. He immediately missed their warmth. He reached up to guide The Shadow’s touch back to his face. Glowing eyes bored into him, questioning.

The Shadow didn’t move their hand away again this time. Their eyes softened in apology. Harry stared back, transfixed, and then those little sneaker-clad feet went on tiptoe, and their hands tugged him in closer, and a pair of delicate lips met his.

The Shadow kissed him carefully, reverently, slowly. As if he were porcelain, and any touch that wasn’t softer than an angel’s could rupture him. Harry leaned in closer, humming. Nothing this gentle could feed his hunger for The Shadow’s touch, so his lips prompted and pried, asking for more...

The Shadow froze up, and pulled back all too fast, and the moment faded all too soon.

“That’s why I save you,” they explained, hushed but firm.

Harry flushed. With his mind aflutter, it took him a second to think up a response. “Because... you’re a good kisser?”
The Shadow rolled their eyes, blue fireflies loop-de-looping in the dark. “No. Because I fell in love with you. And I fucked it up, ‘cause I was young, fucking stupid, and afraid. So I wanted to try again.” They gave a tiny shrug, and smiled a timid smile.

And there they were. The words Harry had been waiting for, for four long years.

A surge of joy rose up through him like a bursting fountain. He stared straight into The Shadow’s eyes, and something deep down within him could feel them calling him home.

This time, it was his turn to pull The Shadow into a kiss. More eager this time, but still a slow burn of a kiss, their lips melting into each other’s. The Shadow relaxed into his touch, and Harry felt smaller fingers intertwine with his own.

Upon opening his eyes, he was almost stunned out of the embrace altogether. The inked lines on The Shadow’s face were fading, crawling away like frightened animals. The glow of their eyes was dying, being replaced by a more human blue that, to Harry, was even more beautiful.

Harry kept kissing with his eyes open as The Shadow changed. As the last inky lines of a mask faded away, Harry pulled the hood back from his hero’s face.

He knew what face to expect. But when he saw it, his heart still skipped a beat, and he laughed in spite of himself.

“Hello, Louis Tomlinson,” Harry beamed.

Louis sighed, his eyes softly crinkling as he smiled. “You caught me. And without all that shadowy stuff, you can probably see me blush now. Rubbish…”

“I think it’s wonderful.” Harry landed a peck on Louis’ forehead.

“You disgust me, Harry Styles.”

Louis squealed as Harry picked him up by his waist and pinned him against the tower wall for a deeper kiss. Louis’ legs locked around Harry’s hips, bare ankles digging into Harry’s back. He gave a happy sigh as Harry worked his lips open with a pace like an eager puppy’s, desperate in the most gleeful of ways.

Harry barely paid any mind to the salty taste of dried blood and sweat. Louis’ cracked lips felt softer than anything. His warmth and his breath and the sounds he made were pure and golden. Harry kissed him deeper and deeper, enveloping his tongue in the warmth of Louis’ mouth.

Louis kissed back more playfully, tangling their tongues and teeth. He smiled into every kiss, his mouth turning up in the corners no matter how his lips moved. Harry pulled back for a moment only to hitch his hips closer to the wall. He took a hand off of Louis’ waist to place it on Louis’ cheek. He needed more than his lips to bear witness to that smile.

When Harry came up for air, he was grinning. Louis shook his head fondly and laughed. They laughed together as a gentle wind passed through, sighing happily along with them.

Still eager, Harry tilted his head and tucked back in to kiss Louis down his neck.

“Come to think of it,” he added in between kisses, “I should have noticed a long time ago that The Shadow never wore any socks.”

“You should also have noticed that The Shadow was desperate to get into your pants.”
Harry grinned, pressing ever closer. “But I wanted to get into this hot barista’s pants. And he was playing hard-to-get, big old meanie.”

“Well,” said Louis, “I figured that a big old hero like you would be in want of a much grander me. Someone with a bit of an edge.”

“And now I get both.” Harry smiled big as Louis pinched his cheeks. “Just…promise me you’ll never do that again ‘cause —”

Louis cut him off with a kiss, and they kissed and kissed before Louis had the chance to ask, “Do what?”

“No more hard to get, I meant.”

“Oh, so you need commitment?” Louis raised his eyebrows. As Harry leaned in for another kiss, the boy slipped through his fingers like smoke, dissolving into shadow as he went.

*Cockblocked by shadow powers.*

“Hey!” Harry yelled, pouting.

“Come and find me, hero!” Louis laughed, his voice popping into Harry’s head out of nowhere.

Harry rolled his eyes. For a disorienting moment, he whirled around, trying to catch a wisp of The Shadow, but saw and heard nothing.

Harry closed his eyes, willing himself into his power state. *Breathe in, breathe out.* With his heart far warmer than before, he felt calmer, more prepared to focus.

When he was ready, he silently asked, *Where is Louis?*

And then came a feeling in his chest that couldn’t be translated into words or images, but that carried all that he needed to know. He willed himself to teleport upwards, to the top of the bridge, just to the right of its central crest.

His arrival startled Louis, who was just starting to coalesce on his left.

“Bastard,” Louis muttered.

“Apparently I don’t know what I’m doing, with my powers.” A shit-eating grin bloomed across Harry’s face. “I just sort of do things.”

“S’true!” said Louis, indignant. “No one should be allowed to be that good at improvising.”

“It is my job.”

“Do the Powers That Be have a hotline?” Louis crossed his arms. “I’d like to call and complain.”

“I tried that yesterday, actually….couldn’t get through.”

“Oh yeah? What could you have to complain about?”

“How it was unfair that I couldn’t get my crush to like me, despite my generous tipping and being not half-bad looking.”

