One day, Liam walked in on his best friend since forever being beaten senseless and Liam refuses to settle for that.

Or.

The first day of the rest of Zayn's life.
Part II: The End of The Beginning

Chapter Notes

In honour of Mind Of Mine here’s the first chapter of the second installment for the "I will stand by you' series!

Sorry if the ends a bit shit, I just wanted something short and sweet to start of with. Please let me know what you think!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things change after that week and not necessarily for the worst. When Zayn wakes up at ridiculous hours in the morning it’s not as bad as it used to be because Liam takes to sleeping in the same bed as him, and makes sure to hush and rock him back to sleep. In the morning they wake up and talk about it and Zayn is as honest as he can. If he’s not comfortable they don’t talk on it too much but if it’s something he wants solved they can go for up to an hour over it. It's hard, that's plain to see but Liam cannot believe that Zayns doing as well as he is and always reminds him of it along with the standard "if you're not comfortable don't push it, it's fine." Liam or one of the boys makes breakfast (depending on the day) and Zayn takes his morning vitamins as normal. Liam either leaves for work at 9:30 or later on at 14:00.

Zayn spends his morning doing small things; either drawing, painting, cooking, playing the piano or whatever he fancies. There are days he feels like shit and so it’s usually spent cuddling with the TV on in the background and swallowed up in comforters. They have lunch and generally a walk follows, sometimes something sporty for an hour to an hour and a half such as kicking a football around with Louis (but he can’t kick very far yet and still has to make up a lot of muscle mass). When they get back Zayn takes a nap for an hour or two because it helps with the stress according to Isabelle (and as it’s known Suicide attempts are hugely stressful for both the body and the mind). When he wakes up they either play a game or do something together again (whichever day or boy it is or includes) and then they have dinner. Followed by the remnants of the activity or a movie from earlier. Then he has a cup of warm milk, brushes his teeth goes to bed with Liam and sleeps, wrapped up under two duvet layers and Liam in-between two of them. On the days he has a session with Isabelle the routine is slightly altered but it’s predictable, it’s neat and orderly, it’s safe and Zayn loves it.

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The first day they decide to add an element of further exercise to their lives they all walk down to the park and play football. After the events of last month it has been decided to avoid certain areas of the park, hence why they are alone at the far corner on a grass playing field. The grass markings that once graced the field are all but gone and the goals are rusted and have flaking white splats of paint with no nets but it works for them. They don’t do more than kick the ball between each other and laugh at nothing. Harry’s footwork is a form of entertainment in itself and he falls over more than
Once, as Louis is so very easily able to navigate himself around his significant other. Zayn stands a few meters in-between Niall and Liam, the two helping him to kick the ball (as it’s known Zayns not really been gifted in the football department as he was the art). Zayn feels rather numb that day, and while sport is supposed to release endorphins which help in the balance of the chemicals in his brain that make him feel like shit on a daily basis. It takes a lot for him to laugh and enjoy himself, he just can’t describe how miserable he feels and he wishes he could change it but he can’t. So he takes what he can and smiles when Niall kicks a goal and Harry falls over again.

When they get back it’s late and the boys all leave before they get in the door. Side by side both he and Liam remove their shoes and place them in the basket beside the door. Zayn's feeling a bit stiff now so it takes a bit of effort to lean down. Liam kisses his forehead when he stands and asks if all is well, to which Zayn nods his head.

“I’ll just get dinner sorted baby, you can go to the living room and relax, yeah?” Zayn nods his head, gaze cast at the floor and goes on his way.

Liam returns in less than 10 minutes and Zayn has put on a marathon re-run of *F.R.I.E.N.D.S.* He's laying on his side and cuddling up to one of the large throw pillows. Liam smiles because he can remember this one time where all of them had spent new years together. Niall had insisted on putting it on but Zayn had never seen it. Niall of course took it as a personal offence which only got worse when Zayn said it was just another bad show. After they had watched the pilot episode Zayn was forced to admit that he wanted to watch the next one now. Liam and Louis had laughed so hard their sides hurt and they ended up watching the entire first season.

Liam sits down at the end of the sofa where Zayn's feet are and pull them into his lap. Zayn groans in pain and immediately Liam's concerned.

"Are you ok beautiful?" He asks, worried that his stitches have pulled or something.

Zayn nods his head but Liam doesn't believe him.

“Are you feeling stiff gorgeous?” Liam asks, leaning over and ruffling Zayn's hair.

Zayn sighs before answering. “Just a bit sore, it’s fine.” Zayn waves him off, curling into the cushion more.

“Whereabouts?” Liam asks, leaning over, nosing at his upper arm and kissing the skin gently in a sensual way that makes Zayn gasp.

“Er, my back and my legs.” Zayn admits quietly.

“Can I do anything to help? Maybe there’s a heating pack somewhere?” Liam mumbled out more to himself than Zayn.

Zayn smiles small, “it’s ok.”

“No, no darling it’s not ok for you to hurt or be sore, can I massage it for you?” Liam insists, leaning up and trailing a hand over his jeaned calf. “Just rub it a bit and work out the areas that hurt?”
Zayn bites his lip and wonders if he’s ready for hands to be over him in a way that’s more than necessary. Liam runs his hands over the material covering his shins and doesn’t do more than that. Zayn figures if it’s just his legs he’s ok with that and nods his consent.

Liam smiles at him like he’s handed him a million pounds and uses his thumbs to dig into the arches of his feet and massage all the kinks and tightness in his foot before progressing up his leg. Liam goes no further than his knee and takes his time, working up and down his leg until Zayn fully relaxes, letting go and just embracing the feeling of the soreness being worked out of his muscles. Honestly, it’s amazing. Zayn sighs when Liam moves onto the other foot and subsequently his calf, shutting his eyes and dozes in and out of consciousness for the next 40 minutes.

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Zayn wakes Zayn up for Dinner when it’s ready and still gets Zayn that heating pack before he’s more than aware that Zayn does not want him massaging his back right now. The heating pack will just have to do.

Zayn smiles at him, and Liam thinks he's the luckiest guy in the world.

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Z A Y N

Zayn wakes up the next morning to Liam nuzzling at his temple and rubbing the upper arm he has above the covers. The long sleeve of his sleep shirt bundles up in areas but Zayn won’t deny its the best way to wake up ever.

"G'morning lovely." Liam croaks. His morning voice rough and a bit gruff.

Zayn nearly rolls his eyes and sighs, shifting so he's cuddled up closer and shuts his eyes again.

"How are you feeling today?" Liam asks after clearing his throat.

Zayn nods, "yeah, m'feelin ok i guess." He mumbles, not exactly awake enough to form full words.

He doesn't need to look to know Liam's smiling. "Excellent," Liam compliments him. "Because I have a plan for today." He reveals.

Zayn moves his head so he looks up at Liam and hums to prompt him to continue.

Liam cards a hand through his hair. "We have all day so take your time yeah?" Liam whispers softly and Zayn nods, laying his head back down to doze for another half hour. Liam hums nonsensically and traces patterns over his shoulder, arm and through his hair.

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They're in the car an hour later. It's Zayn's first time out of the house since his attempt and as he looks out the window he can't help but think that he sees everything in a completely new way now. He can't describe it but everything just feels so different. He makes a mental note to talk to Isabelle about it in their next session. The thought catches him off guard because he's never consciously planned to
talk to Isabelle about anything before. He doesn't think he has anyway. He shakes off the thought and continues to stare out the window, not thinking about anything except how beautiful the physical world outside can be.

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**L I A M**

As they pull into the adoption centre Zayn's eyes widen comically, and if it weren't the first form of an explicit positive reaction since his attempt Liam would've laughed.

Liam shuts off the car and turns to him, looking sheepish. “I remember, when we were kids that we always talked about getting a cat or a dog that was ours because our parents wouldn't let us get one,” Liam starts, clearing his throat. “And at the wildlife park, I figured that you had a great time with the animals and that maybe, that is if you're still interested, we can get a cat or a dog, ya know, give us an excuse to go out on walks or cuddles or just have something really cute at home.” Liam's already thought everything through, this, after all is not the first time it has crossed his mind and he has deduced they can afford something small. He strokes Zayn's cheek fondly, thinking to himself that the cutest thing he's ever laid his eyes on is already living in their home, and that is the man in front of him, but he won't voice that opinion now, he holds it, stored away for another day.

Zayn smiles back at him, a small smile on his face and eyes cast to the ground, Liam can see he's happy about this but doesn’t know how to show it.

Liam reaches over and kisses his forehead, “I'll just go get our coats,” he mutters.

He steps out the car and does so - his old ashen coloured and Zayn's block navy. Zayn has already opened his door by the time he gets around and Liam almost chastises him because he wanted to do that for him, but it's not his place to say. He holds out a hand and Zayn takes it. Liam shuts the door behind him and gestures Zayn to hold up his arms and slip the coat onto him. He's very pleased to see that Zayn's beginning to fit this a lot better than when it was first bought.

Liam pulls on the lapels of Zayn's coat, pulling it tighter across his chest because it's getting windy. “If anything we can just look at how cute and cuddly they are and leave, we don't have to get one.” Liam giggles.

Zayn smiles shyly, curling up and won't meet his eyes, so Liam noses at Zayn's hairline, his love and admiration for this man overwhelming him and he wishes more than anything that maybe a pet will help Zayn out, give him some form of partial responsibility and a non-human friend he can mutter too without a worry. (He himself is guilty of doing that with his friends pets when he experienced bullies, before Zayn found out and came into the whole picture and was his knight in shining armour).

When they first step into the shelter a man greets them from behind the counter and leads them through sections of the shelter, at one point passing through the bunny and rabbit area which they stop over at and spend a good 15 minutes. Where Zayn sits down cross-legged in the middle of a sawdust enclosure with bunnies and rabbits of all sizes and colours hopping around him. A few take to sitting in his lap and the smile on Zayn's face reminds Liam of the wildlife park,. It's not as big, it's not huge, just a small smirk but Liam can see it's reaching Zayn's eyes and that's what makes it genuine and happy.

They eventually make it through to the cat section, Zayn having announced he's not sure about a dog after what happened at the park. (Liam made sure to kiss him on the temple to silently let him know
that it was ok). Liam had an inkling Zayn would go for a kitten anyway - after the events at the park he may have had his doubts and Liam truly believes a kitten may be better for now since they can be so gentle and small, delicate; kinda like Zayn. They could always get a dog in the future one day.

Immediately the little creatures in their enclosures intrigue Zayn, he bends over an open-top glass one and rubs at a cat’s ear to feel and hear it purr. The animal shelter man stands back and leaves them too it and they spend the better part of an hour with the cats. Zayn bends down and reaches up on his tiptoes to see every single one of them. Liam makes sure to put in his two cents every now and again, talking to Zayn about them. He’s delighted to note how into this Zayn is. How good it seems to be going. But none of them seem to take his whole interest and Liam begins to wonder if they will leave with a cat after all.

They're walking to a new section when suddenly, Zayn halts in his tracks. Backtracking to one of the more crowded cages, which had a cat with a litter of kittens in; all the kittens are attached or snuggled up to their mother someway or another with the exception of one. Isolated from the others. Zayn carefully unlocks the door and reaches his hand out to the isolated kitten. The kitten, which apparently was asleep, wakes up when Zayn scratches behind its ear and purrs loudly given its size. There’s no way the kitten is bigger than Zayns palm (and in Liam's opinion that’s tiny). Zayn looks enamored. Completely captured by this kitten - his eyes wide in wonder and mouth agape in awe. Liam wishes Zayn could feel that and look this peaceful all the time. The kitten has jet black fur with a small white patch on it's head. It's eyes are huge and Liam thinks if Zayn was a cat this is what he'd look like. The thought amused him. The kitten meanwhile stands up and paws at Zayns sleeve, gripping on and refusing to let go when Zayn begins to retract his hand, making Zayn laugh. The kitten climbs up his sleeve and purrs into Zayns elbow. Liam has the pleasure of witnessing Zayns first tongue-behind-teeth smile and giggle in a long time. He immediately knows this is the one. He steps forward into Zayns space and pets at the kitten, clarifying “This one?”

Zayn nods, looking up at him like he’s the best thing, and Liam takes pride in knowing he was able to make Zayn so happy.

“This one here is only a few weeks old, so you have to be incredibly gentle with her and give her all your attention.” The animal shelter man says behind them.

“She?”

“Yes, got this bunch sexed yesterday.” The man smiles at them, bouncing on his toes, “So are we taking her?”

Zayn smiles when Liam looks to him for the final conformation and nods.

“Yes, yes we are.”

Zayn holds the box that contains their new kitten the whole ride home, refusing to let go for even a second. He opens the lid partially so he can see her and strokes her when he can.

Little purrs and ‘meows’ sound from the box and Liam doesn’t stop smiling the entire drive.

“What’re we naming her then?” He asks.
Zayn makes a non-committal noise, “I’m not sure… W-we made a list as kids, didn’t we?”

Liam nods, “Yeah we had a whole range on there if I remember correctly.”

Zayn nods in his peripheral vision. “Do you remember any?”

Liam thinks for a moment. “We had some rather lame ones... 'Fluffy' I think-“ Zayn bursts out in laughter for a second.

“Yeah I remember, you saw the fur off the neighbors cat and thought it was fluffy.”

Liam pretends to object “-rude!”

Zayn laughs again and Liam does with him.

“We had salt on there I think.”

Zayn gives him a look, “yeah but she doesn’t look like a salt, she has black fur. Would be a bit ironic.”

Liam laughs, “yeah I guess.”

A silence settles between them.

"How about 'Toothless." Liam Jokes.

Zayn chuckles "She's not a dragon Leeyum." Shaking his head at Liam's antics.

Another period of quiet contemplation comfortably settles on them.

“What about ‘Roman’?” Zayn suggests.

Liam mulls it over, “I like it.” He says truthfully, “It was on the list wasn’t it?”

Zayn nods, “So… Roman?”

They stop at a light and Liam turn to Zayn, he looks hopeful and Liams so happy today is going smoothly. “Roman it is.”

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They’re at the dining table, Roman in Zayn lap as the two of them have dinner. Liam is so unbelievably happy that Zayns happy. Roman was definitely a positive influence for Zayn, not once had the two separated so far and it made Liam so happy Zayn’s mind was occupied on much nicer and simple things in life, not overcomplicating anything or over thinking, just purely enjoying time.

Zayn mumbled something from across the table.

“Pardon sweetheart?” Liam watched as Zayns cheeks flushed red.

“Erm,” he clears his throat, “I was also thinking, about what you and Isabelle said about going to gym?” It’s more of a question than a statement.
“Oh yeah?” He asks conversationally, leaving it up to Zayn to voice what he wants.

“I was thinking, like, that I wanted to give it a try, yeah, but like if only that was ok with you.”

“Of course it’s ok with me Zayn,” He almost scoffs. “What do you want to try?”

“Er, well I was thinking like, those-“ he mumbles the last bit under his breath.

“What was that sorry?”

“Er, like the yoga, or, meditation thing.” He says is nonsensically like he’s embarrassed.

“Yeah of course, if you want to you definitely can. But you don’t need my permission, yeah?” Liam wants to confirm that Zayn does not need to have his blessing to try new things.

Zayn nods, “I was also wondering, like boxing or summat.”

Liam hums, laying his fork down before speaking. “It’s up to you, and you don’t have to listen to me on this but maybe not the boxing just yet?” He says, “Like, try off easier and build up to it when you’ve got a bit of weight back maybe?” He treads the water because he knows; of course he knows weight is a sensitive issue for Zayn.

Zayn hums. Nodding but Liams unsure about what that means.

“Zayn?” He leans over the table, taking his hand, “is that ok, did I say something that put you off?” He’s worried he crossed the line saying something about weight.

Zayn looks up at him from where he’d been patting Roman with one hand. “Yeah, yeah it was fine.” He says. “I have anorexia, I know you worry about crossing that line, I get it. No problem.”

Liams jaw drops.

Zayn looks up from his lap, noticing the silence.

“Is that ok?” He asks, unsure, hesitant. His eyes go wide in worry for a millisecond before Liam's answering.

“Ye-Yes!” Liam says, still in shock. “I-I just, since when have you-?” He doesn’t want to ask outright. He feels like he’s crossing a personal line of some sort but he’s unsure how that is.

“Called it anorexia?” Zayn supplies. Liam nods.

Zayn doesn’t answer immediately, taking his time to work out what he wants to say. “When, it, happened... the photos on the blog. I mean.” Zayn struggles but Liam remains patient. Setting his fork down to hear him out. "I saw some stuff that completely contradicted everything I saw about myself. It scared me a bit and I also realised that I started doing that because I felt I had to, like I was being pressured to look perfect or something. It was also,” He clears his throat, pausing for a moment. “Like, it was a control thing as well because I couldn't control anything else yeah? I could only control how much hurt I inflicted on myself. And now I have to eat and I don’t get to control how much I intake thats err-” He paused again. "Difficult, difficult and a bit confronting too.” He stops again, scratching Roman behind the ear. "Isabelle and were talking and she mentioned this thing - where, like... Referring to it as an eating dis- as anorexia I feel like I’ve got a bit more control over it... does that make sense?” Zayn looks up from Roman.

“Perfect.” Liam smiles, raising his glass and Zayn clinks it in a toast.
It's just before midnight here so appreciate i stayed up to finish this off for u guys ahaha.
Pranayama

Chapter Notes

I'm so overwhelmed by the number of comments I woke up to and have received since the last chapter! Sorry you had to wait this long for an update here because i've been working on stuff for my 'move like a sinner' series! (its that time of the month ahahaha!)

Hope all of you are well and please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They're sitting on the living room floor playing with Roman and a game when Zayn takes his next step.

"I'd cut in the shower." Is all that Zayn says after breakfast. Roman is in his lap and Zayn is playing with her and a toy they bought the day before. "I thought you should know." He says it quietly, like a whisper and doesn't look up immediately. He waits for Liam's answer.

"Ok."

It's so simple and shocks him, he was expecting a different response. He's not sure what exactly, but something different. Liam is watching him with concerned features. "How do you want to go about it?" Liam asks.

Zayn doesn't respond, he keeps playing with Roman. "I don't know."

"Do you want to talk to Isabelle about it instead?" Liam suggests. Zayn shrugs.

Liam hums. "But we've gotten rid of the blades right, so you don't really have anything to do it with... right?"

Zayn looks up on the last word and shakes his head. "No, no I promise." He rubs Roman behind the ear.

"I believe you." Liam says, "I'll always believe you." Zayn feels warm inside at that. "I'm so glad you're telling me all this Zayn."

He hums as a response.

"But, don't push yourself, yeah? I feel like you are because of what happened." Liam says while shuffling to sit next to him.

"It hurts." Zayn admits, "sometimes. Not so much now, but it hurts."

Liam cuddles him into his side closer. "I figured it did." and kisses the top of his head. "M so proud of you though."

Zayn finds it in himself to smile.
ZAYN

Zayn fidgets with his hands in the car on the way over to Liam's gym. He's a little nervous for this, and he's not so sure about what he's about to do. He wishes he felt more confident about what he was doing but he's come to accept he probably won't. Liam takes a hold of his hand over the gear box and smooths out the skin over his fingers. "Feeling ok babe?" He asks.

Zayn just nods and Liam hums, it doesn't sound like he believes him but he's ok with that. They pull into the car park and Liam grabs his mat before they walk in. This is Zayn's first time being here in years (the one and only time he came was when Liam was stranded and needed picking up). Zayn knows Liam called the instructor the other day after he said he wanted to give it a go. Liam had asked his permission to so he could check there wasn't going to be anything confronting during the class and called them right in front of him. He heard Liam on the phone explaining that there would be positions Zayn would be uncomfortable doing. The instructor on the other end of the phone spoke clear enough for Zayn to hear that she understood and that members of the class were more than welcome to skip exercises they didn't feel confident in doing. Zayn decides she likes the instructor.

They walk into the class together 20 minutes early and there's a woman in 3/4 yoga pants and a singlet setting up. She notices their presence and greets them with a smile, "Hello!" Her blonde hair bounces in her high bun and she extends her hand to shake it. "You must be Zayn. I'm Nadine." She says and he nods, taking her hand briefly before retreating back to Liam.

"Hello Liam, how are you? Haven't seen you around in a while." She says to Liam, Liam laughs in response, taking her hand too.

She begins to explain that the class today is focused on Pranayama Breathing Exercises and reiterates to him that if there's anything he's uncomfortable with he's more than welcome to sit out. He nods his understanding and fidgets with the new yoga mat that he takes from Liam.

"I'll be outside yeah?" Liam whispers when he ducks down for a goodbye kiss on the forehead. Zayn nods "Yeah I'll be fine." He puts on a brave face and isn't sure if Liam sees through it, because truth be told Zayns nervous of doing this on his own. Having a session with Isabelle is one thing but this is something else. he feels rather conscious in the yoga pants he's wearing, they expose most of his shins and ankles but it was either these or tight leggings which was a big no-no. He can see some of the light scarring on his calfs on display but they're only noticeable if you really look. They're soft though, and he feels warm in them. His long-sleeved sports jumper is equally soft. It covers a singlet underneath and is big enough that it covers his knuckles.

As he waits for others to come into the class he rolls out his matt in the far corner because he doesn't want anyone behind him while they do this. Nadine must notice he's feeling out of his element because she makes small talk with him as she sets up her speakers. She seems nice and he attempts at conversation but he stutters and apologises, giving up. She chuckles and says it's nothing, that he did fine. Zayn feels a blush settle on his cheeks.

More members flit into the class and when they're full Nadine shuts the door. The class is practically all women - looking around he seems to be the only guy and that's a little isolating. But he doesn't care because he stays in his corner and no one pays too much attention to him except the small 'hello's' from the woman to his right and the woman in front of him. He nods back and waves, not prepared to talk in front of them just yet.
"Namaste class, it's good to see you all here. Today we're reverting back to the Pranayama Breathing Exercises that I'm sure a number of you know about. We are lucky to have new faces here and I'm sure they'll introduce themselves in due course. In the meantime, let's all cross our legs and put our hands together and begin."

Zayn shuts his eyes and lets his head tilt forward, pressing his hands together and following Nadine's guidance for the entire class. Surrendering himself to what she says and letting oxygen fill his lungs and energy course through his veins in a way that has not been present in years.

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L I A M

Something warm and peaceful settles in his chest when he witnesses Zayn step out of the gym room, mat rolled under his arm with a smile on his flushed face. He looks like he's had a good time and calm. He can't help but smile and engulf him in a hug. He's overjoyed that Zayn is finally feeling ok.

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Z A Y N

When they get home Zayn continues to feel relaxed but he's a bit tired. Roman is in the living room playing with the kitty stand they got her. The class was only 45 minutes long so they've been gone just under an hour. Zayn follows Liam into the kitchen, who cuts up an apple for him and spoons out some peanut butter onto the edge of the plate. Zayn chews one slowly while walking into the living room. He'll need a shower soon because he's been sweating, but for now it's unimportant. He sits down next to Roman and plays with her as he munches on his apple slices and peanut butter. He thinks Liam will be concerned about him showering alone given his admission earlier.

Roman climbs up into his lap and rubs against him. He laughs a little under his breath and rubs her ears. "You're a little rascal aren't you." He says. He lays back down on the carpeted floor, Roman padding about on his chest. He feels quite lazy and sleepy lying on the floor, it's surprisingly comfortable and stays there for a while before he sits up. Roman claws at the material of his sweatshirt but he supports her body with his hands. She climbs up onto his shoulder and he laughs again. "Little monkey." He mutters fondly. He slowly stands, supporting her and intends on taking his plate to the kitchen but he notices the piano.

He hasn't played in a while so he pads over, sliding open the cover because he feels like playing a little. "Look Roman, he whispers. "this is the piano." He introduces and sits down, feeling slightly daft for talking to her.

The piano tiles are smooth under him, a murky, not-quite shiny white, balanced out with the equilibriums of the black far and in between. He pushes down, on this one key in particular and
plays the beat – 3 apart.

Once, twice thrice, and add the second key.

The piece develops in a way he can’t quiet explain, the composition he loves unraveling under his fingertips with a beautiful fast-yet-relaxed pace. He sways with the music, his fingers dancing over the keys.

No violence will be found here. No hurt, agony or pain. Instead he finds peace within the spider web of notes, the waves of noise that will wash over you and the quality of song, beautiful and broken intertwined beautifully. He can hear the lyrics in his head, and he focuses on them playing. The original to this song would sound completely different but at this point in time he cannot bring himself to care. He is lost in a trance – a beautiful one. Roman climbs down his arm to the top of the instrument which disrupts his playing for a moment, making him stuff up some keys but thats ok. He brushes it off and doesn't aim for perfection as he re-starts the piece.

The composition progresses and his lips tug upward, it’s small – not a smirk, but not a smile. It’s not cheeky, not necessarily happy – but it’s peaceful, it’s content. He feels Liam’s presence enter the room and sit in the corner, watching, as he closes his eyes and continues to be absorbed by the music. Playing it on a loop because it’s too good to end.

Suddenly, quietly, under his breath – so smooth he himself doesn’t notice it at first. But he’s singing along. “This is not, what it is only baby scars.” The music keeps playing. “I need your love, like a boy needs his mothers side, yeah.” He opens his eyes, looking at Roman roll around and slip on the shiny surface. Meanwhile Liam stands and walks over to him.

He lets the piece end this time and lets out a small smile. He doesn't understand why but he's feeling a little emotional because the song is so beautiful. He only played a snippet but his eyes water a little.

"You." Is all Liam says as he cups his cheeks and deposits the billionth forehead kiss that day.
"You're doing so good."

And Zayn feels good.

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"I’m so sorry! I-I’ll get it in now.” Zayn runs out the house without an answer, he’s so scared. He’s so scared. Violently yanking the pegs off the fabrics in the dark and placing them in the basket he’d bought on the way out.

Nathan is not impressed when he comes in. Still on the couch with a brown bottle of beer in his hands, staring at him while Zayn shakily takes out the materials and preps them for ironing. The irons now hot and he starts smoothing out wrinkles in the frosty clothing. Nathan seems to have forgotten him in favour of watching the 10 o’clock game on the TV now, and Zayn can breathe a little easier. That is, until Nathan looks up at him sharply while he’s ironing a shirt of his and Zayn makes the mistake of meeting this gaze. The iron runs into his fingers and immediately flies off as a response to the pain of being burnt.
“Worthless piece of shit.” Nathan stands from his seat on the couch,

Zayn flies to defend himself, kneeling on the ground before his boyfriend “So-sorry, it-its cold out
and I ju-just-“ He’s cut off with a smack to the face.

“Burn should’ve warmed you then.”

Zayn furiously shakes. But Nathan is already on his hunches before him and the cigarette that had
been precariously hanging from his lips is being pressed into his collarbone, but he knows better
than to scream. He grits his teeth and tolerates it until the stub is burnt out.

(He deserves this. He deserves this. He deserves this.)

Zayn flinches when fingers are in his hair and yanking him to his feet. A threat is mumbled under
Nathan breath “I’ll show you cold.” Nathan drags him down to the basement, opening the hatch
and forcefully shoving him down. When he’s down in the murky, frosted basement he turns around
and a blow lands on his face, causing him to stumble back. His feet are kicked out and he falls back,
curling into the foetal position and using his arms to cover himself best he can - protect himself as
Nathan kicks him. The toe of his boot leaving bruises until he’s past the point of crying out for him to
stop, please, stop!

He collapses when Nathan leaves him there, heavy steps sound and he panics when he hears the
door shut above him. Zayn forces himself to his feet and climbs up the stairs best he can, shaking the
knob, trying to get it open and banging the door. It’s freezing in here, and he’s terrified. He lets out a
sob, and turns to lean against the door. Sliding down and curling up with his head in his knees.
Fisting at his hair, yanking it because he doesn’t have a blade.

Suddenly the door is yanked open with an exceptionally pissed-looking Nathan there, and Zayn
immediately regrets his earlier actions. He’s pushed down the stairs again and falls onto his back.

(I’m sorry, I’m sorry, ‘I’m sorry!’)

Zayn’s only wearing a navy t-shirt and jeans, and the t-shirt is literally being ripped off him. Zayn
only notices the roll of tape too late, when the snacking sound of duck tape is being ripped he
struggles, pushing his hands far away from each other, spreading himself. His breaths are coming
out short and panicky, he’s hyperventilating and he knows it. He chokes out a ‘please no’ with tears
streaming his face but it’s falling on deaf ears. He struggles under him to get free but Nathan rips off
several pieces, temporarily dropping them on his chest and smacks one over on of his outstretched wrists, ripping another pre-torn piece, ripping out what little chest hair he has in it’s wake and placing it over his forearm, then his elbow and upper arm. He keeps on screaming, trying to get away because "please no! Nathan!" He sobs incoherently "it-it-it’ll hurt th-

Zayn can’t breathe. It’s like he’s drowning, trying to yank his arm up off where it’s taped to the floor and screams, but Nathans shoving in a bit of what is left of his t-shirt into his mouth and tapes over it. He literally cannot breathe right now his mouth is covered, not enough is getting through his nose and lights are dancing over his eyes, everything goes weird and dizzy and then it’s black.

- 

When he wakes up it’s cold. He’s aching and feels drained and it’s just cold. He tries to move, but he can’t. So he tries again and when his eyes adjust to the poor lighting of the room he knows why.

His wrists are taped together, as are his ankles and knees. His t-shirt is long gone and his jeans do very little to provide warmth. He tries to curl into himself, maybe keep what warmth he has. But he has that fucking collar around his neck and the chain is wrapped and locked around the base of the stair banister. He tries to curl his legs in but they hurt so much and when they don’t move far he realises the chains that are wrapped around them too, and attached to some immovable object elsewhere in the room. He sobs out. Wriggling in a futile effort to get free and to make matters worse. He finds out that the only article of clothing on him, is also restraining him. He’s been moved to the place with that stupid hook in the floor and a climbing clip through a belt hoop holds him to it. He tries to move his wrists from the floor, but he can’t move and ~ fucking hell please make this stop. Muffled sobs rack his body, as do shivers, tears streaming his face and disgusting sounds echo the walls. He hates himself, so fucking much; he really does and just wants this to be over with.

It takes him hours, but he gets to sleep and when he wakes up, it’s with a boot to his back, un-clipping him and then un-locking him. With a morning greeting of “Get me my breakfast bitch or you may spend another night down here.” A boot colliding with his chest again.

He wakes up in a cold sweat gasping for air when the boot connects with his ribs and breaks one. He shoots up into a sitting position in the bed and feels disorientated; sick. He hates himself and the room is swimming in murky darkness and he’s cold and gasping for air - he doesn’t know where he is and that just makes his breathing heavier and faster. That is, until something moves next to him. He flinches, holding back a shriek because he’s terrified that it’s Nathan. However, it’s not when he turns his head; heart pounding with anxiety, it is in fact Liam.

He can’t stop himself from thinking, from remembering how Nathan ripped some of the tape off him but refused to remove the gag around his mouth. The whole day Nathan didn’t let him remove the gag or the collar and in fact handcuffed him by wrapping chain around his wrists and locking them. The length of chain was long enough between his wrists that he could continue to do chores and cook but not easily.
He also thinks about how that night he was allowed to sleep in their room again but on the floor. Because Nathan was "disgusted" by him, "absolutely and utterly revolted." Nathan chained his legs together too. Similar to his arms there was enough length between them that he could walk but it was more a hobble. He thinks about how he woke up the next morning, in agony from the beating and sleeping on the cold wooden floor, how he pushed himself up - with great difficulty - and limped downstairs to the kitchen, the chain dragging across the floor and jingling every time he moved. What a pitiful sight met him as he passed the hallway mirror; gagged, chained wrists, chained ankles, limping, bruised, a black eye so bad he couldn't open it, the whole works. He was disgusted by himself and didn't stop crying until he hobbled into their room again, Nathan's breakfast in on a tray to show him how thankful Zayn was for helping him, for not being too hard on him this time. Nathan told him to stop crying "like the pathetic bitch" he was and praised him when he did. Nathan seemed pleased at how Zayn did so well for him like this and didn't unlock his ankles until bed. He removed the gag (Thank Allah), but even though he unlocked his ankles he didn't unlock his hands or remove the collar. No, his hands stayed locked together, the chain biting into his bony wrists and the leather bruising his neck for days to come.

He focuses on slowing down his breathing, moving away from the warmth of Liam's comfortable body to place his feet on the hardwood floor beneath him. He doesn't want Liam to wake up on his account; Liam should not be worried on Zayn's behalf; it only makes Zayn feel guiltier than normal and worse about all his failures. Especially given all Liam does for him and how he felt like he was doing ok recently.

He holds his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees and focuses on the inhale and exhale of each breath. slowly allowing oxygen into his lungs and back out again. He attempts to safe-place, just like Isabelle taught him again yesterday - but it’s hard and he tries to resist the temptation he has gone so far now without. He ignores the burning want for a blade, the stinging need to purge. He’s hyper-aware of Liam being only a meter away from him and tries to keep his shaking to a minimum. He’s not crying, he just can’t quite feel himself. It’s like an out-of-body experience as he nearly pushes himself off the bed and towards the bathroom.

Nearly.

He tries to think about other things, he thinks about the trip to the zoo with Liam and when the guys came around to dinner the other day - their laughter and tries to press on his urge by thinking about the Skype call he had with his mum not ~ he looks at the clock and the red numbers glare 03:12 at him ~ 6 hours ago. He thinks about drawing Liam earlier on and when Liam made him Tarte Flêt, his old favourite from when they went to France as children. He thinks Liam, Liam: Liam.

Liam not a meter away, Liam who tells him he wants him to wake him when he’s feeling like this. To please wake him up if he needs anything.

He bites on his lip, fisting his hands and focusing on breathing again. It's such a juxtaposition to how
Isabelle said go to Liam if he needs help. She said it would really help him out. Liam who said it’s ok to do that and Liam who’s sleeping on the bed next to him right this very second while he sits he contemplating his urges to cut or purge or both.

He lets out a whimper, because he literally cannot contain the urge anymore. He nearly lets his pride take over as well and run to the bathroom; but then he remembers, thinking back to how Nathan kept him chained up that week that he has no pride left, he has no dignity, he has no respect. He whimpers again, but turns around, sitting so he’s facing the top of the bed with one leg tucked under him and the other dangling to the floor, shaking with anxiety and need as he shakes Liam’s shoulder.

Liam groans in his sleep and Zayn takes that as an invitation to stop; he needs to stop. Liam doesn’t want to get up. Liam shouldn’t have to get up. But then the man stirs and blinks open his eyes. Zayn wishes more than anything to take back his action right now and curls up into a ball, focusing on breathing again as he shivers with his head in his knees.

“Zayn?”

Liam gruff sleep-voice gets him to look up and tears brim again. Why is he so fucking pathetic? Why can’t he deal with his own fucking problems?

“Zayn?” Liam speaks clearer now, “What's wrong honey?” He sits up and shuffles over the Zayn, hands on knees and pulling them apart so Zayn can’t hide his face anymore. His bottom lip quivers as if he were shivering from the cold and his body shakes.

_Dammit Zayn, cut already. Feel that beautiful sting and burn, watch the blood drip form your arms and fall to the floor. Repeat it. Over and over and over until you can only feel that nirvana for punishment. Punishment for your worthless pathetic being, and then leave here. Leave here because you don't fucking deserve the attention and affection this man, Liam, gives you. Slip away, become so small you cease to exist and free up the mass of space you take up. Leave here and fall asleep for eternity, that’s what you want anyway- isn’t it? You greedy bastard. To fall asleep and never wake up. You get that blade and you-_

The voice in his head is snapped off by Liam shaking Zayns shoulders. It’s a little on the rough side but no where near Nathans type of rough.
“Please help me.”

It comes out in this barely discernible whimper and much too quick. He’s hyperventilating now because the voice is back and it won’t shut up. It tells him you worthless swine and how dare you. But Liam shuts them off again and pulls on the hand he didn’t realise he had taken a hold of and pulls him on his knees, and then when Liam lays down, pulls him down on top of him, so Zayns head is on Liams chest and his hands are trapped between their bodies with their legs tangled. Liam sits up a bit so his upper body is at an angle and he lifts one leg to 90 degrees. Zayn can hear the thump thump of Liams heart and it’s oddly comforting, but he’s so tense and can’t make himself stop shaking.

He hears Liam shushing him, and an arm is now dropped across his back and a hand is in his hair, massaging the scalp and then the hand from his back is off, pulling covers over him as well. “It’s ok Zayn, it’s ok.” He hears Liam tell him, but he’s so frustrated with himself now because he could’ve cut and been back already. He turns his head so his forehead is on Liams sternum and brings his hands up to his chest, fitting them in there as he tries to shrink into himself, breathing heavy and forced now.

“Zayn, beautiful, Zayn, please tell me what you’re feeling.”

But Zayn can’t answer right now, because if he does he will shatter. He will scream and the need will be too much and he might hurt someone other than himself.

“Zayn?”

He lets out a pained “ahh!” into Liams chest and places his hands flat there. He attempts to push himself from where he is, but the hand on his back stops him. It doesn't panic him like it should, it just makes the first few tears and a hiccup escape.

“Zayn, gorgeous. Please talk to me.” Liam sounds worried. He’s so stupid, he shouldn’t have woken him. He should’ve done the deed and come back.

Zayn takes a shuddery, unsatisfactory breath, gasping out “please!” with a choked off syllable at the end.

“Please what darling?”
“Please, just-” He doesn’t know what he’s asking for, he just needs to be held - he needs the voices to stop - the voice to go away. “-just.” He chokes out again. “Make i-it stop.”

It’s juvenile and desperate, but he can't do much else with his existence than beg. “Please, make it s-stop!”

Liam shushes him more, “it’s ok Zayn, tell me what you want.”

“My blade,” he near shrieks; “I just need my b-blade, and the b-bathroom and I-I need it to s-stop.” He takes too many breaths in that sentence and doesn’t dwell on the regret of telling Liam for long.

“I can’t let you cut gorgeous.”

Zayn sobs into his chest more, “I-I know.” He coughs. “I fu-fucking kno-w.”

Liam sniffs, “It’s ok honey, we’ll get through this together,” and moves his chin so it’s on top of Zayns head and brings the hand down to rub his upper back. The other resting on the small of his back.

He moves to push at Liams chest again, whining when he doesn’t get far again. “Hold me.”

He surprises himself with talking; he didn’t mean for that to come out but he knows, he knows that Liam could hold him so good. He could stop him from hurting himself.

Liam doesn't hear though and lets out a "hmm?"

“Please, j-just lik-ke, h-hold me. I-I need, need it so-so bad.”

Liam seems to understand this and Zayn can feel the biceps holding him down, he can feel - through his shaky sobs and wrecked grunts - the power in them, the strength they hold. Much more than any muscle of Nathans, muscles that could hurt him more and yet work to stop the hurt. Muscles that encompass him and shield him night and day and make him feel *safe*. He feels a kiss pressed to the top of his head and that calms him a little bit with the combination of being held so close and *tight* by someone as lovely, as amazing as Liam.
“Listen to my heartbeat babe, just listen to it, focus on that instead.”

He feels lips on his temples, placing loving pieces of affection on him that go straight to his chest, working their way through this thick sludge and weight that surrounds his heart. His thick arms rub his lower back and now, Zayn turns his head so his right ear is pressed to Liam’s chest so a hand threads into his hair. The fingers massaging the scalp and he feels jolts of calm shoot through his scribbled mess of a brain; the thump thump is louder now. It ploughs through the darkness and brings his disorientated being down again.

“Whatever it’s saying it’s wrong, those voices can never hurt you when I’m here. He can't hurt you when I'm here.”

Hums and a mantra of shush, shush, shush work through the energy of negativity around him - the voices die down, as does his erratic breathing and he lets his body relax into Liam.

“Thank you Zayn.” He hears Liam whisper a while later when his breathing is somewhat calm and mind seems heavier but clearer than ever before.

He can’t answer immediately. The thick mush that appears to be his mind doesn’t allow the words to process for a while. But when it does he gets confused “What?”

“Thank you Zayn.” Liam repeats softly, pressing more kisses to his forehead now. Zayn feels out of it now. Drained from nothing and yet everything.

“Why?” It's a croaked out mess and takes more energy than it should have.

“You woke me up honey, you woke me up and came to help when you needed it.”

That takes Zayn another moment to process, a sniff makes him flinch - is Liam crying? Oh god please no.

“I am so proud of you.” Liam tells him, and Zayn’s breathing stops a second. What?

“I am so proud of you, and glad you woke me up. It means so much, that when you obviously felt
that powerful need to cut, when you were on the verge of breaking you came to me. You woke me up and you told me what you needed.” Liam pauses. “God, Zayn, you’re just incredible,” he feels a hand stroke his face, “I’m so unbelievably proud of you, i am.” Liam sniffs and Zayn. “That must’ve been so hard, so thank you, Zayn, thank you so much for trusting me and coming to me when you were hurting.”

Zayn really cannot respond to that so he stays silent.

Liam chuckles above him, he can feel the vibrations of it under his ear, rippling through his chest. It feels good. “I swear, I forget for one moment just how extraordinary you are, and then you manage to do something to remind me of it somehow.” Liam noses as his temple, kissing his forehead three more times. Zayn opens his mouth to try speak but it’s just a mess of garbled syllables again.

“I know, Zayn.” He hears Liam say softly. “I know you don’t believe me, but just don’t say anything against it, just for now, ok? And one day I’ll show you. You don’t believe me, but I promise, ok beautiful?”

Zayn can’t do anything but nod with his head on Liams chest.

“Good.” Liam kisses his forehead again, thumbing his cheekbone and rubbing his back like he knows what wonders it does to freeing up the lump in his throat and knots in his chest. He sighs while Liam does it, letting his eyes flutter shut and shoulders relax more into Liam, who encompasses him more as if he also knows that Zayn feels safer like this.

“Get some sleep gorgeous, and we’ll finish today off right with something later, ok?”

Zayn chances a glance at the clock and notices it reads 04:59. His eyes train on it until it changes 05:00 and then he nods on Liams chest. He didn’t notice how bone tired he feels right now, how drained of energy he is and swallows, before shutting his eyes and letting sleep consume him.

The last thing he hears before he drops off is Liam saying. “One day I’ll hold you so good all your pieces will fit back together. We’ll make it someday.” With a kiss on his forehead. And then he’s out. Completely dead to the world.

But before he does he thinks that going to Liam made him feel a lot better than cutting in the bathroom.
I wasn't sure if the yoga bit was really finished or not so let me know if u think more should be added to it!

Another update tomorrow with luck!! PURE FLUFF I PROMISE YOU.
Chapter Notes

Sorry this was late, I was writing this and then we had a blackout and I lost a lot of it but I hope you enjoy!

VERY IMPORTANT END NOTE PLEASE READ IT

Zayn wakes up the morning after curled up under Liam’s body. He didn’t feel ok just with the regular cuddle Liam gave him each night, he needed something different and Liam seemed to know exactly what he meant by that. He’s little spoon while Liam is big spoon and practically lying on top of him, encompassing him wholly. Liam had voiced his worry that he was going to hurt Zayn being much heavier than him but Zayn admitted he liked the pressure at that point in time. He nuzzled his face into the pillow and wrung his hands which were tucked under his chin. When he moved Liam shifted above him.

“G’morning.” Liam rough sleep voice sounds, it rumbles across his back. Zayn hums in reply, wriggling under his hold and turning himself around. Liam moves himself and pulls his leg back from over Zayn and the covers and lets Zayn throw his leg over him this time. He cards his hand through Zayn’s hair lazily and thumbing over his cheekbones.

“Are you feeling better now?” Liam asks quietly.

Zayn nods, “yeah.” It’s quiet and under his breath. He sounds small but he doesn’t care. He snuggles into Liam closer and Liam reciprocates by tucking him under his chin. Zayn thinks if he were a cat like Roman he’d be purring by now.

They stay like that, cuddled together for a good while. At some point Liam drags the covers up to make sure Zayn is kept warm because in his twisting and turning they somehow ended up at his midriff. It makes him smile and hum happily.

“I’d really like to spoil you today.” Liam says. Nuzzling his nose against Zayn’s hairline.

Zayn looks up at him, incredulous, “you already do though.” He says, words a little slurred from sleep.

Liam smiles down at him and brushes a hand through his hair. “Yeah, but this is a different kind.”

Zayn huffs out a laugh, “mhmm.” He nuzzles into Liam’s chest. “And what is it exactly, your plan?”
Liam smiles. “Well, I’d really love to cuddle you a lot today,” he starts off small and thumbs over Zayn’s sleep warm cheekbone.” And I’d like to dress you in warm soft clothes that smell really nice and I’d like to take you out for a treat and kiss all over your face.” Zayn’s brow furrow as he registers what Liam's saying. "I'd really love to spend today making you feel loved and safe, give you a massage and if you were comfortable I’d love to give you a bath and then wrap you up in a million blankets before snuggling on the couch with you to watch your favourite movie at the moment.” Liam squeezes him. “If you want that then I’d love to do that with you today.”

Zayn sniffs a little and immediately Liam’s establishing eye contact and hushing him.

“I’m sorry, I’m being silly.” Zayn says between sniffs.

“No, no it’s never silly when you cry beautiful.” Liam sits them up and has Zayn in his lap, chest to chest. “What’s upsetting you lovely?” He asks, taking a hold of Zayn’s hand and thumbing over his knuckles. “Something about your nightmare?”

“M’ not upset Liam.” Zayn says, “Just- you, I don’t deserve this.” He cries unhappily. “You always treat me so well and it’s-it’s a bit overwhelming and I don’t know what to do.” He hides his face in his hands and Liam gently takes a hold of his wrists and noses in the gap between them so he can peek through.

“You deserve this baby, you deserve it so much.” He hums, rubbing their noses together to make Zayn smile. “I know it’s strange but if it’s ok with you i’d just like to spoil you.”

Zayn shakes his head but Liam laughs at him, cooing, “Yes baby, yes you do.” He darts in and kisses at his temple. He also picks up the covers which have fallen around his waist and pulls them over and around his shoulders to create that feeling of security and comfort.

“I-I just, I don’t get it.” Zayn says. “I don’t really do anything to help out and yet you always treat me like I do everything.”

“Well, you make me smile and you focus on helping yourself which makes me happy. You go out on walks with me and give me someone to cuddle, you always try your best which is so endearing and you’re my best friend. Of course you do stuff.” Liam nuzzles at him again.

“Wanna take you out and prove I’m here for the long-run too. That i’m not going to leave you or
treat you like he did.” Liam says quietly. “Prove i’m always going to be here to take care of you.”

Zayn sniffs again. “I-I don’t know what to say.” He says quietly, and if Liam wasn’t so attuned to him he might’ve missed it.

Liam hums, nosing at Zayn’s temple and hairline, “then don’t say anything beautiful. Just let me spoil you a bit.”

Zayn giggles as Liam wraps the duvet tighter around his shoulders. He rummages through their closet and selects a range of their warmest and most comfortable clothing - irrelevant whether it’s his or not. Liam hums and eventually decides on a soft grey hoodie and thick blue joggers that are slim but not skin tight. For underneath he picks out a pair of really nice quality boxers, a singlet vest and a cotton white long sleeved t-shirt.

Zayn hums in approval when Liam lays them out and smiles dopily when Liam kisses his hair. Zayn lets himself get lost in the nice feeling of Liam removing the duvet from around him and slipping off his sleepshirt. He doesn’t look when Liam slips the skin tight singlet vest on but does when the t-shirt goes over the top.

Liam turns around as he pulls off his sleep joggers and pulls on the boxers. They’re new and soft and he nearly cries from how nice they feel compared to the pair’s he’s worn for years - old ratty thin pieces of harsh material that were rough and hurt him, especially after the night’s N-he used him. He’s not sure when he got so emotional about underwear but the moment he sniffs Liam has his arms around him and reaches out to pull the joggers on for him. He feels light when Liam spins him around and ties the hoodie arms around his waist.

Liam picks him up much to his surprise and carries him downstairs, where he sits him down at the breakfast island and goes about making breakfast. Roman climbs into his lap after waking up upon their entry. He rubs Roman behind his ear and mumbles nothing to him, playing with him until Liam brings breakfast back. He eats it, slowly, but he works his way through it. It's easier now, at least he thinks it is. He kind of just doesn't think about it? Roman requires a bit of his attention and Liam encourages the rest of him. There’s a small part of his brain that screams at him but it's easier to ignore nowadays, or even better, it's not there at all on the best days.

He has his vitamins and drinks the rest of his milk (because it turns out he's lacking in calcium and his bones aren't so strong because of what happened before). He looks up, having trained his eyes on Roman for his meal, and sees Liam beaming at him. Planting a small kiss on his forehead and putting the dishes back in the kitchen to clean up later. He comes around and hugs Zayn from behind, humming into his neck and stroking Roman in his lap. His palms are huge compared to Zayn’s or even Roman’s body. It's surreal, honestly.
Liam comes around and picks him up again, because apparently he doesn't have functioning legs anymore. He smiles, feeling comfortable in his arms and just as comfortable as he sets him down on the sofa and pushes on his thick boots. Worn in from many walks.

Liam runs a hand through his product free hair and hums. “So soft.” He compliments and Zayn feels himself blushing. Liam holds up a selection of beanies and Zayn chooses a dark green one, pulling it over his ears and smiling.

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Liam guides him out to the car and drives without informing Zayn where they're going. He doesn't ask either, trusting Liam with what he's planning and watching the country unfold before him. Like before they adopted Roman, Zayn stares out the window and enjoys the physical beauty laid out before him. Soft music plays in the background, washing over him in calm waves. At one point he holds his arm out the window, waving it through the air and enjoying the serenity and genuineness of the moment.

They pull up to the local centre that they used to go to as kids and park. Zayn smiles, remembering how much they used to come here as kids - it's been years since he was last here. He's unclasping his seatbelt as Liam comes around and opens the door for him. It will never fail to make Zayn blush and feel a strange but pleasant rush. Somehow, Liam has also been able to retrieve their coats and helps Zayn put it on as well. Fussing that he doesn't want Zayn to end up with a cold.

Liam guides him through the local shopping mall that he can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of deja vu. It's so familiar and yet so different. When he was with, well, before, he was never allowed out. The only time he could leave the house was to to the weekly shopping but sometimes it turned into fortnightly shopping. Really though, they were feeding one person. While Zayn ate it could not be considered two mouths were being fed in that apartment, that... Relationship. Zayn never had any money to spend anyway, having had to quit his job and drop out of school, and the money he had access to was in the account Nathan constantly checked. He couldn't ever use cash or the ATM because N- he could see it. The one time he ever retracted money from an ATM, regardless that it was only £15 for a-

No. He stops himself there. He is here for a day with Liam. He is here to have a good time. He is here to move on from that time.

Liam holds his hand as he treads along the wall. They used to do this as kids, tip toeing the edge and giggling when they lost their balance only to try again. Oh yeah, and you couldn't tread on the lines because that wasn't allowed. Game rules. He finds himself smiling harder than he probably should but he doesn’t care.
Liam also tucks him into his side and leads him into all his favourite stores from before. Getting him to look around for anything he likes.

“Look!” Liam points to the swimwear section in one shop, pulling him by the hand through the aisles towards it. He positions Zayn in front of him before the men’s options. “If you’re comfortable with that bath later but not sure how you feel about being, well, naked then maybe a pair of swim shorts would make it a bit easier?”

Zayn stares at the wall for a bit, really wondering how much Liam thinks ahead with these things because even he hadn’t thought of that. He might cry a little again because Liam's so considerate and he doesn't ever know how to react to it. He tentatively reaches out for a pair with graphic design on them. He holds them to his waist, they're a little big and he checks the size but they're the only 'Small' option. Zayn's not sure whether to be proud of that or not. He ignores it and, when he checks the price, blanching, and goes to put them back on the rail in search of another, much cheaper pair, he finds that Liam's already got it over his elbow and won't put it back despite his protests because he 'knows that he likes them'.

To Zayn’s equal horror and delight Liam actually buys him things. He feels awkward about it but lets it go as much as he can when Liam insists him not to. It takes a lot of persuasion. Especially when Liam catches him spying a purple jumper in another store and his gaze lingering on a bracelet in one store's window a bit too long. He refuses to look at anything else after that in favour of hiding under Liam's wing and walking around the centre with him. They have regular breaks, sitting down at the benches and talking about nothing, at one point Liam brings out his phone and sends off a few texts but other than they just talk. Zayn loves that, being able to talk to Liam about both the deeply personal and the trivial. It's a Tuesday too, meaning kids are at school and most people have done their weekly shop and thus the centre is quiet which does wonders to his attitude.

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They end up in a cafe at some point during the day. Zayn is wearing his new bracelet and has the bag with his new jumper in over the crook of his elbow. He leans into Liam’s side as they queue. When they get to the front Liam tells to lady behind the counter that he’d like a blueberry muffin and a tea.

He turns to Zayn, rubbing his arm. “You don’t have to get anything if you don’t want but something small would be good.” He whispers, kissing the top of Zayn’s head. Zayn clears his throat and steps away from Liam.

“I-” He stammers, not making eye contact with the lady. He’s wary of the customer behind them.
“I’d like a hot chocolate please.” He says firmly. The lady smiles and recites his order while typing it into the touch-screen computer.

“Is that all?” She asks.

Liam smiles. “Yeah, that’ll be great thanks.”

As he pulls out his wallet Zayn interjects. “Actually… Can I have a cookie with that? The, er- the oatmeal one please.” He looks to Liam, “Is that ok?” But Liam’s already beaming at him, handing over the correct amount of cash to the lady as she prints a receipt.

“More than.” Liam tells him, kissing his hairline and leading his to the waiting area.

(As they wait Liam doesn’t shut up about how proud he is of him and Zayn thinks that this is what it feels like to be happy again).

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"Almost time for your nap.” Liam says.

Zayn scoffs, “you make me sound like a toddler.”

Liam laughs, “No I didn’t!” His tone is teasing.

Zayn scrunches his eyes and laughs back, “Oh yes you did!”

It’s true though; Liam can see that Zayn’s getting tired out here, his stance drooping and his eyes getting heavy. He steers him towards the car with a hand on his shoulder and drives them home the scenic route, one which is on the back roads and shows the rolling green, albeit a bit frozen, countryside the county has to offer.

They get back home and Liam, ever the gentleman, insists Zayn stay put and let him come around for him. All the way up to undoing his seatbelt. They walk in and Zayn sighs, removing his shoes
carefully before placing them neatly on the rack and taking off his coat - Liam beats him to it and takes it off for him though. Roman comes bounding up to them, the bits of metal on her collar jingling happily and Zayn picks her up, cradling her in his arms and rubbing her ears just how she likes. Liam mirrors his actions with the shoes and coaxes Zayn to move on up to his room. Liam follows him up the stairs to Zayn’s room - well, he’s not sure if it’s their room now or whatnot, whatever Zayn feels comfortable with. Liam can’t stop his grin in anticipation of Zayn opening the door.