“I think the Powers That Be knew that your call was full of shit, and decided to ignore it.”
“Ouch.”

“And they’ve decided not to return your calls until you get it through your thick head that you’re impressively good-looking.”

“The Powers That Be think I’m hot?”

“Yes. And I’m the angel they’ve sent to Earth to remind you of that. Sorry I’m late.”

Harry smirked. “You are disgusting, Louis Tomlinson.”

“Get used to it,” Louis shrugged. He smirked back. “Shall we go do more disgusting things, then? No more hard to get?”

Harry pulled Louis back into him, placing his hands on Louis’ waist. Louis clasped his own behind Harry’s neck. The two just stared at each other for a while, beaming, before lights in the distance caught Harry’s attention.

“Do you remember what you said you’d do with your hot model girlfriend, if you ever became a hero? The morning after we met?” Harry asked.

Louis chuckled. “Ah. I was so young, so naïve…”

“But do you remember?”

Louis pressed his lips together and frowned thoughtfully. “Didn’t I say, like, that I’d fly her out over the river, and we’d make out on top of the London Eye, or something?”

Harry nodded. “Sound disgusting enough?”

Louis grinned, crinkle-eyed. “But I can’t fly. And you famously can’t fly.”

Harry shrugged. “I can levitate…s’about it.”

Louis frowned harder. His eyebrows lifted as an idea came to him. “Alright, go levitate just over there.” He pointed to the airspace in front of them, just over the edge of the bridge.

Harry frowned. “What are you —”

Louis pressed a finger to Harry’s lips. “Shush. Just trust me, babe.”

The term of endearment turned Harry’s belly into a puddle, so he did as he was told, disappearing and reappearing in mid-air, several feet from Louis.

“Now turn around,” Louis instructed.

Confused, Harry pivoted. “What business have you got with my back?”

“Alright, ready?” Louis said. “You have to catch me if this goes wrong.”

Harry looked alarmed. “This doesn’t sound like it’s gonna work…”

“Just be ready with a field or something, okay? I promise…well, actually, I don’t promise anything.”

Before Harry could protest, Louis took a flying leap off of the bridge, catching Harry around the waist and nearly knocking the wind out of him. For half a moment, they sagged, and it felt as if they were going to spiral down towards the river in a glorious reprise of their first meeting.
But Louis’ propulsion didn’t end, and they soon levelled out. They ended up horizontal in mid-air, with their legs flying out behind them. Harry, still being held around his waist, kept them aloft by his own means, but the momentum was all Louis. He was the wings, and Louis was the jet engine.

And they were flying.

Harry let out a cackle of joy. The wind whipped his curls, the twinkling lights of midnight London seemed to cheer below him. Tight in the arms of his first crush, he was fucking flying.

He threw his arms out to the wind. “I’m flying, Jack! I’m flying!”

Louis laughed from above him.

Harry laughed with him. “Weeeeee!”

“Are you quite finished?”

Harry alternated between giggling and yelling some more. Louis remained focused until he’d steadied his grip on Harry’s waist.

As they flew over Blackfriars Bridge, rounding the bend in the river, they could feel each other relax— as much as they could, seeing as they were still bloody flying.

Just ahead, with its white cars glinting in blue light, was their destination.

“Ready to try landing, you useless penguin?” Louis called.

As the ferris wheel grew closer, Louis’ dream makeout session seemed more and more implausible. The roofs of the cars were rounder than expected. Landing would require a lot of balance, a skill for which Harry was certainly not known.

Not to mention that they were currently going at it face-first.

“Looks a little steep!” Harry yelled over the wind.

Louis’ bottom lip brushed wet against the back of Harry’s neck as he pouted.

“Lou, I don’t want to take any risks, remember the last time I —”

“The last time, we were kids. Now we’re superheroes!” Louis declared. “What could happen?”

“You know what can bloody —”

“Well, be glad I’m in charge of steering, then!”

“Louis!”

With a grunt and a swing of his hips, Louis deftly changed their course. His arms slid up to circle Harry’s ribcage as he made them climb, aiming straight for the Eye’s top car. Harry felt Louis lick his lips in concentration, felt him use his shoulders to nudge them into line with their target.

“Lou, it’s not flat and it’s slick with rain, you’ve got to hold back —”

“Just be ready with a force field or summat! And relax! You’ve got this, remember what happens when you can’t relax…”
“I’m trying not to think about that!”

“Coming in for a landing…” said Louis through gritted teeth, as their head-first collision drew closer.

And closer. And closer, until suddenly Harry felt the cold lick of night air meet his waist and neck, where Louis’ arms and face had been.

Harry’s heart caught in his throat and he screamed. Louis had thrown him, several feet ahead, and the force of it sent him spinning. He rolled onto his back before Louis flew in and caught him again.

Louis reached up to brace Harry’s head. Harry threw his legs around Louis’ waist and squeezed him hard enough to put a boa constrictor to shame, still screaming. Like the oversized baby he was, he tucked his springbok legs into the air and prepared to go in butt-first.

His back slammed into the dome of the highest car. His body skidded for a nerve-wracking second and then stopped, leaving him atop the London Eye with a beautiful boy between his legs.

They were still for a while, waiting for the shock to wear off. Panting dissolved into laughter.

“Your landing skills could use a little work,” Louis teased. “Out of all of the birds, why oh why did I fall for a dodo…”

Harry pshaw’ed. “You didn’t even give me a chance!”

“I did, and all you did was stick your arse out!”

“What else was there to do?”

“When desperate times call for desperate measures, Harry Styles reacts in kind by sticking out his bum…”

Harry snorted. “Oh, don’t you wish.”

“For your skinny arse? Mine’s much better.”