Zayn pushes the door open with ease, looking up to the bed and stops in his tracks. The bed was perfectly made with new sheets on them. Liam knows it's not much but Zayn is happier over the simple things now which is what this is.

“Who-what?” He begins to question. Sounding a little alarmed.

Liam comes up behind him. “Harry came and did it earlier while we were out.” He whispers.

Zayn knows it’s not much - but seriously, the feeling of getting into a newly made bed, with new sheets was unbeatable right now and he was feeling emotional, he may just cry again. He felt unbelievable, first underwear and now this? He gets emotional over the weirdest things nowadays he swears to Allah.

Liam noses at his temple and thumbs his hip, “go on, make yourself comfortable.”

Zayn does, he doesn’t always realise it but he feels sleepy and laying down in bed just sound so good right now. Liam follows him around when he sits down and takes off his hoodie for him. He also helps him remove his long sleeved shirt and trades it for another one because despite it being so cold he's managed to sweat a little.

He stands and clambers in between the sheets, snuggling himself into the pillows and covers with a happy hum and squirming around for a comfortable position. Tucking his hands into the tops of the sheets to warm them up a little. Liam kisses each of his eyelids before walking to the door.

“Liam.” Zayn calls softly just as he steps over the threshold. Drowsiness already taking a thorough hold.

“Yes Zayn?” Liam asks quietly.

“Cuddle?”

Liam smiles, “of course gorgeous. One moment I’ll be right back.”
Liam leaves the door ajar and returns in under a minute dressed in comfortable clothes himself. He shuts the door with a ‘click’ before padding over to the bed softly. He lifts up the first duvet and goes to climb in. Zayn cuts him off with a small, “erm.”

Liam pauses immediately, ready to back off if Zayn had changed his mind.

“Maybe… the second cover isn’t necessary anymore?” Zayn suggests quietly.

Liam needs explicit permission however, “is it ok if I come under the cover with you and fold this down the end of the bed?”

Zayn nods, “yes please.” Liam smiles back at him and rolls the cover down to the foot of the bed before climbing under the same sheet as Zayn. He gently sidles up to him and holds his arms out, waiting for Zayn to come to him. Zayn fumbles about, his hand getting caught in the sheet at one point, and nuzzles into Liam’s chest. His hand come around Liam’s ribcage and the other tucks under his own chest. His legs tangle with Liam’s… the first time without covers between and it feels much more natural. Liam gently places a hand on his shoulder and the other in his hair. But not before bringing the covers up to around Zayn’s shoulders.

Zayn hums happily and shuts his eyes, slowly letting Liam’s heartbeat send him off to sleep.

Zayn wakes up two hours later feeling relaxed and refreshed. Like he's had the perfect amount of sleep and finds he's extremely satisfied. He hums and snuggles further into Liam's body, somehow they ended up spooning but Zayn's not complaining. He dozes a little longer because Liam's still napping but huffs a little as Roman pads in and jumps up. Demanding attention.

Zayn exhales a soft laugh and pets her, her collar jingling as she shivers under his hand. Liam wakes up when she lets out a small ‘meow’. Neither say anything, just pet Roman and cuddle. Zayn’s in Jannah.

Liam plants a small kiss on Zayn hairline about 5 minutes later. “How’re you feeling?” He asks quietly.

Zayn hums, “excellent.” He answers truthfully. “All thanks to you.”
Liam makes a noise of disagreement, “you certainly do most the work.”

Zayn shakes his head.

“You do, it’s your choice to accept this and be here. I’m just trying to help you a bit.”

Zayn sighs, choosing not to fight this battle, “whatever helps you sleep at night.”

It’s quiet again for a moment.

“How do you feel about a bath?”

Zayn smiles before he thinks it through. At first he considers how relaxing it’d be, but then again… his body showing like that...

“I’m not sure about bath, just, i’m not sure with my body on display like that… but maybe a shower?”

Liam kisses his hairline.

(He’s so proud of him for still wanting to accept a bit of love and suggesting a compromise even though he’s not wholly comfortable.)

“If that’s what you want then we’ll do that.” Liam affirms before getting up.

Zayn whines as he leaves the bed. “Nuuu.” He calls with a small laugh.

“I’ll be right back gorgeous,” Liam answers.

All is ok right up until Zayn has to take off his singlet. He still has his joggers on. They only got as far as removing his socks and long sleeved shirt.

“I-I’m sorry, I thought it’d be easier like this.” Zayn sniffs, holding his arms against his chest. “I jus-
I.” He stops, hiding his face in his hands.

He feels Liam’s presence before him, hands resting on his hips and rubbing slowly but soothingly. “Do you need me to leave babe? It’s ok if you do, or if u don’t want this at all we can go downstairs and cuddle.”

“No, I-I do, it’s just I-” he sniffs, coming out from behind his hands and wiping his face with them. “I don’t want you to see my body, I-it feels wrong.” He says, “but on the other hand it’s you and I’m fine with you and …”

“Babe, babe.” Liam hushes when Zayn cries again, “it’s all ok, come here.” He holds Zayn close into his chest. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re gorgeous. You’re not morbidly obese and you’re not a skeleton now either, it’s up to you, because this is all about how you feel, but you’re perfect to me. Even if you did weigh a hundred pounds you’d still be perfect to me.”

Zayn breaks down in his arms again and Liam can’t help but think this is not how he wanted this to go. “What do you want to do Zayn?” He asks softly, brushing his hair from his face. “We can do anything you want.”

“I-I,” Zayn gulps, “I want to have a shower.”

“Yeah?” Liam asks, moving back so he can make eye contact. “You don’t have to.”

“N-no I want to.” Zayn says, adamant. “I-if you’re ok with it of course.”

Liam laughs, “oh you silly boy, I’ll always want to.”

Zayn smiles though it’s wet with tears and Liam turns the nozzle again, using his hand to test the temperature. While he’s not looking Zayn takes the opportunity to strip. His heart is caught in his throat and he thinks he might throw up or at least choke on it he’s so nervous and self-conscious. Liam turns around and must see how anxious he is because he immediately looks him in the eyes and doesn’t look anywhere else. He holds his head in his hands gently, keeping a hold on their gaze. Zayn’s hands wrap around his wrists, always so careful because Liam is always wary of the scars and healing on the skin there. Zayn gulps, frozen on the spot.

“It’s ok.” Liam says quietly, Zayn nods, swallowing again and feeling a little less panicked.
Liam steps back and grabs Zayn’s new swim shorts and hands them to him, coaxing him to put them on but he’s a little slow and panicked, the knowledge of being so exposed for the first time since his attempt means that it takes a lot of encouragement. In the meantime Liam strips down himself and also puts on a pair of boardshorts so Zayn isn’t alone like this.

Liam threads his fingers through Zayn’s and brings him under the spray gently.

“Here.” Zayn looks up at Liam. “I’m not looking anywhere but your gorgeous face.” He says.

Zayn gets a bit teary again, because he still can’t fathom how Liam finds him so beautiful.

Liam uses a hand to cover his eyes to protect him from the water and wets his hair, holding him under the spray until Zayn begins to relax. “Here, let me gorgeous.” Liam says. Pouring some shampoo in his hand and working up a lather in his hair. Zayn feels tension drain out him like water down the drain and thinks he might melt under the way Liam’s fingers work at his scalp. Little gasps fall from his lips periodically and he shuts his eyes. Liam covers his eyes again and washes the lather out before shampooing his own hair, Zayn helps a little.

When their finished Liam hides him under his chin and brings out the conditioner bottle, humming. Zayn feels the vibrations rumble through Liam’s chest to his. Liam mushes the conditioner in between the strands of his now thickening hair, turning the shower head so it’s still spraying their bodies but not his hair. He thinks he’ll purr when Liam removes his hands and slips on a pair of shower gloves, drizzling out a generous amount of strawberry shower gel which smells amazing and working up a lather before rubbing him down. Starting off at the back of his neck and shoulders, down his chest and around his back.

“Is this ok?” Liam whispers when he reaches his waist. Zayn nods but his breath catches in his throat. He expected Liam to keep going around… there. But instead he must read Zayn like a map because he bypasses that area completely and washes from his knees downwards, not touching the board shorts. Zayn smiles dopily as Liam massages out his calf. Feeling safe and clean as he scrubs him down. He has to lift his foot and place his hands on Liam’s shoulders for support when he insists scrubbing his feet too.

Liam stands when he deems himself finished and smiles down at Zayn, kissing his forehead for the billionth time that day. Leisurely dragging the mitts over his back when he brings him in for a hug while the remaining suds wash away.
Eventually they have to get out of the shower and when they do Liam swaddles him in the big fluffy towel and quickly uses a towel to dry his hair off a bit. Liam removes Zayn’s boardies by grabbing the hem and pulling them down once the towel is fistled securely in Zayn’s hands and does the same for his own when he wraps a towel around his waist.

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Liam dresses him in a new pair of joggers and a soft red cotton long sleeved top before pushing fluffy socks over his feet so his toes won’t get cold. Liam himself pulls over a random t-shirt and sweatpants before picking up a very pliant Zayn and moving him downstairs. Liam sits him down on the couch and wraps a blanket around his shoulders and leaves for a moment, but not before he kisses Zayn’s nose and promises to be back in the minute. Zayn curls his feet up onto the sofa and sits cross legged, tugging the soft blanket decorated with stars around his core. He wriggles his toes, fighting the cold that started to manifest after walking out the shower barefoot to the sound of Liam running up the stairs and 20 seconds later back down. Liam returns as promised holding a small bowl of yoghurt with strawberries, banana and other bits of fruit mixed in and two teas. One with a spoon in because Zayn likes to stir his tea as he drinks it.

(Liam has, ever since they were little, claimed it was stupid because he could poke his eyes out and “Zayn, really? Is a teaspoon worth an eye? In fact, Liam is almost half convinced the whole ‘I-like-a-spoon-in-my-tea’ thing started after Zayn learn of his spoon phobia in an effort to get Liam to stop stealing his tea’s)

Zayn smiles, Liam always finding the little things that make him appreciate life. Liam places the bowl on the armrest and the teas on the floor before climbing in behind Zayn. Tucking the blanket around him so much he’s practically a little burrito. Before he pulls him back into his chest he makes sure to grab the remote and hands it to Zayn, quietly telling him to put on whatever he wishes. Zayn starts to do just that as Liam picks up a second blanket, larger than the one around Zayn’s shoulder and wraps it around the two of them. He settles them into the corner of the seat and sighs as he snuggles Zayn close, tangling their legs together. Zayn selects a range of youtube videos for them to watch and settles himself under Liam’s chin. Liam picks up the bowl and coaxes Zayn to steadily have it as well as the tea. He’s delighted to see Zayn finish said bowl off, even if it takes longer than it should and is even more delighted to see him laugh at the comedic genius’ he’s come across. They watch everything from movie bloopers to comedy stand up and Hamish & Andy. Zayn had a smile on his face the whole time and Liam couldn’t help but imagine what it’d be like if Zayn smiled like that all the time. Roman comes to find them at one point and pounces on them, indignantly meowing for their lack of attention that day. Zayn cuddles her and pets her as they laugh at Kevin Hart and Russell Howard.

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After lounging for a few hours and talking for another Liam went about making dinner. In the
meantime Zayn sits at the table, still swaddled in blankets and draws in his portfolio. He’s drawing a kaleidoscope and is just filling in minor details when dinner is served. Zayn, who has been eating so well all day doesn’t quite manage it all but Liam assures him it’s all ok and reminds him how proud he is of him.

They make their way back into the living room and snuggle back on the couch. Liam puts on some music in the background when Zayn admits he’d like to keep drawing and picks up a book for himself. Zayn’s focus on his drawing means nearly 2 hours pass in the blink of an eye. During that time he’s completed the Kaleidoscope and completes a sketch of a sun and moon ying yang. He’s proud of his work and even shows it to Liam who rains compliments down on him as always and kisses his neck when he nuzzles it, murmuring how brilliant he is. Zayn smiles and just lets Liam do it, he doesn’t deny it for once because he’s happy and so is Liam and it’s best he doesn’t argue after such a great day.

At 21:15 and when Zayn deems his work done Liam mutters that they should move and get off to sleep.

(After the incident where Zayn thought he wanted to rape him Liam’s always been so careful to phrase his sentences in a way that’s explicit but soft.)

Zayn agrees and droops a little as Liam leads him upstairs, getting about halfway before Liam decides to pick Zayn up and carry him to the door.

Zayn pushes open the door and sees that the bed is made again and how everything is neatly set out for him and he’s suddenly about to cry again. Honestly, Liam’s sent him on a rollercoaster of emotions today it’s not funny.

Liam turns him around and he crashes into his chest, hugging Liam in the tightest hug he can muster with his weak arms.

“I don’t deserve you.” He cries, wetting the front of Liam’s shirt and apologising when he notices.

Liam only laughs at him. “If you mean you don’t deserve to be treated like royalty I’m sorry but I have to argue with you on that one.” He kisses the top of Zayns head and rocks him side-to-side until he calms down. Zayn, who keeps on crying he’s so emotional, lets Liam help him dress into pyjamas (Liam looks away as Zayn ditches his jogger and boxers and steps into the bottoms)

“Thank you.” Zayn cries quietly as Liam deposits him under the sheets and follows him. “You’ve made me so happy today and I repay you by crying, I’m so sorry.”
Liam laughs at him fondly, maneuvering the two of them and cuddling him close “It’s ok, you deserved it.” His hand threads in Zayn’s hair and the other rest on his waist.

Zayn shakes his head. A hand fisting in Liam’s shirt.

“You did,” Liam says softly, cradling his head, “and I should be the one thanking you.” He whispers, “letting me spoil you, trusting me in the shower, eating everything, god, Zayn you did so good today, so good.”

Zayn keeps crying into Liam’s shirt, deciding he doesn’t want to argue.

“Hey, remember when Harry and Louis first got together?” Liam whispers, hoping that the laugh he’s been honoured to hear all day will come once more.

It does, “yeah.” Zayn says quietly.

“God, do you remember how shocked they looked when we said that we knew.”

Zayn chuckles again, sniffing for the last time before he wipes the tears away with his fingers. “Yeah, thought they were being sneaky.”

Liam laughs, a deep rumble that goes through his chest into Zayn, rocking him and lulling him to sleep.

The two reminisce all the good times and laugh quietly at the past until they both fall asleep together. Neither noticing that they were both tangled up in each other and that Liam’s lips were pressed to Zayn’s hairline the entire night.
I was abt to write something like “neither noticing that they left the stove on” or “the ominous figure in the doorway” just to watch you guys flip for a joke bahahahahaha.

Ask me questions on my tumblr and i’ll answer them! Anything at all! I post the randomest shit aahahaha https://www.tumblr.com/blog/you-wont-zee-me-coming

Anyway, bit i just wanted to say.

i never thought my fic would ever be as popular or demanded as it has become and i am so grateful for every single one of you reading this, truly I am. I know i am not the greatest writer here and i probably never will be but you have still left kudos and comments that light up my day and make me so happy and satisfied with my work.

Please remember i have a life outside of the fandom. One i have worked very hard for. For those of you who do not know i am finishing high school in a matter of 5 months (technically 6 but i graduate in September). You may also find that the fact i am an elite athlete interesting. I am actually striving to compete at the Commonwealth Games in 2018. I am also the eldest of 5 children and have to regularly care for my siblings since my parents are away working often. I, for the first time ever, have actually got a social life with friends who actually want to be around me and invite me out and are interested in me and i love to spend time with as opposed to the mutually exclusive zero friends or people who i thought were friends and were actually just using me or i was just there. I also need downtime. I promise i work on this when i have a moment or a burst of inspiration that will not be suppressed and sacrifice my study periods to write this.

I appreciate your comments and your encouragement. I do not take any of your demands as an offence unless it has been obviously rude as i know tone and understanding is difficult to convey through the internet. But please understand i update when i can and as fast as i can but its hard to. i don't know when i can update next bc i start school again in a few days and i hate it but i have to focus on it.

After i have finished school i have little planned aside from training and sleep (man, i love sleep) so please bear with me and know i will not give up on this fic. Your comments all inspire me and encourage me so please don't stop even if you have already commented. Further note: i re-read and edit every chapter to make sure its a quality i am happy with.

I am working on this i promise.

Please don't give up on me.

Love,

Zee.
Z A Y N

He wakes up the next morning to a pleasant hum in his head and vibrations running through his body. Stirring, he sees that Liam is on the phone and his talking is making his chest rumble.

“Yeah, he’s waking up now so I’m going to say bye for now.” A muffled voice sounds above him - but that might just be because he’s not engaged with the world at this moment. Happily lost in warmth and blankets and a tangle of arms and legs.

There’s a pleasant silence as he slowly blinks into reality. He clenches and unclenches his fist and wriggles his toes, pushing life back into them.

“Ok, yes. See you later. Thanks Isabelle.”

That captures his curiosity, he shifts so his back is straighter, the sheets ruffling. “G’mornin’” He mumbles, fist still in Liam’s shirt. Sleepy eyes hooded and head foggy.

Liam brings the covers up over his shoulder from where they’ve fallen. “Good morning beautiful.”

Zayn nods and yawns before he curls back up against Liam's chest, deciding it's a bit too early to fully get up just yet. “What was that about?” He mumbles, bypassing the question. He stretches out a bit, mewingling as he does.

“Isabelle just wanted to see how you’re doing and ask me to do something with you later before your
appointment.” Liam whispers back, trailing his hand over his arm over the covers when Zayn re-settles after his stretch.

He inhales, “and what’s that?”

Liam kisses his temple, “nothing too big but it’ll be a little confronting for you so I’d rather tell you a bit after breakfast if that’s ok?” He says it more like he’s asking.

Zayn moves and looks at Liam, feeling a little worried. “How bad?” He asks, he’s still sleepy and his hair must be sticking out in random directions with bits of sleep dust in his eyes, but his minor panic must come through.

“Nothing to worry about, I promise.” Liam says. Sitting up so he’s closer. “I just don’t want you to worry about it and overthink. Just you might find it easier if I don’t tell you until before. I promise I’m not keeping secrets and it’s not terrible but I just think it’d be easier for you.”

Zayn nods, a lump of anxiety building in his chest. He cuddles into Liam when he offers and tries not to ponder possibilities but it’s hard and he can’t relax like he did before.

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He tries not to be difficult and really, really does try to eat breakfast. Yesterday was so good and he wishes to feel like that again. He tries his best but he can’t quite manage all of it, feeling full and partially sick from the lack of information and knowing something confronting is to come.

Liam sits next to him, an arm around his waist while he eats his own with the other hand. “Doing so well lovely.” He comments every few spoonfuls he has. When Liam’s putting the dishes away he wrings his hands in his lap, patiently waiting until he comes back. He feels himself sweating slightly but it’s not too bad. He can manage this, he can. Liam will take care of him, he always does.

Liam laced their fingers together and pulls him up the stairs where they get dressed. Today he chooses the denim jeans with long socks underneath to keep his legs warmer and a long sleeved shirt with the jumper Liam bought him yesterday.

“Let’s go for a quick walk, yeah? It’s nice outside. Or do you want to stay inside and maybe draw?” Liam asks. He’s not wrong, looking out the window Zayn can see it’s the beginning of a beautiful
day. He takes a deep breath, shutting his eyes and trusting Liam will give him a moment to respond. He goes into Safe Space, which ironically, now involves their walks and lets the uncalled for anxiety in his chest dissipate slightly before he nods his head. As predicted, Liam is crouching in front of him, patiently waiting for him to finish before making a move. He shakes his head and stands up - showing he wants the walk.

Liam grabs their coats and wraps a scarf around Zayn’s neck. He picks out a beanie, the same colour as his jumper this time - dark purple, and they set off. Liam hooks his arm through Zayn’s and leads them out on a quick walk. Zayn knows where they’re going and can anticipate that Liam will wait until he talks to him to speak.

(They do that now, where Liam will wait for him to speak and set the topic to talk or intensity of a conversation before he does).

“How did you sleep last night? Well?” Zayn asks about 5 minutes in. He doesn’t want to talk big things just yet, the anxiety he feels is enough to set him on edge as it is.

“How did you sleep last night? Well?” Zayn asks about 5 minutes in. He doesn’t want to talk big things just yet, the anxiety he feels is enough to set him on edge as it is.

“Very well thank you, and yourself?”


They talk about nothing important, trivial pieces of information. Liam tells him that his mum called to see how he was doing and that she misses him. Zayn smiles and says he misses Karen too. He wants to suggest they all meet sometime soon in the future but the thought of people at the moment makes him sick. Logically, he knows it’s just Karen, and that there’s no real reason to not see Karen and Geoff sometime - maybe Ruth again too. Yet it makes him feel uneasy and starts to stress him a little. He can’t pinpoint why and that makes him feel insignificant.

When they arrive back at the front door Liam ushers him inside and takes off his coat for him. It’s a little chilly with the frosty weather so the warmth of the house is controversial to his body temperature. He shivers slightly but Liam immediately rubs his upper arms and hushes him, coaxing warmth into Zayn’s bones. Liam switches on the kettle to boil before he takes Zayn’s hand and leads him upstairs to the main bathroom. Liam takes both his hands in his and pulls him close.

“Isabelle wanted me to weigh you to see how much you’ve improved.” Liam says quietly.
Zayn tenses up, the lump building in his chest again and his throat is suddenly really itchy for the first time in a month. Zayn can feel his chest tightening. He doesn’t like this, he jumps back, dropping Liam's hands. His head begins to shake-

“It’s ok, it’s ok.” Liam is quick to hush, hands held up as if in surrender.

He doesn’t want to be heavy. He doesn’t want Liam to see his weight. His mind is becoming sluggish but sharp at the same time, it feels like there's a piercing scream in his brain and he hates himself. The passion of his self-loathing makes him want to vomit and scream, with the toilet and a sink right next to him he might just. His breathing quickens "No, no Liam please, I-I can't." He stumbles, Liam is already attempting to soothe him before he's even finished his sentence.

Liam wraps him into his chest, a hand in his hair mushing the strands. “You don’t have to look. I was just thinking that we could get it done with really quickly. Just take off your shoes and down to whatever you feel comfortable wearing, you can step on, stay there a second while I read it, step off and we go downstairs for tea and a cuddle, yeah?”

He gags on his own spit and shakes his head harder, "Liam." His voice is so quiet as Liam hushes him. He can feel tears pooling but he's not about to explode because Liam has him tightly wrapped up. He can stay calm.

“I know you don’t want to, but it’ll be good to know how much you’ve improved since the hospital.”

Zayn suddenly feels very cold, every nerve set on edge at both the mention of the hospital and the knowledge of his weight.

Zayn collects himself; thinking to just do it, get it over with. Liam wants him to. Isabelle wants him to. His brain switches off like he used to with Nathan (something he hasn't done since him). He detaches himself from Liam; almost pushing him away and kicks off his shoes almost violently, tugs off the thick jumper he’s wearing and steps on the scales in his denim jeans and long sleeved t-shirt. His breath catches in his throat and a sob is on the brim of his lips, threatening to spill as is the bile in his oesophagus. He's incredibly tempted to look down; habit is screaming at him to look down. But like with every time he's weighed himself he dreads it and he almost can't bring himself to. He wants to so bad but he can't bear the thought it it. The sob is poised and ready. His chest feels like sludge but it's about to explode. His arms are heavy and thighs feel like a million pounds. He-he might be sick.
“Done.” Liam says after what would've been two seconds, to Zayn it felt like it has been an eternity.

Zayn rushes off the scales, his mind catching up with him. The cold from the tiles seep into his socked feet. He inhales a gulp of air as he stumbles off it, panic beginning to grip at him and he doesn’t know why. He turns on his heels and rushes out the door, wanting to get away before he succumbs to his urge to vomit.

Liam wraps his arms around him as he crosses the threshold of the bathroom because if he doesn’t leave now he will have to purge. He sobs as Liam brings them both down the floor in the hallway, Zayn in his lap. He curls up, shaking; shaking so bad; he doesn’t know why… he didn’t even look or anything.

“Shhhh sh sh shhh.” Liam hushes him, rocking them side to side and he lets the tears fall down his face. He’s urging so bad he can practically taste bile, it’s awful, it’s triggering, he hates himself.

“There there.” Liam says after he’s calmed down a bit and become pliant in his lap. He feels nauseous and whimpers as Liam kisses his forehead. His head hurts and he's so very aware of the meat on his bones. They stay there for a while, especially since Zayn starts to hiccup from his sobs, to which Liam cooes at him and hums under his breath, rocking them side to side, reminding him how "it's ok, it's over, you'll be alright."

At one point Roman finds them, maybe she detected Zayn's distress because she meows and jumps into his lap, pawing at him as if she's patting him; asking him human why are you not happy and why are you not giving me attention? He rubs at her ears and uses her as a distraction so he can ignore how he feels. Even manages to smile at her - but it turns into a watery grimace and brings on another round of pitiful sobs.

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L I A M

He's still not quite right even as Liam walks him to Isabelle's office. Liam can feels the tremors like shockwaves. Guilt ebbs away at him because while he knew that this mornings, erm, activity, would've been uncomfortable for him he did not expect it to be on that scale. Liam had to practically force feed him like when he was in the hospital. He didn't even get the whole meal down him because Zayn clamped his lips shut and refused to have another bite. He hasn't spoken either, his eyes were glazed over and dazed like he had zoned out and he had been so stiff to move.
They knock on the office door and Isabelle opens it to greet them. The second her eyes land on Zayn though Liam sees her demeanour change in recognition.

"Come on in Zaynie." She says softly, placing her hand on his shoulder and sending Liam a look which says to come in as well. She leads them to the sofa and turns to put her hands on Zayns shoulders and help him sit down.

"Has he been like this since after..?"

Liam knows what she's talking about and nods. "Sorta zoned big time during lunch." They talk in hushed whispers, but it doesn't even look like Zayn can hear them.

"He's having an anxiety attack." Isabelle says after a beat.

Liam's eyebrows knit together, an anxiety attack? No, that can't be right? Surely.

"Zayn honey?" Isabelle asks, sitting next to him. "Zayn it's ok, whatever you're scared of is ok, it's ok to be scared." Liam keeps on carding a hand through his hair and taking Isabelle's lead.

He, too, sits on the other side of Zayn and moulds his body to Zayns. "We'll get though it together." He soothes, somewhat stumped on what else to say. The two of them work together, reminding Zayn he's ok and it'll be ok. His arms shift at one point, lurching forward in a jerk so his hands cover his stomach. Liam clasps his hands over his and removes them because like he did earlier, Zayn is clawing at his stomach. "No need for that baby, don't hurt yourself." Liam whispers into his ear and they keep him steady until Zayn's muscles aren't locked and Liam can feel him relax into him.

"That's it Zaynie, you're doing great." She says as Zayn blinks a few times, his vision coming back into focus. He doesn't say anything but he inhales deeply.

"Ok Liam, we can take it from here." Isabelle says, smiling at him. Liam nods his understanding but presses his lips into a tight line, he doesn't want to leave Zayn... not now that this just happened and he didn't even realise. Zayn looks around between them as he stands, Zayn looks so vulnerable on the couch with his wide overwhelmed eyes and the lost look in his face, he can't leave him. He freezes before he collects himself... Zayn needs this time with Isabelle... he'll be ok. With that he leans down and kisses Zayns forehead. His lips linger a little more than normal before he reminds Zayn he's just outside if he needs anything and he'll see him in a bit.
When they get home Zayn's better than he was but still not talking a whole lot. Liam decides on a quiet night in and sets up the living room like he did when Zayn needed space and sits on the sofa typing away on his laptop as Zayn draws. After a few hours Zayn finishes his artwork and picks up a book to snuggle with Liam on the sofa where they stay until bed.

"Isabelle gave me something." Zayn says as they make their way towards the stairs. His voice is quiet and Liam almost missed it.

"Yeah? What was it?" He asks. He had seen Zayn holding the rolled up piece of paper in his hand but decided to let Zayn come to him about it.

Instead of answering Zayn shows him. "It's a poster," he says, clearing his throat. "Erm, a motivational one." Liam holds it up in front of him, reading the blue bold words.

\textit{The dinner table is a battle field where warriors defeat their eating disorder one bite at a time.}

"You want to hang it up?" Liam asks, Zayn nods, a small smile on his face. Liam kisses his forehead and does it right there and then. Tacking it to the wall where Zayn can see it every time he walks in.

- 

The next day Zayn attends his second Yoga class. As with the first class, he doesn't say much but he nods his head when the women around him say hello. He's wearing the joggers he wore out with Liam the other day and a long sleeved loose running top which he can tuck into the joggers if it threatens to fall down. It doesn't really matter if it does though because there's a singlet underneath but he'd rather not show his arms or more skin than is necessary. He does skip out on a particular exercise the class does but Nadine comes around and shows him an alternative that he was much more comfortable with doing in the meantime.

He doesn't think about anything, good or bad, from this previous week. He listens to Nadine and the music, channeling his emotions into the activity and draining the insecurities and frustrations he experiences more often than not. He leaves class with a clear head and a confidence he had forgotten
he had.

-

*Ring ring, Ring ring*

"Hi Isabelle!"

"Good afternoon Liam, how are you and Zayn?"

"We're well thank you, and yourself?"

"I'm great thank you. I was calling because I gathered that finding out Zayn was suffering an anxiety attack was shocking for you yesterday."

"Y-yeah, I jus- Doesn't an anxiety attack mean, like, I don't want to stereotype or anything, but hyperventilating and stuff? Like a panic attack?"

"No, it's nothing to be ashamed of, not many people know. Anxiety attack can come in all forms you see, they can be bouts of rage and irritability, or they can be when someone suddenly becomes very nit-picky and hypersensitive to even little messes, they can be fast-talking, stuttering, stumbling over words and the like. It can be not talking at all - when Zayn suffered that period of initial mutism that was different but anxiety definitely had a lot to do with it, and as you saw yesterday, anxiety attacks can mean becoming rigid, staring into space and almost seeming zoned out. Those are just a few of course but you get the gist."

"Um, well, shit."

"Exactly, I also wanted to explain to you something to you, as I discussed it with Zayn. He knows this too and I believe it would be beneficial for you to understand it to."

"Do go on."
"Unfortunately what happens with a lot of people suffering thing such as addictions or mental illnesses they associate a form of pleasure with the pain of cutting or hunger. I explained to Zayn yesterday, as there was a spot of confusion and almost panic where he thought he wasn't getting better and that he's just stuck and going between polar opposites. It would be beneficial to him, and I'm sure you already do it, but keep reminding him that this is going to take time. He has to trust us to get him through. He's doing excellent, and progressing better than I thought he would but he'll never be able to let go of what has happened in the past and make peace with it if he can't let us in and help him."

"So... you're saying, and I know I'm ignoring what you first talked about for the moment, you're saying that he's hiding something?"

"Not exactly, and I can't discuss exact points that are between me and my clients-"

"Yes, sorry, ignore me, that was wrong."

"... But it is very possible that he's only supplying half-truths at this time."

"Oh."

"Now, that's a natural coping mechanism, and with time, when he can trust us we can work towards something with all the facts. This is common and something to be expected initially."

"I understand Isabelle."

"That's all I wanted to say. It was purely to inform you of his progress and remind you to keep up the excellent work. I do hope you two have a good time until I next see you."

"Thanks Isabelle, see you next time."

--

ZAYN
When the boys come over that evening, Harry is the first to notice the poster.

"Looks great," he comments, pointing to it. The numerous rings on his fingers shine bright. "Where'd you get it?" His voice is a slow drawl which is kind on Zayn's small headache.

"Isabelle gave it to me." He says quietly, curling up in his jumper as he stands off to the side of the table and almost opposite Harry. He watches Harry from under his brow, how he exchanges glances between him and the poster. His curly hair is held up with a bandana and swishes every time he turns his head.

Harry hums "I like it." Zayn smiles a little.

They play a game of Star Wars Monopoly up until dinner finish it off when their done. There are 4 pieces available so him and Liam pair up, which is fine by him because it means he doesn't have to make too many decisions and the ones he does are validated by Liam. He knows Liam wouldn't approve of that - him just letting Liam do whatever when he might have an alternative opinion (even if he's wrong), but he's not up for that tonight. Apparently they're all in a Star Wars mood, 'The Force Awakens' is on the agenda for tonight as well. Liam is setting up the film with Harry, showing him how the player works because Harry is always getting muddled. Meanwhile, Zayn and Niall are cleaning up the game. He doesn't know where Louis is until he reappears with a book in his hand.

"So," Louis begins, "I saw this, right, and I thought you might like it." He hands Zayn the book.
Zayn gapes at it, the black velvety cover smooth under his fingers. It is plain with the exception of '365 NOTES' written in some silvery print on the front. Zayn turns it over in his palm, feeling it and relishing in that new book feeling and smell.

"I was thinking -well, Harry also suggested it, but maybe something that'd be good is to write down something positive or something that made you laugh in a day and then when you're having a bad time you can flip through and it'll help you feel better easier?"

Zayn feels emotional after Louis says that. Really, for Louis to think about his happiness and even a way to help him when he's not doing great when he could've been thinking about other - more important things, really chokes Zayn up. He looks up at Louis, it's easier than when he has to look up at Liam or Harry because Louis' a bit smaller. He feels his eyes water and reaches up partially on his tip-toes to wrap his arms around Louis' neck. "Thank you." He says, sniffing, snuggling into his
shoulder. "It means a lot to me."

Louis laughs - as he does and hugs him right back, squeezing him tight and patting between his shoulder blades. There's the sound of mugs being set down on coasters and a second or two later another set of warm arms wrap around the two of them - slightly unusual but not unfamiliar.

"Ye prick I want'd to give him my t'ing too." Niall teases Louis.

"Too slow Leprechaun." Louis banters right back. Looking proud. Scrunching his face up like he does when he's done something he's proud of... a look that can mean only one of two things; something very good, or something very bad.

Zayn's feeling overwhelmed again and pulls back, Niall is holding another book in front of them. "Saw t'is and t'ought you might have some fun with it." He says quietly. Zayn has to remember to breathe for a moment before it registers that it's an adult colouring book - his inner nerd cries out in happiness when he see's it's a Marvel superhero's version.

"Thank you." He blinks rapidly to stop his tears from spilling. "Thank you both so much, you shouldn't have." He sniffs.

"Ahhh, but we did my young Padawan." Louis smirks, Zayn smiles again, wider, because Louis always does this before they watch Star Wars.

"You have no idea how much this means to me." He says once more to suffice. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you all."

Niall cackles. "By being happy and doing what you're doing right now, focusing on you."

Zayn wasn't expecting that. But if that's what the boys want, and coincidentally what he wants, he's sure they can make a deal.

- 

That night Zayn makes his first few entries;
1. Louis gave me this book :) 

2. Roman and Liam comforted me when i had my attack recently

3. Nadine is nice and I liked doing Yoga

4. The Force Awakens had a hispanic, a black and a woman as their main characters and that made me happy

5. Liam's been cuddling me a lot

6. Isabelle gave me a motivational poster.

Zayn finds out that really he has a lot of good going on right now, and he could write more but he'd rather curl up with Liam and sleep and write it later.

-------

Liam brings up the subject of parents again the next morning while they lay in bed.

(The phone conversation Liam had with Trisha plays in his head, how she said she needs to see her little boy after his attempt - even if it's not for long, not even a day, she just needs to see him.

Liam regretfully informed her it's all up to Zayn but he would do his best and Trisha didn't stop praising him for a minute, thanking him for updating her over text every time he could and for doing everything for her boy - how she knew they were going to be the best of friends when Zayn came home the first day they'd met and bragged about his new best friends...)

“Maybe seeing your mum will be good, she’s always been your rock and she worries about you.”
“She shouldn’t.” Zayn argues. For some reason feeling a bit down this morning.

“Yeah, well, mothers do.” Liam smiles, pulling him into his chest. "It's a thing, i think - some code between mothers that they just have to worry about their kids. Ya know, some motherhood thing.” Zayn huffs under his breath in slight amusement. There’s a pause before Liam speaks again. “She loves you is all.” He whispers.

Zayn is silent after that, for a long time.

“Ok.” Is all he says. He doesn't feel as bad as yesterday, he feels like this is manageable. “I think another weekend would be good.”

Zayn knows Liam is looking at him, and looks up to see Liams bronze eyes shimmering with pride. Zayn feels like he’s achieved the ultimate and that maybe, just maybe, he’s on some path to healing.

---

Zayn talks to his mother over speakerphone later that night, inviting them down for the upcoming weekend. When Trisha hears his voice she nearly screams and next thing he knows he's talking to Waliyha too. He laughs at what she has to say and, to his surprise, feels so much better talking with her than he had with even Liam today. Eventually it's decided that his parents will come down for the following long weekend and in the future, when he feels ready, he and Liam will go up to Bradford for a day.

He can't wait.

------

It's lad's night that night the next night and Liam drives them over to meet the boys at the park. Louis has decided to come fully kitted out for a soccer game and looks very professional compared to them. Harry's smirking at Louis, biting his nail and laughing; his eyes gleaming like he's witnessing the best thing in the world when really it's Louis kicking the ball into the goal and calling out "GOAL!" Every time it sails past Niall.
Zayn’s mood gradually changes from rocky to excellent because of it, his face and body scrunching up in the moment and curling into Liam’s side (who has an arm around his shoulders).

Their usual hour or so long game is cut short when a cloud burst opens up overhead and begins to pour down on them. Naturally, all five boys begin to shriek in laughter, grabbing their things and stuffing them under their shirts or other items of clothing to keep dry. In Louis’ case, he ends up stuffing his clothes under Harry’s in a mad rush and when Harry becomes indignant he just sticks his tongue out at him.

Niall on the other hand laughs out loud and embraces the rain, kicking around in the steadily amounting puddles.

Zayn giggles deep in his throat, it’s almost like a huff, and leans back, looking up towards the darkening sky and opening his mouth, letting rain fall onto his tongue. He opens his arms and spins around, he can feel droplets dripping off his hair and down his face; his clothes are saturated within the minute but the water is warm enough that it’s not cold. He feels free, he feels above it all, he feels happy.

He hollers out at the top of his voice, whooping and splashing with Niall and laughing in pure delight.

--

Unfortunately, it’s short lived when Liam ushers him into the warmth of the car. Liam wraps him up in what seems to be every item of cloth in the car including the picnic blanket from the boot. He laughs as Liam tucks it around under his chin and ruffles his hair to dry it before wrapping more around his head.

Zayn doesn’t stop smiling the whole way home.
When they get back home Liam insists he needs to get as warm as possible, meaning he needs a shower. Zayn's not going to argue.

"Is it ok if i wait out here until you're done?" Liam asks, he sounds paranoid.

"Or you could join me?"

Liam smile is almost as bright as his as he reaches for their board shorts.

- 

Liam insists on washing him down again and lathers his hair up to the point you can't see the black strands of hair. The water is so warm, and goes into his very bones; warming him to the core. He cant believe he used to have cold showers because -he would use up the warm water and because it helped to burn fat. As they get out Liam again, wraps him up in towels and dresses him in the softest and warmest clothing they own. He doesn't stop smiling once.

Liam leads him to the sofa and he lays down on his side, propped up with pillows and his legs curling up under him. Liam puts on their film of choice - Big Hero 6, and shuffles over. Pulling Zayn's feet into his lap where he starts rubbing them.

"Your feet cold babe?" Liam asks

Zayn shrugs, "a bit." After all, walking down the stairs on hardwood flooring meant his feet, only covered in thin socks, got cold.

Liam hums, disapprovingly. Zayns eyes shoot up, wide in a form of worry. "I don't like that your feet are cold." Liam says, "Are they usually cold or is that just today?"

Zayns mouth opens and closes - the answer is yes, his feet are usually cold, even with the socks on, but he doesn't want to say it because Liam will do something which he doesn't need to for him.

"They are aren't they?" Liam whispers softly.
Zayns nods mutely. "yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Liam asks equally as quiet, the two merging together in their own little bubble.

"Didn't want to inconvenience you." Zayn admits.

Liam laughs, bopping Zayns nose with his finger. "You're too lovely you." He says. Zayn wasn't expecting that response. His nose scrunches up and Liam laughs again, eyes all crinkly and kisses his forehead. Zayn thinks, belatedly for a moment that Liam is a lot like Baymax. He voices this opinion out loud and Liam laughs, saying in his best Baymax voice, "Hello, I am Liam, your personal healthcare assistant."

Zayn snorts, his eyes clinking so much he can't see and Liam ends up tucking him in even more so it's almost impossible for his to be cold or feel lonely.

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1. Mummy and Baba are coming down this weekend

2. I danced in the rain with Niall today

3. Liam gave me a nice warm shower and washed my hair for me

4. Liam is basically Baymax.

---
The next morning Zayn somehow wakes before Liam. He snuggles in close for the next 5 minutes before he decides he should move. He doesn't know if he wants to if he's honest, he can tell today will be a bit down and while he'd normally love to just snuggle with Liam he wants a bit of space. So he slips out of Liam's grip and pads his way downstairs.

He ends up in the kitchen and flicks on the kettle. Roman wakes up when he comes in and paws her way over. He ruffles her fur and scratches behind her ear while he waits for the water to boil. He makes a tea and looks at the clock. It's 7:30am and knowing Liam he knows his body clock will not wake him up for another half hour at the very least. He sets about pulling out breakfast materials for the both of them but he wont eat just yet. He won't cook something either given that time he went to burn himself but he can set out dishes and cereal. And juice. Yes, juice. Also his vitamins.

When he's finished he looks around. Roman meows and he plays with her for a while before she scrambles up and decides to go climbing on the cabinets. He watches, just at peace in the moment.

The piano is off to his left and he stands, walking over to it. He doesn't want to wake Liam but the piano isn't too loud and the walls are thick so he shouldn't be too loud.

He brings up the sheet music to a song he's just discovered on his phone and decides to have a go. The original song has guitar but piano normally balances out just as fine. It doesn't give the right effect to the song but he sings along to it regardless. He builds a steady rhythm, in reality the notes are pretty much the same over and over with little variation but he finds that he loves playing this piece.

He stops, playing the song off his phone and playing along to it, singing under his breath.

'I will not leave alone, everything that I own to make you feel like it not too late, it's never too late.'

Roman hops up onto the top of the piano. Then she jumps into his lap, the little jingle of her collar tinkling happily. He smiles and keeps playing, his voice is a bit louder by the end of it and he feels slightly ridiculous again for thinking that maybe she understands that he's draining the pain away like this, maybe she understands him.

'Maybe we'll turn it all around cause it's not too late, it's never too late'

He pauses, his finger pressing down on the last key longer than it should. He doesn't care though. He's a little upset because usually playing piano helps him feel a lot better than this. He sighs.
Turning away. There's a knock on the side of the staircase. It's Liam

"Three Days Grace, huh?" He asks.

Zayn nods. "Felt like it."

Liam hums. Crossing the room in five strides and wrapping his arms around his shoulders from behind. Zayn holds onto Liam's forearms. "Feeling ok bub?" he asks softly.

Zayn goes to tell Liam that he's fine but he shuts his mouth when he realises that'd be a lie.

"Not so good." He says quietly. Liam comes around and sits next to him.

"How come?" He asks.

Zayn shrugs, "I don't know." He says in a whisper. He doesn't make eye contact with Liam.

"That's ok, you know." Liam says. "It's perfectly fine to not know."

Zayn sighs, rubbing his face roughly with his hands because he doesn't want to feel shitty.

Liam must sense something here because he leans in closer. Wrapping his arms around him wholly and kisses his temple. "There is literally nothing in nature that blooms all year long, so don't expect yourself to do so."

Zayn's taken aback. "When did you become so poetic?" He looks up at Liam under his eyelashes.

Liam hums, nosing the bridge of his nose before pressing a light kiss between his eyebrows. "When I met you."

Zayn feels lighter and his chest and head feels a little bit clearer.
For the rest of the day up until Liam has to go to work they sit at the piano. Zayn teaches Liam some bits of songs he knows and they look up songs Zayn wants to learn.

At some point in the middle of learning the chorus to one of the songs Liam suggests that "maybe you can show your mum when they get here?" Zayn stitches his eyebrows together, pondering the thought. In the meantime he shrugs and turns back to the music.

By the time Louis is over they've learnt The Kill by Thirty Seconds to Mars and You're Not Alone by Of Mice & Men, Zayn never knew he'd enjoy heavier music but when he listens it's like they words they preach is what he feels and it relates to him, he feels like someone understands him - logically, he knows Isabelle understands, and so does Liam and the boys, but it just feels right when Austin Carlile tells him it's gonna be ok, when Gerard Way tells him how life is shit but you'll pull though in the end, when Ben Burnley is showing fear, it feels right, it feels him.

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1. Liam said that 'There is literally nothing in nature that blooms all year long, so don’t expect yourself to do so,' and that made me feel valid.

2. Roman played with me

3. Piano time

---

When his parents walk through the door this time it's different. He met Isabelle the day before and
unlike he did last time, he doesn't rehearse what he's going to say and do before they come. He 
doesn't even look at the clock. Instead he works on some more art (his book is running out of space) 
and reads. He even cooks a batch of Brownies with Harry when he's there while Liam is at work in 
the morning.

For one, he beams at them. Embracing his mother in a hug the moment she steps over the threshold 
and then, unlike last time when he held out his hand, he moves onto his father to hug him too. He 
doesn't say anything but he kisses his mother on the temple and takes her bag. However not five 
seconds later Liam insists on taking it from him and making sure he doesn't strain himself.

After the bags are abandoned on the bed in Liam's now unoccupied room they make their way 
downstairs and have a tea, his mother and baba filling them in about the journey down. He doesn't 
say anything, just listening to them speak. It's nice.

This time there is an even longer argument because Harry was the one battling to cook over Trisha, 
and if anyone knows Harry, it's that the kitchen is his and you do not, (lets repeat), do not let Louis 
anywhere near it.

The scene unfolds much like the first time, Trisha mentions she plans on cooking dinner, not half an 
hour after all the boys have arrived to say hi and join them for dinner. Niall comes laden with a bottle 
of wine and Zayn wonders since when Niall did that. He doesn't ponder it for too long though, 
because he realises a lot of things have definitely changed over the past few years.

They all know things will be good from the moment they see Harry's expression, like he's 
almost offended that Trisha is saying she'll cook. He doesn't seem to even think about what he's going 
to say when a very blunt "No." Leaves his lips.

In turn him, Niall, Louis and Liam shift closer to each other like they're watching their favourite TV 
show, anticipating what's to come.

"No, Harry I can do it."

"But I'm here." Harry says, his eyebrows furrowed, "I cook when I'm here."
"I could cook!" Louis offers, raising his hand like a student in a class room. "I know how to make this great dish - Chicken, right, wrapped in Parma ham with-

"-homemade mash we know!" Liam groans from next to him. Niall has to muffle his snort and laughter by pressing his palms over his mouth.

"Oi, Liam, maybe you cook other foods but the second you can make something that substantial, well, my friend i shall have you know.

Trisha laughs, "You sound just like your mother." She says, "C'mon, lets do it together then."

"-But, Trisha- wait!" Is the end of it because they both disappear into the other room. Zayn hears his father laugh his throaty laugh.

"Culinary people." He says, "Your mother has been trying to convert me into it ever since she met me." He reminisces.

Zayn laughs, "I know baba." He says, smiling. Yaser turns, beaming at him like he's shocked at the change since they were here last.

If there's one thing Zayn knows, he is too.

1. Mummy and Baba arrived today, I was able to talk to Baba.

Chapter End Notes

Any questions just ask!

Any ways this chapter could've been better? Anything you'd like to see happen?

Lol, and if any of you know about language and gender in the stepford wives (1975), or any additional points on L&G in; Orlando (Woolf), Twelth Night (Shakespeare) or A Doll's House (ibsen), hit me up bc i have a 2000 word essay due on friday and i dont
know/havent done shittttt.

Anyway, I'll be going thru and editing this later. Im posting now bc im tired and i promised Padu_Malik I'd update. Hope it's ok!
Home

Chapter Notes

I had a whole weekend and I didn't do any homework *cries*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Z A Y N

The weekend starts out excellent. He's happy being with his parents and he's finding it easier to talk around them. He stutters, yes, but even he is peaceful with that and reminds himself it's ok to take a deep breath and try it again. He does have a nightmare during the night - but not as bad as he's had in the past and Liam was there hushing him back to sleep before he even noticed he was fully awake.

It goes like this;

The next few days go good. His mum takes him out shopping on the Saturday, insisting that she wants to get him some new clothes or maybe earrings or comics (he doesn't really deserve it though, the voice in his head screams, you have to earn nice things Zayn). Then his dad meets them at the mall and they have lunch together, it's the first time he's eaten lunch without Liam around, the first time he's really eaten lunch out, and he feels so nervous, but it doesn't seem as bad as it could've been.

They laugh and have a good time, he shows his dad the new comics and new clothes he and mum had just got. In return, his dad tells him that one day Zayn will have to formally introduce him to a new series of comic and that he believes Zayn looks good in anything, but these clothes? These clothes Zayn will make you look even more dashing. Maybe you'll even take after me and my handsomeness. Both Zayn and his mum laugh at his dad's faux-imperial pose and then the mock-hurt and feigned wounds he professes.

"So, how is home life going?" His mother asks him after their tea's arrive.

Zayn's confused. "Erm, good?"

"Liam treating you right?" His father asks, it reminds Zayn of the first time they came down.

"W-what does this have to do with home?" Zayn is so incredibly confused.

It's Trisha and Yaser's turn to look confused "I'm talking ur home with Liam." His mum states.
"B-but, home isn’t with Liam?” Zayn’s so confused

"Then what is Liam's home to you?” His baba asks, looking a lot more serious as he folds his arms and leans over the table towards him.

"It's-it's just that, Liam's home.” He says, his parents look off. "I-I don’t contribute or do anything for him, he's never asked me so it can't be home for me."

His dad looks like he's about to say something but his mum stops him, pressing a hand to his chest and giving him a look that says 'patience'. She then faces him and he feels quite lost. "But u have a room there pumpkin."

"I sleep in the guest room." Zayn corrects. "It's not my room."

"but honey," His mum takes a moment to think. "Would you like ti to be?” She asks.

Zayn doesn't answer immediately. "Yes."

"Because as far as I know, Liam considers it your home too." She sips at her tea. Zayn doesnt say anything. His hands are in his lap and he fiddles with them.

"Beta-” His father says, standing up and coming around to sit immediately next to him. "These past few years have been very hard for you." He says, Zayn looks up to meet his eyes. He notes how deep brown they are - his mother has never failed to remind them when she's had an opportunity. "And we understand that. But you need to stop isolating yourself like this.” His father says. He takes a deep breath. "I'm no expert but I can imagine that you have done it thus far because you are scared it will backfire on you emotionally somehow, and we get how that must be so hard on you. It must be so hard to trust anyone after these past few years." Zayn looks down in his lap again, he doesn't want to talk about this. "But Zayn," His father puts an arm around his shoulders. "But you are loved, people care for you, people want to see you happy and well, you are special, beta, you are important."

His mum slides her seat around too, now he has both parents either side of him.
"Don't push yourself away from happiness, we know it's hard and you would rather not put yourself on the line like that, but Liam is a good man, Harry, Louis and Niall are there for you. You're more likely to hurt yourself by pushing them away than you are by maintaining your distance."

Zayn's bottom lip trembles. "I'm sorry." He finds himself apologising.

"Zayn, no no, this isn't something you apologise for." His mother says, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

He ducks his head. "Ok." He says, "I'll try harder."

His baba chuckles, "you already are."

- 

He has to go see Isabelle later on for his appointment. It's brief and he tells her how his day has been as well as the whole 'home' situation, using the time to get what's on his chest off it.

"You're really progressing here Zayn, I think we'll really be getting somewhere soon." Isabelle says, she sounds proud which makes Zayn smile. "Do you agree?" She asks. He nods his approval.

She writes something down on her notepad. "I have something to ask you Zayn." She says, Zayn looks up expectantly. "In the time that you have been coming here we have talked a lot about certain events in the past and experiences you have had to face." She says, Zayn purses his lips. "I always find it necessary to remind the individuals I see that this is a safe area and anything said will not be repeated unless absolutely necessary."

Zayn doesn't know where this is going.

"I find it helpful to also remind them that I'm here to help, as is there support system, and I am aware of the shocking experiences you have had Zayn, I really do admire you for your resilience." Zayn smiles a little.

"But I can't help but think that there's something that you're not exactly saying." His face must fall. Isabelle holds up her hands as if to tell him to hear her out. "- and that's ok." She says firmly, Zayn
nods his understanding.

"You have done exceptionally, Zayn, truly, and this isn't meant to scare you or anything but you will find it beneficial to face everything from your past here or at home." Zayn swallows the lump in his throat. "You are not obligated to share anything before you're ready, but I wanted to take the time to remind you that that's what we're here for."

There's a small silence.

"Wh-what if I say makes you hate me?" Zayn says quietly.

Isabelle looks at him softly, "nothing you say would make me hate you Zayn."

Zayn shakes his head, refusing to think beyond the wall he's built. "You can't say that because you don't know."

Isabelle seems to think this over. "That's true." She admits, "but neither will you." He stares at her. "You won't be able to accept yourself fully if you can't make peace with whatever it is that's happened." She leans towards him.

Zayn feels choked up. It's a lot to take in for one day.

Liam is outside for him after his appointment as normal. He greets him with a find smile and a hug which always betters Zayn in a way he can't describe. They drive home, the days are getting darker so it looks like night and Zayn can see the stars out the window. They get home in record time and are walking up to the door when Liam stops him in the middle of the pathway.

"Your mum mentioned something to me, something I needed to let you know." Liam says, pulling his jacket tighter over his body.

"Oh?" Zayn says, even though he has an inkling over what this is about.
“Yeah, and I really want you to understand this nice and clear, yeah?” Liam says, his tone is firm but gentle.

"O-ok," Zayn feels a little intimidated if he’s being honest.

"This is home," Liam says. "This is your home. You have your own room, and your own seat and your own area – which is the whole house, and you are home." It’s simple and very Liam and Zayn feels weak in his knees. Almost ashamed with himself but he doesn’t know why.

Liam takes a half step forward "I really, really need u to know that Zayn." He takes a hold of either side of his face. "Right now, as far as I’m concerned, your home, if you decide u want to leave and live somewhere else or with your family and whatnot I won’t stop you from doing that even though I’d hate it because I love sharing home with you, you’re home Zayn, this is where you live." Liam kisses a kiss to his forehead and Zayn melts under his soft tone.

"Thank you." Zayn says, feeling emotional.

"Nothing to thank me for." Liam smiles at him.

"There's everything to thank you for." Zayn says, wrapping his arms around Liam's waist and resting his head on his chest. "You've been giving me my whole life back and I can't thank you enough." Zayn mumbles into his chest.

Liam threads a hand in his hair. Wrapping him up with his arms. "This is always your home, it never wasn’t."

Chapter End Notes

Prepare yourselves.
Y'ALL THOUGHT IT'D TAKE ME FOREVER BUT SURPRISE!!!

Also, I have a feeling a number of people will begin to set their murder plans into action. But please know that my brother dropped my phone in the bath the other day and now it's dead so I think that qualifies for exemption, yeah?

Trigger warning - please be careful

They all sit down for dinner and Zayn finds himself staring at the motivational poster on the wall.

He considers what Isabelle said earlier and finds himself lost in his thoughts, his mind branches to what he knows she was implying and the next thing he knows, he's slipped down the well and he's lost in his head at the snap of a second.

In all seriousness, he knew it was only a matter of time until they found out how messed up he was. He must've made it obvious he was a freak in hiding. Unwanted thoughts swirl around his mind and criticise him from every angle, he remembers every cringeworthy and worthless thing he's ever done or said in the space of a few seconds and he hears voices intermingled with his own telling him he's worthless. He hates that his good mood on the patio outside has slipped away and he finds himself thinking of dark things. He was so proud he was able to accept that and then this happens. He hates himself for ruining things yet again.

"Baby?" Liam asks, Zayn snaps his head up so quick he nearly cracks his neck. "Baby are you ok?"

Zayn shudders, trying not to over think this. He refuses to let himself slip that far all because of a name. It's just Liam being nice, Liam accommodating him.

"What's setting you off here? Whatever it is we can negotiate it, yeah?" Liam says, and Zayn nearly laughs in hysteria - because for once this is not about the food. He stares at the plate in front of him, not processing what is even on it because he zones out.
"It's fine." He says after a minute. "I just need a moment." He says. Trying to mentally back away from the issue at hand. Step away from it like a dog thats growling at you in warning.

He fails at not letting it show, miserably. But he doesn’t let it show to the full capacity.

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He remembers looking down at the item in question, holding back sobs as the terrible realisation dawns on him.

Oh god, how will he be able to tell Nathan?

How will he be able to tell him—... He, he, how?

The answer is he can’t, but he needs to.

He remembers the days after; making sure he had done everything extra right those days. Making sure to dote after Nathan as much as humanly possible. Making sure the washing was done and food extra great. He makes sure to give Nathan hand jobs and blowjobs at every opportunity. All work was completed and more. He remembers sitting in his lap after being instructed to and forcing the words out his mouth. He remembers controlling the absolute terror of Nathans reaction better than he thought and watching a smile bursting on the face of his ‘lover’.

He remembers being asked: “Really? Is that true baby? God you’re so good for daddy.”

He remembers feeling sick down to his stomach, but that could’ve been the morning sickness developing to afternoon sickness too.

He remembers Nathan backing off on the beatings from then on, or at least avoiding his stomach when he did. He remembers watching simultaneously to his horror and delight how his stomach grew. He remembers finding out the gender and already naming his baby boy. He recalls eating what he could - no matter how much it tempted him; ceasing the purging, limiting the cutting. He remembers thinking ‘i will not fuck up this child by being fucked up’ and putting the child's needs before his.
He remembers considering other options, whether he could bring a child into the environment, and considering leaving the man he was with. Upping one day and leaving forever.

But, most of all, he remembers the day his baby boy - his Mezhrad was killed by his foolishness.

“Zayn! Zayn wake up! Zayn, it’s-“

“just a dream,”

“ZAYN!”

He wakes up screaming, flinching away from the voice shouting at him to wake and falling off the bed flat on the floor. He retreats into the corner, using his hands to push away whatever trying to get at him and screams even louder. He shakes, so hard it's like he's having a fit as he sobs in shock and for his loss. He can't comprehend everything - it's all too much too quickly and he doesn't know if he's dreaming or awake or even somewhere in between.

It's then he notices Liams there, off the bed, in front of him like when he was in the hospital and soothing him, hushing him. Slowly gaining more and more of his attention and dragging him out of his head, out of his memories. The door slams open and he shrieks, oh god, plagues his mind, oh god oh god oh god. He shrinks into himself as his dishevelled mother and father enter the room.

“-What's going on?”

“-Zayn? Baby?”

He tries to stop the whimpered cry coming from his lips, the closed-mouth scream when his dad reaches out but then immediately retreats due to his distress. He calms himself down as Liam explains it was a nightmare, remembering to breathe as Liam recounts he just started shrieking and woke up, it’s just a nightmare, it’s just a nightmare.
(He then hears Liam go on to say “but this is the worst one he’s ever had.”)

Zayn can't remember much of the next morning.

He knows that at some point or another everybody has had a turn at trying to get him to respond to them - and it's not like he's ignoring them, it's that he mentally, physically and emotionally can't. A dam has been broken and now he feels like a shell of what he was. He feels numb, completely smashed to pieces. Broken. He thinks Liam thought it was another anxiety attack at some point, he sort of remembers how Liam cuddled him close and whispered into his ear how everything was ok and what he was scared of was ok, that they could work through it.

But he couldn't.

There's another time, when he feels the texture of his art pad and a pencil in his hand but he stares at the paper for however long, he doesn't move and he thinks that eventually they give up because then he realises they're not there anymore. At some other time a glass of water is held to his lips but he can't function enough to drink it and so most of it spills down his chin into his lap, he only moves enough to stare dumbly at the wet patch that someone is desperately trying to wipe up. He hears Liam's voice again sometime, not talking to him (how he ended up on the couch is somewhat of a mystery to him) but instead on the phone.

(“Yeah, haven't had anything from him all day... Yes an emergency appointment is in order... i'll do whatever time honestly thank you... yes that sounds fine, see you then.”)

Liam sits with him, he knows that. Kissing his forehead and pulling him in for cuddles. "You're gonna be ok Zayn." Liam says, but the words merge and Zayn thinks he's hallucinating- delusional maybe. Liam kisses his temple and tucks his head under his chin, just how he likes it. Zayn can hear Liam's heat beat, it only just grounds him enough to realise there are now blankets and that he's staring at the back of the sofa. His arms are curled around Liam's sides and in turn Liam's are holding him to his chest. Their legs are tangled and the person who was tucking the blanket around them is gone.

"You're gonna be fine."
“So Liam told me you had a nightmare last night?” He ends up on the couch in Isabelle's office sometime, he forget how and when. He recognises music playing in the background - a guided meditation.

He dumbly nods at the floor, vision unfocused and completely disconnected from himself and the outside world. The music switches off and he finds himself focusing a little more.

“Bad?”

He nods again.

“What about?” Isabelle asks, he doesn't respond. He can't respond. Not only will he look even more like a freak, but a mess of one too.

“Zayn?” She continues softly. “Zayn you're in shock and I need you to try focus on my voice or you're going to be sick, can you hear me?”

He nods. To deep in his thoughts and he guesses now the shock too, churning over the fresh memories, thoughts he’d buried deep for so long now resurfaced.

Isabelle stays silent, watching as the man in front of her sinks further and further into himself, sinking into the couch and disappearing into the depths of mental despair and distress. According to Liam and his parents (whom had come with to drop him off and support him) had been unable to get anything out of him since last night. Nothing at all, no words, no eye contact, no response whatsoever. Completely lost inside his own head.

_He remembers feeling his baby boy kick, he remembers what it felt for him to flutter inside, watch the life grow._

Tears fall and he sobs. It takes him so suddenly that he panics and chokes at the force and lets the wretched sounds leave him. Curling up with his arms wrapping around himself and head on his knees. The dam of thoughts he promised to never open again has been overridden. There is no going back now.
He remembers the blood. So much blood and the pain. Oh god the pain.

In no time he can hear himself hyperventilate, hiccup, gasping for desperate chunks of air. He hears Isabelle talking to him soothing him as much as possible.

“I-I k-ill-led hi-im.” He managed to choke out. Knowing that now there is no going back, he deserves everything that’s coming to him. He wipes at his face with spasming hands.

“Killed who Zayn?” He hears Isabelle asks, she's crouching in front of him now. Hands on his knees. “Killed who?”

Wretched sobs rip from his chest and he pulls away from her touch. He doesn't deserve to be comforted. “Mezi.” He says simply. “Mezi.”

“Who’s Mezi Zayn?”

“My s-son. I k-ill-ill-ed my son.” The momentary collection he had over himself disappears completely and he breaks down again. She's going to hate him now, they all are, he warned her she would, but Isabelle continues to rubs and pat at his back, encouraging him to ‘let it out Zayn, let it out.’

(But he knows that only because it's her job up until he's sent away, far far away from normal people to places where people like him can be 'treated')

“Did you say ‘son’?” She asks him softly between the hiccups and cries, he nods. “I’m not sure I understand Zayn.”

He gags, still trying to calm himself, spluttering out “I’m one of the-the-em, boys-s who can get pregn- gnant.” He gulps in the air like he’s drowning, the overwhelming force of speech crushing him.

“You’re a breeder? Why didn't you say?” He hears Isabelle’s voice; it's so soft, so soft.

He can't manage the full sentence, but he lifts his own head and spits out, dribble down his chin which he wipes away with his sleeve. “Freak, I'm a fr-freak.”
“No, Zayn, you’re not. Other men can get pregnant too, if anything this proves how special you are.”

He shakes his head violently, no, he isn’t special, he’s a mistake, he’s a failure. More tears flow, more than he thought he even had. Wailing for the loss of the unborn child, experiencing the agony all over again.

“Why don't you tell me what you’re feeling Zayn? We can work this out.”

He rocks back and forth, drained of all energy and emotion.

“Everything, and no-thing.” He’s now shaking, hiccuping so even his cries come out stuttered.

_Geez Zayn, you’re so fucked up you stutter all over the place. No one needs a mess like you, especially a killer mess. You murdered your own son. That’s how much of a fucking freak you are. You think you’ve felt pain? You think you have experienced agony? Mortification? Just wait until they ship you off to where you belong. To the people that will remind you of your place._

The voices pound him, he lifts his hands to fist at his temples, pushing down on them. He lets out a weak ‘ah!’ when he pushes hard enough to see stars and a blunt pain slams his mind. Isabelle seizes his wrists in her delicate hands. Gently, yet forcefully she pulls them away so he can’t push at them anymore.

“I’m sorry.” He gasps.

“Sorry for what Zayn?”

“For being so fucked up.” He spits again.

“That statement is incorrect Zayn, we can address that again another time, but I need you to tell me about Mezi, anything you can.”

So he tells her. Through stuttered and mismatched syllables; through gritted teeth about how he was
getting sick without even trying to, and at first it was great because he was loosing weight, but then he noticed something was wrong. After a few months he noticed he had been gaining weight and so he bought a pregnancy test (after much internal fear, debate and wondering) while doing the shopping, (only £15 but he still was punished because he withdrew cash) and finding he was nearly 3 months pregnant. He tells her how he told Nathan, and then how he tried everything; he promises he tried everything; stealing extra food and trying to stop or at least minimise cutting. He tells her how he was making sure to work for the two of them, keeping him safe. He tells Isabelle about the one appointment he was allowed to go to, and finding out he was having a boy. He tells her he was called Mezhrad.

He finally tells her how he killed Mezi, killed his son by his incompetence. Killed his own offspring because he was so stupid (so fucking stupid). He tells her how it all ended that night, recounting the nightmare.

It had been a long day, waking up at 2am when Nathan came back from wherever and then rising at 6 to begin work. He burnt the bacon he made for Nathan a little, and this was noticed by the man in question when he was served the breakfast in bed 15 minutes later, along with the scrambled eggs and onions. Nathan left for work and, ploughing through the exhaustion he did the laundry and all the dishes. He made the bed and did everything he needed. He also made sure to take the vitamins he stored away to help his Mezi grow, provide him with the nutrients that would make him strong and healthy.

He thinks about calling Liam, asking him to help. Or maybe Louis, Harry, Niall, his parents. It’s stupid, to try think he could ever leave Nathan - no, he’s too deep, but he couldn’t bring up a child in this environment. He simply couldn’t. No matter how much he wanted to be the parent to his child it was too dangerous, he wouldn’t be fit as a parent and with Nathan not home during the day he had no choice. Yet he wasn’t about to abandon him at an orphanage or into adoption or foster care. No, never. However, he knew Liam was amazing with kids and maybe he would look after Mezi for him. Maybe permanently, maybe temporarily.

He doesn’t want to eat, now his stomach is huge Nathan comments daily on how fat he is, how repulsive and how dinner better be ready or this better be done by this time or else. But he has to put Mezhrad first, he takes an apple, a banana and a yoghurt. Sitting down at the kitchen bar and eating it; a healthy lunch for his child. Lunch that makes him feel like he’s about to burst at the seams even though he’s also craving weird foods he knows he can’t afford to eat, or even have the option too. Fucking cravings.

He does the second load (he swears, Nathan ploughs through clean clothing) and puts it in the drier. He begins making food for when Nathan gets home, making sure to eat a few muesli bars and bits of the beef stew he’s making so Mezi has something to eat before the father comes home. (That makes him sick, calling Nathan a father right now).
By the time that's done he's dead on his feet. His calves hurt, his quads hurt, his ankles feel swollen and he just aches all over. So much that he just wants to cry. So he sits down on the sofa, glancing at the clock. It reads 18:21. Nathan will be back at 19:00, he can break for ten minutes, lie down so he has some energy and then he can finish everything, prepare food for 18:55 and wait at the table like he’s been told to do.

Only he doesn't break for ten minutes, he falls asleep and is none to kindly awoken when he’s dragged off the sofa by his hair.

As a response he screams, kicking out at the offender;

For once, his kick lands, and he has never regretted anything more in his life.

Nathan doubles over from a kick in the crotch, and Zayn begs;

I am so sorry.
I am so sorry.

He gets up - with great difficulty - and attempts to get to the kitchen where the food will be done and place it on the table.

He knows he will be punished tonight, but at least he can make sure one thing was done to simmer Nathan down before he impulsively acts out and possibly damage the life inside him.

Only he doesn't make it to the kitchen, the moment he’s been able to stand is the moment he is dragged violently back to the ground, landing on his left shoulder. He feels hurt in his lower stomach and realises on the way down Nathan punched him in the gut.

No! Nathan, the baby!

He screams, but all that Nathan’s eyes display is anger, it's like all he can see now is red. There is no redemption, there is no escape.

The kicks rain down on him, to his ribcage, to his stomach and it doesn’t hurt too much at first; sadly he’s experienced it enough for it to have numbed by now. But then he feels a painful tug in his
groin and then something inside him breaks. It's like an extreme cramp, but ten times worse and all he can hear now is the rush of blood in his ears and the agony in his lower region. He screams when he feels liquid down there and he may be out of it, but he knows. He knows that Mezi is gone, he sobs out, and not for the physical pain, but for the loss of the child he loved, for the child he killed.

He finally looks up at her, vision blurry. Trying to just hold on.

Her mouth is moving, like she's trying to tell him something. He can't hear her though over the waves of thoughts slamming, and eroding at his brain. Her facial features are not harsh, they seem shocked, they appear soothing but he can't comprehend them. He’s filled with the need to cut, the need to end his miserable existence, the need to finish himself has not been this strong since his attempt 2 months ago. Everything hammers him, every need he’s felt in the past 2 months, every negative thought, every want to purge.

He could not have told you his name in that moment, he couldn’t have told you about his life or any artwork. All he could think of was the agony he was in before and now.

A ray of light breaks through when he chokes out “Liam.”

(“You need Liam?”)

He’s too busy gasping and still trying to hold the fuck on to answer. Too desperate for anything, he wasn't sure what, but not this. She lifts up from in front of him and he breaks down again. He can hear her talking on the phone, calling someone. He forgot who, he forgot who she is and maybe it’s selfish but he can't think of anything but the pain he’s in, the lump in his throat that chokes him, the weight on his shoulders crushes him.

She crouches in front of him again. A hand on his knee when he wraps his arms around himself again. Trying to stop himself from shattering completely, he feels like a bomb on the cusp of blowing up and sending shrapnel and the remaining pieces of his heart, his sanity flying in all directions. He can't let that happen though, if he does he will lose all the pieces, he will never be able to recover them and will never be able to reassemble himself back together. A hand finds it’s way into his hair, pulling on it harshly to get a grip, to punish himself and above all feel physical pain instead of emotional. He doesn't want the emotional, he wants to actually see it over feel it like this. He doesn't know what he's thinking.

It's at that moment when he hears the door burst open and someone panting, as if they’d ran a marathon.
“Zayn?”

The voice is familiar, the voice is safe. A door slams and he flinches, crying. Footsteps thud the floor and he feels himself being scooped sideways into Liam's arms so his head rests on his shoulder and Liam gently removes and replaces the hand in his hair when he cards his fingers through his hair. He tries to calm himself, really, but he can't because all that he thinks is that he doesn't deserve Liam, doesn't deserve Isabelle, or the boys, or his family, or anything, and yet; here they are, all trying to hold him together. He’s so fucked up and pathetic and weak and yet they are always still there.

He lets out something between a whimper and a wheeze and then the dam is properly broken. He sounds like a dying animal because his throat is incapable of the proper noises as he tries to drag air into his lungs. The tears are coming too fast and too thick and they stream down his face and drip off his chin, wetting the collar of Liam's shirt. He shoves the heels of his hands into his eyes. Attempting to stop the ragged and wretched noises and constant flow of tears. It’s too much; he hates himself so much that it's exhausting. He feels like a rope being drawn so tight that little threads of him are snapping apart one by one. *This close from snapping completely.*

Liam tightens his grip around him, it’s borderline bone crushing but he doesn't feel trapped, he doesn't feel anything but safe and encompassed. Held somewhat together. He can't stop sobbing, but with Liam he feels like it's easier to take each breath. Like the bomb has been cut off and it's not ticking any more. He's not going to crumble and float away like ashes in the wind.

When he’s finally breathing his ears pick up Liam's voice, whispering sweet and encouraging things, and he knows he’s been doing it the whole time, even if he couldn’t hear it. He’s completely exhausted and wants to go to sleep and never wake up. He’s too numb and drained to move from his spot on Liam, simply sagging into him and staring off into nowhere as tears silently still fall.

Liam thumbs at them “Beautiful? Can you please tell me what's happened? I don't hate you for anything and I’m not about to disown you if that’s what's keeping you from telling me. Whatever it is we can work it out. Ok?” He’s too void of anything to answer though, continuing to stare dumbly into space, that is, the birthmark on Liam's neck. There’s a minute of silence. “Beautiful?”

He drags his eyes to meet Liam's, and he must look worse than he thought because he can see Liam tearing up now, “Gorgeous, please let me help you out.” He then kisses his forehead. Holding him closer and whispering how everything going to be ok no matter what and they can work through anything and everything. Running his thumb in circles on his back and upper arms; it's so comforting, really. He wants to tell Liam, he really does, but he doesn't have the energy. So he turns to Isabelle, who has remained silent during this exchange and continues to do so.
She smiles at him, although it's very sad. “Is a weight off your shoulders now?” She asks. It's a strange question, because as exhausted as he is right now and terrible he feels, it feels good to have told her. Like the thing that he had left to do before he could feel something other than the weight on his chest and shoulders. So he knows for certain that he needs to tell Liam - wants to tell Liam. They haven’t kicked him out or disowned him yet.

**Yet.**

He nods, answering her question.

“Do you want Liam to know?”

He nods again, another tear slips out so he wipes it with the back of his hand covered by the sweatshirt he has on. Sighing as he continues to nod.

“Do you want me to tell him?” She asks softly and yes, please, he nods, that’s what he needs. He's not sure he can explain the story again. Not sure he can stomach the thought of using that much energy.

He returns his head to Liam’s shoulder, curling in as Isabelle softly explains - in a lot less stuttered and viable language what happened. She tells it in a way that makes him seems a hero and when that happens, or a particularly painful part comes up he cringes. He's not a hero, he killed his son. By the end he’s sobbing into Liam again, reliving the pain over again same as before.

His hair is petted as she talks and his back is rubbed. It feels nice. Not like Liam treats him like a pet but like he cares. He looks up at one moment and see's Liam has properly teared up.

(It must be his realisation that Zayn is not who he can share home with anymore, must be how his old friend has properly gone down the drain and can never be forgiven.)

“Zayn, I’d like to have another few minutes here before you leave so we can at least sort out part of this if that’s ok, do you want Liam to stay?” Isabelle asks and he nods, he doesn't have the ability to care about anything right now. Much less what Liam will eventually find out.

“Ok, I'm going to start off rather blunt here. Do you believe you killed Mezhrad?”
The name stings, claws at his heart. But he nods.

“Why’s that?”

But he reaches feebly for the board and a pen. Writing in much more loopy, almost unintelligible writing since his whole body is convulsing.

*Isn't it obvious?*

“No, not really.”

He sighs, crying as he admits. *I was so stupid.*

“How were you stupid?”

*I thought I could just take a break...* He holds it up so she can read it. Then rubs it out. *I put my needs before his.* His hand feels like it weighs 10,000 pounds after he finishes writing.

“No, Zayn. You as the carrier needed rest. Sufficient rest, and you never had it. You had worn yourself out and being pregnant you shouldn't have had to exert yourself. The fact is you were in an abusive relationship and you may have not realised you were over-exerting yourself due to the fear of the abusive partner. It’s common with a lot of people who suffer from this.”

His shoulder shake and he sobs again. So utterly broken with this, so utterly shattered.

He rests his head on Liams shoulder again and without meaning to, he shuts his eyes and leaves the world behind as he transcends into a fitful, restless sleep.

———

He wakes up to a hand carding through his hair. He’s warm and comfortable but his throat doesn’t
feel right - it feels blocked by some lump and his eyes and body feel heavier than before.

It takes a lot of work - too much - to finally open his eyes, and when he does Liam is there. Lying cuddled up with him on the bed and tucked into the covers, smiling down at him sadly. On the bedside table there are two cups of tea and a few oatmeal cookies.

“Hey gorgeous.” Liam says softly. “Feeling better?”

He shrugs, because he’s not but he is. Liam exhales.

“I thought so.” He admits, leaning down to kiss Zayn’s forehead, and when he shuts his eyes he kisses each eyelid.

There’s a few minutes of silence.

“Your mum bought in a tea for you.” He says softly. “She’s worried sick about you but I promise I didn’t say anything.” Kissing his hairline as he raises the warm tea to his lips for a sip. Neither of them say anything for a while.

“I’m so proud of you baby.”

Zayn looks up, confusion evident in his face.

“Like, it must’ve been so hard to say that and you're finally getting somewhere with this and coming to all of us, I can't imagine what's going through that head of yours but I want to assure you right now that it’s ok and we’re ok and nobody’s going to hurt you ever again and that I, along with the other boys love you, i love you so much.” By the end Liam has peppered an extortion amount of kisses to his face and his mum has entered the room.

She sits on the edge of the bed behind Zayns knees and slowly rests her hand there over the covers. She looks like she's been crying a bit and that makes him feel guilty.

“No mum, please don't cry.” He says quietly.

“My baby hurting and that hurts me too honey, it's not your fault, don't feel bad.”

“But I do mum, please don't be upset.”

She smiles sadly at him, her eyes a little watery, “you know,” She says, patting the back of his hand. ”You've always been so sensitive and kind to what others have felt, but never considered yourself and it's so selfless and lovely, you're the one who would do that the most out of you and your sisters
and I love that about you, but this, this darling is not a situation where you should feel bad. Whatever it is that happened please do feel free to come to us when your ready and talk with us, because we want to have that relationship with you. We love you.”

With that she slowly leans down and kisses his temple, standing up slowly and looking at him fondly before taking her leave.

The lump in his throat is hard to swallow past and he looks at Liam, tears pooling again.

"Can I join you?" Liam asks. He looks teary too. Zayn nods but he doesn't know why Liam would want to share a bed with him anymore. Liam slowly climbs in-between the sheets and settles himself in, pulling Zayn into the crook of his neck with a sigh and relaxing until the two of them practically mould together.

"You didn't kill him darling." Liam whispers after a moment. "You never asked for this, and you are certainly not held responsible for what happened." Zayn takes deep calming breaths to keep himself calm, but what Liam says leaves him less than calm.

"I need you to know now, and forget what I said last night, this is one of the most important things you need to hear and understand." How Liam is speaking so gently and yet firm is beyond him, he's just trying not to breakdown again. "You are not going anywhere you don't want to." Liam says. "You are home, you are loved and you are not to blame yourself for Nathan's transgressions."

Zayn breaks again. He doesn't know how many more times he can do this until he's permanently gone for good.

Chapter End Notes

@YouxArexBeautiful you might want to start on that machine...
Hi guys, i wanted to get this up for you, sorry but i dont know if theres going to be another chapter for another few weeks - i really need to work.

RAMADAN MUBARAK TO ALL THOSE PARTICIPATING! I hope I said it right!?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

L I A M

Ten minutes after Zayn has fallen asleep again, Yaser enters. Liam hasn’t moved from where he’s sat looking over him in the wicker seat, and continues to thumb at Zayns hand as well as gently hum from time to time.

“How is he?” Yaser asks, voice breaking the silent hum that had previously settled over the room. He stands opposite Liam on the other side of the bed, gaze cast down to his son’s form in the bed.

“Just resting,” Liam says. “He needs it.”

“Of course,” Yaser says. There’s a pregnant pause. “How bad?”

“Sorry?” Liam knows what he’s talking about but he’s not sure how to answer just yet, Yaser and Trisha aren’t stupid, they know something’s happened, something bad. Trisha’s presence earlier proves that they’re on the same page as each other.

“How bad is it? What happened this time?” Yaser clarifies gravely.

Liam has a shuddery breath. “Bad.” he says eventually, “really, not … good. He’ll need time.”

Yaser nods, palming at his face and rubbing his beard in thought. Liam can see his face fall. “What
can we do to help him?”

Liam shrugs, “I don’t know, it’s up to him, time I guess.”

“Very well.” Yaser nods, he silently picks up the chair on the other side of the room and sets it where he stood. “Thank you for everything you’ve done. I don’t think I’ll ever be able thank you enough.” Yaser leans his elbows on his knees.

Liam doesn’t say anything for a while, just looking over Zayn and soothing him with gentle touches. “I-I really think I love him, Yaser, I really want you to know that.” Liam says quietly after a moment. “I really do… It doesn’t matter what’s happened or what will, I love him unconditionally.” He looks up and sees Yaser already looking at him, it’s the first time Liam’s gaze has truly left Zayn in any way since last night.

“I knew beta. I’ve known a long time.” Yaser says, lips curling into a small smirk. “And if you’re worried about my approval in any way, forget it.” He huffs. “I could never ask for someone better for my son.”

Liam almost wishes he didn't smile as big as he did so soon after such tragic news, but he can’t find himself to deny that happiness.

—

Z A Y N

Zayn wakes up slowly. Like in a trance he blinks a few times blearily to get rid of the sleep dust in his eyes. He breathes deeply and allows the oxygen to fill his lung and spread out in his veins to his foggy limbs, twitching his fingers to bring life to the numbness that’s taken over. “Have you told them?” He asks Liam, who’s holding his hand and thumbing the knuckles gently like he was when he fell asleep.

“No,” Liam shakes his head. “No darling I haven’t.”

“Ok.” Zayn says, his voice small, he shuts his eyes again because they’re heavy. “I’ll have to though, won’t I?”
Liam breathes deeply. “Yes, you will. Only when you’re ready though.” Liam moves to sit on the edge of the bed, running a hand through his hair before repeating “only when you're ready though.”

Zayn nods. “Now then.”

Liam looks at him. “Are you sure?”

Zayn nods, opening his eyes. “If I don’t do it now, I won’t ever.”

“Ok then.” Liam says, kissing his forehead. “Ok.” Zayn sits up, pushing away the covers. A shock of cold washes over his arms and upper chest but Liam fixes that by pulling a worn, warm and comfy jumper over his body before they make their way downstairs. Liam has an arm around his waist and another holding his hand the whole way. When they reach the living room Zayn sees his parents sitting side by side on the sofa he likes to cuddle on, both on their respective devices.

"Ma, baba I have something to tell you." He says, detaching himself from Liam’s side to take a step forward and curls his fist into a tight ball, he clenches his jaw to keep it from wobbling, not letting himself fall. They put down their respective devices and give him their undivided attention, sitting up. He feels Liams presence behind him.

“I was pregnant last year and I miscarried after a beating he gave me," he clenches his jaw even though it trembles. He watches as his father collapses back against the sofa and his mother cover her mouth in shock.

Hi mother is the first to react from there. "Zayn," she exclaims. "Zayn - just, come here." She stands and moves to meet him halfway. His dad is covering his mouth with both hands and looking at him in shock. Zayn stares at him, still clenching his jaw and trying to not give in. He keeps it together until his mother cards a hand through his hair. He hides in her neck and lets go. Shoulders shaking as he cries into her. He hears his father stand up and tread over to them. He too wraps his arms around him and as a family they hold each other together.

“H-his n-name was Mezi, a-an-“ he breaks off into sobs he can’t hold back. His parents hold him upright and mourn with him.

"Beta I’m so sorry." His father says. “I'm so sorry you had to go through that."
“We love you.” His mother says. “Always, never forget that.”

Zayn just nods, wrapping his arms tighter around her and noting how his father does the same.

——

"My photo album," Zayn says out of the blue later on in the day when they’re in the living room. Zayn has been colouring in on the floor and Liam has been working on his laptop next to him. Trisha and Yaser are also in the room, reading and talking. Cannonball by Damien Rice plays in the background from the CD Liam has put on earlier, other than that the only other sound is the whistle and hum of a heater. “Did- Harry and Lou, when they went to the apartment, did they get it?”

Liam has to rack his brain to figure out what he’s saying. The key word ‘photo album’ filters somewhere through his brain and he remembers, the text Louis sent him back at the hospital.

“Yeah, it’s in your room.” He says after thinking about it.

Zayn nods, making his way to get up. “No-here.” Liam says, standing up faster than him, “I’ll get it, you sit down, rest.” Liam insists.

Zayn nods, “Ok.” his voice is small and tired. “Ok.”

Liam jogs up the stairs to retrieve the album, well, it’s not an album, more like a brag book. One of the 36 6x4 pages available from supermarkets. Liam hasn’t really thought about it since Louis made it’s existence known - he was too focused on much more important things at the time than the booklet he’s holding. He returns downstairs to Zayn, sitting next to him on the couch and giving it to him.

“Thank you.” Zayn says. Liam presses a kiss to his temple. His silent way of communicating that it’s ok. Zayn runs his fingers over the plastic cover. It still has the sticker on it letting Liam know it cost him a pound from Tesco’s.
“I had to hide this,” Zayn says. Opening it. Liam sees the first picture is a group photo - from a good time back that Liam’s sure he’d practically forgotten. It’s when they all first met as kids. So much has changed. Zayn slowly flips through he pages, revealing more and more photos of all of them over the years; some with the boys, one of Zayn at graduation with his letter of acceptance into university tucked behind it, his parents, all their families at a dinner they had one time, Zayns’ sisters. There is a full range of history that Zayn is showing Liam here.

Zayn turns the page in the middle of the book and Liam holds his breath. The one on the left is of Zayn and Nathan when they first got together, they stand side by side and smile to the camera. The one on the right is of Liam, in his cross country uniform from the same time period. Liam watches as Zayn takes the photo of him and Nathan out of it's sleeve and tear it to pieces in angry rips. Zayn stands angrily, putting the book on Liam’s lap and storms into the adjacent bathroom. It happens quickly and Liam’s still in a form of shock and doesn’t move but he hears the flushing of a toilet not a second after Zayn’s disappeared from his sight and Liam knows that he’s flushed the shards of photograph down the toilet.

Zayn comes back and sits where he was, curling into Liam’s side again, Liam tucks him under his wing and rocks them side to side before they resume looking through. A photo of Zayn’s entire family appears - Liam recognises it as one he took years back at a family reunion. All of Zayn’s cousins, aunts, uncles and relatives all piled into one picture. It’s a lot of people.

The last page is the most shocking, however. Liam notes how Zayn takes a deep breath before turning to the final slot. It’s a sonogram - two, in fact. Zayn pulls them out like they’re the most delicate things he’s ever held. Liam steadies Zayn’s shaking hands by covering them with his own. He thumbs over the little face in the picture. He looks over little Mezi’s photo. He doesn't need to look to know that Zayn’s crying again. He himself is too, grief is embedded in his chest so deep it hurts and it feels like he’s the one who too lost his son.

Zayn doesn't say anything, just nods and wipes his eyes with his sleeve a few times. Liam hears him starting to cry more, his breathing getting heavier. He pulls Zayn into his chest. Holding him close.
“Listen for the heartbeat sweetheart, it’ll help you.” He says. Kissing Zayn’s hair and letting him grieve.

Later on that day they tell the boys too. Liam calls them over after Zayn asks and sit them down to tell them too. They take it well, better than Liam thought they would. Harry’s a bit of a mess but Louis holds him together well enough.

“Maybe we can hold a funeral.” Trisha suggests. “Make a mark and have some closure, it would be good for you.”

Zayn doesn’t say anything, just nods. Liam’s so worried he’ll become mute again. Niall sits next to Zayn on the opposite side of Liam and holds him from that side.

“Where do you want it? We can’t have it in the garden because that’ll constantly remind you, and it’s not pretty enough… maybe we can go to a park? or a nearby woodland?” Liam suggests. Zayn nods. “Which one?” He asks Zayn, Zayn shrugs again. Worried looks are exchanged between all of them.

“Alright then. Shall we go do it? Now I mean. Small ceremony with just us?” Louis says. Zayn nods, sitting up and detaching himself from Liam and Niall, padding his way upstairs. Liam stands up and follows him out. Zayn hasn’t spoken, and only stopped crying about an hour ago. Liam is fucking terrified because of it.

Liam finds Zayn picking out his best clothes; a shirt that’s still big on him and black jeans. Liam lends him a tie which Zayn secures at the hollow of his throat.

Since Zayn has begun living here Liam has found out Zayn doesn’t like belts. When Liam put the pieces together he figured out why which is why he’s surprised when Liam slowly reaches for a belt and secures it around his waist.
Liam sides up to him, “if it makes you uncomfortable you don’t need to wear it, you’ll look smart with or without it.”

Zayn seems to think about it, nods once and removes it, returning it to the hook on the inside of the wardrobe. Liam himself picks out a suit to wear, mirroring what Zayn is doing. He ditches the belt and pulls out two jackets. The one he gives Zayn is small for Liam but big on Zayn. He can’t have Zayn getting cold while they’re out, and in the state he’s in, Liam’s concerned that Zayn isn’t going to feel anything more than what he is now.

As Trisha suggested, the ceremony is small and quiet. They hold it in a woodland about half an hour away that none of them have ever been before but Harry has driven past a number of times and promises is beautiful. It’s just the boys and Zayn’s parents, Louis takes an alternative route and buys some flowers and Niall goes out to a centre in advance where they sell an assortment of goods, in this case a small granite slab which they engrave in the span of an hour. Liam photocopied the sonograms and they’re placed in a small wooden box to be buried.

It’s not long, the slab is placed over the buried item. It reads;

Mezhrad Malik
Loved and Cherished
Greatly Missed

It’s simple and sweet and Zayn is silent the whole way through with the exception of a few tears rolling down his cheeks.

Zayn’s the one that digs the hole in the ground, despite Liam offering. Zayn is the one that lowers the box and refills the space with soil. The slab is too heavy for him so the boys lower it on the ground for him and then they all place flowers around or on it.

Not a lot is said, in fact nothing is towards the end, but for Zayn, actions have always spoken louder
Everyone is early to bed that night and the boys crash on the couches downstairs. With how exhausted Zayn feels, one would expect him to sleep well. But Zayn finds his brain buzzing with thoughts and nothingness for hours. He snuggles into Liam’s chest - it’s warm and comfortable, but there are sharp edges stabbing him in his head and chest and he hurts inside so much. He wants to cry, but there are no tears left to and so he feels numb. Numb and in pain.

Zayn doesn’t know how much he sleeps, but the last numbers he reads on the clock on the bedside table are 03:44.

They all sit around for breakfast, Liam, Zayn and his parents are at the table while the boys sit around the place.

(Zayn wants to thank them for yesterday, for everything really but he thinks yesterday should be first. He clears his throat.)

“I-wa-wn,” Zayn stutters over his words. He clears his throat and tries again, “th-tha-an-“

Liam has to watch as his face falls. Zayn’s head slowly begins to shake, his hands trembling and breathing becoming heavy. Liam can see the tears pooling. “It’s ok, it’s ok,” He rushes to soothe, moving closer to him.

Liam hooks an arm around his waist and pulls him to his side. “It’s ok.” He says, then he whispers into his ear, “for all we know it’s only here for today because of yesterday. It might be gone by bedtime.”

Zayn just sobs into his hands, nodding his understanding.

- The rest of the day is quiet - Louis and Niall have to work but Harry can stay back. Liam switches on some quiet music for the background and Zayn plays with Roman for a bit before she scampers off and plays with her new other friend Yaser or to re-explore the house like she loves to.

Liam thinks that having Harry here is best. Harry their gentle giant to help Liam snuggle Zayn up, and to bring him hot chocolate that he can help him drink and hot water bottles that he can cuddle to his core.

Liam can see that Zayn is exhausted, dropping off at random points during the day but never fully sleeping. Zayns parents want some time to be with Zayn alone, so Liam leaves them to cuddle on the couch and talk, and helps Harry make lunch. They have a variety cooked up, some light foods and some warmer filling foods. Liam made a mental list of how much Zayns taken in today and figures out the minimum he’ll need Zayn to eat.

In actuality, however, it’s like pulling teeth to get Zayn to eat a substantial amount today. He just doesn’t want to, and Liam sympathises with that.

He reminds himself more than once that Zayn isn’t in the danger zone like he used to be, and he’s grieving. Whenever Zayn has been hurting before this, like when his grandfather died, he used to not want to eat, so Liam can let this slide for today and accepts the amount Zayn nibbles at. He can’t let Zayn miss lunch, of course, but he reminds himself that he can feed Zayn throughout the day with little things so it’ll equal a good amount.
Yaser is the one who first taught Zayn to play the piano.

So when Yaser sits down on the stool and pats the seat next to him, looking pointedly at Zayn, Liam is not surprised that they fall in sync almost as easily as he and Zayn normally do. Roman climbed onto Zayn’s shoulder a half hour ago when he was playing with her on the floor. She doesn’t look like she’s leaving anytime soon either.

Yaser and Zayn end up playing something Liam doesn’t actually know. But it’s beautiful and them, and Liam enjoys it so much more when he sees a small smile on Zayn’s lips.

-

(Liam refuses to have Zayn any less than completely snuggled, which is why when they’re going to bed he ends up almost swaddling him in blankets and duvet’s and pillows. Liam makes them hot chocolate and Liam feeds it to him while Zayn picks up on a new book.)

———

The stutter isn’t gone by the next morning. Liam suggests Yaser and Trisha go out for the day - go see Jay or someone because he’s worried that Zayn’s stressed by them being here and watching him stutter again. As said, he needs to rest, be cuddled and feel loved.

Liam justifies this by telling them about how proud Zayn had been, to have gotten over his stutter fully in time for them to come down. Liam reminds them that Zayn’s still not quite in his right mindset and and that this is hurting him. Trisha and Yaser already gathered that was the case, however, and planned to leave for the day.

Liam and Zayn watch them leave from the doorway and Liam leads Zayn back in to rest.

———

It doesn’t end up as calm as Liam was hoping for.
“I want to hurt Liam!” Zayn yells, his voice rough from lack use and the tears of breakdown pooling in his eyes. They're standing in the kitchen and Liam had noticed Zayn was eyeing things that he shouldn't have been looking at so much. When Liam had asked if he was urging, and Zayn had nodded he tried to find a middle ground. But Zayn had snapped. “I can’t fucking stand this thing inside my chest and my head and my body and my heart,” Zayn finds himself using his hands to gesture to the body areas and wave them in thin air. “I can’t fucking take it anymore! I want it to hurt outside, not inside, because inside is tearing me to pieces but on the outside at least it’s valid!” His voice raises more and more.

He sobs, pulling his arms to his chest and backing away from Liam, he had slipped off his seat on the counter when Liam had first breached the subject.

“Zayn, I know you’re hurting but cutting yourself won’t fix what’s hurting you.”

“But it takes it away!” Zayn all but screams. "And I don’t want this! I want it gone!” He screams. Liam doesn’t even flinch.

(Zayn wishes he’d slap him, then he might get what he deserves and feel the hurt.)

His heart stops for a micro second when Liam steps towards him. Zayn’s body is curling in on itself, shaking from the force of whatever this is, from the pain. He turns and makes to get away - anywhere but in front of Liam, because he cannot stand how he is just a disappointment on every occasion.

“Zay- no, wait a second.” Liam says. Stepping well and truly into his space and immediately cocooning him in a hug. His bottom lip trembles and he whimpers as Liam brings him back and seats them onto the floor. Liam noses into Zayn’s neck. “Breathe. We’re just gonna breathe a moment, ok? So lead me in this, what do you do in yoga? or with the meditation from Isabelle, tell me.” He ensures his voice is gentle but firm.

Zayn has to swallow before he does; ”w-we,” he can’t get it out.

“Yeah, what do we do?” Liam repeats.

“W-we g-go- in th-through nose, a-an-d out through m-mouth.” Zayn stumbles over.

“Ok then, so let’s do that a moment. Yeah? Show me.”
Zayn nods, clenching his hands which are caught under Liam's hold. He breathes deep in through his nose and holds it for three seconds before releasing for five. He repeats it over and over with Liam - just in the middle of the kitchen floor. Zayn is still crying by the time a minute has passed.

“There, there.” Liam hushes, carding fingers through Zayn's hair. “You’re ok, just breathe.”

Liam slowly guides them to stand up but he doesn’t let go of Zayn just yet. He holds Zayn with an arm around his waist to his side and putters around the kitchen with him. First getting mugs and then milk and chocolate powder. Zayn reaches out to help him and nearly drops the mug he holds because he’s trembling so much. The violent bang made by him setting the mug on the counter makes him whimper, but Liam hushes him and covers his hand almost immediately. Letting Zayn know in a silent statement that ‘it’s ok’. Liam then goes on to assemble hot chocolate together by the microwave, stirring it around with a teaspoon slowly, which catches Zayn’s gaze. It’s slightly therapeutic, just watching the milk move because of the spoon Liam uses.

Liam heats them in the microwave one at a time, setting the door gently and opening it before the beeper can go off so as to avoid anymore loud noises.

“Let’s go sit down yeah?” Liam says when they're done, and they make their way to the living room. Zayn holds his mug in both hands and tries not to spill it, focusing entirely on keeping his hands still. Liam sets his mug down and takes Zayn’s out of his hands to do the same before curling up in one of the chairs, Zayn in his lap.

It’s silent as Liam wraps the blanket around the two of them, Zayn nuzzles into Liam’s body from where he sits side on.

“You’re hurting, Zayn, it’s plain to see,” Liam whispers when they're settled. “But actually hurting yourself is going to hurt you more in the long run. Inside there you know that and sometimes you break a little and you want to go back to that, but I can't let you.” Liam kisses his temple. “I don't want you to hurt yourself anymore and I know you don't either and sometimes it's going to be hard, and having recently recapped a highly traumatic event means it’s going to be hard for a bit, but I need you to keep with me as much as you can, yeah?”


Liam noses his nose. “It’s ok, I know you didn’t mean it. You were feeling trapped and you’re hurt and tired.” His stubble grazes his cheek, grounding him.
They cuddle together for another few minutes before Liam retrieves Zayns hot chocolate, “here babe,” he says. Holding it to Zayns lips. Zayn sips at the hot liquid, this time not covering Liams hands with his own, instead they keep warm under the blanket.

“I’m sorry.” Zayn says again.

“Zayn,” Liam says firm but gently. “You have nothing to apologise for.” He nuzzles his temple and hums under his chest. He hands Zayn the remote for the TV. They flick on some crap TV for background noise. Liam holds the mug to his lips at random intervals, coaxing him to drink and his eyes become heavy. Crying takes so much out of him, makes Zayn feel like he hasn’t slept in weeks.

“You just need need cuddles,” Liam whispers as he sips at his chocolate. “and love, and peace,” Liam nuzzles his temple again and kisses the skin, “and quiet, and warmth.” Liam says. Hugging him closer, “rest darling,” he holds Zayns head to his chest and thumbing his hairline. “You needn't worry about a thing.”

Zayn feels exhausted, as Liam has mentioned, all he ever seems to feel is exhausted, he hates it but he nods to what Liam says and he truly nuzzles into his place on liams chest and tugs the blanket up to his chin.

His eyes get heavier and heavier. Zayn catches Liam say before his eyes shut “sleep well babe,” and a kiss to his hair.

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Later on when Yaser and Trisha come back they come bearing bags of shopping. They haven't moved from where they were before, and personally Liam doesn't want to because he's quite comfortable snuggled up with Zayn like this. But not everything goes his way.

Trisha steps forward first, "Liam told us your feet were getting cold." She says, beaming. She pulls out a pair of Ugg boots from the bag she's got in the crook of her arm and holds them up to show Zayn. Zayn hesitates for all of two seconds before he leaves Liam's lap and hugs her. Liam can hear a small 'thank you' from Zayn and a laugh from Trisha telling him it's all right. She drops them on the floor and encourages him to try them on. Zayn for his part toes into them, feet only clad in non-slip socks which he pulls off.

"So soft.” Zayn mumbles, not looking up.
"That's why we got them sonshine." Trisha says. "Nice proper fur to keep you warm." Liam can see Zayn smiling a little. It's a relief. Yaser steps around his wife and gives Zayn a bear hug from behind. Zayn leans back and sighs and at the same time Trisha wraps him in a hug too.

"I-it was gr-great having yo-u here." Zayn says, voice scratchy. He's just realised that they're leaving tomorrow evening, and that he had spent all day wallowing.

"It was lovely seeing you too." His mum says. "You're doing so well, much better than when we first saw you."

Zayn doesn't look up, he keeps his gaze on the ground and focuses on the group hug he's in the middle of. "Love you." He finds himself mumbling - quick so he can't stumble.

"We love you too."

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me a comment or two, i love hearing from you all and what you all think is going to happen/what you want to see.
my tumblr is you-wont-zee-me-coming so if u want to talk privately you'll find me there.

But yeah, have a great day/night wherever you are and remember to eat, drink, move at least once every two hours etc :) 

Also, any songs you guys want me to use? maybe one with significance to u?
Zayn actually falls asleep that night at a time which is not morning.

(However, he wakes up screaming in the early hours of the morning. not like the nightmare that bought all of this down on them, but Liam is there holding him as he calms down,

“shhh, go back to sleep, you’re ok, you’re safe,”

He has to work on catching his breath back. By the time he’s caught it again he’s so exhausted he just falls back asleep.)

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Trisha and Yaser leave after lunchtime. The goodbye process takes nearly an hour, with all of them hugging and bidding goodbye more than once before, during and after loading the car.

Liam needs to go to work at two so Harry comes over to spend some time with Zayn. Usually it’d be Louis’ day but Zayn seems to be more comfortable around Harry right now. It’s not a personal thing, they all know, Liam doesn’t think Zayn has even noticed that they keep tabs on these things.

(Harry’s with him when Zayn falls into his trance again. Zayn has a hand under his shirt that covers his stomach. Zayn seems to be zoned out, just feeling at what Harry presumes is the bump he used to have).

Liam is beyond proud to see Zayn in the kitchen with Harry, helping him with some random recipe they found on the internet. Roman is quite happy swishing her tail around from where she’s sat on her perch on the kitchen top. Apparently she keeps alternating between there and Zayn’s shoulder. Liam wraps his arms around Zayn from behind, resting his hands just above his rib cage until Zayn nods - letting Liam know that it’s ok to touch. A gentle kiss to Zayn’s temple sees a small smile.

Later on, Liam’s even prouder to find out that Zayn’s had a go at the piano again - this time teaching Harry, who is a keen learner but apparently not capable of playing this particular instrument. They all
exchange a few chuckles as Harry stuffs up the keys and Liam can see Zayn’s trying so hard to smile more but it's not happening today.

(They go to bed that night and Liam doesn't forget to whisper gentle reminders into his ear).

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Liam rouses Zayn the next morning a little later than usual - but that might have been to make up time for his recent lack of sleep. They go about their usual morning, breakfast, washing, time to draw and read. Then Liam asks if he’s feeling ok to go out with him.

Zayn nods, and he doesn't ask questions. Simply letting Liam do his shoes and wrap him up in a scarf and hat and his coat before taking Liam’s hand as he leads them out to the car.

Zayn recognises the gym, however he isn't aware of having a yoga class today.

“ Wanted to try something.” Liam says to answer Zayn’s obvious confusion. Kissing the back of his hands across the console. He pauses, looking at Zayn deeply in the eyes before he opens the door and gets out. Zayn undoes his seatbelt when he hears the car boot open and shut, then Liam is around to open the door for him. Zayn looks down at the ground as he gets out of the car and they walk in. Liam scans his gym card and they both walk in. Zayn notices that the gym is mostly empty - clear of any people bar one woman who looks like she’s finishing up some workout on the rower but Liam bypasses the room entirely entirely and takes him into the change room. Liam holds the door open for him as he walks in. He looks up and around, surprised at how clean and bright it is inside.

Liam sets down the gym bag with a soft thump. “I bought us both some clothes and other stuff.” Zayn notes how he’s guarding his words and watches as Liam rummages through the bag. He doesn't say anything, just steps forward and takes what Liam offers him in the form of clothes. He recognises the gym clothes as his own and steps into a shower cubicle to change. Liam waits for him outside and beams at him when he comes out, looks proud that Zayns got the energy and motivation to go through with this today. They dump the bag in a locker and take with them a smaller bag Liam has, and walk back into the gym as the woman from before is walking out. This time Zayn holds the door open and she thanks him as she goes by. He makes eye contact with Liam and he realises he’s not the only one who’s happy he was able to do even as simple a gesture as that.

Liam leads them in and heads straight to the floor space where Zayn notes the boxing bags. “Think you need a bit of an outlet.” Liam says quietly, taking his hand and having a deep breath. “Think you’ve been storing a lot of negative energy up, and I know you do your art and other things to help out with that… but I’ve always found it good to hit it out and I think you’d be ok to do it if you want. We don’t have to though,” Zayn sees the sincerity on Liam’s face. “We can go do something else or whatever.”

Zayn closes the space between them and hugs him. “I-I think it s-sounds go-od.” He says.

Liam brings a hand up to his hair. “Lets wrap our hands then.”

- 

Turns out, in the bag Liam had bought it there was enough tape and bandages to mummify someone. Zayn smirks a bit as he sees Liam struggle to find the end of the tape and patiently waits from where Liam’s asked him to sit down on the ledge in front of him.

When Liam eventually finds the end of the tape he sets it down and picks up the bandages as well as
gently holds Zayn right hand. He kisses every one of Zayn's fingers reverently before slowly wrapping the bandages around his hands, wrist and his fingers. When he's done he pulls white gloves over them and then pulls white gloves over his own hands - Zayn doesn’t know why he doesn’t bandage his own when he had just done his own, but he doesn’t comment on it. Liam then holds up a pair of boxing gloves, Zayn recognises them - they’re Liams, he’s had these god knows how long.

“I need to put these on your hands and secure the velcro, alright?” Liam says gently. Zayn nods in response. “If you want them off just tell me, yeah?” Zayn nods again, appreciative that Liam recognises he has bad experience with this. Liam finishes up quickly and leads them over to the punching bags.

“Ok, so-” He starts to explain, making sure Zayn faces the bag with a hand on his shoulder and another on the bag. “You wanna punch like this.”

Liam holds his curled fists, knuckles brushing against his cheekbones before reenacting a punch in slow motion. “You want to punch with your first two knuckles on each hand and keep the back of your hand parallel to the ceiling.”

Zayn nods in understanding and follows his lead, also pushing at the bag and making sure to follow what Liam says. “Good,” Liam compliments him. “Also, if you keep your feet shoulder width apart and one in front of the other it’s better for your stance.”

Zayn shifts his feet into said position and listens intently as Liam explains the difference between a punch and a jab and the different types of punches.

15 minutes later and Zayn’s sweating - so much he even takes off his top layer, something he’s not done in public yet so far. Instead of the long sleeved grey-blue breathable top he had on he now has just a t-shirt and a singlet under that. The old scars that litter them are on full display to everyone but no one’s here except Liam. Zayn doesn’t notice it, but Liam watches in a mix of awe, worry and pride.

They keep working the bag, Zayn feels himself getting more and more confident in it. The rhythm that comes with breathing in through his nose and out the mouth, keeping his hands and feet in the right position, the method when it comes to jabbing then crossing, then a jab jab cross. He doesn’t notice when he zones out of the world, tunnel vision taking over him and Liam’s words fall on deaf ears. He just keeps hitting the bag, over and over and over. Punch, jab, punch, jab, jab, cross. He hits as hard and as fast as he can. The thought of Nathan enters his head and he doubles the pace. Liam is too distant to notice - Zayn is only jarred back into his reality by shaking his shoulder.

Still, he doesn’t stop.

He’s breathing heavily as he hits the bag - the type where he’s desperately trying to stop the tears falling and failing, each punch becoming weaker with each throw.

Liam’s talking to him but he doesn’t want to stop, he feels the ache and pain in his muscles, the tears blurring his vision and he never wants to stop. Liam pulls him away from the bag and at first he pushes him away and keeps punching but once Liam has him securely tucked in he doesn't let go. Zayn keeps crying, his fear increasing as he begins to realise how violent he had just become - “I-I don't want to end up like him,” he heaves, shocked at his own behaviour. “I-I, don't know w-what happened.”

It’s quiet before Liam kisses his forehead and whispers into his ear, “Pain does that to you.”

Liam kisses his forehead a few more times and wraps him up tighter in his grasp, Zayn's muscles
spams and shake with the shock of the workout. Zayn accidentally thumps Liam with his gloved hand and Liam has to soothe him over it. “It’s ok.”

They sit on the floor together, Liam rocking him side to side. “I think that’s enough for today, we can come another time though, if you want.”

Zayn nods. Sniffing. Sighing as Liam pulls him up to guide his through stretches before they leave.

“I remember once,” Zayn says quietly in the car. He’s taking a deep breath and a small break before he continues his sentence. “When he beat me he hurt his hand. I had to strap it back up.” Zayn pauses again, a forced and bitter laugh tumbling out. “He must’ve not used his first two knuckles.”

Liam smiles grimly, gripping the wheel and trying not to feel sick at the vivid imagery filling his mind. “Yeah, serves him right.”