Harry gave a disappointed frown. “That’s enough of you being plain mean for one night.”

“Oh?” said Louis. “Shame, I don’t really know what I’m here for, now.”

“Well I know.”

Louis leaned gently in, letting Harry’s legs slide down his torso to rest on his hips. “Alright,” he said, warm in Harry’s ear. “Tell us, then. Now what?”

Harry’s eyes lit up with a wicked gleam. “Now kiss me, you fool.”

Louis was quick to oblige.

With one hand meshed in Harry’s hair, and the other on the nape of his neck, Louis lifted Harry up to meet his kiss halfway. It began tender and soft, achingly slow. Even so, delirium began to flood Harry’s mind. With every push and pull, he was closing a gap, mending the rift of memory between them, welcoming Louis home. Setting aside everything else for a simple movement, and the sounds of Louis’ quickening breath, and their bodies flush together.

When Louis pulled back, cold night air rushed into the space between their mouths and drove Harry crazy. Fisting a hand in Louis’ hoodie, he brought them surging together again. Louis gave a
surprised squeak, and Harry laughed into his mouth as he took his turn to pull Louis’ lips apart.

Everything about that night had Harry feeling brave, so he let himself be as rash and free, sloppy and needy as he wanted. His tongue took the lead from his lips within seconds, and he did nothing to stifle his hums and moans as their mouths came together and apart. Every sense he had — and maybe some he didn’t know he had — filled up with wonderful and finally and Louis.

Louis pulled back and reached under Harry’s shirt. He walked cold fingertips down the centre of Harry’s chest, leaving little prints on fire. Harry shivered.

Louis grinned, and whispered, “Disgusting.”

“Not as disgusting as what I’m about to do to you…” Harry smirked back.

Louis rolled his eyes and laughed through a yawn. He stretched his arms, hissing as they ached. Carrying a long and lanky specimen on a flight along the Thames hadn’t been all that easy. “I think I’ve already had enough excitement for one night, thanks.”

Harry pouted.

That was enough to ruin Louis’ well-deserved breather. “Oh fine, you —”

As Louis made to pounce again, Harry tugged and tugged at Louis’ hood, and in one swift motion finally slipped his hoodie over his head. As Louis snatched it from him and went to tie it around his waist, Harry made short work of his vest top, too, throwing it to the breeze when he was done.

“Hey! You piece of —”

Harry spread his hands and stroked them up and down Louis’ back. Starting in the hollows of his collarbone, Harry began to kiss and kitten-lick his way up Louis’ neck. “Come again?” he smiled, in between tasks.

“I said fuck you, wanker.”

“Fuck me?”

“Yeah, fuck you!”

Harry grinned. “What a brilliant idea.”

Louis snorted, once again remiss about having fallen for a dodo bird. Harry ran his open lips along the stubble of Louis’ jaw, planting a wet kiss to the skin just behind his ear. Louis gave a whisper of a gasp, eyes fluttering shut, clenching a fist in Harry’s hair.

Louis’ thigh brushed Harry’s, and Harry briefly felt something else. It was almost like a sexier version of a pinch in the middle of a dream. A reminder: This moment is real, and it involves Louis Tomlinson’s semi-hard cock.

Louis Tomlinson was happy, shirtless, on his way to hard, and had delightfully kiss-wet lips. Harry Styles, decorated hero, felt more accomplished than ever before.

“Harry…” Louis swept a lock of hair back from Harry’s face, smiled tenderly, and leaned in to kiss him again — but he didn’t get too far. “Harry, your team — if someone gets pictures of us, it’ll all get out of hand, they’ll have a heyday, and you’ll have shit to deal with. You shouldn’t have to deal with that — not because of me, I won’t have you go through that —”
“Shhh.” Harry placed a hand to Louis’ neck, tracing circles over Louis’ cheekbone with his thumb. “Do you care if they see us?” City lights in your eyes, hard cock against my thigh… It was living poetry.

“I just don’t want for it to mean that you —”

“Don’t appreciate my decision to show the world how fit you look without that shirt?”

Louis snorted. “It was a rather nice shirt —”

“Or are you implying that you’d like to take this inside?” Harry hummed. “Find a nice warm bed, get me nice and naked under you…”

“Hold on, we don’t even know how to get down from here yet!” Louis clucked. His traitor penis told a different story.

“Relax,” said Harry. “We can teleport!”

“Remember the last time we tried to teleport on a London landmark?”

Harry put a finger to Louis’ lips. “I’m a grown-up now, thank you very much. And I know what I want. And I want you to get me into bed, take your time, open me up nice and slow…”

“Fuck, Harry —”

Harry only grinned brighter, with the slightest lick of his lips. “Or maybe I’ll suck you off first. It’s been too long since I’ve had a pretty cock in my mouth…and I think you need something to take the edge off.” He nodded to Louis’ groin.

Louis exhaled through pressed lips, a piece of his fringe fluttering. “Fuck, Haz, I have work tomorrow. I’m opening, at four-thirty. Sharp.”

“Can’t you call in sick?”

“I’ve done that enough times to keep my job in constant peril, so no. As much as I want to stay…”

Harry leaned up to nuzzle into his neck. “Mmm. I like that word. ‘Stay.’ Sounds good when you say it.”

“I don’t like where you’re going with this, but I s’pose you’ve already gone there, haven’t you?”

“Come to mine. Stay over. I’ll wake up really early and make us some breakfast before you have to leave.”

“Three o’clock breakfast?”

“All my friends are stoners,” Harry shrugged. “I’ve done it before.”

“Including the sex bit?”

“I’ll make some minor modifications.”

Louis raised his brows. “That easy, eh?”