“Hi Lou, d’you think you can come over?” Liam asks quietly. He’s standing in the kitchen, hair just about dry after the shower he and Zayn had after coming back from the gym. He’s cleaning up after dinner and had gotten Zayn to go read or draw for a bit.

“Everything ok?” Is Louis’ first question.

“Y-yeah, just- look, Zayn’s been really distant and somethings up so I’m trying to cheer him up a bit but I don’t know how and you always do.” He sighs, admitting defeat.

There’s a rustle of movement and the murmuring of Lou’s voice to someone - Liam assumes he’s saying something to Harry. “D’you need me to bring anything?”

“Er, well unless you have a game or something that’ll make Zayn be happy or at least a little less stressed then yeah.”

Louis doesn’t hang up as he multi-tasks over the phone. It’s a while before he speaks. “You know it’s not going to happen like that, right?”

“What do you mean?” Liams confused - he’s always known this will take a while.

“Like - I know you know things won’t be ok for a while yet, but you do know that me coming around won’t solve or shorten Zayn mourning.”

Liam’s eyebrows stitch together. He can hear the sound of a car door shutting. “What?”

Lou pauses over the phone. “Zayn’s in morning mate.” There is no malice in his words.

Liam obviously struggles, so Louis begins to talk over his thoughts. “Look - think about it, the prick beat him, right? and we know the story and how he lost Mezi right?” Louis pauses and Liam remains silent. “But think about it, after the few hours Zayn spent in agony because he had miscarried and while the bastard had sodded off to get drunk or some bullshit - he, he wouldn’t have had time.”

“Time for what?”
“Time to mourn - the loss, I mean, Liam.” Louis sighs over the phone as he considers what he’s about to say. “Think about it, Nathan wanted Zayn to be his bitch, to tend to his every whim and if he didn't then he would hurt him - do you really think he had the good graces to give Zayn at least a few days to mourn his unborn child?”

The last sentence slams into Liam like a brick wall. He had never thought about that.

“So, Zayn of course had to do what he had to do - cope the best he could, and the way he did that was by building walls - by not thinking, not admitting it, he said how he considered it his ‘unforgivable mistake’ he’s thought it was his fault - but you probably figured that anyway. My point is, Zayn has had no time to mourn or even think about his loss on that front. He was in survival mode and now that has come down and he’s exposed to all these new emotions and having to live it all over again - he’s mourning and all we can do is mourn with him and help him live with it.”

Liam sometimes forgets how observant and brilliant Lou is.

“Look, I'm around the corner, put the kettle on will ya?”

“Y-yeah, will do.” Liam says. “And Lou?”

“Yeah Liam?”

“Thank you.” he says. “Thank you for everything.”

Louis laughs over the phone, the mischievous one he does sometimes. “Lima bean, you silly boy,” and hangs up. Liam almost laughs at how childish he can be and flicks the kettle on.

He turns and see’s Zayn standing in the doorway.

“You ok babe?” Liam asks quietly, folding his arms over his chest and leaning down to Zayns height. Zayn doesn't look at him, just purses his lips. “Zayn?”

Zayn peaks up over his brow for just a second before looking back down again, his shoulders are scrunched up - his arms are also crossed over his chest and he looks cold.

Liam edges forward slowly, “Hey there.” He whispers, ducking even lower so he can see his face. He waits for Zayn to come to him. Zayn looks up again, his lips in a thin line, and steps forward. While his shoulders are still tense he uncurls his arms from around his body and slowly wraps them around Liams waist. Liam uncurls his arms and slowly brings him in.

“Zayn?” Liam asks, not expecting an answer.

Zayn noses his way into Liam’s shirt and sighs when Liam cards a hand through his hair. “Wanted a hug.” He hears Zayn whisper.

“You can always get a hug from me.” Liam kisses his hair. “Always.”

Theres the jiggling of keys in the door and Zayn flinches, pulling back and looking up at Liam for an answer. “Louis coming around if that’s ok?”

Zayn visibly relaxes and nods. “Course it is.”

The door opens - much quieter than Louis normally would and shuts. Liam is focused on rocking Zayn softly so he doesn’t look up when he hears Louis enter the kitchen. Liam can sense his presence and hums when Louis joins their hug, wrapping around both him and Zayn to make a Zayn sandwich.
Zayn had huffed under his breath and turned his head to say ‘hi’

(None of them move until Zayn begins to fidget a little, by then the kettle had gone cold. Nevertheless, Liam could see that Zayn was a little less tense).

—

Z A Y N

Zayn’s kept awake that night - but this time considering the events of that evening.

Liam had called Louis around, and then left them. Zayn tries not to think on it but he’s scared, so so scared that Liam’s getting tired of him - the petty basket case. He doesn't want to seem clingy, he doesn't want to force anyone to be with him and he loves hanging out with the boys - but Liam leaving him alone with them? Has he done something wrong.

The rational side of his brain, the one that agrees with Isabelle when he had bought ip the subject with her tells him it’s ridiculous, that Liam was just giving him space to be with Lou - so he had the freedom to be with him for a bit, and that he’s always more than welcome to go to Liam or any of the boys.

But that rational side of his head can never overpower the force of the other.

—

Zayn’s quiet all day up until they get to Isabelle office for his appointment. So far they’ve been discussing regular things, techniques to help him through meals, how he’s coping with what’s going on and most importantly ways to push through.

Isabelle congratulates him when he said he went to Liam for a hug the afternoon before and again, they discuss the irruption part of his brain that believes they’re all about to abandon him.

Zayn sighs a lot throughout the session, rubbing at his face and blinking more than usual.

“You seem very tired, have you been sleeping?” Isabelle asks gently.

Zayn purses his lips, pausing before he speaks. “Yeah, but n-n’t much.”

Isabelle hums under her breath. It’s without malice but she’s obviously not happy about this.

“Nightmares?” She asks.

Zayn nods, “sometimes.”

“And the rest of the time?” She prompts.

“My head just seems to keep buzzing, I keep thinking about things.” He says.

“What things?”

“I-I can't say, s-sometimes it's ev-everything, sometimes it’s-s nothing.” He says, hardly articulate but
it’s all he knows to say.

“Well tonight is all about getting yourself a good sleep.” She says gently, pointing her pen towards him before writing something down. “If you don’t you’ll feel worse.”

Zayn nods his understanding, and they go easy for the last five minutes.

“Remember, you need to rest as much as you can. You’ll be sick otherwise.” Isabelle reminds him as he was out the door with Liam.

He nods, looking down at the floor. “I’ll do my best.” He promises.

“We know.” She says, and bids them goodbye.

- 

“Lets do something silly.” Liam says that evening. Both of them have been reading and he can no longer stand the blank, emotionless look on Zayns face.

“What should we do then?” Zayn asks, his voice is monotone and tired but Liam knows theres a part of him interested.

“Lets make a fort, and we can read or something in there.”

He’s unbelievably proud of himself when he sees Zayn crack a small smile. “’kay.”

Zayn begins dragging the cushions and pillows off the couches while Liam runs up stairs and grabs all the linen they have off the beds. When Liam returns there’s a good base set up with the couch cushions making a open square area and some pillows lining the base.

They end up making an extravagant castle instead of a fort, with the abundance of linen and cushions available it’s not like they run out of resources. Liam even pulls over a few chairs from the dining room to make it extra secure

Liam loves these rare moments, where Zayn is easy going and happy. They snuggle into the nest of blankets they’ve made and go back to their respective books.

He’s not all there - Liam can see that. There’s a look of misery on his face and he’s still hurting - Liam can see that so clearly, but it doesn't seem too bad now they’re cuddling under their makeshift camp and it’s just the two of them.

—

“What’re you doing?” Niall asks the next morning after Liam has gone to work.

Zayn looks up, startled at his unexpected presence. He swallows past the nervous ball in his throat
and tries to ignore that he’s wearing a t-shirt for the first time in front of Niall, pretend that his scars are not on display as he’s sat cross legged on the living room floor with Roman and surrounded by coloured sharpies. “Erm, Isabelle said… if i was, er, urging-” he coughs into his arm, “for whatever reason, then drawing where you want to erm, ya know, can help it alleviate.”

Niall’s face softens more. “Is it helping?” He asks, sitting across from Zayn. He can’t help but think of that time they had that conversation in Zayn’s room right at the start of this all.

Zayn nods, trying for a supportive smile and kinda failing. “A bit, yeah.”

Niall smiles, and Zayn can see it’s supportive. “Good then.”

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to leave comments and kudos - esp. comments bc they motivate me a lot.
Hi guys, I'm so sorry it's been so long. I've had exams, family disasters, sports and so much on it's not funny. Here's about half of what i was hoping to post tonight, hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re still not sleeping, are you?” Is the first thing Isabelle points out. He’s sat curled up into the corner of the couch with his feet tucked under him. He’s wringing his hands together already, and it's less than five minutes into their session.

Zayn shakes his head, “no,” he says quietly, gazed fixated on his fingers. “Can’t.”

Isabelle sets her pad down on the floor beside her chair. “Well let’s talk about it then.”

Zayn purses his lips, thinking through what he’ll say next. “I don’t know how to talk about this though.” He settles for quietly, still not looking up. “Because I don’t know what I’m thinking half the time.” Theres a beep from some machine in a room nearby that pierces the thought.

“I think we both know what you’re thinking about Zayn.” Isabelle says softly. It’s the first time he looks up.

Zayn lets out a defeated sigh, covering his face with his hands and sliding them down. “I can’t say it out loud.” He admits, “It hurts too much.”

“Sometimes the pain is needed to move forward.” Isabelle suggests.

Zayn drops his hands from his face, his eyes are already reddened and watery. “Such a-“ he sniffs, “such a stupid fucking-.”

“-Zayn,” Isabelle interjects warningly, “we’ve discussed this.” Zayn’s face crumples into a sorrowed frown and he flops against the back of the sofa, neck arching over the support and looking at the ceiling which is a smooth, pale cream.
“It was not your fault.”

Zayn sits up, unfolds his legs and rests his elbows on his knees, breathing deeply; like he’s trying to control himself, keep himself composed.

“Okay, here.” Isabelle says, standing. She walks over to him - he can see her black TOM shoes, “then we’ll do something that can help you process it, yeah?”

He doesn't move from where he is, but he’s almost certain Isabelle can hear his shuddery breathing and how his chest might just explode. A hand settles on his shoulder as she crouches and Zayn shudders at first. Flinching out of habit but Isabelle either doesn't notice or doesn't mind. She settles on her hunches in front of him and covers his hand with her own, pulling it away form his face and coaxing him to look at her.

Eventually, she gets him to move and lie down on the couch. She plumps the cushions and swipes at the seat so it’s more prepared for him to lay there a while. When he lies down he rolls his shoulders and sighs, bracing himself for whatever Isabelle’s thinking. It surprises him slightly when she lends him another pillow, placing it on his stomach for him to cuddle. He's even more surprised with how that feels just a bit better. He closes his eyes, sniffing occasionally.

Isabelle sits on the edge of the sofa, lacing her hand through his slowly - as if she’s ready to pull back if he doesn't want her to interlock their fingers.

She starts off slowly, as normal. He focuses on his breathing and maintains it as his centre.

“Now, just acknowledge what you feel,” she says so gently, “Don’t ignore it, just accept it is there and move through it.” She continues.

Theres a pause. “What do you feel, Zayn?” She asks quietly.

He inhales deeply before answering, “hurt.” He says.

“Where does it hurt?” She asks again, her voice soft as a newly made bed.
“Everywhere… My head, my chest, my throat, my eyes.” He mumbles.

“ok,” Isabelle thumbs at his knuckles like Liam does. “You feel hurt, you've established that - good.” She thumbs his knuckles again. “Now we let it go.” She says. There’s another pause.

“Inhale a breathe, let it settle in your lungs for a moment and let it out in a big breath.” She instructs. “Feel all the hurt fill that breath and push it out.”

His eyebrows stitch together, but he does as he’s told. Every breath exhaled releases tension in his body and feels a bit better.

“Good,” Isabelle says. “Good.”

(A few days later it all comes crashing down).

Zayn whimpers, coughing hoarsely as Liam props him up with pillows. The clock glares that it's 7:56 in the morning and his head is throbbing.

Liam hums, pressing a hand to his forehead.

“I-I don’t understand.” He sniffsles as he wipes his nose with a tissue. “I thought I was getting better.” Zayn cries unhappily. “I-I’ve been eating a-and keep-eping it d-down, I promise, and I haven’t gotten too cold or anythin-.” His sentence is broken by coughing.
Liam hushes him and brushes a hand through his hair. “It’s ok,” he says. “I know you have,” Liam hushes him. “It’s ok now.” He smiles at him reassuringly. Zayn’s glossed over eyes inform him he doesn’t believe him.

“Your body has just taken a big hit yeah?” He tries to sooth. “Like, you’ve not been able to sleep a lot, and your immune system has taken a big hit and you’ve been under a lot of stress.” Liam plucks the diseased tissue from Zayn’s fingers and chucks it into the slowly filling bin next to the bed.

“So now you should just rest yeah? Let us take care of you. Keep warm, drink water and eat as much as you can and with luck this will blow over within a day or two.” Liam offers. Zayn looks miserable but accepts what he’s saying.

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Later on in the day, Liam decides that, yes, Zayn needs to stay in bed but he can’t keep running up and down the stairs to check he’s ok every five minutes like the paranoid person he is while he works at the table. As a result, Liam coaxes him to move from his nest of comforters to the couch downstairs.

Liam helps him sit down slowly and then lay him back against the couch gently, tucking in the blanket around his chest. “Comfortable?” He asks and Zayn nods, shivering. Liam smiles, “good,” and kisses his head before he leaves, but not before ensuring that the blanket is fully tucked around his core. The remote control is within reach and so Zayn flips through a few channels before settling on some crap TV program for background noise. Liam, blessed Liam left the light off, so it’s dim in the room, the only source of light coming from the hallway behind the sofa and the kitchen area around the corner.

- 

Zayn doesn’t move, he lays on his side, exactly as Liam left him with his arms crossed over his stomach and eyes closed as he fights the nausea steadily rising in his throat and tries to control his shivering. He feels beyond terrible and doesn’t necessarily have the will to move beyond his position, both due to the pounding in his head and the violently cold flashes that come every time he moves and exposes a new area of skin, cold by sweat.

Suddenly, just as he thinks he’s fading into sleep, he feels the all too familiar feeling of bile rising up in his throat in a way that’s unstoppable, much more potent than previous lurches, and dashes off the sofa to the kitchen. Harry, who had come over as normal, is obviously surprised by his sudden presence in the kitchen but Zayn doesn’t have time for that - he curls over the sink and throws up
everything he’s eaten so far that day. All he can think is thank Allah that Harry had the sense to clean out the basin earlier.

“I-I didn-“ He tries to say when Liam comes in, hurrying from the noise he must have caused. He feels hands rubbing his back and another palm pressed over his tummy, the muscles convulsing under Liam’s touch. “-didn’t mean to.” He chokes out. When he’s done a napkin wipes over his mouth to rid of the excess spit and puke, he can hear Liam’s hushing him.

“’m not purging, I-I promise.” he heaves, crying into his arms as he tries to slow his breathing down. “I did’n mean to.” He can’t leave the sink, too afraid he’ll throw up again. Acid burns his throat and his voice is raw and rough.

“’Sh shhh, I know darling I know, take it easy, just breathe, yeah?” Liam coerces. “Just take it easy.” Liam shuffles forward and noses his temple, Zayn groans when he flattens a cool palm against his forehead to help him hold his head up.

And ok - ok, that makes him feel better. He half wants to let his eyes roll back into his skull and relish in the feeling of something so gentle compared to what he feels now. He lets out a small whimper and nods slowly, because Liam knows he wasn't purging, he wasn’t purging, he just feels like shit and he threw up, it's ok - just breathe - he can do that. Liam keeps on hushing him and presses his body against his own.

He feels groggy and only slightly less queasy when Liam eventually pulls him away from the sink and back towards the couch. When he’s tucked back in Liam presses a kiss to his forehead and Harry appears behind him holding a glass of milk and a plate.

“Here, you’re not going to want to but try have some crackers, yeah? Soak up the acidity a bit.”

Zayn begrudgingly knows Harry’s right, he knows that the acid in his stomach will be alleviated by eating something like crackers but he doesn’t particularly want to. He blearily looks on and makes no move to take them from Harry so Liam does it for him.

Liam holds one in front of him and he shakily takes it, closing his eyes and eating it for Liam’s sake. First he lets it sit on his tongue and soften a bit before slowing chewing it down. He opens his eyes after swallowing, it feels like daggers down his throat and hurts more than it should. Liam is looking down on him, smiling and places a kiss on his forehead. “Doing so good Zaynie.” He says, and Zayn sips on the milk before he has a second cracker.
Liam places a hand on his forehead and feels his temperature. He hums un-approvingly. “Will be right back honey.” He says and lifts away from the couch off to wherever. Harry sits on the arm rest of the sofa above his head and thumbs down his cheekbone soothingly. Liam returns in a few minutes, of which Zayn has shut his eyes for in an attempt to settle the pounding in his head and how the room spins. He opens them when he feels the couch shifting due to Liam sitting on the edge and watches on as he puts a cap on the thermometer and gently presses it in his ear. He doesn’t say anything and Zayn shuts his eyes again, swallowing past what feels like glass in his throat.

The thermometer beeps and makes him wince. It’s a sharp sound that shoots right into his headache and hurts. Liam takes a hold of his hand and rubs his thumb of the back of it in apology. Liam face doesn’t give anything away bout the result the thermometer provides.

He leans down and kisses his forehead again, smiling encouragingly. “We’ll let you rest for a bit.” He says and Zayn nods. He shuts his eyes and relaxes into the pillows to doze.

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He wakes up not even twenty minutes later in the midst of a coughing fit. His head is still pounding and every breath hurts his throat more and more. Bile rises in his throat and stings. He sits up, because lying down is not helping. Liam runs in with a plastic bowl and crouches next to him, a hand on his back rubbing and, the other handing him said bowl which he holds in his arms under his chin.

He doesn't throw up, but he does dribble a bit into the bowl, and maybe if he felt a bit better he’d care for it, but right now he feels dizzy and sick and just so bad that he can’t quite form the words of apology he intends. Liam wipes at his mouth with another tissue when his fit is over and sits next to him as he slumps - letting him rest his head on his shoulder and then hushing him and rocking them side to side.

When he’s laid back down again Liam manoeuvres him to his side and helps his lie flat. He leaves to wash the bowl but returns soon and leaves it on the floor. Liam tucks him in again and rubs at his scalp. He doesn’t shut his eyes - he’s so tired and he wants to sleep so bad but his brain nor eyes simply won’t let him. Liam disappears again and returns to wipe his brow with a cool cloth and places it over his eyes which makes him sigh because they hurt so much.

He stares into space until he’s helped to the dinner table where he has a small helping of buttered bread and hot chicken noodle soup.
The next thing to happen is his muscles begin to ache. It’s been a day and it's like his calf muscles are wrapped around his quads and his head begins to warp. His quads burn and he can’t quite stretch his arms or legs or body without it being somewhat painful.

Liam moves him so he’s sitting in a chair backwards, his head resting against a pillow on the top of the back of the seat and rubs at his upper back, rolling his shoulders until he’s letting out soft breathy gasps he can’t stop and they feel like they’re in alignment once again.

He catches a glimpse of his reflection in the window when Liam is walking him back to the couch. Red rimmed and swollen eyes, red nose, bright red but cracked lips, pale and sunken skin.

He doesn’t like how he looks, now more than ever.

(“Harry he’s bad, I don't think he’s getting better.” Liam half-whispers over the receiver about mid-day.

“I'm on my way over.”)

“Liam, you need to take him to a doctor.” Harry whispers from the doorway. Liam had let him over despite the ban he’d put on everyone from coming in, fearing for Zayn that they might bring something worse or something could go badly wrong. Zayn is on the couch, shivering under the blankets and mumbling incoherently in his half conscious sleep.
“Yeah, I booked an emergency appointment already for later.” Liam tells him, treading over to Zayn.

“Then why’d you call me?” Harry follows.

“Haz, I’m flat out, I’ve been up with him and working or doing something between and I can’t take care of him if I’m passing out myself.” Liam sounds almost disappointed in himself.

Harry presses a hand between his shoulder blades. “Fair enough, go get some rest, kay? I’ve got him for now.”

Later, the alarm goes off and Liam rolls over to an unoccupied section of the bed. He’s initially worried, but then he remembers why he’s up. He groans, rolling out of bed and dragging on a new shirt as well as selecting some fresh clothes for Zayn. When he gets downstairs he sees Zayns awake, eyes glassy and Harry is sitting with him while they watch crap TV.

Liam slowly moves into Zayns line of vision and gets his attention, letting him know where they’re going before passing him his clothes to let him get dressed. Harry leaves the room and Liam turns around to give him privacy. They leave, but not before Liam swaddles Zayn up in his coat and stuffs enough tissues in his pocket for a small army.

The GP’s office is found down the end of a long set of winding corridors and adorned with basic furniture, that is, a large desk, a few seats and a cot pushed up against the wall next to a bookcase filled with books, medical instruments and random items. The man that leads them there, the doctor, Doctor Horsely, is old. His hair is whitening and his blazer suit can’t button up without a strain from his stomach. He’s rather jolly, and encourages them to sit down when they step in. Waiting as Liam helps Zayn remove all but two of the layers Liam had wrapped him in before they left. He types away at his computer and asks a few general questions before getting down to figuring out what’s going on. Liam relays his temperature and condition from the past two days.
“-and what is your relation to Mr. Malik?” The doctor asks as he retrieves a stethoscope from across the room.

“he’s- erm,” Liam pauses, trying to think what he is to Zayn.

“-Leeyum, he’s my Leeyum.” Zayn coughs, sagging in his seat. Liam turns to look at him, Zayn's nose is bright red and his eyes are glossy but he can see Zayn try to give him an encouraging smile.

“Alrighty then, lets see what’s going on.” Dr Horsely grunts as he sits back in his seat. He places a box with some instrument on the desk and adjusts the stethoscope around his neck.

“Lets see then,” Horsely rolls his chair to in front of Zayn. Pressing his index and middle fingers into either side of his neck and feeling around. In an instant Zayn’s hand shoots out to Liam’s. Liam accepts it immediately and rubs the skin soothingly, humming under his breath to let Zayn - who’s squeezing his eyes shut - know he’s here.

Next Horsely pinches out a small torch, which was neatly sitting in his blazer pocket like a pocket square, and shines it in and out of his eyes. “Can you please open your mouth and say ‘ahh’?” Horsely requests. Zayn follows through, meanwhile he shines the torch down his throat.

Then he asks Zayn to lean forward, as he does so Horsely puts the stethoscope in his ears and moves to the base of Zayn’s (Liam’s?) oversized shirt. In the instant Horsely’s hand in within touching distance of the hem Zayn freezes up, letting go of Liam’s hand and grabbing the end of his shirt in a tight fist. The doctor looks slightly alarmed, “Mr Malik I’ll need you to let me hear your chest.”

Zayn looks to Liam with panicked eyes, his mouth open to speak but disrupted when he begins to cough.

“Is there a chance you can listen over his shirt?” Liam asks. Doctor Horsely looks slightly incredulous.

“Should I have reason to be worried?” He asks cautiously.

Zayn shakes his head quickly, his coughing fit still in progress. Liam doesn't say anything, he doesn't think he has a right to say what is Zayn’s business.
“Then may I please have a listen?” Dr Horsely asks again.

“I-I have anorexia.” Zayn admits. “I-I don’t want you to look there.” The doctor pauses, looking up and down him before conceding and pressing the piece to between his pectorals, over his shirt.

“Breath in,” Horsely instructs, “and breath out.” This repeats for a few rounds.

“Well,” Horsely says as he stops. “Seems to be a simple virus.” He announces. “Not much more than some rest and antibiotics for you.” He continues, rolling his seat back to his desk and typing out a prescription.

They get back home and absolute exhaustion and nausea hits Zayn like a brick in the face. Liam leads him back to the couch and helps him shrug his coat off, letting Zayn settle himself in a spot before tucking him in again. Liam quickly digs his fingers into Zayns calves so as to help remove the heaviness Liam knows is there.

By the end of the day everything is hurting again so much that Zayn doesn't even want to lift his arms. Liam has to spoon feed him soup while he shuts his eyes and tries not to spit the bitter taste out (but that’s probably just his tastebuds acting up) and swallow past the shards of pain in his oesophagus. When he’s done he feels like everything is exploding behind his eyeballs and his heart is trying to lurch out of his chest, given his ribcage is otherwise occupied with the coughing he wouldn't be surprised if it did. He crosses his arms over his stomach and refuses to move from where he sits curled over the bowl.

“How does a bath before bed sound?” Liam asks him quietly an hour (he thinks) later. Zayn tries not to nod too hard because his brain hurts too much and every time he speaks it's painful.

Liam picks him up along with the blanket, an arm under his thighs and the other hand over the back
of his head with his chin hooked over Liams shoulder and carries him up the stairs. Liam must be able to tell how much his head hurts because the ride up the stairs has minimal jostling. “Here, here.” Liam hushes him as he sits him down on the closed toilet seat and begins to run the bath. Zayn’s eyes fall open and shut without permission and he sways without Liam holding him up. He tries to help Liam out by taking his shirt off, but his fingers blur together, the world before him doubles and triples, and he can’t quite figure out how to pull it off when he gets stuck. Liam helps him out, of course. He’s chilly, now the blankets are gone, shaking. Liam, now crouched in front of him so they’re eye level, smiles at him fondly when he can see him again, now rid of the shirt. “There we go.” He says to him quietly. Zayn doesn't respond, instead he leans forward and pushes his forehead into Liams neck, nuzzling under there when he starts shivering from the cold sweat that covers his skin in a thin sheen. He feels delusional.

Zayn curls up and watches as Liam mixes bubbles into the bath and switches on the towel rack warmer. He’s ever so overwhelmed, never quite processing that Liam always takes care of him like this. His head pounds, making his sniffs send pangs of pain to behind his eyeballs, and now he’s overwhelmed he’s tearing up. Liam notices and shifts to hug him, Zayn nuzzles his way back into the crook of Liam’s neck and tries not to begin sobbing - for the sake of avoiding pain and so that Liam won’t worry.

“Here lovely, need you to stand for a minute.” Liam says when the bath is almost done. Zayn does as he’s told-mostly. His knees wobble and quads shake as he tries to stand. He only reaches what he intends to when Liam wraps his hands over his waist - a move that’d normally make him want to scream but right now he’s beyond exhausted, and it stabilises him.

Liam strips him of the jeans and pulls his board shorts on before picking him up bridal style and standing him in the bath, he then gently begins sitting him down in the water, one hand holding the back of his head and the other under his arms. The water engulfs his sore muscles and he moans outright from how good it feels. Liam props him against the side of the tub and improvises by folding up a towel as a pillow for his head. The bath has bubbles and Zayn’s willing to bet his life that Liam’s used the strawberry scented bubble bath. Liam soaps up the loofa gloves and pulls out various limbs to wash before sinking them slowly back into the water.

Zayn’s so relaxed during Liam’s time washing him that he begins to doze off. His chest is covered in the hot water which seems to loosen up the disgusting feeling inside it. He doesn't know how much time has passed until Liam pulls the plug and helps him out, wrapping him up in a big towel and leading him to his bedroom. He feels a bit doozy and content - a bit more balanced temperature wise when Liam sits him down, rubbing him down of the water droplets and suds and changing him into new pyjamas.

He sighs in relief at the new clothing. Having spent that last two days in the dingy t-shirt and joggers this is certainly a welcomed option.
Liam thought that after a good sleep and a bath things might get better. But he thought too soon and within the hour Zayn is awake again, gagging into the bowl because he’s thrown up the soup from earlier.

Liam moves him to couch again the next day so he can work and get everything he needs while keeping an eye on him. The longest they go without Zayn waking up crying from the pain in his head and sinuses, or coughing, or throwing up is 25 minutes.

He twitches and lurches un-expectantly when he tries to sleep and throws up every time he tries to eat something. He then starts shivering and his teeth chatter even when he’s under the duvet. Liam constantly wipes at his brow with a cool cloth which is both heavenly and gives him goosebumps.

Because of this, Zayn begins refusing food. At first Liam can convince him to eat a bit, but when he’s becoming difficult about it (and Liam can hardly blame him, he wouldn't want to eat this sick either). But it starts becoming a very serious matter all too soon.

“If you don’t eat you’re not going to get better and if you get any worse than this I’ll have to take you to hospital.” Liam warns, he really doesn’t want to stoop to this, but he’s desperate now.

Zayn sniffs and looks at Liam like he’s dead, all bundled up to his armpits in covers with pillows holding his head up. Liam hates that look in his eyes, it's been there way to much. Liam wants to get rid of it entirely.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe leave a comment or two for me to wake up to?
(Zayn spends the rest of the day in bed. Roman comes in to play with him after Liam has fed her, the gentle jingle of the toy Zayn is using is thankfully soft on his headache.)

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It happens the next day when Niall is with them. Zayn has been in bed all day - Liam was too scared to move him this morning, fearing he’d cry from the hurt in his body or throw up. Zayn’s energy has wholly left him, seeped out of his body like water down the drain and only in a matter of a few days.

All Liam could get out of him this morning when they woke up was a few noises ranging from a sigh to a whimper. Then a barely discernible ‘Hi’. Liam truly hates this, Zayn is just not getting a break right now.

Liam takes longer to leave bed than normal, revelling that Zayns slept more than a half hour in one go. Liam knows for a fact that if (*cough* when *cough*) Zayn had woken up during the night he’d have kept as quiet as possible so as to not wake him up. Liam both loathes it and loves it.
Niall invites himself into the house - not that this isn't common with them all anyway. He saunters his way into their room, his coat presumably dumped on the couch and miscellaneous items such as keys and wallet strewed across the table. He’s quiet, thankfully, Liam may have knocked his head off if he hadn’t been. But then that’d mean moving… anyway.

“G’mornin,” Niall greets him quietly, Liam gives him a wave.

Zayn eventually stirs between their quiet conversation and Liams hands running up and down his arm. Niall disappears, intent on bringing up breakfast for the two of them so as to give Zayn more time to slumber. Really, it’s only a matter of time before he wakes up and can’t seem to get anymore rest.

Niall brings up brekkie when Zayns eyes are fluttering open. Liam nuzzles into his temple, whispering a “good morning lovely,” and being answered with a fond thumb swiping across his cheekbone.

Liam slowly sits them up while Zayns head rests on his shoulder. He’s surprised to not hear a grumbling protest like normal and brushes it aside. Liam props Zayn up against his side and holds him up, when Zayn sees their breakfast - cereal and yogurt he hides in Liams shoulder.

“Come on darling, need to eat.” Liam coaxes. Offering a spoon of cereal to him. Liam nuzzles him and jiggling his shoulder lightly to get Zayn to lift up. He goes straight back into hiding though, coughing horsely behind his back. “Zayn, please eat just a little.” He tries, only stepping down when it’s border line nagging, “here, yoghurt then,” he tries, “it'll soothe your throat.”

Zayn relents, Liam can see a tear rolling down his cheek as he takes the spoon and swallows. It looks like it's painful to do so, and Liam’s not surprised. A few spoons later and the pain seems to lessen but Zayn refuses not long after that. A hand over his weak stomach signalling to Liam he can’t have more without puking.

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So they don’t move Zayn, Liam relents and moves all his work upstairs. He never works in his room - ever, because he knows the psychological impacts and how physically uncomfortable it is to use your lap as a desk. In addition, the light is dimmer in there so Zayn can rest easier - which does not make for easy sight. This time, however, he can make the exception. Niall hangs around, also doing his work and periodically fetching bits of food (Liam swears the bleached blonde is never wholly
satisfied) and can sometimes persuade Zayn to have a sip of something, or a bite of another. Promising to only just have a little bit and not a meal of it.

Liam’s beyond relieved every time he looks up to see Zayn taking it easy, eyes shut (even though he’s not asleep) or making sure to blow his nose. Little things that make Liam feel at ease, even when he can see that Zayn’s arm shakes when he lifts it and that his coughing has not gotten better in any way.

It makes him feel like he can relax a little, can get the work he needs to do done. Because he needs to work, he knows that he’s not exactly popular with his boss right now. None of them are - but he’s had legitimate reasons for missing work, and he never likes filing paperwork in an office anyway. Processing internships and fellowships is honestly the most boring thing he’s ever had to do. He pushes the thought to the back of his mind - this was never going to be a permanent job anyway. Just a means of income right now, until Zayn’s better at the very least.

“Wanna go bathroom,” Zayn mumbles out of nowhere, Liam looks at him, noting his closed eyes and agape mouth, the puffed up feverish cheeks and gleam of sweat across his brow, he’s not sure if he imagined it. His eyes flicker to the clock. It’s just gone two pm.

He shifts his work off his lap and slowly stands, stretching and nodding, “Ok babe, let’s sit you up first though, make sure you don't get too dizzy.” Liam makes sure to keep his voice low and gentle. Zayn just nods slowly, eyes not opening and making no move to actually move on his own.

Niall comes back into the room as Liam is sliding a hand behind Zayn’s back and using the other to hold Zayn’s head to his chest. Liam catches how Niall’s face is puffed up with whatever food he’s consuming and tuts out of faux annoyance. When Zayn is eventually seated upright he horsely coughs a little in the back of his throat and shakes his head, like he’s trying to shake something off.

“You ok?” Liam inquires softly into his ear. Holding his hand and rubbing the skin. All the response he gets is heavy breathing and then two, slow nods.

“Ok babe, we’ll just stay put a moment and then we can get you to the bathroom, sound good?”

Again, two nods.

They give it another two minutes, Niall migrating to the end of the bed on the side Liam’s seated on so he can help too. Zayn’s so still Liam’s halfway to believing he’s gone to sleep. That is, until Zayn lifts his head up, breathing heavily out through his nose and uneasily rolling his shoulders back.
Wordlessly, Niall lifts up the covers, exposing Zayn to the much cooler air outside the bed which causes him to shudder, and helps him move his feet around to the floor. They take another small break while Zayn adjusts to that. With Niall on one side and Liam on the other, they help him stand up slowly.

Zayn gasps when he’s fully standing, looking down at his feet before screwing them shut a few times. He nods and takes a step forward when he’s ready to go and they move with him to go around the corner. Liam whispers encouraging words to him while not letting him take all his weight, but enough so he isn’t being carried.

Suddenly, Zayn inhales sharply. “Zayn?” Liam asks, looking up from the floor and their feet, no response. Just then, Zayn’s eyes roll into the back of his head and he collapses. His body crumples completely into Liam’s, taking him wholly by surprise. He has to catch him and guide him to the floor before he does so without guidance.

“Oh my God,” Niall says as Liam does, then when he’s in Liam’s arms on the floor he repeats. “Oh my God.”

“Zayn?” he tries again, more urgent. Still no response. Liam’s heart rate escalates and he can feel the panic about to run through him. But he stops it, he has to keep his head on right.

“We need to put him into the recovery position.” Niall says off to the side, hands already moving to do so, Liam can detect an edge of panic in him too. Zayn’s not answering.

“Zayn?” He attempts. Tapping the side of his face, “Zayn babe do something.” He begs, absolutely no response. It makes Liam’s blood run cold. Niall pushes him to help put him in the recovery position. He can feel his head shaking but he doesn’t know why, “I’m so sorry babe,” he speaks to the unconscious Zayn, “But you need hospital.”

Niall pulls out his phone, pausing before dialling. “Are we going to take him or do we call the ambulance?” He asks.

Liam’s checking Zayn’s still breathing. He considers the ambulance option, thinking ahead, but if Zayn woke up while in one he’d go into a panic attack, Liam knows that for a fact after their last experience. Then, there’s the fact that they might not end up at the private hospital, which is where Liam intends for, because the public one is the one where everything went to shit. They can drive him there, he concludes.

“Call the others, we’ll drive him.”
Liam’s thankful that Niall doesn’t question him and instead just does. Liam gets him to go and pack a bag for them while he’s on the phone - including some toiletries, his phone, wallet, charger, spare clothes for him and Zayn and other miscellaneous items.

“Zayn, I’m sorry,” he whispers while Nialls away, knowing that he can’t hear him. “You’re too sick, we need to take you.” He squeezes his hand, asking him for any form of response. Near begging him to squeeze his hand, blink, raise an eyebrow, kick him. Anything.

Harry and Louis arrive in record time, only Harry comes in though, Louis staying in the car waiting for them to get in so they can drive off immediately. Liam lifts Zayn up bridal style, positioning his head so it’s in the junction between his neck and chest. Harry makes sure to grab a pillow and tuck a blanket around Zayn when Liam’s lifted him - just so he won’t get too cold. They get to the car, each step down the stairs is shaky and terrifying. Liam sits in the back with Zayn in the side seat and him in the middle, Niall sits in the passenger and Harry the other side of Liam.

“The private one,” Niall instructs. Louis’ about to argue when Niall tells him “it’s closer and not the last one, will make it easier on him.” Niall instructs which Liam is so thankful for. He was about to do the same but now he knows Niall is on the same wavelength as him he can give Zayn all his attention.

At some point during the journey, Zayn stirs enough that his eyes half open.

“Zayn?” Liam asks, squeezing his hand. “Can you hear me?” He asks gently. Zayn screws his eyes shut and opens them again wider - but they shrink half closed within the second. “Zayn, baby, can you squeeze my hand?” Liam asks again, Zayn does. “We’re in the car baby, just need you to stay awake, ok?” Zayn doesn’t even look like he’s registering what Liam’s saying, he’s so delusional.

“We’ll take care of you.” Liam says after a moment, kissing the overheated skin of his forehead. “I promise.”

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Louis swings outside the emergency room and Harry runs out since he’s on the side closest to the door. He runs in and up to the receptionist, a tall black man with a large afro, who’s typing away at the computer in front of him.
“Hi, I need to request a wheelchair, my friend, he’s so sick, we don't even know what it is but he’s exhausted and there’s no way he can walk in here.”

“He asks as he dials in three numbers into the telephone on his desk.

“Just outside in the car with the rest of our group.” Harry answers, the receptionist gives a short nod and relays the information down the line. The wheelchair service promptly arrives and Harry directs them out.

“Here here.” Liam hushes Zayn as he slowly pulls him out of the car with the help one of the two nurses who have arrived. It’s a painstaking task, because Zayn doesn’t have much strength to support himself and it's at such an awkward angle. But they persevere and gently setting him down in the seat.

Zayn whines in the back of his throat but it turns into a cough, racking his frame violently. He buries his face into Liam’s shoulder to ride it out, his hands feebly gripping at Liam’s jumper in protest. Liam hears him mumble a “no, no.” When a nurse asks him to step away so they can get him inside. Liam thinks it hurts him more than Zayn when he tries to lift away, but Zayn somehow manages to summon the strength to pull him back a little. Liam yields, quickly standing up with Zayn in his arms and sitting down in it himself so Zayn is on his lap and head resting under Liam’s chin. One of the boys seems to have explained why Zayn needs the comfort to the nurses when he was occupied, either that or the nurses are extremely considerate. Liam gently cooes at Zayn while they’re wheeled in.

“Please don’t leave me.” Zayn mumbles quietly, fisting a hand into his shirt best he can. Liam can see how weak it is and it breaks his heart.

“Never.” He promises, resolute. “Never.”

They’re wheeled into an examining room where they have to wait for a doctor to come. In the meantime, the nurses help them by getting Zayn onto a stretcher. All the boys, bar Liam, exit the room as per the nurses instructions (originally it was all of them, but Liam refused, claiming he has excellent reasoning). Together they undress Zayn down to his boxers and tie on a temporary backless gown. The bed’s back is tilted into a seated position so it can ease the coughing some. The nurses then produce some comforters and drape them over him. Liam makes a mental note to thank them profusely later.
During this initial stage they ask Zayn questions. But he’s hardly there with them so Liam answers. With the information provided and then checked one prints off an identification bracelet and clips it around his right wrist.

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It’s another hour before the doctor is able to come to them. When she does it’s a brief preliminary examination to determine the ward he’s to be directed to. It all passes in a blur for Liam, the outcome being the ‘General’ ward. He almost disagrees, surely something like this cannot be a ‘general’ admissions?

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Hours and hours pass, but it's barely noticeable to Liam. How he processes the information and is left on the edge of his seat - that Zayn is sick and he doesn’t know what’s wrong, is killing him. A doctor came in and brought an IV with them, but have yet to hook Zayn up to it. The boys have been allowed in so he’s not alone. Liam thinks about how he has to call Trisha, tell Zayns family he’s in hospital. But Liam has yet to know why, and he won’t leave them hanging like he is right now. He will call when he knows. He sees the clock, it’s nearing seven pm. Still, Liam stays by Zayns bedside.

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“Sir, you’ll need to leave, visiting hours are over.”

“I’m not leaving.” Liam says, shaking his head. He sits on the edge of his chair next to the bedside, holding Zayns hand. “I promised him I'm not leaving.”

“Sir, you have to, it’s hospital policy.” The nurse insists.

“And I said I’m not.” Liams statement is final. He doesn’t look up at her.
“I’ll call security on you.” She says, like she’s had to a thousand times before. “I’ll have to unless you have special permissions to stay.”

Liam clenches his jaw to avoid screaming. That is until he thinks of something. “Does permission from a therapist and or a social worker count?” He asks her, looking her straight in the eye.

“Yes, under certain circumstances.”

He’s already pulling out his phone and dialling in Harriet’s number, “Well I’ll get you your permissions.” He says firmly. “Because I’m not leaving him.” He uses the phone to gesture before placing it over his ear as. The nurse sighs and leaves.

“Hi Harriet, here’s the situation.”

30 minutes later Harriet arrives along with a written consent form. 10 minutes prior, Isabelle had sent in her written documentation over email ready for proof along with a photocopy of her therapy licence and her passport image.

“You could’ve faxed it or something you know.” Liam says. “I don’t think Zayn’s conscious enough to realise you’re here. He looks over his shoulder at the man in question. He’s so small in the bed it’s unreal.

“I know, but as his social worker I’m obligated to be present in situations involving his health. Especially given his recent history.” She says. “I’m fully aware you would not be any part of this. But my presence validates that if any accusations are made.”

He nods. “I’m not offended.” The nurse walks in. “Hi, I need to speak with the main nurse on this ward.” He says.

The nurse notices the document in his hands and Harriet beside him. “Of course, right this way.”

“No, I can’t leave him. They have to come here.” He says.
“Sir!” The nurse exclaims. “We have work to do.”

Harriet interrupts “Well, you should be informed that Mr. Malik here has experienced a recent traumatic incident in a previous hospital where a nurse took offensive action on him. So I suggest that you bring the head nurse to us as Mr. Payne here has every right to not trust hospital staff and Mr. Malik is no where near a mental position to be separated from him.”

The nurse purses his lips and says nothing as she shuts the door.

“Thank you.” Liam says.

“Not an issue.”

-The head nurse comes in and Harriet - thank Harriet - organised his permissions. The form from Isabelle confirming everything validates it all. Liam has his heart in his throat as the nurse looks through the paperwork before her, and only lets it out after the verdict.

“Alright sir, you can stay, but only you.”

-An hour later Liam has already bitten his nails down to little nubs.

“What’s causing all this?” He asks the doctor after they’ve finished their examination. He has his arms crossed, folding his fingers under his arms because he really needs to stop biting his nails. He stands shoulder width apart and only a few meters from the bed to give space for the doctor and a nurse that stand either side of Zayn. His heart rate increases as he witnesses the doctor call for some type of medicine and then insert the IV into the crook of Zayns elbow - his wrist, he overhears, is too scarred an area to successful do.
The doctor turns her attention to him. “Lets talk in private.”

“Sorry, but I can't leave him.” Liam objects.

The doctor sighs, nodding. “Yes I read the mental condition.” She cocks her head to the side in a gesture to stand in the corner. Liam is very worried about what this woman is about to say.

“Mr. Malik is suffering from a viral fever. It’s hardly a life threatening condition,” She clears her throat, flipping a few papers over the top of the clipboard she holds. “In fact it's really just a simple virus and normally he wouldn't have ended up here. However, due to his recent medical history and current health status his susceptibility is much greater than that of someone with better health. His body cannot produce the energy to fight it off and he’s not obtaining much energy because the virus means he can’t sleep or eat easily or well.”

Liam nods. “You're saying this is a regular virus then?” He confirms. He needs to know it’s not going to be something terrible. He needs the explicit statement that Zayn could and will recover from this.

She nods, “Yes, but his immune system is unable to cope with how his body is… Has he been under a lot of stress recently? Not sleeping well?”

Liam nods. “Both.” His hands cover his face as he processes how something so common - so decidedly simple, has bought Zayn down like this.

“That explains it.” She says. “We’ll have to keep him here as he is obviously not well at all and needs some serious medical attention, we’ll have to administer some antiviral and observe him until he is well enough, other than that you needn’t worry so much.”

Liam nods again, the doctor smiles warmly and excuses herself. When she does Liam finds himself letting out a sigh of relief. “Oh thank god.” He whispers. “Thank dear god.”

He’s in the seat next to the bed and holding Zayn hand in less than a second.

The nurse from earlier approaches him after a few moments, having been present the whole exam.

“As Mr. Malik is not in a state to leave bed we’ll have to insert a catheter.” She explains gently. Liam looks at the name tag and sees the name ‘Kelly’.

Liam nods, “Yes, but his immune system is unable to cope with how his body is… Has he been under a lot of stress recently? Not sleeping well?”

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“As Mr. Malik is not in a state to leave bed we’ll have to insert a catheter.” She explains gently. Liam looks at the name tag and sees the name ‘Kelly’.
“What’s a- oh!” Liam thinks aloud. “Oh, yeah ok.” He confirms. He has no idea how to go around it. “Just, maybe wait until he’s properly asleep or something, cause, if he’s awake it’ll stress him out.”

“Absolutely Mr. Payne.” She confirms. Turning around when Liam halts her.

“Erm, I’m just wondering, why were you asking me for permission? Like aren’t you allowed to do whatever it take to look after him?”

“We can, but within reason and it’s etiquette to consult the primary emergency contact or a family member that may be present.” She says.

Liam’s confused. “What?”

“You’re Mr. Malik’s primary emergency contact, did you not know?”

“N-No I didn’t.” Liam racks his brain for any memory.

“Ah well there you go.” She takes her leave but he stops her.

“Wait, for how long?”

“I’ll bring the file in.”

A few minutes later a second nurse, who introduces herself as Lara, announces that she has the first round of antiviral for him. She talks Liam through what she’s doing as she does it, but it’s simple enough. All she does is inject the antiviral via the drip in Zayn’s elbow.

“If he wakes up he’ll be a bit disorientated, this type of medicine also has a soporific effect to help him rest.” Liam nods and she leaves to continue with her rounds.

(Ten minutes later they set up the catheter and Kelly turns to him, saying, “Looks like you’ve been
Zayn blinks blearily, his head is filled with a dizzying, ringing sound that doesn’t stop and his arm feels like it weighs a million tonnes to lift. He’s so confused and somewhat floaty, but he doesn’t know why.

A hand presses to the side of his face and another holds his hand up in the air to a mouth - Liam. Zayn manages to force his eyes open - how he’s unsure of. Liam blocks his view off from everything, leaning in so close all Zayn can see is Liam’s face.

He whispers sweet encouragement to him, “You’re safe,” “You’re ok,” and “Nothing to fear.” Zayn doesn’t quite grasp why Liam’s saying what he is, but it’s comforting all the same.

Zayn clears his throat, but it changes into horrible coughing and pain spikes throughout his body, especially his head. He groans, eyes shut to block out the light of the room. He can’t find the energy to lift his own head up, or move his arms. He feels a blanket tucked around him and sighs, letting himself fade out.

He doesn’t sleep, he can’t, but he rests - fading out from the weird noises of the world around him and hopes it will come sometime soon.

- 

When he opens his eyes next Liam’s there again, but they’re not in his room back home, they’re somewhere else. He scans his eyes around, not listening to what Liam’s saying- not because he’s being rude - but because his brain is sluggish and bleary. Not allowing him to process the words.

Someone enters the room, his mind is not letting go of the fog as he comes to terms with his surroundings. This person - a woman in blue overalls approaches him slowly on the other side of the bed Liam’s on and quickly shines a light in and out of his eyes. Black spots dance around his vision but he can hardly respond.

Later on, when he reflects on that, he realises he’s glad he was unable to understand what was happening. Because he knows without a doubt he would’ve panicked.
Liam is gently talking to Zayn when Kelly comes in. He knows Zayn’s conscious, his eyes are open after all, but it looks like he’s zoned out into space. He can’t get a response.

“Good morning,” Kelly greets. “How are you?”

“Good,” Liam answers.

Kelly rounds the bed and produces a small torch, shining it in and out of Zayn’s distant eyes, “hmm.”

“What?” Liam inquires.

“Slow response to light,” She says, “largely unresponsive, that doesn’t mean a bad thing but really he should be responding to us, soon anyway. Pupils are same size so no signs of any other issues.”

Liam nods, understanding. He looks at Zayn again, and sees some form of recognition flash. He makes sure to smile as comforting he can when Zayn blinks a few times, each time his vision becoming a bit clearer. “Hi Zayn,” he coos. “Take it slow baby,” he says, sitting up closer to him and placing his palm against Zayn’s cheek. “You have all the time in the world.” He says, thumbing at his hairline. Zayn blinks slowly, heavily, sometimes his eyes stay shut for a good while before he opens them again.

Liam witnesses when Zayn first comprehends that they are in a new area. His eyes jolt around in random spastic dashes, his breathing gets heavier and he begins to fidget. Kelly steps away from the bedside, holding her hands up in a non-threatening manner. “Mr. Malik? Mr. Malik you’re safe.” She says in a clear, loud voice. Zayn’s grip loosens and re-clenches in the blankets.

“Zayn, Zayn honey?” Liam gently, but firmly manoeuvres his face to look towards him and holds his hand with the other hand. “Hey hey hey,” he hushes when Zayn’s breathing becomes laboured again. “You’re ok, you’re safe. Save your energy baby.” He says, pressing little kisses around his face. “I’m here, you’re safe.” He continues, repeating it in a mantra. Zayn lets out a small panicked whimper which Liam immediately attends to. “We’re at the private hospital, with Kelly and Lara. The boys are here, I’m here, you’re safe, we’re all here to look after you lovely,” Zayn sniffs, but with his blocked nose it’s more a snort and sounds a bit painful. “You’re safe here, you’re so safe.” Liam pulls back slightly, just to peck his nose and between his eyes - hoping that it may ease Zayn
off into rest or something. Instead, Zayn is as awake as he’s been in days and his bottom lip is trembling so fast he might just chatter. “Oh baby, no, you’re ok.” Liam affirms again, pecking his face and soothing his hands over his arms and face. In his peripheral vision, he sees the bed control panel and presses it so it’ll sit Zayn up some.

As the bed rises into a sitting position, Zayn’s eyes dart around the room more, especially in Kelly’s direction. Zayn’s still jittery, obviously uncomfortable with everything that’s happening. Liam sits next to him on the bed-not under the sheets because he’s not sure if that would make things worse for Zayn right now, and hooking his arm around him, holding him close. He keeps hushing him, and when Zayn’s eyes don’t stop moving he gently covers them with his hand, hushing Zayn without stopping.

Eventually, his breathing calms down and he stops shuddering so much. Liam slowly removes his hand to see Zayn’s eyes still open - but bleary and tearful. Liam pecks at his face while Zayn seems to look around, still comprehending everything. Kelly left the room at some point so there’s no one else in there but them.

They stay like that for a long time, Liam hushing and talking to Zayn - helping him manage the new situation. Liam doesn’t know how much time passes, but he figures it’s about a half hour after Zayn calmed that Niall comes in. First it’s a quiet tap on the door, a sound that makes Zayn stiffen. Then it’s pushing away the curtain that provides them some privacy slowly, peeking his head in the say “hi” before he walks in softly. Niall has bought some of Zayn’s clothes with him as Liam requested - new boxers and pyjamas or old comfortable clothes.

Niall sits next to the bed, “Hey Zayn.” He says softly, squeezing his hand. Zayn blearily blinks back to him, Liam can tell he’s trying to answer him somehow, but that’s not necessary so he squeezes him and reminds him to take it easy.

Another ten minutes later Harry and Louis arrive with pillows from Zayn’s bed and some other comfort items. Liam can see Zayn’s fighting sleep. How his eyes keep dropping suddenly only to open a second or two later. Liam does his best to rock and usher Zayn to sleep but he’s resisting.

“Roman?” Zayn asks. It's the first time he’s spoken. His voice sounds rough and painful, gravelly.

“Roman’s fine.” Louis says, “we fed her and she’s just great.”

Zayn nods, eyes shutting.
He doesn’t sleep. Evident from how he immediately opens his eyes when the door opens a third time. His face is completely blank and obviously exhausted.

Kelly treads in, carrying a tray of food and drink. “Hi,” she announces herself softly to everyone. She barely makes a sound as she sets the tray on the over-bed side table. Louis stands from his chair, gesturing for her to sit down. She smiles gratefully, the mass of black hair from her dark afro bounces on top of her head as she takes the seat. She looks to Zayn, leaning towards him with a soft smile on her face. “Hello Zayn, I’m Kelly.” She says gently. Zayn’s face remains blank. “I’m a nurse, here to help you feel better, is that ok?” She asks.

Zayn stares at her blankly, Liam can see his eyes flicker, he follows Zayn’s line of sight around her afro, the dark expanse of her skin, the piercings in her ear, then back to make eye contact. He nods what feels like a minute later, slowly.

Kelly smiles, “Now, I just need to let you know that anything you say in here is with confidence, and that nobody here will hurt you. Liam is here to stay with you for however long you want him to be and we won’t do anything without asking you or Liam first, are you ok with that?”

Again, it takes Zayn a while. Truthfully, Liam agrees it’s a very long statement to process. Especially with Zayn as he is right now. But he eventually nods.

Kelly continues to smile. “Excellent,” sitting up. “I’ll need you to try eat and drink what you can, I’ll be back in an hour or so with some medicine, let you settle in a little.”

“Thank you.” Liam says for Zayn, catching how after he says it Zayn’s mouth open and closes. Liam squeezes his hand.

Kelly smiles, “I’ll leave you in peace,” and leaves.
Lara comes in before Kelly returns, also introducing herself. Zayn has nibbled on small pieces of what is now the cold marsh potatoes and veg meal. Harry and Niall have gone down the hospital cafeteria in search of different, more manageable food.

When they return Zayn has a small amount of the salad and chicken soup before he feels nauseous, Liam can tell the difference between him feeling genuinely sick and when he’s feeling off. As it is ten minutes later they have a bucket next to the bed just in case.

Kelly comes back with another tray, this one with a bottle of medicine and a syringe that Liam can see before Zayn will. She sets it down again, covering the syringe with a napkin.

“Ok Zayn so I have some antiviral for you. I need you to have some of this-” She picks up the bottle, shaking it between her thumb and two forefingers. “It’s for your cough and the sickness.”

Liam, who is still lying next to him - albeit having shifted them both a little so they’re lying on their backs at an angle - nods, squeezing Zayns hand. Zayn watches Kelly as she uses a thick plastic syringe to dose the medicine and place it to his lips.

At first, Zayn purses his lips and clenches his jaw, breathing heavily through his nose. Kelly pulls it away from him in an effort to relax him. Liam can see Zayn shuddering, “w-what’s in it?” Zayn asks.

“An oral antiviral for your sickness,” Kelly says, “kind of like a paracetamol, so for your fever, headache and that to help you feel a bit better.”

Zayn doesn’t respond - well, he swallows and avoids eye contact with everyone. Liam squeezes his hand, “it’s safe Zayn, we’re all here, Kelly’s not going to hurt you.” He moves into Zayns line of sight so they can make eye contact. “You’re ok.” He reaffirms, kissing his knuckles.

Zayn looks scared, but Liam can see the exhaustion he’s still fighting. “Ok,” Zayn says, quietly. He grimaces as Kelly brushes the plastic tube against his bottom lip but he takes it. Liam sighs in relief. Zayn turns his head when Kelly places the tube back on the tray and shuts his eyes. Liam caresses the side of his face, thumbing his temple and scratching the hairline. His hair is getting greasy from not washing - Liam will have to see how he can change that so Zayn’s more comfortable. “Well done,” he whispers. He knows that there’s the other dose yet, but Zayn hasn’t seen the syringe. Liam leans forward, nosing where he’s just been caressing him. “Just one more and we’re done.”
Zayn whimpers in protest but it backfired when he coughs - a hack that sounds like it comes from the very depths of his lungs. Kelly makes quick work of taking the time Liam uses to comfort Zayn and prep the needle to insert it into the connector in his arm. Liam covers the side of Zayn’s face with the flat palm of his hand - it feels cool compared to Zayn’s clammy overheated cheek. “You’re ok,” he soothes, nosing against Zayn’s temple again. “We’re here, it’s done.”

Zayn sniffs, Liam can’t blame him for how scared he is, but he’s hoping it’ll dissipate soon enough.

Kelly leaves, Liam presumes it’s to give Zayn some space. He’s grateful for the both of them. Especially because Zayn’s still shaking and his breathing is heavy - heavier than it should be.

“Hang in there gorgeous, you’re safe.”

Later on in the day Louis is called in for work, and ten minutes after Niall is too. Harry shows them the door and finds that Lara was en route to the room and lets her in.

“Hi there,” she walks in, carrying a pair of long socks.”I just need to pop these on you, so you don’t get too sore.”

Liam almost wants to let out an aggravated sigh, Zayn was so close to actual sleep before she came in, but that’s not her fault - she didn’t know. Zayn inhales heavily, curling the covers in his fist while clenching and unclenching his eyes open to shut, like he’s scrambling to blink out the exhaustion. Liam stands as Lara shows them the socks. They’re bright orange with a small hole where the top of the foot would be.

“They’ll be a bit tight but it’s nice and comfortable when they’re on,” she smiles. Zayn doesn’t respond more than to sleepily blink and screws his fist up again. Liam reaches over the bed and plumps the pillows some more, noticing they’re lost a bit of their size. He notices they’re damp - he sincerely hopes it’s Zayn finally sweating out his fever. When he’s propped Zayn in the pillows a bit more comfortably he presses a button on the bed panel to raise it up so Zayn’s half upright. Zayn sighs, his head rolling to the opposite side and shutting his eyes half way.

When Liam looks over his shoulder he see’s Harry talking with Lara. He assumes it’s about the socks and what they’re doing as he notices Harry gesturing to what she holds more than once.
He also asks Lara about the socks and what they do, never once leaving Zayn’s immediate bedside. He flattens his palm over Zayn’s forehead, feeling more than hearing Zayn sigh. It’s established that they’ll flip the covers off of Zayn’s lower body, one side at a time and push the socks on. When Liam curls the covers over he finds that the whole of Zayn’s body is clammy. Cold sweat glistens Zayn’s skin and prickle when exposed to the room’s air. Zayn himself shudders after a moment, grumbling a little incoherently as Lara shows Liam how to put the socks on. They roll the first one on, and Liam digs his fingers into the flesh of Zayn’s leg, massaging it out a little in apology for the disturbance. They repeat it again for the second leg, this time Zayn flexes his foot a little. Liam rubs the clothes extremity to relax him a bit.

Lara checks some readings off a machine and writes a few things down. She checks his temperature and notes the time, informing Liam that a nurse - either her or Kelly will be in in a few hours time to give him his next dose of medicine.

She’s only just leaving when Liam asks “wait.” She turns, a half-confused look on her face. “Can we have another blanket - a thinner one just to cover his arms?”

“Sure thing, I’ll just get you one.” She shuts the door with a quiet click.

Liam sits on the edge of the bed, his hand wrapping around Zayn’s calf through the sheets, he squeezes periodically - like a pulse, soothing the muscle and, and what he hopes is comforting him. Harry’s phone begins to ring and it doesn’t take a million bucks to figure it’s their boss calling him in. His phone rings too, a ringtone he specifically set for work calls - but he ignores it. He’s told the company he won’t be in indefinitely, he does not need to re-explain this multiple times or justify why when he has done them nothing but service and been efficient for them as long as he’s been there.

He does the same for Zayn’s other leg, finishing when Lara returns with the sheet. He thanks her and she leaves. He holds the blanket in his arms and makes quick work of unfolding it and tucking it around Zayn. Liam’s almost sure that Zayn is at least half asleep - he mumbles incoherently as he’s jostled slightly but other than that doesn’t acknowledge anything.

Liam sits down on the bed next to Zayn’s legs when he’s finished, pondering everything. Catching himself on the precipice of deep thought when the phone ringing reminds him that he has to call Trisha - he double checks the clock, recounting how inappropriate timing had kept him from calling her before. It’s fine now, so he stands. Bracing himself to make a call he’s half dreading.

“Wanna go home.” Zayn whimpers out horsely from between the covers, fingers gently clasping at
“I know babe, we’ll be home soon.” Liam squeezes his hand.

(He tries not to smile at hearing Zayn refer to it as home).

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Louis returns without calling Liam beforehand, but he knows better than to question how Louis managed to get the blankets off Zayn’s (their) bed. Liam stands, removing the hospital blanket that he had tucked around him earlier and, with Louis’ help, tucking Zayn in much more comfortably. Zayn shifts. He nuzzles into the material, eyes peeking open blearily and, shit- Liam was so sure he had been asleep. The blankets swallow him well up and around his neck, tucked just that little bit under even his ear so he’s swaddled whole.


Liam smiles sadly, “no problem baby,” he lifts up the sheets, wary of Zayns arm and the tubes in it and climbs in steadily. He’d toed off his shoes about an hour ago so his socked feet brush Zayns.

Zayn’s too weak to shift too much, so Liam has to help him, but they end up spooning, as it’s easier due to the drip. Liam nuzzles into Zayns hair, hearing Zayns heavy breathing and trying to calm the shivers by rubbing his upper arm. Liam can feel the material of the knee high compression socks that they put on him earlier.

Liam doesn’t stop mumbling endearments and using safe tones, nor gently caressing his skin, holding him close as he can or threading fingers through his hair until he knows - he knows - Zayn is sound asleep.

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Kelly comes in later, and Liam talks to her while she takes Zayn’s temperature and organises his medicine.
“He’s not been sleeping.” Liam tells here, silently so Zayn won’t wake.

“He hasn’t?” She asks. Sounding surprised.

Liam shakes his head in affirmative. “No, he looks it but now is probably the first time he’s actually soundly slept since we got here.”

Kelly pauses in her organisation of Zayns medication. “In that case I’ll give him the drowsiness inducing one.” She passes by him. “He’ll only get worse if he doesn’t get adequate sleep.” Confirms his fears.

“Thank you.” Liam says as she leaves, taking the emptiness of the room to brush Zayns hair off his forehead. He softly hums, thinking back to Isabelle’s advice for soothing Zayn after panic attacks. He passes his palm flat against Zayn’s stomach. He’s thin still, more than before because this, but much better than after Nathans. His stomach bulges a little more towards the side pressing into the bed, and slowly rises and falls with his breathing. He can feel the thump of his heartbeat where he’s feeling. It’s encouraging to know they’re going to be ok.

Kelly walks through the door silently albeit the click of the door opening and closing. She treads over, the tray fitting onto the table just fine. She picks up the syringe, flicks it twice with the end of her finger and then pushes it into the connector in Zayns elbow.

There’s no reaction on Zayn part as the sedative/medicine works on him. Liam takes that as a sign for relief. “He’ll be fine.” She says, disposing of the syringe before running through some procedures and checking other stats, then leaving.

- Louis comes in an hour before he wakes up, talking with Liam about their days and conversing about nothing special beyond that. Louis even gets Liam to laugh - something he hasn’t done in a few days. It feels magical.

- Lara doses Zayn once more that day after dinner. He’s only been awake for a few hours, now the medicine has worn off and in that time - despite Liam eating next to him he’d only managed a small
helping. They rotate Zayn around so he now lies on the other side of his body and curls into Liam’s chest. Liam had managed to talk to him a little. But Zayn’s speech is more than mumbled and it takes him time to answer. The sluggishness wears off onto Liam and he finds himself dozing along with Zayn.

Along with the medicine is a sedative to help him sleep through the night. Zayn is knocked out in an instant. It saddens Liam how it doesn’t even take a minute to work, how Zayn is so vulnerable his body can’t fight any more than it already is.

Zayn sleeps through the whole night.

The next morning Zayn is on his way to alert. They wake up and Zayn blearily pushes through breakfast, consuming more than the day before on the insistence of Lara, Kelly and Liam. When he’s finished a satisfactory amount Liam makes sure to soothe him and tuck him in close. shifting them around so they don’t become uncomfortable and singing to him softly.

It’s then he lets Zayn know what he’s missed in the last day.

“I called your mum,” Liam starts off - a little breathy in an attempt to keep quiet for Zayn. “They’re coming down later to see you.”

Zayn looks out of it, but nods once, then twice after he’s had a few seconds to process it. Liam doesn’t say anything after that - instead letting the peace reign.

It doesn’t last long, however.

Liam gets out of the bed, making sure to prop Zayn up and make sure he’s comfortable before he goes to relieve and wash in the attached bathroom. He comes back in as Kelly does with the first dose of the day and Zayn stiffens. “Good morning,” she greets cheerfully. “How are you feeling?”
Zayn’s mouth is slightly gaping and his puffy eyes dart around her. He doesn’t respond. Kelly approaches the bed, having deposited the tray on the table and asks again, softer, “how are you feeling today Mr. Malik?” Liam sits down on a chair next to the bed, taking Zayn's hand in his own and kissing the knuckles. It doesn’t grab Zayn’s attention as he hoped.

Zayn shakes his head - and by Kelly’s reaction it obviously wasn’t the reaction she was expecting. Liam sees Zayn's chin and bottom lip start to wobble, and stands up, sitting down on the side of the bed and threading his hands through Zayn's hair.

“Zayn, Zayn baby breathe.” Liam soothes. But Zayn doesn’t follow it. His breathing gets heavier and heavier until he’s hiccupping with tears. Kelly backs away, pushing the table into the corner and throwing a towel over the tray. It becomes so bad that Kelly reaches for the bed panel to sit Zayn up, otherwise he’d choke on his own tears. As it is Zayn begins to hyperventilate.

Liam does his best to calm him, but it's becoming too much - Zayn can’t calm himself down and Liam recognises this as a panic attack. Eventually he pulls to covers - both Zayn’s and the hospitals from his upper body and climbs into bed again. He slides behind Zayn so he’s in the ‘V’ of his legs and wraps his arms around him. Zayn's breathing shudders and becomes gasping. Liam hushes him and covers his eyes. Shutting him off from the world because Zayn’s not ready to see it right now. Needs quietness and peace and comfort that Liam offers to bring him back down to earth.

Zayn has no energy, so the panic attack is short lived and horribly confronting for Liam. Then, Liam imagines it should be the same for Kelly, because Zayn is just… so not ok with everything going on around him.

“Can we do this later?” Liam asks quietly. Zayn now tucked into his neck and lap in the foetal position. Liam tucks Zayn's blanket in around him, hushing him quietly.

“I can push it back around an hour?” Kelly suggests, “Just if he doesn't have it in a certain time frame it’s detrimental.”

Liam nods, “I understand, an hour then?”

Kelly nods and makes to leave

“-wait!” Liam quickly calls. “Can we have a few towels for the shower?” He asks and Kelly nods silently, taking her leave.

Liam looks down at Zayn, “You’re ok baby,” he says, kissing his hairline. “I’ve got you.”
Zayn grumbles something out - his voice rocky and coarse.

“Are you ok with a shower?” Liam ask, “you’re all sweaty.”

Zayn nods.

—

Z A Y N

The first thing he notes about the post-panic aura is that Liam is holding him close. In hindsight, he really thinks that’s what brings him down from the place he ends up in a panic. He, he can’t really think.

The next thing he realises is that Liam is moving - holding him in a bridal style and the woman… Kel? Kehm? Something like that is in the background holding white sheets and towels. His mind is hazy.

This pries to be more so when it’s just him and Liam in the bathroom. At one point Liam lets go of him and he’s shocked into a startling sober version of reality for all of a second before Liam steady him again.

He-he’s confused. How did he end up in board shorts? His board shorts?

He doesn’t know.

The feel of hot water - the shower, he concludes, brings him up a bit. He sways where he’s sat on a… wait, a plastic stool?

He blinks, almost drunkenly. Breathing heavily as he gains a bearing of his surroundings. He looks up best he can. Piecing together fragments of information in his sluggish brain. Something shades him eyes and he can feel the warm water trickle through his hair.

Liam - he recognises Liam saying something to him. “Hi babe.”
Everything’s so warm, is the thing. It’s like he can’t help but doze. He sways more and more - and the water is shut off. Zayn hums.

Then he feels himself being stood - but he doesn’t open his eyes. Not until another set of arms help to support him. He notices blurs of blonde hair and blue eyes. Then he feels wrapped up, warm, soft but rough. He feels dry. Then he’s wearing new clothes.

Everything is - so, so strange.

He’s laid down, in the bed he thinks… it feels new. Like the sheets are fresh, they smell fresh and he feels as his damp hair … do something. He doesn’t know after that.

Chapter End Notes

So, incase ya'll been wondering what I've been up to (and partially bc I'm really proud of what i've done and want to share) here we go. First off... Believe it or not I am now a National XC relay champion! And in the individual 6km... I came 11th overall BUT 2nd out of my age group!!! *shocked emoji* I made it onto the national schools team but because I finish school I can't go!! *cries*

Then, I went on my Gold duke of ed qualifying expedition. The week after the next I GRADUATED high school and had my Yr 12 Formal!!!!!! After that I've had more athletics meets. The diocese one i set a new 800m record and became the age champion, then at the level after I set a 1500m record and got a PB!! So happy to finally get one. Then I've been revising for my exams and on Sunday I got a MASSIVE 800m PB so I'm super stoked about that!! On top of this I've also been completing the pierre de cubertain award and revising!

Whew, there we go.

Please leave a comment! It'll mean a lot to me! I think I have more to say but can't remember right now and i have a headache so I'm signing off for now, check below later for any additions ahaahaha.
Hi.

Incase you're wondering where I've been I was completing my final High School exams, I went away and my coach had been really sick - enough that he passed away on Tuesday (its Friday) and I've been struggling.

Anyway, hope you enjoy this long-overdue chapter!

Zee.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Z A Y N

The first thing he notes is how heavy everything is. His arms, his legs, his eye’s, his mind… everything so slow and heavy. He feels himself stir into consciousness, but can’t open his eyes. He takes a deep breath, embracing the drugged sensation. Liam’s here, he has to be, he said he’d be there in the long run. So he’s safe.

Safe, he’s safe.

He hears murmurs, dull. His ears can’t quite pick up with the words with the exception of some stray syllables that filter into a word or two somewhere in his addled mind. He can feel his hair being brushed, wait, no, stroked? He doesn’t know - it feels good is all. He tries to open his eyes some but he can barely crack them, just enough to see light and it’s already too bright - too much, too soon.

A mantra of *take your time, take your time*. Filters through his brain. It’s not being said now he doesn’t think, but it has been said before.

He can’t think. He rests.

- 

L I A M
He’s expecting Trisha and the rest of Zayn’s family to arrive at any second. Saffaa had called him for Trisha to let them know they were parking. Meanwhile he sits on his usual chair next to Zayn’s bed. He’s close enough that he can hold Zayn’s right fist in his hand up to his mouth. Liam stares at the figure in the bed. Zayn’s dark hair is mostly dry now, fresh-smelling like strawberries and dew from the shower they had earlier just after his panic attack. Niall had been there too, but only for a short while to help Liam get Zayn out of it and into bed. Since then he had to leave as he was only on his lunch break. Not long after he had Kelly came in with Zayn’s food and the dosage. She makes quick work about dosing him. Then they talk about the attack and what can be done to avoid them in the future. Kelly suggests that they could implement a feeding tube. Liam ponders this and eventually they come to no conclusion. Zayn will just have to eat more later. Kelly tells Liam that Lara will be in later to check he’s eating and that they should wake him up to eat then if he didn’t wake up on his own.

Liam had nodded. Pleased with that plan and then she’d left. Now, he waits.

There’s a knock on the door. He stands but is too late to open said door. When it does, as predicted, it’s the Malik family. Liam greets them quietly, all of them are in varying degrees of quiet conversation, from Trisha talking to Waliyha to Doniya’s silence. Liam had warned them over the phone that Zayn was sleeping.

Saffaa’s move immediately to opposite Liam on the other side of the bed. She wraps her hand around the side bars. When Trisha sees Zayn her hand flies up to cover her mouth and she breaths out an “oh,” before she stands next to Saffaa, caressing his cheekbone gently with the back of her fingers. She makes watery eye contact with Liam before re-focusing on Zayn. Yaser stands next to Zayn’s head by Liam, who has not let go of Zayn’s hand. Doniya the other and Waliyha next to Trisha.

“Has there been any improvement?” Yaser asks, drawing up and sitting down in one of the nearby chairs Liam had readied.

“I don’t know, not coughing as much as he was so that’s an improvement.” Liam answers. They’re all sat down in the time Yaser answers.

“Good. That’s good.”

Saffaa whips out her phone and Liam thinks she takes a photo. She then taps away at her screen as if she’s writing out a message and wonders if she’s snap-chatting someone. It makes him feel a little uneasy.
“I’m hoping he’s feeling a little more comfortable,” Liam says, brushing it off. “We had a nice hot shower earlier and the nurse changed the sheets.”

“Good, good.” Trisha says, still in touching Zayn anyway she can be; holding his wrist, caressing his cheek, ruffling his hair and so on. Waliyha opens the satchel that hangs over her shoulder and produces a small, fluffy purple bear before she drops said bag on the floor. Liam beams out of endearment as she slowly pushes it into Zayn’s hand. Then she holds his hand as his fingers curl around it.

Liam see’s Zayn’s fingers twitch slightly, almost unnoticeable. But Liam knows better by now.

“Zayn? Zayn baby your family’s here.” He cooes. There’s no response, so he stands up and leans over him, brushing his lips over Zayn’s temple.

“Baby they’re here, you can do it.” He whispers, thumbing over Zayn’s knuckles on the hand he’s holding. Zayn’s head moves, so slightly but it’s noticeable by Trisha who shoots her hand out to also squeeze his hand.

“Take your time beautiful, it’s ok.” He says again before taking his seat and continuing to rub his hand.

-

Z A Y N

Something is pushed into his left hand. It’s soft and plushy. He puts what energy he has into twisting his head and attempting to look at it. It’s soft; so, so soft. There are velvety threads that caress his fingertips, it’s plushy and easy to squeeze. He grips it as tight as he can and curls it into his body best he can - but he doesn’t think his hand moves any more than his fingers do.

His family is here, he thinks they are anyway. Something has registered in Zayns brain allowing him to acknowledge their presence.

Sluggishly, Zayn tries his best to summon any energy he can. Just for them. He can feel one of them take his hand. Haphazardly, he thinks it’s Doniya, because she always wears rings and he’s sure he can feel a few. She squeezes and he tries to give her anything back but it’s so hard, he squeezes back a little, the action draining him. He thinks he hears Doniya (if it is her) hum, and then feels her soothe the back of his hand.
“If we braided his hair would he be mad?” Safaa asks distantly - no more than a hardly coherent mumble. Yes. He’s certain it’s her. Zayn smiles internally after it processes in his head.

His mum chuckles, “Maybe.” There’s a pause. “He had his hair washed this morning, but it might help keep the hair out of his eyes?” She proposes.

He feels fingers push through his hair, he wishes he could sigh from how nice the simplicity of it feels. He feels strands lightly pulled in multiple directions and looses count of it all.

He is at peace when he drifts off willingly into an easy sleep.

-  

(“Here, take the keys, don’t bother with a motel,” Liam says.

“Liam, I can’t ask you for this.”

“You didn’t, I’m insisting.”

There’s a jingle.

“What would we do without you Liam?”

Liam chuckles, “you’d do just fine.”)

-  

L I A M
Later, after the Malik’s have left to stay the night and settle into their house Liam receives a call from Isabelle to ask on Zayn. He relays the same information that he gave Zayn’s family over to her before she hums and asks if he’s ok.

“I-I think I am, ‘m just a little worried.”

“Liam, it’s so understandable, just make sure you rest, ok? You can’t look after Zayn if you haven’t rested enough.”

“Will do Isabelle, thank you again.”

“Anytime, let me know when he’s out or if you need anything.”

“Will do, thank you, bye.” Liam’s very prompt in hanging up. He doesn’t know why until he considers what Isabelle said hours later when it’s nearly half eleven at night - he hasn’t slept properly in days. He needs to for Zayn.

Just when he’s getting cozy in his chair he hears a noise in the room. He blinks open his eyes, searching the darkened area before he realises it’s Zayn whimpering. He sits up.

“Zayn, Zayn gorgeous you’re ok.” He mumbles, “you’re safe.”

The mumbling and whimpering doesn’t stop, not until Zayn jolts awake with a gasp. Liam feels like he’s aged a hundred years from it. Zayn doesn’t deserve this, he doesn’t deserve the interrupting, never ending repercussions inflicted on him because of someone else. He doesn’t deserve the lack of sleep, nor the blinky confusion that sets in as he has to remember not to panic - all because some arsehole decided to attack him, manipulate him, exploit him. He wants to take it away, he wishes every day he could.

“Baby,” he cooes, tongue heavy with tiredness. “Babe you’re ok.” He says.

He can see the wetness in Zayn’s eyes from the tears and thumb them away. Zayn sniffs when he does. “‘m sorry.” He croaks.
“Hey hey, now, you have nothing to be sorry about.” Liam reprimands gently.


In the darkness Liam senses them having a moment, time seems to slow down for them. He thumbs away the newest tear and kisses his forehead.

“Do you need to talk about it?” Liam asks.

Zayn shakes his head, still snuffling, “No.”

Liams brows furrow in sadness. He pushes a hand through Zayns hair, helping him through the small cough that springs up and the hiccup following.

“Can you hold me, please?” Zayn asks quietly. “Please?”

“’f course baby.” Liam says, it sounds between a sigh and a scoff. He navigates his way into the sheets, bringing Zayns head to his chest, and tucking his into his body. Their legs tangle and Zayn lets out a sigh. The bear is tucked under Zayns chin in Zayns fists. There’s a pause before anything else happens, Liam feels heavy with sleepiness. He’s sure Zayn is somewhat too.

Then, a racking sob.

“’m sorry.” Zayn hiccups. His crying isn’t loud or as harsh as it has been in the past. But it is unsettling, heartbreaking.

“Why are you saying sorry Zayn? You have nothing to be sorry for.” Liam hushes him. Zayn calms down some, wimping his nose on a tissue Liam fetches from the bedside table’s box beside them.

“So gentle.” He whispers, all evidence of crying gone from his voice. “Before this every time someone touched me it was to hurt me.”
Liam tightens his hold, trying to let Zayn know he's listening and that there is no way he will ever let that happen again.

“It hurts when you don’t.” He sobs, “hurts inside…I-I’m sorry to be like this, I'm sorry.” he coughs.

“Hey hey hey, never. you're never to be sorry for being you, or for asking for what you need.” Liam reprimands gently. “Now just rest baby, I'm here, I'm holding you and you’re safe.”

Zayn nods gently, fisting into Liam’s shirt tighter. “I don’t want to sleep though, scared.” They're both tired, a little on edge but Liam understands. Anyway, despite the extended sleep Zayn’s eyes droop. Liam internally guesses it’ll take half an hour at most for him to fall back to sleep.

“That’s fine, you’ve slept so well today anyway, ‘m so proud of you.”

Zayn sniffs. His fist twists in Liam’s shirt. There’s silence in the room for the better part of ten minutes.

“Did you do anything?” Zayns voice cracks.

Liam presses his lips to Zayns forehead, nosing his hair. “Not much, no.” He says. “Was here, with you. And your family came to see you.”

“Yes.” Is all Zayn says. Then, “it’s soft.”

“The bear?”

Zayn nods, “I didn’t know what it was, before I mean.”

Liams not 100% sure what Zayn meant by that, both their eyelids are dropping but he mumbles in a form of agreement. “What’re you gonna call it?” Liam asks a minute later.

“Is it ok for me to name stuffed toys anymore?” Zayn asks half-heartedly, sighing.
Liam opens his eyes, making sure Zayn doesn’t do the same and caressing his cheek. “Absolutely.”


“We can sleep on it.” Liam says, words mashing together but Zayn seems to understand and nods. Liam kisses his forehead and, despite Zayns reservations about sleeping, they both get lost into the world of unconsciousness together.

- 

Z A Y N

The next morning Zayn wakes up and manages to open his eyes all they way. It’s noisy in his room, more so than normal anyway. What, with discussion between Yaser and Liam and his two youngest sisters making a racket. He feels heavy, sluggish - drunk as he focuses on his surroundings.

“G’morning sonshine.” His mum appears in his vision, pressing a palm to his forehead and running fingers through his hair. “Did you have a good sleep?”

He doesn’t speak, instead he just nods. All the clatter in his immediate proximity ceases and he lazily blinks himself into clarity. Liam raises his bed backboard so he can almost sit wholly up. He’s comfortable, but weighed down. He feels nauseous and has a minor headache. He takes his time to wake up fully before he engages in any form of conversation. When he does it's limited and his voice cracks. He thinks he’s getting better because he’s not coughing anymore and the headaches aren’t as bad, but he feels so tired, all the time.

“Can we do your nails?” Waliyha asks after some time, holding up a few bottles and a small kit.

Zayn gives his best smile, filled with an exhilarating feeling of something so normal to his family. Saffaa picks up his left hand and uses a wet wipe to thoroughly wash his left hand. Then Waliyha uses the kit to trim around his nails and buffer them. Zayns eyes never stray from their work, except when he blinks heavily. In a fleeting moment, he imagines himself in a hotbox - he feels that fucked out from the medicine and with feeling so ill. Then Doniya comes in, wielding a tube of hand cream and spends a good minute massaging it into his hand and up his arm, although she’s cautious of the identification band around his wrist. She particularly focuses on compressing her thumbs into the muscles and working them. Zayn sighs.
Saffaa goes crazy on the colour front, thoroughly considering each possibility out loud before selecting a few. She asks him his opinion on the shades of colour to which he quietly rasps out mostly single word answers. She eventually settles on green and purple, alternating the colours every finger. She picks up his hand and begins to paint (he tries his very best to help out but he’s not feeling very strong or altogether stable right now). While Saffaa’s busy, Waliyha and Doniya start to work on his right hand.

“Feelin’ right pampered.” He mumbles incoherently, his tongue heavy as he begins to dip in and out of consciousness.

“Sorry?” One asks.

He mouths another answer - one he forgets as soon as it’s finished despite creating no sound. His eyes open again an indiscernible time later and he sees Waliyha sitting over him with his arm in her lap. She looks somewhat concerned, maybe just tired. He can’t tell. He dips out once more and he’s out.

- 

L I A M

It was a shame for Yaser and the girls to leave as soon as they did but according to Trisha, Doniya had work she couldn’t skip and Saffaa and Waliyha had school. The goodbye takes a solid hour, which Zayn is awake for. Liam watches on as he wishes them well and banters about how much school sucks.

That was yesterday, now. And Liam’s waiting for Trisha to join them. She had gone back to Liams with Louis and Harry so she wasn't alone.

Liam holds out his hand in front of him - inspecting the blue nail polish painted on by Saffaa. It’s chipped already, despite his best intentions, from biting and picking. It’s a nervous habit he intends on dropping as soon as he can.

He reflects on yesterday again. Louis and Harry had time for a visit before the hours ended which was nice. Louis bought with him Zayns little positivity book which had obviously been a boost of good energy for Zayn, enough for him to have a conversation with them while Liam left to get some
food for them all in the cafeteria. When he walked back in he was shocked to see a tear track down Zayns cheek.

“Swans can be gay.” Zayn answered when Liam asked him why he had been crying. “Harry told me and that makes me happy.”

Liam had to resist the urge to smack Harry upside the head because he looked smug - too smug but then Zayn had smiled and wrote it in the book. His hand shook too much to be neat but he did it.

As expected, the energy sapped out of Zayn and now it was the morning after - the clock in the hallway click-clocks in the background, as well as the buzzing of nurses and various machines.

Lara walks in. “Good morning.” She greets. Liam responds the same way. She runs Zayns regular test; temperature, intake and output, dosage and so on.

“He’s done well for a week.” Is what she says. “Someone of his situation would take much longer to push through normally.”

“So he’s doing ok?”

“Better than ok Mr. Payne, he’s doing excellent. Just keep pushing the fluids and rest. I’ll be back later.” She smiles and leaves.

Liams gaze switches between the door Lara just walked out of and Zayn, the door, Zayn; the door, Zayn. Then, his bottom lip wobbles, he puts his face in his hands and begins to shudder.

Liam sniffs, moving his seat impossibly closer to Zayn. He takes a shuddery breath as he grasps Zayn’s hand in his own, the man in the bed squeezes back and Liam thinks he’s partially conscious, at the very least. Liam’s heart beat goes at a million miles per hour. He thinks he needs to say what he has to - not for 'just in case' or because of any other reason than he needs Zayn to know this.

Liam breathes deeply through his nose and out his mouth. Regulating and repeating what he needs to say now. Every emotion from the past week crashes down and it's then he realises he hasn't let himself have a cry for as long as they’ve been here. He presses Zayns hand to his forehead.
"I love you." He says quietly. His voice is scratchy from the nerves and not clearing his throat. He tries again after swallowing down his nerves. "I love you, Zayn. So much it's not funny.”

He lifts his head, Zayn continues to sleep.

"See, you disappeared and I didn't know what to do. Lou used to tell me to keep calling and texting you and I swear I whooped for joy when you answered.” He swallows. "You've come into my life again after being by my side for so long and you've been so hurt and that hurts me too, you can't seem to get a break which is why you're now in here because your body has gone through so much it can't handle a virus without running you into the ground." He sniffs. “You're under my skin, I can't go anywhere without thinking about you or your smile or how amazing you and it's addictive, you're addictive and I love you so much. I love caring for you and playing piano or going on walks with you, I love who you are, I admire you for everything you've come through and will finish coming through.”

Liam breaks, thinking now is the time to stop, because he will repeat this all again when Zayn is well, when Zayn is ready to hear it in full consciousness. But Liam feels better now he has got it off his chest. He kisses the back of Zayn’s hand. “I love you,” he whispers it so quiet no one can hear it, just because he wants to say it one more time. It rings in his ears louder than a gong bell.

“So, Zayn this is why you need to fight on, push past this, because we all love you and we can’t loose you.” Liam says.

There’s a breathy murmur from the bed. “I’m not going anywhere.” Zayn sighs out. He can barely open his eyes an inch, what with all his senses and motor skills dulled by medication and lurking sedatives. It means he’s on his way back out within the moment, not helped by the soothing way Liam cards fingers through his hairline and massages his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Trying to get the next chap done soon. Enjoy life today :)
I tried to upload this yesterday as I felt a few members of the fandom might've needed something nice but alas it didn't happen - there's a timer on my fam's wifi and I didn't get there in time so I apologise.

I also apologise for how little I've written - I swear it's on it's way I'm just so busy right now. But I managed to transfer to a new coach so I've had a reasonable amount of stress lifted off me for now. It's just the sessions are 10x more exhausting now so this is the first time I've had the energy to do anything.

All my love and best wishes to you all. I hope you had something to smile about today, and if you haven't yet - it's ok! You'll get there :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So, Z- this is why you need to fight on ... past this, because we all love you and we can't lose you...

He sighs. ‘I'm not going anywhere.’

The next morning Zayn appears to be and feel much more alert than normal - enough that Kelly sits him up using the bed settings and leads him through a few exercises. The stuffed bear, which has not left Zayn's hand since it was pushed into his palm the other day, remains clutched close to his chest - even though the strands are now a little clogged with perspiration it's soft as he can remember and comforting as Liam's forehead kisses.

“So you get stronger, and to get your heart pumping a bit,” she explains, “you’ve been in bed a while so it’ll be strange when you’re up and about again if we don't get you accustomed soon.”

First, there are high knees, or rather, Zayn picking up his knees best he can, one at a time. Then leg
extensions; where he extends his foot away from the bed and his body then brings it back before copying with the other leg. Then, both legs together. After that his legs are given a breather and he performs some arm curls. Finally, finishing up by rolling his ankles and wrists. By the end - a solid twenty minutes - there is a light sheen of sweat over his skin and he’s on his way to breathlessness.

“Excellent work.” Kelly gives Zayn an encouraging smile which he returns. "Have a rest and I'll be back later, ok?"

Zayn nods. “Ok.”

“Is there anything you need or want us to do for you?” She resets the bed so it's as it was before. Zayn shakes his head and she dismisses herself from the room. The second she's out Liam shuffles his way into the space available on the right hand side of the bed, snaking an arm around his neck as he does.

“Doing so good,” Liam mumbles, pressing a kiss to his temple. "I'm so proud of you."

Zayn hums, content. "Thank you."

Liam doesn't answer, rather thumbs over the back of Zayns right hand, the left preoccupied holding the bear. They're quiet for a moment as Zayn takes a breather. "Have you thought about a name yet?” Liam asks, as he had done the day before.

Zayn lifts up from his designated rest spot in the junction of Liams neck and shoulder, biting the edge of his lip. "I did have one,” he confesses. "But it's childish."

Liam snorts, "hardly," he argues. "It's fun."

Zayn smiles a little. Disbelieving that this is the guy he-

He cuts the thought line off. No, he thinks, leave it.

"Grapes?” Zayn tests it out.
"As in the name or do u have a pecking for some?"

"No, as a name Leeyum."

Liam giggles, nosing his temple. "I'm just teasing, I like it."

Zayn smiles back, tired. "Yay." Is all he offers before he settles back down against Liam. Instead of pushing anything else Liam continues to thumb over Zayn's knuckles and press the occasional kiss to Zayn's face, hair, etc. The vulnerability of Zayn's grief last night still at the forefront of his mind. "So gentle, before this everytime someone touched me it was to hurt me - it hurts when you don't, hurts inside... I'm sorry..." - In addition, he remembers the advice Isabelle had given him so long ago - how hugs and simple human touching and connection releases oxytocin - the feel good hormone in people.

And so it goes like this; Zayn sinks into the comfort Liam provides him with and Liam continues to hold him closer still. After a short period of silence Liam reaches for the TV remote and flicks through the channels with no particular destination. By luck he comes across a Big Bang Theory marathon and they settle on it. And eventually, when it's over and they've both had some food and drink they settle in for a nap.

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Trisha walks into Zayn's hospital room and witnesses a sight she never thought she'd truly see. Zayn; hair fluffy and in disarray over the pillow as he lays on his side, the purple bear from Waliyha tucked under his chin. Liam behind him acting as a big spoon, his face tucked in behind Zayn's head. It's so precious, she can hardly resist quietly sneaking a photo of it for safekeeping.

Quietly, so as not to perturb the sleeping figures, Trisha approaches the bed and draws up a chair to sit down. The leg causes a scraping sound - she cringes, halting in the hopes she hasn't disturbed the peace.

Alas, Liam stirs. "Trish?" He slurs. "Mornin'"

Trisha gives him a small smile and hushes him, Liam nods back, gratefully and tucks himself back behind Zayn before he dozes back off. Trisha takes the time to simply look at her boy - no longer the little child she knew him as, now he's grown. The stark contrast to when he was last in a hospital bed is astounding - she no longer sees the bones of his wrist, or the sunken shell around his eyes. When
she studies him closer she sees his lips are parted - everytime he breathes out there's a little puff, just as it was when he was younger.

------

An hour later, Liam stirs again. In turn, his sleep-addled state clasps onto what he's holding tighter - it just happens to be Zayn. The change in pressure rouses him too.

Trisha changes seats from her chair to the edge of the bed, where she cards her fingers through his hair and holds onto his hand - which had fallen away from his chin during his nap. She squeezes it as he gets used to his surrounding, blurry eyes hoping to focus on something familiar.

“Mummy?” Zayn whimpers when his eyes crack wholly open.

“Hello sonshine, it's me.” She whispers back, squeezing his hand reassuringly.

“Please?” He whimpers. He feebly lifts the hand she's holding and attempts to grasp her shirt. Liam noses at his temple. Energy is sapped out of Zayn quickly - this mornings exercises too much too soon. They're all exhausted, but none like Liam and Zayn themselves.

“Oh, darling.” She tuts. She stands up and shucks her shoes. Then she lies down on the bed next to him, above the covers. A small pained whine comes from Zayn but is amended when he noses his way to rest his head on her chest, just below her neck. She takes his hand a second time and squeezes. “I'm here baby. I'm here.” She whispers to him. His eyes stay open, but Liam knows he's not paying attention - he's in one of those states where he's half-awake and half-asleep, within minutes he'll be out again.

“so warm baby, can you drink something?”

Zayn sighs as he settles against his mother and Liam shifts behind him, manoeuvring himself to get a better, more stable hold on him and so he’s not hurting Trisha in any way. Liam is terrified of being rude, but right now he's so tired no force could stop him from falling asleep too.
Trisha is more than fine to stay where she is, catching up on some quality time in the presence of her son and her adoptive son too. She gets to play with Zayn's hair again and listen to the little snuffles both of them make in their sleep. She is there - through phones left unanswered and nurse checks, when Liam sleep-talks and to hush a potential nightmare.

Really, it's all she could've asked for.

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“Fucking - son of a, son of a bitch.” Liam curses under his breath. It's late at night - almost when visiting hours are over and Trisha's gone to get them something to eat before she has to leave.

Harry, who came around just after Liam had woken up with a new change of clothes for him, looks at him decidedly, curls recklessly out of control and covering most of his eyes. “What?”

“You know what,” Liam sighs, he sounds defeated. Harry watches Liam drag his hands down his face and trudge over from the corner of the room where he had just hung up on the phone and then slouch down in the seat next to Zayn. Harry watches, as Liam takes Zayns hand and presses it to his mouth, curling his fingers around the closed fist protectively, and looking at the man in the bed with a look that can only be described as a mismatched combination of overwhelmed and adoration.

Harry takes a few minutes to think, before nodding. “Yeah I think I do.”

-----

The next morning Zayn wakes up in bed alone - for the first time in a while.

He opens his eyes and sits up, slowly. Scanning the room as he always does...

Liam's not here.

"Morning sonshine!" His mum greets him happily, "good sleep?"
Zayn's mouth, which had fallen open, closes as he gulps. "I-yeah," his voice cracks. "Where's Liam?"

"He went to get some stuff honey, he'll be back soon." His mum smiles at him, pressing a hand to his chest and pushing him down. A throaty cough racks his chest and he has to use a tissue to discard of the phlegm that he coughs up. Wrinkling his nose he half-heartedly tosses it into the bedside bin. He settles back after a while and he had a drink of water through the straw Trisha offers.

"I-how long?" Zayn asks. His voice small.

"Not long honey." She gives him a supportive smile - as if she can sense how lost Zayn feels without Liam now - how dependant he's become on the other man. "But it's just us, and look!" She produces a book from her bag. "I think you were reading an earlier book of this series when we came down last, and it has your bookmark in it."

Zayn looks at the book, he admits it was the one he had been reading before he was admitted here and accepts it gratefully. She asks about it - the series and what this book was like in particular.

"I used to read it mum, don't you remember?"

"You read so many books Zayn! I could never keep track." She finds it amusing and it's infectious.

"Percy Jackson mum! It's the best how could you! Wali and I fought over them!"

Trisha rolls her eyes, good-naturedly, "I guess so," she tuts. Zayn giggles a little, and despite his sore throat (which wasn't too sore anymore) they talked and talked in a way they hadn't for a long time.

-----

Liam is worried how his sleeping pattern has panned out because of this week. After he came back to Trisha and Zayn mid-conversation they had lunch together - the first almost wholly comfortable lunch since they got here and Liam is beyond happy. He remembers the light conversation they all
had and a quick face time to the rest of Zayn's immediate family back in Bradford. Beyond that, Liam's not sure what's happened.

He wakes up, stiff having dropped off in his seat next to the bed. Zayn's hand is in his hair while the other holds up a book that he reads. Liam notes how he's squinting at the pages. Liam yawns like a cat, uncurling his spine and stretching.

“Hey gorgeous.” Liam says, mumbled from a heavy tongue.

Zayn blushes and responds with a quiet “Good afternoon.” His eyes only leave the page for a moment before they're back. Liam stands up, stretching again and climbing into the bed. He cuddles up to Zayn who continues to read.

"You finding it hard?" Liam asks.

"Sorry?"

"To read, you're squinting."

Zayn looks confused. "Um, yeah, I guess I have actually. Not much though."

"Maybe you need some reading glasses," Liam suggests.

"Er, yeah, that might be handy." Zayn agrees.

"How're you feeling?" Liam rubs Zayn's upper arm.

Zayn looks up at him, "much better, thank you." Liam humms, "My headaches gone and I don't feel stuffy or so horrible anymore."

Liam beams, "I'm so glad babe."
Zayn returns the smile, this one is a little shy, and he returns to his book yet again.

“Did you know they’re releasing a new DC Movie?” Liam asks a few minutes later when Zayn pauses his reading to have a drink - he’s learnt from experience that when Zayn’s hooked on a book no matter what you say or do you won’t get his attention.

“Um, no? I didn’t sorry, which one?”

Liam grins. “Suicide Squad, looks sick.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Liam parrots, leaning back in his seat and pulling his phone out of his pocket. He sits on the bed next to Zayn, snuggling close before he plays the trailer.

“I was thinking when we get out of here we could go see it - only if you want to though.”

Zayn grins - and it’s then that Liam notices the colour has come back to his face and he’s not to weighed down with exhaustion right now. “Sounds epic.”

------

Later on, Kelly and Lara come in.

"We want to get you up and about again," Lara says. "If you're ready we wanted to take you on a short walk."

Zayns lips curl up until his eyes are half-crinkled. He throws the covers off, not caring that he wears the batman pyjamas Niall brought him yesterday.

It’s a process, going through every step as if Zayn’s incapable - frustrating him, but eventually they stand him. Granted, he’s a little wobbly, and his first few steps are somewhat stiff. Liam treads behind him, nervously gnawing on his lip. Lara lets Liam take Zayn’s right side for support in the
"'m doing it." Zayn says. "'m up."

Liam beams. "Of course you are, you always could."

Zayn gives him a cheeky grin.

------

The following morning, when Zayn's still asleep and Liam's only just returned from the bathroom, the doctor comes in. She has a neutral look on her face as she goes about checking Zayn's chart and whatever it is that she needs to do. “Well his temperature has gone down.” She starts - she makes a few facial expressions Liam can't describe as she analyses the statistics, "and it looks like he’s gonna be ok." She says. She turns to Liam, “with enough rest and should he keep up his fluid and food intake he’ll be on the right track - we might even be able to send you home later.”

Liam wants to cry. “Thank you so much.”

She smiles, “just doing my job.” With that she leaves and Liam literally jumps for joy. Fumbling, he takes out his phone and sends out a mass text to let everyone know it looks like Zayn’s going to be ok. When that’s done he sits down again and takes Zayn’s hand. Thumbing his hand like he has been the whole time.

Zayn stirs, blinking sleepily and shifting. The pillows swallow his head and the blanket that covers his upper body and is tucked around his neck to keep him warm makes him look like he’s made a a nice little nest.

Liam cards a hand in his hair and leans to nuzzle at his temple. “Hey baby.” he says softly, “how’re you feeling?”

“Ok.” Zayn whispers back.

Liam smiles, “good.” Then more to the point, “we could be going home soon.” he whispers into
Zayns ear.

Zayn manages to open his eyes most the way. “Really?”

Liam nods. “Yeah baby, you just gotta keep eating and drinking as well as you are and resting and we could be home, doc said we might even be able to go today.”

Zayn smiles, nodding. “I can do that.” he whispers. Not pushing his throat.

“I know you can.” Liam says, pressing kisses to his temple, forehead and nose. Zayn snickers under his breath but as a result ends up coughing. Not too harsh but still a cough. Liam grabs the cup off the bedside table and retrieves the remote that controls the angle of the bed and raises it so Zayns sitting up at an angle.

“Have a drink.” Liam ushers, pushing the cup to Zayns lips. Zayn covers Liam hand with one of his own and sips gently. “Tha’s my Zayn.” Liam smiles.

Zayn finishes the water and drops his hand back under the blankets.

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Kelly comes in for a check-up, Zayn jitters the whole way through. Nervous that it's not good enough.

But it is.

They're going home.

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“Exclusively bed rest.” Lara instructs Liam firmly. Zayn almost laughs at how Liam just nods in affirmation. Like an army general giving a soldier instructions. Currently, he is sat in a wheelchair - some 'precaution' Zayn is entirely convinced is fiction and that Liam asked for specifically. Liam
himself is stood next to him with Lara in front. It's comical, absolutely comical. “He is not to push himself physically in any way, and to keep eating. Push the fluids too.”

“Absolutely, consider it done.” Liam responds, and Zayn does laugh at that. Liam turns and gives him the crinkly eyed smile Zayn adores.

“Well, then I guess you two are good to go.” The nurse sighs. “Take care of yourself Zayn.” She says pointing at him determinedly.

He nods back at her. "Thank you," he says. "Thank you for everything." He means it.

Lara gives him a soft smile. "Just keep doing what you are, and be happy and hopefully we won't see each other again."

Zayn grins. "I'll try." He promises. Liam's behind him, wheeling him off the second he's finished the word.

"Thank you again," Liam calls down the corridor, and again for each nurse they pass that have been involved with Zayn. Zayn's surprised to realise Liam knows most of them by name. Before they know it they're downstairs and Nialls out the front waiting for them in the drive through.

"WAYYYYY!" He calls, pulling a party popper. Zayn laughs outright. "We're goin' homeee!" He calls, bending down to give Zayn a hug. "C'mon let's get you in and outta here, You probably want a real bed and a real shower by now.” Zayn doesn't even get to answer before Liam coaxes him to stand and Niall's running off to return the chair.

“-nurse said not to push yourself physically in any way, walking counts.” Liam justifies.

Zayn rolls his eyes.

When you're lost, we're lost together

I'll stand by, I will stand by you.

Chapter End Notes
Not wholly edited! Will revisit at a later date!

Comments and Kudos are appreciated as always :)
Cinemas and noticeboards

Chapter Notes

*comes out from behind wall* *waves* "Hi!"

Joke: I haven't posted, since like, last year (yeah now that's out my system actual opening note...)

Sorry this took so long, I'd take the time to explain my absence but that would be delaying my uploading of the chapter! Here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zayn giggles as Liam picks him up again and carries him into the apartment. They've just pulled into the driveway and Niall is not far behind them. Liam, as always, is out of the car before he is and ready to open the door for Zayn, making a loopy smile appear on his face. As Liam helps him out of the car (and insists on half carrying him to the front door) Niall goes about opening the house.

As soon as they’ve set a foot inside a pained ‘meow’ sounds, followed by more as if in a mantra. As they get louder due to this particular animals impending arrival it sounds happier.

“Roman!” Zayn beams when she’s in sight, crouching down to pick her up and cuddle her. She scolds him for his absence by a series of more whines. Only to be satisfied when he nuzzles her, her forgiveness announced by her loud purrs.

Liam, too, then crouches behind Zayn, coaxing him to stand so they can shut the front door and usher him into the kitchen for a light lunch and his meds. As they make their way Zayn inquires into Romans activities and what she’s been up to while they were away. Of course, he expects no response but it still amuses him with how daft he’s being. While Liam is preparing lunch and Niall is sitting with Zayn (and Roman) they eventually settle on mutual snuggling. Zayn holds her close and Roman purrs. As a system to keep them both happy, it works.

Throughout lunch Roman remains pacified on Zayns lap, only jarring when Zayn reaches for the jug of water and covers her patch of sun - much to the amusement of all around the table. Zayn has his meds from the hospital mid way through their meal and by the end of it he’s a little drowsy. As he stands, Roman grumbles and scampers off his person to her little nesting spot in the corner of the room. Liam chuckles, placing a hand on the small of Zayns back and leading him upstairs. When they reach their room the bed is freshly made. Liam scoops him up, pressing a kiss to Zayns forehead before treading over and laying Zayn over the covers.
Zayn sighs, letting his arms flop over the covers outstretched. "So much better." He moans, and Liam laughs. They had already discussed how the hospital beds were less than adequate.

“Now you can get some real sleep.” Liam comments, getting Zayn to sit up so he could remove his jumper and then crouching for his shoes and fluffy socks. Zayn shifts from side to side, humming when Liam removes his trousers for a pair of pyjama bottoms, floating in and out of awake-ness.

"Come snuggle," Zayn half whines, half demands when Liam begins to tuck him in. "You're tired too."

Liam relents, well he doesn't put up a fight anyway, failing when he tries to hide his grin and toes off his shoes and climbing between the sheets. Niall, now upstairs after cleaning up lunch, switches off the main light - now only the bedside lamp illuminates the room, as Liam and Zayn align themselves. Zayn's legs between Liam's and head on his chest as Liam lays side on. Niall goes to leave, until Zayn calls him too. "Niall! You gotta come snuggle!" He mumbles, half way off to sleep just with Liam.

Niall laughs under his breath but follows the lead Liam set. He mirrors Liam in that he removes his shoes and socks before climbing in the other side so he spoons Zayn.

"Better?" He asks.

"Much." Zayn hums back. Practically purring, spurring Liam to think that Romans in the room, as he drops off.

"You're gonna have to tell him sooner or later, you know that right?" Niall says after a moment, his fingers occupied in Zayn's hair. "He has a right to know."

Liam sighs, "yeah, yeah I know." He pauses. "But he's not been good and like - Niall he's just come out of hospital. Telling him will only stress him."
"It'll also stress him if you wait it out."

Liam nods resentfully. "I know. Just want to make sure he's ok before we talk about it though. Give 'I'm a break ya'know."

"Fair enough. I figured the same thing but you have to tell him sooner, not like the week before-"  

"I know." Liam cuts him off, uncharacteristically sharp. "I know, I'm sorry. Just a bit on edge right now."

"Understood. I know why you're doing it. And we're - all of us are gonna support you, both of you ... You know that right?"

"Yeah I do. Thanks though Nialler."

Niall smiles back at him "as long as we're clear here."

Liam grins. "Crystal."

The next week is incredibly quiet, Zayn comes to practically live in the sitting room along with Roman, his books and his sketchpad. The rest of the time he's in the kitchen - wether it be watching Harry cook (and joining in minimally) or for mealtimes. Zayn, on one occasion plays the piano and another time he suggests a walk. Liam, who's on the verge of paranoia when they leave is very reluctant to let Zayn take off even his glove.

(Although it’s very endearing, Zayn draws a line when Liam considers him wearing a second coat out loud)

Then, in the evenings he calls his mum, the first day he’s fresh in confidence and they talk for almost
forty minutes. Then the next day when he’s not feeling so great it lasts maybe ten. That doesn’t matter though - Zayn’s talking, of his own free will to people outside of Liam.

Then, he rests.

He has his first session with Isabelle since his sickness first began and Zayn hadn’t realised how relieved he was to have it - to talk out what has been missed in the last fortnight. When he walks out to Liam in the car he figures this is what true relief feels like.

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Zayn sits on the floor of the living room with his legs tucked to one side as he plays with Roman. Liam, who is sitting to the side where he hasn’t got his legs positioned becomes his backrest much to Zayn’s cheeky smugness and Liam’s amusement.

“Were you still up for that movie sometime?” Liam has been carefully planning when he can ask this - so he asks at a time when Zayn might be able to give him a wholly truthful response rather than what he thinks he should do.

Zayn sits up a bit straighter and faces him. “Yeah! It’s out now isn’t it?”

“Yeah it’s in cinemas.” Liam confirms, smiling at Zayn’s enthusiasm - oh, how he’s missed it.

Zayn smiles a private smile. “Do you think, if there’s a viewing on today we could go?”

Liam looks at his watch and reminds himself what day it is before nodding. “As long as we’re back before your yoga I don’t see why not.” He stands and paces over to the laptop on the table. He retrieves it, bringing it back to where they had been before and opens it up. After Liam plays the trailer to Zayn who comments how “sick” it looks.

After wrapping up warm - despite the temperate climate, they head out. While there is a bus that runs from not far away to the little shopping arcade they’re going too Liam doesn’t want to take any chances, and especially have a certain means of coming home rather than relying on the bus. On the way there they sing along to songs off one of Harry’s ‘Calmer’ mix-tapes and when they arrive they duck into the supermarket there for some snacks. While it's not conventional they walk away with a vitamin water and regular water, a pack of crisps and two bananas. It’s easy enough to sneak the
snacks into the theatre and they sit in their allocated seats, chatting to pass the time and laughing about nothing at all.

It’s then that Liam also notices how cute Zayn’s scrunchy little nose is, and how the dimples in his cheek are like craters when he’s genuinely happy. Liam’s taken aback by how far Zayn’s come, and how everything is so much better now. How, despite the unfortunate events that have surrounded them, that Zayn living with Liam has changed everything for the better.

Before he can voice these thoughts in any format, or make Zayn giggle again the first ads start to play.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been in a cinema,” Zayn whispers excitedly.

Liam opens his mouth to ask how come, but when he thinks it through he understands why it may have been a while.

“We can come anytime from now.” Liam promises.

“Ok ok - but Margot Robbie was the best in that movie.”