Harry nodded. He could feel Louis’ pulse racing, where his wrists met Harry’s skin.
“If I come back to yours…I’ll want you. So fucking bad, Haz.”

Harry couldn’t help but giggle, delirious from the heat in Louis’ voice. “That’s the point.”

“Shit, I’m half mad with it already…”

Harry gave a hungry little hum, and turned his hip so he could slip a thigh between Louis’ legs. He slid it up against Louis’ inner thigh, pressing harder as it inched towards Louis’ crotch. Louis tried to bite back the sensation as Harry finally slid his thigh along his clothed length, but he lost it, first in a hiss, and then in a sigh, hands gripping Harry’s waist.

Mission accomplished, Harry smirked. “Only half?”

“Completely mad now, thanks a mill.”

Harry kept it up. Louis didn’t stop him, but he tried to distract himself from it nonetheless with some tenderness of his own. He traced an idle finger along Harry’s forehead, dragging it down to his cheek, and drew patterns under his chin until it tickled and Harry swatted it away. He replaced his hand in Harry’s hair, stroking it in time with Harry’s rubbing rhythm. “There’s so much I want to do with you, and we’ve barely any time, it’s already late —”

“Lou, don’t worry. We’ll just do something. Something’s better than nothing. And we’ll save the rest for later. We’ll have loads of time.”

Louis sighed. “But I won’t be happy with just something. Not when I’ve been waiting for this for…”

“Waiting for this?”

Louis laughed. “What do you think I did when I got home from our stay in London? Bored, hormonal mess in Doncaster? It was quite a while before the wet dreams stopped —”

Harry’s smile was cheeky, but his eyes lit up with something else. “Just after that one day?”

“Mhm. I can’t believe you, Hero.”

“What?”

Louis rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe you thought that I’d forgotten.”

Harry shrugged. “What was I supposed to think!”

“That I was being a shit!”

“Fair enough, I guess.”

“I never forgot you, idiot.”

“Yeah, but…” Harry could only nod, impressed.

“Fine. I was completely, humiliatingly gone for you. That better?” Louis cracked a smile, reflecting Harry’s dumb mushy light right back at him. “I fell for you — didn’t I? Quite literally. From the sky.”

“You more, like, fell into me —”

“I’d really like you to kiss me before this banter gets any more awful.”
Harry complied.

A cold breeze swept over them again, their mouths fiercely warm against the chill. Harry tightened his grip around Louis’ waist until they were locked in an embrace warmer than even their kiss. Louis gave Harry’s bottom lip one last tug before Harry pulled the kiss apart again, keeping their noses together.

“I won’t let you wait any longer,” Harry breathed, “unless you’re not ready. Please tell me if you aren’t. I know, I’m rushing. But I’ve been waiting, too, and I want to make the best of, of what we have…” He let his sentence hang, not bothering to finish the thought.

Louis sighed. “I’m going to have a shitty shift tomorrow, no matter what —”

“You’ll be well fed and cared for, and Zayn will pump you full of caffeine.”

“You’re good people. But I was going to say…”

“Ready?” Harry asked, soft and cautious.

Louis rested his head on Harry’s shoulder. He left a peck just below Harry’s jaw. “Yeah, ready.”

Although Louis had never even been there, feeling the weight of the warm boy in his arms made it easier for Harry to call to mind thoughts of his home. Feeling soft hair and breath against his neck, goosebumped skin and squishy little love handles under his hands — it all somehow really jibed with thoughts of his fireplace, his décor, his magnet-covered fridge and the photos on the walls. It didn’t take long for a brilliant image of his flat to spring to mind, complete with him and his boy tucked into his bed, as if they’d always belonged there.

Harry took a deep breath of cold, damp air, and willed himself to take them home.

It would seem the universe really had it out for Harry’s back that day. With a resounding thud, they landed on the floor of his bedroom, just shy of the damn bed. Louis let out an ach in pain, his forehead having collided with the floorboards over Harry’s shoulder. Harry bit down on his lip and grimaced away the throb in the back of his skull.

Initial pain over, breath returning, Harry registered his sweaty palm, still resting in the dip of Louis’ back. He absent-mindedly began to stroke over Louis’ gooseflesh, until Louis’ giggles in his ear startled him back to reality.

Harry hugged Louis tighter. Holding him, feeling him, the boy who had evaded him like smoke…it was surreal. He felt like pinching himself. But instead, he pinched every inch of Louis.

Louis squirmed away, squealing, as Harry zeroed in on his ticklish lower back. With his disbelief finally starting to trickle away with the sight and smell and overwhelming warmth of Louis, Harry snorted and squawked along with him.

When the laughter died down, an ache settled into Harry’s belly. Louis’ chin still rested perfectly in the crook of his neck, Harry’s hands on Louis’ lower back. As if every dip in Harry’s body was made as a resting place for a part of Louis, and vice-versa.

Harry gently turned his head. Louis’ stubble ticked along the base of his neck. Harry spluttered,
sending spittle flying into Louis’ ear.

“Extremely sexy, that,” Louis remarked, pulling back to hover above him.

Looking up at his boy like some hanging work of art, Harry stroked his thumb along the lines of Louis’ features. He half expected Louis to snort with impatience at the stall in foreplay, but Louis was silent, matching Harry’s gaze. Intent, but gentle.

Louis readjusted as Harry caressed, curling his toes, vans squeaking on the floor as he planted his feet. He pulled away from the touch and made to slide down Harry’s torso, in all his glassy-eyed and bare chested glory. Harry couldn’t let him get very far. He rose to meet Louis with an open-mouthed kiss.

Louis dropped his hips, giving them a roll against Harry’s. Harry took it as an invitation to slip his tongue between Louis’ teeth. Louis gripped his shoulders and forced him back against the floor.