“Are you kidding? Diablo, man, Diabolo!” They squabble as they walk out the theatre.

“Look, I’ll accept your decision, but I’m telling you you're wrong,” Liam smirks, holding up his hands in false surrender.

Zayn giggles, all scrunched up and happy. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

They laugh as Liam leads them towards a cafe on the corner when they hook their arms together while studding in line. Zayn leans into the touch, nuzzling at Liams shoulder when he presses a gentle kiss to his hair. “You did so awesome with the snack in the theatre but I’d really appreciate it if you had something small to eat or drink.” Liam says softly.
In return Zayn nods. “I was actually feeling a little hungry,” he admits.

“Why didn't you mention it?”

“Oh, we were in the movie and it wasn’t bad but it's only been a short while I promise.” Zayn rushes the end part of his sentence.

Liam kisses his forehead, gently. “I believe you, it’s ok.” He says. “Whatever you want, it’s yours.” He placates.

Both of them notice the minor tension leak from Zayn’s frame. “Well, can I have a tea and the oatmeal cookie then?”

Liam kisses his forehead again, “of course you can. Do you want to find us a seat?”

Zayn nods - much quicker than he might normally and heads off for an empty booth in the corner.

—

Just after they finish their drinks and respective foods Zayn whispers to Liam; “So, um, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed right now, so if we could go somewhere quiet, and um, alone, for a little bit i’d really appreciate it.”

Liam kisses his forehead and some of the anxiety drains from him - some. “Of course sweetheart.” He takes his arm and steers them off out of the cafe in an unknown direction. “I don’t know where’s the best for you but if you see somewhere just let me know and we’ll go there.”

Zayn gulps before nodding and keeps his head down - worried that the lump forming in his throat would make it hard to speak. They walk for a few minutes, and ride another escalator upstairs before Zayn sees it. He points at the quaint bookshop in the corner.
Liam sees it and give Zayn an encouraging squeeze before they slightly alter their course to walk in. As they open the door a bell rings. “This is nice,” Liam encourages him by rubbing his arm.

“Yeah it is.” Zayn agrees. Not paying so much attention on him as he is the books. He runs his hands over the spine of one book, the material is fibrous and familiar to him.

“It’s not that the cafe wasn’t lovely, I don’t know why I felt uncomfortable but I just did so sorry.”

“Ah ah ah,” Liam chastises him gently. “Don’t apologise, keep listening to your instincts, ok? They’re there for a reason.”

Zayn nods, “ok.” Theres a long pause while they mull through the aisles. “I actually feel really safe here.” He says, eyeing the noticeboard and a particular sign on it that dress his primary attention.

“Good,” Liam kisses his temple. “Do you see one you like the look of?”

Zayn shakes his head. “No.” He replies truthfully. “I just like to look and feel them.”

“Fair do’s,” Liam responds.

Later on that day again they get into the car to drive to the sports centre for Zayns yoga. They holds hands - because Zayn is nervous to explain his absence and Liam is terrified of being separated from Zayn more often than not now. However, all goes smoothly as nadine is more than accepting and Liam finds he /can/ breathe without Zayn by his side and with the realisation that everything is ok.

While Liam waits he treks outside to the reception area - where he knows most of the staff by name. He spots an advertisement that captures his curiosity and pulls it off it's pin on the wall. His mouth falls open and rushes to ask for more information.
When Zayn walks out, Liam feels much more hopeful, and happier, than he has done in weeks.

Two days later, Zayns on the phone to his parents as he has been every night for the last week. “So, um, tomorrow, I was hopin' like, we could Face Time? Or Skype or something?” Zayn has to gulp in a huge chunk of air to push the words out. In reality, he knows he’s fine with it. The uncalled for reservations that sound in his head make it harder to do anything.

“What did he say?” Zayn hears his fathers muffled voice in the background. “Beta do you want to Face Time now?”

“No!” His response is immediate, almost too quick. He thinks they now absolutely know of his discomfort. “I'm not really dressed.” He excuses. It's a terrible half lie. But he hasn't had time to prepare himself for it.

“That’s fine, but don’t push yourself yeah?” His mother says, he can hear mumbled bickering in the background which makes his lips tug up into a half smile. “So will I be seeing you tomorrow?”

“It’ll only be me here, and maybe Wali because everyone else has something on but we’ll see you then.”

“See you tomorrow.” He hangs up, inhaling a huge breath. He has no idea why he’s so worked up about this. It just feels like work. The call ends not long after and he works on breathing steadily. Liam's downstairs making dinner and his stomach revolts. He fists his hands, forcing himself to stand. He hates how his mind betrays him.

It's in my head, it's in my head. He repeats. Only my head, it's him, it's not me. But the more he says it the less he really believes. Again, he retreats back to what Isabelle and he have discussed in the past, the plan they conjured if he felt insecure again.

(After they had mapped out a suicide plan they had gone on to do the same should he feel triggered or overly insecure again; together they went back to previous events - including when he woke Liam up and matched what went better then to previous times. It seems simple - it should be, but now he's
here he doesn't think so.

See, these things come in waves, not gentle laps against the shoreline but a dumper - a plunging wave that crashes into the sand, the type to wear his away little by little until he's swept away.

He realises he's on the verge of crying - but he's not going to let that happen. No.

Zayn recalls the plan. He opens up his figurative notebook and flips the pages until he finds the right one. He breathes, inhaling through his nose and exhaling through his mouth on the count of three.

One step at a time. Zayn reminds himself.

And, only because he hates himself a little he grabs at his stomach, palming it and stretching it. His breathing is shoddy as he opens his eyes - not realising he'd closed them in the first place. He squeezes them shut, grinding his teeth together in effort as he lets go, belatedly realising he's shaking a little and straightens them by his sides. He forces himself to walk down stairs to Liam.

Numbers and thoughts and negativity cloud his mind, he fails in his attempt to let go of the nagging need to know his weight.

"Liam," He half chokes out, refusing to be anything but stoic. He needn't say anything passed that, because Liam knows - Liam always knows.

"You're ok," Liam tells him as he wraps him up, "you're ok."

Zayn feels the flashback coming sooner than he normally would. enough time that he knows it's consciously happening before it does.

He’s in the kitchen. He’s not triggered in any way that makes him want to hurt, it just comes in flashes. He whips his head around - bits and pieces flashing in his minds eye before it takes full hold.
The sad thing is that Zayn sleeps better when he’s on the floor.

Every muscle, joint and bone ache - cold seeps through to his very core and his head pounds over and over. His eyes throb with daylight streaming through the half-closed curtains and his hands tingle with the pinprick of pins and needles, no doubt from the pressure of the cuffs around his wrist.

Nathan is passed out cold on the bed - the stench of cum and sweat making Zayn queasy. He thinks the worst thing about the smell isn’t what he can smell, but rather the lack of one. He thinks if he could smell alcohol he’d feel more comfort. But him being in the bed and Zayn on the floor means Nathan can’t constrict him when he fidgets or breathes too deeply. It means Zayn can have an almost full nights sleep.

The elongated chain connecting his wrists makes a loud scraping noise as he sits up, one he has no energy to hide. Nathan, as before continues to snore obnoxiously loud through every jingle and thud of the metal on the hardwood floor.

Something Zayn is grateful for, as he trudges down the stairs to start the day, is that he was able to wear a shirt during the night. He especially feels grateful for it because it’s not so humiliating for him to walk around with at least this on - one of Nathans fleeting moments of mercy, no doubt.

He can’t stand the sight of his stomach in windows, the hallway mirror or anywhere else. He can’t stand the gleam of the metal around his genitals - the chastity device that pinches and aches from prolonged use.

A racking cough shakes him as he stands at the counter in front of the kettle, one that stems from the very depths of his lungs and brings up bit of phlegm and bile. Zayn groans, rubbing his eye to the point of pain to stop the dizziness.

Zayn fades out of it back to reality a sees himself staring at his reflection in the window. Here, though, he is fully dressed. In more than enough layers that include one of Liams nice smelling t-shirts. He fists it and brings it up to his nose, taking comfort in the warmth and smell of it. His minds eye projects images of him in this stance before - only a lot colder, thinner, and sadder.

He recalls how Nathan accused him of being selfish, of taking care of his own needs rather than his. Of course, implying that Zayn had gotten off without him around. Now, Zayn finds it preposterous. He cannot fathom where Nathan thought he’d have had the time, energy or courage to do something as outrageous as having a wank.
He looks down his body, taking deep breaths as he skims over his much better stomach and imagines what he has under his clothes. It’s not impressive, what with being denied any kind attention during that time and how it’d be locked up every now and again with smaller and smaller settings. Zayn is not foolish enough to believe it’s anything substantial down there anymore and that hurts.

Liam turns around from the stove as Zayn looks up again.

“Everything ok love? You got really quiet and still there for a moment.”

Zayn doesn’t respond immediately. “Yeah,” he croaks, voice weak. “Just a flashback, that’s all.”

Liam steps closer to him. “Bad? You need me to do something?” Zayn notes how Liam holds out his hands but doesn’t touch.

He leans into the comfort slowly and then all at once, sighing a “no, just a hug would be good.”

Liam kisses his hairline. “Good.” He pauses. “Are they getting easier?”

Zayn doesn’t reply.

Liam kisses his temple again, steadily rocking them as Zayn gets more comfortable. “It’s ok.”

———

That evening they shower together - the two boys under the hot spray wearing their board shorts as normal. Zayn is on edge - jittery, anxious, his eyes flicker everywhere just as they have been for the last two hours. As if looking for a threat, questioning his safety in a way Liam knows is not healthy and wonders if he’s been trigger by something for his PTSD to rear its head or if it’s simply settled in now that he had spent a week in hospital.

“Shhhh, shhh,” Liam hushes him when the click of the shampoo makes Zayn jump, whimpering. “You’re safe.” He nuzzles Zayn’s temple, taking care to wash Zayn’s hair in the best smelling
shampoo they have, and equal care with the conditioner.

When both of them are washed and fresh they step out. Liam wraps Zayn in a big towel and uses a smaller one to quickly dry his hair some. Liam dries himself off with his own towel and uses a separate smaller one to cover the beds pillows. While he’s stepped out Zayn pulls off his board shorts and leaves them to dry over the side of the sink.

Liam makes his presence known before he reenters the bathroom, guiding Zayn to their bedroom and making him comfortable before they go to bed.

“Can you - with like, the pressure thing… please?” Zayn asks.

Liam kisses Zayn temple. “Just let me know what you need, anytime.” He says as he slips on leg over Zayns body where they’ve been spooning and encasing Zayn wholly with his upper body and arms.

Zayn sighs, in what sounds like relief.

“Comfy?” Liam asks, pressing another kiss to his face.”

Zayn nods minutely. “Yes, thank you.”

———

The next morning is a bit difficult due to a lack of motivation on Zayn’s front, however it is amended by the promise of kisses and cuddles until Liam has to go to work later. Liam picks Zayn up and carries him downstairs for breakfast where he trudges through a slow but healthy breakfast of yoghurt and muesli with tea.

After that they change out of their pyjamas into loose comfortable clothes. Liam makes a point of ensuring they smelt nice (especially Zayns) by spraying them with some perfume.
Liam does good on his promise of cuddles and kisses when they retire to the sofa downstairs with a second cup of tea between them. Liam leans between the left armrest and the back of the sofa and Zayn lies on his side against him. Liam flicks on the TV and settles on the current ‘How I Met Your Mother’ marathon.

They’re three episodes in when Liam’s phone begins to ring. Zayn makes no move to do anything so Liam has to shift with him in hand to reach his phone on the table. The caller ID reads ‘Harriet’ so Liam answers it to her name and asks how she is through speakerphone.

“I’m good thank you, I trust you two are well?”

Liam looks at Zayn, rubbing his arm as he says “yeah we’re doing alright, having a bit of a chill right now.”

“Oh good, well I have some news for you, granted Zayn is around?”

“Yeah we’re both here, you're on speakerphone.”

“Oh great! Hi Zayn!” She retreats to greet Zayn.

“Hi Harriet,” Zayn mumbles. “You good?”

“I'm great, thank you Zayn, but I’m even better with what I have to tell you.”

“Oh?” They say at the same time.

“Yes, I was calling to let you know that the blog has been completely scrubbed from the internet. It’s down, and no longer exists.”

It takes a second for the two of them to register what she’s just said. Zayn freezes in Liam’s arms. “Like-“ Zayn lets out a small squeak. “Like no one can see it?”
“Gone, forever, scrubbed.”

“-see darling, it's ok now, it's gone!” Liam beams, Zayn returns it - albeit a bit strained.

And that's when a sob breaks out from Zayn. “Thank you.” He rushes out. Clenching his hand in the front of Liam's shirt. As a habit Liam pulls him in closer and hushes him. “Thank you so much.” It's all he can get out before he chokes a little on what feels like relief.

“It's all worked out, there's no need to cry.” Liam soothes him, placating hand in his hair and on his back.

“'m, 'm happy.” Zayn sniffs. “Thank you.” He repeats again for Harriet.

“'m just glad this has worked out Zayn, I'm so glad you're happy and I hope you realise you're absolutely safe from any harm he caused you.”

“I am, I am,” he chokes out. “Thank you.” He keeps going.

“It’s in the past now Zayn, everything going to work out just fine.” She sounds like she’s smiling. “Now, keep up the amazing effort, I'll be checking in again sometime in the future. Otherwise give me a call if you need anything and keep going strong, ok Zayn?”

“I will,” he gasp out - still clutching Liam like his life depends on it. “Thank you so much.” He muffles out, picking up the phone to hold closer to his mouth. “Thank you.”

“It’s ok Zayn, it's a pleasure.” She hangs up before Zayn can stutter out his next thank you, so he just hides his face in Liam's neck. He shudders and cries and lets everything pour out of his system as Liam hushes him, reassuring him that this is real - it's actually gone and how “I told you we could do it, only up from here now you don't have that on your mind.”

Zayn just nods, letting Liam wipe away the tears he doesn't get before they fade out into the background.
“It’s August, isn’t it?” Zayn says out of the blue one morning.

“It is.” Liam confirms for him.

Zayn nods. “Ok.”

“Why honey?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Ok then, now you do.”

“Thank you.”

Liam nuzzles him. “Never a problem.”

——

The next time Niall is around is when Zayn get set on his secret project.

“It’s Liam’s birthday soon, isn't it?” He clarifies as he sets out a fresh canvas and pencils.

“Yeah, in a few weeks.” Niall answers, smiling as he watches Zayn bounce around happily. "Why?"

“Ok, so here’s what i'm thinking.” He grins gleefully, ignoring the previous question and clicking his tongue as he prances on the balls of his feet.
Ok, so let's be real the time frame of this fic is completely screwed so just work with me here - it is August at the end of this fic and I'll try harder for integrating dates and periods of the year better - let's all go along with how it's a blur in Zayn's head and all focused on him doing awesome, kay?

Hope you liked it! It's 1am here and I stayed up to finish this off for you so maybe leave a comment or two? Please? Also any things you'd like to see?
Ya'll Im sorry. I've been so busy.

Also, I made the Australian Team for an Athletics competition so I've been exhausted with training.

Leave a comment? I promise I'll be more courteous. I'm tired and sorry I've kept you all waiting this long. Any typos or mistakes let me know! I haven't fully proof read it. I also meant to update more but there's this one bit im not enjoying writing so its taking forever, thus i have another 10,00 words ready to go but can't post it without this one bit. Im sorry.

Cheers, Zee.

ba-dingg, ba-dingg, ba-dingg

The ring of the FaceTime call pierces the otherwise relatively peaceful living room. Zayn is sat on the floor, painting, with Roman in his lap. He checks the caller ID once before using his pinky finger (the only appendage with no paint on it) in order to answer it. When the call connects he greets the caller; “hello mum!” He says cheerfully.

“Good morning!” She returns, equally as cheerful. He can see in the image from the screen she’s sat at the kitchen island back home in Bradford. “How are you dear?”

“’M good mum, had a good night and I’ve been doing well.” He tells her, continuing to paint a little as he speaks.

“‘M good mum, had a good night and I’ve been doing well.” He tells her, continuing to paint a little as he speaks.

“Excellent honey! And what have you been up to?”

Zayn sees her shuffling in the background of the screen as she sits down but elects to ignore it as he regales his week. Describing what he’s been doing and the project he’s working on. He tells her of the funny instance last night at dinner where Louis thought the hot chilli sauce was ketchup (how, he does not know).

She laughs, “sounds like you're having a great time honey.”
He smiles, rubbing Roman behind the ear. “I am mum.” He says. “Anyway, what have you all been up to?” As soon as he says it Waliyha appears on screen. “Salaam Wali!” He greets.

“Zayn jaan, how are you?”

“I’m great thank you.” He repeats his statement form earlier. “Mum was just telling me what you’ve all been up to.”

“Oh, well-“ From there Wali and his mum take turns in letting him know every detail of their week. This ranges from their dads shenanigins and what Safaa is up to, including grocery shopping and nonsense pieces of information. It amuses Zayn. Just as they finish up, Liam walks in.

“That your mum?” He asks as he approaches, Zayn takes a moment before answering to appreciate how professional he looks in his suit. Then nudges over while Liam takes a seat in the space beside him. Zayn nods his confirmation as he sits down. “Hi Tricia! Hi Wali!”

They both say their hello’s at the same time and from there the conversation takes off. Zayn thinks for a moment he can keep track of the topics being discussed, but looses them within around 30 seconds. He zones out at one point, focusing on petting Roman and letting Liam take reign of the conversation. He only zones back in when Liam curls an arm around his back - for no other reason than he wanted to and Zayn let him. It makes him a little breathless. They bounce around from topic to topic, Zayn occasionally inputting his two cent but otherwise remaining relatively quiet.

“Well, there is an ultimate point to this call.” His mum says once all points of conversation have been exhausted.

“Oh yes?” Liam prompts her. Zayn has a sip of the cool water he has had next to him this whole time.

“Yes, we wanted to ask if having the two of you up here for a few days was on the cards.” She doesn’t phrase it as a question. More an open invitation.

Zayn raises his eyes as he places his glass down. “Yeah?” It’s more to fill any following silence than actually provide her an opinion. “When?”
“Well whenever you feel like honey, but also whenever you’re ready.” She says cheerfully with a side of seriousness.

“That would be lovely!” Liam says enthusiastically. Liam looks at him after he says it, as if checking for confirmation. Zayn offers no protest and so Liam runs with it. “We’ll have to do a bit of calendar coordination-“ Liam, ever the responsible one, begins, “but I’m sure we’ll be able to do something soon-ish.”

Tricia beams. “Wonderful! We look forward to having you up here!” Waliyha leaves the screen, mumbling something along the lines of ‘want a tea?’ before Tricia continues. “But it’s not set in stone. If you decide it’s best not to come then that’s fine, but you’re welcome at any time.”

Zayn just beams, “nah ma, i think it’d be fun.” He rubs Roman behind the ear, making a point of not looking at anyone else.

“All right sweet cheeks, well. We’ll be off. I have to go pick Safaa up from Gymnastics and Wali has stuff to do.”

Waliyha rolls her eyes and Liam chuckles. “All good, speak soon.” He says as Trisha waves and the call ends.

Liam sighs and tugs him in a bit closer. “I’ve gotta go to work soon.” He says regrettably. Breathing through Zayns hair.

Zayn returns the sigh, albeit a bit sadder. “I know.”

“You gonna be ok with Harry?” He asks in a whisper. The thing is, Liam's so conscious of how jittery Zayn is at the present, how little things make him jump and that he's become slightly skittish. Even if Zayn himself doesn’t notice.

“Yeah I’ll be fine.”

The second the last word is out his mouth there’s a knock on the door, preceded by Harry himself walking in.
“Speak of the devil.” Liam announces. Harry walks in, greeting them individually and popping down the items he carries - Zayn thinks there’s a few food items, most likely ingredients for whatever Harry’s found on the internet. He then disappears off and after a minute the sound of the blender goes.

“Makin’ a milkshake, isn’t he?” Zayn thinks out loud.

Liam huffs, “probably, yeah.”

Less then a few minutes later Harry re-emerges with two milkshakes. One which he is already sipping through a straw and the other held in his bin lid hands - the glass is so small compared to him that his fingers and thumb overlap.

Liam shifts and plants a kiss onto his cheek, “I’ll be back later, ok gorgeous?”

Zayn has this feeling of elation in his chest - expanding into an indescribable happiness. Not because Liam is leaving, truth be told he doesn’t know what brings it on. “Yeah ok.” He says, smiling. He ducks down, rubbing Roman behind the ears. She yawns, a vibrating purr warming his hand. Liam stands up, thanking and saying goodbye to Harry before he grabs his keys and shouts a final goodbye as he walks out the door.

Meanwhile, Harry sits down next to him in the area Liam did. Just not as close. They remain silent, after all there’s no need for conversation just yet.

“Can you help me out with something later please?” Zayn asks. Like when they were on FaceTime he doesn’t look up.

“Course I can, this Liam’s thing?” He ponders aloud.

Zayn nods. Roman blinks up at him a few times, nuzzling into his palm as he lets out a quiet laugh. She blinks up at him slowly, as if in a trance. He smiles down. Just embracing how happy he feels right there and then.

“You just got a kitty kiss!” Harry says, sipping his milkshake through his straw.
“Did I?” Zayn asks, looking at him but not letting up on his playing with her.

“Yeah, they communicate with their eyes and that’s how they, like let you know they like you.” Harry confirms.

Zayn snorts, “trust you to know that.” He banters. It’s quiet for another few minutes as Zayn thinks to his session with Isabelle the day before. His ‘365 notes’ book is next to him, his sketchbook which he had been doodling in earlier. It's what prompts him in fact, and he recites what she reckoned Harry in particular could help him with; “Harry,” he starts. “What do you reckon are unique calming thoughts?”

Harry’s eyebrows draw together until Zayn explains where the question originated from.

“Ok, what did she mean by unique?”

“I don't know.” Zayn says, flipping open his sketchbook. “I'm assuming things which aren't immediately thought of.”

“Jelly.” Harry says immediately. “Jelly, in a bowl, wiggling a little.”

Zayn grins and sticks his tongue out as he messily write ‘Calming Thoughts’ at the top of his page in distorted font. Then he draws a little doodle of Jelly in a bowl with little wiggle lines around it. As he draws Harry rattles off a number of feelings that can be calming or comforting to him. “Somewhere warm and cosy is always nice, i don't know, like - lets go unconventional and say a warm sleeping bag, preferably with Louis in but that’s my opinion.”

Zayn lets out a snuffly laugh at Harry’s external monologue and draws a sleeping bag and write ‘warm, cosy places’ with an arrow.

“I like fish.” Harry says out of the blue. “Imagine something swaying in a current, but it’s wearing, I don't know a… a suit.”

Zayn barks out a short laugh, startling Roman from his lap. She indignantlys shivers and clambers off his lap to go get food from her bowl. “A fish wearing a suit?” He asks. “Wow Haz.”
“Ok, then a bowtie, a fish wearing a bowtie.”

Zayn hums, and starts to doodle a seahorse instead. It takes longer than other doodles but that’s ok. He can picture it actually. How nice and easy it’d be to get lost in something like that. For the sake of it, he adds the bowtie.

——

Later on that day they become much more productive, they spend an hour on Zayn’s surprise (which in the grand scheme of things isn’t long for it at all), and then spend the next few in the kitchen with Harry’s latest culinary invention. Then they spend a little more time on Zayn’s project but he’s not really feeling it - he’s a little tired out now. After that Zayn lays down for his nap and when he wakes - an hour later he and Harry play guess who.

During their third game, when Zayn’s sure Harry is Madame Pomfrey Liam comes home from work. He seems a little strained but Zayn puts that down to their inconsiderate boss, who apparently has been giving everyone a hard time. There’s a part of him that ponders if he is a catalyst for some of the issues Liam now has with his boss... He has caused Liam to have a number of absences.

Niall joins in with him as he sets the table and Louis will be coming later for dinner, but in the meantime Zayn, now feeling a little quieter and calmer, helps Liam out with little jobs. Really, everything feels fine.

——

Roman gave me a kitty kiss today according to Harry

——

The first thing Zayn notices, when he wakes up sometime during the night, is that he is comfortably tucked in the sheets, but alone. The second being he’s actually awake and not dreaming.

The third, that something is wrong.
He sits up straight, scanning the empty room for any sign of Liam. The bathroom light is off - telling Zayn that he’s not using the loo. Which makes Zayn panic a little. His grip tightens around Grapes. He didn’t realise he’d fallen asleep holding him but it looks like he did after all.

He pulls the covers off his body and steps out of bed, feet curling on the floor before he ads over to where his Ugg boots are and to sling over one of Liam’s jumpers that lay discarded on the chair in the corner. He exits the room quietly, searching around for any sign of him and doing his best to calm the beating of his heart with Grapes curled to his chest. At first there’s nothing, he searches every room upstairs but finds no sign of him. Then, he hears a muffled sob.

Immediately, like a knife piercing his chest, his body goes cold. First it’s in his chest and then it spreads everywhere like frost. Even his toes tingle - it’s numbness unlike any he’s ever felt. On bated breath he treads downstairs, careful to not make any sound. When he reaches the kitchen, he sees Liam sat at the table crying.

“Liam.” He exhales.

Like a deer in headlights, Liam flicks around to look at him, startled.

“Zayn,” he says, voice broken up. He makes a valiant effort to cover his crying by pawing at his face with the tissue in his hand. “Why are you awake?”

Zayn ignore the question. Instead stepping over to warm Liam up. When he does Liam breaks down again, sobbing.

Zayn has no idea what’s caused this, what he’s supposed to do. Normally their positions are swapped so he feels completely out of his element. All he does know is that Liam needs comfort and he’s going to give it to him. He rubs his back, the way Zayn knows he likes and hushes him because that soothes him when he needs it.

“'m sorry,” Liam says. Zayn pulls back, giving him an incredulous look. “It’s not all that bad, I don’t know why I'm crying really.”

“What is it then?” Zayn asks. Pulling him into his chest.

Liam sighs, shuddering. “Can you sit down please?” He says, pulling the chair behind Zayn for him
to sit down on. Zayn does as he’s told, but not without letting Liam go.

“You can tell me,” Zayn encourages him.

Liam inhales deeply, covering Zayn’s hand with his own. “Don’t think I wasn’t going to tell you, because I was I just didn’t know how and with you having just come out of hospital I didn’t want you to think you had anything to stress about.”

Zayn tries not to shiver in discomfort. He fails when a tickle runs up his spine. “Ok,” he prompts.

“Basically, I’m being let go from work.” Liam gulps. “I’ve been given two months lenience to find a new job, but I think I’ve found it. So I don’t know why I’m crying at all really. Just couldn’t sleep, ‘m sorry.”

Zayn has to remember to breathe for a second. “Of course you have a reason to Liam, that's very stressful.” He reprimands him. “How long do you have before being let go?”

“Another 5 or so weeks, so really it’s a long way off yet.” Liam admits, pulling a new tissue from the box and wiping his eyes. “I’m sorry,” Liam says.

Zayn has to resist the impulse to roll his eyes. Trust Liam to apologise. “Don’t say that.” Zayn tells him. “I would be worried too if I was in your position.”

“I was going to tell you, I just didn’t want you to have anything to stress about.”

Zayn nods, understanding why Liam might think that. “When did you find out?”

“A few days before you were discharged from the hospital.” Liam admits. Sniffing, so he blows his nose.

Zayn wraps him up in a hug and presses Liam into his chest. He thinks he might cry himself. Rational areas of his brain agree with Liam. It wouldn’t have been smartest to spring that on Zayn during that time. Other part scream at him, telling him he’s a liability, a burden to Liam, that he would still have his job for sure without him. Zayn wraps Liam up in a hug so tight’s he’s not sure if
it’s to comfort Liam or himself. Liam returns it, quelling the multiple voices in his head.

“C’mon LiLi,” Zayn says after a few minutes. “Let’s go to bed, we can talk in the morning.”

Liam nods, inhaling sharply to divert a yawn. “Yeah, let’s go.” He says. They plod up the stairs together and slide between the sheets. To Liam’s surprise, Zayn turns him around and cuddles him from behind.

“What’re you doing?” Liam mumbles as Zayn wraps himself around him.

“I wanna cuddle you and comfort you because that’s what makes me feel good so it'll make you feel better too.” Zayn mumbles back. He’s a lot smaller than Liam so in order to level their bodies out Zayn buries his face in the short hair at the back of Liam’s neck. “G’night Li.” He says.

“Night Zayn.” Liam yawns back.

They’re asleep before the clock can change from 3:31 to 3:32.

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The next day, Zayn and Liam sit down together on the couch, Roman between them and talk. Liam comes clean about what he’s been holding back the last few weeks, and what he’s planning thus far. Before Liam can finish up Zayn interrupts him.

"What about boxing?"

Liam who had been planning what to say back stumbles to answer.

"I mean, when we were younger you loved boxing, but you didn't want to compete. You love being with kids, why not combine the two? I saw something outside the gym last week, maybe we can check it out?" Zayn wipes his suddenly clammy palms on his thighs. "I-I mean if you want to that is."

Liam gives him a watery smile. "You know me so well, don't you?" He laughs, "Zayn, I can't
believe you nailed it." As it turns out, one of the older boxing instructor's at the gym Liam used to go to and that currently holds Zayn's classes is retiring.

"I spoke to Lucy at the front desk-" Liam explains, Zayn doesn't know which one is Lucy but, he has a vague idea. "-then to Piers, the instructors who's retiring and they said that the job is basically mine, except I have to undergo a few courses in the meantime to ensure that I'm qualified and able to work with children."

"Liam! That's great!" Zayn exclaims. "I can't believe you kept it to yourself this long!"

Liam, who has been valiantly attempting to stay calm and not cry the whole time sniffs. "I'm sorry," he starts. "I just hate to stress you out."

Zayn cuts him off by hugging him. He rubs his back and holds him for a long time. "Liam," he begins. "I know my mental positioning hasn't been that great, and that I'm still not well, but I don't want you to think you're responsible for everything, or worse, bring yourself down to my level because of how stressed you are." He pauses and continues to rub Liam's back. "If I'm wrong I need you to tell me but we're a team, right?" He gulps, pulling back to look at Liam.

Liam nods in confirmation.

"And like, I keep you in the loop of how I'm doing or what I'm feeling when I can, so I would like you to do the same with me so I can help you when your feeling down too, yeah?"

Liam nods. "I get it Zayn, I promise."

They hug each other, until Roman meows at them, indignant.

(When Liam leaves for work Zayn has time to finish off his surprise for Liam.

A sigh of relieve leaves him when it's done. He's satisfied, wholly, with his work. He genuinely believes he's done a good job, and maybe, just maybe, that means he can really start learning to love
That night Zayn is making the two of them a tea when Liam comes up behind him and slides his arms around his middle.

"Hey," Zayn whispers, his voice is slightly hoarse because he hasn't used it in a few hours.

"Hey yourself." Liam presses a kiss to his cheek on the edge of Zayn’s hairline. "How're you feeling? Been a bit quiet."

"Yeah I'm good. Just feeling a bit disconnected."

Liam presses another kiss to the side of his face. "I see."

Zayn stirs the tea, probably more than he should.

"I'd like to give you a bath if that’s ok?" Liam says.

"How can u give a bath?" Zayn snorts, his attempt at sarcasm falls short when he melts a little inside.

Liam smiles and Zayn leans back into his hold. "Like give you one, ya know?" He smiles.

"Like, just look after you and cuddle you and wash your hair and stuff?" Liam proposes. "Like to spoil you a little."

Zayn's heart palpitates. "Did u want to come in with?"

"Er, only if ur good with that." Liam stumbles. "I don't wanna make you uncomfortable but if you think me being in with you will trigger you in some way then I won't."
Zayn lets out a small, slightly uncomfortable laugh. "Yeah, sure." He says. "I think I'd like you to join."


Zayn’s so disconnected that it feels like a jumpcut from where they had been in the kitchen to when he’s lying down in the tub. Liam, whose chest is pressed to his back runs his hands up and down his arms. They’re quiet as they soak in the hot water. It’s perfect really. Warm enough that it feel like it ebbs into his bones but not boiling.

“Do u still feel like you’re crushing me?” Liam asks.

Zayn inhales deeply. “Yeah,” he won’t lie but pauses to gulp. “Sometimes, but - I mean I get that I maybe, well, that I haven’t been seeing myself right?” He clears his throat. Suddenly it tickles. Perhaps from not talking for a little while. “It's hard but I think I’m starting to accept the fact I have an eating disorder, but there are days when i just want to rip it all off and never consume anything again. but it's hard now because now the foods staying down i get hungry, and I-I don’t like it.”

Liam nuzzles his neck almost apologetically. “I'm sorry it's so hard babe.”

“Not your fault.” Zayn mutters.

“Well you know that I'm here right? And even if you don't want to talk to me any of the boys will and your mum would be more than happy to get a call and help you out. Don't think you have to work through it alone.”

“Yeah, I know.” He says as he forces himself to relax back against Liam. He hadn’t noticed he’d started tensing up. Liam nuzzles the skin of his shoulder.

“Can you please pass me the shampoo gorgeous?”

Zayn does as he’s asked. But the moment he lifts up is the second he’s startlingly aware of the scarring on his back. He curls up against Liam, feeling small. Liam kisses his temple. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”
“It’s not you.” Zayn replies truthfully.

They pause and enjoy the peace for a few more minutes. Then, Liam coaxes Zayn to sit up. Using the shower head he wets his hair and then pushes the foam through the strands of hair. When he’s done Liam again uses the showerhead to rinse it out. When that’s done Liam asks Zayn to pass him the conditioner, which he then massages through his hair.

While it sets Liam tugs Zayn to lean back against him. He makes sure to wrap his arms around him safely, and securely, and that his hands are over Zayn’s so he’s not touching Zayn’s stomach.

Liam presses a kiss to the wet skin under his ear and whispers, “Is this ok?”

Zayn almost giggles. “Yeah,” He rolls his shoulder. “This is ok.”

Liam presses another kiss to his skin. “Are you self conscious right now?”

“Er, yeah. but it's not terrible, because you're not looking directly at me and it's you. like, you've seen me like this before so it's not too bad and i can deal with it.” He shrugs,

“What's making you the most self conscious?”

“Um,” Zayn offers eloquently, “my stomach. And my thighs. but it's mostly my stomach when it comes to the whole ‘weight’ and ‘fat’ situation.”

Liam lifts up Zayn’s hand as he lifts up his own and uses the pads of Zayn fingers to stroke his tummy. “I love your tummy.” He mumbles.

Zayn lets out a small smile at Liam’s childish terminology. “Thanks Li.”

There’s another pause.
“Erm... I remember, when i was, like. You know pregnant.” Zayn gulps, it’s still weird and painful to say out loud. “It was hard because i loved the idea of it growing but i also hated it. And, like, i remember this, Zayn breaks as Liam wraps him up that little bit more. “One time when Nathan was away on a business trip or something. i was home alone for 3 days, absolutely glorious. and i just wanted to eat so much. i kept craving the weirdest shit and that was the only time i got to have it, since he was away and if i ate anything in front of him i know what he’d say.”

_ Liam doesn't want to interrupt him, but he wants to know exactly what Nathan called Zayn...

“-and i hated my stomach but i loved it too, and I’d stopped purging because i didn't want to fuck up the baby by being fucked up.”

Liam winces behind him, and wraps him in tighter as they pause for a minute. “Sorry, i didn't want to go in that deep.” Zayn apologises

“No-no, Zayn- it's fine. can I ask though... what did he used to call you?”

“Um, like, fat bitch, and other stuff apart from the normal names including huge and animal things like whale and elephant and dinosaur. Ya know?” Zayn ducs his head and pans his hands through the water.

Liam wraps him just a little tighter. “Hey, I just want to tell you. What you said at the end, how you didn't want to fuck up your baby by being fucked up. You aren’t, beautiful. You never have been and I just want to let you know so you can think about it. You don't have to accept it immediately, but you were suffering. A lot, and you may have believed you were fucked up but you aren't and you did everything you could for him. You would make an amazing dad.”

Zayn has to shut his eyes and take a deep breath. He dips into his safe space for a few seconds to divert breaking down. Liam pauses, and washes the conditioner from his hair. Zayn’s proud of how he’s kept emotionally stable recently. He doesn’t want to cry again after the past few weeks and so diverts his attention. “I love how you hold me.” He admits in a whisper. “Makes me feel safe and warm.” The second part comes out unexpectedly and he flushes... This thing with sharing with Liam is so new and he feels exposed, vulnerable doing it.

Liam simply wraps him tighter. “Then I'll hold you like this all the time.”

“Please do.” He smiles. There’s a pause while they enjoy each other's presence. “Erm. do u want me
“Only if you’re comfortable,” Liam whispers. “If something’s on your mind or you want to share then please do, but don’t force anything, ok? We have all the time in the world.”

Zayn clears his throat. Diving in head first. “Back to the whole business weekend thing, it was the best time in the relationship. I was alone for three days and -” He clears his throat again. “While I cut and stuff - but not a lot because, you know.” He trails off. Liam nods behind him. “I got whole nights sleeps and that was the best.”

Liams eyebrows knit together. “How come you didn't sleep through the nights when he was there?”

Zayn takes a moment before he continues. “Well, he was either, well. Using me for stuff or I’d be too terrified to sleep.”

“Why?”

“It was just that. that was when I was especially defenceless, and I’d get nightmares, and-” he gulps. “I kept waking up anyway because he’d hold me too. But it was a different kind of hold. it hurt, and I’d wake up with these bruises because I’d been moving too much - which you probably know I do or because i was breathing too loudly.” He waves hand through the bubbles again.

Liam kisses his head. “I will never do that to you. i swear, and if i ever do anything remotely wrong. well, gorgeous, you have my full permission and every right to kick me out of the bed to the couch permanently.”

Zayn barks out a laugh, then turns to side to snuggle some more. I don't think I ever would anyway, for starters, i can't kick u out of your own bed in your own apartment. You always hold me just right.”

Liam kisses his forehead. “Our bed, our place, I'm glad.” Something in Zayn’s chest compresses when Liam says that. “So are u ok with going up to see your family?”

Zayn beams, “I am, I'm excited actually.”
Liams tongue presses between his teeth and he laughs, “It's gonna be fun isn’t it?”

Zayn hums, “Just imagine how mums gonna get you back for cooking when she wanted to.”

“Ah ah ah now,” Liam banters in a faux stern voice. “I fully intend on cooking first night we get there.”

Zayn laughs.
Self-Care

Chapter Notes

Ha, ha ha ha the thing read 'publishing date 15th May' yeah, two months later.

I'm sorry guys, I'm really not feeling this right now and I'm trying to get from A to B with the story so but I have to establish stuff first. I promise to try and get better with this.

Hope you're all safe and well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, Zayn, following on from our last session I want to discuss self-care techniques."

"Ok." Zayn sips from his glass of water. On the table between them he has the page to his doodles from the other day open. Isabelle had told him he was the first person she'd ever met that drew a seahorse with a bowtie. He had joked that she should give him a sticker on his book. To his great surprise she followed through with a 'great work!' sticker used for reception kids. He can't help but think how much more motivated he might've been in high school if teachers had done that with his work.

“Zayn, what would you describe self-care as?”

“Um, prioritising yourself?” He suggests, wringing his hands. “Not in a selfish way but sensibly.”

She jots it down on her paper. Zayns in a position now where he knows that is more often than not a good thing. “And can you give me an example of that?”

“Er, backing away from something thats hurtful to you?” He tests. It is relevant after all.

“Good. Zayn, here. Let's try it this way.” She reaches for the whiteboard thats taken a permanent spot next to her chair and sits down next to him on the couch, handing it over to him. This time he chooses the green marker. “Can you write ‘self care’ in the middle, we’ll make a little spider diagram.”
He does as she says.

“Ok, so, you’ve identified self-care as prioritising, that's very good so could you please write that down?”

He scribbles it onto the board and then draws a line from it to the oval he’s whipped around the ‘self care’ in the middle.

“Now what else can you think of? It can be anything.”

He takes time to think. “Comfort?”

“Good!”

From there he struggles a little to think up of something. He tries, “people?” However there’s a slight grimace when he says it. He doesn't always find people comforting.

Isabelle nods, “how about we use the word... ‘community’?”

He nods, pressing his lips together as he writes it down. He should've thought of that.

*No, Zayn. He thinks to himself afterwards. It's ok to not be perfect.*

"Like, with people," he thinks out loud - not necessarily considering the end product of what he's about to say. "Community's a good word but like, more what they do... Is support a good one?"

"No that's a really great one, write it down." His tongue sticks out in concentration as he does.

"Now what else can we think of? How to be kind to yourself? What have you been doing these last few months that've worked well?"
Zayn pauses with that one. "Time?"

Isabelle twists her expressions to be considerate of the word but let him know he could probably come up with a better one.

He thinks, his brain scrambling for anything. "No need to rush anything Zayn, and there are no wrong answers. Time works, I just think you can get more from that word."

"Patience?"

"That's what I was thinking!"

He writes both 'time' and 'patience' down. Ten minutes later he's added 'acceptance', 'awareness', 'slowing down', 'gentle', 'rest' and 'ease' to the diagram. There was a block of two minutes where he thought to himself about what he could write and ended up doodling a flower in the corner of the board.

"So one more that I've been thinking of, down a bit of a different route which you might not have considered yet or thought of for a while-" Zayn nods along "-and please let me know if this is too much to handle right now because remember this is entirely at your own pace and there is no obligation to talk about anything."

"Ok." His voice is a little croaky from not using it much.

"What about pleasure?" She folds her hands in her lap.

"um, like- masterbating?" His cheeks and ears flare up incredibly quickly. He can feel the rush of redness creep, no, ascend up his cheeks and into his ears.

"Not necessarily but down that route yes."

"Um, I haven't done anything in-since, like-" He stumbles before admitting, "It's been a while."
"There's no shame in that, there's no shame in never having done it either."

He nods, suddenly feeling very awkward. All the muscles in his core and arms seem to have locked in an effort to keep himself perfectly still for no reason other than he feels awkward. "He- he didn't like me doing things to myself unless it was bad. It's not the most eloquent thing out of his mouth but it works. "Like hurting myself."

"I know, Zayn." She admits sadly. "Which is why you've been hurting so much."

The cringe Zayn feels doesn't lessen at all, in fact it gets worse. "He-he," Zayn's voice hitches.

"Yes?"

"He'd cage it. Like, bought a lock so I wouldn't 'whore out' or 'be greedy'" Zayn says far too quickly. "It hurt to wear, like, pinching. And when I protested he-he did something worse and-"

Isabelle's brow knots, but Zayn still has things to say yet.

"I-I wasn't anyway, like- I was always faithful," He rushes out. "But... he never trusted me." His voice fades out towards the end of the sentence. It's like a little switch goes off in his brain. He's suddenly painstakingly aware of the power imbalance that was between him and Nathan. Not the obvious and more physical one, which he realised some time back, but how much Nathan sucked out of him... how much of Zayn's personality, his humanity, his identity Nathan took from him. "I gave him everything and he never gave me anything back." His voice is so quiet, like a whisper.

Isabelle remains silent, as if to invite him to continue speaking. He doesn't look up at her from where his eyes have been trained on the board for so long, all the words in his head blurring to become unrecognisable - like a foreign language as he follows this train of thought. "I gave him everything and he never gave me anything back." He repeats softly.

Isabelle remains silent.

"Wait, no-I- he took everything from me, but never gave it back." Zayn feels nauseous. His hands fold around his stomach. Then he rocks forward and back. "I-I didn't want him to take but he did anyway. I gave, then he started taking." He moves his hands to rub his upper thighs. Suddenly twitchy.
"Yes Zayn." She confirms. "Do you think you're starting to see an alternative side to the situation now?"

Zayn mouth hangs slightly agape. He nods. After a moment he swallows to wet his mouth. "I-I jus-"
His mouth falls open again as so much process through his mind - how everything seems to be highlighted. "He... I..."

"Take the time you need Zayn." Isabelle reminds him softly, using her right hand to blanket his left. He spares a glance, noticing how the grip he has on his knee is turning his knuckles white. But as soon as she says it everything tumbles out. He bears everything. His cut record, how much he'd actually 'diet', how Nathan took his virginity, how he was more often in chains or rope than clothes.

"He said he loved me." Zayn whispers.

"But now you see that he didn't." Isabella says.

Zayn shakes his head, mouthing out a 'no.' Heat rises in his cheek and he can feel tears pool.

"I-I never did anything to provoke him!" He spits out, becoming overwhelmed by the emotions running through him. In an attempt to calm himself he presses the heels of his hands to his temples, panicking with how much he's legitimately realising. "I don't know why he wanted to hurt me so much!"

Meanwhile Isabelle rubs his back. And when he's finished for the time being asks, "It's very good that you're recognising the negative dynamics of your relationships with him, Zayn. Particularly now the emotional ones instead of just the physical and sexual." She says. "How it's not you who's at fault here."

Zayn sniffs wetly, reaching out for a tissue from the box on the coffee table to blow his nose. He takes deep, soothing breaths, letting himself be calm - yet he finds himself to be anything but that. His heart pounds - thuds deep in his ears. He continues to blow his nose.

There's a long break where Zayn thinks and Isabelle lets him without inquiry. Then, "In light of this I would like to revisit something from one of our first few appointments." Isabelle tests out the waters, not proceeding until he nods; dropping the hand closer to her so he can face her. "Do you still believe you are 'insane'?"
Zayn exhales harshly. Thinking, he shifts back and forth. "I-I don't- no. No I'm not. But... I."

He stops again. Long enough that he knows she is aware he has nothing left to say, and so Isabelle takes the reigns. "This is progress Zayn. A lot of progress. Do you have anything else you want to say?"

Zayn shakes his head. No, no he doesn't. He feels like he's been stripped bare. Naked isn't strong enough a word, vulnerable isn't either. Not like how he used to with Nathan, because here he is safe - and that's not just the feeling of safety, it's the knowledge that he is safe - to speak his mind, to wear what he wants, to be who he wants to be. To, to do art- to go outside, to show affection to more than one person... to eat what he wants, when he wants and not be judged, to call his family, to read and not work dawn until dusk on a few hours sleep.

He feels heavy with the knowledge that has slammed into him, but at the same time; relieved.

"Before we move on we'll take a little break, I don't want you to feel too overwhelmed or triggered in anyway. We have finished the hard stuff for today unless you want to continue."

Zayn shakes his head, "No, no," he rambles. "I'm good. Please." Isabelle passes him a new tissues which he promptly uses and disposes of. "Brain's hurting." He holds his head.

"Ok, well how about I tell you something that I think you'd enjoy?" She says quietly. "Something you don't have to think of too much?"

Zayn nods, "yeah, ok" Frankly, he sounds disinterested, but he doesn't have the energy to put much emotion into it.

"I would like to recommend you go see a nutritionist." She says.

Zayns back stiffens again. "How would I enjoy that?" He asks timidly.

"Well, for starters it enables you to get some independence over your meals and control of your health. Then it means we can continue to keep working towards healthy living and what feels healthy to you."
Zayn remains silent for a minute. Then nods once, twice. "Yeah, ok-" he sniffs. "ok then."

This feels like freedom.

When Zayn walks out of his appointment Liam is sat outside waiting for him as he does every week. It hits Zayn how truly lucky he is to have someone like Liam in his life. "Zayn!" Liam stands to hug him. "Good appointment?"

"Yeah." Zayn mumbles into Liam's shoulder. He feels very content in Liam's arms. "Realised some things that I'd been putting off."

"Yeah?" Liam pulls back. "That's really great Zayn." Then Liam kisses his forehead. "Lets get home and you can have a rest."

Zayn nods and they start to walk out of the building, that sounds like a fantastic idea. When they're in the car and Liam's starting the ignition a thought occurs to him. "Don't you need to pick up your Working With Children Check?" He asks Liam.

"Oh shit, yeah I do." Liam changes the indicator from left to right. "Thanks."

Zayn beams. "All good. When does your course begin?" After all, Liam had been organising it while he was with Isabelle.

"Few days after we get back from Bradford."

"Oh good."

"You excited?" Liam asks, turning to face him at the traffic lights.
Zayn had zoned out of the conversation momentarily, so had to think through what Liam was asking. "Oh, Bradford? Yeah. It's been a while."

"Anything you want to do in particular when we're up there?"

"Um, really just wanna see the family. Few walks. Not much."

"Alright then."

Zayn feels like he should apologise and so he does.

"What? Why 'sorry'?"

"Just, I'm sure you'd like to do more."

Liam smiles and says; "Zayn, I want to be with you. And I don't want to do anything that you don't. Truthfully, that sounds lovely and sounds like we'll have some good downtime."

Zayns heart skips a beat. Liam's so endearing. "Oh, good then." He smiles.

They've arrived to the services station, and Liam parks the car. "Do you want to come in or wait in the car?" He asks Zayn.

Zayn really appreciates that, Liam asking him and giving him choices before he does anything. "I'd like to wait in here please. Don't feel like I want to talk to many people."

Liam smiles softly. "Fair enough." He says and kisses Zayns forehead. "I'll be a few minutes then." With that, Liam's out of the car, leaving the keys behind in the ignition so the radio continues to play. While he's gone Zayn fiddles with the stations, landing on the current one that's playing the latest Bruno Mars. He shuts his eyes and leans his head back on the headrest, but taps out the beat to '24K Magic' on his knee with his fingers, humming to the chorus. A part of his chest hurts and feels empty from the session and he regrets not bringing grapes with him to the session like he's done a few times now. He'll have to wait until they get home to cuddle Roman, Grapes and Liam. What order he'll decide in time.
"Are we taking Roman?" He asks when Liams back in the car.

Liam asks him to repeat the question as he was starting the ignition, and he does. "We could, but it might not be fair on her. I was thinking maybe Harry can stay in? Or one of the boys to keep her company."

Zayn nods his head. "I'd like that. Want her to feel loved, don't want her to feel alone." He thinks out-loud.

Liam has to bite the inside of his cheek, wondering if Zayn knows how close that cuts to the bone. "Grapes can come though." He offers.

Zayn laughs outright at that. "Yup, my second favourite teddy bear is coming with."

Liam beams, so glad to hear Zayn laugh. It is still such a rarity after all. "You have another teddy bear?"

"Yeah," Zayn giggles, smile split over his lips. "You." He sniggers.

Liam grins. "So glad my cuddle services can be of use."

Zayn smiles, humming the last few notes of '24k Magic'. "Isabelle recommended a nutritionist." Zayn says a minute later. "Woman called Rebecca."

"Not a bad idea." Liam supplies. "Do you want to do that?"

"Um," Zayn pauses. "I think I would, but either get it done today or think about it for a few weeks."

"Ok." Is all Liam replies with.
The rest of the day runs smoothly, Liam finishes up one of his last days at the office and Zayn attends another Yoga class. They shower together and Zayn decides this time he's going to be the one washing Liam's hair. He can understand now, why Liam insists on washing his. Not just because it feels nice for the person receiving, but it can feel rather therapeutic to the person giving. Zayn feels like he's giving back a little to Liam, and that is enough to make him feel happy for the rest of the night.

---

Showers! Are! So! Amazing!

---

Naturally, Liam left packing up his old office until the night before they leave for Bradford. The two of them are finishing packing their bags when Liam suddenly goes "Shit!"

"You ok Li?" Zayn's face morphs into amused confusion.

"I forgot, I have stuff left at the office!" His mouth drops open and Zayn laughs as he says "well go get it then!"

"Crap, the boys are coming 'round soon."

"Liam, just go, get your stuff, come back when your done." He continues to smirk. "It's not the end of the world if you leave and the boys arrive."

"Sure, true, ok, be back later. Lo-" Lam stops himself mid word which confuses Zayn. "See you soon!" With that, Liam walks out their bedroom door. Zayn hears the front door shut a few minutes later.

He continues packing, reckoning he may as well finish it up for the both of them before the others arrive. He can't help but think of what Liam started to say before he left. A small part of him thinks back to being in the hospital. He knows he was somewhat out of it, but something keeps nagging in his brain. It has been for a while. He's partly sure that Liam said he loved him? But since he was only
semi-conscious had dismissed it. The thought that maybe Liam was about to say 'Love you' comes out of nowhere.

To his surprise, Zayn doesn't feel that affected by it. He doesn't freak out at the notion and doesn't think much beyond it, let alone whether or not he returns the same sentiments. He will probably have to bring it up with him at some point... wait, maybe with Isabelle first before he jumps to conclusions. Before he can overthink everything there's a knock at the door and he can hear Louis opening it. Judging by how loud it is and how he could pick out Louis' voice anywhere.

He zips up the last bag, leaving it on the bed for Liam to move later (he knows he can't pick that up) then goes downstairs to greet the boys. Roman is in the room with him so he picks her up and sits her on his hip like she seems to love and leaves the room.

As soon as he's downstairs Roman jumps from his and goes over to purr at Harry (the traitor) and leaves Zayn to get hugs from Louis and Niall. When they ask where 'Payno' is he replies that he went to finish packing up his office. Once that's settled, Zayn grabs his coat and beanie from the rack next to the door and pulls them on quickly. Then they all pile into the car and make their way to the park for a game of footy. And by that, they mean aimlessly kicking the ball around and laughing when one of them falls over.

They must have been playing for around thirty minutes when Liam rocks up.

"GUESS WHO'S FINISHED A JOB FROM HELL?" He shouts at the top of his lungs, opening his arms to no one in particular as he walks over to their group. Zayn throws his head back, laughing because he can and smiles as the other boys holler with him. Niall runs up and jumps onto Liam, knocking them to the ground. It makes them all laugh. Liam stands himself back up, brushing himself off as he walks over to Zayn. Zayn moves towards him, taking his hands out of his pockets to hug Liam.

"So glad your happy." Zayn says to him.

"Me too, so glad to see you happy." Liam retorts. Zayn just pushes his face into Liam's neck some more, suddenly a little overwhelmed by him.

They move away eventually, the other boys giving them some privacy by resuming their mini game - which is slowly turning into a match with questionable teams. "Oh my goodness, Zayn!" Liam suddenly says. "Where are your gloves?"
"At home." Zayn says. "Forgot em,"

Liam pats down his body, as if he's searching for a pair on his person. "I'm fine though," Zayn says. "Feel warm enough."

Liam looks at him incredulously. "Ok." He says. "But if that changes let me know. I think there's a pair in the car."

Zayn smiles, so - just, unbelievably happy for no reason. "Sure."

--

The usual downpour that is typical of British weather cuts their time short by about 10 minutes. Niall, Liam and Zayn rush to Liam's car and Harry and Louis run to their.

"Beat you back to your place Payno!" Louis shouts from the passenger seat.

"Drive safe!" Liam retorts. Zayn fiddles with the heater in the passenger seat, pushing it up because he feels he's about to begin shivering. "Niall," Liam asks into the backseat. "Can you grab the towel in the boot?"