Thunk.

Maybe Harry’s back would forgive him in the morning.

Before Louis could have any more of his way with him, Harry went for the button of Louis’ jeans. Louis was patient as Harry fumbled, finally forcing them down his thighs with a jerk.

Louis made similarly quick work of Harry’s button-down, but retracted at the sight of Harry’s bare chest. He was littered with angry bruises from the fight at Selfridges, a gash or two crusted with dried blood. Looking up at him, Harry saw his eyes flash bright.

“You’re still hurt…” His fingertips skirted a long cut, up and down Harry’s flank. “Not to mention all of your steady landings in the past few hours. We can have a cuddle, call it a night. We can wait.”

Harry whined. With the extra space Louis had given him, he undid his own fly.

Louis rolled his eyes. He stroked a hand further down Harry’s tummy, dipping his fingers just below his waistband before flitting his hand up again. And back down, and back up again. Deeper every time.

“Thought you just wanted to cuddle,” Harry teased.

Louis snorted. “Naked, obviously.”

Harry placed his hands on Louis’ ass and pulled him back in.

Somehow, in a flurry of kisses, jeans and pants were shucked. Louis tried to drag Harry up and into bed, but Harry was stronger, pulling Louis back down onto his lap. He aligned Louis’ hips with his own so that their cocks touched. He gripped Louis’ waist with one hand and circled their cocks in the other, pumping them together. Louis keeled forward, breathing a moan, catching himself with a hand on Harry’s collarbone. Harry rocked his hips in time with his pulls — or tried to, what with his naked back stuck and clammy against the foot of his bed — but as he built a rhythm, Louis caught on, circling his hips languidly, little gasps turning to throaty moans when the friction caught just right.

Harry tried to close his eyes, lost in sensation, but Louis’ face, outlined by a halo of city lights in the window behind him, and the way his stomach muscles rippled and clenched...there was too much to see, too much to get lost in. Louis’ voice as it tried not to plead for more — but oh, did he plead. The warmth of his cock, against his own, against his hand...Harry wanted to be consumed.
As he could feel his orgasm building, the muscles of his abdomen tightening, sparks on his skin, Louis slowed his hips, grinding to a stop. He gripped Harry’s shoulders to steady himself.


Louis answered him with soft eyes.

“That was...good,” he finally got out. “Really good. But I didn’t want to come like that.”

Harry bit his lip. He watched Louis’ sweat-shiny chest rise and fall, the glint of city light across his stag tattoo. He slowly released his hand.

“Then how should I make you come, love?” Maintaining eye contact, he raised his own fingers to his lips.

“Mm...Guess,” Louis said softly, as if the bedroom was more public than Harry had imagined.

“You’re going to have to give me something to go off of.”

“Alright. Less of a what, more of a where.”

It took a second for Harry to process that. “You want to go somewhere else?”

Louis snorted. “Where would we go?”

Harry shrugged. “I have a nice car. Or twenty.”

Louis shook his head. Harry couldn’t quite see whether his expression was amused, or closer to already-regretting-sex-with-this-dumbass. “I more meant...”

He stroked a palm down Harry’s forehead, Harry’s cheek. “Should I come here...”

He teased a finger along Harry’s bottom lip. “In there...”

His hands began to roam Harry’s body again, but Harry had already decided on his preferred location.

“In me,” he said softly. “Fuck me. Please.”

Louis shifted tantalizingly in Harry’s lap. “No more foreplay, babe?” he cooed. “I was quite enjoying riling you up.”

Harry bit back his frustration and begged, “Please.”

“Someone needs to teach Mr. Right-Place-Right-Time a little patience.”

Louis slid off of Harry’s lap, crawling backwards on all fours. Leaning in, he ran the tip of his nose and lips up Harry’s inner thigh. He put a hand on Harry’s erection.

He lifted his eyes. The eye contact alone made Harry bite down on his tongue to try to keep his arousal at bay. Louis’ eyes went neon for a split second. When the flash of light was gone, Louis’ tongue was on Harry’s slit.

With each kitten lick, Harry felt something in him come undone. He whined for sweet relief, pushed up against Louis’ hand for some friction. Louis only gripped him tighter. Harry grew harder and hungrier, lick by torturous lick.
Louis pulled back to moisten his lips, then took Harry’s head into his mouth. He expertly bobbed his head, flirting with Harry’s shaft for a while before taking him down further.

Harry let out an “Aaaaah,” as Louis’ lips eventually joined his fist. He keened, bucking up into Louis’ touch. He panted for more more more.

Louis then removed his hand and swallowed him down almost to the hilt. He placed his hands on Harry’s hips. He increased to a furious rhythm, moans emanating from the back of this throat.


Harry lost his ability to string words together from there. Louis removed his lips with a pop and jerked him hard and fast. His small hands were strong and just as perfect as his mouth. Harry gripped the baseboard of his bed behind him. The wood creaked in time with his panting.

“I’ve been practising,” Louis smirked. “Had to find guys with the right…” He nodded to Harry’s cock. “…equipment, to practise on. Knew you were big.”

Harry’s knuckles went white around the baseboard as he shot up into Louis’ fist. He let out the loudest and longest sigh as the aftershocks took him over.

When he looked up, Louis was perched on his knees, feet tucked daintily under his bum. How could someone look so calm and so innocent right after enacting a living wet dream?

One by one, Louis licked his come-wet fingers clean, agonizingly slowly.

“So we’re both come sluts here?” Harry remarked, at the same time as Louis swallowed and said, “You taste like a bloody vegan.”

Harry laughed. He sighed. “You’re fucking incredible, you know that?”

“I do, but I could stand to hear about it again.”

Harry chuckled. He slumped back against the baseboard. “Here, lean down and kiss me, I’m not much for moving right now.”

When his back had had enough, Harry sat up with a groan and made for the bed, quick as his boneless body could carry him. With Louis in the ensuite, he threw back the sheets and laid himself out in a starfish across the mattress.

Reaching into his right-side pillowcase, he found his emergency satchel at the very bottom. He extracted a condom from it, laying it on the bedside table. Then a bottle of lube. He slicked up two fingers, tracing them over his entrance, teasing himself with cold little shocks before massaging them deeper, and finally slipping a finger in. He clenched, sensations a touch unfamiliar. Out of practise. Against his rabbiting pulse, he reigned in his breath. He found a rhythm, and slipped in a second finger, breathing into the stretch.

His breath hitched at a phantom touch. He felt something snaking up his free hand, up his wrist, up his arm. He squinted in the faint light. The tingle crossed to his thigh, up his chest. Something pulled down his bottom lip…

Harry kicked out a foot. Louis hissed, and Harry laughed.
Louis made himself visible. He was braced above Harry — hair freshly mussed, still gloriously naked. He pulled a goofy face, and the two of them laughed in harmony.

Louis placed his hand on Harry’s wrist — the one that was connected to Harry’s more occupied hand. Harry’s fingers stilled. He whined as Louis guided them out.

“Lou…”

Louis’ eyes fell to the bottle of lube. He squinted. “Does that say organic?” he muttered as he popped the cap and slicked up his own fingers, gently replacing Harry’s with his.

“Turn on the light,” Louis said softly, holding Harry’s eyes steady in his own as he slipped two fingers at once past Harry’s rim. “Want to see you.”

Harry clapped. When the lamplight found Louis’ face, it was buried in between Harry’s thighs. He gave a nibble and a lick, before sinking in to suck a bruise, so close to where his fingers were working Harry open.

Harry’s breath came out in hitches. He tried to work himself down onto Louis’ two fingers, seek more friction, but no more pleasure came from the half-fullness. He moaned in vain.

“Not enough, love?”

“Lou, just…”

Louis curled a finger, searching. Harry felt the barest brush against his prostate and mewled.

“Uh — please — just fuck me already.”

“Isn’t foreplay more first-date appropriate?” Louis mused.

“I don’t fucking care, just — ”

Louis’ fingers suddenly stilled, and Harry squirmed, searching for friction.

“I’m ready,” Harry said. For what it was worth, he was pretty certain he hadn’t ever sounded more sure of anything in his life.

Louis withdrew his fingers. Harry clenched around nothing, holding out only with the thought of the more satisfying fullness to come.

Harry fumbled for the condom, tore the packet open. Scooting closer, he pried Louis’ hand away, hurriedly rolled on the condom, and slicked Louis up (“That smells organic,” Louis said of the lube), before surrendering to the mattress again.

Harry arched his back, lifting his hips in invitation. Louis caught hold of his thighs and spread them a little, shifting in between them. Slight trepidation in his eyes, he looked down at Harry. “Like this? How do you want it?”

Harry daintily drew up a pointed toe, throwing his leg over Louis’ shoulder, drawing him close with a calf behind Louis’ neck. “Ruin me.”

Louis smirked, leaning in further. Harry crossed his ankles behind Louis’ head.

“Me? Ruin a mighty hero?” Louis kissed up Harry’s neck.
When they were face to face, noses touching, Harry whispered, “You saved me, didn’t you? Means only you can ruin me.”

Louis snorted. “How exactly does that work?”

Harry beamed. “No idea.”

Their lips met with a gleeful burst of tongue and teeth. Louis hurriedly pulled away. He slipped a pillow under Harry’s lower back, and slid back down Harry’s body to line himself up.

Harry closed his eyes, humming at the first touch of Louis’ head at his entrance. The initial stretch made Harry grit his teeth, suddenly aware of just how out of practise he was.

“I can go slower, babe, if you want.” Louis’ voice strained and sighed, the pressure and pleasure vivid on his face.

“Keep going,” Harry said.

Louis pushed in slowly. Harry bit his tongue, hissing as Louis’ cock opened him up. For a moment, a stab of pain took over. Harry gripped the sheets. Louis slowed to a stop, rubbing soothing hands up and down Harry’s hips.

“D-don’t, keep going,” Harry insisted. “I’ll be fine in a minute. S’just...been a while since I’ve bottomed.”

Louis’ hands re-cemented their grip. “Has it, now?” He pushed in further. The stretch burned, harsh turning to pleasant. “I guess heroes don’t tend to bottom,” Louis said with a cheeky grin.

Harry’s laugh came out between pants and groans. “It’s not like that. It’s — ah — far more complicated.”

“Is it?” Louis smirked. “No one will look at me and suspect that the world’s most powerful man is my bottom.”

Harry grinned. He reached up to twist Louis’ nipple, managing it just as Louis bottomed out.

“Managing like you said, sweetcheeks?”

Harry took a deep breath and smiled. “You’re frighteningly strong, for someone so small.”

His tease had the desired effect. Louis’ eyes narrowed, and all at once he shifted Harry’s hips forward on the pillow and met him with a deep thrust. The new angle struck a sweet spot. The feeling spread like a warm, filthy-good syrup. Harry whined with it. He clenched, muscles trying to
savour it as it faded.


“So eloquent,” Louis clucked. “Will you —” he grunted, “— ask nicely?”

His next thrust hit home even sweeter, and Harry cried out. His yells and gasps dissolved into a string of harder again harder again harder again, pitchy and desperate.