Niall does as asked and Liam uses it to quickly wraps Zayns hair up and ruffle it somewhat dry. Zayn opens his mouth and makes a sound 'urgggggg' as he does because it's what he did as a kid and is fun. Liam pulls the towel away and frowns, Zayn smiles back and when Liam realises Zayn was playing, resumes his task of drying Zayn off best he can. When he's finished wiping down his hands he flips it around and wraps the non-wet part around Zayns shoulder. "And the other blanket, Niall?" Again, Liam gets what he asks for and spread it out over Zayns lap, tucking it around his waist, hips and down to his knees. "No getting sick Zaynie, we have a trip tomorrow." Liam laughs.

Niall, meanwhile, makes himself comfortable in the backseat by propping his feet up. "Quick," he says, "else the married couple will eat all the food."

Liam makes short time of starting the car up fully and making their way back home. The drive only takes ten minutes, which they spend listening to the CD in Liam's car, Niall belting out the songs from the back and Zayn humming to them. When they do return, the rain has ceased temporarily. Liam parks the car and makes his way around to the passenger side to open the door for
"What am I! Chopped Liver?" Niall asks indignantly. Liam laughs, opening the door for him as well.

When he steps out, as Liam offers Zayn his hand, Niall starts laughing. "Look at 'em!" He giggles, making his way to where Harry parked their car.

"Wahoo! Lover boys! This is a public space!" He doesn't stop laughing as he makes his way over. Thats when Zayn notices that they're snogging in the backseat. Louis straddling Harry's lap. Immediately he feels a flush take over him.

Liam laughs along with Niall, walking over with Zayn by his side. "Yeah, keep it PG you two"

Harry smirks shamelessly through the window before Louis opens it and steps out. "Sorry, got bored waiting for you slowcoaches."

Zayn's ears have gone red from flush. He laughs with Niall but the sight reminds him of his conversation with isabelle earlier this week about 'pleasure'. Its been so long he wonders since when he became a blushing virgin at the display of anything somewhat intimate.

Still, all remains well and they make it into the house before it starts pouring down again. They all chip in to help make meatballs and pasta in record time and eat in the living room watching 'How I Met Your Mother'

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*The Boys and our football games*

*Nice food :)*
I have to apologise. I lost all motivation with this and tbh i dont want to churn out anything forced bc it'd be awful. Wanted to actually write this story not just tell it.

Let me know of any mistakes! Shout out to everybody who's commented and to "Harryismybae' bc their comment today motivated me to put this snippet out for you all :)
Zayn really wishes he had chosen a different time to think out loud. But it turns out, his ability to speak without a filter can occasionally be useful.

The night before he had spent up, thinking over what Liam had said earlier on before he left for the office, and that had lead him to think of time spent at the hospital. What Liam had said when he thought he was sleeping. His mind had crawled through every experience he'd had with Liam, right from childhood through to being at the park, and then cuddling on the sofa, wrapped up in comforters and fresh, soft warm clothing which Liam had laid out for him during a quick shower.

Then, when he woke up he was resting his head on Liams stomach, having tossed and turned in the night, and Liams arms were wrapped around him. Liam rose with him, pressing a kiss to his forehead when Zayn shifted back up the bed to rest on the pillows. Zayn had slowly blinked himself awake, met with the sight of sleepy Liam; a three day stubble and mop of hair fanning out over the pillow.

He felt safe, and appreciated, and cared for.

"You love me." He says, sat at the dining table. Liam looks up from his bag. Zayn forgets to breathe as what he said out loud filters into his brain. He had shaved that morning, and naturally the first thought Zayn had was how much he missed Liam's stubble.

Liam had been packing his charger and other last minute items. Zayn had been twitching and not sitting still for the past hour, but Liam had put that down to potentially breakfast. He looks flushed and there's a look on his face Liam can't describe. There's silence between them before Zayn says; "In the hospital, you said you loved me... right?"
"Love." Liam corrects almost immediately. Putting down his phone, which he had been holding. "Yes I do love you." He smooths down the folds in his shirt by tugging at the hem.

Zayns mouth drops open. "Oh." He's glad he's sitting down because he feels a little weak. Liam strides towards Zayn in two steps.

"Is that ok?" Liam asks softly. Where Zayns sat on the edge of the table means Liams only slightly taller than him.

"Um-" Zayns face twists to become slightly sour. Then he swallows and it's gone. "Like-" He stops, looking away from Liam. He places his hands either side of his thighs and pushes himself up so he's sat up better in the seat. "Are you sure?" He looks straight into Liam's eyes.

Liams face morphs from concern to fondness. "Yes." He nods. "It's true."

Zayn swallows again. "Really?" He asks again in a small voice, wiping his hands against his thighs.

Liam grins, laughing a little. "Yeah, Zayn, I do. So much." He wants to kiss Zayn's forehead but he's worried Zayn won't react well.

Zayn rubs his hands together, not saying anything for a short while. "I-I want to, too." He says. Looking up at Liam with wide eyes.

"Love me, or love yourself?" Liam clarifies. Shuffling a little closer.

Zayn blushes. "Maybe both?"

Liam nods.

"But." Zayn trails off. Swallowing before he answers. "I'm scared."

Liam nods "I am too."
There's a silence before Zayn admits, "I know it's different here, but Nathan said he loved me and I know he didn't and I shouldn't believe it but I don't think I'm ready." Liam runs the back of his index finger up and down Zayn's cheek.

"That's ok," Liam hushes, "We're just in different places right now. I don't expect anything of you. I can wait."

Zayn has a deep breath and nods. Relief on his face. "Thank you." Then he's smiling. So big he couldn't knock it off his face if he tried.

Liam smiles and shakes his head. Holding Zayn's face in his hand and pressing a kiss to his forehead. "I'll wait forever." He says quietly.

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During the car ride up to Bradford they sing along to old favourites, talk about random things and bicker over the map. He has grapes in his lap and only an hour into the drive he misses Roman a little. To help he texts Harry who sends him back a photo. He saves it to his phone. Really, given the gravity of the conversation they'd had that morning Zayn can't believe how easy it was to relax around Liam like nothing had changed.

It strikes him then that perhaps that rang truer than he originally considered.

Hours later Liam's car peels into the driveway of his childhood home. Seeing it now, exactly as it was all these years later is a real slap in the face to Zayn. Just how much he's missed this place and what it meant to him is almost overwhelming. They step out either side and shut the car doors with a heavy thud. "C'mon, let's go inside and say hi before we bring in our stuff."

Zayn doesn't feel like talking right now, there's an inexplicable lump in his throat which prevents him. So he just nods and wait for Liam to swing his arm around him before they trudge up to the door.

They walk in and in an instant his family are all surrounding him.
Zayn can feel himself getting overwhelmed, it’s so much – too much, with his sisters all crowded around him like they are, how his mother and baba is off to one side. He’s choking up, crumbling to pieces under the emotions he’s experiencing… and he’s only just walked in the door. They’re all different, see. He knows who is who with his eyes shut. Waliyha is the one who’s rubbing his back, the last one to join the huddle and wrapping herself around all of them. Next comes Doniya who pushes her face into his shoulder and her arms around his mid-riff and Safaa, little Safaa wraps herself around his torso and squidges into his tummy. It makes him a little nauseous, how they’re all so close and touching the areas he doesn’t like, but he can manage it, he’s been through worse.

They all pull off him a few seconds later. However, Safaa doesn’t let go. "Saf, are you ok?" Zayn asks in a whisper. Making a point of curling her in closer just because he sense’s she needs it.

"You were really sick." She sniffs, "and looked really bad."

Zayn snorts. "Way to compliment someone Saf." he says. She thwacks him on the chest with her fist.

"i was worried." she admits. And ok, that does a number on him.

"I'm sorry." He says. "Never again." He promises. "I'll never do that to you again."

"Did you like the bear?" she asks.

"So that was you?" he asks. Looking at her. She nods. "Well i love grapes."

It's her turn to snort. "Trust you." He smiles with her. Pleased to be with her.

It's then he tunes into his surroundings. Liam greets his parents and, lo and behold, his mum is already barring him from the kitchen.

"Told you Liam." He says with a huff. As soon as it's out his mouth his mum and dad engulf him in a hug. Just like that, any nerves or anxiety he had about this week fades away in the blink of an eye.

He'll be fine.
Later that night, after a rather successful game of Cluedo and dinner are out of the way they all congregate in the living room for Graham Norton. After everything that's transpired over the course of the day Zayn feel exhausted, but satisfied. His exhaustion is not helped when he and Liam cuddle up under a thick blanket in the corner of the sofa. They all laugh at the conversation between a number of celebrities line the couch, he recognises Daniel Radcliffe and Julie Andrews but other than that he doesn't know who anyone else is. He can feel himself dropping off but tries to stop himself by catching himself everytime his head falls.

It doesn't work.

All is quiet in the Malik house until an earth shattering scream comes from the room that Zayn and Liam are in.

Almost immediately, lights are on throughout the house and questions of "what?", "Is he ok?" and "What's going on?" happen almost immediately. Doniya, Trish and Yaser reach Zayn's old room to find that Liam's already got Zayn, clearly having experienced a nightmare. Trisha rushes to sit next to him on the bed. She joins in with Liam, hushing him and running hands through his hair. Zayn can't stop shaking or sobbing, and now his family are there he feels mortified. Liam, as he has done every nightmare ensures Zayn is comfortably on his lap before tucking him under his chin and wrapping him up tight in his arms. He hums a random tune, just so his chest can hum pleasantly for Zayn and hopefully calm him down quicker.

"S-sorry." Zayn croaks, "I-I di-dnt mean t-to w-wake you-u u-u-up." Liam begins swaying back and forth and around in circles.

Yaser, who had just crouched before him, says "Never apologise for this Zayn, it's fine, now are you ok? Do you need anything?"

Zayn heaves in a few shaky breaths. "Water?" He asks, wiping snot from his nose with the back of his hand. Yaser turns his head to face Doniya.

"I've got it." Doniya says instantly as she ducks out of the room. Yaser turns back to helping Trisha
and Liam soothe Zayn. Doniya returns in record time and hands him the glass but he's too shaken and almost spill some. He whimpers a little at a near miss, but Liam cups his hand on the glass and coaxes it to his mouth.

"That's it, little sips, like Isabelle said." Liam shushes. "Good, there you go." When Zayn sipping on some water Liam asks, "Trisha, can you please pass me my phone?" As she does Liam shifts the two of them so he's better position for the long term. Trisha hands him the phone and Liam turns it on. When it's on he opens up the music app and plays something Yaser reads as "Zayns Calm Playlist 2"

They're silent for the first few minutes of the piano and guitar instrumental. "Is there anything you want Zayn?" Liam asks. Thumbing his cheeks gently. The sleep warm skin seeps into Zayn's.

Zayn nods, wiping his eyes, "wanna sleep." He mumbles, words slurring.

"Ok, thanks guys but I think I can take it from here."

Trisha is obviously reluctant to leave, as is Yaser and Doniya. But she doesn't complain. Before she walks out she gives him a kiss on the cheek and hugs him, telling Zayn that she loves him and if he needs anything to come at anytime. Yaser and Doniya do the same and they're left in peace. Liam rubs Zayn's arm. "How do you feel?" He asks, knowing he'll get a more honest answer alone than with Zayn's family there.

"Shit." He heaves, "Like, I woke them up and I know they don't mind but I'm embarrassed and I can't even remember the dream all that much but I feel rubbish." Liam hands him a tissue from the nightstand and Zayn blows his nose.

"Well why don't you safe space to the music and tomorrow we can try again?" Liam suggests.

Zayn is so so tired and agrees within seconds. He shuts his eyes and lets himself float into safe space. Liam rubs his arm and hushes him. He's back to sleep within minutes.

----

Zayn doesn't wake up again until breakfast. When Liam and Zayn do wake up at their usual 8am,
they discuss and eventually put it down to a change in environment as what bought on such a bad
nightmare. Liam, who wants to respect that this is Zayn's family home lets Zayn shower first and sets
out some clothes for him to choose from and decides he'll shower later before bed

*(but if he chooses that because he knows he'll smell fresher climbing into bed so that Zayn might find
it pleasant that's for him to know and no one to find out).*

Over breakfast Zayn feels skittery, but not enough that he refuses to eat. Just it takes longer than the
rest of the family, long enough that Safaa runs to finish packing up her day-bag and Doniya, who has
class later on, packs some materials for that. He makes sure to have his morning vitamins and a larger
glass of water than normal because he knows he may have been dehydrated the day before and that
could've contributed to having a bad night. The conversation remains light, and mostly concerned
with just how prepared Safaa and Walihya are for school starting in a few hours.

The day itself is spent with Zayn and Liam settling in, taking their time to unpack their bags into the
closet and drawers. Zayn's art pad came with them and so he sketches for an hour while sitting cross
legged on the bed. Liam meanwhile flitters about the room, at one point settling down with his laptop
to read into a few last minute details about his course and other new-job related things. There's a
moment where Zayn's mind wonders back to the days he was in University, and when he worked
and earned his own money. He'd like to do that again one day, he thinks as he adds the last few details
to his cartoon. That way he could maybe start giving back to everyone who's given him so much.
That thought on it's own is enough to make him smile. One of the small, private type.

He feels eyes on him, and so he looks up. His instincts prove him right as Liam returns his gaze. He
smiles wider, for an unknown reason and looks back down at his work. But before he does he sees
Liam's smiling too.

*He loves me.* Zayn thinks. He doesn't need to think further and let himself freak out too much. He's
done enough overthinking and worrying already in his life. Instead, he takes a deep breath and
focuses on his sketch, making a mental note to talk to Isabelle about it next time they chat.

----

"So we hear Harry made you a mixtape so we had to one up him" Safaa shoves the CD case into his
hand without warning. It shocks Zayn from where he had been reading peacefully next to his mum
on the couch. He's startled by the sudden movement a jumps, but plays it off with a forced laugh
when Walihya and Safaa look guilty. Doniya smiles from where she sat working on her laptop at
the coffee table opposite, and when he looks Liam and Yaser are missing from the room.
"Look at it!" Waliyha prompts. He's said nothing and takes a moment to remember what he's supposed to be doing - oh yes! The CD.

"Woah guys," he says, flipping the case so he can read what's inscribed on the back. "Thanks." He stands up, much more enthusiastic and hugs them. "That's really nice of you."

"Yeah, whatever." Waliyha says and leaves the room, his mum snorts from the couch.

"It's her 'tough girl' act." Trisha explains and Zayn laughs, eyes crinkling. "Not uncommon in the teenagers of this household."

"Oh come on mum, I wasn't that bad." Doniya calls her out. "Zayn was definitely the worst!"

His mum retorts something he doesn't quite hear, he's too busy reading the song list again. They're generally calmer songs, which he likes the thought of. Harry's are usually motivational or something of the sort, having this for variety is appreciated.


Without a word he stands up from where he's sat and leaves the room, following the trail of his younger sisters. He first finds Safaa, and tells her what he wants to say before trailing after Waliyha to do the same. He knocks on her door, and only enters when she responds with "come in!" At first he just opens it, standing in the threshold. Waliyha turn to face him from her desk.

"Thank you, I love you." He says quickly. Then he strides in and hugs her, squeezing her best he can.

"Love you too."
On day three Liam and Zayn are left alone for the first time since they arrived. They stand in the kitchen, Liam washing the dishes and cutlery, and Zayn on drying and 'putting away' duty.

"When we get home can we go see the ducks?" Zayn asks as he's drying a plate. "Miss them."

Liam never fails to smile when he hears Zayn refer to home as home. When he thinks about it he had been so worried about Zayn after hearing what he thought of 'Liams place' before Liam told him he was home. No feeling can ever describe Zayn saying out loud that his home was also Liams. "Of course we can." Liam says, handing him a fork. "They'll be starving without our bread supply."

"I'm sure they are." Zayn laughs.

"Oh Zayn!" Liam suddenly says, drying his hand and reaching for the dial on the radio sat upon the windowsill in front of them. Troye Sivans 'Wild' blares through the speakers.

"Cause there's still too long to the weekend," Liam sings, stepping side to side and snapping his fingers, "too long till I drown in your hands"

Zayn wipes his hands down, going to Liam as he gestures him over, "Leave this blue neighbourhood," Zayn sings under his breath. Liam takes Zayns Left hand in his right, and carefully places his other hand on Zayns hip, Liam looks at him pointedly, silently asking if that was ok. Zayn hooked his free arm around Liams neck, singing, "Cause when you look like that,"

Liam joins him for the next lyric, the two harmonising "I've never wanted to be so bad, oh,"

From there they get lost in dancing - just spinning in aimless circles and laughing when they step on each others feet and mess up lyrics. The washing is long forgotten.

Towards the end of the song Doniya walks in.

"Like our dancing Doni?" Liam asks as Zayn twirls him around.
She wrinkles her nose, "You call that dancing?" She asks sarcastically and leaves, her reason for originally entering not followed through.

----

That evening is enjoyable to say the least. Safaa, upon Zayn's request, paints his nails for him and the whole family goes on an evening walk, bundled up in coats. When they get back Trisha asks Zayn to go up to her room. He follows her up the stairs and is presented with a wrapped gift.

"Mum, what is this?" He asks.

"It's for you of course, I got one for Liam jaan too, and in hindsight giving you these before the walk would've been a good idea but here we are now." She explains.

"Well... thank you." He says, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling at the paper. Inside is a red gilet.

"I know you're still getting cold and judging by all the football stories I've heard from you two it seems a bit inconvenient to play it in a coat." She justifies. "Also it's nice and comfy to wear around the house if you want."

"Mum... thank you." He says, hugging her tightly.

She returns it, rubbing his back thoroughly. "Oooohhh, I'm so proud of you darling." She says, not letting him go. "You've done so well, and been so brave, I'm so proud of you." She repeats, sounding a little teary towards the end.

"Mum..." Zayn trails off, a lump forming in his own throat. "Just... thank you."

"Now, I know you know this but you - and Liam - are always more than welcome here, and if you want to talk about anything both your father and I are happy for you to call, day or night. Don't forget that, ok?" She pulls back from the hug, giving him a pointed look.

"I understand mum, thank you." Zayn nods, his whole body moving up and down on the bed as he
does. "There is actually something I wanted to say."

His mum tilts her head to the side, inviting him to continue.

"Liam said he loved me, the other day." Zayn admits. He hadn't planned on talking to her about this, but it seems right to.

"Oh ok then, are you alright with that?" She asks, sounding a little confused.

"Well, I know its not the same and I should get over it but Nathan used to tell me he loved me," as he says the name he feels a wave of cold flow over him, and his mum's facial expression turns a little sour. "Like, he used it to justify a lot of what he did and - before I launch into a tangent I just feel scared the same will happen with Liam."

Trisha opens her mouth to speak but Zayn stops her.

"I know, it's not the same, I know Liam wouldn't do that to me, but I'm just so used to it and it feels a little off sometimes."

Trisha has a deep breath. "Well, have you spoken to Isabelle about it?" She asks.

"Not yet, no, but I plan to."

"Ok, and what about Liam?"

"I told him a more thought through version of what I told you."

"And what did he say?"

"He said-" Zayn has a deep breath. "He said that it was ok, that we were in different places and that was ok. He then said that he'd wait forever if he had to, it wasn't a long conversation. Just about that."
"Ok, and are you worried about it?" She asks, taking his colder hands in hers to warm them.

"Um, no-no I don't think so."

"Ok then, sonshine. And there isn't anything you should worry about. Do you want to talk further?"

"No- I mean, I'm not sure why I bought it up. Just felt like it." He says, gulping.

"I'm glad you did, and I'm happy for you." She says, smiling. Zayn returns it and they stand up together. He shrugs on his new gilet and presents it to Trisha, turning around so she can see the full thing before she asks him to fetch Liam from downstairs, but to not spoil the surprise by showing him his red one.

(And while Liam and Trisha are upstairs, Zayn ventures down into the kitchen on his own. Yaser is out hanging up the washing and his sisters are in their rooms working. He begins to start on dinner, measuring out ingredients into individual bowls and cups. He turns the radio up, listening to music from his phone through the bluetooth option. Before he knows it, he's swaying his hips to the music and singing along to the songs.

Unbeknownst to him, Liam and Trisha come downstairs after Trisha has presented Liam with his green gilet, intending to show it to Zayn and see his one too. When they hear noise form the kitchen they quieten down, and creep around the corner to investigate.

Sure, Zayn isn't belting out the lyrics to 'You Get What You Give', but he's singing.

Liam says it out loud; "He's singing." Happy tears pool in his eyes. He looks to Trisha to see the same with her. "He's singing." He says again, like he can't believe it. Trisha nods, mouth agape in joy and shock. Liam hooks an arm around her waist, pulling her close.

Liam has only ever wanted to see Zayn happy. Sure, Zayn has been happy before. But often in front of people, either as an act or as a product of amusement in that environment. When he's been alone, or having a bad day, that act falls and Liam wonders if Zayn knows that Liam has seen it.

But here, Zayn thinks he's not being watched. He's in his own little world, dancing around the
kitchen to music and singing along without a care in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Funny story, I accidentally wrote 'Beyonce' instead of Doniya once in this chapter. Do not know why but hey.

I'm going to reply to all your comments! Just I was busy finalising this chapter for ya'll but I've read every single one and THANK YOU SO MUCH!!!

Let me know of any mistakes!
Liam and Zayn's time at Bradford has been pleasant. Zayn finds it helpful to have experienced something so domestic and normal for his family. They still have another two days up here before Liam needs to start his course, and while Zayn loves it here he cannot wait to go back home and be with Roman, and all his books and art supplies. Speaking of, he had been up in the attic where all his old work had been sorted. He is so monumentally grateful to have not lost everything to Nathan. While his dad offers for him to take something down, after all, it is Zayn's work, he declines. He wants to work on new pieces that they might be able to hang up around their home.

Later on he finds himself spacing out, his brain begins to feel fluffy, like cotton balls are in it and he can't focus on anything - dipping in and out of reality for no particular reasons. It shows, with everybody having a chance at drawing him out, but even Liam can't. That afternoon Liam suggests they go upstairs for a bit of R&R before dinner, and Zayn doesn't protest. Too preoccupied with visions and memories swimming in his head.

He doesn't notice, but suddenly it just Liam and him in his old room. Liam helping Zayn out of his jumper and into a softer one, then out of his jeans and into sweatpants that tickle the hair on his leg in the nicest way. It grounds him for a moment.

"Sorry I'm like," Zayn has to pause to think. "Disassociated or somethin'. Like, I can't stop my brain from thinking of this one thing. Just- I'm trying, but it keeps coming back." As he says it he can feel his eyes glazing over. He tries to focus on everything that's not in his brain but the only sound bouncing around his heads are unanswered pleas and the chafing of metal on skin.

Liam thumbs his eyebrow. "Have you tried safespace?" He asks quietly, leading him to the bed and sitting him down.

"I can't get it out. It hurts." He grimaces. "Want it to stop, stop now."

As he says it Liam begins to curl him in closer. "I know, I know." Then he shuffles, pulling him so they sit up. Liam outstretches his legs and helps Zayn sit in his lap, then he wraps the duvet around their shoulders and pulls his so their foreheads touch. "Maybe play it out? Like, talk me through it if you can, if- if you want to that is."

Zayn nods, blinking slowly and sniffing. "I can't get it out. It hurts." He grimaces. "Want it to stop, stop now."

"And he always told me how it was because he di'nt want me to like- be greedy, or do anything"
without him around." Despite the covers he shakes. Liam rubs his arms through the material of his pyjama sleeves. "an-an' I never was, but he would never hear me out." He sniffs. His words slur together and limbs become number than they had been. Zayn wonders if that's him falling out of it or if it's a side effect of overthinking to the point you forget which room you're in.

"I'm not sure I understand." Liam says calmly, rubbing his upper arms. "What pinched?"

Zayn shudders. "This-this chastity device," he seethes. "This lock over my-my-" He grits his teeth and forces his brain to try and focus but it won't work.

Liam nods, like he understands. But he can't. He never will, so maybe he nods like he understands Zayn's hurting and he's willing to help him feel better. Zayn doesn't even know if Liam gets what he's specifically talking about, but his brain won't let him effectively communicate this.

Reality begins to blur as the scenes play in his head. He remembers falling to his knees, begging Nathan to not do it, how it hurt so much. Please please Nathan, I'll be good I promise. Nathan had simply stood over him, looking down as Zayn begged him to show him some mercy. Zayn knew Nathan lived for this, for the rush of power he experienced every time Zayn so willingly submitted to him, pleaded to him.

Nathan told him to change into some pants and Zayn practically flew to the drawers. Yanking on his boxers and then his one pair of non-soiled jeans. Then he returns to Nathans feet. So quick he doesn't process he's there until Nathan forces him to look up by a strong hand on his chin.

"Anything? But the device?" Nathan clarifies.

Zayn's aware of how dangerous that word is. 'Anything' can literally mean anything.

Tears pool in his eyes as he confirms "Please just not that." When in his head he's really asking 'Please be merciful'. As he says it the boxers chafe the rubbing on and around his penis. He thinks he may have an infection or reaction of sorts going on down there, but he's too scared to ask to go to a doctor and check it out.

The look Nathan gives him after that is almost feral. "Stand." He sneers. Zayn can't stop shaking as he does. He's surprised his knees don't collapse under him as he does

He is so afraid. He is so, so afraid.

Nathan moves away from Zayn, but he doesn't dare move. He trembles as Nathan disappears behind him and forces himself to still, he can hear the box open.

Fuck, the box, fucking fuck fuck.

Zayn has to clamp down on his lip so as not to whimper when he hears the jungle of chains and rustle of other objects drag around. Cold sweat breaks out over his skin and goosebumps ripple across his naked chest. Every hair stands up on its end and he can't stop shaking. He jumps as a chain is wrapped around his left thigh from behind. It begins in the middle and works its way up his
leg. Again, he daren't move. It then wraps around his waist – up the the belt loops of his jeans. Then, back down and around his crotch and down to his mid thigh again. But he knows better than to think it’s over until Nathan has walked out the door. The snip of a padlock sounds as Nathan secure the end of the length.

Don't think it's over, he reminds himself. It can't be over just yet.

And he's right. Nathan adds an assortment of some five additional locks around the chains. A focus around his crotch area.

"You're lucky I love you." He tells Zayn. "I should be doing so much worse." He says as he circles Zayn. Zayn thinks it resembles a hawk circling its prey. Nathan disappears back to the box. This time retrieving and fastening the collar around his neck. He always sets it just a little too tight, Zayn can never breathe easily with it on unless he stands absolutely still.

"Thank you." Zayn forces out when Nathan steps back. He knows better than to say more than that.

"Thank you what?" Nathan almost growls.

Zayn swallows painfully. "Thank you sir." He rasps.

"I should think so, and now I'm late for work, jesus fucking christ." Nathan swears as he collects his things off the bed. Zayn follows him to the front door, keeping his head down. Nathan stops before he leaves. "See this?" He asks, gesturing to his belt. Zayn nods a few times. "Expect it to be used on you when I'm home."

Zayns heart stops. "Yes sir." He grits out.

"Good boy, you're learning." Nathan steps out the front door and Zayn steps to the side so no one outside can see him. "I will be home around five thirty." With that the door is shut and Zayn is left alone and cold.

"I just, it hurt so much." Zayn nuzzles into his neck. "I didn't want to-" he gestures down to his genitals. "They were- It was... so chaffed and red cause it was always too small." He sniffs. "But I regretted it so much later on." He hides his face in his hands.

"Why?" Liam asks softly, hip lips grazing Zayns temple.

Zayn sniffs, his head continues to feel fuzzy. "I needed to go the bathroom, midday." He explains.

He had needed to go to the bathroom for almost an hour now, but he knew he couldn't. He sat at the kitchen counter, trying to stave it off for another few hours until Nathan got home but with the way his knee was tapping up and down like no tomorrow and how he had already had a few near misses
he knew it wasn't going to happen.

He had tried everything, expanding his stomach to relieve pressure, not running the tap, as it was he was tempted to palm over his crotch to find some form of relief but he knew it wouldn't work.

As a final resort he called Nathan. The phone was in their room so he sat in the bathroom as he made the call. Thumbing out one of the only contacts in his Nokia and pressing 'call'.

At first he didn't answer, and it went through to voicemail. Zayn shook, wanting to sob and pressed the device to his forehead. He knew better than to call a second time. The phone was for emergencies only - and Nathan had made that very clear. This was not an emergency and calling would only make it worse. But ten minutes passed and he was still on the bathroom floor, shaking and so fucking desperate he called again. This time he answered.

"What." Was his greeting. Not a kind 'hello' or 'are you alright?' Just 'what'.

"Nathan," Zayn's voice trembled. "Please I need to go use the bathroom, please, is there a spare key?"

Nathan huffs on the other end. "You chose this." He says. "You have to deal with it."

Zayn suppresses a sob. "Please sir I'm begging, what can I do to please you enough for the emergency key? After I'm finished I'll chain myself back up, please I promi-"

"-who the fuck do you think you are trying to negotiate with me?"

Zayn doesn't have to see his face to know how angry Nathan is now. His voice in itself was cold, unwavering, not even sounding angry but Zayn knew.

"Sir, I-I'm sorry." He apologises. "I won't do it again."

"Good. Now deal with you situation on your own. I'd like to think you have enough brain cells to know there is one key and you're not getting it. Now, I have to work."

With that Nathan hangs up and Zayn howls. He rocks back and forth - the chain digging into his screaming muscles and pulling at him. He uncurls himself and tries to yank at the chain, for some reason thinking he can shimmy it down or away somehow. Maybe he can undo the zipper and work that way.

"Allah," He says aloud. "Allah, if you exist please kill me." He begs. "Kill me now, I'm finished." His head falls as he begins to sob, unable to control the sounds escaping him. "Please let it end."
But Allah does not answer him. Allah is not real.

He knows it's too late. He crawls to the loo, lifting the seat and sitting down on it. His shoulder shake.

'Deal with it' Nathan had said. Zayn's body trembles as he finally relieves himself. A large, warm and wet patch appearing over the front of his jeans. After he's finished he doesn't move. He just sits there, empty of any energy. He chokes on a hacking sob, screaming into his fist, over and over.

"You're not real." He screams at the top of his lungs. He pushes his eyes into his fists. He always believe Allah would never give anyone more than they could handle, he would test them, yes, but never give them more than what they could do without some form of assistance or reassurance. He had broken, and Allah was not real. He stands up, feeling the now cold liquid run down his thighs and the cold air meet his crotch area.

He stares at himself in the mirror above the sink and screams.

"I blacked out from there." Zayn explains, shuddering. "All I remember after that is suddenly seeing all this blood on my arms and then I just got on with everything, I just remember being empty." He takes a heaving breath, tears welling and dripping down his face.

Liam holds him so close. Zayn can hear the beating of his heart, it's grounding, and real. He can focus on it, as opposed to the permanent marks etched into his skin.

Liam joins Zayn in crying. "Zayn, I want to take it all away, please let me know what I can do to take it all away."

Zayn shakes his head. "You can't, but this helps." He admits.

"Then I'll do it until you tell me to stop." Liam says, so genuinely Zayn is fully compelled to believe him.

"I feel so blessed to have you." Zayn says, teary. "I can't believe that you would want me. Even after that."

"Zayn I-" Liam has to think his words through. He means to say 'I love you' but now is not the time. "Zayn, I adore you. You mean everything to me in ways I cannot describe so please, never ever doubt that."

Zayn sniffs. "I won't."
Liam nods, he'll take that. "What do you want to do?"

Zayn pauses to think. He's warm, and comfortable, but he feels a chill from the cold sweat and tremors. "Can we, have a shower? And you like, wash my hair and stuff?" He asks. "Like, thinking about it makes me feel dirty and my skin is crawling and to be honest I feel a bit mortified."

"Why do you feel mortified?" Liam lifts Zayn's face so he can look into his eyes.

Zayn breathes heavily. "I-I'm a grown man and I wet myself." He says it like he's disgusted by the word.

"Zayn, gorgeous. Everyone needs to go the bathroom, I need to, you need to, the- the Queen needs to, ok? That's normal and you were restricted from going, and if you need reminding of that for any reason I will do it, day or night, kay?"

Zayn nods, sniffing. "Thank you." Although even to his own ears it sounds largely fake.

Liam kisses his forehead. "Anytime. Remember the chart you drew up with Isabelle? On self care?"

Zayn nods and sniffs at the same time, wiping his nose with the back of his hand again.

"On there you wrote time, and patience, and all these wonderful things. Don't forget that you need them. Take time to move through things, let yourself recover before you judge yourself. Because I can't stand to hear you talk so negatively about yourself."

Zayn sniffs, nodding. "Ok." His voice sounds clogged and rough. "I'll try."

Liam kisses the space between his eyes. "That's all I could ever ask of you."

---

ring ring, ring ring

"Hello, Isabelle Dooley speaking."

"Hi Isabelle, Liam here."
"Oh, sorry Liam I didn't look at the caller before picking up."

"No worries, look, I can't talk long but I wanted to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Ok, so, yesterday Zayn started zoning out and was reliving some harmful memories big time, and we talked through it but it took him a really long time to get over it and focus on anything so I wanted to ask if there's anything we can do to help him with that."

"Well for starters thanks for letting me know that, I'll keep it in mind for future sessions but in the meantime we need to find something that will ground him. For now I think he finds you stable but he can't always have you around. He's mentioned it before but didn't admit it was enough to space out like that."

"OK so if he spaces out again, quiet place and give him a cuddle."

Isabelle huffs out a laugh, "you simplify it but yes in a nutshell that would probably be the most effective. If you get him to call me later, around six he and I can talk out what was bothering him yesterday for a bit. But only if he wants to."

"Thanks Isabelle, I'll tell him you offered."

"Great Liam, thanks for calling."

----

Zayn does eventually call Isabelle back and spends half an hour after dinner talking through his thoughts. It's interesting, the difference in experience while having a session over the phone, although he can't quite pinpoint it. The results are however similar as always, and Zayn rests easy that night.

The next morning Zayn is up early with his mum and they make breakfast for everyone together. It is amusing when Liam comes thudding down the stairs halfway through their time in the kitchen because he hadn't seen Zayn leave bed and got worried.

"Jaan, I am fine, go back to bed for a bit." Zayn laughs.
Liam pouts, "but I'm awake now."

Zayn rolls his eyes fondly. "Ok, well sit down or something, ma and I are making pancakes."

"I can see," Liams eyes twinkle. "I'll go grab a shower, be back soon."

When he's gone, Trisha asks "Jaan?"

Zayn smiles timidly. "Yeah, just slipped out."

Trisha doesn't say anything in response. Just smiles again. Then, "would you like to go out later?"

Zayn nods, "yeah sounds nice, what did you have in mind?"

"Oh just the blackberry woods, go for a walk."

Zayn smiles, "sounds epic."

"Can-can I drive?" Zayn asks hesitantly. Both Trisha and Liam freeze, slightly shocked. But Zayn doesn't appear to have said it as a joke.

"Trisha is the first to respond. "Of course sweetheart."

Zayn smiles as Liam hands him the keys. He feels proud of himself, and when they reach their destination he genuinely believes that there are a lot of people out there who are proud of him.

Zayn can feel his eyes closing against his will more often now. His feet begin to drag along the
ground. They had just finished their walk through the woods, everything so beautiful and peaceful sometimes Zayn has a hard time believing it’s real. While he had been ecstatic to drive everyone here he’s going to be too tired to make the return trip.

“Leeyum,” he says quietly, “I’m really tired.”

Liam squeezes the arm around him. “I know, not far until we’re back.”

Zayn nods tiredly, only tuning into what his mum is chatting about for half a minute before everything in his body is pulling on him, dragging him into dreamland.

He barely notices they’ve arrived home and, frustratingly, seems to wake up a little more after they cross the threshold. Liam places a hand on the small of his back and guides him to the sofa. “Jus’ so tired.” Zayn mumbles. “Dunno why.”

Liam kisses his forehead as he lies down on the couch. “We haven’t had lunch yet, which is much later than normal for us. It’s probably your energy levels dropping because of it.” Liam picks up a blanket off the back of the sofa and Zayn pushes his head into the cushions. “I’m quite tired too, not surprised that you are as well.”

Zayn hums, “You should rest too then.”

Liam smiles, fondly. “I’ll quickly help your dad with lunch then after we eat we can lie down for a bit.”

Zayn hums again, “sounds good.”

Liam, although Zayn can’t see it since he’s shut his eyes, smiles. Then he kisses Zayns forehead and he melts under the pleasant pressure. “I’ll come get you in a bit.” Liam promises, and leaves.

Zayns already half asleep.
The next afternoon he and Wali wind up watching re-runs of the Big Bang Theory. His mum and dad out to pick up the other two and Liam upstairs with a call to the leisure centre.

"So why have you not sent me snapchats of Roman everyday?" Wali asks as she browses her phone. "Honestly it's almost offensive."

Zayn laughs. "I dunno, havent downloaded it again."

Wali rolls her eyes and holds out her hand. "Give it here." He does as he's told and hands her the mobile device.

"How did you know my old password?" He asks, confused as she downloads the app and enters in his old username.

"Um, because you have the same password for everything?"

Zayn moulds his face into being offended. "I do not!"

"'Red Power Ranger' All one word?" She asks, and his face heats up. Wali snickers. "Knew it." Zayn is a little speechless as she hands him back the phone. "C'mon we gotta start a streak so I can see my precious kitten everyday."

Zayn laughs. "You mean my kitten?"

Wali smiles. "yeah ok, mostly yours."

Zayn shakes his head in disbelief.

"You look a lot better, a lot healthier." Wali says out of the blue.
Zayn reminds himself to take a moment and breathe, looking down he thinks over what Liam and Isabelle have helped him with so far. He gets that he doesn't see himself right but he finds it hard to link how he feels to healthy every day.

"Thanks Wali." He says sincerely. They share a moment. Only interrupted by the hysteria that comes through the front door when the rest of his family arrives home.

Zayn's so relieved that he's been well enough, for the most part of this trip, that no plans have had to change. When his parents came down last time and he had been so unmotivated to do anything he felt guilty and upset with himself for not utilising the opportunity in front of him. This visit to Bradford had been different, and as he packs up he wishes they had another few days. Something amuses him in the knowledge that if they had he might have ended up taking out the bins.

Since Safaa has school up first and Doni and Wali have sixth form and uni commitments later they say their goodbyes early. It's also a long trip down and Liam wants to ensure they have enough time to make it back, including rest stops, before lunch. Hence, they leave at the same time as school starts. That is at least the plan. It's somewhat delayed by the fact that they spend the better part of half an hour to say goodbye and make it from the front door and to the car.

The biggest hug Zayn receives is from his dad, who loosens up a little after his mum makes an unsatisfied noise, as if to warn Yaser he'd crush Zayn. It's there that Zayn vows that should never happen again.

But when they do leave (eventually), Zayn thinks that there's so much more to come.
It's A Start

Chapter Notes

low key chapter title is for me not the actual fic bc i have reasons for not updating (see end chapter notes) and i wanted this update to be significantly longer but hey, it's a start after all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s nothing personal to Zayn, and it's not that he's worried about the pay with Liam's new job.

It’s just that he needs to feel useful.

He feels it's almost a physical need. It's something he was denied, cut off from before. He wants to do something that resembles normalcy. Something outside of himself that can physically be put towards his and Liam's life together. More than his new escapades in gardening, decorating the house through art, and cooking on occasion. Something everyday people do. Something... Completely independent. Not to mention, Liam's hours are all over the place now with his new job, which, by the way took off as soon as he started. Previous classmates and friends of Liam's had signed up for classes almost immediately and the gym had been so impressed that new classes had been added to the timetable.

It goes like this;

Zayn's been considering it for a while, getting a job that is, and there's really only one place he can think of that he'd like to work. He still has the flyer with information about that job in the book shop he picked up last month. Really, it's high time he called. So when he does, one day when Liam's at
work and he's out in the small garden clearing up what he has now declared his bit of gardening space, and gets through to the lady on the other end in only a few seconds, he has to steel himself to ask if the job is still available and if so, if he might be given the opportunity to put in a few hours a week.

This lady, who he finds out is called Jess says she'd love the help, and if a Tuesday afternoon and a Thursday morning might be open to him she had some availability. It was surprising, to say the least, that he could get it with such little effort or information on his part. He thanks her profusely, saying how much he appreciates the chance and when he might be able to start. And that's how he gets an induction shift for next Tuesday afternoon.

Liam's jaw practically drops when he shyly tells him what he's done. The two of them facing each other in the highest bubble bath Zayns ever been in, knees breaching the surface, with a tea for each on the side bar.

"You-you're not worried about anything? Are you?" Liam asks. "Like Zayn this-this is awesome don't get me wrong but I-I just need to-want to check?"

Zayn smiles, sipping the brew. "No, just really wanted to do something outside just me you know? I know that you're more than happy to just accomodate me and let me live here without paying any rent or contributing beyond general jobs and that, but just wanted something to like, get me out the house weekly and to put something monetary to our life." Liam remains quiet so Zayn rushes to continue with "I- I love life right now Liam, but I feel like I need to do something else that's normal for everybody else to get any better, I love the boys coming around and you letting me work at my own pace but I'm a big boy, I can do this."
Liam again doesn’t say anything. Instead, after a short pause, moves slowly through the water, leaning over Zayn to kiss his forehead. "If this is what you want-" Liam kisses his forehead again, "and it makes you happy," he kisses him again. "Then I have absolutely nothing against it." Zayn, whose eyes closed during the attention open again, and bore into Liams. Liam, who looks nothing short of proud, and happy, and ecstatic.

Zayn's suddenly short of breath, realising how much he wants Liam to kiss him lower down his face, perhaps his lips. He thinks Liam catches him staring at his mouth but he doesn't say anything. Liam keeps smiling as before, kissing his forehead one more time before moving back. "Well," Liam breaths out, reaching for his mug, "I think this deserves a toast, hey?"

Zayn grins wholeheartedly, raising his mug to clink them together.

---------

“I think I want to dye my hair.” Zayn says as he walks into the living room on a gloomy Saturday afternoon.

He's been working at the bookshop for two weeks now, every shift going brilliantly. He only has four hours on a Tuesday morning and five on a Thursday, as another girl who works there can take over his shift for the last two hours after uni and he only works to lunch on a Thursday. He can’t believe how lucky he was, finding not only a kind employer as nice as Jess who understands his situation entirely, and is more than welcoming to his mental illness. As it turns out her daughter is currently suffering PTSD, and has a similar job nearer to where her and her husband live. Liam, who picked him up from his first shift and Jess wanted to chat to, also appreciated how she agreed to make sure he kept up drinking and having a snack halfway through his shift.
Liam is on his laptop, typing up a schedule for the upcoming month of gym classes and Niall is reading off his phone. When Zayn makes his announcement immediately looks up from where he’s sat on the sofa, “Yeah?” Niall does the same.

“Yeah.” He pushes his hand through the black locks.

“What colour?”

Zayn shrugs, “I dunno, haven’t really got that far,” he chuckles a little, “but I’m thinking maybe purple would be a cool colour? Or silver? I’m not sure, what do you think?”

“I think,” Liam treads, “that if you want to do it and it’ll make you happy then you do it.” He says honestly, “However, maybe it’s a good idea to do temporary first and then if you find out you don’t like it it’ll come out within a few weeks.”

"Yeah, first time ye do it it's good to just check it'll work and ye like it." Niall adds helpfully. "What about green 'doh?"

Zayn ponders it, smirking, "Green," he thinks out loud, wondering if it's just a way to release how
happy he's feeling inside. He swears it's because he just likes to see Liam smile. "I like it."


Later that night Liam leaves for the late afternoon and evening classes, he comes back to find Zayn sat at the table in the kitchen, eating a toasted hot cross bun with Niall. He looks beyond chuffed with himself.

"Oi Liam, do'sn't it look good?" Niall greets him.

Liam drops his bag at the door, taking in how the ends of Zayn's freshly trimmed hair is now green. "Bro," he smiles, "looks sick!"

Zayn beams back, eyes scrunching up in pride. "Shoulda seen us trying to find the right one Li, and then navigating the bathroom to get it done right." He bites into the bun. "We took some selfies." Something else Liam takes the time to notice is that he's actually wearing an old ring of his, his earrings and a necklace. He looks good. Healthy.

As he says it Nial is opening Zayns phone - which has yet to have a passcode - and flipping it to show Liam. He laughs outright, arching back with the back of his hand over his mouth at the photos of serious faces Niall and Zayn make in the mirror, and then silly ones. "Mate, Insta worthy." He
laughs, now moving to fill a glass with water, but not before he offers a drink to the others.

"Maybe I need to make one." Zayn says.

"Bro, we can do it now." Niall says, already on the app store. Within minutes Zayn has a new Instagram and posted his first photo, tagging Niall. They go through and follow all the boys, it only takes about thirty seconds for Louis to follow him back and comment multiple 100 emojis.

Liam is reminded how when Zayn had come back from his first shift at the store he had been beyond worried, instead of letting Zayn just take the bus there and back like he had been planning too Liam had absolutely insisted on dropping him off and picking him up - if just for his first shift so it wasn’t too overwhelming. He’d initially been worried he’d overstepped his mark and made Zayn uncomfortable. Instead he had been amused, and humoured Liam by letting him do as he wanted.

Now, though, seeing Zayn with green hair, a job, a social media page… Liam’s really not too concerned.

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L I A M

It's not that he spoke too soon. It's just that he should have been expecting one of these days to come up sooner or later, because they happen to everyone. Not just Zayn. But the fact remains that Zayn
does not want to get up this morning. Liam asks if he slept well and how he doing, but doesn’t get many answers. Ironically, it tells him all he needs to know.

Luckily it's the morning Liam's got off, before the two of them drive to the fitness centre for Zayn's yoga class and Liam’s lesson set at 12. It works very well for them, because all Zayn needs to do is just sit in the gym while Liam teaches until 3 and read or draw, or even occasionally text his sisters.

They lay in bed for an extra hour, Liam wishes the gentle caress of his hands could alleviate the heaviness, and he knows in part that it does, but it's not enough. Liam also makes a point of reminding Zayn that he loves him.

"Please no." Zayn moans when Liam makes to leave.

"C'mon babe, gotta start today somehow." He presses, flipping the covers back to expose the pyjamas Zayn's wearing, he's trialling a new short sleeved set which shows off his arms.

Zayn doesn't respond, and that tells Liam all he needs to know. He gets up, leaving Zayn for the bathroom where he brushes his teeth quickly and begins to run the shower. He retrieves their boardies and returns to the bedroom. "C'mon darling, the shower will help."

Zayn, who hasn't moved since Liam left, whimpers. Mostly out of frustration. Liam leaves his
boardies behind and returns to the en suite to change and give Zayn some privacy. He waits in there for just over 5 minutes, because he knows Zayn needs the time. He knocks before re-entering and sees Zayn sat on the edge of the bed, slumped over, changed into boardies but not out of his shirt, and unmoving. He walks over calmly, "oh babe, I know it's tough but you've got through this before, remember?" He palms Zayn's upper arms. "In fact you've been through worse, you know deep down you can make it through this morning if nothing else."

Zayn looks up at him, over his brows and through the green and black locks of hair. He nods, "yeah," he says quietly. "Just give me a minute."

"A thousand, for you," Liam whispers. Not bother too much to wonder if it's contradictory of him to say that.

Z A Y N

The idea of moving makes him feel sick.

It's not that Zayn's unwell, physically at least. Just the bone crushing dread of doing anything today, whether it be talking, eating or any form of socialising is just too much for him to bear. He can feel Liam's body pressed up behind him flush against his back and that provides him with some comfort. However, once the aforementioned body moves away from him to press the button on the alarm clock it's as if any resolve and strength he has for the day dissolves.

"Good morning gorgeous." He hears Liam's sleep rough voice sound behind him. "Sleep well?"
Zayn thinks he may respond but then it occurs to him that several minutes have passed. He doesn't move or respond in anyway. Not because he means to, but because he doesn't have the will too.

"Zayn?" Liam asks. Trailing a hand up and down his upper arm. "Zayn baby?"

He somehow finds it in him to hum a response.

"Is today proving difficult so far?" Liam asks quietly, pressing a kiss to the back of his head and wrapping him up tight in his arms.

Zayn nods once, then twice to answer.

"Ok then, we can take it slower today." Liam hushes.

Zayn curls up even more, he thinks the shame must radiates off of him in waves.

“Hey,” Liam says calmly, running his finger through Zayns hair to push the hair off his forehead. “I love you.”

Zayn feels himself being to loosen up.

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L I A M

On Liam’s first day Zayn and Harry drive him to work and walk him in the door. It’s an overcast Tuesday, As per Liam’s timetable it will work out Tuesday morning through to afternoon, Wednesday morning and Thursday morning and early afternoon, then Friday early morning. While Liam recognises it’s rather erratic he loves it, much better than what he’s used to.
“Well,” Liam adjusts the strap of his duffel bag. “Wish me luck!”

Zayn smirks, “Oh you’ll be fine,” and steps in to hug him. “You know what you’re doing, just be you.”

“Look at you,” Liam grins before pulling away and hugging Harry, who has thus far been quiet. “Always so good to me.”

Zayn doesn’t say anything, just leans into Harry as Liam waves them goodbye. “See you later!” He calls, Zayn and Harry wave back.

“We’ll be back to pick you up at five!” Harry calls.

Liam gives them a thumbs up and pushes through the double set of doors into the gymnasium behind him.
Zayn stands in the doorway to the living room. Liam won’t let him go upstairs alone in this state so he’s had to use the downstairs restroom which is next door to where Liams sat. His arms are crossed over his chest and gripping at his biceps so tight the skin on his knuckles turns white. He’s shivering, badly. Enough that after a few seconds his teeth begin to chatter.

Liam immediately rushes to stand in front of him, and cradle his face. Laptop abandoned on the kitchen work surface. "Hey, baby, what's going on?" A first Zayn doesn't answer, just continues to curl into himself.

"Cold." Zayn shudders. "Jus' feel cold.” His forehead falls into Liams chest and Liam moves them to the sofa, pushing Zayns shoulders gently to coax him into the seat and wraps the blanket on the back of the sofa around him.

“This helping?” Liam asks as he reaches for a second one. Zayn shakes his head.

“One second gorgeous.” He asks of Zayn, rushing to the kitchen and making two tall mugs of hot chocolate. He returns swiftly, making sure to not spill anything. “Here,” he offers Zayn the mug. He pale, red hands grasp the mug without much difficulty, which Liam is very grateful for. Liam puts his down on the table beside the sofa and rearranges themselves so he’s sat behind Zayn, the blanket now tucked around the front of Zayns core and under his arms down to cover their legs. He then reaches for the second blanket, momentarily throwing it over Zayns legs while he retrieves Zayns ugg boots. They recently got a portable heater so he switches it on to fill up the room - it had been getting on the cooler side of things anyway.

"Come on, chill for me, yeah?” He says, sitting next to Zayn and pulling him into his side, Zayn nestles himself in, and Liam adjusts the blanket around his legs to be comfortable. The chattering stops but the shivering persists. Liam rubs his hands over Zayns upper arms. "Shhhh, shhh, shhhhh," He hushes. Liam plays with Zayns hair, because he knows how much that relaxes him, and eventually it subsides. Roman joins them, indignant to have been left out of the cuddle but is pacified when she curls into Zayn and begins purring.

Yeah. He can make it through today.
The thing is, right - not that it’s a huge thing…But it is his birthday tomorrow. Sure, it’s been mentioned in passing and his mum called to ask what he wanted and what they have planned.

It’s also not like he expects anything, but it is still an occasion.

Again, however, with the shit-show that has been the last year Liam is hardly surprised anyone has time to do anything. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t sting when the boys come over the night before and haven’t said anything. Even worse, he’s worried Zayn’s condition won’t let up before tomorrow, and he can’t ask Zayn to do anything in that state - it’s just not fair.

He’s a big boy though, so he brushes it off, wakes up like it’s any normal day - which it is, and gets ready for work. It’s his early morning classes, so Zayn remains dead to the world as he climbs out from between the sheets. As he goes Zayn mumbles in his sleep - Liam freezes - but then he goes back to how he was before. Liam laughs at himself, wondering if he’ll ever be smooth getting out of bed ever. It’s a grind, but it’s also nearly the weekend - so he can make do.

He slips into the clothes he set out the night before and leaves the room. The clock reads 5:24am. Just before he goes though, he quickly looks over to Zayns sleeping form. His back is to him, so all he sees is a bundle of hair and a lumpy figure under covers, but it makes him smile anyway - even in his sleep Zayn is adorable. Quickly, and on a whim, he grabs Grapes from the bedside table and pushes it into Zayns open hands, fingers twitch and curl around it somewhat as he tucks the sheets around him and leaves. Ready to embrace the cold air outside as he starts the car and drives to the centre, his breath fogging up even when the heaters been on for a few minutes.

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Given there had been no indication of any plans, Liam’s pretty surprised when he leaves the centre and see’s Harry and Zayn standing out front. Zayn has his arms crossed over his chest, wrapped up in warm - surprisingly smart clothing. His smarter pair of jeans along with the new dress shoes Zayns parents got for his birthday, and Harry has a dress shirt with slacks on and a backpack over one shoulder.
He crosses the car park, genuinely happy to see them “Liam!” Harry waves as he approaches.

“Hey guys!” He calls back! Zayn doesn’t say anything, and as Liam gets closer he can see just how hard he’s trying to smile back. Firstly, he embraces the two of them for several moments, then Harry moves away and he sinks into Zayn. Another moment later he pulls away, kissing Zayns forehead. “What are you doing here?” He asks.

“Well, it is a certain someones birthday, see.” Harry explains. “And we may or may not have a surprise for the birthday boy.” He hints.

Liam looks between the two of them, “Really?”

“Yes,” Harry rocks back and forth on his feet. “And it may or may not require said birthday boy to let us hijack his car since we bussed it here and drive him somewhere.

Liam laughs, hooking an arm around Zayn, “Really?” He repeats.

“Really really.” Harry confirms as they start walking. “You’ll also need to get changed but we can do that when we get there.”

“Awesome! Thank you guys! Glad I just had a shower now!”

Zayn still hasn’t said anything, and doesn’t even as they climb into the back seats of the car, Harry taking the wheel, the backpack in the passenger.

Liam really doesn't know what to say as they pull up next to the arena, large play and concert posters adorning the outside walls and advertising stations.
“Here we are,” Harry says as he parks, grunting as he pulls up the hand brake. They get out the car, Harry hands him the bag and Liam quickly changes behind the car. When he emerges, in a light blue shirt, his blue blazer and black slacks. He shoves his clothes unceremoniously back into the bag and the back seat before he comes around the front. He goes straight to Zayn, slinging his arm around him again.