To Harry’s relief, Louis grinned and obliged. His slower pace allowed him to drive deeper, hitting Harry’s prostate every time.

Harry’s mind went fuzzy with bliss. Louis’ edges blurred in the soft light, until he may have been some golden god bent over him, coaxing out moan after moan from his mortal lips.

“This good?” Louis checked. Harry nodded. Louis’ cheeks were pink, his chest heaving. His eyes were dark with bliss. Harry gave a long aaaaaaah as Louis stroked and fucked him harder.

The near-orgasm sensations struck him all at once — the tension in his muscles, the gooseflesh. He thrust up and down, trying to meet Louis’ cock and his hand all in one go. Neither friction satisfied. Harry mewled. He needed, needed, needed more, or he would implode. Or explode. Likely both.

Harry barely recognized his voice as his orgasm rose to meet him. The stars in his eyes erupted as he finally came, long and loud and good.

He opened his eyes right in time to see Louis’ face, all scrunched in sweet anguish. To watch his mouth make an O as he emptied into the condom. Harry sighed with him, long and loud and good.

Louis’ silence, it turned out, felt just as comfortable to Harry as his sounds and words did. He held onto a good hour of it, with Louis spooned around him.

As he grew drowsier, Harry clapped off the light. He figured Louis was already asleep. But Louis stirred.

“Harry?” said Louis into the darkness.

“Mmm?”

“Is it too early?”

“For what?”

“I mean,” said Louis, “to say certain things?”

Harry should have understood what he meant by that, but he was too tired even for the obvious.

“What things?”

Louis took a deep breath. He sighed.

Harry turned over to face him. There was a long pause. Harry’s eyes adjusted, and the lines of Louis’ face came into focus.
Louis broke the silence with a poke to Harry’s nose. Harry smiled.

When the moment faded, Louis said, “I love you.”

Those words didn’t scare Harry, nor did they take him long to process. But he stalled. This joy was more than he knew what to do with.

He took Louis’ hand, twining their fingers together. He gave Louis a long, deep look.

“Goodnight, my love,” he said.

They came together one last time, still-sweaty bodies sharing a kiss in a freshly-made bed. It was short and understated, but it suited Harry just fine.

They would do this again. They would have more than enough time to play catch up.

In the radius of Louis’ warmth, Harry drifted to sleep.

When Harry woke up, the warmth was gone.

Well, not all the warmth. MJ had snuggled up to his feet in the night.

But the warmth that had come from a boy, strong and golden, with a beating heart pumping against his shoulder blade — all gone. In his wake, he’d left the smell of sex that clung to the room.

In the grey morning light, something new on his bedside table caught his eye. It was a page torn from his journal. Harry fumbled for it, squinting to see what was written there in a scrawl of gentle curves.

*If you want to come find me, you know where I am.*

*Xx =)*

When he entered That Starbucks, he was surprised to find that there was no queue, and not surprised to find a slim brunette girl leaning her elbows on the counter as she took a very long time to place her order, finally settling on something familiar.

“Frappy-wappy, hanky-panky, llama-bama ding-dong,” Louis recited. “Got it.”

“…with soy…” Zayn chimed in.

“…and whip,” Harry added, approaching the counter.

Louis’ eyes widened in delight, before resuming a sleepy smile. Eleanor slowly slid her aviators down her nose to give Harry a look that succeeded in frightening him far more than any evil glare from a challenger ever had.

“Well, look who we have here!” Louis exclaimed. “Harry Styles, Britain’s Hero, superhuman sensation, Mr. Right-Place-Right-Time, peddler of lunchboxes. Come for a drink? El, want me to take an insta pic for you? People Magazine’s Sexiest Man of the Year is right behind you, so you
might as well…”

Eleanor slammed her shades back into place. “Actually, Lou, I was here to ask, um, if…you might be free sometime this week.”

The silence was made both more and less awkward by the sound of the blender as Zayn got to work on the Thigh Gap-Enhancing Man Juice.

“Um, ah…” Wide-eyed, eyebrows-raised, lips pressed tightly together – Harry still knew Louis’ *quick, let’s improvise!* face when he saw it. “Free, like…what kind of free?”

“Say, sometime in the evening…for dinner?”

“Ah, sorry love,” Louis frowned, shaking his head. “I’ve got my last exam this week, gotta study hard!”

“You said that a *month* ago…”

Louis bit his lip. “Well…I’m also, um – oh, that’s right, starting full-time work this week –”

Eleanor folded her arms. “Don’t play me for a fool, Louis Tomlinson.”

“Yeah, about that,” Harry interjected, “I wanted to make sure you’re still good for the orientation tomorrow.”

Louis’ jaw went slack, until Harry gave him a look to say *roll with it.*

“You’re…you’re working for him, now?”

“You’re…you’re working for him, now?”

“Um, yeah.” Louis smiled.

“Doing *what*?”

Before Louis had the time to look dumbfounded, Harry spat out “Personal assistant.”

Louis couldn’t hold back a grin. Eleanor turned to glare at Harry again. This time, the aviators came off. “You’re Harry Styles. Harry *fucking* Styles – and you hired a disorganized, unpunctual Starbucks barista with a newly-earned pointless acting degree to be your *personal assistant*?”

“Assistant’s assistant.” Harry hastily corrected. “He’ll be assisting my assistant with assisting me.”

“And yet you’re the one giving him an orientation tomorrow.”

Louis waved a hand dismissively. “Come on, El – he was just double-checking. No need to get your knickers in a twist.”

“You’re making no sense, Lou…”

“The best things in life don’t make sense, clementine,” Louis grinned.

“Your, um, frap is ready!” Zayn interjected from the receiving counter.

Correcting her posture with a pout, Eleanor went to grab her frap.