“I chose that outfit.” Zayn says quietly.

“You did?” Liam asks as they start walking to the arena.

“Yeah - before we left. Harry came over before I woke up.”

They don't talk until they meet Louis and Niall inside. “Guys!” Liam laughs, shocked to see them here - he thought everyone was working today.

“Leemo!” Louis shouts - inappropriately loud for this setting. “Happy Birthday you goof!” He hugs them both.

“So what are we doing here?” Liam caves in to ask.

“Well, it's been noted that you may or may not have been wanting to see WICKED for a while.” Harry hints.

“You're joking! Guys, thank you!”

“Really, ’t was Zee’s idea here.” Niall says, “Now c’mon we have popcorn to buy.” He’s off before the rest, getting them a good spot in line.

“Guys thanks so much,” Liam repeats. “Really this is awesome.”

(Zayn eats everything Liam was hoping for, and yeah, Liam knows Zayn isn’t on top of the world, but being with them - the boys and Zayn? This is all he could ever ask for.”
After the show Louis announces they’re going out for a late lunch. As soon as he’s said it Liam looks to see how Zayn reacts to the news. Either he knew about it already or isn’t too phased because he only smiles back at Liam and tucks his head into his shoulder.

(Liam thinks Zayn has to know by now how special that makes him feel).

“Thanks guys, really, you didn’t have to.”

“Oh yes we did!” Niall retorts, already opening the car door to climb in. “You two in with us, Louis can take the other car.”

“Why?” Liam questions. “Like yeah the car has to be moved but why just Louis?” He’s more bemused and suspicious. He went to uni with these guys after all.

Zayn giggles, and Liam feels like he’s flying. “Well he’s leaving now so…” As Zayn begins to talk the obnoxious sound of a horn and too loud music blares though the open window of Louis’ car. He whips out of the carpark and is on the road to wherever he’s going. It’s then that Liam decides to just go with the flow. Whatever hideous, humiliating, good-natured torture Louis has planned. It’s so on.

“You ok with this?” Liam asks quietly once they’re in the backseat of the car and on there way to wherever.

Zayn gives him a small smile which doesn't quite reach his eyes. It's how Liam knows he’s feeling uneasy. “Of course,” Zayn says. “It’s going to be nice.”

Liam reaches over to thumb over his knuckles, the bickering Harry and Niall in the front seat over what music to listen to drowning out the rest of the conversation. Liam looks out the window, noticing they're heading towards the coast. They don’t usually go over that way, so he’s keen to find out what place they’re eating at.
Twenty minutes of indie/rap filled music later they pull into the secluded car park of somewhere called the ‘Harboured Hotel’. He’s heard of it before, but can’t quite place how.

“You gotta put this on.” Niall tells Liam, throwing some scrap of fabric at him. Liam stares at it incredulously. “Sorry?”

“It’s a blindfold. Put it on.” Harry clarifies. But really, Liam’s just as perplexed. He looks over to Zayn for confirmation who just looks amused, so when he’s out the car he does as he’s told. He can hear Zayn giggle again and he thinks that if Zayn is amused by this then it’ll be well worth it no matter what it is. He feels slim hands on his shoulders - not Zayn’s, Niall’s, and they steer him into the great unknown.

“OK watch out for the stairs here Liam.” Harry warns him, grabbing a hold of his arm to guide him as he fumbles in the darkness.

“Alright you ready?” Harry asks when they stop.

He shrugs his shoulders “yeah, sure.”

The blindfold falls form his eyes and in front of him is a table with a cake on it, Louis standing behind it with a lighter. His arms outstretched he yells “Happy Birthday!”

Liam laughs, turning to his side face the others to say thank you when suddenly a million and one bang’s go off at once. He jumps, yelping “shit” and laughs when the entire of his family and some other friends of his are standing behind them shouting “Happy Birthday!” Equally as loud.

The boys all look like they’re going to wet themselves. “Your face!” Niall just about chokes out. It’s ok though, because they’re laughing with him; not at him. Liam goes around, hugging his parents and sisters, saying thank you to everyone in attendance. He’s in awe, he had no idea that this was how his birthday would end up. He looks around for Zayn, spotting him almost immediately since he hasn’t moved from his first spot and strides over to him. His hands are stuffed in his pockets and looks a bit perkier than earlier.

“Do you like it?” He asks.

“I love it.” He replies quietly, everyone else lulling their conversation into background noise, “did
you do anything to organise it?”

Zayn looks at his feet sheepish. “I had the idea.”

Liam’s blown away at that. Suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. “I love you.” He says quietly. “I hope it’s ok to say that.”

Zayn beams “of course it is,” taking his hands out of his pockets and wrapping them around Liam. “Happy Birthday.” He says into his shoulder.

“Thank you,” Liam says again. And as he begins to repeat, “I love you,” the sound of his friends and family starting to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ drowns him out.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, just wanted to apologise for the delay in updating. I’ve not given up on this fic but I was temporarily abducted by another fandom and have been overwhelmed with uni and training.

A brief run down of what else has happened since I last saw ya’ll:
- I became injured and went through a very depressed episode
- Uncle had a brain aneurism
- Started university
- Writers block
- Temporary transfer of fandoms and disinterest in this as a result of normal life
- Several jobs and travel issues
- Actual plot lines

Lol

Anyway, hope you like! Please comment any thoughts or suggestions! I go on break next week and am looking to finish up a lot of the little bits I haven’t done and post a few chapters at once!
L I A M

It’s been a week since Liam’s birthday and he’s beginning to realise just how much he loves life. His position as an instructor at the gym has proven to be a massive relief, because he’s actually doing something he loves over what he needed to.

He doesn’t regret working at the firm. It was necessary at the time, especially when Zayn was so vulnerable and unwell, and it gave him experience in how not to live his life. Which is just as valuable as the alternative to Liam. Zayn is thriving off his part-time job, and while he struggled through some his bad days last week they weren't nearly as bad as they used to be. Liam feels like he’s glowing, rather than - not that he would ever want to admit this - surviving.

“I got you something else.” Zayn admitted quietly when they returned from the Harboured Hotel, the boys downstairs preparing a movie marathon while Zayn said he needed some alone time with him.

“Zayn, you didn’t have to.” Liam protested lightly. Beaming as Zayn hands him the ‘Incredible Hulk’ covered package. It's flat and rectangular, but thin. He kisses his forehead lightly, not missing how Zayn can't stop smiling when he does and sits on the edge of the bed.

“Technically I didn't have to spend much so really, it wasn't that I ‘got’ you anything.” Zayn clarifies, shifting to sit on his hands as Liam carefully unwraps his gift.

“It’s a drawing of him holding Roman. Roman fitting in his hands and squished up to his cheek, his hair has different coloured streaks through it, something he never would have expected to work but it does so well. “I love it.” Liam says. “I’m in actual love with it,” he stands up, carefully putting the frame to his side on the bed and embracing Zayn. He kisses Zayn's temple, Zayn himself flails a little, it’s like Zayn wasn't expecting the hug and was knocked a little off balance. But he corrects himself.
and returns is, nosing into the junction of Liam's neck and shoulder. “Thank you.” He gushes some more, completely overwhelmed for the second time that day. Liam’s heart keeps beating so fast, and he feels so alive around Zayn, and now this gift is just everything to him.

“It took a while, and we had to keep hiding it from you.” Zayn remarks, squeezing Liam harder.

Liam snorts.

When they finally resume the activities downstairs Louis has an announcement; “We’ve replaced you.” He says. “Roman is cooler than you guys anyway.”

Liam snorts and Zayn rolls his eyes. “Whatever you say Lewis.”

Louis squawks, indignant, and cuddles Roman closer. But she’s had enough and gracefully jumps out of his hold and plods over to Zayn.

“You were saying?” Zayn offers, smug.

The man and kitten in question are currently sat next to each other as Zayn sketches in the living room. Liam’s just come back from early morning classes at the gym and a quick swim in the centre’s pool. A routine he’s begun to develop includes him coming home, flicking on the kettle to make a tea. He calls to to Zayn, asking if he wants one and Zayn responds ‘Yes please!’ Liam thinks Zayn loves it just as much as he does. He’s humming along to some song on the radio, adding in the sweetener to both their teas when a pair of arms wrap around him. Liam’s first instincts have now developed to assume something may be wrong when that happens, but as he tries to turn around Zayn rests his chin on his shoulder, and he realises Zayn was only coming in because he wanted to. “G’morning.” He says, tapping the teaspoon against Zayn mug and leaving it in there before passing it around.

“Thanks,” Zayn mutters.

“What are you drawing?” Liam asks, picking his up by the handle as Zayn encompasses his ceramic with both hands.
“Nothing interesting, just a person.” Zayn says. Liam hums, he knows sometimes Zayn used to just draw a person with no real direction or particular features. Usually women with long hair, and then turns it into something more unique later down the track.

“Tea tastes much better with a bit of sweetener in it.” Zayn remarks, leaning against the counter. His hair is still green, it creates a fun green hue around him when he stands in just the right lighting.

“I so agree.” Liam sips at his drink. “Glad you feel confident enough to have it with sweetener in it now.”

Zayn smiles back at him, and sips again. “I don't think I’d mind having actual sugar now.”

“Yeah?” Liam asks.

“Yeah… but like, start off raw?”

Liam shrugs. “I only ever have raw anyway, lower GI.”

Zayn chuckles to himself. “Health freak.” He teases.

Liam laughs. Sipping again. “Any plans for today?” He likes to ask because he never wants to assume how Zayn is feeling.

“No, but I did actually have an idea.”

“Oh?” Liam cocks his head. “I'm listening.” Sipping his beverage.

“Well…” Zayn drags out the ‘l’, “I was thinking I got my first paycheque yesterday, and now that I’m, ya’know, totally loaded, that I should take you out to lunch.”

Liams eyebrows skyrocket. “Really?” He had not seen that coming. Zayn, going out for lunch, and
spending money has rarely been in the same sentence together. “When?”

Zayn keeps smiling, and it reaches his eyes. “We could go today?” He offers.

Liam sips his drink again, liking it at such a hot temperature. “Are you sure?” He has to ask.

“Yes!” Zayn laughs, nodding his head. He swaps both hands on his mug for just one and crosses the other over his body. “I want to.”

“Ok,” Liam can feel his eyes crinkling, and he repeats; “Ok.”

Zayn downs the rest of his mug like a shot and puts it in the open dishwasher. “I’ll just go get dressed.” He says.

Liam finishes his mug then too and says, “and I’ll grab a quick shower.”

Liam, has never, not even before Nathan, seen Zayn once run up the stairs he’s so excited for something.

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Something else that really come to fruition in the last week was the status of Zayn’s bank account.

Zayn’s card had conveniently gone ‘missing’ not long before the ‘bath’ incident. At the time Zayn found it odd that Nathan was always onto him for using his own money, and having his own card. Furthermore, Nathan proclaimed himself the ‘income’ of their relationship, and didn't like that Zayn relied on his own money when he could just use Nathans. Especially when Zayn struggled from time to time like any uni student would. In hindsight, Zayn knew then and definitely knows now that Nathan must have cut them or disposed of them somehow.

Then again, during his time in their ‘relationship’ Nathan must have either forgotten about his
money or underestimated how much there was in it. Both Liam and Zayn had looked into opening Zayn a new bank account for his job, when Zayn thought if his old one was still active, and a quick call to his parents dug up the few bits of information he had forgotten. He was pleasantly surprised to see that he had more than he remembered in there and had amassed a small fortune in interest. At least in his eyes it was a small fortune.

Zayn’s jaw dropped, suddenly struck by the notion that he hadn’t been so financially stranded as he once thought when he was with Nathan, and that he had money that was his before he’d even started his new job.

“I-I can’t believe it.” Zayn had repeated, mantra-like and in a daze. “I had no idea.” Liam pulls him in for a side hug, rubbing his bicep and pressing a kiss to his hair.

They hold hands as they walk from home to the small cafe/lunch shop not far from where they live. It’s a good chat, debating on whether they should go see ‘Solo’ before ‘Deadpool 2’ or vice versa. Liam laughs at one point, saying maybe they should go see both back to back.

“I mean, Solo looks good but Deadpool is a whole new level.” Zayn argues.

“Can’t deny that bebz,” Liam answers as they approach the quaint luncheon. “Looks like we have a decision?” He asks as he opens the door for Zayn.

Zayns face flushes as grins, hiding his face in his scarf and mumbles a small ‘thank you’. It’s a quiet enough day that they’re allowed to choose their spot. Like normal they head to the corner table. It’s circular, with a wicked chair opposite a fabric booth. Zayn takes the booth and Liam takes the chair.

“When would you want to see it then?” Zayn asks.

Liam shrugs, “as soon as possible.” At that moment a waiter approaches, handing them the menu and offering them current specials or if they may be ready to order drinks. Liam asks for a cappuccino and Zayn requests a hot chocolate, and both thank the waiter as he leaves.

From there the conversation dwindles out, they choose their food, and order it when their beverages arrive. Liam though is almost too distracted seeing Zayn so happy. He watches him bubble in
excitement, his knee bouncing like Roman on catnip. His nervous, excited and energetic smile cutting through any doubt Liam had in his confidence today. Before Nathan Zayn had been so careful with money, only spending it when necessary - usually because art supplies cost so much. Now though he’s so excited he has to sit on his hands.

Liam almost expects a 180˚ when the food arrives, because it’s more than expected. But the only negative reaction on Zayns parts is a small but not unpleasant ‘oh’. A pause. The background chatter just about blocks out the ringing of worry in Liam ears, but Zayn proceeds to cut the food up into smaller pieces, and half it down the middle of the plate.

“Isabelle said once one good way to trick your brain into eating when you're not ok is to cut it in halves or quarters and work from there.” Zayn announced.

Liam chews on his bite before asking “are you feeling bothered or triggered now?”

He pauses to mull over the question. “No.” Zayn decides. “But sometimes it can feel a little overwhelming. Like, I don't have an issue with it, but I'm not used to seeing that much on my plate… does that make sense?”

“Perfect.” Liam says, smiling. “Thank you.”

“After everything you’ve done for me? This barely covers it.” Zayn says nonchalantly.

“Hey now,” Liam points his fork at Zayn and raises a brow. “This isn’t a who owes who situation, never has been and never will, I just want to say thank you for taking me out.”

Zayns eyes glint in the sunlight as he watches Liam over his brow, and both of them are smiling like idiots when he says it. But. There is good food to be eaten, and so they almost symmetrically continue to dig in. Letting conversation flow gently, and enjoying each others company.

When they finish up they’re not ready to leave, so they order a fresh pressed juice to share, chatting to extend their stay to two hours. When they are ready to leave though Zayn beings buzzing like he had earlier all over again. He hands over the appropriate amount of cash at the counter with the smile that Liam loves oh-so-much, and tips their waiter.

They walk out hand in hand and Zayn bounces or giggles or scrunches up the whole way back.
Liam can feel the waves of self-pride and self-confidence wash over him it’s that pungent.

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The morning of their first kiss is almost idyllic. Birds are chirping, sun is shining, and it’s Liams day off from work. They have a picnic blanket set up in front of where they normally feed the ducks.

“I think that cloud looks like a shoe.” Zayn announces, applauded by the cackle of ducks squawking in the nearby water. “And that one’s like one of those spikes you wear in your running shoes.”

Liam hums. “Still think you can whoop me on an XC course?”

Zayns head tilts back in a laugh. “Maybe once upon a time, and with the correct motivation.” He resigns to. “Not so much now.”

Liam shrugs, “I dunno man, I was actually thinking of it the other day, think I want to do some XC again.”

“Yeah?” Zayn asks. Again, some squawking.

“Yeah.” Liam confirms. “Like just for fun, I enjoy my runs around the block but would like to compete again every now and then. Local park runs and that, not nationals aha.”

“Sounds great babe.” Zayn says.

“You can come take pictures of me again.” Liam pokes Zayn in the side. He giggles.

“Oh I see, you need me to be a pap again.” Zayn deadpans.
“Hey you signed up for a lifetime commitment when you did it the first time. Not my fault you’re so good at it. Need some more insta posts.” Liam jokes. “Speaking of,” he shifts around to draw his phone out of his back pocket.

“Oh god,”

“Say cheese!”

Zayn rolls into Liam’s side and pulls a cheesy grin for the selfie. After a stupid one Liam manoeuvres his arm around the back of Zayn’s neck and pulls him in closer where they take a nicer one.

“Stunner.” Liam compliments.

Zayn blushes, and hides his smile in Liam’s shoulder before gripping onto Liam’s other shoulder in a hug. Liam covers Zayn’s outstretched hand and thumbs the knuckles.

“I think that one looks like a sheep.”


“But Zayn I’m telling you it’s a little lamb!”

Zayn huffs another laugh. Choosing to remain quiet this time, and snuggle into Liam’s shoulder.

“Liam?” Zayn asks after a few minutes silence. “What are we?”

Liam doesn’t answer for a while. “What do you mean?”

“Like.” Zayn braces himself, because he didn’t expect to actually bring up this conversation. “Do you see me as your roommate, or do you see me as something more? I get the impression that we’re
beyond that but I was talking with Isabelle and she said I should talk to you about this more than her.”

Liam sits up crosslegged, bringing Zayn up with him. “I’m your Liam.” He says slowly, decisively - like there is zero doubt in his mind. “And you’re my Zayn.” He offers. “I don’t know if that clears anything up for you…”

“I mean, not really.” Zayn swallows, shifting from where he’s sat. His bum is pressed to the ground in the triangular space between Liam’s crossed legs, his own legs either side of Liam’s hips and hands fiddling with the front of Liam’s shift. “I just- I just would like to know explicitly.” He’s avoiding eye contact on purpose. Mainly because he doesn’t know how to look Liam in the eye when they talk like this, but also because he’s smiling from what Liam already said and saying now.

Instead, Liam continues to be a little less explicit and indirect. “I love you.” But then, “I want everything with you. I want what you want and at a pace we’re both comfortable with.” He supplies. “Does that clear it up a bit for you?”

Zayn’s heart is in his throat, his chest pounds so hard he’s sure Liam must hear it. “Yeah.” He stifles out, failing at hiding his smile. Without realising he begins to curl into himself.

“No-no don't go quiet on me.” Liam says softly. A finger crooked under Zayn’s chin to make him look up. At first Zayn struggles to make eye contact. And when it’s too quiet for too long Liam has enough.

“Zayn?” He whispers.

Nothing.

“Zayn babe look at me.” He presses his fingers and thumb to Zayn’s chin to encourage him up from looking at his hands.

“I love you.” He says again, like it’s a secret. But everyone in their lives know it’s far from that. “And I want a life with you, but I know for a fact you’re not ready for it. I’ve said before I’d wait a lifetime for you, and that still stands. it will do. Forever.”

Zayn shudders - not because he’s crying, but he is overwhelmed. in the best way.

"I mean, I don't see how anything would change from what we are now.”
“Ok.” Zayn says quietly. “Thank you for clearing that up with me.”

Liam leans in, their noses touching. They breathe the same air as Liam says. “Of course. Anything.”

Zayn shifts again, folding his legs so his knees are bent, and his heels dig into the side of his thighs, and closes the distance between them, closing his eyes as he pushing his forehead to rest against Liams. His hands have dropped from where they were clenched into his shirt and rest on Liams hips.

“If you’re thinking what I am, and feeling what I’m feeling,” Liam gulps. “Then I want to make it clear that you have to make the first move, because I won’t.”

Zayn huffs out a laugh. Everything about this moment is so cheesy and rom-com-esque and ridiculous but he loves every second of it.

Liam laughs with him, and then asks why Zayn laughed at him in the first place.

“Because I think I’m beginning to love you a little bit too.”

The grin on Liams face explodes - so rapidly moulding his facial features to squint his eyes together and Zayn wonders why he ever felt scared to be anything less than honest to Liam about everything. Liam seems lost for words, just grinning to himself and Zayn finds he’s grinning like a fool too. They rock back and forth once or twice because Liam is swaying under Zayn. It’s so soothing, and perfect, and wonderful that when their foreheads bump together again Zayn plants his lips on Liams.

It’s not kissing; more brushing. then Zayn remembers Liam is waiting for him to close the distance; Letting him dictate how this ends up. Liam is allowing him to make this decision for them.

It’s the easiest thing he’s ever done, closing that gap to seal the deal.

Fireworks don't go off like they do in the movies. There isn't a magic spark that ignites between them. Perhaps thats because it’s always there. Regardless, it's just pleasant. Simple, and enjoyable. Not complicated.
When they do part they don’t move far, Zayns eyelashes flutter while Liam’s remain wide open. He thumbs at Zayns cheekbone and kisses him again.

Zayn makes a noise of surprise when Liam lies them back down, Zayn lying on top of Liam.

“Liam.” Zayn admonishes. “We’re in the middle of a park.”

He ignores him in favour of saying; “You look so beautiful.”

“Don’t get all sappy on me now.” Zayn warns playfully, the two of them knowing full well how much he loves it. Liam hands moves up to play with the small hairs on the back of his neck. Just like that the world fades out again.

“I am the sap.” Liam argues. “Full of it and cheese.”

Zayn groans, pressing his face into Liam’s neck. “Can’t go outside with you anywhere.” He teases. Liam presses a kiss to the skin of his neck he can reach. Prompting Zayn to lift up again and kiss him some more. As he does Liam threads his fingers through Zayns hair, knowing full well how much he loves it. He’s suddenly struck with a thought, how their position is not unlike the time he lay on Liam in the hospital, not long after Nathan threw him into the coffee table. Back then he had tried in vain to lift up from Liam, get away from him because he was scared and vulnerable.

Now, weighing significantly more than he did a year ago. He lays on Liam with zero reservations about it.

Liam grunts a bit as he sits them up again, Zayn laughing as he falls down Liams body to his lap. Liam crosses his legs under Zayn, his legs bracketing Liams hips and arms coming up to rest on Liams shoulders as they kiss again. Liam smiles into Zayns mouth, resting his hands on Zayns sides.

Redness blossoms on Zayns face, indicative of how much they were laughing earlier. When they do stop kissing Zayn rests his head in Liams neck, nosing it occasionally. His face hurts from smiling so much.

Eventually, they lay down again. This time Zayn favours lying on his side flush to Liams left. He hooks a leg over Liams body and an arm too, for good measure. Liam takes the hand of the arm, and threads their fingers together, pressing a kiss to Zayns forehead as he rests it on the space of the
blanket next to Liams shoulder, finding it more comfortable for his neck. They talk, eventually
dozing off in the delightful warmth of the afternoon sun.

“I love you.” Liam says again as his body relaxes totally and breathing evens out. The sleepiness in
his voice tells Zayn he’s drooping too. “All of you.”

A smile quirks on his lips, barely leaving even as he falls to sleep, surrounded in warmth, fresh air,
the sound of leaves rustling and ducks splashing. He dozes off to the sound of peace and quiet.
Tickles

Chapter Notes

Ya'll I feel like I'm on a roll here #9000words

Let me know what you think!!!!!!!!

The day after their first kiss Zayn wakes up to Liam climbing back into bed, post-run. The dampness of sweaty skin and cloth is more than apparent, and the coolness of said wet skin and cloth is absolutely definitely confirmed when it's pressed against Zayns bare arm.

“Zaynie! Time to wake up!” Liam announces like a small child.

“I am awake you tool - oh god how long did you run for?” Zayn scrunches up his face at the feeling of Liams nose pressing into his neck and the wet kiss he smacks in it's place not long after.

“7k.” Liam plants a - drier - kiss on Zayns cheek, the post-run high clearly still running through him. “Please come shower with me.”

“Urgh, I might if you make me a tea.” Zayn compromises. In a flash, Liam’s off him, running down the hallways with the remnants of a “be back in a sec!” bouncing off the walls.

Zayn pulls himself out of the sheets, wondering if next time Liam runs he could too. He imagines he’d be a huffing, athsmatic heap within the first few k’s, and if Zayns not mistaken, Liam was out of bed only 50 minutes ago. Meaning he took around 40-45 minutes to cover 7k. Zayn’s day’s of doing that are long gone. Maybe he’ll cycle instead.

He yawns and stretches, arching his back and going onto tip toe as he makes his way to the bathroom, discarding his pyjamas into the hamper - because there’s definitely going to be sweat on there that he won’t want to feel again later, and pulling out his board shorts.

As he tugs them on, he contemplates if he really needs to wear them now. There’s not a chance that he’s ok with his body all the time, and definitely not with anyone seeing it outside of Liam. But the only person showering with him is Liam.

He wears them anyway, rubbing the sleep dust from his eyes as Liam enters the bathroom. He kisses him on the forehead once, still seeming to vibrate on energy. “Tea is on the bedside table for when we get out.” Zayn hums happily, sighing quietly as Liams cool, sweaty hands cup his face and kisses his forehead again. “How are you feeling?” Liam asks. “I realise that may have been a rude awakening for you.”

“Nah I’m fine.” Zayn says, stepping into the stream of water as Liam strips off. “Besides if I’m going to be a normal person I need to get used to you coming back packed with endorphins after your morning run.”

“Hey - nothing about you not being normal, yeah?” Liam says. “But seriously, you alright?” He opens the glass door, joining Zayn.

“Yes Leeyum,” he makes a point of enunciating the syllabus. “I’m really good.”
Liam looks at him with an expression Zayn can’t quite pinpoint. But that might be because water will get in his eyes if he tries any harder.

“What makes today good?”

“Well, I woke up in a lovely warm bed with our cat snuggling up to me and then by one of my favourite people in the world coming in after a run and now I’m in a warm shower. It looks like you’re about to wash my hair and I know with all your post run tendencies a great breakfast is in order.”

Liam beams like he did yesterday. Unfiltered in every way. “Just glad I didn’t accidentally trigger you. Didn’t think it through when I came in.” He admits.

“Hey hey, now my turn to tell you off.” Zayn reprimands. “I was unwell and I’m still not 100% but under no circumstances are you to contain yourself because of me. If you do it again and it’s a bad day I’m sure we’ll work through it one way or another.”

Liam removes the shower head from it’s hold and Zayn tilts his head back. Accustomed to his role in having his hair washed. “You’re very wise ya know.”

Zayn grins, but it’s a bit awkward with his neck at the angle it is when he says “bitch I’ve always been wise.”

Liam laughs, moving the shower head to away from Zayn’s face and down his back instead. Zayn says “And Isabelle’s getting me to be rather philosophical, as you know.”

Liam wraps his other arm around Zayn’s waist. The shower stream pounding Zayn’s hamstrings, and kisses him. Zayn reciprocates, wrapping his own arms around Liam’s neck. And apparently, that’s the end of that conversation.

“I had a quick look about that park run you know.” Liam announces as he cracks eggs into a bowl. He doesn’t wait for a verbal response “There’s a few distances, I’m thinking of the 5k’s.”

“Nice.” Zayn says. “Any others?”

“Well there’s a 3k and a 7k, depending on what week it is, and technically a 1k but we’re not under fourteens.”

“Are they difficult?”

“Actually, some of them seem to be held at the park.”

Zayn creases his brow, previously he had been observing Liam in the kitchen as he normally does. Sunday mornings is exclusively Liam’s morning to cook breakfast. It was declared long ago - before their uni days and even Zayn isn’t allowed to contribute. Zayn remembers one morning, many years ago from their early days at uni. Louis had camped out in Liam’s flat every Saturday night for three weeks just because he found out Liam had a thing for sunday morning breakfast.

“The one we play footie at?” He clarifies.

Liam nods. “First one next week, I was gonna sign up unless you had any other ideas being that I wasn’t aware of.”
“Nah man, sounds great.” Liam pours the omelette mix in the pan. “You going to drag Harry along?”

“You know what, I hadn’t considered but I might.” He says. He pours the rest of the ingredients into the pan before flipping the omelette over. “You still wanting to have a go?” He asks, not looking away from the pan.

Zayn hums, verbally announcing his thinking. “Maybe. But not right now.”

“Good plan, but just checking.”

“I’ll come watch though.” Zayn sips on his tea.

“You realise it starts at 8am on Saturday morning?”

Zayn groans internally. “Yup.” He forces a faux disappointed smile. It disappearing entirely when Liam looks over his shoulder and Zayn transforms into a barely-contained ‘oh my god he looked at me’ giggling schoolgirl bundle. His arms, which are crossed over and forearms planted flat to the table provide a barrier between his face and the table.

Liam leaves around two pm for his three o’clock classes, and maybe it's some form of sick fascination, or maybe it's because he has to see it for himself.

He watches as Liam peels out of the driveway, waving him as he goes form the threshold. The TV is on in the background from when they turned it on earlier, and pans and utensils from breakfast clutter the kitchen area. Long forgotten in favour of playing with Roman and cuddling up.

Which confuses him more, because he’s having such a great day. There should be nothing possessing him to even try break the colourful haze he’s in.

Harry’s due to arrive in a few minutes, and he knows this is not what anyone wants him to do. Not Liam, or Isabelle, his family or any of the boys would ever recommend or bring up in conversation. But he does it anyway, even as he retrieves Liams iPad from it’s charging stand he knows he could stop, and leave it at any moment. But he doesn’t. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, Zayn types into the google browser, www.zmtriplen.tumblr.com

The browser takes a long time to load, and every second that passes makes him sweat a little. It makes him think oh no someones re booted the site or, it wasn't ever taken down at all.

Then, Tumblr pops up, almost obnoxiously announcing; “nothing to see here!”

He collapses against the back of the sofa in relief, firstly stunned, and then he laughs at himself. What a dramatic reaction for one page. Keys jingle in the lock at that moment, and he quickly quits the browser before he stands up. Harry’s here after all, and he promised to bring a new recipe to try.

Zayn’s at work stacking books. It’s unextraordinary, but somewhat satisfying and therapeutic to have to catalogue and order every book into the system and on the shelves. Currently he’s in the biography section, shelving some of his all time favourite 80s artists, though they're songs are not the one’s stuck in his head.
Last night he and Liam danced to the radio while making dinner. A smile blossoms on his face, and he sways his hips side to side. Gentle whispers of the song you can hear it in the silence, tangle in his eardrums. He hums along to the You can feel it on the way home.

He’s interrupted by the sound of the shops door bell tinkling. Where before the bell had made him a little anxious to enter the shop now it’s a relief to hear it - because he knows if someone else has come in or not. Today is a good day, and even if it’s work he’s greeting the entrant with a smile and asking them if they need anything.

“Isn’t…” Zayn begins questioning something he has been meaning to ask Isabelle in a while. It’s Thursday, a whole week since his and Liam’s first kiss - which he has been regaling to her so far this appointment, and 8 days since his last session with her. “Like - I don’t want to be rude somehow or question you here but aren’t psychologists generally meant to encourage people to be well before they enter a relationship?”

He doesn’t think it’s an unfounded question, and he doesn’t want things to change necessarily but Isabelle’s been working with him to not keep everything he’s thinking over multiple times to himself. Perhaps it’s not that, though. Perhaps he’s just curious on a base level. “I mean I just thought that was a thing.”

Isabelle shrugs her shoulders before asking a question of her own. “Why would we do that when the essential root of most of your anxiety stems from forming healthy relationships and being in them?”

She’s got him there. “You can’t answer a question with a question.”

Smiling, Isabelle replies “I just did though.”

“We’ve discussed this.” Zayn banter. Relenting his grip on the query with each syllable.

“Plenty of depictions out there concerning therapy, and in particular therapy concerning mental health are incorrect. Media often portrays extreme versions of them, like hospitals, or use them as settings for horror films, or puts the person seeking help in harms way and gives the impression that mental health services are untrustworthy. Lets take ‘Easy A’ for example, you know that film?”

Zayn nods.

“So you have a student councillor in there, a trusted person for students to go to in need, but by the end of the film you find out not only did she abuse her position as a staff member to blackmail the main character, but she slept with an underage student, simultaneously cheating on her husband. And while that’s not the main plot of the film it leaves people who watch it - especially young and impersonal people with this subconscious distrust of councilors. Then, you have films playing off archaic mental hospital representations or otherwise portraying them as places to be scared of, say Girl Interrupted, which are now modernised and safe places for people who need the help. That’s just one way you can see how therapy can be misunderstood.”

Zayn, who reclined into the sofa a bit while she was talking nods along. “Yeah, but like-relationships?” He really hopes he doesn’t sound rude.
“Yes! Sorry, went on a tangent there. So, in most cases, it would be relevant for someone to be well mentally before engaging in close relationships outside of their family or care system, because often these people come from those damaging relationships and are convinced before they’ve been in therapy long enough that they don’t need or want it and end up in the same toxic positions as before. Then you have people who would be the toxic element in their relationship, because their mental illness or experience can mean they are damaging the people and relationships around them without realising or otherwise not engaging in a good quality of life because those relationships can distract and detach the person from learning how to take care of themselves correctly. Does that make sense?”

Zayn nods. It doesn’t entirely, but he gets the gist of what she’s saying.

“I’ll give you an example of why that would be prevalent in your case. Lets rewind two years ago from today. Do you know what you were doing?”

Zayn curls his neck over the back of the sofa, staring at the ceiling. “I don’t know, nothing healthy though.”

“Can you give me an example?”

His stomach curls a little, nausea at the thought of going back there stirring in his gut and oesophagus. “Err...” He starts. “Probably self-harming, or being hurt.” He offers. “Maybe-” He stops again, despising the word restrained, “Probs being raped.” He clears his throat.

“In that situation, while we know Nathan would not have let you see a therapist had you wanted or thought you needed one would not have let you, but lets say hypothetically he did. Would you have been seeing them still, a year later? Especially after displaying definite progress?”

Zayn shakes his head. “Nah.”

“Exactly, when we started these sessions it’s fair to say that you weren’t in a good place, and that directly affected your ability to trust, engage and participate in anything outside of what he had limited you to. You were so conditioned in that environment to believe that you had done something wrong and needed to return to Nathan regardless of how much he was hurting you emotionally and physically. It meant you didn’t want to engage in activities you would have before, so we’ve been working on you and your relationships, particularly that of your relationships with Liam and the boys because that’s where you were struggling to engage and be yourself. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.” His voice is deeper because of the angle of his neck still. “Cause I was Nathans bitch.”

“Now where did that come from?” Isabelle asks.

“Absolutely not.” Zayn looks back to her. She doesn’t look angry - or disappointed like he expected (maybe thats something he needs to work on too) - she looks concerned. “Now I know you didn’t think of that out of the blue, so lets talk about where you heard that or what drove you to think of that.”

“I dunno.” Zayn shrugs honestly. “Like I’ve had such a great time getting through every day since we last saw each other.”

Isabelle remains silent. noting something on her piece of paper. “Have you seen something triggering or having nightmares again?”
Zayns eyebrows pinch together as he leans onto his elbows in thought. “Don’t think so.” He says truthfully. “I know I’ve had a few weird dreams but I don’t really remember them. M’not waking up in the night.”

“Run me through what you’ve been doing. Did you visit the park and see - sorry Zayn let me know if this is too much - dogs with the cones again?”

Zayn shudders a bit but it’s not overwhelming. “No.” He says shaking his head lowly.

“Seen anyone at random that you had red flags about? Say on the bus to work?”

Zayn shakes his head again.

“Read or seen anything that reminded you of him?”

Oh.

“Ah, may have thought of something. I, um, wanted to see if what Hannah had said ages ago was true and checked if the blog he had made was still active.”

Isabelle writes something down on her pad. “And what made you do that?” She asks, not unkindly.

“I dunno, just wanted to. Like, closure. Was curious.” It’s not the most eloquent thing he’s come up with but it gets his point across

“And who was with you, if anyone?”

“Nah, searched it while I was waiting for Harry to arrive a few days back.”

She writes something new. Then looking at him, “did you have any self-harm urges or need to look at the chart we made?”

Zayn is tired of shaking his head. “No. Just wanted to see.”

“And you’ve not had any other repercussions because of it or urges to do anything out of the normal since?”

“Nope.” He pops the ‘p’.

“Good. However, you might want to consider how highly traumatic that blog and it’s contents were, and that it triggered a suicide attempt the last time you saw it. Even with your progress it would have been detrimental to you if it had somehow still been active. But that’s beside the point. As long as you’re ok and you do exactly as you have so far by letting someone know if you feel bad, then all should be well.”

“Thanks Isabelle.”

“No, Zayn, well done. Going back to our original conversation look at how far you’ve come as a result of your relationships with the boys. Had they not been a part of your recovery do you think you’d be in the same place you are now?”

Zayn doesnt answer at first. “No, probably not.”

“Liam and the boys have been nothing but beneficial to your health, and if entering a more intimate relationship with Liam will make you and he happier than you are now then I see no reason as to why anyone should attempt to intervene with that.”
After a moment's silence Zayn asks “do you think I’ll be with him that way?”

“What way?”

“Like - you know, sexual.”

Isabelle puts her pad to the side. “That’s up to you. Of course, we can discuss it, but I’m not an expert if you were to really try dive into a sexual element of your life, and fully regain confidence after the trauma you’ve had through sexual means. I know plenty of experts I could refer you to if you were interested but I don’t see why you couldn’t.”

Ok, so Zayn didn’t see that last bit coming, and he tells her that.

“Don’t discourage the idea. Maybe a few sessions could be good. Just to help with some confidence, there’s no shame in it.”

“I’d rather talk with you.”

“And I’m more than happy to discuss that too if you want, but just know I won’t know everything and sometimes a sexologist would be more ideal. But let’s start, have you been able to masturbate at all?”

Well. That went from zero to sixty in a few short words. Then again he should have expected that. Zayn stutters a few times before he punches out “No.”

“Have you tried?”

Zayn shakes his head. “Haven’t really thought about it.”

“Have you or Liam made plans to have sexual relations anytime soon?”

Zayn pulls an incredulous expression that says ‘really?’

Isabelle makes a face of ‘so what’, “Then don’t stress about it. When the time comes we can talk but I have no doubts that if you wanted to, you could very successfully pursue a healthy sexual relationship with Liam. Do you want to?”

“I dunno. Like, I think I want to but I also don’t know if I really want to.”

“Do you believe that’s because you have only ever had negative sexual experiences?”

“Perhaps.”

“On the one hand it’s possible that you could pursue one and it not work out - and that’s ok, on the other hand you could try it and find it helps in your recovery by replacing bad memories with good ones. But that’s up to you to decide and at a later date, as we’re running out of time. Did you want to go through a guided meditation or discuss anything else in the last ten minutes?”

“Meditation please.” Zayn says, re-arranging himself to lie on the couch horizontally as Isabelle stands to set up the speakers.
Zayn is in the shower the next morning. Liam’s out at his early morning classes, having left promptly sometime around 6 for the 6:30am class, and he won’t be back for at least another hour after the set finishing around 10:45. His schedule has a large enough break then to justify him coming home for a meal but Zayn doesn’t know if he’ll do that or not. Well, at least if Liam did say as he walked out this morning then Zayn didn’t hear it.

He thinks back to the day before, Isabelle asking if he’s had a wank. He doesn’t know why his face heats up so much at the thought of it. He was never like that before Nathan. Why should he be after? The thought makes him somewhat angry. Zayn isn’t a blushing virgin - at least not technically, and he knows sex and how sex works. He takes a deep breath, and leans forward, placing a hand on the tiles; screwing his eyes shut against the stream of water. With his other hand he takes a hold of his flaccid penis. He struggles to not grimace, painfully reminded that there doesn’t seem to be a lot there.

Whether it’s an issue with body dysmorphia - if that’s even a thing that can happen because he was anorexic. Or if he genuinely has nothing much in his package he doesn’t know. The main thing is that it damages his pride somewhat.

Steadfastly ignoring the sickly feeling of inferiority he pumps the length. It doesn’t do much for him. It’s like he knows there should be a good feeling there but there is none. But then it starts to feel plain wrong. Again, with not much to explain why. He keeps pumping, hoping he’ll fill up steadily and that it may work.

A minute passes and not much changes. He becomes a little harder, but it doesn’t do much for him. Eventually he lets go. Ignoring the pang of failure and disappointment flooding him. He’s tempted to run the water cold, and get rid of his hard on if he can. But there’s not much point in that, because when he no doubt tells Isabelle of this she’ll remind him that action is not necessary. Instead he turns off the water. Pats himself dry, throws on loose old clothes of Liam’s and wonders downstair to snuggle with Roman and watch a re-run of Sherlock instead.

———

True to his intentions the previous week Zayn is out with Liam at 7:30 Saturday morning watching him warm up. The boys had been over for dinner as normal the night before, and Harry had agreed to run with Liam despite not having done any serious running recently. Which is how Zayn finds himself holding a warm flask of tea; wrapped in warm clothing watching Harry and Liam warm up for their race. Niall stands next to him, making a surprise appearance.

“You running?” Zayn asks, confused.

Niall laughs. “Ha! Not a chance! Just came to keep you company.”

Zayn laughs too, in hindsight the fact he’s not dressed for the occasion should have been a give away. “Louis sleeping in?”

“Course he is. Won’t get him out here for this on his weekend.”

Instead of replying Zayn offers Niall the flask, patiently waiting for the race to start and plod up the hill to the other side so they can cheer as they run around. The last few good luck’s are exchanged and Liam passes Zayn his jumper.
“Here, pre-warmed for you, keep it warm for me?” He asks cheekily.

Zayn grins like an idiot as he removes his coat to shuck on the woollen item, and then pull on the coat again with Liam’s help. “See you at the end Payne.” Zayn jokes, pressing a small kiss to his lips.

Liam beams, “I’ll only be a minute.” He also jokes, and leaves to stand on the muddied start line next to Harry.

Zayn pulls out his phone to take a photo. Harry’s kept an old headband on to keep his hair off his face and it annoyingly suits him. But hilariously, the look of concentration the two of them wear, standing next to a plethora of individuals in all different outfits; some ready to start their watches, others not even leaning into the line.

The gun goes and their off, he and Niall start cheering almost immediately for the two of them and then make their way to the other section of the course.

“I had no idea these even existed.” Niall comments as they both get out of breath walking up the hill, not as much as he once would have, but still enough. For a fleeting moment he thinks about Yoga, thank god for that.

Twenty five minutes later they find themselves at the finish line, cheering as their two goofballs charge down the finishing straight. They had discussed in the warm up how they’d stick with each other the whole way this time around, but apparently that got thrown out the window in the last five hundred meters.

“My moneys on Harry.” Niall states before shouting at the top of his lungs “C’mon Harry SPRINT MATE.”

“Go on Liam!” Zayn cheers equally as loud, screaming in delight as they cross too close to call.

The course has fenced markings to funnel runners into single file before they can leave the course, Liam lets Harry go through first which makes Niall whoop “called it!” and they move around to meet them at the end of it.

“Well done you.” Zayn gives Liam a hug as congratulations. In turn, Liam rests his head on Zayn’s shoulder and loosely wraps his arms around Zayn’s waist.

“Thanks-“ Liam pants, completely out of breath. “Been a while since I tried to move that fast.”

Zayn laughs. “You did great.” There’s a water station near them and Harry brings Liam a cup too. Both their noses and cheeks are red from the exertion and cold. Liam stands and thanks Harry for the cup with a nod, his breathing back to normal levels.

“Tell you what,” Harry says, sipping the last of his drink. “Could do with a good breakfast.”

“That’s a great idea, wanna go to the place down the road?” Niall suggests.

Zayn shrugs, a pang of fear always hits him when someone mentions eating out in public but to hell with that.

“Yeah?” Liam questions, looking both like he doesn’t believe him and elated. Then more quietly, “You’d be up for that?”

Zayn smiles, privately. “Yeah, course.” Harry and Niall have started walking away, Harry turning
his phone back on when Niall, who had been looking after his gear, hands it back to him and calling Louis. Zayn can hear a faint ‘shift your butt outta bed we’re going out to eat’ Which he huffs a laugh too.

“Can I kiss you?” Liam asks Zayn gently when they’ve moved out of earshot. Up until now he has always asked first.

Zayn gives him this look which makes Liam think of the word soft. It’s equal parts fond and happy; almost a little watery. “Course you can Leeyum.” He says. So Liam leans down and connects their lips, reaching out to hold Zayns hand as he does. Zayn uses the opportunity to reach out and take Liams muddy shoes off him, and stuffs his also wet and muddy socks in the foot cavity.

As they leave the park, Liam lags behind, watching Zayn catch up to Harry and Niall in their trip to the car.

Zayn. Who still struggles to lift his own weight carries Liams wet muddy shoes, Zayn who remembered to bring fresh socks and clothes for him to change into post race. Zayn, who got out of bed earlier than he needed to to watch Liam (and Harry) run in the rain. Zayn, who’s wearing the most beautiful smile as he laughs to something Harry said that Liam didn’t hear. Liam can’t hear, because all he can see is Zayn and the energy that now encompasses him.

Zayn notices his absence, and turns to check on him. He’s still smiling, and Liam nearly stops dead in his tracks. Within a second Zayns looking forward again, ploughing forward with the walk up the hill now he’s satisfied Liam’s still with them.

Fuck. Liam is so screwed.

With breakfast being a success, and both Harry and Liam successfully recovered but tired it’s no surprise that they end up back at theirs. Immediately Liam offers Harry the shower first, in favour of putting on a wash and having a cup of hot chocolate with Zayn and Louis.

Later on they curl up on the sofa for the next film. It’s Harry’s turn tonight and in the art of breaking tradition he opts for a film that is not star wars or a rom com. “I’ve heard a lot of great things about Battle of the Sexes” He says, bringing it up on Netflix. “Got Emma Stone and Steve Carell in it.” He adds as if it contributes any merit. Zayn snuggles into him, back to the television in favour of resting his head on Liams chest, who’s half lying flat on the cushions and half pressed to the back of the sofa.

Liam kisses his forehead, moist lips lingering on the now-warm skin while his arms held the now non-emaciated body that is his significant other. Zayn giggles, squirming in his hold with the biggest smile on his face and that always does things to Liams heart.

He bends down again - slowly so Zayn has time to tell him no - and gives him another kiss, proper, on the lips. When he pulls back Zayns eyes are bright and he’s biting his lip.

Liam smiles back, how can he refuse with a look like that. “Gimme a kiss.” He says, it's playful and he pouts his lips in the most ridiculous way he knows, screwing his eyes shut for added effect and he can hear Zayn giggle again.

He pouts for longer than necessary, he should’ve been kissed by now…

He opens an eye to peek down at Zayn who’s curling into himself again, still biting his lip with a grin on his face.
“Gimme a kiss.” He means to sound wounded but it comes out too giggly for it to be successful. Zayn shakes his head, “Nope.” The veins in his neck strain when he smiles even wider and giggles with a small squirm.

God he’s so cute.

He gasps, meaning to sound shocked, “Please gimme a kiss.” He tries again, leaning in to smooch his cheek, Zayn pulls back, darting to avoid him with that ever-present ridiculousness on his face. Liam can tell Zayn joking - teasing him in fact, so he’s not worried by the response. He looks so happy.

“Please with a cherry on top?” He pulls on his best puppy-dog face.
It seems Zayn isn't falling for it as he shakes his head again. “Nope.” How he does it looking so innocent, Liam will never know.

“Uh huh.” He gawks, “I'm offended.” (It should be illegal for someone to giggle as adorable Zayn can).

Zayn squirms in his arms, wriggling to get more comfortable. He looks away from Liam and notices Harry’s filming them, the curly mans grin caught between his teeth. Zayns hands move from under his chin to cover his face. “No! Harry!” He yelps and Liam giggles.

God he’s so cute.

He gently grasps Zayns wrists in an attempt to pull his hands away, when he succeeds Zayn buries the side of his face into the pillow.

“C’mon babe, you’re beautiful, give him a smile.”

Zayn shakes his head into the pillow. A muffled “Nah uh.” sounds.

Liam rolls over so his weight is pressing down on him like at night on the days when Zayn’s feeling insecure and needs to be wrapped tight. Kissing his jaw and cheek and whatever skin he can peck at. The ultimate spoon, if you will.

He goes to hide his face in his hands but Liam’s a bit quicker, grasping the hand with the one that is under Zayn and extending it out so his arm is straight and over the edge of the sofa. Zayn squeaks when his other hand is encompassed by his own huge ones and curled up under his chin again so Zayn is facing the camera again. He leans over, satisfied that he’s secure enough (but not that he feels unsafe or couldn't move away from Liam if he was truly uncomfortable, of course). “Now, that kiss.”

Zayn laughs outright, his head thrown back and eyes scrunched up. It’s honestly the best and happiest sound anyone could ever hear. Liam pecks at his face, oblivious to the video still running in Harrys hands. Zayn turns into his outstretched arm when Liam makes for his lips, giggling.

“I'll tickle you,” He warns, Zayn shakes his head.

He brings the arms over the end of the sofa across Zayns chest, trapping his other one under them and moving his hand to Zayns side. “I'll do it,” he teases in a high-pitched voice. Nuzzling at Zayn neck. Zayn doesn't say anything but he can sense that he’s biting his lip again when he squirms, looking downward but not outright into the pillow. That’s a victory for Liam.

His now free hand moves to Zayns side and his outer leg hooks around Zayns legs.
“I'll do it…” He coos. 
Zayn lets out a ‘khee’ sound and “Oh god no!”

His fingers dance over Zayns sides and he erupts into laughter. “No! No! Stop!” He cries between the giggles, wriggling to get out but at the same time wriggling closer into his body. Liams hand pauses for a moment and rubs over his tummy, soothing the jumping muscles there before he tickles him more. Dancing around his tummy to the bottom of his ribs and back around to his sides. Zayn screams and shrieks of laughter increased. He had always been ticklish, as kids Liam chased him around all the time only for the tables to turn. Zayn was stronger than him back then, he was the one always ending up on his back while he tried to push the black-haired boy off him. He drinks in Zayns laughter, the little gasps and sounds that fall from his mouth and the now-present muscles that contract under his fingers.

He slips his hands under Zayns shirt, careful not to expose skin because he knows Zayn’s not ready for that to happen, softly scratching at the bare, warm skin. “Please-Liam,” He gasps out between cackles of pure delight, “St-stop!” His squirms become more violent and he arches his back when Liams hand grazes a particular area on the ‘V’ of his torso, ahh… so there’s good. He shrieks louder “Stop! Liam, Please!” Panting out between the laughter. “Only if you give me a kiss.” He kisses the shell of Zayns ear and tickles him more.

“N-Ne-Never!” Zayn challenges, and his hands speed up. Zayn bites on his bottom lip, attempting to stop the pleas. But Liam is determined, giggling along to Zayns laughter. His fingers relentlessly going at Zayns weak spots until a half minute later he gives in.

“F-fine!” He gasps out, “I’ll Gi-give you a kis-ss!” Liam slows it down and spins his hand over his tummy, waiting for the pants and small giggles to cease before half releasing him, unhooking his legs and loosening his arms just enough that Zayn can move in them, safely and comfortably, and give him a kiss, but not up and away.

Zayn turns over, his eyes are so bright and small tears seem to have welled there from laughing so hard. He’s still giggling, smiling so hard it looks like it hurts with his tongue pushed up behind his teeth and rosy cheeks.

In Liams opinion, he has never looked better.

Zayn leans forward, lips shaped and ready to give him the kiss he wants, he shuts his eyes, anticipating the soft and gentle feeling of Zayn kissing him. Like it’s the very first time wh-

He gets a quick press against his nose and then the lips are withdrawn. He blinks his eyes open in surprise, confused only to see a giggling Zayn attempting to extract himself from his arms and run away. Liam then realises that Zayn kissed him on the nose.

“Where’re you going?” He playfully smirks when Zayn nearly gets away, pulling him back into his chest with a small yelp. “I need a kiss.”

“I gave you a kiss.” Zayn protests. His voice bright and full of mirth. “On the nose.”

“I meant on my mouth.”

“You didn’t say that.” Zayn shrugs. Nosing at his t-shirt and feigning innocence.

(It doesn’t work).

“Well, I wanted one on my mouth.” He says, very seriously. “And I need one there.”
Zayn giggles in his arms again, hiding in his chest and continuing to attempt nonchalance. “Well, you needed to specify; you wanted kiss, I gave you a kiss.” Zayn shrugs and sighs in his arms, like he’s saying ‘I tried,” or ‘Well what a shame.’ Liam slips a hand to his armpit and tickles there, Zayn reflexively jumping away with a gawk and curling up to stop the offending hand. “LiAM!”

Liam’s hands tickle at his armpits and move down to his sides again for a better response, soaking in the giggling pleas and sounds of laughter tumbling from his significant other. “Pl-please! No more!” He shrieks, squirming against his relentless hold.

Liam keeps going, exploiting Zayn’s ticklish spots and complimenting him, nuzzling his face into his neck when Zayn throws his head back in glee. Nibbling at the gorgeous blemished column, tickling with his tongue.

“Li-Li-LiAM!” Zayn gasps between his laughter. “I’m sorry!” He shouts, “I’ll ki-kiss you!” He cries. “I’ll give you a kiss!”

“What was that?” Liam laughs, rolling over Zayn to trap him even more. He pushes, however, with more force than anticipated. Enough so that they roll off the sofa, Liam twists so they land on his back and Zayn doesn’t get hurt. He then rolls them over again so he’s on top of Zayn and has lined his forearms against Zayn’s where they have fallen at a 90 degree angle and Zayn’s hands are held in his and are in line with his head. He’s still laughing, his nose scrunched up in the most adorable fashion. Liam pecks at his face.

(In the background Liam believes he picks up Louis saying something along the lines of oh for fucks sake).

“Gimme - a - kiss.” He demands between them, watching as Zayn laughs under him even though he’s not being tickled. Eventually it slows, with little giggles and chuckles at random intervals until he’s nearly fully calmed down. Looking up at him with wide eyes. For the first time in years Liam can finally see the full spark there. The spark that went missing for so long, buried under depression and anxiety and insecurity and self-hate. That spark, that glimmer, is all Liam ever wants to see. Ever.

In this moment, there are no feelings of hurt, no hate, no sadness. Only happiness, and laughter and light and energy.

Liam lets go of Zayn’s hands. He notes they don’t move far, his left just straightens out a bit and the other covers his tummy. Liam moves his so they bracket Zayn’s head where the two of them immerse themselves in complete tunnel-vision. Forgetting the other three in the room when Zayn laughs again, now pulling both his hands into his chest and leans up. Kissing Liam full on the lips.

Liam sits up so he’s half-up on his knees and Zayn sits up from where he is, chasing his lips for another kiss which Liam happily accepts.

“You two are sickening, like. I’m considering throwing up.” Louis snorts.

Niall joins in. “Yeah, tooth-rottin’ fluff there if ye ask me.”

Harry’s still filming, it must’ve been on for 5 minutes now and while Liam knows no one watches 5 or more minute home videos, he’s getting Harry to send him that and will probably watch it over and over, forwarding it on to Trisha and his mum and everyone else. Maybe even post it on Youtube so everyone can hear the sound of an Angel laughing.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!