Louis gave a tiny sigh of relief and looked to Harry. “What’re you in for?”

“Don’t you mean to ask what can you do me for?”
“Been there, done that,” Louis muttered through a smirk. “What’re you in for?”

“To see if you might be free sometime this week.”

Louis stilled his fidgeting hands. Then his eyes darted left and right, looking for something. “Any paps on your tail?” he asked.

With a brief glance behind him, Harry grinned. “Negative.”

“Then how about you rephrase that as a question?”

Harry took a mock-deep breath. “Louis Tomlinson – would you, perhaps, be able to take some time out of your daily grind…” He trailed off, winking.

Louis frowned, confused, until Harry began to point to everything coffee-related in sight, and Louis rolled his eyes. “You’re the worst.”

Harry said the rest through giggles. “…to go on a date with me?”

Louis crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

And that response simply would not do for Harry. Desperate times call for desperate measures. **Initiate Operation Puppy Eyes.**

Said operation proved highly successful. A heartbeat later, in one swift motion, Louis was bending over the counter, seizing Harry’s face in both of his hands.

They leaned in, but the counter found Louis’ stomach before their lips could touch. “Shit. Hang on, I’ll come around, or this thing will give me the Heimlich.”

They met where the counter ended, and here they had their good morning kiss. Harry closed his eyes, locking himself away from the daylight and the smell of coffee and the patrons sat quietly around him.

Louis tasted of sleep, and of course, coffee. His lips pried and pulled, both gentle with love and strong with want.

Despite all that had come before, all that had happened last night, this was the most intimate moment of his life so far. He gave all of himself to it, all as a gift to Louis Tomlinson.

When the necessity of breath brought them apart, Harry was giddy. The door clicked closed behind Eleanor, startling Harry back to some approximation of real life. He looked up to find Zayn smirking at him.

“Alright, Zayn?” Louis called over.

Zayn kept his eyes on Harry. “I won’t say I told you so…”

Harry shrugged, big and wide. “Go on, say it. You’ve earned the right.”

Zayn shook his head, beaming, and turned back to his work.

Louis cleared his throat to bring Harry’s attention back to where it belonged.

“Tomorrow night sound alright? Are you going to pick me up in a sexy sports car?”
“How’s a Range Rover?” Harry shrugged.

Louis pouted. “Oh, so I’m not worth one of your Porsches? Nor a vintage Rolls Royce? I know you have a Bond car…”

“James Bond and I have very different tastes.”

“Clearly. I guess I will settle for the unromantic box of a Range Rover. What time tomorrow suits you?”

“Say, seven? Where d’you live?”

“Euston Square, abouts. It may be wise for you to text before coming over, and I can give you the lowdown.”

Harry began a muttered rendition of “Txt Me If U Want Me,” only stopping once he’d registered Louis’ look of mild disgust.

“Well…” Harry muttered sheepishly, “I’m gonna need a little something, if I’m to text you.”

Louis nodded. When Harry insisted on just standing there, biting his lip, he prompted, “Go on. Be a brave boy. Ask me.”

“Louis the Latte Boy?”

“Yes, Harry the Twat?”

“That’s Harry the Hero to you.”

“Come now, that’s what the rest of the world calls you. I need to find you a new, more condescending pet name. But for now – yes, Harry, what did you want?”

“Your digits, if I may.”

Louis smiled, satisfied, before reading them out. Harry immediately typed the number into his phone, fired off a text (“Cheeky,” Louis commented upon receiving it), took a surprise candid of Louis for his display picture (“Hey! Take another, I was distracted!”), and saved him in his contacts as “Louis the Latte Boy.”

“So, where are we going?” Louis inquired. “Italian and a movie? Or are you more of a tapas and spoken word night kind of guy?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Look at yourself, idiot.”

Harry truly didn’t understand how a headscarf, bone-tight skinny jeans, scuffed boots, and an undone grandma-print shirt could have him mistaken for a hipster.

But back to the date. “It’s a surprise,” said Harry, “but I promise to make it worth your while.”

“Alright then, I leave it in your capable hands. Now, did you actually want anything to drink?”

Harry shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind a celebratory concoction…”

“Sounds like a plan.”
“…on the house.”

“Nice try, Mr. Millionaire.”

Murmurs from a cluster of newcomers filled the room. Louis perked up. “Better get going if you want to escape without a hassle. Concoction another time? Of the alcoholic variety? Tomorrow?” Louis held out his hand for a shake.

Harry gripped it firmly and shook with gusto. “Tomorrow.”

Louis leaned in, and the two shared much more of a chaste kiss this time, just to seal their promise.

With a wink and a nod, Louis bid him a silent farewell, and turned to the newest customer with a “Hello there, what can I do you for?”

There was an unadulterated skip in Harry’s step as he turned the corner onto Great Queen Street, as if he’d left the Starbucks to enter a musical. After checking for paps, he performed a meagre happy-dance. Where were his backup dancers when he needed them?

He resembled an over-excited emoji for the rest of the afternoon. He saw it in the pap pics the next day. Disgusting.

On his way home, he texted Gemma.

_I got a cute boy’s # today :D_
_...and a date._

She texted back an hour later.

_Honestly u could have all the dick/pussy in the world right now if u wanted and ur impressed that u can pull one cute boy??_

Harry didn’t answer that. Luckily Gemma sensed the long-distance awkward silence and broke it.

_Send me piiiiccs. :D <3 :D <3_

Chapter End Notes

YOU DID IT! YOU MADE IT! I'M SO HAPPY YOU DID!!

Your comments and kudos mean the world to me. As always, you can also come say hi on Tumblr!

You can reblog this tumblr post if you liked the story!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!